

THE ICE MERCHANT

PAUL BOOR

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PART 1

The Island City

Arrival

4 March 1889

Galveston, Texas

My dearest Ruth,

I have arrived in this peculiar island city safely, though greatly fatigued from our ten days with the cargo. The ice fared well & God willing, its rising price will shore up the profit, as was our good fortune in New Orleans.

I profess my loneliness for you, my dearest, & for the children, though I fear for your well-being & again entreat you to refrain from visiting that quack Valdis, or any of those other charlatans promising a cure. Surely your symptoms will eventually abate. It's best to remain snug at home, where our intrepid young Abigail (such a competent girl!) might seek your counsel during the final stages of the ice harvest.

I must be off to the docks now to find Adam & oversee the unloading. It promises to be an intriguing few days here. I am told that the local celebrations before the beginning of Lent are quite extravagant.

Yrs affectionately,

N

Nicolas Van Horne adjusted his tie and leaned across the writing table of the hotel's postal office. He sighed, then took a moment to listen to the Gulf of Mexico thrumming onto the beach just yards from where he sat. In a way, it felt quite good to be so far from New York. His mountain home was a magnificent place of clear lakes and dense, green woods, but it held sorrow, and worries, too. Others might think his North Country calm and peaceful, even idyllic, but this Northern man of commerce knew otherwise.

Yes, it felt quite good to be on this island.

Nicolas made a move to cap the ink bottle, then decided to dip the pen once more.

p.s. I hope you've had word on the whereabouts of our wayward son.

He gazed for a moment out the open window, admiring the bright morning and the blue-green expanse of water. The elegance of his beachfront hotel, the balmy breeze, and the gentle pounding of the gulf seemed so unnatural to a hardheaded Yankee who, just days before, had left his upstate village in the cruel clutch of an Adirondack winter.

Nicolas sealed the envelope, slid it across the marble counter to the postal clerk, and reached in his pants pocket for some pennies. With the coins' jingling, Van Horne's thoughts turned to his steamer lying calmly at harbor, and to the ship's cargo of ice, twenty thousand tons of it—dense, profitable, lucid three-foot blocks packed in sawdust and covered with canvas. And then there was the darker thought of the unusual goods concealed in the bottommost layer of his ice—the cargo he hoped to deliver quickly, quietly, and at a profit remarkable even for a Yankee trader.

Van Horne climbed into an open carriage at the southern entrance of Galveston's most elegant accommodation, the Majestic Beach Hotel. "Pier 22," he told the driver, a grizzled old man with a great chaw of tobacco stuffed in his cheek, and the carriage rolled off the sand and onto the bright brick streets of the city.

Warm salt air permeated the fine Irish wool of Nicolas's jacket, the smooth, long-staple cotton of his tailored shirt. "It's already summer here," he muttered to himself as the carriage whisked him past row after row of gaily painted houses. Pink. Blue. Purple. The avenues were broad and the houses were graced with intricate decorative work and wrapped by sprawling porches on both first and second stories. Undoubtedly the homes of the island's captains of

commerce, Nicolas thought. Even finer than those he'd admired in the most elegant sections of New Orleans.

Nicolas removed his homburg and jacket, leaned back, and stretched his lanky, six-foot frame in the warm morning sunshine. As the carriage crossed Galveston Island from gulf to bay, the graceful homes changed to commercial brick, and the quiet of the neighborhoods became the bustle of the harbor.

"Could you tell me, kind sir," Nicolas called out over the clippity-clip of the mare's hooves. "Where would one find your new medical college?"

The driver slowed his carriage and pointed east, over the warehouses, to a four-story, red-domed building towering shiny and new in the distance. "That's it, right there," he said. He jerked the reins in the opposite direction, and the carriage drew alongside the wharfs.

"An impressive structure. Quite imposing."

"Huh. It's sure pretty," the driver grumbled. "But I'll tell ya, the folks in this town wisht it was on some other island. It ain't nothin' but a—" The driver was drowned out by the low-pitched blast of a steamer's horn as a great ship, low in the water from her load of cotton, eased from her berth.

Nicolas marveled at the many steamers and tall-masted sailing ships, flying flags from all points of the globe as they wove to and fro seeking berths for their cargoes of lumber; coffee; exotic, unnamable fruits; and tea and cloth from the Orient. In this booming port city, Nicolas's cargo seemed almost ordinary . . . almost, he thought, as his nerves gave a troublesome jolt.

He stepped down from the carriage at Pier 22 and held out a coin to the driver. "Would that medical college have a dock of its own?" he asked.

"Ask the stevedores, why don't ya?" the driver replied. Then, with a smirk, he said, "You won't be going there alone, I hope. No telling what might become of a person at that gawd-awful place." The driver spat forcefully onto the oily brick street, slapped the reins, and pulled away.

Nicolas spied his foreman, Adam Klock, waving from the bow of their ship at the far end of the pier. Adam was a sinewy rail of a man who stood a good six inches shorter than Nicolas.

"Ahoy there, Van Horne!" he shouted.

Nicolas wove his way down the dock, dodging around coils of rope, cotton bales, crates and barrels, and the dark, sweating stevedores who labored there—from men black as ebony to those who'd been roasted nut-brown by the sun.

"A good morning to you, Adam," Nicolas said when he drew near. "How goes it?" Nicolas scrambled up a rope ladder and stepped nimbly onto the deck of their steamer, a double paddle wheeler that had been their home down the

“The finest Northern ice,” Nicolas added coolly. “Pure and clear as crystal. We’ve recently unloaded her sister ship in New Orleans, sir, without event, I might add.”

“You ain’t got no apples, eggs, fresh produce . . . nothin’ like that down there, eh?” the inspector asked as he brushed sawdust away, pulled up the corner of a canvas cover, and squinted into the ice. “There’s a different tariff rate for such, and you ice traders been known to maximize yer profits thusly.”

The inspector shaded his eyes from the sun and peered deep, where the morning light filtering into the bluish ice outlined row upon row of large, ill-defined shapes, like sides of beef wrapped in canvas.

“Somethin’ big down there?”

Adam, his eyes like tea saucers, stared blankly at the inspector’s broad back.

In a single motion Van Horne reached inside his jacket and smoothly extracted a well-worn leather billfold. “We’re due to unload shortly,” he said, flipping the purse open. “If there’d be an additional tariff of some sort, sir, I’d be happy to settle it.”

The inspector turned. “Now that, sir, would be most expeditious.” He dropped the hatch and stretched himself up; he was near six feet in height, almost as tall as Van Horne, though twice as big around. He reeled back on his heels, his hand extended.

“Would three be enough?” Nicolas asked.

“That’ll do nicely.”

Nicolas peeled off the bills; the inspector smiled and slipped them into his pocket. “I thank ya,” he said, “and I’ll make a note down at the office. You’ll encounter no problem with yer commerce here, sir. I assure ya of that.” He jumped from the ship with a thump and ambled down the pier. “And I bid ya both a good day.”

Once the inspector was out of earshot, Adam asked, “Whatta ya think? He see something?”

“If he did,” Van Horne said with a smile, “I’m sure a few drinks will help him forget . . . but I’d best get to that college straightaway.”

“You figure to try their newfangled electric trolley, boss?” Adam asked, pointing to a bright orange trolley car that rumbled along the waterfront under a shower of sparks. “They tell me the college is only a few minutes away, if you dare ride that blasted thing.”

“Come, come, my man.” Nicolas guffawed, his ice-blue eyes twinkling. “Just because we’re from the woods, we needn’t act like bumpkins.” He clapped his friend’s bony shoulder. “I’m sure it’s safe enough.”