

BILLIE THE KID

Rick Wilber

Rick Wilber's extended family is filled with talented women athletes: high school and college basketball players, soccer stars, cross-country runners and track sprinters and more. It's no wonder he often offers fictional versions of these fine athletes in his stories. Here's one of those fictional versions, playing shortstop for the Hollywood Stars baseball club in the Pacific Coast League of the 1940s even as she's busy saving the worlds. Moe Berg, famous World War II spy and ballplayer who features in a number of Rick's stories, plays a more minor role in this one, as does the woman-of-many-names (here, she's Eddie Bennett) who's Moe's spy handler and sometimes lover. And a number of Hollywood celebrities show up, too, including the glamorous Hedy Lamarr, who really did co-invent a patented frequency-hopping radio-guided torpedo system that, perhaps, might have worked something like the way it does in this story.

Captain Nobukiyo Nambu
Aboard Submarine I-401
Solana Beach, CA
August 9, 1945

It is four A.M. Captain Nobukiyo Nambu of the Japanese Sentoku class submarine I-401, the largest submarine in the world, is not a stupid man. He knows the war is unwinnable now, but he has his orders, and he will follow them. But as he sits at his tiny desk in his captain's quarters and looks once again at the decoded message from six days ago, he can only shake his head. Operation Cherry Blossoms will not change the final outcome, though there will be carnage, to be sure, when his three planes attack. Three planes, that is all. Two will defend the third, the one that carries the new superbomb the Germans call Das Biest. It is capable of destroying a city. That city is Los Angeles.

The bomb will incinerate the city of angels. Tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds

of thousands, will die. His two German scientists, the ones who have attended Das Biest since it was brought aboard in Bergen, Norway, two months ago, are certain it will work. Their only fear, in fact, is that it might ignite the entire atmosphere, destroying all life on Earth. The odds of that, they think, are very low.

It is insanity to take such a risk. Even if this superbomb works as it should, it will, in the long run, change nothing. The Empire is exhausted, and the only possible outcome from Operation Cherry Blossoms might be a better bargain for the inevitable surrender. What is more likely, Nambu thinks, is that a furious America will wreak even more vengeance on a depleted Japan. More incendiary firestorms destroying more cities attacked by the nearly untouchable Superfortress bombers. An invasion of the home islands by a million furious American soldiers. There will be incalculable losses on both sides, to be sure; but mostly it will be the Japanese who will die.

Nambu thinks of his wife and his daughter. They have been in Nambu's parents' home for months now in Yamanashi Prefecture, where they have a splendid view of Mount Fuji. He hopes that view is soothing for them as they struggle to find food and survive this dreadful war. At least they are away from the terrible firestorms of Tokyo and Yokohama. He thinks of the families of all his crew. He thinks of all that has happened and all that is about to happen. But his orders are his orders. And they came directly from the Imperial Japanese Navy Headquarters in Hiyoshi, Yokohama, written by Vice-Admiral Miwa himself and handed to Nambu on the morning of the day the I-401 left its submarine pen and headed east.

Miwa's orders were in considerable detail, starting with a hurried journey across the Pacific, through the Drake Passage and then north and east in the Atlantic, and finally to Bergen, Norway, to pick up the superbomb and bring it to the coast of California. The journey would need to be a swift one, because the bomb was alive and ready to be armed; but the Reich was nearly dead.

The I-401 reached Bergen on May 3 and left with the weapon on May 4. The loading and refitting was chaotic, with Nambu's crew doing much of the dock work to get it done. Germany surrendered on May 7, but by then the I-401 was well into its journey to the coast of California, where further orders would come.

The Vice-Admiral had visited the I-401 himself to hand deliver the orders, coming out of the Hiyoshi tunnels where most of the Imperial Navy's leadership now lived and worked to wish Nambu and his crew great success. The Empire's future depended on them.

And now here they are, off that coast, and Nambu, who was on radio silence for all those many weeks of dangerous travel, broke that silence only once, six days ago, at noon, to confirm he was in position and to receive the simple coded message: Launch Cherry Blossoms. Nambu acknowledged receiving the order, and all has been silent since.

Surely the Americans heard this message and decoded it. But could they know of the I-401 and its location? Nambu thinks not, but just minutes ago his radar operator reported a single blip to the north out over the water, perhaps thirty kilometers away but headed directly toward them, so that is a worry.

Nambu rises from his desk, walks forward to the control room, takes a look around at the crew, his men, loyal fighters all. They will do what they are told. But Nambu himself? His days of fanaticism are long gone now. He is a realist. Japan is starving, and dying, and losing the war. But he has his orders.

He asks for the periscope, looks through the eyepiece to see the same scene he saw an hour ago. He is three thousand yards offshore of the predawn California coastline, and the streetlights are bright, cars are driving on the Pacific Coast Highway with their headlights on, homes atop the coastal bluffs have their lights on, and

there is even a bonfire on the beach, with crowds of people dancing around it, celebrating one thing or another. Crazy Americans, who think their war is over and they've won. Nambu doesn't know what, in particular, they are celebrating. He doesn't know that the *Indianapolis* was torpedoed on its way to Tinian and Little Boy went down with the ship. He doesn't know about Bockscar and the Fat Man and the mushroom cloud over Tokyo Bay. He doesn't know how the emperor and his advisers are battling over the question of unconditional surrender even as Nambu stares into his periscope.

What he does know is that those Americans on the beach, dancing and drinking around that bonfire, won't be celebrating for long.

Nambu's boat, his I-401, is the pride of the Imperial Japanese Navy, or what's left of it. I-401 can travel around the Earth without refueling, has a crew of two hundred and ten officers and men, plus those two very important German scientists and their translator. It has a pair of anti-aircraft deck guns that can fire incendiary rounds at a rate of nine rounds per minute and can hit a target two miles away, and it has a main deck gun that can fire a 5.5-inch shell that can hit targets more than nine miles away. And, most importantly for Operation Cherry Blossoms, it carries those three fighter-bombers.

Yes, it carries airplanes. The Sentoku class submarines are aircraft carriers. I-401 can surface and launch all three of its planes inside of thirty minutes. In less than an hour, just before dawn, those planes will launch and fly north toward the Channel Islands, and then sweep in toward Long Beach and Malibu and Hollywood, staying low, below the radar. Then, still out to sea, two of them will stand by to fend off any planes rising from the naval air station, and the third, the one carrying Das Biest, will rise and rise to twenty thousand feet and circle over the city and drop Das Biest. If it works as promised, hundreds of thousands will die in the bright fury of that bomb, and the emperor and Hirohito, it is hoped, will have the bargaining chip they need.

One more look, Nambu thinks. He looks through the eyepiece. He does a quick look around, all the way around, turning himself with the periscope to make sure there's nothing in sight, no U.S. Navy or Coast Guard or a lonely fisherman. There's nothing. He looks back to the shore. He can read the large well-lit sign that sits atop the bluffs above the beach. "Solana Beach Is Proud of Its Civic Progress" he says aloud in English, and then says it again in Japanese. And he steps away.

Nambu utters the command: "Blow negative," and I-401 begins to surface. A half-hour from now his planes will unfold their wings and, one by one, be catapulted from the submarine, and Das Biest will bring hell itself to Los Angeles.

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**Billie the Kid
Kirkwood Manor
Kirkwood, Missouri
August 9, 2021**

Billie "the Kid" Davis, ninety-four years old, is newly awake, lying on her back in her bed in her small apartment in Kirkwood Manor, where she's been for four years now, house having been sold, friends having died.

Life is more constricted now for Billie, what with the worries about her heart and the difficulties with the artificial hip that she got ten years back, and all the rest of the things one accumulates from an active life. But her mind is active, if a little dodgy on the details of the here and now. But her long-term memory is excellent, as it ought to be. Billie the Kid lived a most memorable life. It's fun to get her started talking about those days.

Billie hears the door opening, and there is Josephine coming in to help her sit up

and eat breakfast and help her get to the bathroom afterward to take care of the necessities and get washed up a bit and brush her teeth and make herself presentable.

Her caregiver's name is actually Tonia, but Tonia doesn't mind being Josephine when that's what Billie needs. Josephine was the name of the nanny who did the hard work of raising rambunctious Billie back in the 1930s. Billie talks about Josephine and everything else from those days a lot lately, recalling the good and the bad and the frightening and the loving and the heroic and the cowardly of an interesting life in St. Louis, in Hollywood, in Chicago, in Hiroshima, in Buffalo, in Paris, in Cape Town, and, circling back to the St. Louis area, these last five years here in Kirkwood Manor.

Together, Tonia and Billie get the teeth brushed and the toilet done and her body washed down with soap, water, and a washcloth. Then Tonia helps her to her sitting room, where there's a nice lounge that she can sit in and watch television or read a book or, like today, relax and tell her stories, all of which Tonia has heard, all of which are incredible, from playing baseball in post-war Japan, to the safaris in South Africa, to running the nightclub in Paris, to marching for Tonia's rights in the 1960s and her own rights years later. Courage, Tonia marvels, that's the mark of Billie's life.

"Could you fluff this pillow, Josephine?" Billie asks. "I've got a ballgame tonight, and I really could use a nap."

"Of course, dear," says Tonia, and fluffs up the pillow the way Billie likes it, so she's looking straight ahead, looking right into the past.

Billie smiles at Tonia. "I'm going to tell you a story that I haven't told anyone, Josephine. You'll have to keep it secret, all right?"

"For sure," says Tonia. "Not a peep."

"Good," Billie says. "Take a seat over there in that chair and get comfortable. This may take a while."

Tonia sits down. She's holding her phone in her hands in her lap. She taps and the phone starts recording.

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Billie the Kid Hollywood Stars Baseball Club July 10, 1945

In 1945 I was interim player-manager for the Hollywood Stars baseball club. I was called Billie the Kid in those days, and I was a slick-fielding shortstop with a great glove, a strong arm, and a bat that was just good enough for the Pacific Coast league. I was seventeen years old, and looked younger than that, but I could play the game. All arms and legs, five foot eight and one hundred ten pounds soaking wet; but if you slapped out a sharp one in the hole or up the middle I would get to it, and then, one way or another, I'd get the ball to first.

In the dugout I was the boss, the manager, the skipper; and I was in charge of things, from figuring out the lineup and the batting order to working out the pitching rotation and arguing with the umps and fining anyone who showed up late for batting practice.

It was a difficult job, but I was getting better at it as the months went by. This was July, and Moe Berg, our regular manager, had left right after opening day in April on another of his extended leaves that he wouldn't tell us about. We knew that Eddie Bennett from Wise Studios had gone with him, like she'd done a few other times over the past two seasons, so the rumor mill had some fun for a day or two; but down deep we all knew it had something to do with the war and stopping Hitler and Hirohito, so we put it aside, hoped for the best for them both, and got back to playing ball.

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It's a gift, playing baseball. Catching and throwing, hitting a curveball, running

the bases; all of it. I must have inherited those skills from my mother, though she never had the chance to use them. She did play a mean game of tennis at the country club back in St. Louis, and had a handicap of five hitting from the women's tee in golf. But softball, much less baseball, was something she'd never tried. Dad was an engineer and designer and a pilot, and the only sport he had any interest in was golf, which he hated; but it was the social glue in his company, so to be sociable he went out every few weeks and suffered through a round.

But I had the gift for baseball. It came to me easily as a child, and I fell in love with it and played it at one level or another my whole life. I wish I could still go out and play catch right now with my great-granddaughters like I used to when they came to visit. One of them, Terina, loved baseball and kept telling me she wanted to play in the major leagues. Her mother, Jessica, and her father, Calixto, and her grandmothers and grandfathers and me, we all told her she could if she was good enough and tried hard enough. She had the tools, I told her, and I know them when I see them. I had them myself, long ago, back in Hollywood, when I got my chance to play the game and meet the people who mattered most to me as I worked with them to change the worlds. Me and Moe and Eddie and Hedy and my dad, the five of us, we changed things for the better.

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Billie took a sip of water, smiled at Josephine, and went on:

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It's a suburb now, but Kirkwood, just west of St. Louis, was its own small town in the 1930s, and I liked it there fine. I had friends I played ball with through the long, hot summers; and I did okay in school. I liked to read, I liked math and history, and I loved to play shortstop. I didn't know how lucky I was that no one told me I couldn't play, starting with my mother and from there to the Khoury League coaches in our town and the high school coach at St. Joseph's Academy where I spent my first year-and-a-half of high school.

St. Joe's, as we called it, was then and still is today an all-girls Catholic prep school run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, who felt that exercise was just as necessary for their girls as academics. For me, that exercise was baseball, or softball when I had no other option.

My coach was Sister Barb Brunsman, who was an all-around athlete herself, in the mold of Babe Didrikson. Like the Babe, Sister Barb played golf and tennis and baseball in the hot St. Louis summers, wearing her dark blue habit, the long skirt of it tied up around her knees so she could move. She coached our softball team to the league championship both years I was there. We competed hard for Sister Barb against the other eight all-girls Catholic schools, sliding into second to break up double plays, and crashing into the catcher at home if that's what it took. Sister Barb liked that attitude.

And then on the side Sister Barb brought a lot of the girls from those other schools onto our field on weekends, even in the dead of winter when the weather allowed, and we'd get to know and like each other, as ballplayers and friends, playing baseball, hardball, the real thing; taking batting practice against her rifle arm and then taking infield as she hit us grounders and flyballs with her fungo bat. Sister Barb said it was important, what we were doing. I just thought it was the most fun I'd ever had.

I didn't quite realize it until years later, in the nineteen-sixties, at the end of my career after playing for the Hollywood Stars, and the Hiroshima Carp in post-war Japan and the White Sox and the Cardinals and the Bisons; but what I loved most about the baseball even in those days was the simple joy of playing the game. Sure, the score mattered; but being poised at shortstop as the pitcher sent one in, sinking into those moments in time when I could see the bat strike the ball and know instantly where the ball was going and what I needed to do to get there, to get my

glove down in front or backhand it to the side or take it on the short hop and cradle it in the middle or dive for it and feel the ball in the pocket as I hit the infield dirt and was already starting to get to my knees to rise as I reached to grab the ball and throw it to first without so much as a look at the first baseman. It was marvelous, getting completely lost in those moments, being one with the game. There was a lot happening in those moments, and all of it was perfect and fluid and good.

Anyway, it was good, too, that I had baseball, because I didn't have much else to love for the longest time. I wasn't pretty, not in the way the boys liked you to be in those days, or even the girls. I wasn't cute or coy or charming, so I was lonely when I wasn't with my teammates. But that was all right, it gave me more time to practice. I was, after all, a ballplayer. Even in grade school, out on the playground at recess at Mary Queen of Peace, there was no red rover for me, no games of tag, no dodgeball. Me and my little group of friends played ball on the asphalt parking lot behind the school and church with the field lines painted on. That was plenty good enough for me; at least the bounces were true.

It was 1935, but our little family was well off by Depression standards. Daddy designed airplanes and flew them. He was an engineer and designer and test pilot for Roberts Aircraft in St. Louis, and he was proud of his work. He was principal designer for the Roberts RA-2 passenger plane. They wanted that plane to compete with the DC-3 from Douglas Aircraft. Dad's design was sturdy and solid and his RA-2 seated more people in more comfort for longer flights than the DC-3, and so the plane sold well and that made his career. He was famous in aeronautical circles.

Dad trusted every strut, every piece of metal and cable, every piston and cam in those two engines, every inch of the variable-pitch propellers, every aileron and rudder and wing flap in that plane. It was all-metal, stressed-skin construction, that single wing set low, and retractable landing gear. It was a perfect machine, sturdy and safe and wonderful to fly.

He was his own best test pilot, and he flew hundreds of hours in it, getting it perfected, so he wasn't surprised when the plane became a success, and he was proud to be its principal designer. What's more, all that flying in the RA-2 gave me the chance to learn how to fly, too. Once the RA-2 was certified, Dad would take me up whenever I wanted, flying around that part of the Midwest for an hour or two, me in the copilot's seat, learning how to fly when Dad would give me the controls and guide me through it. I was a natural. Eventually I got my pilot's license, the youngest girl ever to get one. As a sophomore in high school, when I wasn't in class or playing baseball, I was in the air, flying. It was amazing, becoming one with a plane, feeling like it was an extension of my own arms and legs, like it responded to what I wanted or, a couple of times when there was trouble, what I needed.

Those were heady days for us. My parents had good jobs and we had money during those hard times, and St. Louis was a nice place to live. Dad's designs were innovative, and he was awfully proud of them. Mom was director of nursing at St. Louis General Hospital and the first one they called whenever emergencies cropped up at the steel mills or the stamping plants or the shoe factories and, one time, one horrible time, at the airfield.

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She stopped again, took another good sip of that water, looked over at Tonia and there was a light on now in those eyes; she was in the here and now, looking back. "You recording all this, Tonia?" she asked. "I want you to. I want you to know what the truth is about things."

Tonia held up the phone. "Got it all right here, Billie. Every word."

"Thank you, Tonia," Billie said. "I don't say that often enough to you, or even call you by the right name," she chuckled a bit at herself. "But I do appreciate everything

you do. I really do.”

“Happy to, Billie,” Tonia said, and Billie went on:

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I was an only child, so my parents paid attention to me when they could, though both were busy. I had a nanny named Josephine who pretty much raised me. She loved baseball as much as I did, and she told me, don't let anyone stop you from playing. She told me about all the great ballplayers who couldn't play in the major leagues; Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige and Cool Papa Bell and Judy Johnson and Oscar Charleston. Those players are all in the Baseball Hall of Fame now, but back then only Black America knew much about any of them. When the Kansas City Monarchs came to St. Louis to play the Crawfords in an exhibition game, I was twelve years old, and Josephine took me to the game, where I was welcomed by everyone around us when she told them I was a player myself and the star of my high school team. The game was wonderful, the crowd was wonderful; but I was sad to see that Judy Johnson wasn't a woman at all, but just another guy.

Still, it was baseball, and that was all that mattered to me.

When school wasn't in session I played sandlot baseball until I was thirteen, when I tried out for the St. Louis Wanderers, a semi-pro club that traveled around the Midwest in the summer. I told them I was fifteen and they didn't believe me, but they loved my fielding and my arm and my attitude, and they kept me on the team. And that was really where it all started, barnstorming around in towns like Cairo and Cape Girardeau and Joplin and both Springfield and Jefferson City and Kirksville and all the other stops in a thirty-game summer. Josephine chaperoned me when we stayed overnight, and Mom and Dad, of course, paid for nice rooms in boarding houses. I called Mom every day to share how things were going.

It was a golden summer for me, hanging out with ballplayers not all that much older than me and learning how to play the game to win, instead of just for the joy of it. At the end of the summer, with school starting in September, I had to hang up my Wanderers uniform and go start high school at St. Joseph's, where Sister Barb already knew all about my baseball talent and wanted to see what else I could do, so it was cross-country in the fall and basketball in the winter, because shortstops need strong legs. I was no great shakes in cross-country, but I turned out to be a quick forward in basketball. Six-on-six is how we played it in those days, with three girls on each side of midcourt who couldn't cross over, so really it was three-on-three, and you played offense or defense all the time. There was a real premium for girls who could shoot from outside or dribble and drive to the basket and make their layups. That was me, and I sometimes scored as many as thirty or forty points a game.

I liked basketball. It took good hands, good vision, a sense of where you are on the court, the courage to mix it up underneath for rebounds, and stamina; a lot of stamina. I was good at all that.

But it wasn't baseball, and it was in the spring—an early warm one that year in St. Louis with the irises and crocuses and daffodils coming up in early February—that I shined. Sister Barb told me years later that she knew while watching me take infield that first day of tryouts that I'd be her star and that I could pretty much play for anybody.

She was right, and I was lucky that she saw right away that I could play the game. But there was also a lot I could do to get better, and it was Sister Barb who got me there, working on short hops, working on my backhand, working on throwing across my body or staying low to throw the ball from down where I caught instead of straightening up to send it over to first. And my hitting? Well, she worked like crazy on my hitting and she had the pitching arm to make it a challenge. I prospered.

Classes were fine, the Sisters of St. Joseph weren't as mean as the Sisters of Loretto had been at my Catholic grade school, and I had that sports success to buoy me. I was happy.

I'd never known anything but happiness, really, though I didn't think of it that way. I expected good things to happen and they did. For every strikeout or groundout in baseball there was a single or a double to make things all right. For every shot I missed in basketball there were two others that I made. For every Latin test I struggled with there was a day when I read a page of Cicero and actually understood some of it. I had friends, too; most of them teammates but one of them a chemistry lab partner, Ellen King, who I really liked. She was cute and funny and bubbly, and all of those were things I'd never been and never would be, but we liked each other.

It was all very innocent. Over the summer break, when I wasn't playing ball with the Wanderers, I was over at Ellen's house. I'd ride my bike there and we'd play tennis and swim in the pool. Her dad was a doctor and well off, like we were. Life was good. Life was great, in fact, a kind of helium balloon that was rising and rising and carrying me along from sports to schools to friends.

And then it all came down to Earth in less than a minute, that whole good life, ruined by a falling glider a few months into the school year.

Roberts Aircraft wanted to win a government contract for a military glider that could be towed behind the RA-2 and carry twenty soldiers and their gear to a battlefield and land safely. Father's team was in charge of the wings for that glider. His wing-strut design saved money and kept the cost down so Roberts had the low bid and got the contract.

And then, on a bright Sunday afternoon in November, a nice warm day the way St. Louis can be sometimes that time of year, Dad's wing strut failed, and ten people died, and all the air went out of that happiness balloon.

It happened this way. We were all there watching, sitting in the special VIP seats that had been set up in front of the hangar. The glider had been on a trial flight that morning, towed to two thousand feet by a new Air Corps RA-2 and then released to glide down to a smooth landing at the newly named Lindbergh Field. Dad had been copilot on that test flight, keeping an eye on the wings he'd designed. The flight was smooth as silk as they climbed, and then the tow-plane set them free, and the pilot, a man I called Uncle Milton, the top test pilot they had and Dad's best friend, brought her down in three slow spirals to the right, lower each time until they touched down on that new concrete landing strip. It was perfect.

Many years later, as he lay dying of prostate cancer and wanted to unburden his soul, Dad told me that as they'd spiraled down on that test flight he'd felt a vibration on the right side that he didn't like. After they landed he walked around that wing and it looked fine. He pushed and pulled and tugged on the wing and it felt perfectly fine. The mayor was there with some city politicians, the archbishop was there, some army brass, too, and the president of the company, Mathew Roberts, a guy who liked my dad a lot and Dad liked him in return. He told Dad they had to take it up and try and bank left and bring it on in. Later, even tomorrow, they could take that wing off and find out what was causing that vibration, right?

Right, said Dad, though he knew better.

At two in the afternoon we all listened as the mayor, Mr. Roberts, Archbishop O'Brien who'd done so much for the city, a couple of the Army Air Corps bigwigs who'd flown in from Washington D.C., and the others were all introduced, and the mayor said a few words about how important this was to St. Louis, which would henceforth be known for its aviation prowess. The archbishop blessed the glider and sprinkled some holy water on it, and then they all climbed aboard and the RA-2 towed them back up to two thousand feet and released them.

It was beautiful and then it wasn't. The glider looked good against that pale blue sky, and then it banked to the right to start circling in for a landing, and I felt a niggling of worry and then, sure enough, midway in that turn, clearly visible to all of us, the right wing buckled and then parted ways with the glider's fuselage, tearing out the side of the glider as it left, so that the wing and the fuselage and the passengers all fell, almost lightly it seemed to me, tumbling slowly to the Earth. There was no fire or explosion, just a loud crumpling noise of tearing fabric and broken metal and the sight of shattered and broken bodies, and that was that.

There were no survivors. For me, at thirteen, it was the most horrific thing I'd ever seen, knowing they were plummeting to their deaths in that fluttering ruin of a glider. Josephine took me home. Mom stayed to help, and Dad stayed behind to do what he could and to face up to the possibility that this was all his fault, that it was his wing strut, a special cost-saving, weight-saving design of his, that had failed.

Several terrible weeks later he was exonerated. It was the strut, sure, but the fabricator of the strut, the St. Louis company that manufactured it, was blamed. The strut design was perfect, but the metal held impurities, deadly tiny bubbles in the strut, and those had caused the strut to fail and the wing to fail and the deaths. Ironically, that company also built metal caskets.

Dad was allowed to resign and then was lucky to have a friend who worked at Hughes Aircraft out in Culver City, California, and Hughes had a new government contract to build wing struts for the B-25. Nobody knew wing struts better, or had learned harder lessons about their safety, than my dad. He was glad to get the job.

For me, sunshine and baseball all year around were my thirteen-year-old thoughts as we drove out there just before Christmas, leaving the sleet of St. Louis winters behind us to make our way to the West and a new start in life.

It also meant leaving you behind, Josephine, and that tore me up. You were more of a mother to me than my own mom. But Dad said we couldn't afford to pay you anymore, and when Mom argued with him about it, you were the one who solved it by saying no thanks, you'd stay in St. Louis with your family and all your friends. I know you were sad to see us go, and I know I was sad to leave you, but that's what we did.

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"I was torn up about that, too, Billie," said Tonia, playing her part. "I loved your whole family, and especially you, my rambunctious tomboy. But change is part of life, you know, Billie, and those were hard times."

Billie smiled at that, and went on.

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It worked out all right in Glendale, California. Mom found a nursing job, Dad was working a few steps below where he'd been in St. Louis, but it was a job in those hard Depression times and he still got to be a test pilot now and again. My flying hours went down but didn't disappear entirely. Mostly, I flew small planes like the AVRO Cadet biplane and an old dependable Curtiss Robin, but every now and then Dad would take me up with him in some planes meant to carry passengers, like the DC-4 or my old friend the RA-2, and he'd hand me the controls. Those were wonderful hours, flying those planes.

And when I wasn't flying or doing my schoolwork, I was playing baseball, either throwing some catch with Mom or, often, out in back of our house, throwing a ball hard against a concrete wall that ran along the side of the yard and then fielding the short hops that came back to me. The yard was bumpy, the hops uncertain, so it was great practice for a shortstop.

We weren't well-to-do anymore, but we had enough to get by, and the high school's baseball practice started in January in that warm sunshine. I caused a high school scandal by trying out for the team and a greater scandal when I made it and wound

up a starter. The boys joked at first, and then they quit laughing, and then they became good pals and teammates.

I liked it there in Glendale. Mom and I had left the Cardinals behind, back in St. Louis; but in March we went to see some baseball, cheering for the Hollywood Stars, the team that was owned by a bunch of Hollywood celebrities who'd often show up at the games. The Stars played in brand-new Gilmore Field, and we agreed to pretend to ourselves that they were every bit as good as the Redbirds had been in Sportsman's Park in St. Louis.

Life is full of setbacks; life is full of opportunities. You just keep playing, that's what I learned. Keep your butt down and the ball in front of you and make the play.

* * *

I hit .360 for Glendale Union High School in the spring of 1939 and was steady at shortstop. Then I ran cross-country the next fall and did fine there, too. There was no girls' basketball in the public high schools, but that was okay by me since baseball started in January and 1940 was magical for me. We had a great team. I was fifteen by then and a junior, but I held my own, hitting .420, making no errors in twenty-seven games and generally doing fine as we won the conference, then the state playoffs, and then the state championship. I was MVP for the team and the conference. I got a lot of ink in the local paper, and you could look all this up, it's true as it could be.

School was out for the summer by the time the high school baseball playoffs ended, so I immediately started looking for a summer job to help out with the expenses of a family that now lived on a budget. In those hard times a summer job might, at best, mean scooping ice cream at Buffalo Bob's, and I'd be lucky to get that. It was funny how wonderful life had seemed on the day we won the championship, and how dismal the summer looked just a couple of days later. There were no summer baseball leagues where I could play, no high school amateur leagues, no decent semi-pro teams. No job and no baseball. That sounded grim.

And then I saw an ad in the sports page of the *Glendale News-Press* announcing try-outs for the Hollywood Stars. It was a silly idea. I was the wrong gender and the wrong age and probably not nearly good enough anyway. But still, what did I have to lose? It's not like I was too busy to make the effort. So two days later I took the trolley from our house in Glendale to Gilmore Field in Hollywood. The field was new that year, built across the street from the old Gilmore Stadium and the Pan-Pacific Auditorium.

There were fifty or more would-be ballplayers out there when I walked onto the field, and more of them kept arriving as I loosened up. It looked to me like I was the youngest one there, for sure, and the only high school kid. None of my Glendale teammates were there, and I didn't recognize anyone except for the Stars' coaches and some of the owners who were standing there, trying to look like they knew something about the game. Hedy Lamarr, so beautiful I just stared at her for a few seconds, was there with some guy I didn't know. Barbara Stanwyck was there, too, and Gary Cooper, and George Burns but no Gracie Allen, and Zeppo Marx, and Bing Crosby, actually puffing on a pipe, and Gene Autry, the singing cowboy himself.

I was awestruck, I admit. I'd seen the stars before in the stands when Mom and I came to the games; but to have them watching me was something else entirely as we all loosened up, played some pepper, and ran some dashes up and down in the outfield. Then we got serious when they took the infielders like me into a few groups and hit us ground balls and popups. The coaches worked wonders with the fungo bats, making us move hard to glove the ball and then watching to see how our arms looked if and when we snagged it and threw to first.

I won't be coy about it, I stood out in all those infield drills, and as the day wore on and the coaches walked over to players one by one to say thanks for coming but

you're not ready yet, or you're not what we're looking for, or just sorry pal, our numbers thinned until it was just me out there. I must have gloved a hundred grounders by the time the manager of the club, a guy named Moe Berg, came over to pick up the fungo and send a few my way. I hadn't had an error all day and didn't have any trouble with the balls he sent, and after ten minutes or so of that he called me in.

He had a friend with him when I got up to him, and he was shaking his head at her and saying, "You're right, you're absolutely right, she's really special." And the woman was chuckling at that for some reason and then looked at me and smiled, and said, "You're Billie the Kid. It's really nice to meet you," and she held out her hand for a shake. "I'm Eddie Bennett."

"Pleased," I said and shook her hand. I didn't know her, and I didn't know what she meant by calling me Billie the Kid. I'd been Billie all my life and planned on keeping it that way, but if adding "the Kid" to it got me a spot on the team, I'd take it.

Moe Berg asked me, "How old are you, Kid?" and "Sixteen," I lied.

"And can you hit?"

"I led Glendale High to the state championship not two weeks ago, Mr. Berg," I said. "I hit .420 for the season."

"High school pitching," he said, and "Yes," I admitted. And he smiled at my admission and added, "All right, then, Kid. In a few minutes we'll have you take some batting practice so we'll see if you can hit at this level or not."

A few minutes later when I stepped into the batting cage to hit a few, I looked over at Moe Berg and thought he wasn't even watching. He'd walked over to talk with the celebrities, all of them laughing and joking and having a great old time, while the pitching coach, a tall, lanky Black guy named Quentin Reynolds that I knew from games where Mom and I had sat down by the bullpen, threw strike after strike my way, breaking some of them off as curveballs, changing speeds, hitting the corners, coming in high and tight or down and away. I got the job done. I wasn't going to hit for power, but I made good contact, had a nice swing, and I sprayed the ball around.

When I finished I looked over to Berg, and he and his friend Eddie were talking, Berg shaking his head and Eddie smiling. Then they walked over together toward me.

"Congratulations, Kid," Berg said, and handed me a single piece of paper. And, "You're going to do great, Billie the Kid," said Eddie Bennett. She gave me a quick hug and said, "I'll be seeing a lot of you, sweetie. Congratulations."

The piece of paper said Hollywood Stars Baseball Club at the top, and Moe Berg and Gene Autry had signed it at the bottom. I went home on the trolley that evening as a professional ballplayer, a shortstop for the Hollywood Stars. Five dollars a game if we lost, and ten if we won. That sure beat being a soda jerk at Buffalo Bob's. I sat there on the wooden slats of the seats on the trolley and held that contract like it had been handed to me on the mountain. And I thought about Eddie Bennett, who was the most beautiful woman who'd ever hugged me, including Mom and Josephine. And now as she'd hugged me, she'd said she'd be seeing a lot of me! It was almost too much to take.

I'd have to talk my parents into signing that contract, of course, and I'd have to admit that I was only fifteen years old, and once Eddie knew that she'd start treating me like a kid instead of "The Kid," but that was a risk I was willing to take.

Later, Dad didn't care and Mom was ecstatic, so she signed it for both of them. The next day, when I showed up at Gilmore Field during an off-day for the Stars and handed the contract to Moe Berg he noticed my age, but just raised an eyebrow, almost like he knew it was coming. Eddie Bennett wasn't around, and that disappointed silly fifteen-year-old me with my schoolgirl crush. She worked with Jacob Wise at Wise Studios, Berg told me, and wouldn't be around all that much. She had a movie studio to help run, so she couldn't make it to every game, either.

But that didn't matter. I was going to make it to every game—that was for sure. I

was a ballplayer, and I was on my way. Berg said I should be there tomorrow at ten A.M. for a one P.M. game.

I got in nice and early the next day, but Berg and the rest of the players were already there. When I knocked on the clubhouse door, he answered the knock and brought me in to meet my teammates. They'd rigged up a shower curtain on the showerhead closest to the doorway in the shower room for me, and they already had a separate one-person toilet room with a sink in it for the manager and the coaches, so I could use that. Otherwise I had the same open wooden locker and the same wooden slat folding chair and the same name written on a piece of white athletic tape on the top front of that locker like everyone else. Except mine said "Billie the Kid," and they all had a good laugh about that.

"Listen up, fellas," Berg told everyone as I stood there with him in the middle of the clubhouse. "This is Billie the Kid Davis, and she's gonna play some infield for us, now that Jorge's out with that broken ankle. We held a tryout yesterday and fifty-seven good ballplayers showed up. This player here, all five foot five of her, was the best one there and we sent the rest of them home."

He looked around. "She's your teammate, starting right now. Act like it. Anyone gets out of line, you'll answer to me. She's our shortstop, and you'll see why when you get out there and take some infield."

The clubhouse was quiet. Berg looked around, clapped his hands and said, "All right, guys, and girl, let's get out there for some batting practice."

The team stirred, then one guy, and then another, got up to head out through the tunnel that led from the clubhouse to the dugout. The first one of those players, Ray Dunne, our right-fielder, walked by me and said, "Good luck, Kid. Glad to have you," and that got everybody saying something like, "Give 'em hell out there, Kid, show your stuff," and "Go get 'em, Kid," and "Welcome, Kid," and the like as they headed out.

Then Berg pointed to his right and said, "Your locker's over there, Kid. Get your flannels on and let's show these lunkheads what you can do out there, all right?"

All right, I thought. No one said it was going to be easy, but I was going to earn my pay the only way I knew how. Glove. Ball. Bat. That's it. Simple game.

* * *

That season and the ones that followed were great for me, and I was too naïve to feel guilty about it as the country went from isolationist to waging a world war against cruel enemies. The Japanese were marching all over the Pacific, and the Germans were clobbering Europe, and by the 1941 season a lot of ballplayers went off to fight and only those too young, or too old, or too female stayed behind. Those were the days of Rosie the Riveter, and I was part of that, in my own way, playing baseball for the Hollywood Stars.

There were tough times, too. Awful times. Mom took ill in the Christmas flu epidemic of 1943, nursing soldiers and civilians alike who'd been laid low by that flu. She had it for weeks, struggling along at first and then slipping away from us after it went into pneumonia and even the new penicillin drugs couldn't stop it. Her death and the funeral got a lot of notice when all those celebrities showed up to say good things about her and mourn her passing.

Dad was as lost as he could be without her, which meant I moved from the apartment I'd rented near Gilmore Field back in with him; and as the months went by we slowly got a little better, the both of us. We did our best to cope.

I dedicated that 1944 season to her memory, and I played like a demon. I went from Billie the Kid, the girl phenom, to Billie "the Kid" Davis—yes, the nickname stuck—all-star shortstop. I'd been a curiosity at first, but over time, the novelty act part of it sort of faded away, and I became a shortstop who could do all those things the fans—and the coaches—like to see, diving stops, great backhands and rocket

sidearms and short hops and long ones and getting up in the air over second when it was double-play time.

They liked me, those fans, and paid money to see me play. That made the owners happy, and by the next year there were two more women playing in the PCL and then, after Pearl Harbor when most of the men headed off to the fight, more women made the teams, in Seattle and Portland and San Francisco and San Diego and Sacramento and even on the other Los Angeles team, the one out in the valley, the Angels.

By the 1944 season I'd graduated from high school and turned eighteen that July, and I was happy to be one of the dozen women playing in the PCL; mostly middle infielders like me, but a couple of them pitchers and one of them, our very own Babe, Didrikson, out in right for the Padres. We'd earned some respect, that dozen of us.

I was still a celebrity, though I was no cute Shirley Temple-type in a baseball uniform anymore. I was a couple of inches taller, a couple of years sturdier, a lot more experienced in the ways that losing your mother can grow you up and being in Hollywood can harden you.

I had friends from high school, sure, but mostly I hung out with my teammates and the celebrity owners, since they knew what life was like in the footlights.

The players were mostly good people, and even the celebrity owners were pretty decent under that slick veneer of fame and fortune. George Burns and Gracie Allen were maybe my favorites and I spent a lot of time at their house in Beverly Hills. It was a big place that seemed palatial to me, with a fancy swimming pool out back and a pool table upstairs. I would babysit their two small children sometimes and the three of us would play pool or go for a swim in that nice pool that, like the pool table, hardly ever got any use.

George and Gracie liked me because I was calm, and Catholic. Gracie was Irish Catholic and George was Jewish and they'd agreed to raise the kids Catholic until they were old enough to make up their own minds. That worked fine with me—we'd even say the rosary together sometimes—and all summer long George and Gracie would bring the kids to Gilmore Field for ballgames and I'd get the players to sign balls and caps for them. It was fun.

There were others I liked, too. Barbara Stanwyck, Gary Cooper, and Zeppo Marx, who were all nice to me as I grew up playing baseball right in front of them.

But the one I liked best was Hedy Lamarr. She was so beautiful that it took my breath away, but she would come up right to me and talk about baseball, which she'd learned to like for its complexity, she'd say, and then she'd chat about the weather or the news. She hated Hitler with a passion that I understood after Moe Berg explained to me how she was an Austrian Jew who'd fled her movie career in Europe and come to America to get away from Hitler and what he was doing to the people he'd conquered, especially to the Jews.

In those days, I didn't know how bad it was over there, but Hedy knew, and told me, and I believed her. She was about the smartest person I knew and she was always talking about her inventions and how they could be used against Herr Hitler. I thought she was joking or something, but no, she really was a great inventor. She and her pal George Antheil, a composer who wrote movie scores for all the studios, had invented a kind of frequency-hopping radio guidance system for torpedoes. They even had a patent on it! In 1942 the U.S. Navy was considering her and George's system for their torpedoes, but they wound up passing on it. Hedy and George decided to build the system anyway, and that mattered to me a couple of years later.

After Mom's death I started to think more about doing something important with my life. I could play baseball, and that was fine. But always I was thinking there had to be something I could do to help fight the fascists like Hedy was doing. I'd done everything patriotic that I could do in Southern California, even appearing in some

USO shows up and down the state as the famous Billie the Kid ballplayer, where I wore my Stars uniform and played catch with some soldiers in the audience and generally had a good time. I was nervous as hell doing that, but it always worked out. That was okay, but I wanted a chance to fight, to do something real. When Germany surrendered in May of 1945 I thought that was it for me. But you know what? That chance showed up after all.

* * *

Billie the Kid
Hollywood
July 1945

I was nineteen years old in 1945, no longer a kid though the nickname had stuck with me, and I was still playing ball for the Twinks, which was the insiders' nickname, because stars twinkle, you know. Moe Berg was still the manager, though he wasn't always there. When he wasn't, I was the one who took over as interim, sometimes just for a week or two, and once, in 1944, for two whole months.

In July of 1945 the team was doing well, but Moe was on some assignment again and I was running things. We were in a losing streak and playing an important game against the first-place Sacramento Solons. We were in front of a big crowd at Gilmore Field, most of them pretty raucous. We'd lost all three against the Solons up at their place, and they'd knocked us off our first-place perch into third in a tight race, but now we'd come to our place to play three, and we'd won the first two, so winning this third one would put us back on top.

In the bottom of the eighth we had a man on second and two outs and we needed a hit to bring him in. But the Solons had brought in their closer, a lefty named Jorge Ramirez who had a good enough fastball, but a great curveball that came in at the knees of a right-handed hitter and dropped from there. For most of our right-handed hitters, including Tammy Johnson, who was due up, that pitch was pretty much unhittable. I needed to bring in Bozo Clopton, who hit from the left side and might get the bat on the ball and tie the game up.

But Tammy and Miggy Mandala had been close, you know? And on that day we had dedicated the game to Miggy's memory. He'd been killed on Hacksaw Ridge in Okinawa a couple of weeks before, and we'd all just got the news. He'd died a hero, manning a machine gun he'd toted all the way up to the top of the ridge and then firing at the banzai counterattack of the Japanese, giving our guys the chance to retreat back down that ridge. He'd saved a lot of lives and we were proud of him, but a dead hero is still dead, and Tammy took it hard. I told her she could take the day off, but she wanted to play, and I wasn't going to say no to her. No surprise, she'd been shaky in the field and hitless on the day, and an at-bat that produced a hit and a win would mean a lot to her, you know, in honor of Miggy the Magician, as we'd called him before he'd enlisted. He had a great glove and that famous leaping, twisting throw to first on the double-play. He'd anchored second last season, but then he'd had that seventeenth birthday and signed up with the Marines, and now we'd heard he wasn't coming home. Okinawa had claimed him and seven thousand others. Carnage, but it had to be done as our soldiers took island after island on the long march to Japan. It made you shudder to think how bad it was going to be when the Marines landed on the Japanese homeland and the great finale to the Pacific War took place. Hundreds of thousands dead on both sides? A million? We were all guessing that landing would come in September—that final great battle against an implacable enemy. It would be horrible.

So I was thinking on it, standing on the top step of the dugout, my left foot up on the narrow concrete edging with the front cleats in the dirt, my right foot one step down, the team looking on from the dugout, the owners' row right behind me with

George Burns and Gracie Allen, and Gary Cooper, and Barbara Stanwyck, and Gene Autry and the rest of them all quiet for a change while I mulled it over. They probably felt like I did. I liked Tammy a lot; she'd paid her dues and earned her shot at this. And nobody liked Bozo, who earned his nickname by being an asshole with a heart murmur that kept him out of the service. But he was hitting .385 against lefties. And I liked being player manager, if you know what I mean. I wanted to keep the job, and an important win might help in that regard. Here we were in July and fighting for first place, and I'd like us to stay there. So I thought on it hard.

After we got the news about Miggy, we'd talked about it some in the clubhouse and decided to dedicate the game to him. Not that it would do him any good, but we'd play our hearts out for him, that was certain. Which we'd done, played out hearts out, and now here was the big moment. The game on the line, and me with a decision to make.

But there was that nasty curveball to consider.

Four or five of the owners were speaking up now from those box seats right behind me. "We need this win, Billie," said one. I knew that voice, Barbara Stanwyck. And "We gotta get the win, Billie," said another voice I knew, Gary Cooper. And "Don't get sentimental," said a third, and that voice was Gene Autry, back in the saddle.

And then "Tammy," said a voice I hadn't heard in years. I turned back to look up and there she was, Eddie Bennett.

She'd kissed me once on the lips, the day she was saying goodbye in September of 1941. I'd had a terrible crush on her and she knew it, and she treated me gently. She was older, in her twenties then, and so much more glamorous and worldly. And beautiful. And smart. And everybody liked her.

The kiss came after that one adventure I'd had, me and my dad and Eddie and Moe Berg. They fought the Nazis right here in L.A. and they'd stopped them cold. I saw it all happen. You probably know that story; it made all the newspapers. I was proud to be a part of it, though all I did was get my dad involved. The way they suckered them in, Moe and Dad pretending to be admirers of Hitler, setting up a meeting with Hans Diebel, who ran the German American Bund, our local Nazis, in Southern California. Diebel wanted to blow things up and help the Nazi cause, so Dad and Moe played him along, setting a trap for Diebel and, sure enough, he walked right into it. Dad worked for Hughes Aircraft and swore he had access to the new, huge Hercules flying boat, the one they called the Spruce Goose, the one that would carry two hundred troops and tanks anywhere on Earth or drop ten plane-loads of bombs on any target. Destroy that plane and set back the whole program for years, they told Diebel, and he could strike a blow for American fascism.

That plane wasn't past the drawing boards yet, but Diebel didn't know that. He wanted to believe in it so he could blow it up and make Hitler happy, and so he did believe in it, right up to the day he saw the one-tenth scale model that we'd used to take pictures to show him. There it was, sitting on a planning board right before the FBI cuffed him and took him away. That was, I have to tell you, a great moment.

I was just a gawky sixteen-year-old girl shortstop, and I looked every bit of sixteen then, from the acne on my face to the ponytail in my hair. But all that disappeared when I was playing baseball. As soon as I fielded a groundball or two, all the gawky disappeared and I turned into Billie the Kid again, the girl with the golden glove, the teen terror of the infield. That version of me, the brave one, is the me that Eddie Bennett chose to see instead of the gawky kid.

So after the big sting when the FBI shut down the Bund, Eddie celebrated our heroics by kissing me right on the lips. I sort of swooned when she finished the kiss, and she held me up and then leaned over to whisper in my ear, "You're going to do great things, Billie. Important things. Trust me."

And then she left.

I hadn't seen her since then. Weeks had gone by and I fretted and worried. It started to affect my play on the field, my glove work got sloppy, and my struggles at the plate deepened. I was hitting .220 or so and had three errors in the last five games when Moe Berg took me aside for a chat.

"She's gone, Billie," he said, getting right to the problem. He obviously knew about it. Hell, he'd probably laughed about my crush on Eddie as she and he made love together and then shared drinks, laughing about the teenager who thought the world of Eddie and had almost fainted with that one kiss.

"That's not it, Billie," Moe said, reading my mind. "She really likes you; but you're too young, you know? And even if you weren't, it couldn't have gone anywhere anyway. Know what I mean?"

"I know," I said, miserable.

"And she's got another job she's got to do, Billie. She had to leave town for now."

"She's gone?"

He nodded. "She's gone. It's going to be a while before she's back, too, Billie."

I knew what she did by then, of course. At least some of it; enough to know that I wasn't going to find out more. If she'd left it was for a good reason, that's for sure. She was off fighting the Nazis or the Japanese. She was a hero, a secret kind of hero.

"I hope she comes back some day," I said.

He smiled. "I bet she will, Billie. And you'll be older then, too." And he let that thought hang there for a while. Her? Me?

"She told me she'll be thinking of you, Billie," Moe said. "She told me you're the best shortstop she's ever seen."

Well, I knew that couldn't be true, but I liked it anyway.

"And," he added, "she said you needed to keep your head up. You're going to be doing your own important work, right here, playing ball, taking people's mind off the war, and maybe opening some doors, you know. Getting people to think about things."

He smiled, and I smiled right back. "Sure," I said. "Open some doors. All kinds of doors," and he kept smiling at me and I kept smiling back. Funny how we shared some things, Moe Berg and me, that as long as you kept it pretty quiet were all right in Hollywood. There was a lot of that going on. I got the message okay, back then, I'd keep my head up and play ball and do whatever else I could to help us beat the Germans and the Japanese. And I did, I played my part for four years. More women in the league, local little-league teams letting girls play, maybe cracking some doors open a little bit.

* * *

And now, right here, this moment, there she was, the woman who'd told me to play the game, winking at me. She didn't look a day older. She looked, in fact, as wonderful as ever. I froze for a second or two, and she said it again, softly, "Tammy. She'll get the hit."

"Billie?" Tammy was asking me from the on-deck circle. She knew she might be pinch-hit for in this situation. But I was looking at Eddie, who was talking to me, so softly that I couldn't hear her over the crowd noise, but I didn't need to. I could read those lips like anything. I nodded at her, turned to look over at Tammy. "Get us that base hit, Tammy," I said, and clapped my hands and then made a fist for her.

Three pitches later she did just that, a looper to short right that didn't get far enough out there to make it easy, but Orestes read it right and took off and when the throw to the plate was up the line he slid past the tag and across the plate with the tying run.

We won it in the ninth on a single, a sacrifice and a base hit, and so we all came out of the dugout to give each other hugs and shake hands and all the usual things you do when you win a close one. Then we trotted back toward the dugout, and I looked up to wave at Eddie and say hi, but she was gone.

In the clubhouse after the game I bought a round of beer. Maier's Golden Brew was

one of our sponsors and the beer wasn't bad, so that was what we had on ice in the cooler, and we all clinked the bottles together to celebrate the win. It was Tammy who raised her bottle and said, "For Miggy the Magician!" And we all toasted Miggy.

After that I showered in the women's stall, threw on a dress I had in the locker just in case I needed it, worked on my hair a bit and put on some lipstick and a little rouge and headed out to the parking lot. My dress-up paid off, because there was Eddie Bennett and, next to her, Moe Berg, who I hadn't seen in a couple of months.

They were both smiling and came my way and gave me hugs and hellos. Eddie included a kiss on the cheek. Damn, my heart went thumpity when she did that. Years later and I still had that crush.

She knew it, and I could tell she knew I wasn't a kid anymore, too.

"Great ballgame, Billie," she said, and Moe added, "Best thing I ever did was leave town so you could take over, Billie. Swear to god."

I laughed. "It was nice to get the win for Miguel, anyway."

They both nodded, faces grim. Then Eddie reached out to put her hand on my shoulder. "I'll get right to it, Billie," she said. "I need you."

There went that thumpity heart again. She was saying this in front of Moe Berg?

"It's about the war, Billie," Moe said. "It's something we have to do. It's way off the books, so we have to put it together ourselves, just a few of us. Nobody else can know. We need a pilot, a good one, a brave one. Someone who can fly a B-25 into danger and then keep her mouth shut about it."

"I'm your girl," I said as I was thinking, hell yes, this was my chance. Could I fly a B-25? Did the sun rise in the East and set in the West? Of course I could. It'd be nice, though, to get one into the air a couple of times for a little check-out time before I took part in whatever adventure these two had in mind. Still, there was no question about it.

"I knew you could count on you, Billie," she said. "We've got two weeks to get our little team ready." And it was Moe Berg who added, "So let's meet somewhere quiet for dinner and we'll tell you all about it."

* * *

Billie the Kid

August 6, 1945

Coastal California

The trickiest part of the pre-dawn takeoff in the beat-up B-25 Mitchell was taxiing down the apron at Hughes Aircraft, where my father had cleared the two of us for a joy ride to test out the changes he'd made to the plane to accommodate a Mark VI torpedo attached to the belly. Dad was at the controls. I was copilot, like always. Mitchells were notorious for bad handling during taxi, so Dad wiggle-waggled his way to the far end of the runway, turned us around, checked the flaps and the rpms and the rest of that checklist, and then he pushed the throttle forward and we eased forward and then picked up momentum and speed and then we were up and flying and I was bringing up the landing gear and it was time to go hunting.

We'd smuggled some others aboard; Hedy with the radio-control equipment she'd built with George Anthiel, Moe Berg, who could handle the top turret gun if it came to that, and Eddie Bennett, who said she could handle the side fifty if she had to. It was quite a crew.

* * *

After the big win over the Solons, Eddie and Moe took me out to dinner, just the three of us, in a small private dining room of the Culver Hotel. Eddie had steak, rare, with potatoes. Moe had Culver Chicken, which always looked like good old fried chicken to me, with some mashed potatoes. I had a steak, rare, because Eddie did. I didn't like it much but was too nervous to eat anyway.

“Billie,” Eddie said to me after we got our drinks—a round of Golden Brew—“what I’m going to tell you is something so secret you can’t share it with anyone, not your friends, not your teammates. No one. Ever.”

This was Eddie Bennett talking to me, so I would have said yes to anything. I took a breath, so I maybe wouldn’t sound so nervous, sitting there a few feet away from her. At that moment I didn’t feel like a ballplayer, I felt like some nervous Nellie. But I managed to sound calm enough when I said, “Okay, Eddie, sure. No one hears it, ever.”

“She’s dead serious, Kid,” said Moe. “This is top secret stuff you’re going to hear.”

“Okay,” I said again. Sure, part of me thought they were putting me on and we’d all have a good laugh at my expense once I got the joke. But the larger part of me thought they both looked so damn serious that this was real. So, “Okay,” I said for the third time.

“All right then,” said Eddie, and reached over to put her hand over mine on the table, looked straight into my eyes, and said, “Billie, Moe and I need your help to change history for the better.”

All I could think about was that hand on top of mine, so it took me a second or two to understand what she’d said. “Change history?”

“Change history, Billie. My history, but your future.”

“I don’t understand,” I told her.

And that’s when she told me that she traveled through time, going back in time to make changes that needed to be made. Moe worked with her whenever she was in this time period, going by a lot of different names but always a ballplayer, always a spy. They’d had some great adventures together, the two of them, and now it was time for one more adventure, the greatest of them all if they could pull it off.

That’s crazy, I thought, but “Okay,” I said. “So you’re from the future?”

“Yes, Billie,” she said. “My true line is a hundred years from now.”

“Your true line?” I asked her.

“It’s complicated, Billie, but there are a lot of timelines. Hundreds, maybe thousands. We can only get into some of them, and we have to be very careful when we do.”

“We? There’s a whole team?”

She smiled. “Yes,” she said, “it’s a kind of team.”

“And you’re on this team, too?” I asked Moe Berg, looking at him.

“I’m on a lot of teams, Billie, baseball teams and teams like this one, right here, with you and me and Eddie.”

I sat back in my chair. “Holy crap,” I said. “So we’re here to fix something in this, um, timeline, to make things a lot better down the line somewhere, right?”

“And better here, too, Billie,” she said, and then Moe took a sip of his beer and looked at me and smiled at Eddie and said, “It’s a good plan, Billie, but it has to be very secret, and it has to be you.”

Eddie added, “You’re what we call an inflection point, Billie. You’re very, very special, very rare. Let me tell you why.”

And I listened as she did.

* * *

And now here we were, at three thousand feet over the Pacific, not far from Santa Catalina and the other Channel Islands, in a patched up B-25 named “Stinky.” I could see Avalon and that pretty little bay out my right-seat window in the distance. The plan was to circle around a few times while Hedy made sure the guidance system was working for the torpedo, and then we would head south along the coast and somewhere down there, near La Jolla maybe, we’d spot a Japanese submarine, on the surface. It was a huge sub, Eddie had told us, the largest in the world. It was big enough that it was a kind of aircraft carrier and held three planes in a hangar. It could bring out and launch those planes with a catapult from its deck.

One of those planes carried a German superbomb that the sub had traveled all the way to Bergen, Norway, to get, just days before the German surrender in May.

We had to stop that plane, but we didn't know which one it was. Best case? We'd sink the sub with our torpedoes before it could launch the planes. Worst case? One or two of the planes were already launched, and we had to sink the sub to stop any more from taking off and shoot down the ones that were already in the air. Could we do it with this B-25? Hell yes, said my dad, who was in the pilot's seat and knew everything about the plan now.

I hoped he was right. That bomb could blow San Diego or Los Angeles all to hell, killing hundreds of thousands.

I heard Eddie, sitting right behind me in the flight engineer spot, quietly say, "Eddie, we need you," and I wondered what the hell that was about.

Then I heard Hedy yell from farther back in the plane, "Eddie, we need you!"

"On my way!" Eddie yelled back and stood up from her tiny flight engineer stool and headed back to help.

"We'll circle one more time," Dad said, and I said, "Okay," but I was worried if we'd get down there in time now. Eddie said the sub was going to launch all three planes just after dawn, and as we circled I could see the sky to the east getting lighter in a hurry.

"Dad," I said, "let's head down there now. They'll get the guidance working by the time we get there."

My father looked at me. Somewhere along the line in the past year or so he'd begun to see me as something other than the little girl he and Mom had raised to be independent and athletic and smart. Somewhere along the line he'd started seeing me as an adult, someone with her own mind, someone who knew what she was doing. I was nineteen, but to him I think I seemed older in that moment.

Which was good, because he listened to me, and we came out of that bank and straightened out to head straight south, right down the coast. We'd spot that sub in ten or fifteen minutes, I was sure. The sun was just beginning to rise in the East.

* * *

Captain Nobukiyo Nambu
Submarine I-401
Solana Beach, CA
August 9, 1945

Captain Nambu's radar picks up the blip of an airplane heading their way just as the Sun emerges over the hills to the East as the first Seiran is catapulted into the air from the deck of the I-401. It's radio silence or he would tell the pilot of that plane to head north and west and identify the approaching plane. Instead, he has a signaler use semaphore flags to tell the pilot and after a few precious minutes the message is sent, the Seiran waggles its wings in confirmation and heads northwest.

The I-401's radar is the best the IJN has, but that doesn't mean it's trustworthy. Nambu also instructs the lookouts to watch for that plane should it slip past the Seiran that's looking for it. He calls for battle stations and highest alert.

Nambu can't dive and get out of trouble since there are these planes to launch. The second Seiran is already on the catapult, and this pilot has his instructions to stay close and shepherd the third Seiran, the one carrying Das Biest.

The plane launches, and now the trickiest part of the day for Nambu and his crew takes place. The original design for the I-400 class submarines was to carry two planes, not three, and so the flight deck can accommodate only the two that have been launched. The third plane, the one that really matters, has to be brought out of the forward hangar by the onboard crane and carefully placed onto the catapult where the pontoons will be attached. The process takes twenty minutes or more.

The good news is that Das Biest is armed and ready. When the bomb is dropped

from twenty thousand feet it will start the timer, and fifteen seconds later the altimeter will take over at two thousand feet, and Das Biest will ignite and Los Angeles will burn. But none of that will matter until the Seiran carrying the bomb is catapulted into the air, joins the other planes, and heads up the coast, staying low and avoiding American radar until the last few minutes, when the plane with Das Biest will circle and climb until it reaches twenty thousand feet. From there, perhaps a minute later, Los Angeles will die.

* * *

Billie the Kid
B-25 “Stinky”
Coastal California

We saw the first Japanese plane just as Eddie came back from working on the radio transmitter for the guided torpedo.

“We fixed it,” Eddie said, and “Japanese plane,” I said and pointed to the east, “about three o’clock, headed our way.”

It was a tiny dot against the rising Sun and a brightening sky. I’d been lucky to see it at all, much less identify it, but, “It’s a Seiran, a pontoon equipped fighter bomber from that submarine. It won’t engage with us,” Eddie said, and sure enough, it peeled away and headed toward the coast.

“The pilot’s worried that we’ll follow him, and when we do he’ll turn back and attack us. We’ll shoot it down but we’ll be damaged and when the next one comes—and the next one will come in,” she looked at her watch, “twelve minutes. So don’t follow it, Billie. We know about where the sub is, let’s head straight there.”

“Okay,” I said, “but where’s there?”

Eddie leaned over to shout above the engine roar, “Head due east and I’ll let you know when to turn south. Ten minutes or so, and then ten more and we’ll be in the fight of our lives.”

It was crazy, the fight of our lives thing, because even as she said it I tingled from having her face so close to mine, from having her shouting in my ear. I didn’t understand, really, what the hell was going on, why wasn’t the U.S. Navy out here doing this job, sinking a sub and shooting down some Japanese airplanes? Why was our little ragtag group of actors and baseball players trying to do all this? I didn’t get it, but I didn’t need to get it. If Eddie needed me to do this for her, then count me in.

We’d lost sight of the Japanese plane, but Eddie leaned over to tell me not to worry about it. It would be back, and with a second one, and we had to fight our way past both of those and then drop those torpedoes and sink that submarine.

Then she gave me a kiss on the cheek, a good one, and I turned to look at her for a second, and she smiled at me and said, “This is your moment, Billie. Coming up right now. Save the worlds, Billie. Change everything. You can do it.”

I smiled back, confused as hell, wasn’t Dad flying the plane and I was his backup? But, “Sure,” I said to Eddie and turned back to look out the front cockpit window, and there it was, emerging from the dawn glow, the whole tableau, two of those Seiran planes coming right at us. The sub—a monstrous thing the length of a football field, and double-hulled it looked like, like they’d put two subs side by side and then pasted them together.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, a squeeze, and then Eddie left me to go climb into the top turret with those twin fifty-caliber machine guns. I suspected she knew what she was doing with them.

My dad, at the controls, had been quiet through all this. But now he got up from the seat, patted me on the shoulder and said, “We need all the firepower we have, Billie. I’ll go back and man the left belly gun; you fly the plane. Get us close enough to drop that torpedo, all right?”

"Will do, Dad," I said, and then focused my attention on those two Seirans that were coming our way, climbing up toward us even as we were dropping down toward the water so we could let the torpedo go. Hedy had climbed down into the bombardier's compartment and she would guide it from there. She'd been waiting for a moment like this for years, I knew, and now here it was. This was her chance to sink Hitler's bomb before it could add to the dead Fuhrer's long, long murderous list. Millions had died at his hands; she wanted to stop this last weapon. Would the guidance system work, I wondered?

Sure it would; but first, these two Seirans, and where was the third? "On the deck of the sub," I heard Eddie say in my headphones. "They're getting ready to launch it. That's the one we have to stop, Billie. Get past these two Seirans, then get to that sub. Minutes count now."

The two attacking Seirans were firing their wing guns at us, and I felt the B-25 shudder from our answering fire, Eddie on that top turret and my dad and Moe in the belly, while Hedy sat by her transmitter and waited for me to get my part of the job done, dropping us down steeply now to the floor. I wanted to be just yards above the water.

The B-25 was designed for this kind of low-level attack, and I was betting this very plane had done it plenty of times, coming in to strafe the Japanese defenders on one island after another in support of the marines as they were landing on Guadalcanal or Iwo or Kwajalein or Ie Shima on the march toward Japan.

All those patches on the fuselage that we saw a few hours ago in Culver City when we loaded up for this strange mission? Every one of those patches was an enemy bullet or shell that had found its target.

And still the B-25 flew on, through all of that. They were tough planes, these Mitchells. They could take a beating and stay in the air and get the mission done.

Like this one. With me at the controls.

I was down near the deck, almost wavetop and ready to launch the torpedo, when I heard Moe over the intercom say "Got one, starboard!" and I glanced that way to see a Seiran, smoking badly, crash into the sea. One down.

But the other one, maybe with a better pilot or maybe just lucky, had made two passes at us and hit us both times, but apparently nowhere critical, and now was coming in right at us, head on, those wing guns sparkling at me as the pilot fired short bursts.

I did the same, short bursts from the wing guns and one shot after another from the front cannon. I could feel the hits we were taking, and I heard a yell from the belly, someone had been hurt; but I thought I'd hit that Seiran hard in return so I kept at it, and finally, it wasn't more than a couple of hundred yards away, right down on the deck with us, coming right for us, when I saw the cockpit of the Seiran explode. A shell from the front cannon of the Mitchell had ended this, and the Seiran twisted right and the wingtip caught the water and it cartwheeled away from us.

"The sub, Billie!" I heard from Eddie, and "Ready to launch torpedo" I heard from Hedy down in the bombardier compartment, so I cautiously banked left to get us headed in generally the right direction without catching a wing on the water like the Seiran just had, and then I said "Launch it, Hedy," and she did. I could feel the lurch as it left the plane.

The change in the aerodynamics with the weight loss and the sudden lack of drag with that torpedo gone almost sent me spinning into the sea, but I caught us, leveled out, and kept flying toward the sub. We had to stop that third plane that I could see clearly now in the catapult system on the deck of the sub.

"It's working," said Hedy, "I'm controlling it."

"Billie," I heard from Eddie Bennett, "your dad's been hit. It looks bad."

* * *

From the conning tower of the I-401, Captain Nambu had a ringside seat to watch the fight that had been going on overhead and was now almost at eye level as the B-25 dropped its torpedo.

There was the final Seiran to launch, and it was minutes away from ready. But if that torpedo hit, there wouldn't be a launch, and Das Biest would likely go to the bottom with the I-401 and most of her crew. "Full speed ahead and hard left rudder," he said into the intercom, and he felt the sub heel over some in response to both those commands even as he kept his binoculars focused on the wake that the torpedo was producing.

It would miss, he thought with relief some seconds later as the I-401 turned into the torpedo and a good fifty yards to the side of the torpedo's track. Another half-minute and the torpedo would pass them by and he could turn again into the wind to launch Operation Cherry Blossoms and Das Biest and turn the whole war around. No more hesitance now, no more doubts about the future, no more worrying over the slaughter at home and the slaughter yet to come once Das Biest fell on Los Angeles. He had his orders, and in the heat of this moment he was going to follow them. "Right full rudder," he said, "bring her into the wind."

And then, a few seconds later, "Prepare to launch."

And then, a few seconds after that, Yamada, his exec, said, "Captain, the torpedo!"

It was turning. Radio guided? It must be. "Jam that radio guidance signal!" he said into the intercom. He had the capability of that jamming, he knew. They could override the guidance, so there was still a chance to outrun the torpedo.

But the torpedo was still turning, and, now aimed directly amidships, it was only five hundred yards away and coming fast. "Yamada?" he said to his exec. "The signal can't be jammed, Captain," Yamada said, rather sorrowfully. "There is nothing we can do."

There was one thing, thought Nambu, and gave the order, "Launch the plane! Launch it!" and into a side wind the catapult threw the Seiran that carried Das Biest. The plane labored, the load heavy, the wind not helping. It struggled, slowly fell toward the sea and then, Yamashita, every bit as great a pilot as his reputation said he was, stabilized his plane and it caught the air and began to rise.

There was a great cry from all those above deck, the gun crews and the catapult crew and the conning tower lookouts and the captain and his exec. Yamashita would take the war to the enemy!

And then the torpedo hit, not amidships but forward, rupturing the outer hull and putting tremendous pressure on the inner hull. More importantly, it put the forward deck guns, two of them, out of action.

* * *

My dad! Hurt! Damn it, but I couldn't leave the cockpit to see how bad it was; no one else could fly this thing. I sobbed and pounded on the control panel. Dad!

But I had to keep us flying. So after we dropped the torpedo, and with the two Seirans done for, I pulled away, but had to stay close enough to the action for Hedy to see what she was doing with steering the torpedo to its target. Her control of that torpedo was amazing. When the sub turned to port to try and head toward the torpedo to minimize the target, Hedy guided the torpedo in a half circle that ended up with it aimed right amidships. "I knew it, I knew it," she muttered over the intercom.

The captain of the sub realized right away what was happening, and we could hear over our radios the jamming that was flooding the airwaves. But that didn't matter to Hedy Lamarr and her guidance system, which changed frequencies so often the jammer couldn't keep up.

And so the sub's captain gave up his ship to launch that third plane. He quit trying to avoid the inevitable and, knowing that torpedo was coming fast, didn't even take

the time to head into the wind for the catapult launch of the plane. He got the plane off, and seconds later the torpedo hit and the explosion of that hit nearly rolled the sub over, and then, as it rolled back, the sub took on water and listed to port.

More important, I realized, was that their most effective deck guns, those two 25mm anti-aircraft guns, were out of action. It would be easy to finish the sub off. But first things first. We had to catch and sink that third Seiran, the one that was just launched, the one that carried that German superbomb. It was struggling for altitude as I watched it climb, no more than eight hundred feet up at the moment. Encumbered by those pontoons and carrying that heavy bomb we could see attached to its belly, it struggled to climb. It had been heading south as it launched, and now it was trying to gain altitude and come around to due north.

"My dad?" I yelled into the comm system.

"Still with us, Billie," said Eddie. "Maybe he'll be all right. Keep flying this plane!"

I did just that. When the Seiran finished its turn it was at two thousand feet or so and still climbing. I knew that exactly because we were at two thousand ourselves and heading straight for it. The pilot must see us, I thought; but he wasn't trying to evade. He was climbing, faster than we could, for sure, but still in front and below us.

I could see the future. I sank into the instant the way I did all the time at short-stop, where time stretched out and I was one with my glove and it all happened without a lot of conscious effort. There, in that moment, I was the B-25, totally locked into it, a part of the plane. I knew he'd climb right in front of us and we'd go by underneath him. That would give us one good chance at him.

"That's the one, Billie," I heard in my earphone from Eddie. "We have to shoot that plane down."

"Thirty seconds," I said. "Be ready, Eddie, you'll get the best shot. I'll fire the wing guns at him, and he'll turn to evade. When he does, you and Moe get him in the belly."

"Where the bomb is," Moe said from the side guns. "I'll have a good chance of hitting him."

And that's how it turned out. That plane had to go by us and climb as it went, so we stayed where we. I could tell the pilot didn't want to fight with us; he had other things in mind. He wasn't even firing his wing guns at us, so I guessed he planned to use his higher ceiling and faster speed to outrace us to one side or the other.

Which way would he go? It was guesswork, but not completely. I faked a bank left and he bit on it, trying to get by us on our right side. I pulled it back to roll slightly right and there he was, in front of my wing guns for a precious few seconds. I gave him a good burst and thought maybe some of them hit. And then he was to our right side and on top of us, still trying to climb while Eddie was banging away hard with those twin fifties, and Moe, with his fifty out the side door, was firing steadily, too. The din was awful, with the engine noise and the rat-a-tat-tat of the guns.

He went by, and I lost sight of him and thought for a few seconds that we'd lost him; but then Eddie said, "Got him! There's engine smoke. He's leaking oil," and Moe yelled, "Me, too! Raked the cockpit, for sure, and banged away at the engine!"

This meant that I had a chance now to catch him. Even if he survived those hits he'd be slower now and struggling to stay in the air. I banked hard and tight to the right and came out of it behind him, maybe five hundred yards back.

I fired off another burst as Hedy came up out of the bombardier compartment and sat in the copilot's seat. "That bastard!" she said, and looked at me and urged me on. "Get him, shoot him down. This is our moment. We'll never forget this, so make it count!"

He banked right, me staying on his tail. I could see Long Beach in the distance, and beyond that was Los Angeles. I could see the Hollywood Hills. I imagined I could see Gilmore Field, where we'd all be missing this evening's game, I supposed, unless

we could stop him.

Eddie was still firing off bursts at him. Me, too, from the wing guns. Flames started to lick out of his engine cowling. We had him. We'd stopped him.

And then he released that bomb, and I watched, horrified, as it fell toward the sea beneath us. We were at six thousand feet. If that bomb went off at two thousand feet, like Eddie said it would, we had seconds to get the hell out of there. I banked left, hard, and gave the Mitchell everything I could to get the hell away from what was coming. In my last look at the Seiran the pilot had pushed back the canopy and was standing up. He saluted us, I don't know why, as his plane nosed over and down he went, to join that bomb.

That was the longest twenty seconds of my life, pushing Stinky hard to make a getaway and then seeing that incredible bright light that was behind us and then around us and then part of us, and then the shockwave that tossed the Mitchell around like a toy, and a great rush of wind and chaos that tossed us some more while I fought for control.

* * *

Nobukiyo Nambu I-401

August 9, 1945

The I-401 was sinking as Captain Nambu stayed on the conning tower to watch the distant air battle between that B-25 and Yamashita's Seiran.

Nambu had ordered his crew to abandon ship, but he planned to stay aboard and go down with the 401. He watched the distant planes do a kind of aerial dance with each other, and then he thought perhaps he saw smoke from the Seiran. Perhaps, he thought, that was a good thing.

There's a large crew on an I-400 series submarine, nearly three hundred souls, including the two German scientists who'd helped build and then had armed that superbomb that Yamashita had planned to drop on Los Angeles.

He watched as the planes dueled, the Seiran trying to escape the B-25 that followed it. Then, as the Seiran seemed to stumble in the air, banked right and headed for the water, the B-25 pulled hard left and fled the scene, trying hard to get away.

That could only mean one thing.

Below him, on the deck, the two German scientists were clambering into a rubber raft. They had just made it and were just sitting down, when the sky to the north turned a blinding, phosphorous white. Nambu closed his eyes and ducked down behind the cowling on the conning tower. From there, he heard a tremendous roar and felt the terrible wind that heeled the I-401 onto her side, capsized. A full three minutes later, Nambu stood up and was watching a giant, growing mushroom of a cloud as it grew and grew more and then he saw a great wave coming toward them and he knew what would happen to his crew, his ship, himself. The wave rolled over them and drove the wounded sub down and then farther down into the La Jolla trench where the pressure crushed her, and that was the end of the I-401.

There were some survivors, those who'd been on the port deck when the bomb's great concussion hit them, and were thrown off into the sea and somehow managed to survive the great wave that came two minutes later.

* * *

Billie the Kid Santa Catalina August 9, 1945

I blanked out. I don't know how long I was out, but when I came to the Mitchell was flying fine, level and steady, and my father was in the pilot's seat, smiling and humming some new Glenn Miller tune, and there was Santa Catalina below us and

the sky held some puffy innocent clouds and the sea below was calm and blue and I was in the copilot's seat and the two of us were having a nice day, flying around the Channel Islands and enjoying ourselves.

Dad banked right and said, "Why don't you take us on in, Billie?" and I did that and twenty minutes later we were on the tarmac at Hughes and I was taxiing us in to park it in front of the hangar and it was time for me to head to the ballpark for the afternoon game against the Solons.

We heard on the radio as we checked in for our landing that the Japanese had unconditionally surrendered after we'd dropped an atom bomb on Tokyo Bay. The war was over. When I got to the ballpark Moe Berg was there and he was the player-manager not me, and he'd been there all season. There was no Eddie Bennett and never had been. Miggy Mandala was alive and well, playing second. There was no Japanese submarine, and no Seiran pontoon planes, and no superbomb, and the war was over.

I was a little confused, as you might imagine; but Moe called me into the manager's office and set me straight. He was the only one who knew anything about what we'd done earlier in the change to day. "But I can't tell you much about it, Billie, there are rules that can't be broken, you know?"

"I know," I said.

"And those rules apply to you, Billie. You know you're a singular instance, right? There's no one else like you that we know of, right?"

"That's what Eddie told me," I said. "But I think I didn't really get it until now."

"Some awfully good things have happened, Billie, because of you. We need, all of us, everyone, for those things to stick. And that's up to you."

I nodded. I was an inflection point, Eddie had told me. I had to stay quiet about that. Forever.

"I don't suppose I'll ever see Eddie again, right, Moe?"

"She thinks the world of you, Billie. But yes, she'd be breaking all the rules if you two ever met again."

"And she's not a rules breaker, right?"

"Right," he said. "The opposite, in fact. People like Eddie, they make the rules."

I nodded. I got it.

"So play ball, Billie, okay?"

I managed a smile. "Sure," I said to Moe. "I'll play ball."

* * *

Eddie Bennett Culver City August 9, 1945

It's been a very busy day for our Eddie Bennett. It started at three in the morning, she and Moe, the alarm going off, the two of them climbing out of bed, brushing teeth and washing up, getting dressed. No joking around, this was the big one. Last night had been fun, and touching, and special, and she really did love him in her own way. He was a generous lover, for one thing, pleasing her before he thought of himself, every time and every place they'd made love. And he and Eddie both knew how far it went and how far it didn't, and how important it was that days like this one went the way they were supposed to.

That was their job. Getting it right, matching it up to the way they wanted things to be, saving lives if it went right; millions of lives, in fact, some of them today and some of them upstream, a lot of years from now.

They were in Moe's car, a nice sedan, a Ford Super De Luxe Coupe, the kind of car a minor-league manager would be driving in 1945.

Hughes Field was in Culver City, a fifteen-minute drive this time of the morning. They were the only car on the road. They came up to in the entrance, waved at the

sleepy guard in the hut at the gate, who knew them both and waved back and then lifted the wooden bar for them. They drove through and then over to the smallest of the three main hangars. They parked the car at the side of the main hangar door, got out, and walked in. Billie the Kid and her father standing there, chatting with Hedy Lamarr. Right behind them was a bulky radio transmitter. Behind this chummy group was a beat-up old B-25, a Mitchell bomber, with Stinky painted on the nose and lots of patches, dozens of them, all over the fuselage.

Billie's dad had pulled all the strings he had, and Eddie had pulled the rest. They were making a movie, see? And it needed to be realistic, see? Hedy had an old Edison camera with her and had climbed up the stepladder to put it into the plane when they arrived.

Hollywood people, they were all crazy, the ground crew was thinking; but damned if that wasn't Hedy Lamarr, and look, that was Billie the Kid, the shortstop for the Hollywood Stars, and right there with her was Moe Berg, the manager.

Whatever they were doing was crazy, but the ground crew had their instructions and had already attached the big Mark VI torpedo to the belly of the Mitchell, and the boxes of ammunition were being put into the plane right now. Enough ammo for the twin fifties up in the top turret, and the fifties at the doors, too. It was gonna be a hell of a movie, the ground crew thought. Live ammo? They were better off not even asking.

Inside of a half hour the Mitchell was loaded up and ready, and Billie and her dad had done their checklist and sure enough, they were wiggle-wagging their way out to the runway. Ten minutes after that they were taking off.

What happened after that is what happened after that, and while the plan was to get that German superbomb into the drink and not have it blow, it turned out all right when it did blow.

* * *

Eddie Bennett
Niagara Falls
April 9, 2045

Eddie had known good things were happening when the bomb's shockwave hit and she felt that old familiar flash of nausea, and now here she was, back in her apartment on the fifth floor of the Niagara Building, looking out the window toward the Niagara Gorge below, the morning sun filling the far side of the deep gorge with sunlight while this side, the American side, was still in shadow.

She turned and walked over to the nightstand, picked up her helpmate, and slid it into her right ear and then asked, "myBoop, how long was I gone?"

"Hello, Elizabeth. You were gone for twelve minutes and fifteen seconds."

Pretty good timing, then, despite the unplanned exit. "myBoop," she asked her helpmate, "Who's the president of the United States?" And the answer she got was very cheering. It was back to democracy, at least for a while. "And who's the striker for the Portland Thorns?" Before, there was no women's soccer, or any women's sport. Such activities catered to the wrong sort of behavior.

"Terina Gomez is the striker," myBoop said, "leading the league with twenty-six goals on the season. She's been named to the national team again."

"Will these changes hold in this line?" Eddie asked. It was important that the oligarchs were gone for now and important that Gomez find fame in sports. That would lead her to politics, and she'd be the one to stave off internal rebellion and lead the country through the Great Crash of 2061.

"There are several hinges. If your subject is there in all four, the changes will hold. She's the inflection point. She's looking for you all the way down the line. You may have overdone that flirtation a bit. She pines for you. She needs to see you a few times. It keeps her going."

"Hmph," Eddie says, though it's worth noting that that's not her name in this time and in this place. Here, she's Dr. Elizabeth Stern, Ph.D., a tenured finance professor at Niagara University. She has a graduate seminar to teach at six o'clock, Finance Forensics.

And, damnit, she did not overdo the flirtation at all. That wasn't just acting. She really liked Billie the Kid. If things had been different . . . but they weren't different, of course, at least not in that time and in that place.

"I'll go do those appearances then? See and be seen. That will cement it?"

"It will," says myBoop, "and in that other major line, too. Major changes there, the whole atomic-war fiasco avoided."

"All right," Eddie/Liz says. "But you'll get me back no later than half-an-hour from now? I have that seminar to prep."

"No problem. Leave me in, I'll give you the details as you get to each one."

And so Eddie does that, not even bothering to change her clothes, just stepping into the closet and the portal and the nausea and the hours spent in Hiroshima, watching the Carp play baseball in 1951; in Paris, where the women win Olympic gold in baseball; in New York, where Billie is the manager and wins the Series; in Cape Town, where she saves a life and finds the right person to build a family with; and then in St. Louis, circling all the way to the starting point. Eddie is there to see Billie all those times as she grows up and then grows old and then dies, changing lines for the better all along the way.

* * *

Billie the Kid
Kirkwood Manor
Kirkwood, Missouri
August 9, 2021

Tonia has recorded this whole thing on her phone, and she's glad of that. She hears a lot of great stories in her job. Kirkwood Manor is full of people with great stories about who they were and what they did. There's the piano player with his Casio keyboard in 206 who was the accompanist for Alberta Hunter, the great blues singer. He says he's putting together a combo and looking for a vocalist and can Tonia sing? She laughed, and sang a few bars from "My Handy Man."

There's the novelist in 245 who wrote under three different names and has been working on his next great novel for the past year. He's on page one, and the first few sentences look very promising.

There's the bank manager in 105 who saved lives and was awarded a medal in Vietnam, and the woman in 201 who broke the glass ceiling to become a successful lawyer in 1953 Wisconsin, and the golfer who finally came out just eight years ago and now holds his husband's hand as they watch *Tin Cup* together every single day.

These and many more have great stories to tell; they all lived interesting lives.

But Billie the Kid? She has some of the best stories of them all, and they've gotten crazier and crazier as she's slipped ever farther into her private world, day by day by week by month.

Really crazy, actually, like the one Tonia's been recording. Traveling through time! Now that's a story.

Billie is finishing up:

So that's what I did, I played ball. For the Hollywood Stars and then, after the war, for the Hiroshima Carp in Japan, where baseball helped them recover from the horrors of the war they'd started and the firebombings they'd been through as it ended. And later, for the White Sox, when Grace Comiskey was the owner and forced open a spot for me, and then for my old hometown Cardinals for a couple of years before I went into coaching and all the rest. You know that whole story, Tonia, right?

* * *

“Yes, dear, I know that story,” Tonia said. “And the part where you met Jeremy and started a family.”

* * *

Yes, that, too. I saved his life, you know. We were on a photo safari near Cape Town, and that rhino almost got him. We hit it off over there. Jeremy understood me, and had his own things to deal with. He was a good man, and we loved each other in our own way. We did what we had to do in those days, you know?

* * *

“I do know,” Tonia says, and so does her wife, she thinks. “I know very well.”

* * *

I used to think I saw her here and there. Once in the Louvre, in a group of us sitting next to Winged Victory. Once in a pub in Camden Town. And once in a restaurant in Dublin and then another when I was walking through a park in Cape Town, and then I’m pretty sure it was her that I saw out in Hollywood when we had that old-timers reunion game for the Stars players. She was in the stands, I was pretty sure; but I couldn’t find her afterward.

And a few times, recently, too, back here in Kirkwood, since the kids brought me here so I could be near the grandkids and the great grandkids. I swear I saw her at the Grind just a month ago when the kids took me there for lunch. I’m glad for that. But I wish. Well, you know what I wish.

* * *

Tonia reaches out to take her by the hand but doesn’t say anything.

There’s a knock at the apartment door and then it opens and someone pokes their head in. It’s Eddie Bennett, and she looks straight out of the 1940s, wearing the same slacks and white blouse and tan jacket and knit cap she was wearing when they flew that B-25 to save the worlds. She doesn’t look a minute older.

“Billie,” she says. “It’s so wonderful to see you, girl,” and she walks over to Billie and holds her hands and kisses her on the cheek. “It’s been too long.”

“I don’t know what to say,” says Billie, who’s staring at Eddie, wondering if her mind is really going now. Is she near death or something and hallucinating all this? If so, she thinks, she’ll take it. This, this moment, is worth anything.

“Maybe say hello?” Eddie asks her, smiling.

“Oh, hello, hello, hello,” say Billie and puts her arms out for a hug. Eddie hugs her, and then kisses her on the cheek while Billie keeps saying, “Hello, hello, hello,” over and over.

Eddie finally steps back and says, “I’ve been following your life, Billie. You’ve done so well, knocking down walls, breaking glass ceilings, all of that.”

“And playing shortstop,” Billie says.

“And playing shortstop,” Eddie says, reaching out to hold hands with her again. “You did well, Billie the Kid, you did really well.”

“I thought I saw you sometimes, Eddie. Wearing that same outfit you have on now, the same one as on the plane, when you were shooting down that Seiran. It was you that I saw, wasn’t it?”

“I can’t say, Billie. It might have been me. That’s all I can say, dear.”

“You might have been breaking some rules, doing that?”

“I might have,” Eddie says and smiles.

“This isn’t breaking the rules? This, now, you talking to me?”

“I have special permission, Billie,” she says, which isn’t completely true, but myBoop did say that this last visit wouldn’t change anything, for better or for worse. Soon, very soon, that heart will give out, that courageous heart, and that will be it for Billie. And as soon as Eddie leaves the room and shuts the door, Tonia won’t remember a thing about this. Her phone’s recording? myBoop says the recording will have everything Billie’s said but just a hiss where it’s Eddie talking.

They talk, Eddie and the Kid, for a good twenty minutes, reminiscing about that day when Billie was at the controls and Eddie in the top turret and they shot the hell out of that Sieran and then scampered away before that bomb went off.

"That was the best day of my life," says Billie.

"Better than that day you hit a double for the White Sox that won the pennant in 1955?" Eddie asks. "I was at that game. Damn, that was exciting. I screamed for joy. I wanted to jump right out of the stands and run up and hug and kiss you!"

"I would have liked that," says Billie. "I would have liked that a lot."

"What a life you've had, Billie," says Eddie. "And that great grandchild of yours, Terina? She's going to be a great athlete, and a politician, too."

"A ballplayer? Oh, that's wonderful."

Eddie smiles and says, "A soccer player, a striker. She'll make the national team and help them win it all two different times before she gets into politics."

"Wow," says Billie.

She wants this to go and on, does Billie the Kid, but she's getting very tired. Eddie can see it, and Tonia, too.

So it's time. Eddie helps Tonia get Billie the Kid out of her chair and into her bed for a nap. A long, long nap. Then Eddie leans over and puts her face next to Billie's, cheek to cheek, and whispers something that Tonia can't hear. She kisses Billie lightly on the cheek after that, and then lightly on the lips, and then pats her face and says, "Rest now, Billie the Kid," and then turns and walks out of the room.