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To Catch A Spy

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Extract

CHAPTER 1

IT HAD STARTED five nights earlier. Friday, December 31, 1943. New Year's Eve. My landlady, Mrs. Plaut, had thrown a party to which she accepted no refusals or excuses. Irene Plaut, tiny, broomstick thin, almost deaf, and somewhere over eighty years old, was not a creature to whom one could say "no." She simply issued proclamations and expected them to be obeyed. In this case it had begun with a summons two weeks before the party being held at her boardinghouse on Heliotrope Street, two blocks off of Hollywood Boulevard.

She had painstakingly and in tiny letters handed out flowered invitations to her tenants and had given me a handful to deliver.

The invitations read:

> A PARTY CELEBRATING THE ARRIVAL OF THE NEW YEAR OF OUR LORD NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FORTY-FOUR WILL BE HELD AT THE HOME OF MRS. IRENE PLAUT ON DECEMBER THIRTY-ONE, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FORTY-THREE. IT WILL COMMENCE AT THE HOUR OF EIGHT AND END AT THE HOUR OF TWELVE-THIRTY-SEVEN,

WHICH IS THE HOUR THE LATE MISTER WENT TO MEET OUR MAKER ON THIS SELF-SAME DATE TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO. FOOD AND REFRESHMENTS AND APPROPRIATE BEVERAGES WILL BE SERVED. APPROPRIATE DRESS AND BEHAVIOR IS EXPECTED.

IRENE ZENOBIA PLAUT

Mrs. Plaut had handed me the stack of invitations in little blue envelopes after we had one of our regular morning discussions about food stamps. This discussion particularly baffled me.

"There will be a new pork bonus from the Office of Price Administration after the start of the new year," she explained slowly. "Spare stamp number two in ration book four will be worth five points of fresh pork and sausage, not smoked or cured pork or bacon."

"Yes," I said, standing in her sitting room on the first floor and trying not to check my watch. Actually, there was no point in checking my watch. It had belonged to my father and was the only thing I had of his. It never told the correct time. Edgar Guest or Will Rogers or someone once said that even a stopped watch is right twice a day. My father's watch kept running but jumped back and forth in time. I once tried to have it fixed, but the watchmaker said he couldn't see anything wrong with it.

"It's jinxed," he had declared professionally. "Not the first one I've seen jinxed like that."

He charged me a quarter. I kept wearing the watch.

"Are you listening, Mr. Peelers?" Mrs. Plaut asked.

Mrs. Plaut had decided when I moved into her boardinghouse that my name was Tony Peelers and that I was a full-time exterminator and part-time book editor. These misconceptions were a combination of misunderstood conversations and Mrs. Plaut's unswerving hold onto whatever initial conclusions she drew. I had learned to go along quietly.

"I'm listening," I said. "Pork."

"Pork," she repeated. "This change will be good only from January two to January fifteen, which will be a Saturday. Spare stamp number one, which has been good for fresh and cured pork, will expire on January two."

"I see," I said, having no idea what she was talking about but understanding she wanted me to turn over some of my ration stamps to her. I had brought my ration books down from my room, anticipating this because Mrs. Plaut had awakened me at seven-thirty by opening the door to my room, mop in hand, and announcing, "We must not waste the day."

There were no locks on the rooms in Mrs. Plaut's boarding-house. There was no need for an alarm clock, providing you wanted to get up no earlier than seven-thirty.

I had been lying on the mattress on the floor, wearing my boxer shorts and a bleary, unshaven look of semiconfusion on my battered face. I'm no beauty. My nose is almost flat, my hair is dark but showing more than a little gray. I'm compact, meaning I'm somewhere between five-eight and five-ten depending on where I measure myself. I look like a washed-up boxer who had ten too many fights. In my profession, private investigator, the look was perfect.

I had dressed quickly, rolled the mattress back on the bed, put on clean if slightly creased pants, and hurried to the only washroom on the floor to wash and shave. The other residents of Mrs. Plaut's were already downstairs, awaiting breakfast and me. Mrs. Plaut always waited until we were all seated in her small dining room before serving.

At breakfast that morning, Mrs. Plaut had handed out invitations like summonses. The first went to my closest friend, Gunther Wherthman, the less-than-four-foot-tall Swiss little person, who had once been in the circus and had appeared in *The Wizard of Oz*. Gunther made his living by translating documents, books, and articles from more than a dozen languages for pub-

lishers and the U.S. government. He took the invitation with a nod of his head and an adjustment of his perfectly pressed three-piece suit. Gunther wore a suit and tie and carefully polished shoes every day even though he worked at the desk in his room.

Other invitations were handed to Emma Simcox, a good-looking, lean woman in her forties, who worked in the office at the May Company. According to Mrs. Plaut, Miss Simcox was her grandniece. Mrs. Plaut's pallor was the color of mountain snow. Emma Simcox was definitely a light-skinned Negro. There was no sign of family resemblance, but Miss Simcox did call Mrs. Plaut "Aunt Irene."

Ben Bidwell, who smiled when he took the invitation, was a car salesman at Mad Jack's in Venice. He was about fifty, skinny, dark-haired, and one-armed. The lost arm went missing somewhere at Verdun. Emma Simcox was quiet and shy. Bidwell was either bouncy and full of bad jokes or so depressed that he couldn't talk.

We already had the beginning of a great New Year's Eve party.

Breakfast, as I recall, had consisted of coffee, orange juice, Eggs Garfield Surprise, and Spam covered with a pasty, gray layer of sauce. No one asked what was in the Eggs Garfield Surprise. No one wanted to know. It didn't taste bad.

Throughout our discussion of pork stamps, Mrs. Plaut's bird had squawked, making conversation just a little bit more difficult. Mrs. Plaut had not heard the bird, whose wide variety of screeches and sounds that resembled words could be heard throughout the house when she left her door open. She changed its name regularly, not because she kept forgetting but because, as she said so pithily, "Variety is the spite of life."

The bird's current name was Pistolero.

I had delivered the invitations dutifully to everyone, including my brother, Phil, and his family; my office landlord and friend, the poet Jeremy Butler and his wife, Alice Pallice Butler; my mechanic,

No-Neck Arnie; Sheldon Minck, D.D.S., inside of whose office at the Farraday Building I had my closet-with-a-window that served as my working address; Violet Gonsenelli, Shelly's secretary-receptionist; and Juanita, the bespangled sixty-plus-year-old soothsayer with a never-to-be-lost Bronx accent.

It promised to be quite a party.

For the next two weeks I went to my office, listened to Shelly tell me about his new plan to use high-speed water jets to clean teeth "just like fire hoses," and avoided making bets on any fights with Violet, whose husband, Rocky, was a promising middleweight whose career had been interrupted by the war. Rocky was serving somewhere in the Pacific. I had some minor work done on my Crosley by No-Neck Arnie, whose son was in uniform somewhere in Italy.

I had lunch almost every day at Manny's Tacos on the corner, listening to poetry Jeremy had written and doing my best to avoid Juanita, who always had something important to tell me about my future. Juanita was usually right, but what she told me never made much sense until after it happened.

As for work, I had one job for a week filling in at night for the house detective at the Roosevelt Hotel, and I did four days at Hy's For Him clothing store on Melrose. Someone had been getting away with suits again. I basically sat in my Crosley for hours outside of Hy's and tailed whoever came out looking bulky or carrying something that could hold a passable gabardine jacket. It took three days. The thief was one of Hy's new salesmen, a wounded war vet named Sidney, who walked with a limp and was reselling Hy's inventory to pay for a morphine habit he had picked up in the army.

Then came the day before the new year began. I had been at my office with nothing much to do except listen to the arguments of a trio of panhandlers who did something like living in the small, square, cluttered concrete lot five stories down below my open

window. I looked at the photograph on the wall across from my desk. It wasn't far away. There was just enough room in the former storage room for my desk and two chairs for drop-ins or the occasional clients I was forced to meet here instead of someplace more impressive.

The photo on the wall was of me, my father in the middle, and my brother, Phil. Phil looked older than his fourteen years. I looked like a kid with a goofy smile who was not destined to grow up beautiful. At our feet was our German shepherd, Kaiser Wilhelm. My father, in his grocer's apron, wore a sad smile as he clutched his sons to him. My mother wasn't in the picture. She had died giving birth to me, which caused a lifelong resentment from my brother, who was now a Los Angeles police lieutenant.

On the wall to my left was a large painting, a woman holding two babies and looking down lovingly at them. The traditional-looking painting had been a gift from Salvador Dalí, a former client. I seldom told people the painting was by Dalí, and I only told those who asked and who I knew wouldn't believe me when I told them.

The *Los Angeles Times* lay open in front of me. Army bombers were hitting Jap bases in the Marshall Islands, particularly Kwaja. In Italy, the Fifth Army was on the Casino Road and battling in San Vittorio. They were on the way to Rome. Inevitably, but at a price, they would get there in a few weeks.

Mrs. Plaut had told me to dress "nicely" for the party, which was why, although I needed the money, I took my pay from Hy in the form of a lightweight gray seersucker. I called Anita to tell her I'd be picking her up at seven-thirty and told her about my new suit.

"What color?" she asked.

"Gray, seersucker."

"Let Gunther pick out your tie," she said.

I was going to anyway, but I said, "Okay."

I had known Anita since high school, had taken her to the prom, and had lost track of her for more than two decades, a marriage and divorce for each of us, a daughter for her. I had run into her at the Regal drugstore, where she worked behind the counter. We were comfortable together right away.

Anita was nothing like my ex-wife, Anne, who had left me because she wanted a husband not a kid who kept aging. Anne was a few years younger than me, with a beautiful dark face and full body and more style than I had ever deserved. She was married now to a B-movie star. I actually liked him. Anita was thin, blonde, and good-looking, particularly when she tried and wasn't worn out from a day of dishing out burgers, Cokes, and cole slaw.

I decided to reread the funnies and was just moving from "Brick Bradford" to "The Little King" when the phone call came through.

"There's a guy on the phone," Violet said. "Says he has to talk to you. Didn't give his name but did a rotten imitation of Cary Grant. Almost as bad as Dr. Minck's."

I picked up the phone.

"Toby Peters," I said.

"Cary Grant," he said. "A former client of yours, Peter Lorre, told me you'd be the right person to handle a delicate job."

"Peter Lorre," I said.

"Yes, I did *Arsenic and Old Lace* with him about a year ago. He mentioned your name. I asked some questions and here I am."

"And you're Cary Grant?"

"Born Archibald Alexander Leach in Bristol, England. Became a U.S. citizen two years ago and am now officially Cary Grant and in need of some very confidential help from a reliable investigator."

"Okay," I said. "Let's meet."

"How about tomorrow?" he said. "My wife's throwing a New Year's party tonight. I think it would be better if I came to your office. I don't want Barbara, my wife, knowing about this."

"Name the time," I said.

"How does eleven in the morning suit you?" he asked. "It will give us both plenty of time to sleep. I know I'll need it. My wife's parties go on most of the night."

"You have my address?" I asked.

"Yes."

"My office is modest," I said.

"That sounds like what I need. See you tomorrow."

He hung up. That was how it started.