

Eleven

Rum Row

The shrill ringing of the alarm that Frank was holding near Pierce's ear woke him violently once more. After giving the amused man a piece of his mind, Pierce washed up and got a cup of tea and a few crumpets from kindly old Mrs. Moore in the kitchen. When he opened the door leading into the breakfast nook, he saw Brody speaking to Kelly. Pierce kept the door cracked and listened in.

"I don't like that limey twat, Mr. Quinn," Brody lovingly stated. "Why do I have to bring him out with me to Rum Row?"

"The kid has experience in this sort of thing," Kelly pointed out. "And because I ordered you to."

There was a pause. Kelly sat in his usual chair by the bay window, dressed in his robe. Good ol' Brody stood by the table, his back to Pierce. Pierce could only imagine the cross look on the Irishman's face. In the silence that followed, and the awkward way Brody shifted his weight, it was apparent he wanted to protest further. Instead, he held his tongue.

Gonna be a long day, Pierce thought grimly, taking a bite of his crumpet.

Pierce and Brody rode in a milk truck to the marina. Unsurprisingly, the journey was a quiet one. Brody spent a lot of time fiddling with the truck radio, turning the dial this way and that, trying to find a clear station. He passed on the jazz stations, which disappointed Pierce. Eventually, the bloke landed on the news where the newscaster was talking about a standoff on Forty-Ninth Street in Hell's Kitchen, and how the bull was using a tank to blow up a building where bootleggers had taken shelter.

"Christ Almighty," Brody bleated. "The coppers have tanks now?"

Pierce kept to himself and did not try to strike up a conversation. The man already hated him, and Pierce, having belted Brody in the head with his own gun, had only perpetuated that hatred. If they did say anything, it would likely start an altercation, and Pierce didn't want the headache, especially since they were traveling for miles across the Atlantic together. The wanker was likely thinking up an "accident" that Pierce could have.

They drove to an area called Inwood, past 207th Street, and rode alongside Harlem River. Soon, they arrived at the boat basin.

"Bloody hell," Pierce said, eyeing all the colorfully painted houseboats. "Is this a colony?"

"Aye," answered Brody. "People have been living here for a while now. Artists, craftsmen,

and people who didn't want to live in the city without actually leaving the city. Some of these are rented out during the warmer months, but most are lived in year round."

Pierce hadn't seen a waterfront colony such as this since he visited the Netherlands some years ago. Those colonies ran up and down the canals of Amsterdam, yet the floating neighborhoods weren't nearly as large as the one in Inwood.

Chicken wire partitioned off patches of snow-covered ground in front of some tethered houseboats, and many had the stems and vines of vegetables sticking out. A houseboat on the water's edge had a giant sign that read "Inwood Store." Many of the houseboats didn't appear as if they moved much. Presumably, they were not exactly seaworthy any longer, but they were certainly livable. Smokestacks jutted out of the roofs with smoke billowing from them. Some boats even had lights brightening their windows.

"They have electricity?"

"If they can afford it. I told you—craftsmen live out here, too. A lot of them are electricians who make a good living tending to these people's electrical needs. The same goes for plumbers and carpenters. It's a productive community."

They rode over a wide dirt road and arrived at a boathouse.

Nearby, old posts, where piers had once been, stuck straight out of the icy black water with frozen barnacles covering them. A lonely, discarded dinghy left to rot sat like a leashed dog at a post.

Brody parked the milk truck between the side of a boathouse and a stack of snow-covered crates.

"Get out," he barked at Pierce.

Being a self-employed bloke (in a sense) who had lived life by his own rules, Pierce didn't enjoy others bossing him around.

He opened the door at the same time as Brody and a frigid wind greeted him. A shudder rushed up his spine and he buttoned his coat up to his neck. He had brought his scarf and a pair of fingerless gloves, which helped, but the cold was still biting. He pulled his cap down over his naked ears. The whole area smelled of salt water and ice.

Brody grabbed a tarp from where it lay in a heap under inches of white powder and tossed it over the hood of the truck.

"Help me with this, eh?"

As Pierce helped Brody, he gained a better look at him. He had very pale, but remarkably clear, skin, hair as black as oil, and cobalt eyes. He stood a tad taller than Pierce and had a sturdy build. Brody seemed to be more or less Pierce's age—perhaps younger—and had thick, bushy eyebrows. If the bloke didn't carry a constant scowl on his blasted mug, he might actually have been a decent looking fella.

Once the tarp covered the automobile, they went into the boathouse, which was just as rundown as everything else. Brody unlocked the door and the pair stepped in.

Greyish light shined through spaces between the boards. The boathouse was long and wide enough to fit a small schooner in it. Icicles hung low from the rafters. A creaky walkway ran alongside a vessel the likes of which Pierce had never seen before. It had a

sleek, glossy auburn body with green padded seats in the front and back, a glass windshield with wiper blades, and a steering wheel resembling a car's. A small American flag was mounted on the bow. She was a lovely boat, and she stood out from her drab house like a beautiful princess trapped in a cave. There was only one thing missing.

How does it sail without a smokestack or mast?

Brody noted his confused expression. "Haven't you ever seen a runabout motorboat before, English?"

Ah, it has a motor in it. Pierce wondered how fast the boat could go.

"No," Pierce replied truthfully.

He honestly saw no value in lying about it—not to the likes of Brody, anyhow.

The Irishman snorted. "Don't doubt it. They only started manufacturing them a few years back. Mr. Quinn bought her last summer after traveling to Saint Pierre. Get in. We need to meet up with the rumrunners before three, and I want to return and unload the cargo by evening."

Pierce was the first in and sidestepped to the far end of the front seat. As he did, he studied all the gauges and buttons. Brody tossed his rucksack into the back seat, untied the line from the post, and got in.

"Reach into the compartment and fetch the goggles."

Pierce opened the compartment in front of him where maps and a compass were stored, as were two pairs of goggles. He handed one to Brody, who removed his cap and slipped it on.

"Put yours on, lad," Brody commanded, using a key to crank the engine. "The winds blowing against your face will blind you by freezing your own tears, they will."

The boat began reversing through the chunks of ice floating in the water. After Brody maneuvered the boat out, he steered her about-face until her nose pointed toward the wide watery plain ahead. Brody took it slowly down the Harlem River. "So as to not draw suspicion," he told Pierce.

After passing under the Spuyten Duyvil Bridge they accelerated.

Pierce couldn't wrap his plaid jacket and scarf around himself tight enough. The cold stole all the feeling from him, and the bitter wind stiffened his joints with burning numbness. As impressive as the speed quality was, even by the *Ekta's* standards, Pierce was no longer curious; he only wanted to live through this without freezing to death. Brody, on the other hand, despite his cherry-red face and chattering teeth, looked to be having the time of his life. Pierce only hoped the bloke knew where he was going.

They eventually reached the ocean and kept up speed. After a while, the cold ate away the thrill in Brody. He slowed the vessel and shut off the engine.

"We're pa-st th-the border," he said. "Mr. Quinn s-said that if we traveled at one knot per hour, we'd pass it in eleven minutes or so."

Pierce said nothing. In truth, his face felt so numb, he doubted he could say anything. Brody fished through his coat pocket, his hand shaking, his teeth chattering louder than Pierce's.

“Ta-take out the Sparky from my bag, eh?” Brody ordered.

Pierce twisted his body around, and it protested against being moved so vigorously from its rigor mortis-like state. With groaning muscles and popping joints, he reached behind Brody’s chair, seized the rucksack, and lifted it with some effort. The bag really wasn’t heavy, but to his frozen bones, it felt like it was filled with bricks. He set the bag between them and lifted the flap.

Brody rifled through it and pulled out a pair of headphones and then a wooden box. He placed it down and opened it. The top half came all the way off and underneath the lid was a mechanical wonder.

“Is this a telegraph machine?” Pierce guessed.

His words sounded muffled and incoherent even to himself.

“Better,” Brody explained. “It’s an Omnigraph. This machine cost fourteen bucks.”

Fourteen? Bloody hell, things have gotten expensive!

Brody carefully placed it on his lap.

“What are these?” Pierce pointed to a round silver object fastened beside a brass clock motor that was itself attached to a governor mechanism.

“It’s the drive disks with customized tabs,” Brody explained, picking them up from the short spool they were on and adjusting them. “There’s five of them stacked together.”

As Brody placed the stack on the spool, Pierce studied the disks’ jagged edges, which were the tabs. “Do the tabs contain Morse code messages?”

“Aye,” he responded peevishly. He tapped on an iron arm on the other side of the disks. “And before you ask, this is the contact strip and notch cam wheel.”

Pierce decided to watch Brody work the thing instead of angering him even more with his questions.

Brody first twisted a windup key, which got the governor mechanism’s flyweights spinning very fast. Brody turned a small knob and slowed it down a tad. The gears of the clock motor rotated. Brody moved a short arm with a rotating gear attached to it and set the gear against the disks, which made them turn. The cam wheel on the contact strip moved over the tabs, raising the arm. A high-pitch beeping sound came from it.

“What’s the message?”

“I’m letting the rumrunners know we’re here and giving them our code names and password. This week we’re the Wonder Boys.”

“Can’t others besides the rumrunners pick up on our message?”

“Like the feckin’ Coast Guard? Aye, but the codes always change, and the captain of the rumrunning ship will give us a new one with every meetup. By the time the law deciphers this message and the message the runners will be sending to us soon, we’ll all be long gone.”

After he sent off the message, Brody plugged the headphones into the Sparky, put them on, and waited.

Pierce didn’t mind. The stillness gave him a chance to regain some feeling in his body. He wished for a touch of sun, but it was hidden behind a patchwork of bright silvery

clouds. He only hoped it wouldn't snow or rain. At least the winds were easygoing, more of an annoying breeze than anything else.

A nagging desire in his chest told him he should smoke a cigarette. He'd begun to feel the urge of late whenever he hadn't had tobacco for a while. He pulled his crumpled pack from his trouser pocket and lit a cigarette. The lighter trembled fiercely in his hand. Just as the end of his cigarette caught fire, the Omnigraph's sounder beeped a few times.

Brody took out a leather-bound booklet and flipped to a page full of random letters. He jotted down what he heard through his headphones in it. Once he had decoded the message, he brushed the headset off his head and let it hang behind his neck.

"Where did you learn to code?" Pierce asked.

"I was a codebreaker in the war," he answered matter-of-factly. "They're ten kilometers northeast from here. Give me the map and compass."

Pierce retrieved the items from the compartment and helped spread the map out between them over the seat. Using the compass, Brody tried pinpointing the direction that they needed to go in. It quickly became apparent, though, that the man was no navigator. He studied the map for a long time and started becoming frustrated. Clearly, Kelly had appointed him to this task because he read and decrypted Morse code and knew how to operate the motorboat, but he hadn't taken into account that Brody couldn't judge the distance on a blasted map!

He stabbed the end of the pencil he held into a spot on the paper. "They're here, I suppose."

Pierce looked at it and arched an eyebrow. "Let me see that."

He moved the chart around and grabbed the compass. At least Brody had gotten the direction correct.

"Are you a navigator, limey?"

Pierce was—sort of. During his time onboard the *Ekta*, he'd asked the crew's navigator, Guides the Way, to show him how to navigate. He taught Pierce how to read maps of the ocean and how to measure longitude with and without the use of a sextant.

"Ten kilometers, you say?" Pierce mused, mostly to himself. "That's about six miles."

He ran his finger over it, going by miles, which was how Guides the Way had taught him. And since they had no ruler, which would have been useful, Pierce counted in his head the millimeters it took to make a mile. His finger went past the mark Brody made and kept going until he counted six miles.

"That's where we need to go," he announced. "You were a tad off, mate."

Brody scrunched his face up unpleasantly.

"Right, well, if I'm wrong, I'll buy you a pint, eh?"

"I don't drink," Brody admitted, cranking up the engine. "And if I did, I'd get it without charge."

Pierce huffed. "Fine. Go whichever direction you want, but if that ship leaves before we collect, you tell ol' Kelly."

Brody mulled it over a moment. "We'll go to your location, but if *you're* wrong, I'm

tossing your sorry arse outta this boat, got it?"

You'll bloody well try.

To make sure the bastard stayed on course, Pierce directed him while holding the compass. He wouldn't put it past Brody to deliberately miss their pickup so he had an excuse to force him to "walk the plank," as it were. It also occurred to Pierce that he still carried no firearm and that, most likely, Brody did.

Dammit.

The Irishman stayed the course, and when they arrived at the location, Brody halted the boat and cut off the engine. No one was about.

Both men used a classy pair of French Chevalier binoculars to scout the watery area.

"See anyone?" Brody asked.

Pierce did, and still he couldn't believe what he was seeing. It had the body of a schooner, but the sails were turned upward, facing the sky. Black smoke billowed from two rear smokestacks. Underneath each layer of canvas were large fans much like the ones on the *Ekta*. And like the sails they faced skyward, fanning strong winds into every canvas. A pair of propellers spun on either side of the rudder. And the only reason Pierce could see the rudder was because the vessel wasn't even *in* the water!

"Fuckin' hell," Pierce exclaimed, lowering the binoculars. "It *flies*?"

"You're joking, right?" Brody scoffed. "Airships have been around since the mid-1800's. Diesel-fueled ships—like that one—are faster than the old coal-powered ones, though. Haven't you seen them before?"

Pierce shut his jaw tight. He quickly remembered Kelly saying something about a war airship when he had explained about the aerial bomb in his house. Pierce had tried to prepare himself for whatever this century threw at him in order to keep from blowing his cover, but that practice had failed him right then.

"I . . . erm, didn't think schooners flew anymore," he threw out, hoping it would be enough to repair the damage.

Brody tutted at him and cranked up the engine. "You're a dolt."

The airship schooner slowed when the propellers wound down, as did the blades of the fans. The ship gradually descended until it landed like a graceful swan in the ocean.

Pierce and Brody came alongside the vessel where shaggy-looking fishermen stood on deck.

Brody cut the engine and asked the crew, "Captain Durand?"

A man dressed in a long black coat, wearing a cap, and smoking from a corncob pipe, answered in an unfamiliar accent, "That's me. You must be Kelly Quinn's boys. He told us he'd be sending out an Irishman."

The captain had thick, greying muttonchops with stubble covering his chin and upper lip.

"Aye, Cap'n," Brody acknowledged.

The captain gave a curt nod with tobacco smoke breezing from his mouth and nostrils. "Good. Whelp, c'mon an' collect your bounty."

Brody handed over the cash for the booze, and then he and Pierce loaded the barrels of alcohol, stored inside burlap sacks, into the backseat of the runabout boat and in a storage compartment in the rear. The workout helped get Pierce's muscles going again. He was impressed by how many barrels they'd managed to fit in the boat. He estimated at least forty gallons, which wasn't a bad take. There were still more burlap bags onboard the schooner, and when Pierce queried Brody about them, he said the crew must be waiting for another pickup.

Sure enough, on their return trip, they passed another motorboat heading for the schooner. The two boats were a good distance off from one another, but Brody saw who they were.

"That's the Sugar Hill Gang. Violetta Romano's lot."

"Romano, eh?" Pierce remembered Frank mentioning her.

"The Italian mafia. We ought to be safe, though. Mr. Quinn made a pact with Romano."

"A pact?"

"Aye, a treaty. No worries," Brody assured him, a smile appearing from underneath his goggles. "We'll be fine."