

## The Prologue

IT WAS A HOT, humid August night in Cleveland, Ohio. The year was 1941. Three friends from West Tech High school had decided to take a night swim in Lake Erie at Edgewater Beach, just west of downtown. Officially the beach closed at 9 p.m. and thousands of swimmers were headed back to the sweltering city streets.

It was only a few days before Labor Day weekend and school would start again the Tuesday after the holiday. The boys thought they would have one last summer fling before they started their senior year.

Sneaking into the park after hours was not hard. There were still many swimmers and picnickers strolling around the park, enjoying the cool Lake Erie breezes. A few night fishermen dotted the rocky piers jutting out into the waves.

Swimming in the water was a different story. The lifeguards who patrolled the lakefront frowned on swimming after sunset, it made their job almost impossible. But the boys had an in, one of their friends from West Tech was working that day, and he looked the other way as they slipped into the water unobserved.

Quietly they stroked out to the deep water, beyond the noise on the shore. The water was cool and peaceful and the boys forgot the many worries of the day. Despite their young years their generation was shouldering a large load of responsibilities.

The United States was just beginning to recover from the misery of the Great Depression. Jobs would be scarce when they graduated from high school. Their families were struggling to put food on their tables. And war clouds were gathering in Europe that might change everything. So they floated on their backs, looked up at the stars and said little, not wanting to be noticed.

Suddenly, they heard a noise in the darkness, like a school of fish thrashing about. But as they listened the sound grew louder and they could hear voices above the din speaking in a foreign language.

It was a boat moving swiftly toward them. They had to duck under the waves to avoid being hit with the props from the outboard motor. It happened so quickly the boys did not know what to make of the ruckus. The boat should have had a light on its bow but it did not. Then it stopped moving for a few moments and two bodies jumped in the water and began swimming to shore. The two strangers still remaining in the boat, turned it around and headed back toward the deep water. In a flash the vessel was gone, as quickly as it appeared.

The three West Tech students did not know what to make of the incident. They could not recognize the foreign dialect or make out any of the words above the noise of the motor. That was not unusual since Cleveland in the 1940s was a melting pot and many citizens were European immigrants, like their parents, who did not speak English.

But the stealth of the operation did make them curious. There were no lights on the boat and no sign of a bigger boat that might have deposited it in the water. It was a dangerous operation considering the amount of boat traffic on Lake Erie.

However, they were high school kids and easily distracted. The boys soon went back to floating on their backs. They discussed the strange sight for a few minutes then their conversation moved on to other subjects like girls and sports. By the time they snuck out of the water and walked back home they began to forget that the incident ever occurred.