

## Chapter One

Philadelphia, PA, May 1943

The clock struck ten o'clock that Wednesday morning. A clairvoyant, a medium, a crystal ball reader, a seer of ghosts and a nurse with healing hands sat around the polished, antique table in the Hamilton House mansion library, now their conference room. The stormy weather that heralded America's entrance into the war had finally passed. Balmy breezes crept through the opened French doors allowing exit to a flagstone patio and extensive estate grounds. They—the Operation Delphi team—were the White House's top secret psychic defense against Nazi mind control. They were attempting to raise their psychic powers to new levels. Distractions could wreck the experiment.

“Stay focused, people.”

U. S. WAVES Lieutenant Olivia “Livvy” Delacourt rolled her shoulders and shook out her hands before raising one hand to push back a bobbed strand of brunette hair still curled from the dampness of a morning shower. Beneath the starched, white-cotton collar of her uniform, she massaged a spot of tension at the nape of her neck. She and her team were attempting to coerce U. S. Navy Commander Barrington Drew, III—“Trey” to most everybody—to act against his better judgment.

Livvy glanced at their goal written in white chalk lettering on the blackboard—*Get the boss to eat hardtack*. Skeptical engineer that he was, Trey wouldn't be a cinch to manipulate into eating food he despised.

The stakes were high.

British spies had picked up rumors that Hitler's inner circle of occult practitioners was capable of disrupting war preparations purely by mental suggestion directed against U. S.

citizens. To combat this, President Roosevelt established the ultra-secret The Watch Committee. In turn, and under the supposed oversight of the Navy, the committee created a U. S. occult team named Operation Delphi.

A second mission, but just as important, was to psychically search for Nazi spies who infiltrated cities and towns along the East Coast, especially in the states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. In this, their team had had some success. A few weeks back, they'd zeroed in on German spies, resulting in their capture. But that success was a drop in the bucket compared to what must be done to win a war.

Visions normally came willy nilly to Livvy. As a Delphi operative, she must invoke clairvoyant visions at will. If rumors were true, they were neophytes compared to their Nazi counterparts and had a lot of work cut out for them.

“We need to get this right.”

Livvy spoke aloud, as much to fortify herself as to spur on her team. She rubbed her hands together, the resulting friction creating physical warmth even as it drew sustenance from the ethers. She aligned her eyes to a crammed, floor-to-ceiling bookcase directly in front of her. Unfocusing her physical sight, she relied instead on her psychic third eye. She'd just begun dropping into a meditative trance when eighteen-year-old Isadora Turgenev distracted her.

“Holy moley, if stage mesmerizers can force people to do things, we should be able to.”

Looking like an ancient priestess invoking an oracle, Isadora waved her slender hands above her family's crystal ball. The wide, wrist-length sleeves of her silk robe shifted dramatically with the movement. In day-to-day living, she was the facility's receptionist and those hands carried out mundane typing tasks and logged in visitors and deliveries.

“Child, we're not stage hypnotists.”

John Clifford's deep bass conveyed a no-nonsense perspective. White haired and slightly stooped, his elongated skeletal frame seemed to disappear into the wallpaper like the ghosts he sought.

Despite his ethereal look, Livvy knew that John was anchored to this world by an abundance of common sense. Callused hands were testament to a lifetime of cabinetmaking and affirmed his cover story as the facility's handyman and carpenter. Also, his work on the framing of a small sailboat, being built in the end garage on the estate for Chief Michael Posner of Operation Delphi's security staff, was another diversion to convince neighbors of the benign, quasi-military nature of Hamilton House and the Delphi staff.

"He only needs to take one bite!" Isadora spoke with the impatience of youth.

"Which he'll refuse to do." Middle-aged and short in stature, Garrett Alterman was a medium by talent and—despite wartime food rationing—a seeming magician at creating gourmet meals. He'd spent years as a requisitions clerk for the Navy before being recruited for Operation Delphi and seemed to know everybody along the East Coast who had anything to sell or barter.

"You heard our beloved commander at breakfast, 'Hard as bricks. Won't touch the miserable stuff'—and this after I was up at five to bake a fresh batch!" Incensed, Garrett's mouth hardened into a straight line.

John pointed to the silver tray containing the hard tack and also a cinnamon apple tart. "What he'll do is pick his favorite. That apple tart will be in his mouth as soon as he gets through the door, you wait and see." John's lower lip pushed out, as if avowing his words.

Isadora looked up from her crystal ball. "Golly, let's not be negative."

Garrett shifted his weight in the wing chair he preferred to the straight backed chairs around the table. It was set in a corner between the row of black walnut bookcases and the

French doors. “Maybe we’re making things too hard on ourselves with that tart on the same plate.”

Livvy gazed with unfocused eyes at her team. “Reminder, everybody. We need that apple tart. We’ll only know our psychic powers were successful if our beloved commander bypasses the tart and eats the hardtack.”

“If we keep talking about it, I’ll eat it.” Garrett’s rotund figure attested to his love of food.

John stretched as if loosening kinks in his back. “Let’s not waste time.”

“That’s right, my dears.” Muriel Evans was a semi-retired R.N., whose starched, white nursing cap perched precariously above a netted bun of gray hair rolled at the nape of her neck. She’d been recruited to Operation Delphi because of the healing power in her hands and her ability to discern past events using those hands. She was rubbing Trey’s monogrammed handkerchief between her fingertips to connect with his kinetic energy. “Let’s not dilly dally.”

Livvy tapped unpolished fingernails on the conference room table. “Down to business, crew.” She adjusted horn-rimmed glasses against the bridge of her nose before dropping into a deeper meditative state. Her feet in their Navy-issue shoes were flat on the floor as she sought an energy anchorage in Mother Earth.

Before being assigned to Operation Delphi a few months back, Livvy’s clairvoyant experiences consisted of aura readings for friends and an occasional—unsummoned and unwanted—prophetic vision. Since joining Delphi, she’d learned to conjure precognitive visions on demand.

A shiver raced down her spine. Did they have what was needed to take on this mental fight with the Nazis? She was unsure, but there were no others. It was up to them. Her small

team must wage psychic battles and be the winners.

With anxiety adding an edge, Livvy's mind probed outward from where she sat near the antique library table. She searched the ethers for traces of energy belonging to her handsome superior officer who'd been her—"still secret"—high school crush, as well as a family friend. Discovering a wispy trail of translucent yellow energy, she created a stronger mental connection by dispatching repeated, telepathic communications. "*Make Trey eat the hardtack.*" The energy message sped across the wispy trail as if on a supernatural highway. The message carried with her plea the aroma of her gardenia perfume.

She waited, and waited some more. Where was he? What was he doing?

Releasing her will power from the mystical bonds that anchored consciousness to her physical body, she allowed her spirit to drift upward as if riding a sunlit cloud. From ceiling height, she dispatched a mist of spiritual wellbeing to her physical body which sat dutifully on the straight-backed, conference room chair. With a mental tug on the silver cord connecting body to spirit, she drifted through the wall and along the back hallway.

Dragging the silver cord and probing ahead with rainbow-colored tendrils, Livvy glided closer to Trey's office. Her spirit effortlessly slipped through the office wall and drifted leisurely across the ceiling, then floated downward, stopping behind the high-backed, black leather executive chair where Trey sat. Livvy knew that the comfortable chair and his rosewood office desk were a gift from his politically prominent, industrialist father, who was also a member of The Watch. A lined, yellow, legal-sized pad rested on the leather-bound, desk blotter and had some notes written in ink.

From this close vantage point, Livvy reached out tendrils of mental willpower to tug on his aura and to entice him into the conference room.

*“Make Trey eat the hardtack.”*

“Dammit to hell.” He shouldn’t be bothered by hunger pangs. He’d eaten a large breakfast not that long ago. Trey pulled out a desk drawer, looking for candy, but no luck. Adding insult to injury, on top of hunger pangs something was poking him at the back of the neck. He checked beneath his uniform collar to see if the laundry tag was straight. His fingers unearthed nothing to explain the sensation nor where the hell the smell of gardenias was coming from. Irritating.

Trey recognized he wasn’t in the best of moods as it was. By courier yesterday, he’d gotten dim-witted orders from The Watch.

“What’s the matter?” Chester asked.

Trey blinked, realizing he’d blanked out while U. S. Navy Lieutenant Chester Franklin waited patiently on a guest chair by his desk to find out why he’d been called into the office. What was going on that he’d do something so uncharacteristic?

“Sorry for the distraction. I’ve been puzzling over some stupid orders I got from The Watch. I have to do something about them even if they’re nonsense.”

“What are the High-and-Mighty up to now?”

“They want me to calculate how much energy psychics like Livvy put out. They want to know if such measurements can separate out fake psychics from the real ones.”

Chester wasn’t a man to suffer fools. He looked hot under the collar. “Bloody fools of pencil pushers. We have to trust our Delphi team to sort out the fakes.”

Trey’s engineering training predisposed him to measuring and testing, but “measuring” assumed something quantifiable. Just what about psychic energy did The Watch think was quantifiable?

“It’s not like you can see, hear, smell, touch or taste the stuff.” Chester echoed his thinking.

Trey’s father had gotten him this assignment—his first command. He realized he’d never have gotten promoted so quickly if there hadn’t been a scarcity of able-bodied men on the home front and if his socially prominent parents hadn’t known the Roosevelts. He’d planned to use his engineering skills on shipboard and had raged when first told about Operation Delphi and its mission, but he’d come to respect the psychics, even if he didn’t understand them.

He agitatedly ran his fingers through his hair in a failed attempt to distract from his stomach discomfort. This was one of those times Trey wished he’d chosen a window office instead of being security conscious and choosing this windowless office located off Reception where he could keep an eye on things. Gazing out a window might make it easier to come up with ideas for The Watch’s experiment.

“What do you want me to do?”

Chester was always prepared to follow orders, even ridiculous ones.

“I need you to look through the senator’s library here at Hamilton House after our team is done with whatever they’re doing in there. If you see something relevant to psychics or energy experiments, set those books aside on the conference room table. I’ll look through them when I get a chance.”

Hamilton House belonged to a Pennsylvania senator, also a member of The Watch Committee, who’d donated the mansion and most of its furnishings to the Navy for the duration of the war. The senator now lived with his family in their Georgetown townhouse in Washington, D. C.

“We could ask the Reference Librarian at the public library, too,” Chester said. “Their

collection is more extensive.”

“I don’t want them to get suspicious about what we’re doing here. We’re supposed to be merely wartime paper pushers, not occult practitioners. I may end up sending you over there, but I’ll have you mix in random materials to confuse the issue.” Military protocol had even been suspended within the estate grounds to give the impression that those coming and going were mostly civilians. “We can’t blow our cover story.”

“I understand. ‘Loose lips sink ships.’” Chester quoted the government’s motto to caution U. S. families to leave home-front war news out of any letters mailed to the battlefields so the enemy didn’t have fodder for propaganda.

He stood to leave. He looked ready to do the research.

“You’re taking this latest from The Watch in good stride.” Trey was happy to compliment him on never shirking a task.

“‘Duty largely consists of pretending that the trivial is critical,’ according to John Fowles. I know my duty.”

Trey chuckled.

As Chester was closing his office door, the phone rang. Trey picked up the receiver.

“Yes, Denise?”

“Some man wants to talk with you, but won’t give his name because he wants to surprise you.”

Only a touch of southern accent came through from when, as a child, her family lived in Charlestown, South Carolina. The accent was a charming touch and added to the magnetic effect the voluptuous, but spoken for Denise had on the male population. She was recruited as staff secretary because she was Livvy’s friend from Sarah Lawrence College and her co-worker at

Cryptology before being reassigned to Delphi.

“He says he’s a friend from long ago, but drifted out of touch.”

More weird stuff happening. It seemed one of those days.

Trey knew there was no breach in security that a friend could find him at the facility. All inquiries for any Delphi members were routed through a switchboard operator at the admiral’s office at naval headquarters and, only then, forwarded to Delphi’s confidential number. Who would be looking for him was another matter. “I’d better see what’s going on. Put him through.”

The phone clicked as the caller was connected.

“Hi, Old Buddy. Here’s a voice you haven’t heard in a long time.”

There was no mistaking the mellow tones of his Dartmouth College classmate and rival in the romance department.

“Bernard Kensington, as I live and breathe.”

Memories of two young campus studs on the prowl brought on a grin at their former one-upmanship in the friendly game of dating. “If I’d known it was you, I’d have had the switchboard operator send you packing.” Trey spoke with an amused tone.

“Is that any way to treat a long, lost friend?”

“You mean the man who swore he’d stay in touch and then disappeared off the face of the earth?”

“Not a disappearance. I was seeing the world as business manager of a traveling show.”

“No time to send a post card?” Trey had been disappointed Brick hadn’t kept in touch, but as time passed, life took a different turn.

“You know how it is, Old Buddy.” Brick’s chagrin manifested in his voice. “Besides, my folks knew where I was—more or less.”

“It must have been ‘less.’ I tried your folks.”

“I’m chastened. Once war broke out, I hopped a flight home to the good old U. S. of A. I now manage USO shows for military bases on the East Coast.”

“Show business. Now that’s right up your alley.”

“Isn’t that the truth? I was always bringing musicians and singers to Dartmouth.”

Trey was annoyed his hunger pangs weren’t going away. He started thinking about an apple. “That’s a cushy wartime job you captured. And here I thought you were in Europe fighting the Nazis.”

“I’d figured the same for you. I was surprised when I bumped into your father in D. C. last week and he said you were in Philadelphia.”

Trey’s stomach growled. *Maybe an apple wasn’t enough. Maybe he needed something more substantial.*

“When I told your father I’m based out of New York and travel around the East Coast,” Brick said, “he told me that you were working out of Hamilton House. My folks are friends with the senator so I know exactly where it is. In fact, the senator was instrumental in getting me this job when it turned out I had flat feet.”

Brick was a persuader *par excellence*, but Trey’s father was used to resisting any kind of approach. “I’m surprised The Deuce said anything because we’re top secret. We may be paper pushers, but we’re still part of the war effort.”

“No sweat, my friend. Top-of-the-line clearance for me. Added to family clout, I can get in most anywhere.”

Trey guffawed. “You always were the one to wangle the best invitations.”

“I finagled your phone number out of your father. He couldn’t resist my charm.”

Trey knew the number his dad gave out was the one re-routed through naval headquarters. “Where are you right now? We should meet up for cocktails and dinner. My treat.”

Discussing food was a bad idea. His stomach wouldn’t stop growling.

“I’m in New York City.”

“Next time you’re in town, we’ll get together.”

“It’s a deal. Look, old boy, the reason I phoned instead of waiting until I was in town,” Brick said, “is that I have eight front-row tickets for this Friday night’s USO show at the naval base in Philadelphia. The tickets are looking for a new home. An admiral’s family was supposed to use them, but something got in their way at the last minute. Can you use them?”

“Damn right, I could. We could use some time off around here.”

“I’ll get my secretary to put them into a courier packet. You’ll have them at Hamilton House by tomorrow afternoon.”

“That’s terrific.”

“Look, I’ve got to run. I left my number with your secretary. Call me if you’ll be in New York City.” And like that Brick was gone.

With the hunger pangs worsening, Trey capped his gold Mont Blanc fountain pen and lay it on the leather-trimmed desk blotter. He rose and briskly strode toward the office door, intending to go to the kitchen and see what leftovers were in the refrigerator.