

ORCHIDS OF WAR

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*To my late mother, Harriette Marie Frisino, whose sense of humor
kept us afloat and whose love reached beyond our door.
To her memories of growing up in Seattle and the Second World War.*

Acknowledgements

WHILE RESEARCHING MY BOOK, *Whiskey Cove*, a gentleman I interviewed in the San Juan Islands, Mr. Thompson, told me of a young Caucasian woman studying Japanese language at the University of Washington in 1941. The FBI discovered her expertise and took her to San Francisco. Dressing her as a hooker, they established her in bars where Japanese men frequented. She would then report back to the FBI the intelligence she had gathered.

I am ever grateful for the concept and named her for my mother's best friend and partner in crime, Billie McCloud.

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I am certain I have probably missed someone along my years of research. Please forgive me.

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While this book deals with a very real topic and incorporates accurate details, the story is fiction, with no intent to harm those who suffered during this horrific clash of nations, the Second World War.

ONE

THE ORCA'S HAD ARRIVED. They were a bit early this June of 1941, but then the salmon were running early too.

Billi O'Shaughnessy sat on her father's lawn in Dyes Inlet that sloped to the water, watching the giant mammals force the salmon down the inlet, straight toward her. Their huffing sounds as they breached set the rhythm of her own breath, fast and intense. The salmon flickered in the golden light of the sunset as they sprang from the water in an attempt to outswim their killers.

Her small rowboat sat in their path on the still water, which now rippled with the fierce movement in the battle for life. The black head of a seal pup appeared on the land side of her rowboat, seeking shelter from the onslaught. She held her breath for the creature and marveled at his cunning trick. As the salmon neared the bar of land, they split in two directions and the mighty orca's made easy prey of the moment as the water took on the red hue of death.

Long before Billi stood to leave, the tall shadows of the trees from up the hill had spread across the water, darkening the scene of destruction. A sense of loss, mixed with her calm understanding of the forces of nature, had distracted her enough. An immense decision loomed ahead and her father had been of no help. He had only looked at her, picked up his coffee laced with booze, and muttered about the damn Japanese.

Mr. O'Shaughnessy had never appreciated her relationship with Eileen Nakamura and her family, but had scoffed at her interest and involvement with their culture. While he had been born in Ireland,

traveled to America as a young man, he seemed to find it difficult to tolerate others whose language sounded so foreign.

“Why the hell do you want to talk that Japanese, Bright Eyes?” his brogue thickening in his distaste for the idea.

Maybe jealousy sparked some of his venom. After all, when Billi’s dad divorced her mother, an unheard of event for the times and the Catholic Church, Mr. Nakamura had tended to Billi as he did his garden, with thoughtfulness and care. He even went so far as to include her in his family teaching of the Japanese way, an innocent extension that could become her biggest challenge and lead to unforeseen danger.

She stopped at the door to her father’s cabin, rough-planked and slightly at odds with any plumb line as it listed to one side. She could smell the fire and hear her father singing, whiskey-warmed and joyful, with his slight brogue. How she loved him for all his follies. She had to make him comprehend this was not about leaving him, but about the adventure of a lifetime. An opportunity to visit the faraway islands of her dreams: Japan.

Mr. Nakamura’s eyes had lit up like a new morning at the news of the possibility of Billi stepping on the very land of his birth. But her father’s reaction had been a storm as violent as the orca’s kill.

Billi took a deep breath and let the memories of what had brought her to this decision play out in her mind as reassurance. At age seven, her mother had taken a job as secretary to the governor at the state capitol in Olympia, Washington. Billi, angered by the recent divorce of her parents, rebelled. Constantly, the guard escorted her to her mother’s office, told her to sit in a chair, read a book, and behave. But within minutes, the irascible child would sneak off, demonstrating her emotions by raining chaos on the capitol building, sliding down the marble banisters, her school uniform flying, a guard quick on her heels. Once, the guard had placed a spittoon at the base of the low, wide railing that created the perfect long slide. When she landed in the offensive container, head first, soaking herself, she merely learned how to slide feet first and kick the spittoon at the last second.

One especially warm spring day, Billi sailed down her favorite banister, flicked the squat receptacle aside, leaving the dark ooze spreading across the floor, and raced out the door with the capitol guard

in determined pursuit. She ducked into a large rhododendron bush where Mr. Nakamura intently picked the dead heads off old blooms.

“Which way did that kid go?” the guard demanded of the Japanese man, hunched over the bush.

Mr. Nakamura barely raised his shoulders as he kept his gaze on the shrub and the large blue eyes of the child who hid in its dense branches.

“Damn brat.” The guard shuffled off to continue his search.

As soon as the guard strolled out of sight, Billi slipped from behind the bush. She started for the door when she was stopped by the soft voice of Mr. Nakamura.

“I will not tell of your indiscretion if you promise a favor in return.”

“What’s that?” Indignant at being waylaid, her small hand met with her hip, and she looked up at him with an untrusting stare.

“Meet my daughter Eileen here tomorrow at this time.”

“No. What’s an indiscretion? And why would I want to play with her?” Billi folded her arms with a defiant look.

“I will have the answer to both questions tomorrow, here, at four o’clock.” Without another word, Mr. Nakamura picked up the can he had been putting his trimmings in and left.

As life would have it, the moment Billi met Eileen, their bond became unbreakable. They spent nights at each other’s homes, carefully learning as much from one as from the other. Billi showed a deft hand with the elegant fan at the Bon Odori dances she attend with Eileen; she studied the glass-encased geisha girls that adorned the Nakamura home and began what was to become her lifelong passion for the Japanese language.

When her mother moved Billi and her older brother Eddy back to Seattle, the Nakamuras were right behind them. They opened a Nakamura Grocery store in Seattle’s Japantown, with an apartment above, allowing Eileen and Billi to graduate together from Garfield High School.

And now, an incredible opportunity had been presented to her by her professor of Japanese at the University of Washington. Professor Fujihara had convinced her she would win the Japanese language competition and the prize trip to Japan.

Somehow, without the support of her father, winning would mean nothing. For pleasing James Edward O'Shaughnessy she perceived as the only way of mending his broken heart. Her mother remained the only woman he had ever loved, a love that had regrettably become slurred when he lost yet another fortune and turned to drink. Their divorce still tore at his heart.

Knowing time was running out as her father's bottle of whiskey emptied, Billi took one more deep breath, gathered her strength, and pushed open the door to try again.

"Dad, did you see the orca's?"

"Killing machines. Thank heaven today you were not a salmon." He eyed her suspiciously and waited.

"Right. Better to be the seal pup who uses our row boat as shelter."

"Clever black fiends, they are."

"Dad, I have to leave soon. I have to get back to Professor Fujihara and tell him what I have decided about the competition." She straightened and waited for his response.

"You always did like a challenge. But it's not a time to be travelin' over there."

"You've been hanging out at the naval base far too much. Any work there?"

"As a matter a fact, I've been asked to swing a hammer over at the shipyard startin' very soon." He raised his cup in her direction.

The job at the Bremerton Naval Shipyard was always on the horizon, but never a reality. She smiled at him encouragingly.

"That's great, Dad." She took time gathering her things in the hopes the conversation would turn again to her decision. But her father kept his eyes on the fire, seemingly mesmerized by the tranquility of the leaping flames.

She reached the door and stopped. "Okay. I'll let you know what I decide."

"Be careful, darlin'. I know somethin' terrible is about to happen. I just feel it comin'."

A chill ran down her body, for her father and his predictions were something of a legend. Often brushed aside as drunken prattle, his insights were the talk of the town when they came to be. If he had only

had that ability with his own dealings. She shook her head at the list of the calamities they could have avoided.

But for now, Billi's only concern centered on entering the competition at the University of Washington for the chance of an adventure to Japan. If something terrible was about to take place, it certainly would not impact her.

TWO

BILLI COAXED HER MOTHER'S OLD BUICK down 30th Avenue South, just off Jackson Street, where the O'Shaughnessy house stood out in all of its Victorian splendor, badly in need of paint. As she rattled to a stop at number 304, she heard the voice of the man she loved, Raymond Wilcox Richardson. The voice she had listened to since he came home with Eddy so many years ago.

"Hey, beautiful."

Ray's words were magic to her troubled soul as she stepped from the car. Her journey back to Seattle on the Black Ball Ferry had left her feeling anything but beautiful. It had been a long two hours of turmoil as she mulled over her next steps, and how to break the news to Ray had been a big part of her dilemma.

"I've been waiting for you. Boy, do I have good news." Ray took her arm, swung her around in a happy dance, and then pulled her to him. He kissed her under the new leaves of the oak tree.

"Watch it now," Eddy, her brother, teased as he appeared on the porch. "She's not yours yet."

"We'll see about that." Ray guided Billi up the concrete steps, his broad smile a treasure to behold. "Come on, darlin'. I'll announce it to everyone at once."

Billi, used to Ray's wild ways and extravagant behavior, let him lead her into the parlor. Between Eddy and Ray, the O'Shaughnessy home vibrated with exuberance. The two boys had grown side by side into head-turning young men, dark and handsome, full of life and adventure. Like a third leg, Billi had always trailed behind them. Now,

everywhere the trio went, doors opened wide to the excitement that followed in their wake.

“Go get your mom,” Ray instructed Eddy. “I need a moment alone with my gal.”

Eddy gave Ray a warning smack on the back before disappearing into the dining room, shouting, “Mom, you better hurry. Ray’s alone with Billi.”

“Billi, I have to know right now. Will you marry me or not?”

The question lingered again between them. Billi had just turned twenty-one and wanted to travel, to learn, to win the competition and visit Japan. Ray whirled through life, his fast actions not always in keeping with her stride. Just like his love of flying, his need for speed drizzled into all his endeavors.

“Ray...”

“Make it yes. Just a simple yes. Then when I get back we can—”

“Back? Where are you going?” Billi’s stomach fell at the sudden thought of saying good-bye, even for a short time. Funny, her head went light, it didn’t seem to matter that she planned on telling him she hoped to leave, to go on an adventure to the unknown world of the Far East. But to have Ray go off twisted her insides with a gripping sensation.

Ray put his arms around her, drawing her to him. “That’s what I came to tell you. But you have to say yes first.”

The kitchen door swung wide as Mrs. O’Shaughnessy stormed in, followed by a whistling Eddy. Mrs. O, her preferred name amongst loved ones, presented no slight figure. Her German stature, round and full-figured, commanded attention. To be accepted in high society became her goal, at any price. Having run the office of the governor all those years ago had spilled into every activity she undertook—and with it, a sense of entitlement. If it weren’t for her one slight bad habit of pinching other people’s small, shiny objects—a practice that had developed during the Depression—she would be allowed into more of society’s glamorous parlors.

“Why, Raymond, you unhand my only beautiful daughter.” Mrs. O’s voice filled the room, her diction perfect.

“Not until she says yes, Mrs. O. I’m not leaving here without it.”

Mrs. O'Shaughnessy lowered into her one good high-backed rocking chair, her seat of honor, and watched the young couple. Ray stood, eyes locked on Billi, holding her in a death grip.

"What is she saying yes to?" Mrs. O spoke to anyone who would answer.

Eddy stood behind his mother. "Just wait until she answers, Mom." The next words he spoke were whispered to her in German.

Billi shot him a dirty look. It had been so aggravating that she could not learn her mother's first language as her only sibling had. She had spent years trying, listening to the easy flow between mother and brother. At Garfield High School, Eddy had excelled in German, with Mrs. Pelton advancing him to level sixteen and an independent course. But Billi had fallen in love with Japanese. Even though several Japanese students attended Garfield, Billi had no opportunity to formally study their language until she began studies at the university, where Professor Fujihara had quickly taken her under his wing and pushed her toward the competition.

Eddy smiled back at her. She speculated how much he wanted this marriage as well. He loved Ray like a brother and would be so happy to welcome him officially into the family, and she knew he regarded her as too stubborn, his little sis who would rather be up a tree, in a boat fishing, out dancing, or learning more about the Japanese culture than saying yes to Ray and settling down.

The air thickened, suddenly stifling, and sweat began to roll down between Billi's breasts. She loved Ray beyond words and there could be no question as to their getting married. But if she promised now, before the competition, would he let her go?

"Okay." Ray collected himself and began again. "I want to make this official before I head off."

"Where?" Billi asked, tears beginning to form.

"I've signed up with the Army Air Corps. Since I have so much training as a pilot already, they asked me to join. They came to Galvin's flight training school and spoke with Jim. He said I am their best and the Air Corps wants me now. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Yes." Billi shook with fear mingled with the thrill of his announcement.

“Did you hear that Mrs. O?” Ray shouted. “She said yes!”

Mrs. O leaped out of her chair and engulfed the young couple in her arms. “Wonderful! A big wedding for you two.”

Billi struggled to be free. “No. I mean, yes, it’s wonderful. It’s your dream.”

“Our dream,” Ray corrected her. “I’ll become a commercial pilot and we can travel anywhere you want to go.”

“Time to celebrate!” Eddy clapped his hands and hurried toward the kitchen as he continued. “I’ve had the champagne chilling since Ray first asked you months ago.”

“We’ll invite the world.” Mrs. O dramatically flung her arms into the air at the opportunity to organize a grand function. “It’s the moment I’ve been waiting for since the day you were born.” She waddled off toward the kitchen, babbling as she began to create her to-do lists.

Billi stood and watched the joy spread around the room. A joy she did not fully share, as her dream of winning the competition slid further from her.

“You have to ask my father for his permission first.” She crossed her arms defiantly.

The announcement brought her mother to a screeching halt midsentence. Mention of James Edward O’Shaughnessy Sr. broke an unspoken rule that hung over the house like a dark shadow.

Eddy entered, tray in hand, with the chilled bottle and four elegant champagne glasses. He sang as he made his way through the silence. “‘Here comes the bride, all dressed in’—what color will you wear, sis?”

“Oh, stop that, Eddy,” Billi snapped. “I think our celebration is a little premature. Ray needs to ask Dad first.”

Ray took the offered full glass and handed it to Billi. “I already have.” He took a second one and handed it to his mother-in-law-to-be. “And you’ll be happy to know he gave us his blessing and wishes of good luck. He can’t wait ‘to stroll his little darlin’ down the aisle.’”

“Thank heaven.” Mrs. O’Shaughnessy downed her drink in one gulp. She extended the empty glass toward her son who, with a knowing smile, poured her another. “A bit more for the moment, rare and beautiful, when two lovers make the biggest decision of their lives.”

“To my little sis and my new brother.” Eddy held his glass high. “So cheers, to us and to our future.”

Billi the last to raise her glass to toast a future that surprisingly felt binding and restrictive, forced a smile. It had also been her dream to become Mrs. Raymond Richardson. Yet, at that moment, when her champagne glass tapped that of her future husband, she swore she would go through with the competition but keep it a secret. Her first deception to her fiancé. And it felt very strange.

DANNY GUNNER TAPPED AT THE DOOR OF 304 30th South, as he usually did several times a week. Elated he had concluded the final exams of his junior year at Garfield High School making him officially a senior, he let himself in. After all, Mrs. O had claimed him as family and this summer, selling candy at her concession stand at Mount Baker Beach, held so many promises.

“Dahlia says hi, Eddy.” He spoke offhandedly to his idol as he stepped past him into the living room. Secretly Danny felt great pride at the fact that his older sister, with her picture-perfect blonde hair, had caught Eddy’s eye. Or at least *she* was smitten—no, head over heels in love with Eddy. Danny felt his sister’s attraction gave him better standing with the O’Shaughnessys, a family he spent every spare minute with.

“When do you need my help setting up your concession stands, Mrs. O?”

Danny’s freckled face, red hair, and slight build gave him an even younger look than his sixteen years. But his willingness to help made him a favorite of Mrs. O’Shaughnessy’s.

“Ah, sweetie, we have big news.” She rocked back in her chair. “Billi and Raymond are engaged.”

“Does Dahlia know? Are we...” Danny blushed; his red cheeks amplified his red curls.

“Yes.” Billi helped him with his embarrassment. “Of course you and Dahlia will be there. Aren’t we the gang of five?”

“Boy, will she be excited.” Danny looked over at Eddy.

“Yes, I bet,” Billi teased. “Better watch out. Eddy. Love is in the air.”

“You should think about it.” Ray slapped Eddy’s back for encouragement and then checked his wristwatch. “Well, I’ve got to run. Have to be there for new recruits first thing in the morning.” He kissed Billi’s cheek and dashed out the door, flying high on love and dreams.