

The Eyes of the Enemy



Robert Black

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Royal Fireworks Press
P.O. Box 399
41 First Avenue
Unionville, NY 10988-0399
(845) 726-4444
fax: (845) 726-3824
email: mail@rfwp.com
website: rfwp.com



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Prologue

June 6, 1944, Helmerton, Nebraska

It was still dark when the shouting began in the Syverson home. Even on one of the longest days of the year, the first rays of early morning sunlight hadn't yet appeared when the joyful cries erupted from the living room.

“It's on! It's on! THE INVASION'S ON!”

Kathy Syverson jolted awake. Rubbing her eyes, she rolled over in bed, pushed off the covers, and set her feet on the chilly wooden floor. She swept her curly, rust-colored hair out of her face and looked at her alarm clock. She hadn't been awake this early since the last time she'd helped with the harvest on her Uncle Morten's farm.

She was still getting her bearings when she heard the *thump thump thump* of excited footsteps racing up the stairs. Outside her room she could hear the rest of her family stirring and stepping into the hallway to find out what all the commotion was about.

The words reached her even through her closed door. “They hit the beaches right at H-Hour! Perfect timing! France is seven hours ahead of us, you know, so they've been fighting since around eleven. I knew I should have stayed up and listened for it!”

Kathy opened her door to join the gathering. The excited voice outside her room belonged to Andy, the youngest of her three older brothers. At age sixteen, he was counting the days until he could enlist in the Army and join the World War that the country had been fighting for the last two and a half years. He knew what was happening on all of the battle fronts around the globe, from the fight against Japan in the Pacific Ocean and in China to the fight against Germany and Italy in Europe. For the past few days, as rumors and reports claimed that the Allies were about to cross the English Channel and invade France, he hadn't talked about anything else. It was actually surprising that he *hadn't* stayed up all night listening to the radio for news.

By the time Kathy stepped into the hallway, her parents were standing in front of Andy. Her mother looked cross, but her father hung back, looking sleepy.

“Andrew Syverson!” her mother exclaimed, shaking a head full of curlers. “What on earth are you doing at this hour? You'll wake half the neighborhood, not to mention that you've awakened us!”

“But Ma!” cried Andy. “We're finally sticking it to the Krauts!”

“Well, they won't have beaten Hitler by breakfast,” her mother scowled. “You can catch up on everything then.” She glanced around at the rest of the family before redoubling her glare at him. “Now go back to bed! Your father has an important meeting today.”

Andy groaned in protest, but like all of the Syverson children, he knew better than to argue. He turned and slumped back down the stairs instead, heading back to the radio.

Before she went back into her room, Kathy exchanged glances with her seventeen-year-old sister Ingrid. Ingrid looked more annoyed than anyone else. Kathy figured she was fuming that Andy interrupted her beauty sleep. Her oldest brother, twenty-two-year-old Lew, wasn't home yet. He worked as a foreman on the night shift at the electric motor plant just outside of town.

There was one other member of the Syverson household, and Kathy found herself thinking of him as she went back to bed. Her middle brother, twenty-year-old Danny, was on the other side of the world—not in Europe among the men storming the beaches at that very moment but in the Pacific as a United States Marine. He had already been through one battle, and when they'd last heard from him, his unit was training for its next campaign. One of her brothers may have been excited by the thought of going into battle, but she couldn't help thinking about the brother who had actually done it.

Kathy loved everyone in her family, of course, but Danny was special. She was only fourteen, and as the youngest child, she often felt like she got lost in the daily bustle. Danny had always looked out for her, and she had missed that since he'd left. She also missed talking to him about the things they both enjoyed—things that didn't interest most girls her age, like baseball and the suspense-filled radio dramas she listened to every week. She knew that Danny was off fighting for his country, for freedom—for *her*—but she still wished that he could be home instead.

She turned on her bedside lamp and opened the drawer of her nightstand, reaching inside it to pull out a handful of small coins. Danny had sent them to her, a few at a time. They were from all over the Pacific and as far away as Australia. When she'd gotten the first batch, she'd carried them around in her pocket—until one day when she'd gotten them mixed up with her American money and had tried to buy a bottle of soda pop with one. Now they stayed next to her bed, where she could take them out and look at them when she felt her brother's absence too much.

As Kathy held the coins, she found herself silently humming a tune. She had to think for a moment before she realized what it was: an Australian song called "Waltzing Matilda." In one of Danny's letters, he had mentioned that it was his division's battle hymn. She had only heard it a few times, but it had imprinted itself in her mind.

The tune was still in her head as she put the coins away and flopped back into bed. The last thing she remembered thinking before she drifted off was what a surprisingly effective lullaby it made.

Chapter One

August 12, 1944, Helmerton, Nebraska

“Get out of here, you dirty Japs!”

“Why aren’t you in a camp somewhere?”

“You’d best be glad I don’t have my BB gun with me!”

Kathy heard the voices and rushed to the rescue. The insults being hurled across Helmerton’s town park could only mean one thing: some friends of hers were in trouble.

Sure enough, she spotted a group of boys surrounding two smaller children. Eight-year-old Morten Fong was trying to defend his older sister, ten-year-old Maddie, who cowered behind him. He swung his fists at several of the boys, but they all dodged him easily, laughing as they did. Finally one of the boys lunged in and pushed him into his sister, sending them both tumbling to the ground.

“Oh, so solly!” the boy taunted in a fake Japanese accent. He reached up to his face and pulled his eyelids taut, mockingly imitating the way an Asian person’s eyes look. “Please no report me to honorable Tojo!”

By that time Kathy was on the scene. She grabbed the nearest boy and shoved her way past him, putting herself in the middle of the circle. After a quick check to make sure the Fong children

were all right, she turned to face their tormentors. As she had expected, their faces were all new to her—probably children of families that had just moved to town. Fortunately, they were all smaller than she was.

“Hey! What’re you doin’?” cried the boy she had pushed out of her way.

“You ain’t protecting these Japs, are you?” another boy shouted angrily.

“They’re not Japs!” Kathy shouted back at them. “The Fongs are *Chinese*. China’s one of our allies.”

The boys hesitated, gathering around the biggest of them as they looked curiously at her and the Fong children. She turned and saw that Morten was already back on his feet. Maddie, however, was still on the ground whimpering. She offered a hand to help the girl up.

“What are a couple of Chinese kids doin’ here?” another of the boys asked at last.

“Their family has lived in Helmerton for as long as there’s *been* a Helmerton,” said Kathy. “Morten’s even named after my uncle. Haven’t you been to Fong’s Market before?”

She pointed toward the edge of the park, where the market was clearly visible. In its window was a poster with American and Chinese flags crossed in a V for “victory” and the words “PROUD TO BE AMERICAN CHINESE.” That made the boys stop and think. At least some of them had been there before.

“Yeah!” Morten cried belligerently. “So you guys knock it off and leave us alone!” He stepped out in front of Kathy, his fists up

and ready again. Kathy wondered if she would have to grab him and pull him back before he started the fight all over.

By that time the fracas had caught the attention of others in the park. Among them was Kathy's best friend Robyn Taber, a small, wiry girl with short brown hair and glasses. Robyn had run over and was hovering just outside the range where the boys might notice her.

But the boys had grown tired of their game. The biggest of them rolled his eyes at Morten and walked away, calling for his friends to follow. Once they reached a safe distance, Robyn dashed over to Kathy's side. "Are you all right?" she asked breathlessly.

Before Kathy could reply, Maddie threw her arms out and hugged her from behind. "Kathy, you saved us!" she cried. "I was so scared!"

"Aw, I would have licked 'em," bristled Morten, although Kathy couldn't help noticing the relief on his face now that the danger was past.

Maddie spotted it, too. "You would not," she chided, poking him lightly on the arm.

Kathy smiled. "Let's just be glad you didn't have to find out," she told them.

"Who *were* those boys?" asked Robyn.

"Probably just some new kids in town," Kathy sighed. The electric motor plant where Lew worked had drawn a lot of new people to the community in recent months—that and the need for people to work on farms in place of the men who had gone to war.

"They thought we were Japs," pouted Maddie.

“I ain’t no Jap,” Morten declared, still looking ready to punch anyone who suggested otherwise.

Now it was Kathy’s turn to roll her eyes at the boy. “Why don’t we get you home before you start any more rumbles?” she suggested.

“We were going to Grammy’s,” Maddie told her.

“Well, that’s even easier,” said Kathy, her face brightening. “It’s on my way home.”

Kathy shared a special bond with Maddie and Morten. Their families were two of the three that had founded Helmerton back in 1899. The children’s grandmother was the old widow Hannah Fong, Helmerton’s last surviving founder. According to the town’s official history, her husband Charlie had been a railroad worker before he’d met Kathy’s grandfather, Helmer Syverson, and the town’s other founder, Olaf Sommervold. Kathy still remembered Charlie. He used to sneak her a piece of penny candy whenever her mother went shopping at the market. Widow Fong, on the other hand, had always been more reclusive. Some people said it was normal for Chinese women to let their husbands handle everything outside the home. Others with more vivid imaginations believed she practiced some kind of ancient Chinese mystical arts that she had brought with her from Hong Kong. But Kathy had never paid attention to those stories. Widow Fong had always seemed like a normal old lady to her.

Robyn tagged along with them as they walked through town, stopping only to look over the movie posters as they passed the theater. “I hope Peter Lawford does another picture soon,” she

said when she caught up to them again. “Something as heroic as *The White Cliffs of Dover*.”

“I want to see *Dragon Seed* next,” said Kathy. “Katharine Hepburn’s playing a Chinese freedom fighter!” She had idolized Katharine Hepburn for years—ever since *Little Women* had played in town. She and the actress had the same hair color and spelled their names the same way, and Kathy had adopted the movie star’s style of wearing trousers instead of dresses.

“Do you really think Katharine Hepburn can play a Chinese woman?” Robyn asked. “She doesn’t look much like the Fongs.”

“They have makeup men for that,” Kathy said dismissively. “I just think it’s good they made a movie that’ll remind people that the Chinese are on our side. Maybe then Maddie and Morten won’t get picked on.”

Robyn mulled the idea over. “I suppose you’re right,” she conceded. “I was just hoping for something else. There’s never much to do around here.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Kathy. “We just did another scrap drive and helped with the Red Cross packages, and Ingrid’s already getting ready for our next turn at the Canteen in North Platte.”

“But that’s all war stuff!” Robyn complained.

“And a war movie isn’t?” asked Kathy with more than a trace of exasperation.

“You know what I mean,” Robyn defended. “We get all the boring parts of the war. Over in Kearney they’ve got an army

airfield. Wouldn't it be swell having all those dashing pilots around and watching them fly through the sky over us?"

"I'd like that!" Maddie enthused.

But Robyn's expression turned sour again. She turned to Kathy. "You have a brother in the fight, so you get to hear all about what's going on. The war'll be over by the time my brothers are old enough to join up," she sulked.

"Danny never tells us about what the fighting is like," replied Kathy. She grinned impishly as she added, "But you're welcome to borrow Andy if you want to."

It wasn't much longer before they dropped Maddie and Morten off at Widow Fong's house. Robyn waved as she headed across the street to her house, and Kathy walked alone the rest of the way home. Before she opened the door, she paused to look at the service banner hanging in the front window. Before long a second blue star would be added to it, the sign of a second family member on active military duty. That notion didn't thrill her as much as Robyn might imagine.

Kathy's mood lifted when she walked into the house and found four small brown envelopes on the front table. Each was marked "WAR & NAVY DEPARTMENTS V-MAIL SERVICE—OFFICIAL BUSINESS." It was a group of letters from Danny. They usually came in groups like that. For one thing, Danny often wrote a different letter to each member of the family. For another, sometimes there would be a logjam at the Navy censorship office, after which several of his letters would go through at once. Now there was a letter waiting for her, as well as one for each of her siblings. She guessed that her parents had already taken the

letters sent to them. Danny always numbered his envelopes, and numbers 1 and 2 were missing.

Kathy snatched up her letter and pulled it open. The letter inside was a copy; Danny's original letter was still overseas, where it had been photographed onto microfilm for shipment. Still, a copy was better than nothing, even though she could already see that some of it had been blacked out by a censor. Her eyes quickly devoured the brief message he had written.

Hey Squirt,

How's your summer going? I bet it's not as hot as it has been here. At least I hope it's not. You'd probably all melt! But at least it's still quiet. With all this R&R, we'll be more than ready when it's time to fight again.

I'm glad you like the coins I sent you. I'll get you some Jap ones when we ship out [REDACTED]. There'll be plenty lying around for me to choose from, and the Japs won't be needing them anymore, if you get my meaning.

What have you been up to? What's going on with The Shadow these days? I've only heard a couple of shows on the Armed Forces Radio. And how are the Belles doing this year? The only scores we get are from the major leagues.

Kathy smiled. Danny always wanted all the news from home he could get, and he always asked his family members about the things that were special to them. In her case, *The Shadow* was a radio adventure they listened to together, and the Racine Belles were her favorite team in the girls' professional ball league that