

**RICHTER'S WAR:
Case of the Ghostly
Séance**

A.K.A., "That's No Way to Treat a
Dame"

By Daniel P. Douglas

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SAMPLE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Richter's War: Case of the Ghostly Séance is my third paranormal thriller to feature L.A.'s hardboiled, World War II-era private detective Karol Eugen "Geno" Richter. The first two were short stories and this is the first stand-alone novel in the series. All are a heartfelt homage to one of my favorite authors, Dashiell Hammett. As you read the book, you will spot a few references to some of his work. There are also irresistible nods to other influences, such as certain TV shows and movies. Let's see what you find.

Trusted by the War Department to hunt down nefarious Nazi agents, spies, and saboteurs, Geno has seen how the supernatural can loom over the City of Angels when he takes on these foes. In *Case of the Japanese Alien*, he faced off with Nazi thugs in a race to recover an extraterrestrial visitor. In *Case of the Lady Crow*, a shape-shifting woman worked directly for Berlin to sabotage war production in Los Angeles.

In *Case of the Ghostly Séance*, Geno's once again entangled in wartime intrigue, hunting down Nazis, and confronting otherworldly forces. This time, he must stop the enemy from fulfilling harrowing, ancient prophecies while fighting an evil entity who lures Geno into a deeply personal war. As usual, he's gotten more than he's bargained for.

We also find him in the heart of wartime Los Angeles. In *Case of the Ghostly Séance*, the architectural centerpiece is the Los Angeles Central Library, which opened in 1926 and is not far from L.A.'s Union Station and the famous Biltmore Hotel, both featured in *Case of the Lady Crow*. When Geno speaks of the library as a "temple of

doom,” he gives voice to very real sentiments about the building expressed by yesteryear’s Angelinos.

Today, these places are historical landmarks in a sprawling city. In Richter’s time, they were relatively new, promising, and distinctive traits of L.A.’s emerging, modern identity. It is no wonder they marked the trenches of Geno Richter’s unique war.

Daniel P. Douglas, May 2022

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*To dogs everywhere, may you never be spared a treat and
may you always grant us a place by your side.*

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Chapter One

Joe Blow

I turned up the collar of my wool trench coat and straightened my fedora after a chilly gust jostled it to one side. In Los Angeles, winter happens anytime the temperature drops below 60 degrees. Although born to German parents, I'm a native Angelino, so this mid-October evening felt out-and-out frigid. It was no more than 45 degrees, overcast, and breezy.

Abbott and Costello's radio show aired that night, but I missed it because of some strange antics at the Los Angeles Central Library in downtown.

A professor from New York City, Emile Durak, was in town. An anthropologist by day and suspected Nazi sympathizer by night, he spent a lot of time at the library, especially after hours.

My boss at the War Department, Dexter Jamison, thought Durak might be using the library for covert meetings with Nazi agents. In just shy of two years since the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, I'd seen enough Kraut infiltrators to last me a lifetime. They crawled out from under just about every rock in the city once the war started. It was hard to keep track of them all.

Alone on this stakeout, I stood tucked behind a pillar at the corner of a building next door to the library. Durak

went to dinner, then I saw him return to the library a couple hours later and enter through a door that faces Fifth Avenue.

After about ten minutes, I walked over to the door. It was locked, so I took a few steps back and peered up at the building. It looked like an ancient Babylonian temple. A stocky tower, topped with a pyramid, rose from the center of the squat, blocky structure. In a city enamored with the Spanish Colonial style, the library's architecture was unique. If you squinted at it just right, you could almost see Hammurabi himself walking the grounds.

When the Central Library opened in 1926, I was still in high school. Like everyone else, I heard odd rumors about it. Maybe the sphynx sculptures inside or the many inscriptions and mosaics—all topped off by that pyramid—concocted an unsettling air about the place, especially since the original architect died without warning prior to its opening. Add in collections of ancient manuscripts and Latin quotations chiseled into the outside walls, and *presto*, you got yourself a foreboding temple of doom.

Not that I believed any of that.

I strolled around the building and checked a few more doors. All were locked, so I went back to the pillar and slipped behind it again. I pulled a turkey sandwich out of my coat pocket, unwrapped half and put the rest back in my pocket. I took a bite and while chewing, got that funny feeling I was being watched. I leaned against the pillar and took a small bite of my sandwich. While I looked around, I slid my Colt .45 handgun from its shoulder holster inside my suit.

A row of tall Italian cypress trees swayed in the wind, then bowed during a strong gust. I pressed down on my hat

and squinted as dust blasted my face and eyes. After a faint rumble, like thunder, the wind died down.

I walked to the next pillar, waited, then walked to the next one and stood behind it. I could see the library off to my right, and to my left, the gardens in front of it. That's when I spotted the observer who tailed me. I glanced around and didn't see anyone else there. He was alone and making no bones about the fact he had me in his sights.

Slapping my leg, I whistled and said, "Here boy. Come on. Come here." I showed him what was left of my turkey sandwich and he trotted right over.

The dog looked like a light-brown fox terrier and was not much bigger than my shoe. I crouched down and gave him some turkey, then noticed he was shivering. I picked him up. The poor, wet rat didn't have a collar.

Just as he licked my cheek, I saw bright flashes in the library's top row of windows. A second later, there was another faint rumble, so I figured the flashes were reflections of nearby lightning. You could've fooled me, but I'd swear the pyramid at the top of the library began to glow.

I would've paid more attention to something strange like that, except someone came running out of the library just then. Judging from the screams, the person was a woman. She sounded terrified, so I packed the dog into one trench coat pocket and my Colt into the other, then ran toward her.

Had she not stumbled on the wet sidewalk, we would have collided. As I helped her up, I asked, "Are you alright?" No one seemed to be chasing her. "I heard you scream."

At first, she clung to my coat, but then pushed me away and said a string of things in French, I believe. None of it sounded like, "Thank you," or "Yes, I'm in grave

danger.” I don’t speak French, but I do know when I’m being scolded.

The woman stood a few inches shorter than me and had a face that resembled a lady in one of those Renaissance paintings, like she was well fed. Her pale skin was as smooth as silk.

“*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*” I asked.

She gasped, took a few steps back, and glared at me.

“Okay, didn’t mean to offend. Looky here, lady—”

“You are with them!” she said in English, backing away. She turned to go but came face to face with Emile Durak and one of those Nazi goons I always seem to run into. They crept out of the darkness like hungry cockroaches.

Durak, whose long, black cape fluttered like a torn sail, towered over the goon and, in fact, me and the dame too. He first spoke in French to the woman and next in German to the goon, who then ushered the woman toward the library. A modest growl came from inside my coat pocket.

“Sir, we were quite distressed about our lady friend,” Durak said, sounding like a phony baloney. “I’m grateful you helped her before she might hurt herself.”

The fella had to be a full foot taller than me. “I don’t know,” I said, craning my neck to look him square in the eyes. “She seems like the type who can take care of herself. I just have to wonder why she came running and screaming out of the library.”

I glanced at Durak head to toe. His right hand held the lapel of his double-breasted suit, while his left hand clasped the top of a fashionable cane with a rounded brass handle.

“Couldn’t help but notice,” I said, “that’s where you came from, Professor Durak.”

Durak didn’t move. He just stood there, silent, like one of the library’s statues.

The dog in my pocket chimed in. He growled, popped his head out, and began to bark and snarl. I hushed him, then tried to tuck the dog back down into my pocket. He squirmed away, jumped onto the sidewalk, and scurried into the darkness.

Durak poked his cane at the dog as he ran past, then aimed it at my face. “I am in no mood to be trifled with, Mister...?”

Not the first time I’ve been asked to introduce myself.

“Joe,” I said. “Joe Blow.”

Durak snapped his fingers. Two Nazi cockroaches grabbed me from behind. Next thing I knew, the sidewalk rubbed like sandpaper on my cheek, and I had a knee on my neck. In the tussle, my left arm and hand remained free long enough for me to grab the Colt out of my pocket and fire it upward, past my head, toward what I hoped was the goon with a knee on my neck.

It worked. He screamed and tumbled away, then ran toward Fifth Avenue. I saw Durak flee too as I pushed myself up onto my knees, just in time for the other thug to give me a firm kick in the gut. That knocked a bit of turkey sandwich into my gullet.

I keeled over, coughing, gagging, and gasping for air. I rolled onto my side and pointed my gun expecting to see the barrel of a Luger pistol aimed back at me. I was wrong, so I took a breath and looked around.

No one. This party was over.

I made it to my car just as the skies let loose with a lightning flash and clap of thunder. The drive back to my apartment up near Pico and Union wasn't long. Heavy rain slowed me down and I could've sworn I was followed. I noticed a distinct pair of headlights in my rearview mirror—one lamp was dimmer than the other. About halfway home, I took a detour and that seemed to do the trick. If the car was tailing me, then it wasn't any longer.

Even the weather improved, at least until I parked my car. From around the corner and up the front steps of my apartment, I ran through a downpour and spiraling winds. Across the street, my neighbor, Kenji, struggled a moment to close the front door of his restaurant. Then it was my turn to wrestle the wind and my apartment building's front door. After shutting it, I headed up the staircase to my second-floor flat.

Once inside, I peeled off my trench coat, and tossed it and my fedora onto the sofa, then called Jamison.

“Dex,” I said, “something is definitely up with Durak.”

“I was afraid of that.” Jamison coughed and sounded congested. “What do you need?”

“First, for you to blow your nose—”

“And second?”

“Some back up. Can you spare Walt Welles or one of your other boys? Durak isn't alone.”

“Welles is on another assignment...” Jamison paused to sneeze and to blow his schnozz. “But I do have someone new who can help.”

“A tenderfoot probably won't be a good fit. Is he—”

“*She.*”

My jaw didn’t drop when he said this, but my eyebrows set a new altitude record. As they descended, I realized I’d never known Jamison to be the conventional sort. He pushed ahead in unexpected ways at times, but he always had his reasons.

“You there, Geno?”

“Yeah, Dex, I’m here.”

“Her name is Anna Torres. She’s a Marine Corps nurse. She was stationed in the Solomons but was injured. War Department assigned her to me because she’s from San Diego and is still able to work.”

“Looky here, Dex, I have no problem working with a woman, but if this assignment is meant to get her out of your hair and into mine, count me out.”

“I would never.” Jamison laughed, then coughed. “Headquarters says she’ll make a crackerjack gumshoe.”

As I sighed, rain pelted the windows. The lights in my apartment flickered.

“Okay,” I said. “I’d talk all night but I think we are about to lose power from the storm. Have her meet me at Kenji’s restaurant tomorrow, half past eleven.”

“Sounds fine, but what storm are—”

The phone went dead. I clicked it a few times but didn’t get a connection, so I hung it up. The wind howled like an alley cat in heat and the lights flickered again, then went out. I fumbled my way to the bedroom and lifted the window blinds to look outside. My street was dark, but I could see the lights burning in the distance along Venice Boulevard and toward downtown.

A sudden, bright flash startled me. I winced, expecting to hear the crash of thunder. Instead, there was silence and the appearance of two lights across the street. *Headlights!* One was dimmer than the other. The car raced away. I pressed my face against the window in a desperate attempt to see any details before it passed from view.

Then, clear as day, a woman appeared in front of me, the dame from the library. Well, it was only her plump, Renaissance face, and she looked horrified. I stumbled back from the window and drew my gun. My hands felt like ice. My eyes fluttered as I inched toward the window. Peering out, I didn't see any sign of the lady or the car with the buggy headlight.

As my shock wore off, the lights along the street and in my apartment flickered on. I grabbed my hat and coat, then wandered back outside. Not a cloud or horrified dame in sight.

Strolling back to my apartment, I tucked my hands into my coat and that's when I noticed a card in my left pocket. I didn't remember it being there earlier, so I pulled it out. It was a standard index card with writing on both sides. I didn't understand what the batches of short lines with triangles meant. Those were written on one side of the card. The triangles looked like little arrowheads.

But I did understand the words on the other side of the card. Written in English, they said, "*Help me!*"

Chapter Two

Lines and Triangles

Next morning, I drove to the Central Library and got there just after they opened. Inside, the place seemed busy with readers and researchers. Past a reception desk set below a soaring mosaic and surrounded by wood-paneled walls, I found myself staring eye-to-eye with a black sphynx sculpture. I tipped my hat to it then marched onward like I owned the joint until I entered the building's central rotunda.

“Good morning, sir. Did you need help finding your way?”

The dame's voice was easy on the ears and when I turned to greet her, I saw she was also easy on the eyes.

“Good morning,” I said, removing my hat. “Do you work here?” I cleared my throat and pushed errant strands of blond locks off my forehead.

“Why yes, I'm a floor supervisor here.”

She motioned with her smooth hands to indicate I should gaze at the spacious library. I glanced around but then centered my attention again on her stunning green eyes, wavy dark hair, and saintly face.

“My name is Miss Kenna Lawson,” she said, offering her hand.

“Are you sure you're not Hedy Lamarr?” *Mein Gott*, was I relieved when she laughed. We shook hands and I said,

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Lawson. I’m Geno Richter.” Her soft hand had a firm grip. “Maybe you can help me? I’m looking for someone, a scholar who has been working here lately, mostly after hours.”

“Oh, him.” She rolled her eyes and we both chuckled. “Professor Durak. I really shouldn’t laugh but he is quite the character.”

“I see. Well, do you know where I might find him or tell me when he might be at the library?”

Miss Lawson folded her arms and tapped a forefinger on her full, red lips. “He comes and goes on his own when in town. He’s quite the respected scholar on the medicines of ancient Mesopotamia. Hmm...”

She looked like she might be calculating an equation for Einstein, so I didn’t want to interrupt her. All I could do was stand there and admire how well she filled out her blue, short-sleeve cotton dress with red cuffs and matching red sailor necktie.

“I know!” she blurted.

“Yes?”

“I will make it a point to speak with our head of special collections, Mister Bernard. He is very familiar with the professor’s work.”

“Say, that would be very kind of you.”

“Would you mind coming back at closing?”

“Not at all. Would I be looking for Mister Bernard or you, Miss Lawson?”

“Me. I’ll find out what I can. May I tell him why you are interested?”

“Certainly.” I pulled the index card out of my pants pocket and showed her the side with all the arrowheads on

it. “I need help understanding what these lines and triangles mean, if anything, that is.”

She peered down. “Ah.” She folded her arms again and placed a fingertip back on her sweet face. “It’s Akkadian script,” she said, smiling. “We have many Akkadian documents in our collection, so I’m familiar with the language, but the real expert certainly is Professor Durak. He’s very knowledgeable. I’m sure he can help you.”

“Akkadian script?”

“Yes, a language of the ancient Babylonians.”

“You don’t say. Kind of like Egyptian hieroglyphs?”

“No, not quite, except in terms of age, I suppose. Akkadian is phonetic and more similar to—”

“There he goes!” a man yelled.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two burly security officers running our direction. I put an arm out and stepped in front of Miss Lawson, expecting a ruckus. Instead, I heard yipping, the kind a small dog makes.

The guards shouted a chorus of “Grab him!” and “Don’t let him get away!”

A light-brown fox terrier, not much bigger than my shoe, ran toward us. Well, ran toward me. Sliding to a perfect stop at our feet, he sat and peeked at me with an adept, forlorn expression.

“Sorry... Miss... Lawson,” one of the guards huffed and puffed.

“Oh, excellent work, sergeant,” she said. “I see you have him cornered.”

Everyone looked at me, including the dog. “Does the library have a rat problem?” I asked.

“We... have been ...trying to... catch him for the past week,” the sergeant wheezed.

“Yes, came out of nowhere,” Miss Lawson said. “No one seems to know who he belongs to.” The dog barked and stretched his front legs toward me. “Aww, he seems drawn to you, Mister Richter. I’d take him but I’m allergic.”

“Lucky you,” I said.

Just then, the other guard lunged at the dog. It was close, but the little guy slipped the officer’s grip, and the chase resumed.

“Thanks, Miss Lawson,” I said, nodding. “I will see you later today.”

“Please, call me Kenna.”

“And I’m Geno.” I put on my hat, grinned, and pointed at the fleeing dog, “I bet he likes turkey.”

On my way from the library to meet Anna Torres at Kenji’s, I stopped by the Figueroa, an office building on Olympic Boulevard. During the drive, I got a little spooked by a blue Buick I spotted more than a few times in my rearview mirror. It drove past me after I parked. I watched it disappear down Olympic.

Before the Great Depression, the Figueroa was a bank. Its imposing limestone façade, high arches, and tall, recessed windows were now just reminders of what seemed like a distant past. Things got bad when the economy flopped, then they got worse with the start of another world war.

Anyhow, my boss decided I should stop working out of my apartment, so he modified my contract and included a nice, respectable suite for me on the first floor in the Figueroa. He also moved half his special projects staff—

engineers, accountants, and a few spies—to the same building from Terminal Island.

Getting out of my car, I noticed the morning chill had worn off, so I left my trench coat and fedora in the car and walked into the Figueroa under bright California sunshine.

Inside, the lobby was modest. Most of the first floor was partitioned into new office spaces, so a once-grand hall was reduced to a narrow space with a reception desk shared by a stern secretary named Dotty and a gloomy-Gus doorman named Charlie. He kept a Louisville Slugger close by to keep riffraff away.

“Good morning, Charlie,” I said, “Dotty not in?”

“Under the weather supposedly. Some bug is making the rounds,” Charlie said, rolling his eyes.

He stopped polishing the lobby’s wooden balustrade just long enough for me to pass through its waist-high gate. I tried not to smudge the woodwork’s sheen with my fingerprints. Judging from Charlie’s loud sigh, I failed.

“Appears you missed a spot here, Charlie.” I pointed to the railing, then walked down the hallway to my office, which used to belong to the bank’s head honcho. It was right next to the vault and roomy—with two offices and a reception lobby.

When I asked Jamison why he assigned the space to me, he admitted no one else wanted it due to the unfortunate way the banker died in it. Messy, self-inflicted gunshot wound on Black Thursday in 1929.

“Looky here, Dex,” I had told him, “stepping over the memory of a corpse is a small price to pay. In case these folks forgot, we are at war.”

With that, Jamison handed me the keys to the finest office suite in the whole damn building.

I walked through another balustrade—this one bordered my suite—and found the receptionist filing a stack of folders. Since it was Friday, she'd put out her homemade custard pie. One of the accountants from upstairs, Jimmy Alton, walked past me with a mouth full of it. He smiled like a Cheshire cat. Had it been another day of the week, he'd be gobbling down fruit pastries or, my favorite, *puddingbrezel*.

Yes, the receptionist was a German lady who loved to bake. She also happened to be my mother, Martina Richter.

"*Karol Eugen, Grüß Gott!*" she said, dropping her head and peering at me over her elegant, gold bifocals. A large pearl and diamond broach adorned the lapel of her navy-blue blazer, the color of which matched her lengthy skirt.

"Good morning, Mama," I said.

When it came to picking a receptionist, I made an obvious choice. My mother, in her mid-fifties, had decades of administrative experience under her belt. And for her, helping me became a way to help fight the Nazis. She embraced the opportunity, and kept me in line and well fed at the same time.

"*Eugen*, I put several messages for you on your desk. They are both from Betsy at headquarters."

I laughed. She enjoyed calling the offices at Terminal Island "headquarters."

"And I have reviewed the files sent from *Herr* Jamison about Professor Durak. I've typed it all up in a

memo. I put that on your desk too,” she said. “Did you know *durak* in Russian means ‘fool’?”

“Thank you. And no, I didn’t. You mean like a clown or idiot?” I opened the door to my office and sat down at the desk.

“I believe more like an idiot,” she answered from her desk just outside my door.

My mother had learned much of her spoken English while working for a British trading company in Munich before immigrating to America with my father, so she sounded a lot like Greer Garson who was in that motion picture *Mrs. Miniver*. Good film, it won Best Picture.

“Well, it figures. Have to be an idiot to be a Nazi sympathizer.” I glanced at the messages from Betsy, Jamison’s secretary.

“Of course, Geno, but I think he might be more than that. I’ll let you read my memo.” She stepped into the doorway and added, “I’ll buzz if you get any visitors,” then eased my office door shut.

I read my mother’s memo about Emile Durak. Seems this guy didn’t stick around anyplace for very long. Then there was a bit about his trips to Germany before the war. Wherever he went, he was seen with a woman named Lilith de Malvois. She wasn’t Durak’s wife but rumored to be his personal astrologer of all things.

At that point, I buzzed my mother and asked her to bring in any photos from Durak’s file. She sat down in front of my desk and handed me a folder and a slice of custard pie.

“There are a few photos of his companion,” she said, “the so-called astrologer.”

“Hmm, not her,” I mumbled, noticing the astrologer bore no resemblance to the woman I saw last night at the library, or later in my *imagination*? The astrologer’s emaciated face looked pallid and wrinkled, like my fingertips after swimming too long in the cold surf at Santa Monica. Her hair resembled a bouquet of cauliflower.

“Did you notice her necklace?” my mother asked.

I grabbed my magnifying glass from inside the desk drawer and examined a couple of the photos. “Looks like a curved Christian cross flying a triangular banner on each end.”

“First time I saw that symbol was in a magazine a couple of years before your father and I came to America.”

“What magazine was that?”

My mother removed her bifocals and folded them into her hand. “It was called *Ostara*, something published in Austria. Horrible magazine, talked adversely about Jews and others, and promoted this idea of German superiority. Dear, dear, if only death would have its day.” She shook her head, then added, “They also made all sorts of mystical claims. I remember seeing a sketch of an old-style swastika from the Middle East.” She pointed at the necklace in the photo. “It was exactly like this one.”

“Seems like some of their ideas stuck, unfortunately.” I took another look at the necklace. “Wait,” I said, “I think I’ve seen this before too. Have you seen the file on Winifred Burkhardt? She’s a Nazi spy we sent to the slammer last year, in February.”

“Yes, of course.”

While she went to the adjacent office to retrieve the file, I took a bite of the custard pie. *Köstlich!* Tasted as delicious as always.

Glancing again at the messages from Betsy, I picked up the phone and dialed her number. The phone conversation was gossipy but brief. I learned Jamison was out due to his head cold and my new partner, Anna Torres, was a dish with a lot of moxie.

“We’ll see what she makes of this new case,” I said. “Give Dex my best. You’ll hear from me soon. Bye.”

As my mother returned with the file, she said, “Yes, you have seen it before.”

I took the folder and opened it. Inside were all my surveillance reports on Winnie, and a slew of newspaper clippings with photos of her at dozens of galas and Hollywood premiers, where she often wore a Sautoir necklace with an ivory pendant.

“Well, holy mackerel!” I said, looking at a photo of Winnie with my magnifying glass. Carved into the pendant was a Middle Eastern swastika.

“Geno, these are more than just designs. People who wear them, who display them, worship an idea. They are kneeling and... beckoning.”

“To whom?” I looked again at the photos of Winnie and Lilith. “For what?”

“I think that’s where this idiot, Durak, comes in.” She pointed at the memo.

“With any luck, I’ll see that crumb tonight.” I thought for a moment about the pendant and said, “I wonder how Winnie is these days?” Smiling, I added, “Seems like it may be a good time to pay her a visit.”

After finishing the slice of custard pie, I went to meet my new partner at Kenji's restaurant. This time, I didn't notice any blue Buicks along the way. Still, after last night, chances were good I was being followed. I parked next to my apartment building, then walked across the street to the restaurant.

Kenji Nakamoto and his wife, Emiko, started the restaurant after emigrating from Japan and arriving in Los Angeles. I've eaten at Kenji's at least once every day since I moved into my apartment. Well, except for that time when the restaurant closed a couple months after the war started. Good old Uncle Sam had rounded up Kenji, his wife, and their two children, both Nisei, and dumped them into a Japanese internment camp.

I blew my stack. In the end, Jamison came through with their release, but only because... well, let's just say I had the goods on something big—the truth about an incident on February 25, 1942, the night of the *Great Los Angeles Air Raid*. It's all hush-hush, but anyone who was there will tell you our boys weren't firing their ack-ack guns for hours at an air raid balloon that slipped its moorings.

Inside the restaurant, I took a seat at a booth near the entrance. The narrow dining room had five booths along one wall. Across from those, a half dozen tables sat next to a row of windows dressed up with red and white checkered curtains. The place wasn't getting by on its looks.

Kenji's teenage daughter, Sakura, who went by the name Sarah, came over and handed me a menu.

“Will you need this, Mister Richter?”

“I will today, Sarah. Thank you. A guest will be joining me. Of course, you already know what I want.”

“Pork cutlets with noodles.”

“Good girl, and while I’m waiting, I’ll take a cup o’ mud, please, if it’s fresh. Just black.”

“On its way.”

As Sarah walked toward the kitchen, I noticed different cutouts taped on the restaurant’s walls and windows. Some were orange and round, like pumpkins, others were white and shaped like ghosts. Also, a few gourds were stacked on top of the cashier counter. Then I noticed a flyer pinned to the wall next to my booth. It announced a Halloween parade and fair were coming to my neighborhood in a couple of weeks. *Costumes encouraged.*

“Will you be at the parade, Geno?” Kenji asked, sliding into the seat across from me.

“I’ll be sure to get back to you about that.” I shook my head. “I mean, if I had kids and all.”

“Then give me your candy rations so I can hand them out for you, otherwise you know what they say, ‘*trick or treat.*’ You’ll end up with soap on your car windows.”

“When did you become so American, Kenji?”

He laughed and tapped the tabletop with his forefinger. “The day my son joined the United States Army.”

We both heard the front door’s bell chime, so Kenji smiled, saluted, and went to greet the customer. Sarah returned with my cup of coffee then checked on a few other guests. Bing Crosby’s new song, *Sunday, Monday, or Always*, played on the radio in the dining room.

Soon enough, Anna Torres walked up and introduced herself. She wasn’t in a Marine uniform. Instead, she had on a pleated, dusty-pink blouse tucked into a forest green skirt. Like me, she skipped wearing a hat and, as far as I could tell,

makeup too. Her dark hair was stacked in curls and parted on top.

Betsy was right, Anna was a knockout.

I stood, shook her hand, and invited her to take a seat. She was a bit shorter than me and seemed a few years younger, but not by much.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mister Richter,” she said. She adjusted her harlequin-style eyeglasses and glanced around the restaurant.

“Please, call me Geno. May I call you Anna?”

She smiled. “Yes, that will be fine, especially since you pronounce it so well.”

I pronounced it *AH-nah*.

“Thanks. Not trying to butter you up,” I said. “Just like to do things right. When I can, that is.”

When Sarah returned, Anna broke into a string of Japanese phrases. I nodded here and there as they spoke to each other. *She'll be a fine sleuth in wartime Los Angeles*, I thought.

Not once did Anna look at the menu, she just handed it back to Sarah, who bowed and walked to the kitchen. “I haven't been able to speak Japanese since I left the Solomons,” Anna said. “I can't wait to try their *kaiseki don*.”

“If it's anything like their pork and noodles, you'll go bonkers for it,” I said. “By the way, they told me you're a nurse. How did you have time to learn Japanese?”

“Oh, I learned it growing up in San Diego. We had friends, you see, who were Japanese. I went to school with a couple of their kids. I ended up learning Japanese and they learned Spanish.” Anna's voice trailed off. “Now they're in one of the camps.”

“Say, we’ll have plenty of time to get to know each other.” I hated the camps and didn’t want to spoil lunch talking about them. “Right now, I’m working a case, and I need your help. Do you have a car?”

“Yes. It’s a loaner from the motor pool at Terminal Island.”

“Good, good.” I gazed around the restaurant and leaned toward Anna. “We’ll leave from here separately. You’ll get in your car and drive around the block, then pick me up in the alley on the west side of the apartment building across the street.”

“Understood,” she murmured, nodding. “But will we eat first? I’m famished.”

“Absolutely,” I chuckled. “I bet this lunch will be the highlight of your day.”

Chapter Three

Butt Violins

While I paid for lunch, Anna did as I'd asked. She exited Kenji's restaurant and walked to her car. If anything, this little exercise was good practice for keeping a low profile. Still, while I knew it wasn't likely anyone followed me earlier, the hairs on the back of my neck disagreed with me. They stood a little taller than usual when I left Kenji's.

I strolled across the street to my apartment building and went inside. Instead of going upstairs to my flat, I walked down a side hallway, past a few first-floor apartments, one of which had their front door open.

"Where you think you're going?" a man asked from inside his flat.

That was Mister Jenkins, a soldier from World War One.

"Hello, sir," I said and kept walking.

"Your *fuehrer* is the other way!" he shouted. He didn't like me. In his day, he fought and killed Germans until a round punctured his right lung during a charge at Belleau Wood. To him, I was the enemy.

Someday, all this hate we have for each other will get the best of us. Still, if it weren't for my medical condition, which disqualifies me from military service, I would have signed up in '41. It's plain as day there's evil in this world. Why Jenkins had to invent more of it, I'll never know. Plenty of the real kind to go around, and the kind you thought was

made up just to scare you. Turned out, some of that was real too, and the Nazis were in love with it.

Or, it was in love with them.

“Be back to check on you later, Mister Jenkins,” I said, passing his doorway.

“I mean business, you dirty Kraut!”

He was known to be armed with more than insults. People said he owned a shotgun, but I didn’t stick around to find out. I turned the corner ahead and followed a short hallway to the building’s side exit. I popped out into an alleyway next to a stack of well-worn car tires and a pile of old pots and pans. *Scrap for victory!* We all have to do our part or at least try.

Anna was parked in the car, engine running, a few steps past the side door in a black Ford sedan. I opened the front passenger door and climbed in.

“We’re going to my office,” I said, “but let’s take the scenic route. I want to flush out anyone who might follow us.”

“I’ll go to the right up there,” Anna said, pointing to the alley’s intersection with the road between Kenji’s restaurant and my apartment. “I know a few of the side streets around here.”

“Let’s go then.”

The plan changed well before we reached the street. A blue Buick, like the one I’d seen earlier, turned into the alley from the road and barreled straight at us. Anna slammed on the brakes, jerking both of us forward, a minor inconvenience compared to the shock of gunfire. At least two rounds pierced the front windshield and another

pummeled the right side-view mirror. That round was meant for me, so I felt within my rights to return the gesture.

“Motor pool won’t appreciate that,” I said, reaching for my pistol.

I glanced at Anna. She looked like someone just pissed on her shoes.

“Hold on,” she yelled, slamming the Ford into reverse. She gunned the engine and we shot backwards down the alley.

The car screeched, rattled, and bounced. I heard a bang come from behind, then saw a couple of pots, a frying pan, and a cookie sheet spiral down in front of us while two tires spun like dreidels until the blue Buick’s front bumper knocked them aside.

I sunk low in my seat and entertained the notion of taking a shot at the goons chasing us, but with fence posts and metal railings whizzing past, I didn’t feel like losing my arm. I made other arrangements.

“Swing around so I can get a shot,” I said.

“Almost there,” Anna replied. “Get ready.”

“Way ahead of you.”

Where the alley met the street behind us, I saw Anna wince, close her eyes, and spin the steering wheel to the right. I braced myself with my legs and left arm just as Anna slammed the brakes.

“Perfect,” I said, then fired four rounds from my Colt, a nice spread into the Buick’s windshield. Before I could aim again, Anna jammed the accelerator. Good thing, because another two rounds hit us. Yeah, I was disappointed these thugs were still well enough to chase us, but Anna soon cheered me up.

“Get behind me!” she ordered.

I didn’t argue. Instead, I climbed into the back seat and rolled down the left window.

“Ready,” I said.

The U-turn Anna executed had me sliding across the back seat like a loose ice block on a sweaty Saturday. I clawed back to the window just in time to fire two more rounds at the blurry Buick. They swung around too as Anna floored it toward Venice Boulevard.

“They must really hate you by now,” I said.

“The feeling is mutual.”

Anna swung us into oncoming traffic. Her wide eyes danced to the rhythm of quick mental calculations. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she’d done this before. The cars swerved and honked, confusing and blocking our friends behind us in the Buick.

“I’m trying to find...,” Anna said.

“What?”

Anna found what she was looking for. One final calculation, then she cranked the steering wheel to the left and charged us forward into another alley. The ploy worked. I watched the Buick race on by. Blocked by the other cars, they swerved back into the right lane.

“I’m sure they’ll circle around,” I said

“Counting on it.”

We rolled past a number of apartment building carports, then Anna stopped the car. She reversed and pulled backward into an empty carport between a black Pontiac and a snazzy green Chevrolet coupe.

I stretched out in the back seat and re-loaded while Anna ducked down below the dashboard.

“You got moxie, kid,” I said.

“Thanks,” Anna whispered. “I’m a Marine.”

“I know, and I’m glad you’re on our side.”

Anna chuckled. “My friends in the Solomons used to say the same thing.”

The sound of a revved-up engine approached. In the blink of an eye, our pursuers in the Buick sped by. I let out a sigh of relief and started to climb into the front seat, only to be thrown back into a heap when Anna launched the Ford out of the carport and turned left into the alley.

“Anna!” I shouted. “What in blazes?”

“Don’t you want to nab these guys?”

She was onto something here. I wanted to beat the living daylights out of them. And that was just for starters. “They turned left onto Union!”

“I see them, I see them!”

Anna slowed to merge into traffic on Union. She weaved around several cars ahead and pulled up right behind the blue Buick, then leaned on the horn.

Two men swiveled their heads to peer out the Buick’s back window. Yeah, more Nazi goons from the looks of it. They pointed and shouted at each other. A red traffic light at Pico Boulevard up ahead turned green, so the chase resumed.

The Buick didn’t waste any time. Neither did Anna. I stayed in the back seat with both the left and right windows rolled down in case I could get a bead on them. We rocketed through the intersection with Pico and that’s when I saw and heard the cops. Lights flashing and sirens wailing, they closed the gap without much delay.

Rather than slowing down, Anna accelerated. She breathed down the necks of Gunter and Schmitt, or whoever they were. They started to swerve and speed up a few blocks north of Pico, and tried to take a wide turn west, onto Olympic. That's where they hit an oak tree on the sidewalk.

Anna slammed on the brakes just in time to sandwich the Buick between the oak tree and the right side of our car. I swung the door open and rushed the passenger, let's call this one Gunter. He was scrawny for a member of the self-proclaimed master race so tackling him was easy. We rolled into the gutter where I made sure he knew what concrete tasted like. The other one, we'll call him Schmitt, looked like he enjoyed too much strudel and dumplings. Like a boulder, he rolled toward Anna, who had run toward the driver's side of the Buick. Judging from her pose, I'd say she meant to put the chop down on Schmitt with some karate.

He tried to grab her but she ducked out of his way then kicked his ass with a brown, block-heeled oxford. He collided with the side of our car, lost his balance, and rolled into the street, toward me and my new concrete-eating friend, Gunter.

When Schmitt pulled a Luger pistol from his inside his coat, I got angry. He pressed himself off the ground with the Buick's bumper and took aim at Anna.

"Anna," I yelled, "duck!"

When the shots rang out, they didn't come from the Luger. They came from the .38 caliber revolvers behind us. A couple of the cops dropped Schmitt like a sack of rotten potatoes.

I hooked up Gunter with a pair of handcuffs and that's when I noticed he had a bronze ring on one of his

fingers. I filched his wallet then took a closer look at the ring. Carved on its face was one of those old-style swastikas from the Middle East. I twisted it off his finger and pocketed it.

“Grab some sky!” a cop yelled at me.

“Yes, siree!” I raised my hands and stood. “My holstered heater’s licensed.”

“We’ll see about that, Bub.”

“And don’t get jealous of its size.”

As he frisked me, another officer approached Anna and roughed her up. He cuffed her and shoved her toward his car.

“Hey,” I yelled, “that’s no way to treat a dame!”

The officer behind me murmured, “She’s no dame, just a damn Mexican.”

Later, at the police station downtown, the cops took their sweet time bringing Anna from booking to the lobby. That’s where they dropped me off with nothing more than a stern warning. They no doubt backed off arresting me because of some friendly intervention from one of their own, a detective named Thomas O’Malley. He also happened to be a longtime family friend.

In a deserted corner of the lobby, I sat down on a creaky pine bench and watched people come and go. After a moment, I reached into my pocket and pulled out Gunter’s wallet. My laughter echoed a bit after I read the name on his driver’s license: *John Smith*. These goons were getting lazy. Not much else in the wallet except a few bucks and a movie ticket stub—to that new one with Betty Grable, *Sweet Rosie O’Grady*—from the Sepulveda Theater, up near Santa Monica.

There was also a receipt made out to John Smith totaling \$250 for smoked tuna bought from Bremmer's Fresh Fish, also in Santa Monica. I laughed again and pocketed the receipt, then tucked the wallet and the rest of its contents inside my coat. Looked like my old friend Hans Bremmer, a meddling fool, had gotten mixed up with Nazi spies again. He ran fishing boats out of San Pedro and always seemed to mix on the fringe of trouble. I'm guessing, but I'd say the tuna money was a payoff.

As I pondered how much I'd have to rough up Hans for details, Detective O'Malley walked over and greeted me.

"Geno, my dear, sweet boy," he said. "I am so relieved you aren't hurt, or worse. I'd hate to have to call your mother."

As a friend of my parents, Tommy always spoke to me like he was family. I'd known him for as long as I could remember. My father, before he passed, worked as a bricklayer with Tommy. They helped on the Biltmore Hotel's construction. Tommy later became a cop.

I stood and we shared a handshake. "Thanks, Tommy. I'm just fine, but I'm starting to worry about my partner, Anna Torres."

"Ah, yes. She's on her way."

"They better not have touched her," I said. "Such damn fine professionals. I don't think they like her all that much. You know, because of—"

"Well, they hate your guts and you're fine." Tommy laughed. His plump, round cheeks grew rosy and his smile widened into a full grin. "She's unhurt. And their tails are between their legs, for now."

Tommy removed his bowler and we sat down together. His white hair seemed a bit thinner than the last time I saw him. Must have been months ago. Saint Patrick's Day, maybe.

"Thanks for clearing our release."

He wafted his hand like he was shoeing away a fly. "Let the record show that you and Miss Torres were never here. Let your boss know I'm keeping a tab and I'll come for payment once the war ends." Tommy reached into his coat and pulled out my pistol. "You might want to tuck this away. And clean it when you get home."

I nodded and holstered my Colt. "And I have something for you, Tommy."

"How kind. What is it?"

"This." I handed him John Smith's wallet. "Poor guy dropped it during the scuffle."

Tommy smiled. "I see."

"I picked it up but then forgot I had it."

"Really? I know you wouldn't lie to me."

I winked and said, "It's all yours."

As we chatted, the lobby grew busier. More uniformed cops wandered in and there seemed to be a small crowd near the center of the lobby. A paperboy looked to be selling the afternoon edition of the *Los Angeles Times*.

"News of the Nazi occupation of Rome, no doubt," Tommy said. "We will win this war, but there are many more battles to fight before then." He squinted, then looked me over, head to toe. "Your father would be proud of you."

"My father...." I sighed and peered down at my shoes. "Can we check on Anna, please? She should be here by now."

“Certainly.”

Tommy and I stood. He stared at me while I gazed around the lobby.

“Geno, someday you have to accept your father’s death,” Tommy whispered. “You don’t have to get yourself killed or take down every Nazi in town to prove you’re worthy in anyone’s eyes.”

I shook my head. “All due respect, Tommy, I think you’re wrong. I take down Nazis because there’s a war on. Just look at the headlines.” I pointed to the crowd around the newsboy. “Although I’m beginning to think we aren’t all that different from them. We spew hate and racism just as well as they do.”

“Some of us do, and I’ve seen and heard some of that with my own eyes and ears.” Tommy leaned in and frowned. “I’m Irish. Next to the Italians and Poles, I’m everyone’s favorite joke.”

“And I still get it for being German.” We strolled toward the center of the lobby. “Anna must face it all the time. They’ve interned Japanese families whose kids are American, doggone it. Even my boss, Dexter Jamison—one of the smartest men I know—gets the sneers, the whispers, the avoidance because he’s negro. Somedays, I wonder when we’ll be fighting with the Nazis and not against them.”

“I know, you say that a lot, Geno.” We paused while a few officers passed by. They disappeared behind the desk sergeant whose phones were ringing off the hook. Tommy put his bowler back on.

“My wife, Shauna,” Tommy said, “may she rest in peace, was Protestant. Yours truly is Catholic. Instead of dividing us, those differences made us stronger. We

respected each other and learned from each other. We became better people because of it. Same idea goes for this country if you ask me.”

“You were in love. Of course, you could look past those things.”

“Love conquers all. Is that what you’re saying?”

I folded my arms and gazed up at the ceiling. “So, I’ve heard.”

“Come to me when you speak from experience, Geno.”

“Hey, don’t go bustin’ my chops. You’re not my—”

“Papa? No, siree.”

During the ensuing silence, Anna appeared, walking around the newspaper crowd and toward us. She looked... *unharméd.*

“Tommy,” I said, “thank you for squaring things with the officers and getting my pistol back.”

“Cost you my standard fee, a bottle of Scotch.”

“A bargain.”

I introduced Anna to Tommy and while chatting, we all heard the comments from some of the passing cops. They made sure to be just loud enough.

“Would someone take out the trash?”

“Hah! A Kraut, Spic, and Mick walk into a police station....”

“There goes the neighborhood.”

Before my anger got the better of me, Anna announced, “*Métetelo por el culo!*”

That turned some heads and shut some cake holes. I agreed with her, they should definitely *shove it up their ass.* Now there’s a dame I can relate to.

“That’s right,” I added, “*Arschgeigen!*” Since *ass* was in play, I felt calling them *butt violins*, a truly German insult, was proper.

“Indeed, such *gobshites*,” Tommy said, ending with tasteful Irish flair. He then walked us to the impound lot and gave us the keys to Anna’s shot-up loaner car.

We drove off, but not to my office. Since it was already late afternoon, we headed to the library. I had an appointment to keep at that temple of doom.

SAMPLE