

Chapter One

Early March, 1942.

Squeak – squeak – squeak.

The bent rim of the old man's battered bicycle rubbed against the frame, making a harsh rasping sound as he peddled down the meandering sandy lane. The sycamores and oaks slowly gave way to pines, which grew ever shorter as he peddled. Ahead lay a hill, an ancient scrub-covered sand dune. The overgrowth of sea grasses and low shrubs had long ago taken a hold of the sand, transforming the dune into a hill not quite fifty feet high. It was Jeb McKendry's final barrier, the last obstacle separating him from his duty.

Although in his mid-sixties, Jeb peddled his antique bicycle with a firm and steady pumping of his legs. He had spent his life sailing his little fishing dory out of Wellfleet Harbor before sunrise each morning to fish for flounder on Billingsgate Shoal. Lean and hard from more than sixty years of strenuous work, a three-mile bike ride was barely worthy of mention as exercise. Still, Jeb had to stand on the pedals when he reached the hill. His pace became slower as he strained to force each pedal down in turn, adding pressure by pulling up on the handlebars.

"Must be getting old," he muttered angrily to himself as he willed his legs to continue pumping. The strain deepened the already heavy lines in his weathered face. It would have been easier to dismount and walk the bicycle up the hill, but Jeb would have none of that – it was a matter of pride. He wasn't, as he was fond of saying, too old to cut the mustard. At least yet.

Finally, he reached the crest of the hill and paused to celebrate his little victory – he had peddled all the way to the top. Panting hard, he took off his cap and wiped his brow. It was early March and cool, almost cold. The sea breezes blowing in from the Atlantic still had the scent of winter on them. Normally, the summer folks would be arriving in a few months for yet another summer on Cape Cod, a refuge from the sweltering cities. But not this year, nor the next, or even more years to come. Pearl Harbor had changed all that three brief months ago. Now the country was at war, and German U-boats were marauding along the entire seacoast. People would stay away from the cape for fear that Nazi hordes might one night pour out of a fleet of U-boats, come ashore, and slaughter them in their own beds.

Yes, Pearl Harbor had changed everything, Jeb reflected as he glanced around at the surrounding countryside. All the young men were in uniform, forcing the older men to take up the slack – even Jeb, although he had retired. Unable to serve in the Spanish American War because he had a wife and family to support and the First World War because he was too

old, Jeb finally found himself in uniform. At last he was serving his country although the task was most onerous. Perhaps it was his sense of guilt over having avoided the previous conflicts that made him accept his new duty. Or perhaps he just wanted to prove that he was still able to contribute. In any case, he wore the uniform of a Western Union Telegram delivery boy; he was the one who bore the terrible news of love ones killed and maimed in combat.

Jeb's eyes settled on his destination, *Ballinasloe*, the Fitzsimmons' summerhouse. It lay about a half mile away on the crest of the revetment-like cliff that lined the eastern shore of Cape Cod. Beyond was the Atlantic. Nearer, in the little hollow separating the hill that Jeb was standing on from the sea coast cliff was a little fresh water marsh filled with cattails and cackling waterfowl.

The house was anything but impermanent – it was a fine four-story mansion with twenty-eight rooms and a widow's walk on the roof. Some thought it presumptuous for the house to have a widow's walk for the Fitzsimmons were not a seafaring clan, but others held that it was only proper that a house overlooking the sea should have one.

A legacy from New England's seafaring past, the homes of ship captains often had a windowed cupola-like room build on top of the roof with a wooden walk outside. In fair weather and foul, the sea captain's wife would climb up to the roof each day and search the horizon with a telescope in hopes of spotting her husband's returning ship. Too often the ships never returned. Many a sea captain's wife spent the rest of her years climbing to the little room each day in the vain hopes that she would still somehow spot his ship. Thus the little room on the roof and the wooden porch that often surrounded it became to be known as the widow's walk.

Although he was only six at the time, Jeb remembered when the house was finished in 1884, the year before Barry Fitzsimmons was born in it. Now *Ballinasloe* belonged to Barry and what was left of his family – Jeb touched his jacket pocket to make certain that the telegram from the Navy Department hadn't fallen out. He felt it crinkle under his touch. More weary from the burden of the news he bore than the bicycle ride, Jeb put his cap back on and remounted his bicycle. Then with a gentle push with his left foot he began to roll down the hill.



“Oh god, no,” Barry Fitzsimmons gasped as he clenched the brass barrel of the telescope in his clammy hands. In his mid-fifties, Barry bore little resemblance to the patriarch who ruled the Fitzsimmons clan and all that it owned. Known in Boston as a man who could ruin the merely rich with a snap of his fingers and cause the powerful to grovel with a stare, Barry was known in Wellfleet as a kind and caring man. He had been born in *Ballinasloe* and therefore always considered it his home.

Now that Anne, his wife, had past away two years ago, he retired to

Ballinasloe to live out the rest of his life quietly. An average looking man with thinning steel gray hair and gold-rimmed glasses, Barry dressed casually and thought nothing of wandering into the *Golden Hind Pub* near the docks in Wellfleet to drink a beer or two with his neighbors. Nor were they surprised at his habits. They all knew him for most of their lives. He was one of them.

Although retired, Barry remained an active man, but only with his many hobbies. His favorites were flying and ham radio, but the war changed that. With his airplane grounded and his transmitters decommissioned, Barry threw himself into a new hobby, ornithology. Within weeks he had mastered the Latin names of nearly all of the local bird life and now spent countless hours high up in the widow's walk with his grandfather's brass telescope studying the birds in the little marsh behind the house. He had been searching the hillside for signs of a blue heron's nest but found a harbinger instead – Jeb McKendry was riding his bicycle down the lane that led from town to *Ballinasloe*.

He was certain who it was for he knew everyone living for miles around. And he especially knew Jeb McKendry who had once saved Barry's life when he fell overboard during a sailing regatta and nearly drown.

No, there could be no question of who it was nor of Jeb's destination, Barry owned the beachfront land for nearly a mile in both directions. *Ballinasloe* was the only house. And Barry also knew that Jeb had permitted himself to be virtually drafted into the thankless task of delivering telegrams.

"Oh, god, no! Not Dick!" he croaked as he hurried to the stairs.



"Sorry to disturb you, sir," Jeb apologized when Barry answered the doorbell's chime.

"Jeb, I've known you all my life," he replied softly, showing his irritation at Jeb's formality. " 'Barry' has been good enough between us until now."

Jeb McKendry glanced obsequiously down at his feet in response to the admonition. "I'm just doing my duty, sir," he replied meekly as he dug in his jacket pocket and produced the yellow envelope. "I'd hoped Mrs. Williamson would've answer'd the door."

Jeb paused to look into Barry's face; his eyes were bleary with sadness as he handed the yellow telegram envelope to him. "It's from the Navy Department – in Washington."

The old man stood silently holding the envelope until Barry finally reached out and took it from his hand. Then Barry stood for a moment holding the telegram in his own hands, staring at it. Finally, he slipped it into his pants pocket unopened.

“Come in, Jeb,” he said kindly. “You must be exhausted from that long ride from town. I can’t let it be said that a Fitzsimmons didn’t treat a visitor properly.”

“But I ain’t no visitor, sir,” Jeb protested as Barry grabbed the older man by his arm and gently pulled him into the house.

“Nonsense,” Barry replied firmly. “We’re neighbors, and I’ll have no truck with impoliteness. You’ve had a hard ride to bring me this telegram, and the least I can do is show you my appreciation. A beer perhaps – you must be thirsty after that long ride from town.”

Barry turned toward the back of the house. “Mrs. Williamson is in the kitchen. I’m certain she has some of the apple pie left over from last night. Come on, Jeb, let me at least see that you don’t want for thirst or hunger.”

“But, sir,” Jeb tried to protest as Barry once again pulled on his arm and led him to the kitchen. There they found Mrs. Williamson preparing a duck for dinner. A matronly woman with her gray hair pulled back into a bun, alarm flashed into her eyes when she saw Jeb McKendry standing in the doorway.

“Mrs. Williamson,” Barry announced with unexpected formality, “Jeb here has just ridden his bicycle all the way from town to bring me a telegram. Please see to it that he has something to eat and drink.”

Then he turned toward Jeb who was watching with his mouth hanging agape.

“Now, Jeb,” he said slowly as he fought the emotions welling up inside of him, “if you’d excuse me, I’d like to retire to the library to read the telegram in private.”

Neither Jeb nor Mrs. Williamson objected as Barry silently turned and retraced his steps to the front of the house. He opened the oak door to his right and entered the library. Then, after carefully closing the door and testing to be certain that it was latched, he tore open the envelope with trembling hands.

Finally, after fumbling with it for a moment, he managed to open the sheet of paper inside. He read it aloud, ““The Department of the Navy regret to inform you that your son, Ensign Richard Albert Fitzsimmons, was killed in action February twenty-three on the North Atlantic ... ’ OH, GOD, NO!”

Jeb and Mrs. Williamson heard his scream and found him lying on the Chinese rug, sobbing uncontrollably. They looked silently at each other and then quietly closed the door.



It was well after sunset before Barry Fitzsimmons recovered from his anguish. The room was dark, but he quickly found the light switch by the door and clicked it on. He glanced around and spotted what he wanted, the

brandy decanter. Once the pride of one of his wife's sea-going ancestors, the hand-cut crystal captain's decanter sat regally on the sideboard surrounded by a retinue of brandy snifters.

He grabbed the decanter and one of the snifters and headed for the stairs; he would find his solace in the widow's walk.

Barry had been born in his mother's apartments on the second floor of the house over fifty-seven years ago and so knew every nook and cranny of the place. His favorite room was the widow's walk room on the roof. It was to this room he fled when Anne, his wife, died two years earlier, and it was to this room he now went each day to spend his time studying the local birds through his telescope. As in the case of his father, it was his refuge.

He climbed the stairs with a slow, steady, purposeful gait, taking each of the white marble treads in turn. He reached the second floor and turned down the hallway. His mother's apartments were to the left and those of his father to the right. He rarely lingered on this floor nowadays and kept the apartments and guest rooms closed off. Memories of his wife flooded his mind as he walked down the silk brocade and wainscoted hallway.

For years Barry and Anne used these apartments whenever they were at the house, which was often. As in his case, their last two children, little Richard and Judy, were practically raised out here. Each April they'd all climb into the family cars and make the pilgrimage from Boston to the Cape to spend the spring through the fall months. It used to be a regal parade as their chauffeur drove Barry and his family in the Rolls Royce at the head of the column of cars with the servants following behind in mere Buicks and Chevrolets.

Anne loved the house and insisted on spending as much time in it as possible. Only the social season could drag her away from it. It was also the reason he bought his first airplane and learned to fly. They could make the trip to Boston in less than a half hour by flying over Cape Cod Bay directly to Boston. They thought nothing of spending the day at their summerhouse and the night in Boston at some social gala, only to return to Cape Cod the following morning.

Barry smiled when he thought about the airplane. Buying it had been Anne's idea, and although she was terrified of crashing in it, she was the one who had always insisted on using it. And through the years she often volunteered its services as well as those of her husband to fly a critically ill neighbor to Boston for proper medical treatment. Half of Wellfleet's population had showed up at her funeral even though it was in Boston.

Now she was gone and *Lulubelle IV*, his current airplane, stood in its hangar out in the meadow unused. He had no yearning for Boston's social life without her and so retired from the presidency of Commonwealth Assurance, the family's insurance company, and moved to Cape Cod permanently. Although called a summerhouse, the mansion had central heating and was built for year-round use.

Barry reached the next flight of stairs and began his climb to the third floor of the house where he now occupied the same room he used when he was a child. Filled with childhood memories, it was a more comfortable place for him than his father's apartments. Richard had used the same room when he too was a child.

The third floor had been finished with children in mind. The hallway was painted plaster and easily repaired. Barry remembered some of the deprecations he had inflicted on the walls during his own childhood. He walked down the now silent hallway remembering the joyous shouts and screams of children at play that once filled the place. At the end of the hall was Nanny's room. He paused and looked at the closed door and remembered her. Richard and Judy also had a nanny when they were young. Now the place was quiet except during Christmas when the Fitzsimmons clan descended en masse upon *Ballinasloe*.

But that was months ago. How he longed to hear the shouts of children at play again.

A door separated the third floor from the backstairs that led up from the kitchen to the fourth floor and the attic above. Those were the domains of the servants when there were any in the house. Once a staff of ten lived at the house during the season, as Anne called it. Now only Mrs. Williamson occupied the floor except, of course, during Christmas when visiting relatives brought their own servants.

The door was open; he had left it that way when he had rushed down the stairs to meet Jeb.

Barry climbed the pine stairs swiftly. He didn't tarry on the fourth floor, it was considered improper by his mother to go into the servants' quarters. Still, as a child, Barry and his brothers and sisters often trooped up these stairs to reach the attic above where they spent rainy days playing among the trunks and disused furniture. Young Dick and his local friends often did the same when it was too wet to play outside.

Had it been that long ago? he wondered as he paused to look around at the dusty furniture and unwanted portraits that now populated the attic.

Finally he came to the solid oak door his father had installed in the attic to insure his privacy. Beyond were the stairs that led to the widow's walk on the roof. When Barry's father built *Ballinasloe*, he commissioned one of Boston's finest architects to design it. There was but one change he ordered in the original design; he enlarged the widow's walk.

The homes of all proper seafaring folk had one and so the architect placed one atop *Ballinasloe*. It seemed too small to Barry's father, at least in proportion to the size of the rest of the house, or so he claimed. Thus the little eight-foot cupola became a fifteen-foot square room with windows covering every wall.

Barry's mother quickly discovered her husband's true intentions

regarding the room as soon as they moved into the house. The widow's walk immediately became Barry's father's private domain with a solid oak door and heavy brass lock to ensure his privacy.

As a child, Barry rarely visited his father when he was in the widow's walk and then only at his father's explicit invitation. It wasn't a policy he held to when he became the master of *Ballinasloe*. Both Richard and Judy had free access to their father when he was up on the roof. It was as much their playground as it was his.

Barry pulled the door opened. He hadn't locked it for years. He only locked the door while the children were young and the widow's walk was unoccupied. It would have been too easy for the children to go up to the room unsupervised and somehow fall off the walk outside. Now both Dick and Judy were grown. Their childhood playground had become an old man's hermitage.

Although well after dark, a glow greeted him as he opened the door. Puzzled, he climbed the stairs softly half expecting to find a burglar; he knew that he hadn't left a light on. Yet one was on and the room was warm. Then he saw the plate of sandwiches.

Mrs. Williamson had guessed his intentions. While he lay on the library floor convulsed with anguish, she had climbed up to the widow's walk and lit the Franklin stove. The coal fire glowed merrily at him through the glass window in its door. She had even pulled the blackout curtains closed over the windows, preparing his sanctuary for him.

Silently, he placed the decanter and snifter on the table and picked up a picture frame sitting on it. It held photographs of his two loves, Anne, his wife, and *Lulubelle IV*, his Howard DGA-11 airplane.

Anne was a little woman, barely five-foot tall and weighing little more than a hundred pounds even after a hearty meal. Dark-haired with mischievous pixy eyes, she had captivated him the night he had met her at a ball. That was more than thirty years ago. They were married less than a year later, a proposal he never regretted. Anne was his counter-balance, the one who saw to it that Barry retained his humanity and humility, even through the great tragedy of losing their two oldest children to the influenza epidemic of 1918.

Lulubelle was something else again: It was a big single-engine, high-wing monoplane capable of flying five people cross country at nearly two hundred miles per hour in complete comfort – a proper airplane for a Fitzsimmons to own. The airplane was his mistress and Anne knew it. She jokingly called it “that scarlet hussy” and insisted that it be painted scarlet red with a yellow stripe down each side. Yet she wasn't jealous of it and even insisted on going with him to Chicago to pick it up at the Howard Aircraft factory.

Barry sighed as he replaced the photographs on the table and ran his fingers over the frame of another picture. It was of his son, Richard, taken

when he graduated from Annapolis just last May.

"I've come to say good-bye, Dick," he said quietly as he poured brandy into his snifter.

Although he usually had a glass of wine or two with dinner, Barry Fitzsimmons rarely drank to excess. He reserved that for weddings and wakes. Born and raised in one of Boston's patrician Irish families, Barry had attended a goodly number of weddings and wakes although the Irish wake seemed to have fallen out of fashion lately.

He hadn't been drunk since the last time he'd climbed to the widow's walk with the brandy decanter. That was two years ago, just after Anne had died. The family was against a wake for her so he left Boston and held one in her honor up in the widow's walk. Then, as now, he was alone.

Barry sat in the battered leather upholstered chair that had once been the pride of the library's furnishings and stared into the fire in the Franklin stove. He took a sip of his brandy, already his second glass, and remembered his son.

"I'll be all that will be at your wake, Dick, but at least you'll have one," he said sadly as he took yet another sip. He last talked to his son in this very room just after he graduated from Annapolis, less than a year ago. It had been an acrimonious conversation.