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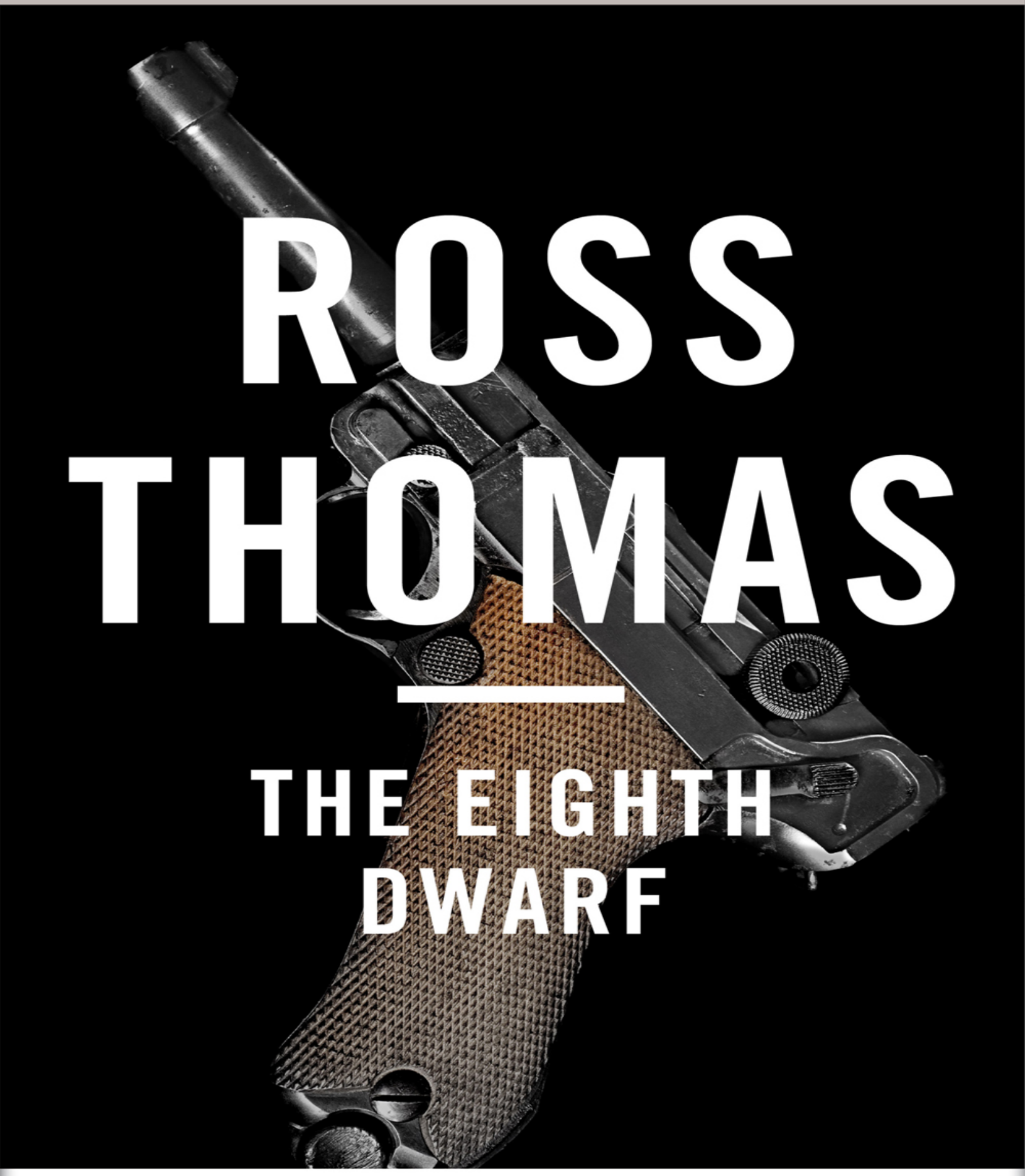

ROSS THOMAS

THE EIGHTH DWARF

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

Contents

Looking for more suspense?

About the Book

Nicolae Polscaru, a three-and-a-half-foot-tall dwarf, is tossed into a Hollywood swimming pool by four drunken screenwriters, who take bets on how long he can tread water. Minor Jackson, his OSS training still fresh a year after World War II's end, beats the bullies senseless and pulls Nicolae from the water. A friendship is born.
Jackson is broke, his spying days over, and Nicolae offers him a job. A former spy himself, the globetrotting Romanian has a commission to find Kurt Oppenheimer, an expert assassin of high-ranking Nazis. Kurt won't stop killing, no matter what the bloodshed will do to the fragile world peace, and the Soviets, the British, and the remains of the Nazi High Command all want his head. Jackson will beat them all to finding Kurt-unless his new friend betrays him first.

Review quote.

> “Ross Thomas is without peer in American suspense.” - *The Los Angeles Times.*
>
> “What Elmore Leonard does for crime in the streets, Ross Thomas does for crime in the suites.” - *The Village Voice.*
>
> “Ross Thomas is that rare phenomenon, a writer of suspense whose novels can be read with pleasure more than once.” - *Eric Ambler, author of The Mask of Dimitrios*.

About the Author

The winner of the inaugural Gumshoe Lifetime Achievement Award, Ross Thomas (1926-1995) was a prolific author whose political thrillers drew praise for their blend of wit and suspense. Born in Oklahoma City, Thomas grew up during the Great Depression, and served in the Philippines during World War II. After the war, he worked as a foreign correspondent, public relations official, and political strategist before publishing his first novel, "The Cold War Swap" (1967), based on his experience working in Bonn, Germany. The novel was a hit, winning Thomas as an Edgar Award for Best First Novel and establishing the characters Mac McCorkle and Mike Padillo.

Thomas followed it up with three more novels about McCorkle and Padillo, the last of which was published in 1990. He wrote nearly a book a year for twenty-five years, occasionally under the pen name Oliver Bleeck, and won the Edgar Award for Best Novel with "Briarpatch" (1984). Thomas died of lung cancer in California in 1995, a year after publishing his final novel, "*Ah, Treachery*!"

The Eighth Dwarf

Ross Thomas

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

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FOR
JANE JENNINGS WEGENER

Chapter 1

During the war Minor Jackson had served with the Office of Strategic Services, in Europe mostly, although some four months before the fighting there was done they had flown him out to Burma. He hadn’t liked Burma much, or its jungles, or what he’d had to do in them, but now that the war was quite finished, as was the OSS, Jackson had almost decided to go back to Europe, because he suspected that one way or another he might be able to make some money there. Perhaps a lot of it.

Whether Jackson went back to Europe in that early autumn of 1946 would depend in large measure on what the dwarf had managed to arrange. Jackson was waiting for him now in the Green Gables cocktail lounge on La Cienega, just down from Santa Monica Boulevard; and as usual, the dwarf was late.

Jackson, at thirty-two—in fact, almost thirty-three—had taught himself how to wait during the war, which, he had been mildly surprised to learn, was almost 90 percent waiting. And even though the dwarf was nearly forty-five minutes late, Jackson sat patiently without fidgeting, not quite slouched down into the deep chair at the low table. He had sipped his beer slowly to make it last, and it still was not quite half gone. For entertainment there had been the bitter argument at the next table to listen to.

The argument had been going on in furious whispers for nearly as long as Jackson had been waiting. It was between a young couple, and at first it had been about money—or rather, the lack of it—and the woman's careless handling of what little there was. But now she had launched a vicious, devastatingly intimate counterattack, choosing as her weapon the man's sexual inadequacy.

Because Jackson was a normally curious person, actually a bit more so than most, he shifted slightly in his chair—a casual move that he hoped would afford a quick, undetected glance at the victim.

The young man sat with his head bowed, his lips bitten, listening to his damnation, which must have been made more awful by the caressing whisper that delivered it. He was also quite pale, although when the woman's attack first began he might have blushed pink or even scarlet. He looks like a blusher, Jackson thought.

The woman seemed to be about the same age as the man, and although far less than beautiful, she was more than pretty. However, Jackson had not expected her to be quite so observant. She detected his scrutiny almost immediately and broke off her whispered denunciation to glare at him and demand, "What're you looking at, Pop?"

Jackson shrugged. "I just wanted to see where he was bleeding."

If it hadn't been for the "Pop," he might have smiled or grinned when he said it. Jackson's hair was gray—in fact, almost white—and although he had thought about it often enough, a kind of reverse pride or vanity had prevented him from dyeing it. Sometimes when asked, usually by women, he would claim that it had turned that way overnight during the war while he was on some romantically mysterious mission for the OSS. Actually, it had started turning gray when he was twenty-three.

After Jackson's crack, the young man rose abruptly. In doing so he accidentally knocked over his beer, which

flooded the table and even slopped over onto his club sandwich. Some color had crept back into the young man's cheeks. His lips started working as he stood there. They trembled a little at first, but finally he got it out.

"You're a real bad rotten bitch, aren't you, Diane."

Since it certainly was no question, the young man didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he turned and hurried around the tables to the three carpeted steps that led down to the cocktail lounge's foyer.

The woman stared after him for a moment or two, her own lips working as though she were still silently rehearsing some undelivered lines. Then she looked down at the table with its two uneaten sandwiches and the spilt beer. She seemed to study the mess carefully, as though she might want to paint it someday from memory. Finally, she looked up at Jackson. He saw that her rage had gone, perhaps drained away into some secret hiding place for possible reuse. She also wore a new expression, one of slightly puzzled dishonesty.

"Who's going to pay for all this shit?" she said.

Jackson shook his head. "One wonders."

She stood up quickly and almost darted around the tables to the three steps.

"Hey, Johnny!" she called. "Wait up!"

But Johnny was long gone. She started down the three steps, in a hurry, looking for Johnny and not at all at where she was going. On the last step she knocked over Nicolae Ploscaru, the dwarf.

The dwarf didn't have far to go, but still he went down hard and landed on his butt. The woman glanced down at him; said, "Aw, shit," by the way of apology; and hurried out the door after the vanished Johnny.

Nobody offered to help the dwarf up. He didn't seem to expect it. He rose slowly, with considerable dignity, and thoughtfully brushed off his hands. After that he shook his big head in mild disgust and again started up the three

steps, climbing them one at a time because of his short, slightly bowed legs.

Ploscaru made his way through the tables to where Jackson sat. “I’m late,” the dwarf said, and hoisted himself up and back into one of the deep chairs with a combined hop and wriggle that seemed practiced.

“I’m used to it,” Jackson said.

“I don’t drive,” the dwarf said, as though revealing some long-hidden secret. “If you don’t drive in this town, you should depend on being late. When I was in New York I took the subway and was almost never late. I wonder why they don’t have subways here.”

The dwarf had a noticeable Romanian accent, probably because he had learned his English fairly late in life, long after the French that he spoke with virtually no foreign accent at all and his almost equally flawless German. During the early part of the war, in 1940 and ’41, Ploscaru had worked for British intelligence in Bucharest—or rather, for two English spies who were posing as correspondents for a couple of London dailies. One of the spies, Ploscaru had once told Jackson, had been rather competent, but the other one, constantly aflutter about a play of his that was being produced in London at the time, had turned out to be pretty much of a bust.

When the Germans finally moved into Romania in the spring of 1942, the dwarf had fled to Turkey. From there he had managed to get to Greece and somehow from Greece to Cairo, where he sometimes claimed to have spent the rest of the war. Although Ploscaru would never admit it, Jackson suspected that the dwarf had somehow had himself smuggled into the United States, possibly by the Army Air Corps. At any rate, the dwarf always spoke warmly of the Air Corps, in spite of what it had done to Ploesti.

“You want a drink?” Jackson said.

“Did you see her knock me down? She didn’t even stop.”

“She didn’t pay for her lunch, either.”

The dwarf nodded glumly, as if he had expected something like that. The big head that he nodded was almost handsome except for a trifle too much chin. “A martini,” he finally replied to Jackson’s aging question. “I think I’ll have a martini.”

“Still the barbarian.”

“Yes,” the dwarf said. “Quite.”

Jackson signaled for a waiter, who came over and stood hands on hips, a bleak look on his face, as he surveyed the lunch that the young couple had neither eaten nor paid for. The waiter was young and gossipy and a bit effeminate. He gave Jackson a knowing look.

“Well, *I* could certainly tell when they came in, couldn’t you?” he said.

“No,” Jackson said, “I couldn’t.”

“Well, *I* certainly could. Didn’t you notice how close together her eyes were? That’s the sure sign of a deadbeat —well, almost, anyway. You want another beer?”

“And a martini for my friend here.”

“Extra dry?” the waiter said to Ploscaru.

“Extra dry,” the dwarf said.

After the drinks were served, Jackson waited while Ploscaru took the first swallow of his martini, shuddered, and lit one of the Old Gold cigarettes he favored.

“Well?” Jackson said.

Before replying, Ploscaru took another swallow of his drink, a larger one. This time there was no shudder. Instead, he sighed and, not quite looking at Jackson, said, “The call came through at eleven this morning. A little after eleven.”

“From where?”

“Tijuana.”

“They both came up?”

“The daughter did. The old man stayed in Ensenada. He doesn’t speak English, you know. The daughter does, after a fashion. They would like a meeting.”

“Did you talk about money?”

The dwarf looked at Jackson then. He had green eyes which seemed clever, or perhaps it was just their glitter.

“We talked about money,” Ploscaru said, “and she seemed to think that our price was too high; but then, she’s a Jew.” The dwarf shrugged, expressing his mild contempt for any Jew who would be foolish enough to believe that she could out-haggle a full-blooded son of Romania.

“So we negotiated,” Ploscaru continued. “In English, of course, although German would have been preferable, but the war hasn’t been over quite that long. It’s very difficult to negotiate over the phone, especially with someone who’s speaking an unfamiliar language and speaking it badly. One misses the—uh—nuances.”

“So what did you come up with?” Jackson said.

“A thousand for you; five hundred for me.”

“That’s slicing it a bit thin, isn’t it?”

Ploscaru pursed his lips in disagreement. “My dear chap, to strike any bargain that requires two separate payments, you should *appear* to resist with your last breath all attempts to reduce the initial payment. But then, when your arguments are exhausted, you should give in grudgingly and then hurry on to the second payment. This one you can inflate, if you are clever and persistent, because your fellow negotiator knows that if you fail in your task, he will never have to pay.” The dwarf took another swallow of his martini, licked his lips, and said, “I really should have been a diplomat.”

“How much?” Jackson said. “The second payment?”

“Ten thousand for you and five for me. To be paid in Switzerland.”

“If we find him.”

“Yes. Of course.”

Jackson thought it over. It was more than he had expected, almost two thousand dollars more. The dwarf had done well, far better than Jackson himself could have done.

He decided to pay the dwarf a small compliment—a tiny one, really, because anything larger would have gone to Ploscaru's head and made him insufferable for the rest of the afternoon.

"Not bad," Jackson said.

"Quite brilliant actually." Whenever the dwarf paid himself a compliment his British overtones deepened, possibly because the two spies he had worked for in Bucharest had seldom given him a decent word and he now liked his praise, even that which came from his own lips, to be wrapped in a British accent.

"I'll still have to sell my car, though," Jackson said.

"What a pity," Ploscaru said, not bothering to disguise his sarcasm.

"The meeting," Jackson said. "When do they want it?"

"The day after tomorrow at their hotel in Ensenada. They've insisted on a couple of code phrases for identification—really dreadfully silly stuff; but I'll give you all that tomorrow."

"What do you want to do this afternoon?"

"Let's drive down to the beach and drink beer and look at women."

"All right," Jackson said.

Chapter 2

They had shipped Captain Minor Jackson back to the States aboard a hospital ship in mid-1945 because of an acute case of infectious hepatitis he had caught in the jungles of Burma where he, along with a couple of enlisted hard cases and a dozen or so even tougher Kachin tribesmen, had harassed the Japanese behind their own lines. Jackson's small unit had been part of a freewheeling OSS outfit called Detachment 101. The reason it was called Detachment 101 was that the OSS felt the name would make it sound as if there might be a few other similar detachments around, although, of course, there weren't.

Jackson had spent the day and night of the Japanese surrender aboard the hospital ship in Seattle harbor watching the fireworks and listening to the sounds of the celebration. The next day in the hospital at Fort Lewis the Red Cross had told him that he could make a free long-distance call home.

This posed a small problem, because Jackson's parents had been divorced for nearly twenty years and he wasn't at all sure where either of them might be. However, he was quite positive that his mother wouldn't be in Palm Beach—not in August, anyway.

He finally had placed a call to his father's law firm in New York, only to be told by a secretary, who might have

been new in her job, that Mr. Jackson was in an important conference and was taking absolutely no calls.

Later, Jackson wrote his father a postcard. Two weeks went by before a letter arrived from his father congratulating Jackson on having survived the war (which seemed to have surprised his father, although not unpleasantly) and urging him to get out of the Army and settle down to something "productive and sensible." Sensible had been underlined. A few days later he received a telegram from his mother in Newport, Rhode Island, welcoming him home and hoping that they could get together sometime soon because she had "oodles" to tell him. Jackson translated oodles into meaning a new husband (her fourth) and didn't bother to answer.

Instead, when the Army asked where his hometown was so that he could be transferred to a hospital nearby to recuperate from his jaundice, Jackson had lied and said San Francisco. When he arrived at the Army's Letterman General there, Jackson weighed one hundred twelve pounds, which the doctors felt was a bit light for his six-foot-two frame. It took them more than six months to fatten him up and get his icterus index back down to normal, but when they did, Jackson was discharged on February 19, 1946, from both the Army and the hospital as well as from the OSS—which, anyway, had gone out of business on September 20, 1945.

Jackson's accumulated back pay, separation allowances, and not inconsiderable poker winnings amounted to nearly $4,000. He promptly spent $1,750 of it to purchase an overpriced but snappy 1941 yellow Plymouth convertible. He also managed to find and buy six white shirts (still scarce in early 1946), a rather good tweed jacket, some slacks, and a gray worsted suit.

Thus mounted and attired, Jackson had lingered on in San Francisco for nearly six months, largely because of the charms of a redheaded Army nurse. But then the nurse,

convinced that Jackson was no marriage prospect, had accepted a posting to an Army hospital in Rome. So Jackson, his plans still purposely vague, had driven south in early September, heading for Los Angeles, the first stop on his roundabout return to Europe.

Three principal reasons took Jackson to Los Angeles. The first was that he had never been there. The second was a woman who lived in Pacific Palisades and who had once gone to bed with him in Washington years before and who might again, provided she remembered him. The third reason was that during the war Jackson had made friends with a more or less famous actor who had also served in the OSS. For a while Jackson and the actor, who also was something of a sailor, had run guns and supplies across the Adriatic from Bari in Italy to Tito's partisans in Yugoslavia. The actor had made Jackson swear to look him up should Jackson ever be in Los Angeles or, more precisely, in Beverly Hills.

As it turned out, the woman Jackson had known in Washington had just got married and didn't think it would be too smart if they started seeing each other again—at least, not yet. "Give me a couple of months," she had said.

The actor, however, had seemed delighted when Jackson called. He even urged Jackson to stay with him, but when Jackson politely demurred, the actor gave him some halfway-useful advice about where to find a room or apartment in the midst of the housing shortage that still gripped Los Angeles. He then insisted that Jackson come to a cocktail party that same evening. It was at the actor's party, by the pool, that Jackson met the dwarf.

A quartet of drunks—two writers, a director, and an agent—had just thrown the dwarf into the pool and were making bets about how long it would take him to drown. The writers were giving odds that it would take at least fifteen minutes. The dwarf had never learned to swim, and it was only the violent splashing of his immensely powerful

arms that kept him afloat. Jackson might not have interfered had not the two writers tried to sweeten the odds by stamping on the dwarf's hands whenever he managed to gasp and splash his way to the edge of the pool.

Jackson went up to one of the writers and tapped him on the shoulder. "I think you ought to let him out," Jackson said.

The writer turned. "Who're you?"

"Nobody."

"Go away, nobody," the writer said; he placed a large, curiously hairless hand against Jackson's chest, and shoved him backward.

The writer was a big man, almost huge, and it was a hard shove. Jackson stumbled back for a step or two. Then he sighed, shifted his drink to his right hand, went in fast, and slammed a left fist into the writer's stomach. The writer doubled over, gagging, and Jackson, amazed at his own temerity but enjoying it, gave the writer a slight push which toppled him over into the pool.

The other three drunks skirted nervously around Jackson and hurried to their friend's aid, although before fishing him out, the director and the agent tried to get bets down on how long it would take the writer to drown.

Jackson knelt by the edge of the pool, grasped the dwarf's thick wrist, and hauled him up onto the cement. Ploscaru sat wet and gasping, his stubby, bowed legs stuck out in front of him, his big head down on his chest as he leaned back on his powerful arms and hands. Finally, he looked up at Jackson, who, for the first time, saw the almost hot glitter in the dwarf's green eyes.

"Who're you?" Ploscaru said.

"As I told the man, nobody."

"You have a name."

"Jackson. Minor Jackson."

“Thank you, Minor Jackson,” the dwarf said gravely. “I am in your debt.”

“Not really.”

“What do you do?”

“Nothing.”

“You are rich, then?”

“No.”

“But you would like to be?”

“Maybe.”

“You were in the war, of course.”

“Yes.”

“What did you do—in the war?”

“I was sort of a spy.”

Still staring up at Jackson, the dwarf nodded slowly several times. “I can make you rich.”

“Sure.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“I didn’t say that.”

The dwarf rose and thoughtfully dusted off his still-damp palms. It was a gesture that he often used whenever he was trying to decide about something. It was also a gesture that Jackson would come to know well.

“Drowning is thirsty business,” Ploscaru said. “Let’s go get some drink and talk about making you rich.”

“Why not?” Jackson said.

They didn’t have their drink at the actor’s. Instead, they left without saying goodbye to their host, got into Jackson’s Plymouth, and drove to the dwarf’s place.

On the way, Jackson learned for a fact that the dwarf’s name was Nicolae Ploscaru. He also learned, although these facts were totally uncheckable, that Ploscaru was the youngest son of a minor Romanian nobleman (possibly a count); that there were vast but, of course, long-lost estates in both Bessarabia and Transylvania; that until the war, Bucharest had boasted the most beautiful women in

Europe, most of whom the dwarf had slept with; and finally, that before escaping to Turkey, the dwarf, when not spying for the British, had slain four, or possibly five, SS officers with his own hands.

"I strangled them with these," the dwarf said holding up the twin instruments of death for possible inspection. "The last one, a colonel—rather a nice chap, actually—I finished off in a Turkish bath not too far from the Palace Athénée. You know the Palace Athénée, of course."

"No."

"It's a hotel; quite a fine one. When you get to Bucharest, you should make it a point to stay there."

"Okay," Jackson said, "I will."

"And be sure to mention my name."

"Yes," said Jackson, not quite smiling, "I'll do that too."

The dwarf's place was a house with a view high up in the Hollywood hills. It was built of redwood and glass and stone, and it obviously didn't belong to the dwarf. For one thing, the furnishings were too feminine, and for another, nearly everything that could take it had a large, elaborate intertwined double W either engraved or woven or branded into its surface.

Jackson stood in the living room and looked around. "Nice place," he said. "Who's WW?"

"Winona Wilson," the dwarf said, trying very hard to keep his w's from sounding like v's and almost succeeding. "She's a friend of mine."

"And what does Winona do?"

"Mostly, she tries to get money from her rich mother up in Santa Barbara."

"I wish her luck."

"I want to get some dry clothes on," the dwarf said. "Can you make a martini?"

"Sure."

Ploscaru gestured toward a long barlike affair that separated the living room from the kitchen. “It’s all over there,” he said, turned, and was gone.

By the time the dwarf came back, the drinks were mixed and Jackson was sitting on one of the high stools at the bar looking down across the slightly sunken living room and through the glass to the faraway lights of Hollywood and Los Angeles which were just beginning to come on in the early-September evening.

Ploscaru was wearing a long (long on him, anyway) green silk dressing gown that obviously had been tailored. Peeping out from underneath the skirt of the dressing gown were a pair of red Turkish slippers whose toes turned up and back and ended in small silver bells that jingled not unpleasantly when he moved.

Jackson handed the dwarf his drink and said, “What do you do, friend—I mean, really?”

Ploscaru smiled, revealing large white teeth that seemed almost square. He then took the first swallow of his martini, shuddered as he nearly always did, and lit one of his Old Golds. “I live off women,” he said.

“Sounds pleasant.”

The dwarf shrugged. “Not altogether. But some women find me attractive—despite everything.” He made a curiously sad gesture that was almost an apology for his three-foot-seven-inch height. It was to be one of only two times that Jackson would ever hear the dwarf make any reference to it

Ploscaru glanced about for some place to sit and decided on the long cream-colored couch with its many bright pillows, all with WW woven into them. He settled back into it like a child, with much wriggling. Then he began his questions.

He wanted to know how long Jackson had been in Los Angeles. Two days. Where had he been before that? In San Francisco. When had he got out of the service? In February.

What had he done since then? Very little. Where had he gone to school? The University of Virginia. What had he studied? Liberal Arts. Was that a subject? Not really. What had Jackson done before the war?

For a time Jackson was silent. “I’m trying to remember,” he said finally. “I got out of school in ’36. Then I went to Europe for a year, bumming around. After that I was with an advertising agency in New York, but that only lasted six months. Then I went to work for a yacht dealer on commission, but I didn’t sell any, so that didn’t last either. After that I wrote a very bad play, which nobody would produce, and then—well, then there was one winter that I skied, and a summer that I sailed, and a fall that I played polo. And finally, in ’40, I went into the Army. I was twenty-six.”

“Have you ever been poor?” Ploscaru said.

“I’ve been broke.”

“There’s a difference.”

“Yes,” Jackson said. “There is.”

“Your family is wealthy.” It wasn’t a question.

“My old man is still trying to get that way, which is probably why he married my mother, who always was rich and probably always will be as long as she keeps marrying rich husbands. The rich tend to do that, don’t they?—marry each other.”

“To preserve the species,” Ploscaru said with a shrug as though the answer were as obvious as preordination. He then frowned, which made his thick black hair move down toward his eyes. “Most Americans don’t, but do you speak any languages?”

“French and German and enough Italian to get by.”

“Where did you learn your languages?”

“At a school in Switzerland. When I was thirteen my parents got divorced and I turned rotten. They packed me off to this school for three years, which was really more like

a boys' prison. Rich boys, of course. You either learned or else."

Ploscaru examined his cigarette and then crushed it out in a soapstone ashtray. "So now you would like to make money?"

"It would be a change."

"When a war ends," the dwarf said slowly, "there are a number of ways for the enterprising to make money. The most obvious, of course, is to deal in scarce goods—the black market. Another is to provide certain services for the rich who managed to remain rich even though they themselves were, in effect, casualties of the war. This I propose to do. Does it interest you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"No, I really didn't expect you to."

"But it's a way to make money?"

"Yes."

"Is it legal?"

"Almost."

"Then I'm interested," Jackson said.

Chapter 3

There was a gas war going on in Long Beach, and Jackson pulled the Plymouth into a station with a big sign out front that boasted of gasoline for 21.9 cents a gallon. Catty-corner across the street, the man at the Texaco station, a grim look on his face, was taking down his own sign and putting up a new one that would match his competitor's price.

The top was lowered on the convertible, and music was coming from its radio. The music was Jimmy Dorsey's version of "Green Eyes," and the dwarf sang along while the attendant filled up the tank. The dwarf liked to sing.

That was one of the several things Jackson had learned about Ploscaru since their meeting at the actor's pool three weeks before. A week after that, Jackson had accepted the dwarf's invitation to move in and share the house in the Hollywood hills that belonged to Winona Wilson—who, it seemed, would be staying on in Santa Barbara indefinitely as she struggled to get money out of her rich mother.

It was during those same three weeks that Ploscaru had carried on his often mysterious negotiations with the people in Mexico—negotiations that Jackson would be concluding later that day in Ensenada. And it was also during those same three weeks that Jackson had discovered that the dwarf knew an incredible number of people—incredible, at least, in Jackson's estimation. Most of them, it

turned out, were women who ran the dwarf's errands, chauffeured him around, and took him—and Jackson—to parties. At the parties Ploscaru would often sing and play the piano, if there was one. Sometimes the songs would be sad Romanian ones, and if the dwarf had had enough to drink, he would sing with tears streaming down his face. Then the women would cuddle and try to console him, and while all that was going on the dwarf would sometimes wink at Jackson.

But more often than not, the dwarf would sing popular American songs. He seemed to know the words to all of them, and he sang in a true, deep baritone. His piano playing, while enthusiastic, wasn't really very good.

Jackson came to realize that most men resented the dwarf. They resented his singing, his size, his charm—and most of all, they resented his success with women, which small knots of them would often discuss in prurient whispers at the endless succession of parties. Ploscaru seemed to enjoy the resentment; but then, the dwarf, Jackson had learned, doted on almost any kind of attention.

With the tank now full, Jackson followed the coast highway south toward San Diego. It was still early morning, and the dwarf sang most of the way to Laguna Beach, where they stopped at a hotel for coffee.

After the waitress had poured him a refill, Ploscaru said, "Are you sure you remember the code phrases?"

"I'm sure."

"What are they?"

"Well, for one thing, they're silly."

"In spite of that, what are they?"

"I'm supposed to call her on the house phone and tell her my name and then, like a fool, I say, '*Wenn der Schwan singt lu, lu, lu, lu.*' Jesus."

"And what does she reply?"

“Well, if she can stop giggling, she’s supposed to come back with, *‘Mach ich meine Augen zu, Augen zu, Augen zu.’*”

The dwarf had smiled.

After the coffee they continued down the coast, stopped for lunch at La Jolla, and then drove on into San Diego, where Jackson dropped Ploscaru off at the zoo.

“Why don’t you go to a picture instead of hanging around here all afternoon?”

The dwarf shook his head. “There’ll be children here. Children and animals and I get along famously, you know.”

“I didn’t, but I do now. I’m going to try to get back here before midnight. Maybe when you get through with the kids and the animals you can locate us some bourbon. Not gin. Bourbon. I can’t take any more gin.”

“Very well,” the dwarf said, “bourbon.”

A half hour later, Jackson was across the border checkpoint, through Tijuana, and driving south along the narrow, much-patched coastal road into Baja California. There was a lot of scenery and not much else to look at between Tijuana and Ensenada. Occasionally there would be a cluster of fishing shacks, a substantial house or two, and the odd tourist court, but mostly it was blue sea, steep bluffs, fine beaches, and on the left, dry, mulberry-colored mountains.

Jackson made the sixty-five-mile trip in a little less than two hours and pulled up at the entrance of the sprawling, mission-inspired Hotel Riviera del Pacífico, which had been built facing the bay back in the twenties by a gambling syndicate that Jack Dempsey had fronted for.

It was a little after five when Jackson entered the spacious lobby, found the house phones, picked one up, and asked the operator for Suite 232. The call was answered by a woman with a low voice who said only “Hello,” but even from that Jackson could detect the pronounced German accent.

“This is Minor Jackson.”

The woman said nothing. Jackson sighed and recited the prearranged phrase in German about the swan singing lu, lu, lu, lu. Very seriously the woman replied in German that it made her eyes close. Then in English she said, “Please come up, Mr. Jackson.”

Jackson went up the stairs to the second floor, found 232, and knocked. The woman who opened the door was younger than the dwarf had led him to expect. Ploscaru had said that she was a spinster, and to Jackson that meant a maiden lady in her late thirties or forties. But Ploscaru’s English, sifted as it was through several languages, occasionally lost some of its exactness.

She was, however, certainly no spinster. Jackson guessed her to be somewhere between twenty-five and twenty-nine, and on the whole, he found her almost beautiful, but if not quite that, at least striking. Her face was oval in shape and light olive in complexion. She wore no makeup, not even a touch of lipstick on her full-lipped mouth, which was smiling slightly now.

“Please come in, Mr. Jackson,” she said. “You are just in time for tea.”

It sounded like a phrase that had been learned early from someone with a British accent and hoarded carefully for later use. Jackson nodded, returned her small smile, and followed her into the suite’s sitting room, where a tea service rested on a table.

“Please sit down,” she said. “My father will join us presently.”

“Thank you, Miss Oppenheimer,” Jackson said, and picked out a comfortable-looking beige chair near the window. The Oppenheimer woman decided on a straight chair near the tea service. She sat down slowly, keeping her ankles and knees together, and was not at all concerned about what to do with her hands. She folded them into her lap, after first smoothing her dress down over her knees,

and smiled again at Jackson as though waiting for him to say something observant about the weather.

Jackson said nothing. Before the silence became strained, the woman said, “You had a pleasant journey?”

“Very pleasant. Very … scenic.”

“And Mr. Ploscaru, he is well?”

“Very well.”

“We have never met, you know.”

“You and Mr. Ploscaru?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“We have only talked on the telephone. And corresponded, of course. How old a man is he?”

“Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, somewhere around there.”

“So young?”

“Yes.”

“On the telephone he sounds so much more older. No, that is not right. I mean—”

“Mature?” Jackson supplied.

She nodded gratefully. “He could not come himself, of course.”

“No.”

“The trouble with his papers.”

“Yes.”

“They are very important these days, proper papers. Passports. Visas.”

“Yes.”

“He is a large man, Mr. Ploscaru? From his voice he somehow sounds quite large.”

“No, not too large.”

She again nodded gratefully at the information. “Well, I am sure you will be able to handle everything most satisfactorily.”

“Thank you.”

Jackson had never prided himself on his small talk. He was wondering how long it would continue, and whether he

might risk lighting a cigarette, when the blind man came in. He came in almost briskly from the bedroom, carrying a long white cane that he didn't really seem to need. He moved into the center of the room and stopped, facing the window.

"Let's see, you are near the tea, Leah," the blind man said in German.

"Yes, and Mr. Jackson is in the beige chair," she said.

The blind man nodded, turned slightly in Jackson's direction, took two confident steps forward, and held out his hand. Jackson, already up, accepted the handshake as the blind man said in German, "Welcome to Ensenada, Herr Jackson; I understand you speak German."

"I try."

The blind man turned and paused as if deciding which chair to select. He moved confidently toward a wingbacked leather one; gave it a cursory, almost careless tap with his cane; and settling into it, said, "Well, we'll speak English. Leah and I need the practice. You've already met my daughter, of course."

"Yes."

"We had quite a nice chat about Mr. Ploscaru," she said.

The blind man nodded. "Damned clever chap, that Romanian. Haven't met him, of course, but we've talked on the telephone. Known him long, Mr. Jackson?"

"No, not terribly long."

The blind man nodded again and turned his head slightly so that he seemed almost to be looking at his daughter, but not quite: he was a trifle off, although no more than a few degrees. "Think we might have the tea now, Leah?"

"Of course," Leah Oppenheimer said, and shifted around in her chair toward the tea service, which Jackson, for some reason, assumed was sterling.

Afternoon tea was apparently a studied and much-enjoyed ritual in the Oppenheimer household. It was