

Operation Blackbird

By Ellen Butler

A Companion Novel to *The Brass Compass*

Power to the Pen

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Power to the Pen
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Woodbridge, VA 22195

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Chapter One

The Recoleta

Argentina, October 1952

It was merely a glimpse, but, in that moment, memories from almost a decade ago flooded back as if it had happened only yesterday. The pungent scent of gasoline, crackling wood, and black clouds billowing in the air. Screams of terror from women and children trapped inside—only women and children, for the men had already been rounded up and marched off to a camp, the old and infirm shot on sight. Black uniforms of the SS surrounding the burning chapel. Finally, the peppering spray of gunshots, which, at that point, was merciful to those inside. I—on a ridge, too far away to do anything—watching in horror. I could smell the acrid smoke, tasting its bitterness on my tongue. The day's hot breeze only sought to enhance the jagged memory.

The wail of a small child crying for his mother distracted me, pulling me back to the present and away from the terrible memory. The mother snatched the toddler, who was dressed in a sailor suit, by the hand and chastised him for running away from her.

When I looked back, the man had disappeared. My heartbeat slowed and the memory faded. Perhaps it wasn't him. My vantage point was about fifteen yards away. His features had been in profile to me, and he'd been speaking to another person who had been out of my line of sight.

Of course, I followed him. Luckily, I was wearing the new pair of espadrilles I'd purchased at the market yesterday. The rope-soled shoes made little sound as I darted past the extravagant sculptures and marbled mausoleums in the Recoleta Cemetery. He'd been wearing an ocher suit, and I heard dress Oxfords tapping along the tile flag way ahead of me. At the next lane, I turned right and hurried forward, catching sight of a man's brown shoe rounding the far corner. Barely dodging a mourner placing flowers in front of a mausoleum, I received a well-deserved frown and excused myself for disturbing her lamentations. Around the bend, I followed my quarry, only to be caught up short as I practically plowed into a bespectacled, elderly gentleman in a tan linen suit innocently reading the scripture on a particularly ornate angel statue.

"Un millón de perdones!" I gasped.

He mistook my anxiety. “*Con permiso, estás perdido? Puedo ayudarlo?*” he asked kindly in a soft Argentinian accent.

With effort, I lightened my features. No, I assured him, I didn’t need help; I was not lost. Glancing down, I observed his brown Oxfords and realized I’d been chasing the wrong footsteps. Pardoning myself again, I retraced my path.

I put an ear out for the telltale sound of men’s dress shoes. Unfortunately, it was Sunday and the Recoleta was full of sightseeing tourists and families who had come to place flowers for their dead. Similar to the famous above-ground cemeteries of New Orleans, the Recoleta was packed tight with mausoleums, and it was easy to lose sight of someone amongst the ten- to fifteen-foot-high burial vaults. Moreover, many of the visitors had come from church and wore their best dress shoes, which clicked and tapped along the tile avenues.

After twenty minutes of traversing the labyrinth of alleyways, with not another sign of the man, I gave up and asked an elderly nun dressed in full habit if she could point me in the direction of the closest exit. Taking the map from my hand, she used her gnarled finger and drew an easy path for me to follow.

I found myself on a different road from where I’d entered at the busy main gate. A car zipped down the street, but there was little pedestrian traffic. The sun, at its zenith, beat down upon my head and shoulders, and the concrete sidewalk seemed to throw the heat back up at me. My hair prickled with sweat beneath my straw hat, and the cotton of my checked mint green-and-black dress stuck to my back. Parched and desperate for a drink, I spotted a handful of outdoor tables indicating a restaurant and headed straight for it.

Three French doors across the front of the building were open, to allow the breeze to enter. Inside, along the right, a dark walnut bar seated half a dozen diners, and tables were lined up symmetrically from front to back. The open windows, white tablecloths, walnut-paneled walls, and general hum of conversation from the patrons created an open and inviting atmosphere. I chose a small exterior bistro table, beneath a Jacaranda tree, and took the menu from beneath the salt and pepper shakers. A waitress in her mid-forties wearing a chambray dress and a yellow scarf around her neck arrived to take my order. I chose empanadas and iced tea.

The feathery leaves of the Jacaranda fluttered in the breeze, and a purple blossom dropped at my feet. I removed my hat and gently fanned myself with it. Closing my eyes, I allowed the murmur of Spanish conversations to wash over me. I’d been in

Argentina for two days, and my ear was now attuned to the language.

The tea arrived, and, using the tiny tongs, I transferred the four cubes of ice from the metal cup into the warm tea along with a twist of lemon. The combined earthy-lemon flavor quenched my thirst, and I reflected upon what I'd seen.

The man must have simply borne a resemblance to the Waffen SS platoon officer who'd helped to carry out the destruction of the tiny farming town outside of Lyon, France, in 1944. The town had been destroyed in retaliation for a successful French Resistance mission which blew up a rail line and killed a dozen soldiers, including an SS-*Sturmbannführer*. Eighty-six people were murdered. I'd been a courier for the team that destroyed the rail line.

Perhaps he had merely been a ghostly vision conjured by my own imagination. After all, I *had* been roaming one of the most famous cemeteries in Buenos Aires. Why my subconscious would have conjured up such a horrible man, I had no idea.

A different waiter—a young man in his mid-twenties wearing black pants and a white shirt—placed a plate in front of me. "*Su empanada, Señora.*"

I thanked him and ordered another iced tea. The outer shell of the empanada had been cooked to a perfect golden color. I poked a hole in the flaky crust of the crescent-shaped meat pie to allow the steam to escape and to cool down the pie before eating it.

Laughter erupted at the bar area, drawing my attention.

My breath caught.

The fork slipped from my fingers and clattered onto the plate. The noise was overshadowed by the boisterous merriment. Now, instead of fifteen yards, the man stood only fifteen feet away—behind the bar. A shaft of sunlight clearly lit his chuckling features, and recognition instantly flooded my senses. His hair was longer and bushier—steely locks mixed with the dark curls—and ten years of age lined his features. An extra twenty pounds made his frame stockier, but not outright fat; after all, he'd been on the thin side during the war, as were we all. He'd removed the suit jacket, rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, and was wiping down the bar with a white rag. I supposed he would have been considered rather attractive for a middle-aged man. Knowing the atrocities he'd committed, though, I could see nothing but the monster, even when he smiled in response to a patron's comment.