

Chapter 1

Office of Senator Ralph T. Caldwell
Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.
September 5, 1938

SENATOR CALDWELL'S SENIOR AIDE almost always returned from his lunch break at Union Station on the hour, but the late summer heat lingered that afternoon. Even in the midday shade, the Lower Senate Park was stifling. The aide hung his hat on an ornate coat rack and draped his suit jacket over the back of a heavy wooden armchair. He started to sit down when he noticed their one window was only halfway open. The man weaved around several desks to open it, then stopped when he overheard the senator's voice behind his closed door. The aide glanced at the old wall clock across the room, wondering why the senator had returned so early. He snaked back to his own desk, concentrating on the one-sided phone conversation.

The other staffers returned a few minutes later, joking and laughing after their short lunch break downstairs at the congressional cafeteria. The aide busied himself with a stack of papers, but still concentrated on the senator's phone call. The young men quieted down when they saw their supervisor so hard at work.

The hands of the wall clock moved slowly throughout the hot afternoon while the aides typed replies to constituents' letters and ran errands around the Capitol. At five o'clock, the younger staffers grabbed their hats to leave for the day as the senior aide knocked on the senator's door and stuck his head in.

"Anything else, Mr. Caldwell?" he asked.

"No, not today." The California senator took off his eyeglasses and leaned back in his chair to stretch. He spoke to the ceiling. "I'm probably

going to have to meet with Mr. Douglas again soon to talk about his aircraft factories.” Senator Caldwell leaned forward onto his elbows and dropped a newspaper on his desk. While he was one of the few senators who agreed with President Roosevelt on rearming the US military, there was little he could do about it with an isolationist Congress. The senator’s aide glanced at the headline on his boss’s paper. It was the article about the Nazi’s demand to annex the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, which was gaining momentum. The aide had already read it himself. “Good work on that speech, by the way,” Senator Caldwell continued, not looking up. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, sir. Good evening.”

The aide stopped at his desk and reached into a drawer for the small wrapper of breadcrumbs he always saved from his lunch. He grabbed a small piece of chalk from the dusty metal tray on a wall-mounted chalkboard before shutting the window and leaving for the day.

He liked the smell of the halls in the old building. The sweet mustiness reminded him of visiting museums as a boy. The marble steps down the old office building’s stairwell were worn down the middle, like the ones he remembered from his childhood. They somehow remained cool even in the late afternoon heat.

The sun was low but still bright when the aide exited the Senate office building. He stopped at his usual bench in the park and fed breadcrumbs to the almost-tame squirrels who must have recognized the man after all these years. The wrapper fell to the ground when he stood to leave. He steadied himself on the bench to pick it up, leaving an unremarkable chalk mark on the backrest.

He resumed his stroll across Capitol Hill, a breeze cooling him down after another stuffy afternoon at work. His favorite part of the day was admiring the large homes on the way to his small apartment. He planned to live in one of these beautiful old houses one day. Ancient trees shaded the sidewalk, with the occasional mother pushing a stroller through the neighborhood.

Later that evening, the aide sat under a single light bulb at his kitchen table and recalled his boss’s conversation with Donald Douglas, the founder of the Douglas Aircraft Company. As the lead aide to the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs, he was familiar with all the current issues. The Senate had debated national defense spending for weeks and would soon vote on a bill.

No, you heard right, Mr. Douglas. The Army has canceled all orders for heavy bombers . . . that's correct . . . and stopped any further spending on R and D . . . Well, I just heard myself. The decision was apparently made after that large-scale training exercise off the coast of New York . . . yes, the one in the papers last month . . . yes, that's correct. The Army Air Corps has restricted all aircraft to the defense of our own coast. No more than 100 miles out to sea . . . Well, I think we are sending a clear message to the world. Congress does not want to enter a European war, and our current planes are defensive only . . . No, Donald, I don't think so. Why would the Army want any long-range fighters? The heavy bombers are supposed to be able to defend themselves . . . As you are aware, my appropriations committee only approved thirteen B-17s for the initial build . . . Yes, that's right. We made it clear that if the Army wanted to push for more fighters, the funding would have to come from the bomber appropriation. The Air Corps leaders were unwilling to raid their bomber funds. They wanted bombers, not fighters. Now they don't even want the bombers . . . No, there are no plans to mass-produce any long-range fighters . . . No, I don't have that information yet. Yes, I'll let you know when I'm back in California.

The aide wrote a short summary of what he overheard, leaving out the pleasantries at the end of the conversation and the social plans the men had made. He then knelt, loosened a short section of floorboard, and reached for a small pocketbook in the void. He sat back down at his table and turned to the corresponding page for the current month. He spent a long time writing on a new blank page, constantly referring to his pocketbook. When he finally finished, he had an unintelligible list of letters filling the page in groups of four. He folded the coded message tightly and placed it in a metal pillbox that fit in the palm of his hand. The box was magnetized and stuck to the metal brace under his kitchen table, where it remained until morning.

The aide wove through a crowded line of honking taxis the following day and made his daily stop outside Union Station to buy a newspaper. Today, however, he would go inside. Three pairs of large doors were propped open to let commuters pour out of the station, and they scattered in all directions. He waited for a break in the rush from the nearest opening and entered, holding his hat on his head so he didn't lose it in the crush.

A low roar echoed under the gold-leafed plaster ceiling of the main hall as he wound through the steady flow of people. He sat down at a table and scanned faces in the crowd until he saw the elegant blond wearing a red hat. She stood next to a newsstand, avoiding eye contact as she looked toward the tunnel entrance that led to the track platforms below. She shifted her purse from her right side to her left.

The senior aide scanned the headlines of his paper. The lady in the red hat seemed to recognize someone, waved, then disappeared into the crowd. The aide stood, folded the newspaper, and made his way toward the station exit. Another man sat down in his place and produced his own newspaper from inside a brown double-breasted suit.

The gentleman opened the paper and allowed himself a moment's distraction, confident in his morning task. The same thing always struck him when he watched the Americans rushing through the loud station. There were almost no men in uniform. Nothing at all like his home. He refolded his newspaper and felt for the pillbox under the metal tabletop.

Once outside the station, the gentleman turned right on the sidewalk and matched the swift pace of the other pedestrians crossing First Street. He turned right again at the corner post office and gradually slowed down as he walked up the slight incline of Massachusetts Avenue toward Embassy Row. He stopped two blocks later in front of a store window, leaned against a light post, and lit a cigarette. He eventually started up the sidewalk again, this time at a saunter, seeming to enjoy the late summer morning. After six blocks, he confirmed his tail was still there with a casual glance behind him and across the street. He was used to being followed, and the FBI men were not hard to spot. He smiled to himself and continued up the street.

The Austrian flag caught his eye, waving over their three-story embassy. A few steps later, he had a better view and was able to see the Nazi flag as well, hoisted directly under it. It was a recent addition, he noted, from earlier that year.

Soon, the gentleman in the brown suit arrived at 1435 Massachusetts Avenue Northwest and rang the bell next to a bronze plaque inscribed, "Deutsche Botschaft."

"Guten Morgen, Herr Ober," greeted a tall guard as he opened a heavy wrought iron gate.

"Good morning, Antony." Herr Ober admired his country's flag, mounted on a tall pole on the roof, as he climbed the steps leading up the rolling lawn to the four-story mansion. A large front door opened, and

he passed through the main entrance of Germany's diplomatic residence in Washington.

The diplomat went straight to his office, opened his safe, and chose the correct codebook. It took fifteen minutes to decode the message from the pillbox, and he decided to transmit it immediately. He would share it later with Herr Schrader, head of station, when he returned to the embassy that afternoon. He re-coded the message with his own remarks and then double-checked his work.

Herr Ober took the message up two flights of stairs to the top floor of the embassy, then down a corridor and up a small stairway to the attic. At the top of the landing, he opened a door to reveal a dim, warm space the size of a large closet.

Vacuum tubes hummed inside electronic racks stacked to the ceiling, emitting an orange glow. A young man with headphones sat at a small communications station. His sweaty wrist twisted imperceptibly as his thumb appeared to tap out Morse code on its own. The interruption did not affect the operator's concentration, nor did he look up. The diplomat placed the message in a basket on the operator's desk, knowing it would be transmitted to their Fatherland across the Atlantic in a few minutes.

Herr Ober smiled at the memory of the antenna connected to the back of the high-powered transmitter as he descended the creaking wooden stairs back to his office. He had helped hide the antenna years before, when he was a junior secretary. It went up along the closet wall, through the ceiling, across the roof, and up the tall flagpole.

His telephone rang, and he picked it up before sitting down.

"Herr Ober speaking." He was proud to be known publicly now as a legitimate diplomat. He sat down at his desk, a little straighter than usual, and pictured the Nazi flag waving in the breeze atop the roof of the German Embassy.