

# PROLOGUE

WOLA, POLAND, 1944.

He pressed back against brick and stone, arms over his head, shielding himself as the buildings shook and the earth beneath him rumbled.

When the blast subsided and he opened his eyes, the square was shrouded in white dust and ash, a sight both curiously beautiful and chilling, as tiny fragments of the town and the people in it spread like unearthly snow all round. This was not destruction from a single grenade, that comparatively tiny, violent salvo of resistance, nor was this from the Nazis' devastating Goliath tracked mines. For days the west of the city had been raided and torched, residents shot on the spot or tortured for information, and so he knew this ash was not only the remains of building and concrete, but also the remains of those who had perished within the village square during days of tireless massacre. The *Verbrennungskommando*, 'the burning detachment', was destroying evidence of the massacre here, and so his photographs, if he could smuggle them out, would

matter all the more. He tried not to breathe in the deathly smoke, tried not to let it inside him. Over the past two days he had not eaten, had barely found a sip of water, and he was almost glad somehow, as the stench in the air would surely have made him retch.

There had been shouting and movement, a grenade explosion, and now the noises stopped, a kind of respite to match the eerie, slowly falling ash. He wiped his face, raised his camera.

Crouching, he moved forward on one knee. It was not safe. None of this was safe. Just a few more shots and he would retreat to the makeshift shelter inside the bombed-out building behind him, the building that for now obscured his presence, and that of his ever-present camera. But he would have to find a safer place before the dogs were let loose to seek out survivors to be killed. Already half of his focus was on escaping with his photographs. He had been in tight situations before, smuggling film out in empty toothpaste tubes, but this, he feared, was yet more serious. How would he do it? The conflict had quickly revealed itself to be a homegrown uprising of Polish rebels against a well-planned and -resourced Nazi mission of outright extermination. The German soldiers were killing all citizens, all witnesses. If they found him, they would not let him live. That, he knew.

Makeshift barricades constructed of torn-up and shattered flagstones had been manned by several young Polish boys with rifles and homemade grenades and bombs – one of which, no doubt, had caused the latest blast – but as the dust cleared, he noticed the brave boys were nowhere to be seen, their modest

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supply against the Wehrmacht, Dirlewanger Brigade 'Black Hunters' and SS Police Battalions doubtless spent. He seemed alone in the bloody square, though he doubted that was the case. Had the resistance – such as they were after five years of occupation and days of non-stop fighting – retreated to where they had a better stronghold, the square now ceded? The dusty air that, moments before, had been alive with bullets, boots and ash had now settled, it seemed, to make way for something greater, something slow and menacing. He heard the heavy crunch of tracks moving over the ground and knew instantly what it was. There was shouting in German, but he could not make out the words. From somewhere came a woman's screams, disturbingly urgent and clear in the temporary quiet. A new rumbling grew louder.

Something was coming.

A German tank moved into the square, gun first. It was a mighty Tiger II, weighing nearly seventy tons, moving right into the line of sight of his Argus camera. The massive machine, with its brutal gun turret, thundered steadily into the square, towards the makeshift barricades, lumbering inelegantly over each bump like a great impenetrable beast, crushing everything in its path. No barricade would be equal to it. He pushed his back into the dusty building again and his shutter clicked, clicked again. He brought the camera down from his face.

No, he was not mistaken. There was something hanging on the front of the tank. Something tied there.

Not something, *someone*.

A woman.

It was her screams he had heard – a woman in civilian dress, tethered by the wrists to the huge gun, her body dwarfed by its size and stretched out, legs pulled back and secured by the ankles to either side of the front of the tank. Her dress was dirty and torn, her white face twisted in horror and framed by lank, brown hair. Petite and terrified, she might have been fourteen or forty, a mother or a child. All he saw was primal terror in her large, dark eyes. Again, her screams filled the square, far above the din of the tank's infernal rumbling.

The sound proved too much.

Before he'd even begun to comprehend his actions, begun to form a plan, he foolishly rushed forward, hands outstretched, his Argus swinging awkwardly at his side, momentarily forgotten. He crossed the square in seconds and leapt onto the front of the massive, slow-moving monolith, which would not pause for him, not for anyone save its master at the helm. Caught in a kind of temporary madness, he tore at the ropes that bound the struggling woman with a singular focus. Once he had freed her left ankle, she twisted in place and gestured to her other ankle. '*Tamten!*' she shouted in Polish. *That one!* He had to get the other next or she could fall face-first before the tank and be crushed under it. He tore at the binds, and heard the great hull opening, a soldier shouting.

There was no time; the soldier was climbing out and reaching for his pistol.

From the corner of his eye, he caught the movement as the woman – she was indeed an adult woman, perhaps in her twenties, he realised – swung herself nimbly upwards onto the mammoth gun with a grunt of effort and locked her

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dirt-streaked legs around it. She was hanging upside-down beneath the gun, and, despite his own dangerous position, he watched as if mesmerised as she inched herself forward with surprising speed and a survivor's will, as nimble as any acrobatic performer, until her secured wrists slipped off the end of the giant gun and she fell backwards, swimming in the air, dress and hair hanging, suspended by her legs, the ropes now loose and no longer binding her. With a mechanical grinding the gun turret moved to the left, taking her with it, and she let go, throwing herself from the giant tank, then disappearing from view.

There was a pistol shot, then another, and reality came back to him with a crash as he realised how exposed he was, the precariousness of his position on the enemy tank. He turned to jump but was not fast enough; the Nazi soldier was faster, and as he hurled himself off the tank's side he was caught across the neck, body jerking back and upwards, killing all breath, a sick, gurgling sound in his ears. He hung like a rag doll from the side of the tank by his own leather camera strap, and the mighty Tiger II continued through the square, gun roving, the great beast not halting, not even slowing.

Desperately, he clutched the strap at his neck, frantic for air, and saw blood on his fingers, his hands. It was his own, he realised. The strap of his camera was cutting in, his neck opening up. There was shouting in German, another pistol shot, and the world went black.



# CHAPTER ONE

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, 1947.

On May Day, the client walked into the offices of B. Walker Private Inquiries, announced by a faint buzzer. Billie Walker heard this from her position at her small sixth-floor balcony, where she'd been smoking a Lucky Strike and regarding, with a well-honed emotional detachment, the safety bridge that connected Daking House to Station House. She heard the door, heard the little buzzer, heard her secretary-cum-assistant welcome the stranger, their voices muffled by the closed connecting door, and took a long drag. On the slow exhale, smoke floated from Billie's red lips, creating a temporary haze across her view of the city streets.

Cigarette dangling, Billie turned, closed the balcony doors behind her, and walked to the oval mirror on the wall inside her office. She checked her emerald tilt hat and red lipstick in one quick and practised movement, regarded the steady blue-green eyes staring back at her in the reflection and, satisfied, made

for the corner of her wide wooden desk and stubbed out the last of her fag. Smoke drifted upwards, settling in the air. The Bakelite clock above her door informed her that this potential client was right on time. This one had made an appointment, though Billie had not been furnished with any information regarding the nature of her query, complaint or troubles, only a surname. Things having improved at Billie's humble agency in recent months, Ms Walker – the B of B. Walker Private Inquiries and the principal agent – no longer had to wait out long days for the phone to ring or a knock at the door, and, for the moment at least, did not need to contemplate the empty walnut chairs in the small waiting room and find odd jobs for her secretary to do. Business was booming for Sydney's most famous – or was it infamous? – female inquiry agent.

Billie smoothed down her skirt suit, opened the connecting door, and leaned against the open doorframe to take in the stranger who had entered her waiting room. She did so hope this wasn't another divorce job.

'Ah, here she is now. May I present Ms Billie Walker,' Samuel Baker, her tall secretary announced, right on cue. 'Ms Walker, this is Mrs Richard Montgomery.'

She still had no first name of her own, Billie thought. Shame.

Amusingly, the woman's gaze was fixed on Billie's secretary in his lightly pin-striped suit and flattering tie of burgundy and sky blue that brought out his baby blues. A flirtatious smile played on the older woman's painted lips as she regarded him. To be true, Sam was a pleasing sight. He was a strapping Australian lad whose experience of the war had left him changed, most



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notably his injured left hand, which was always covered in a leather glove, lending him a touch of mystery. That hand had come up against an Italian thermos bomb and was now missing a few fingers, replaced by wooden prosthetics. Sam had already proved himself invaluable on numerous occasions, so if Billie had his injury to thank for the fact he was happy to work for her, well, the army's loss was her gain. He didn't mind taking orders from a woman – far too rare a trait, in her opinion – and his trigger hand was as whole and steady as you could ask for. It was a bonus that he was something like Alan Ladd in appearance, though far taller, and built several axe handles across, as the saying went.

As Sam provided a handsome distraction, Billie took in the woman's appearance quickly and efficiently, observing cues drilled into her from work as an inquiry agent and before that as a war reporter, and a childhood spent listening to her father, Barry Walker, the policeman-turned-private investigator who had inhabited these very offices, sitting at that wide wooden desk and smoking on that same small balcony where his only child now spent her moments of contemplation. *Always look at the shoes*, he would say. *The fit and quality of the suit. The timepiece. The hat. Look at the eyes. Each detail tells a story.* Indeed it did.

At a trained glance, this woman's story appeared to be one of style and apparent luxury – not something one saw in great abundance since the war. The suede burgundy shoes were new and well crafted, the stockings nylon and without flaw. (Billie suspected this woman had never had to stoop to painting her legs with gravy and drawing a line up the back of her legs with

eye pencil to create the illusion of stockings, as so many had.) The Akoya pearl set she wore was delicate and quite real, Billie was sure, that particularly desirable lustre not being possible in the new fakes. Her navy skirt suit was notable for being of the latest style, echoing the scandalously feminine silhouette of Christian Dior's 'New Look' that had taken the fashion world by storm months before: softly rounded shoulders, nipped waist, a slightly fuller skirt falling mid-calf – not quite full enough to cause outrage on the streets of Sydney, rationing still being in place, but enough to set this woman apart as a specimen of fashion, a local doyenne of the Parisian trend. Yes, it set her apart, as did the genuine, high-quality glass-eyed fox stole she wore around her shoulders. This was no pre-war throwback.

Mrs Montgomery somehow had her finger on the pulse of international fashion trends and had money and the tailors to pull it off for her. Billie rather wanted to get a name. One thing was for certain, this was a woman of means, and that impression was confirmed by the crowning glory of her engagement ring, which was over a carat, Billie's trained eye told her, and completely overshadowed the comparatively simple wedding ring worn with it.

'Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs Montgomery,' Billie said and meant it, satisfied that she was attracting the kind of clientele whose cheques were unlikely to bounce like rubber. She lifted her shoulder off the door frame and smiled, locking eyes with the Joan Crawford-esque beauty. Mrs Montgomery had large eyes in a strong, rectangular face, her gaze direct and framed by dyed red hair worn short across the forehead and swept back in a centre part beneath a flat,

tilted navy hat. It was the face of a strong-willed woman of high standards.

‘Won’t you come into my office?’ Billie said, and turned on her stacked Oxford heel. She disappeared inside and the woman followed in the investigator’s wake, her posture erect and proud, eyes flicking back to Sam, who was trailing just behind. If he was bothered by the woman’s flirtatious gaze, he didn’t let on.

The office Billie Walker welcomed this fashionable stranger into was not the kind of surrounds where Mrs Montgomery would seem, under normal circumstances, to belong. Though Billie was not exactly unglamorous herself, with the striking contrast of her dark hair and pale skin, and her Tussy’s Fighting Red lipstick, the utilitarian office suited her like a battered trench coat, or well-travelled uniform. It was a place of action, with Billie herself a devotee of action, as the war years and more recent events as an inquiry agent attested. Fashion was something she enjoyed and employed in her profession to gain entry to all echelons of society, but her office had very few frills about it. Her aristocratic mother, if she ever again deigned to lower herself enough to grace those four walls, would complain the place ‘lacked a woman’s touch’, despite the space now being occupied by Billie and her so-far-exclusively female clientele. Billie had left it much the same as when her late father had operated his agency. The carpets were rust red, the filing cabinets a fading hunter green, the wooden desk appropriately scarred, all of it imbued with the sense of his presence, now further layered by this new generation of Walker investigator. The only concessions to its new occupant were the placement

of the handy mirror, a small bottle of Bandit perfume on a shelf, some personal photographs and the addition of a few of the more fashionable women's journals in the waiting room. The place suited Billie well, as if her late father had lovingly worn it in for her.

Sam plugged the doorway to the office, waiting, knowing the next part of this client ritual well.

'Would you care for tea, Mrs Montgomery?' Billie asked, once the woman was comfortably seated across the desk in the chair she reserved for clients.

'Thank you kindly,' she replied, and broad-shouldered Sam disappeared, gently closing the door behind him with a barely audible click. Billie had seen him throw full-grown men across an alley with his good hand, but he played down his physical size and strength in situations such as this, his strategic invisibility well practised.

Mrs Montgomery – who had taken the time to watch Sam go – was now surveying the space around her. Although such roughly finished spaces did not seem her natural habitat, she showed no signs of disappointment. Perhaps, if she'd been living as a bird in the proverbial gilded cage – as was one theory Billie was forming – more salubrious surrounds would not be comforting in this moment. Something had brought her out of her natural habitat and into Billie's.

'Are you the only woman investigator in Sydney?' Mrs Montgomery asked.

'Sometimes,' Billie said, and leaned one elbow on the wooden desk. One of her competitors was currently in gaol for some petty matter, nothing to do with Billie of course.

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Her main competition came from male investigators, however. They dominated the trade, and always had. In fact, much of her post still arrived for *Mr B. Walker*, as if the fact of her obvious femininity was not quite enough to overcome the assumption that the principal at a private inquiry agency would be a grizzled gentleman gumshoe.

‘How may I be of assistance today?’ Billie asked.

‘You assisted a friend of mine, Nettie Brown, you may recall,’ the woman began.

Billie did recall. That had been in late 1946, almost six eventful months before, and had begun as a seemingly routine missing person case, a search for Nettie’s seventeen-year-old son, and evolved into something far larger and more sinister. She resisted looking again towards her smoking balcony, even while a vivid image of the Nazi who had flung himself over it flashed through her memory. Yes, she did indeed recall the case. A fair bit of Sydney did, also.

‘Nettie was quite impressed by you. She recommended you rather highly,’ the woman went on.

‘That is pleasing to hear.’

Billie’s gaze moved to the glass-eyed fox around Mrs Montgomery’s shoulders, as if it could tell her that it had been purchased at the Brown family’s fur shop at the Strand Arcade. Her muscles had tensed at the memory of the case. There had been a good outcome, but not without shots fired, and lives altered and lost. But then, she and trouble knew each other rather intimately. No reason the end of the war would stop such a seemingly natural pairing, she supposed.

‘I understand you spoke with her a few months ago?’ Mrs Montgomery continued.

‘Yes,’ Billie replied.

She had, in fact, run into Mrs Nettie Brown, in the literal sense, under quite the most extraordinary circumstances on New Year’s Day. It had been a frightfully humid day, and just as Billie was having her semi-regular afternoon tea with her informant Shyla at the Central Railway Refreshment Room, a freak hailstorm had hit, assaulting Sydney from the skies with considerable violence. The clock face above the station was smashed, and the skylight along the entire main assembly platform had been decimated, raining shards of glass on those below. To Billie it had sounded like a squadron of bombers and those who had been there could be forgiven for thinking it the return of the Blitz. Fortunately, most of the waiting commuters had only recently been whisked away on their various journeys.

In the midst of this maelstrom, Billie had sprinted from the refreshment room to determine the cause of the thunderous crashing – always the type to run towards chaos and not away from it – and Nettie Brown had run straight into her, head on. After a moment of shocked recognition, the women had sheltered together by the Central concourse until the storm passed. Their somewhat bruising meeting had felt peculiarly like foreshadowing at the time. The case for the Brown family was officially closed, but loose ends niggled at Billie, never quite letting her go despite the passing months, and it seemed the powers that be weren’t keen on releasing her, either. She only hoped those loose ends weren’t weaving themselves into a noose, for her or for someone else.

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The year of 1947 had announced itself with a bang. Billie had almost been waiting for this follow-up.

‘The case quickly faded from the headlines, which was a small miracle,’ Mrs Montgomery continued when Billie offered nothing more. The Browns would not have liked the publicity. And the case had faded from the headlines, but not before making a considerable impression.

‘Yes, though I’m afraid I can’t claim responsibility for such miracles. I’m not that powerful,’ Billie remarked of the press eventually moving on.

Mrs Montgomery frowned. ‘Nettie assured me you can be discreet.’

‘Discretion I *can* guarantee, Mrs Montgomery. Discretion is an important aspect of my work. Had I had it my way, the Browns’ case never would have made the papers at all, but once a Nazi war criminal is involved there’s no holding the papers back.’

‘He’s the one who ...’ Mrs Montgomery trailed off, lifting a manicured hand towards the now-closed balcony doors, one finger extended for a moment, before curling back, as if broaching the subject might have been too vulgar.

Billie nodded, pushing away the rather too vivid memory.

The Bakelite clock above the doorway ticked. Billie’s prospective client shifted in her chair and seemed for a moment to sink into the embrace of the deceased fox wrapped around her shoulders, as if it could comfort her.

‘The public’s appetite for a grisly story is always ripe,’ Billie said, offering that morsel of truth to ease an uncomfortable silence. ‘But they move on. There’s always something else

to catch their attention. I can't claim any credit for steering them away.' The case had steered new cases to Billie's agency, however. The women of Sydney had come knocking, and now here she was, gainfully employed for the first time since the war. For many women, the war had been a time that had first provided the independence of a proper wage, modest or otherwise. That Billie's agency was doing a roaring trade now, after so many women were again out of work, was a stroke of luck for Billie, but that winning streak was not guaranteed to continue. Billie was becoming rather concerned that she would soon run out of disgruntled wives, having aided so many through her offices. How many more could there be in one city?

Not that it appeared Mrs Montgomery would be able to relate to the financial worries of single working women.

'I am at your service, Mrs Montgomery, and you have my discretion. Nothing you tell me will leave this room without your blessing,' she said, hoping to move things along.

'It gives me no pleasure to be here, you understand,' Mrs Montgomery admitted. 'Oh, no offence.'

'None taken. Like dentists, perhaps, few revel in our professional presence, but we are a necessary evil, you could say.' *If you don't want the rotting tooth to fester – or the rotten marriage – and eventually take the whole patient with it.*

There was a gentle knock at the door, and Sam appeared with a tray, upon which two tea cups and the necessary accoutrements were neatly assembled. This felt like good timing. The woman had still not given a single clue as to the reason for her appointment, and Billie was starting to become impatient.



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In her experience there were two types of clients: the kind who came in with a rush of tears and stories rolling off the tongue, and this type, reticent or hard to read. Anything might be on Mrs Richard Montgomery's mind, though the impression of the bird in the gilded cage still clung to this woman. What had made her fly the coop, if that's what this was? Was there a job on offer, or not? Billie had been busy, but there was a worrying hole in her calendar coming up. She could use a touch more security from well-heeled clients such as this one.

'Sugar?' Billie offered, and the woman nodded. She prepared a cup and pushed it across. 'Now, if you will, how may I be of service?'

The Joan Crawford jaw flexed, relaxed. The woman took a sip of her tea, decided something, and those bright, glinting eyes fell on Billie with a different intensity. 'It's a delicate matter. You see, my husband is a very wealthy man, and he ... well, he likes his little adventures.'

'I see.' *A divorce case then.*

Some part of Billie shrank, but then again she was the one who had decided to reopen her father's inquiry agency. Divorce work came with the turf.

'You are perhaps wondering where his adventures have led him?' Billie suggested gently. This was a frequent complaint for the clients who entered Billie's office. 'Another woman.'

'Undoubtedly,' Mrs Montgomery replied. 'Perhaps several. Or I believe there was.'

'Was?' Past tense.

'Miss Walker, my husband hasn't been heard from in almost two years. That is an awfully long time.'

‘Indeed it is,’ Billie agreed.

‘You see, he’s an advertising man, quite successful, and some government department – what do they call it again? – the Bureau of Information, well, they got him to help them out with their war efforts and so on.’

Billie had heard of the department, though she didn’t know a great deal about it. From what she did know, its bureaucrats were responsible for the promotion and advertisement of war bonds, government propaganda, and censorship of information.

‘There was this “Australia in peace and war” exposition in Paris, you see, just a couple of months after Victory in Europe Day, and nothing would have it but to send him all the way over for that. It was the jewel in the crown of the department, this exposition, and he was – or is – one of their top men. He flew to London – he hails from there – and then arrived in Paris a week or two later with the rest of the men. He wrote to me from the hotel there – the Ritz Paris, a very fine hotel. He seems to have done his work for them and then just ... vanished. After that letter nothing else came, and there was no word of his return. I was not alarmed at first, but it is unlike him to not send *any* letters at all, so when there was no second letter, and time stretched on, I became worried. I have contacts in Paris’ – Billie had guessed this, and now she nodded – ‘but they tell me they haven’t heard from him. Naturally, I contacted the Bureau of Information, which wasn’t altogether as easy as I’d expected, and they said he didn’t work for them. I mean, *really*,’ she said, aghast. ‘It was quite galling. The advertising firm he works for said he was working for the department, and round and round it went.’

‘The Bureau of Information denied that he worked for them?’ Billie asked, intrigued.

‘They told me my Richard had completed his employment and he no longer worked for them. Yet, the advertising firm said he’d left them to work for the department.’

‘I see. And how long ago was this?’

‘A few months after the exposition, towards the end of ’45. At first I thought he was ... well, just being Richard. But I did become concerned.’

‘Of course.’

Mrs Montgomery watched Billie’s face carefully. ‘You mustn’t judge me, Miss Walker,’ she said. ‘My Richard is a good man of sterling reputation. He works hard, and naturally a man of his status and demanding workload deserves a certain amount of ... freedom. He’s very... masculine, a leader. So, you see, although some may find my attitude shocking, it’s the only way to ensure harmony in our marriage. We had an understanding.’

Billie nodded and leaned forward, meeting the woman’s large eyes. ‘You do not need to defend yourself, or your marriage, to me, I can assure you of that.’ If there was one thing Billie had learned in life, and certainly in the course of her work, it was that marriages took many different forms. ‘Judgement is not my job, and I don’t trouble myself with it. My job is to find your husband, if you choose to employ my services for the purpose.’

Mrs Montgomery’s shoulders dropped beneath the rounded contour of her tailored suit. ‘Thank you,’ she said simply.

Billie leaned back and thought for a moment. ‘How much did your husband discuss the scope of his employment with

you? The aim of his work at the exposition, his day-to-day, and that sort of thing?’

‘We never discussed work or financial matters,’ Mrs Montgomery replied, shaking her head adamantly, as if this non-communication on issues of finance was a wifely virtue. ‘Richard was the man of the house. That was his role. His work was his own affair. He was a good provider, Miss Walker.’

Billie had no reason to disbelieve her. ‘Have you any employment, Mrs Montgomery? Any—’

‘Certainly not,’ she shot back before Billie could finish. The very idea seemed to aggrieve her.

‘Of course,’ Billie replied, keeping her expression even. This view was commonplace; if a woman like this worked, it was thought it was because her husband was not an adequate provider, not for reasons of human need, independence or personal fulfilment.

Mrs Montgomery paused, perhaps realising the implication of her views. ‘No offence,’ she added again, looking around Billie’s office. ‘Some women are *forced* to work, I understand.’

Billie held her tongue. After all, she couldn’t claim she didn’t have to work, but it hadn’t always been simply for necessity. Puzzles enlivened her, and the work she did during the war as a reporter ... Well, she was proud of what she’d achieved. In truth, she didn’t much savour the idea of a life without some mystery to solve. Not for her was the bliss of ignorance. Billie wanted to know what was happening below the surface – and there always was something.

‘If your husband returned to Australia, as seemed to originally be the plan, in your opinion is there any possibility

he could have entered the country without your being aware?’ Billie did her best to read this potential client, who she hoped would not be insulted by this suggestion. ‘Please understand this question is one of logistics,’ she decided to add. ‘I am not casting aspersions on your relationship with your husband.’

Mrs Montgomery appeared to consider this. ‘I think I understand what you mean.’ She took a sip of her tea, frowning, and contemplated something. ‘The fact is, my Richard never liked to keep a low profile, so I’d say yes, I would simply have known if he was in Australia this whole time. Yes, absolutely.’ The Crawford jaw flexed as she considered her errant husband. ‘I don’t believe my Richard could return to Australia without my knowing, certainly not for this long, and certainly not to Sydney. And he wouldn’t have any reason to. I never kept him on a tight leash. It just wasn’t like that.’ She shook her head for good measure. ‘No, he simply doesn’t know how to keep a low profile, even if he were motivated to.’

Was he motivated to? Billie wondered. Many men had returned from the war in secret, to live out solitary lives in the Australian bush, too psychologically damaged by war to face society or the lives they had once known, or unwilling or unable to endure the uncomfortable stares of neighbours and pointing of children at scars and war wounds they could not hide. But this woman’s husband had gone missing in Paris just *after* the end of the war in Europe. He wasn’t involved in combat that they were aware of, and there was unlikely to be a great deal of danger in his particular line of work. It didn’t fit.

‘And what have you done in the intervening years?’ Billie asked gently.

'I won't mince words, Miss Walker. I have been fairly comfortable, though bothered by the mystery of it.' She paused, and Billie wondered if this woman's pride was somewhat more injured than her heart, but then, after so long, one had to find ways to cope. Billie knew that more intimately than she'd like to.

'It did me no favours socially, I can say. It seemed to others at first that I was a deserted wife,' Mrs Montgomery added. 'However, in time most assumed he had passed on. It became accepted that I might be a widow. After all, there are so many widows nowadays. I guess part of me accepted that, too.'

'Is that what you believe?' Billie asked.

'Well, I don't quite know what to believe,' she replied, and on face value Billie sensed she was being honest about that. 'After a time I went to the usual agencies, naturally, the constabulary, the Red Cross, but I'm afraid it hasn't been much help. Well, it hasn't been any help at all frankly, and the whole thing is such a frustration, especially now.' She swallowed, and Billie wondered if she detected a flicker of guilt. 'Without some evidence of his adultery, or a certificate of death ...'

'You will remain married, and unable to move on. Should you wish to,' Billie added.

Mrs Montgomery nodded. She seemed a determined woman who knew what she wanted, and often got it, Billie wagered. Forced to remain married while abandoned would be an unsuitable status quo for such a woman, particularly one who considered a wage beneath her, or a sign of failure. That gilded cage may have been fine for a while, but it had surely tarnished with time. It would be getting lonely in there.

Billie leaned back, and quite inconveniently cast her eyes over one of the photographs on her wooden desk. It was *that* photograph – the one in the small frame. It had been an unconscious impulse to look at it, the image she had taken of Jack in Vienna. In the image Jack was smiling, and his smile was intoxicating, eyes alive with the irresistible chemistry that had erupted between them like a bright flame. This was the weekend they'd fallen in love, before the war had begun, before the world had been irretrievably altered, and long before their makeshift wedding and her father's sudden passing that followed, taking her far from him and their work together. Her husband was just as he looked in those flashes that haunted her each time she closed her eyes. That smile. Those hazel eyes. That lean, tanned face. And those lips she had kissed for untold stolen hours, locked in embraces in bombed-out buildings, hearing shells in the distance.

*Jack Rake.* Sitting up, Billie averted her eyes and swallowed. It was only the tiniest movement of her throat, a subtle sign that this conversation was a touch close to home. Someone who knew her well might have caught it – her mother would have – but not this stranger, who was quite understandably caught in her own thoughts about her marital troubles. Billie's bread and butter was missing husbands, and cheating husbands. That Billie's own husband was missing was something she hardly needed reminding of. With all the war had done, there was rather an increase in missing men. Professionally, she was adept at looking for missing husbands, but in time she'd all but given up on her own.

Mrs Montgomery was still talking, oblivious to the gooseflesh that had crept up Billie's legs, and her words returned suddenly to Billie's ears, like a radio turned back on. '... and between us, I can't access more finances unless he, well, unless there is some resolution ...' She paused. 'You see, I can't remarry unless I divorce Richard.'

'Indeed. I see your predicament,' Billie replied smoothly. The money – which must have been substantial – was running lower than was comfortable, along with this woman's patience for answers. This was understandable. After two years, she needed a divorce settlement or the proceeds of probate. But even in the event that finances were not a pressing concern, and that was indeed rare, the social suspicions cast upon unmarried women were not something widows were spared, particularly not if they appeared eligible, as this well-turned-out woman did. It was assumed that such a woman wanted a man, and there were certainly fewer going around these days. Single women had long been considered threatening – one reason daughters were routinely married off while still barely children – and a woman who was not attached to a man was viewed with suspicion by many, with no male hand to guide her, rein her in, and keep her from seducing the unsuspecting husbands of others. Billie was all too aware of these notions.

'It must be terribly hard for you, not knowing.'

Mrs Montgomery nodded, her eyes glistening. Finally, a hint of emotion, a hint of vulnerability.

'Sadly, I see these sorts of cases far too often,' Billie continued. She understood there were millions of missing persons recorded by the International Red Cross Missing Persons Bureau in



Geneva. Just how many of those stories would have happy endings was increasingly slim as the years wore on. ‘You have my sympathies, but I’ll be frank, Mrs Montgomery: if you are sure your husband is not in the Antipodes, I fear I can’t be of much help.’

With this, the arms crossed, and Billie caught a better look at the glittering engagement ring – a central large solitaire diamond surrounded by two cascading swirling tiers of round brilliant-cut diamonds and glittering baguette diamonds. It was well and good to have clients from the high end of town walking into Billie’s office, but not if she couldn’t help them. It seemed a shame to turn Mrs Montgomery away.

‘Nettie said you were the one to come to, that for missing persons you are second to none. What is your rate for this kind of case?’ Mrs Montgomery pressed, ignoring Billie’s observation as if it hadn’t been raised.

‘It’s the same as it is for all of my work,’ Billie explained calmly, having already decided this was going nowhere. ‘We charge fourteen pounds a day plus expenses.’ Her rate had gone up recently, with her higher profile after the complicated Brown family case. ‘We dedicate ourselves entirely to our clients for the duration. There is no guarantee of how long any individual case may take. Some are resolved in just a couple of days and some take far longer. I have found many a husband,’ Billie said without false modesty. ‘However, as I mentioned, I fear we are not suitable for your particular needs, given the likelihood your husband did not return to this country. We can certainly explore any local connections, but it does seem you likely need an inquiry agent in Paris, and possibly London

as well. Sadly, I don't believe I have contacts on hand to offer you, though I could look into it for you, if that would help.'

She tried her professional smile, hoping to ease the woman's disappointment.

'But you do have contacts,' Mrs Montgomery replied, to Billie's surprise. 'Did you not work there yourself during the war? You will go to Paris for me on the next available flight and you will find out what happened to my Richard.'

Billie was caught without words for a moment. Since returning in '44 and reopening her late father's agency, she'd worked in Sydney and surrounds, as he had before her. The possibility of travelling for the work had not occurred to her.

'Oh, I had you checked out, naturally,' Mrs Montgomery added, while Billie searched for a response. 'I wanted to know who I was hiring. You were a reporter, weren't you?'

Billie nodded. She missed that work, though not the war. The newsrooms of Sydney had not been so keen on women reporters once the men returned.

'You must understand, you couldn't get me on one of those beastly deathtraps ... aeroplanes ... for all the tea in China,' Mrs Montgomery continued. 'My aunt died in one of those cursed machines and Richard never could convince me to get in one. No, I am not going over there, and I am quite determined to have you do it. I will pay handsomely.'

Billie could certainly see that her determination was real. There was no doubting it. But though she was not the type to dissuade a clearly well-heeled client from hiring her, she wasn't prepared for this idea, and it set off a series of conflicting thoughts and feelings.

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‘I’ll admit it’s an intriguing idea,’ she replied cautiously, ‘but it would come with some considerable expenses, you understand.’ She watched for the woman’s response, but her warning did not seem to faze her. Could she be the only woman in Sydney not to feel the pinch of the war years? ‘I can’t guarantee my assistant will be available,’ Billie continued. ‘I’ll have to consult with him on that, and look into our calendar.’

Billie must have appeared uncertain, because what Mrs Montgomery said next sealed the deal.

‘Naturally, Miss Walker. I’ll pay double your usual rate.’

Having seen a fair bit in her years, particularly since ’39, it was rare for anyone or anything to raise Billie Walker’s brow, but Mrs Montgomery had succeeded.

‘It’s a day rate, I think Nettie said?’ Mrs Montgomery added. ‘I’ll double your fourteen-pound day rate when you are outside the country, all expenses paid. Reasonable expenses, of course,’ she specified. Those eyes focused on Billie with an unusual directness. ‘I want this done, Miss Walker. I’ve waited quite long enough and I won’t take no for an answer.’ The square jaw was set.

And with that the woman slid two hundred pounds across the battered wooden desk and handed Billie a formal card, embellished tastefully with an illustrated spray of flowers.

*MRS VERA MONTGOMERY*

*Vera.* She had her own name after all.