

*Every Story a GEM!*

# THE RUBY FILES

Special Preview  
Edition



*Introducing*  
**RICK  
RUBY**  
*Private Eye*



*Handwritten signature and date: 2011*

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# Die Giftige Lilie

*By Sean Taylor*

The woman's accent was just German enough to get his attention, all dripping with sexy gutturals and thick vowels, just exotic enough to trick a man's ears into thinking he was having a drink with Marlene Dietrich instead of some two-bit nightclub singer in a no-account New York dive like Belle's. But the comparison stopped cold at the woman's voice. She was attractive, of course, but lacked the sex appeal that would have brought sell-out crowds to the local bijou. Her skin was pale and almost sickly, and her figure—while a far sight better than that of the average woman with a nice apartment and radio in her living room—well, it was never going to get her silhouette painted on a playbill. But her eyes, her dark eyes that threatened to go solid black in just the right light, those were something special, and it was those eyes that had convinced him to listen to her story in the first place.

“So listen, honey,” he said, tapping a Camel from a pack of cigarettes then slipping it back inside his coat pocket.

“Gerta,” she said.

“Right. Gerta Stein. You said that.” He smiled and nodded as he lit the Camel. “So, what's all this noise about your uncle?”

She shifted her weight in her seat, and he pretended to be gentleman enough not to overtly notice the way her dress slipped off the side of her thigh. “I think he’s in trouble, Mr. Ruby. I think he’s in the kind of trouble could get him killed.”

“What kind of trouble is *that*, honey?”

“My Uncle Oskar, he’s a scientist, a chemist who works on weapons development. Only, he’s not very happy with the direction our government has taken, and he’s looking for an opportunity to seek sanctuary here in your United States.”

“Sounds like a smart man.”

“He’s very smart, Mr. Ruby.” There went those legs again, uncrossing and then stacking one on top of the other in the opposite manner. Rick didn’t pretend as well this time. Still, she either didn’t notice or didn’t seem to mind. “He is in New York with a group of scientists and officials for some kind of conference, and he’s staying at the Grand Hotel.”

“Nice place. Ritzy. Expensive.”

“Yes. The Nazis spare no expense to keep their war makers pliable and complacent, Mr. Ruby.”

He stopped her by raising his index finger between them.

“If I’m going to help you, honey,” he said, intentionally not watching the swing of her legs, “then we’re going to have to get one thing straight. My friends call me Rick. Only the bankers, cops, and jealous boyfriends call me Mr. Ruby. Okay?”

“Then I’d prefer you call me Gerta as well.”

“Sure thing, honey.” He smiled. “So, Gerta, tell me more about your Uncle Oskar.”

She stifled a shudder and continued. “Word has gotten out among his companions that he wants to stay and become a United States citizen, and I overheard several of the party officials traveling with him plotting to have him either killed or beaten and forced back to Germany.”

Rick finished the last of his Camel, then tapped another out of the pack. “Cigarette?” he offered.

Gerta shook her head. “Well, Mr. Ruby?”

Rick raised his index finger again.

“I’m sorry. Rick?”

“That’s better, honey.” He lit the second Camel and took a long drag, sucked it into his lungs and then blew it out his nose. “Two things. One, seems to me there are other channels in place for handling this kind of noise, official government channels who would be tripping over themselves to get a Nazi scientist here on the U.S. payroll.”

“German scientist, Rick.”

“What?”

He’s a German scientist, not a Nazi. We do not all support the party even though we may still love our homeland. One can do more to effect change from within than from without.”

“Ah. Yes. Sorry.”

She smiled.

He took the gesture as a signal to keep going. “Anyway, I’d think you’d have more luck finding the proper channels to arrange for his escape from his companions.”

“We don’t have time to find them out, Mr. Ruby. Even now it may already be too late.”

Rick reached across the table for her hand, hoping to calm her display. “Which brings me to my second point, and I hate to sound so mercenary, but I do require a week’s expenses up front and a per diem after that. Will you be able to cover my financial necessities for this case if I agree to take it on?”

Gerta bit down on her bottom lip, opened her eyes wide and black, and waved her leg again. Rick almost told her he could give her a discounted rate, but that empty feeling in his pockets reminded him that louse or not, he still had bills to pay. Besides, if she couldn’t cover his costs, he could at least introduce her to Mac and let the coppers handle it for her. Either way, she’d get the help she needed.

She sniffled loudly and rested her hands, folded together, in her narrow lap.

He started to speak, but thought better of it and simply let his smile stretch into a sort of, he hoped, silly grin.

Gerta uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, reaching for her handbag sitting on the floor at her thin, pale feet, even through the stockings. When she sat up again, she held her bag in her lap and one hand had disappeared inside.

Rick tried not to raise his gaze to follow the hand inside the black leather.

“Will this do, Rick?” she asked as she placed a neatly bound stack of 20 dollar bills on the table between them. “My family has more than sufficient resources to pay for your services, I assure you.”

Rick nodded. “That’s a good start, honey.”

Damn, there went those pale legs again, re-crossing back to the way they had been initially. She noticed him admiring them. “The payment stops at money, Mr. Ruby, no matter how much you may like what you see. I may be desperate for your help, but –”

“It’s not like that, honey. I can enjoy the stilts without needing to try ‘em out myself, I assure you. I’d never take advantage of a woman, no matter how vulnerable she might be. I’m the good guy, remember?”

As he said it, he picked up the money and shuffled through it. Thick, he thought. Far more than enough to cover the first week’s expenses. Maybe enough for the first two, not that the case would need two weeks, he figured.

“But not a complete good Samaritan, I see,” she said with a friendly smirk.

“Got to pay the room and board, honey. They don’t give out these licenses for free.”

The room grew quiet, and everyone was suddenly looking at them. No, he realized, not *at* them but *through* them.

He turned to follow the stares.

All the way to the stage.

A slender shadow of black curves stood poured into a shiny silver dress that flowed down to two stocking-clad legs perched atop matching silver shoes. Then the shadow opened up to reveal a smile white enough to hit the room like a spotlight.

Evelyn Johnson had taken the stage.

And she was staring at him, her eyes locked onto his, ignoring the pale, dark-eyed German woman seated beside him.

“This is for everyone helping to keep Belle’s alive, one drink at a time,” she said, then the band kicked into “Riffin’ the Scotch.”

“She seems to know you,” Gerta said.

“We... have a history.”

“I imagine you have a history with more women that you let any of them know.”

“A gentleman never discusses past loves.”

“A gentleman?”

She was bouncing those damn legs again and staring at him with those eyes so black he couldn’t see the light reflect back at him.

“As much a gentleman as my upbringing will allow me to be,” he said.

She reached across the table to take his hand, then cocooned it between both of her own. “Thank you, Rick. You’ll never know what this means to me. I couldn’t live with myself if anything happened to him.”

Rick wasn’t looking, but he felt Evelyn’s eyes boring into him.

“Think nothing of it, honey. It’s what I’m trained to do.”

Gerta squeezed his hand. “It looks to me like your history thinks you have a present tense.”

“Yeah, well...”

“As I said, Rick, I do not intend to become part of your history, so it’s really none of my business.” She let go of his hand. “But I do admit that her jealousy gives me a delightful feeling I haven’t felt in a while.”

“...I lost me a cheatin' man,” Evelyn sang with the thick syrup of her voice. “And got a no-count liar...”

Rick felt his throat constrict and fill with something he tried to tell himself didn't taste like guilt. Evelyn knew they weren't a regular item, and that he didn't expect any more of her than he wanted her to expect of him. Besides, with society being what it was, if word got out about their occasional crossing of the racial divide, chances are that they'd both be strung up at least figuratively by the good citizens of New York. And Rick liked having his figurative neck in place just as much as his literal one.

“So let's get out of here, honey, and go meet this uncle of yours.”

The last thing he heard before hitting the door was Evelyn's voice cracking with intentional pretense, “...Swapped the old one for a new one, now the new one's breakin' my heart...”

+ + +

Walking the human clutter of Oak Street reminded Rick of both the beauty and the foulness of New York. Breadlines shuddered hungry on one corner while top hats and shiny gowns packed the theaters to laugh at Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn's staged pratfalls and one-liners in *Bringing Up Baby* less than a block away. Torn somewhere between poverty and luxury, New York was as schizophrenic a lady as he'd ever known, and difficult both to hold any long-term affection for and avoid regularly falling in love with like a schoolboy with a crush on an alluring young school teacher.

“Your New York City is a beautiful city,” Gerta said, her heels click-clacking on the sidewalk.

“She's a fickle place,” he mumbled.

“Not grand and glorious like my own Hamburg, of course, but lovely like a young woman, not a stately lady. Evidence of her need to grow up is all around, but the maturing features are still beautiful nevertheless.”

“You never told me you had the heart of a poet, honey.”



“I..” she started, and he could almost hear her throat try to block the words. “I get sentimental about my home. It wasn’t always a *Gau* for the Nazis, Mr. Ruby. There was a time when it was a place to respect our history and not try to enforce the party’s understanding of the future.”

He said nothing, and instead grabbed the pack of camels from his coat pocket and felt the wind blow through his thick red hair. With all the hats men seemed to find fashionable, he found that he could stand out better without one. Of course, when he needed to hide in a crowd, there were plenty of Fedoras to be had for a modest price. He tapped out a cigarette and offered one to Gerta. She declined.

“I’m not here to judge, honey.” Rick lit the Camel and sucked a thick tarry stretch of smoke into his lungs. “We all have our sins to account for.”

“I assure you, Mr. Ruby. The party has more than a few small sins to account for. The bastards pretend to be about the German workers, but—” She stifled a choking cough. “I’m sorry. After how the party has treated my uncle, I tend to lose my temper when I think about them.”

“Like I said, I’m not here to judge.” He cocked his head to the side and grinned, hoping more for charm than goofiness. “Say, you speak English like a pro. What gives?”

“I sing,” she said.

“I know. I’ve caught your act. Not bad.”

“Thank you, Rick.”

“That doesn’t completely answer my question.”

She ran her fingers through her hair, tucking it behind her ear. “I have lived in the United States for several years. Before my manager booked me into New York, I used to perform in San Francisco, Carson City and Denver. It was his idea to move me to the east coast in hopes of bigger crowds and better money.”

“Aw,” Rick mumbled more than said. “The filthy lucre.”

“Says the man who demanded a week’s pay up front.”

“Never claimed to be free of the root of all evil, doll.”

“Please, it’s Gerta.”

“Okay. Gerta.” Rick caught a whiff of fish and knew they were getting near the markets. “Still, not much of an accent at all.”

“I tend to pick up accents of the people I’m around, I’m afraid. You should hear me when after my Uncle visits. I can’t almost taste the thick German that creeps back in. And let me tell you, Rick, the only time an American wants to hear German is in the cinema or from the mouth of a female crooner in a slinky gown.”

“Well, can’t say that I disagree terribly, honey.”

“You haven’t met the right Germans then, Rick.”

Rick smiled and glanced in her eyes just long enough to see the doors close there.

“But don’t any ideas.”

“No ma’am,” he said. “Best behavior.”

“It’s around the next block, Mr. Ruby.”

Rick shook his head and took another long drag on the cigarette to get the fish smell out of his nose. “Let’s not go back to that noise, Gerta. I thought we were getting to be friends.”

She smiled but said nothing.

“Hope you don’t keep your windows open, honey.”

Gerta looked at him, scrunched her eyes in thought, then nodded. “Oh. The smell. No. We don’t get it much on the other side of the block. The wind ignores us, so the smell never seems to reach my windows.”

“Thank heaven for small favors,” Rick muttered mostly as an excuse to keep talking.

“And for large ones, Rick.” Gerta slowed and turned to face him. Those black eyes probed him and came up full of information, he was sure. “Like finding you to help my Uncle Oskar.”

“Don’t make me out to be a saint, honey.” Rick tightened his lock on her arm and brought her heels back up to speed on the sidewalk. “Because I’m not ready to die for anybody’s faith in me, and those who think too highly of me usually end up pretty disappointed.”

Gerta grinned and laughed, then stifled the sound. “You’re too hard on yourself, Rick. No man or woman knows he or she is a saint. It’s only the hindsight of history that reveals the truth about them.” Her hand stretched out, each finger trying to escape the confines of its neighbor, then they rested again across his knuckles. “You may surprise yourself set.”

“And half of New York, I’m certain.”

She smiled, then stopped then at a set of eight stone steps. “We’re here,” she said. “My temporary home.”

“Thought you said he was staying at the Grand.”

“He is. But surely you didn’t think we would meet him there with all his—”

Rick stopped her cold. Pressed his lips against hers then shoved them both against the stone railing that lead up the steps. She resisted the intrusion for a moment, then relented and stopped squirming in his grip, and Rick felt her breath push her chest against him in a slow, steady, deliberate rhythm that felt like the band at Belle’s.

He watched as the blue sedan cleared the corner and disappeared.

Then he returned to the kiss, gave it a few more seconds just for the hell of it, and finally released both her arms and lips.

For a moment, Gerta stood shakily on the steps until she braced herself on the railing with her left hand. Then with her right, she swung back and let it go toward Rick’s face.

He smiled and caught the delicate wrist before she connected with his cheek, then said, “They’ve been following us since the moment we stepped out of Belle’s. I needed a reason to slow down and let them pass and to get a good look at them as they did. Two men, both blonde, one’s tall enough to bump his head on the top of the car. Ring any bells?”

“You may let go of my arm at any time, Mr. Ruby.”

“Now let’s not start that Mr. Ruby noise again, honey. I told you, it was just a diversion to let them pass.”

“And the extra time after they did so?”

“Oh,” Rick said. “You noticed that.”

“I most certainly did.”

“Well, that was for you. You seemed to be enjoying it, so I—”

Slap!

Her left hand all but leapt from the railing and did its damndest to leave a calling card on his face. He felt the camel dive from his hand.

He let go of her arm and took a step back. “Ouch.”

“I’m left-handed, Rick,” she said. “And whether I enjoyed it or not, my embraces are not part of your daily fee, I recall.”

“Don’t get your skirt ruffled, doll. I assure you I meant nothing by it.” He grinned and waited for her to return the feeling. When she didn’t, he continued, “So, Gerta, do you know of any German treetops hanging around your uncle?”

“German treetops?” She look at him flatly, then smiled.

“Ah, the tall man. I do find your way of speaking both refreshing and exasperating, Rick.”

“So we’re back to Rick now?”

“Well, as you said, nothing was meant by the gesture.”

Rick said nothing.

“Don’t look so hurt, Rick.”

“Well, they know we’re here and most likely why we’re here, so I guess we might as well get moving.”

Gerta’s face grew pale and skeletal. “Do you suppose I’ve put him in danger just bringing you here, Rick?”

Rick grabbed her hand and pulled her up the steps toward the doors. “Let’s worry about that when the time comes, honey. Right now, let’s get Uncle Oskar to somewhere safe.”

Once inside, Gerta guided Rick to the elevators, but he stopped her and motioned toward the stairs instead, the stairs in the back. After three flights as quietly as they could walk, even making Gerta take the dirty steps in stocking feet, Rick cracked open the door and peeked into the hallway.

Sure enough, a German soldier leaned against the wall with a clear view of the elevator cage.

Rick closed the door and whispered. “Okay, honey, it’s time to take a walk and make it count.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, Rick.”

“Don’t get innocent on me now, Gerta. If we’re going to get your uncle somewhere safe, I need to know that soldier-boy there is watching you, not me.”

“Ah. I understand.”

“Good girl. Now slip those high-heeled click-clackers back on and put those stilts of yours to good use.”

“You don’t give up, do you, Rick?” she breathed at him.

“Not for me this time, baby. Promise.”

She grinned. “Methinks you doth protest too much.”

“So the lady knows her Shakespeare.” He motioned toward the door. “We’ll trade books later. For now, let’s go get your uncle.”

As she brushed past him and gripped the doorknob, she leaned toward him, almost resting her chin on his shoulder. “I did enjoy it, Rick.”

“I—”

“But don’t consider that an invitation for an encore, Mr. Ruby.”

“Whatever you say, baby.”

“Gerta,” she said.

“Right.”

He stepped back into the shadows of the stairwell as she swung open the door and swished into the hallway. He let the door hit the frame enough to clank but not far enough to click shut. Then he pushed it open just wide enough to see the straight black seam of Gerta’s stockings sashay past the soldier.

She nodded at the soldier as she passed, and he said “*Guten Tag, Fraulein.*”

She responded in German, and Rick wished he had learned the language. But it wasn’t much and the important part of the conversation was in the tone, not the words. She had hooked her

fish, and that was all that mattered, and with each step away from him, she pulled the barb in farther. Rick kept one eye on the soldier as he tilted his head after her for a better angle and one eye on her legs himself.

“Damn my time,” he muttered, and he pushed the door open quietly and stepped into the hallway. Germany’s finest never had a chance. In three wide steps, Rick had cleared the distance between them and sent him to dreamland with the butt of his Colt .38. No sooner had the young man hit the floor than Gerta stopped and began to click her heel on the marble floor.

“Is he... dead?”

“Not this time. He’ll live to plague the free world again, honey. But not your uncle.”

“This way,” she said and motioned to a door three rooms down the hallway. “Room 347.”

Rick nodded. “You knock, but let me go in first. If they’ve got a boy out here, they could just as well have one inside.”

She gave him a worried smile and nodded once.

Then she walked to the door, knocked three times and called out, “Uncle Oskar. It’s me, Gerta. I’m back.”

No one answered.

Rick nodded at Gerta. “Say hello.”

“Uncle Oskar, it’s just me. I wanted to invite you to my show tonight.”

The door cracked open. Rick backed away out of view. “Your uncle is sleeping, Fraulein Stein. You may leave the tickets with me.”

Rick thought for a moment that it was odd the German would be speaking English, but he had no time to wonder about it in depth, because Gerta pushed open the door all the way.

“I need to see him, and I am to believe this is a free country.”

The door opened to darkness, the only light, the glint of steel thanks to the hallway chandeliers.

“Gerta!” came a voice from inside the room.

In a flash, Rick dove from his hiding place at the edge of the door, sending both himself and Gerta onto the floor. Just as fast the .38 was aimed at the shadow in the doorway. Before he could fire, though, a loud clang resonated from within the room, and the shadow melted onto the floor.

“Are you okay, my flower?” said the same voice from a moment before.

“You may get up off me, Rick. I believe we’re safe now.”

Rick realized that in the dive, he had managed to roll Gerta completely onto her back and use his own body as a shield, with the exception of one of his knees planted firmly between her own.

“Anything you say, honey.”

As he pushed up to his feet, he took a moment to give Uncle Oskar a once-over, then a twice-over. Probably pushing his mid-50s. Gray in all the ways that make a man look older than he actually is. Unkempt, and he obviously didn’t rate his appearance high on his list of priorities. He fit every stereotype Rick had imagined.

“Thank you for distracting him, Gerta.” Uncle Oskar returned the favor and gave Rick a clearly suspicious examination. “You and your... friend.”

“This...” she began, then cut her eyes at Rick. “This gentleman is a private detective in my employ, Uncle. I hired him because I was worried about you.

When Rick was securely standing, he reached for Gerta’s hand to help her up as well. “Your niece is concerned that you’re being strong-armed and believes you might want to stay here in the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Uncle Oskar leaned into the hallway and checked both directions. “The other soldier?”

“He’s taking a nap,” Rick said.

“Gerta is correct, Mr. Ruby.”

“We can work out the details later, but for now, let’s get you somewhere safe, both of you.”

+ + +

“Listen, Edie, honey,” Rick said as he tried to swallow a huge bite of his secretary’s apple pie.

“Oh no, Rick Ruby. Not for all the charm in that insincere lump you call a heart.” The normally sweet voice of Edie Rose Adams threatened to tip the scales into an actual yell. But just barely. If Edie was anything, she was all decorum and self-control.

He was counting on it.

She didn’t let him down.

“You cannot use my suite as a safe house for a Nazi scientist and a night-club singer.” She turned to Gerta. “No offense.”

Gerta grinned. “None taken.”

“You’re my best bet for keeping them safe, honey.”

“Don’t *honey* me, Rick.”

“C’mon, doll. Uncle Oskar here wants to become a free man, a citizen of the U.S.A.”

Edie wrapped her arms over her chest with a loud humph.

“What’s it going to cost me?” Rick asked.

“Don’t mind us,” Gerta said. “We promise you’ll never know we’re here.”

“It’s not that,” Edie said, tossing a thick fluff of hair back over her ear. “It’s who else might know that you’re here. And after the last bullet I took for you, Rick, I don’t have taking another one on my Christmas list.”

“Nobody knows, honey. I promise.”

“Nobody knew last time.”

“I—”

“In spite of your promise last time too.”

“Edie, Edie, Edie...” Rick started, then saw the Bible she had left on the kitchen counter. Decorum and self-control indeed. Especially to read all that jazz in the kitchen. “What would Jesus do?”

Edie stopped, her breath seemed to stick in her throat. “You didn’t read it, did you?”



“Just enough.”

“Now you start to listen to me?”

“I ain’t puttin’ in for sainthood, honey, but I’ll tell you what. You do me this favor, and I’ll actually go down to the mission with you this week.”

Eddie looked at the old man and the female crooner. A little jealously, Rick thought, when she took a few extra seconds to take in Gerta. But that was okay. Sometimes a man had to keep the women in his life playing against each other to get the results he needed. And sometimes to get the results he wanted, whether he needed them or not.

“Well?”

“I’m thinking.”

He leaned in and placed a tender kiss on her cheek. “Promise. Scout’s honor. Nothing’s gonna happen this time.”

“Damn it, Rick.”

“Watch that language, honey.” Rick laughed.

“You bring out the worst in me, Rick Ruby.”

“So you’ll do it?”

Eddie stared at the floor. “Yes. I’ll do it. But so help me if you try to get out of the meeting at the mission, I’ll never speak to you again, and you can start looking for a new secretary.”

“You’re a saint, honey.”

“Thank you,” said Gerta.

“Yes, thank you for your hospitality, Miss Adams,” said Uncle Oskar.

“You have to die to be a saint, Rick.”

“Oh,” said Rick.

Eddie shook her head. “Would you like some tea?” she asked her new guests.

“Do you have scotch?” asked Uncle Oskar.

Eddie shot Rick a glance. Rick smiled.

“No, sir,” she said emphatically. “I do not keep any alcohol at home, Mr. Stein.”

Rick laughed as he headed for the door. “You’ll be safe here, and Edie will take good care of you.”

Gerta had taken a seat on Edie’s sofa and was bouncing those damn legs again. He tried not to linger, but stayed just long enough for Edie to notice.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be, boss?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am, I do.” He winked at Edie. “You’re the best, honey. Never forget that.”

“Pride is a sin, Rick,” she said, then added with a whisper. “Just like lust.”

“Yeah, I guess I need to get a move on.”

Edie’s voice dropped even softer. “Rick?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“Please be careful. I worry about you.”

+ + +

Good ol’ Mac, Rick thought, as he crouched in the shadows behind the Wellington Fish Co. warehouse. The place stunk to high-heaven, and not just because of the wet meat in the boxes. He could take the odor of fish over the odor of Nazis and sympathizers any day, especially the kind that put dames like Gerta on their hit lists.

Thank God he still had a friend or two with a badge. It saved hours of hoofing it and miles of leg work.

Even after five years on the force himself, the department by and large had little love for him. Sure, he had a damn good reason for quitting and fading away into a drunken stupor—God rest Greer Lawson’s soul—and it hadn’t even been his idea in the first place to come out of the gutter and get his P.I. license, but none of that seemed to matter to bucks who still wore the blue and carried the badge. They just didn’t like private dicks like him getting in the way of the justice machine.

Mostly because without all the hoops to jump through, he could get the job done quicker and easier, though he might have to bend the letter of the law occasionally.

Still, he did have a few friends on the force, as long as he didn't mind not using more than one hand to count them. And Mac had come through with flying colors this time, tracking down the license plate with the county, and given him the address down at the docks.

Good thing, he thought, the business of plates had gone to the counties in '34. Getting that kind help from Olympia would have taken the kind of time he couldn't spare.

Still, Mac's info had been dead on the money. The car belonged to the Wellington Fish Company, and it turned out Wilhelm Wellington had a grandfather in the Fatherland. Call it a hunch, but adding those facts together only equaled trouble.

As he watched a black sedan drove up to the warehouse. A quick peek through the binoculars told him it was the car he was looking for. Two tall men, both blonde as Carole Lombard, and one with a good six inches on the other that made him look twice as thin as he probably was. Both packed pistols, he could tell by the way their coats bulged at all the wrong spots.

"Hello, sauerkraut," he said.

It bothered him that they were out of uniform, but he couldn't expect Nazis to walk around in their dress threads all the time, especially not when kidnapping was the game of choice they were playing.

The two men met two others near the door, and were ushered inside. Rick knew he needed to get closer.

He saw the door about twenty feet away. Well, he thought, not so much a door as a forgotten corner of a door sneaking one corner out among the boxes piled up against. He considered using it, knowing they'd never expect him to come from behind them, but if it were forgotten on the outside, he could be damn sure it was most likely forgotten and hidden behind boxes inside too.

So much for convenience.

Looks like the front door, he thought. Again. He sighed and inspected his .38 for a full load. He didn't want to need it, but if things turned sour, he'd need his trusted ol' friend at his side.

"Damn!" he said, catching himself and crouching in the shadows again when he saw the broken window. Not big enough to crawl through, but he didn't need to be inside if the sound could make it out to say hello directly to him.

"Looks like I finally caught a break after all," he whispered as he shoved the .38 against his back again.

He crept to the window, then sidled into the shadows beneath it and listened.

"—don't like it," said one of the guys who had received the two German trees. "It's too risky." An American, born and bred in New York, judging by the accent.

"Be calm, Bernard," said the tallest of the blonde trees. "Chess is best left to the thinkers. Be happy you are a pawn and do your duty."

"Watch your mouth, Kraut."

Clearly, Rick thought, Bernard didn't like being a pawn. But what, he wondered, did that make the trees? Knights? Bishops? Or just taller pawns?

"I still don't like it." Bernard cleared his throat. "That's all I'm saying. He's a lot smarter than we're giving him credit, and that's—"

"He's important only inasmuch as he pertains to our plans. And then we don't need him any further."

"Otto?" came a new voice, and Rick assumed it was one of the two receivers.

"Yes, Mr. Killian?"

"Lay off Bernard. He's the best bean counter the Italians can recommend. If he doesn't like the plan, then he doesn't have to."

"Thank you, Mr. Kill—"

"But he still has to do what is expected of him."

There was a long moment of silence.

"Do I make myself clear, Bernard?"

More silence.

“I assure you that my hearing is perfect, but even I cannot hear your brain rattle. When I ask you a question, you will give me an answer, a verbal answer. Do I make myself clear, Bernard?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now,” said Killian, “you’re certain there will be no trouble with the will?”

“It’s iron-clad, sir. You couldn’t punch a hole in it with a German blade. Trust me.”

“Scheiße!” Otto exclaimed. “You’ve obviously never been at the mercy of a German blade.”

“It was an expression, Otto,” said Killian. “Calm down. I’m sure Bernard intended no disrespect.”

“Yeah, it was what he said, an expression, that’s all,” said Bernard, his tone clearly not backing up the sentiment.

So Bernie’s not a big fan of the Nazis either, Rick thought. It wasn’t much, but if push came to shove, and his track record proved it could—and most likely would—he could find a way to use that.

But where, he wondered, was the talk about the politics, about keeping Uncle Oskar from leaving Hitler’s master plan and becoming an American? Something didn’t add up.

Inside the warehouse a phone rang.

Rick stood up just enough to peek inside the corner of the window. Bernard was a plump, dark-haired man in an ill-fitting suit and desperately in need of a haircut and a shave. Killian, on the other hand, seemed as put-together as if he were one of the Rockefellers. Brown hair. Dark gray suit. Matching fedora. Shoes shiny enough to make out all the way from where Rick was at the window. And a pistol in front of him on the table.

Killian picked up the phone. “Yeah,” he said.

Bernard and the trees all focused on Killian.

“It’s the boss,” he said. “Yeah. What? Who?”

“What?” said the taller tree. Otto.

“Sure thing.”

Killian made a circular motion in the air with his finger then pointed to Otto and the other tree and then at the door.

The Germans nodded and turned around, pulling their pistols from the backs of their slacks.

“Damn,” Rick said, pulling the .38 from beneath his coat. “Just my luck.”

“Everything smooth on your end, boss?” Killian asked, then waited about fifteen seconds before continuing. “Sure thing. Okay. I’ll send the brothers Karamazov as soon as they check things out here.”

Rick heard steps around the corner to his right.

“Yeah, yeah, I know it’s not Karamazov. It’s a joke, okay. Right. Right. Okay. Goodbye.”

Well, well, Rick thought, that was that, nothing more to learn here, just keep moving right along, sir, thank you very much. He shot a glance to the alley. Only ten or so feet, and he had the darkness to cover him, but there were three problems. One, he’d have to be quiet so he didn’t tip off the German around the right corner. Two, the street was in the opposite direction. And three, that meant no access to cabs, and he’d be hoofing in for longer than he had planned. Time was money, sure, but in his business, time could be someone’s life too. And time was not his most plentiful resource.

He bit down on his bottom lip. No other choice. The footsteps to the right were growing louder. And now they were joined by footsteps to the left too.

Keeping a tight grip on the .38, he bolted from the window toward the alley.

And slipped on a slimy spot on the pavement.

As he fell he screwed his mouth closed so he didn’t yell out.

For all the good it did him.

Instead, before he hit, he tightened his grip on the Colt, and fired a shot down the right side of the back of the warehouse. It split the otherwise silent evening like a cannon’s boom.

But that wasn’t all.

When he hit the pavement, the impact started at his knee, then the butt of his palm, and the Colt when flying from his grip.

He wiped something thick and wet—which he was sure in the darkness was blood—from his screaming and probably shattered hand, and rolled over to reach for the lost gun. But a gunshot stopped him cold.

“Ve know you are there, Mr. Ruby.”

Then silence. Thank God the darkness as least was on his side.

“Ve have been following you and Ms. Stein all of the afternoon. It appears you haf ignored our varning from earlier today.”

Rick wanted to ask why Otto was putting on such a fake Hollywood German accent when he already knew Otto could speak fluent English. At least he assumed Otto realized he'd been here long enough to hear that much.

But he didn't. Instead, he kept his lips and gums tight and reached through the cutaway pocket in his slacks for the spare Colt holstered around his upper thigh.

You feel good, baby, he thought as his fingers caressed the pistol and pulled it free, through the hole where a pocket should have been.

Another shot cut the air, followed by a shout in German that he couldn't understand. Either Otto's companion didn't know English, or he was keeping the fact that he did close to his chest.

A beam of light found him and lit up his legs.

“Heya, fellas, I found him. He's right here.”

The light danced on his chest, and he followed it back to the window where he'd been eavesdropping. The little dark-haired guy, Bernard, stood at the window, shining a flashlight at him, giving the two trees all they needed for a kill shot.

Good thing, he thought with a sigh, the first one missed, flying a foot or so from his head and zinging off the pavement.

He was on his feet in less time than it took him to remember to start breathing again. He hated leaving the .38 behind, but guns were replaceable, even during a slow month. Rick Rubys on the other hand, were one of a kind, and he planned on keeping the one he had around and in jim-dandy shape.

So he ran. Through the alley, then around the office of the Crayton Shipping Co., then through the bar at the mouth of the dock, all the way to 3<sup>rd</sup> Street on the Southside before he realized the gunshots had faded away.

He sat down against the wall beneath a playbill advertising “Beatrice the Bountiful” doing her strip tease number at the burlesque club across the street.

He waited and caught his breath while the first three cabs passed by.

He waved down the fourth and gave the driver the address for Belles. Then he politely excused himself for a quick nap during the trip while he heart refused to slow down from the run and instead paved the way for that way-out rhythm that would be waiting for him at the club.

+ + +

Belle noticed him immediately when he walked into the club. So did Evelyn. She even missed a lyric before catching herself and returning to the song, some tune he hadn’t heard before, but she never let her eyes leave him. He could feel them even when he sat at the bar and asked Broomstick for a gin and tonic.

“You don’t need no gin and tonic,” Broomstick told him, and instead handed him a bottle of whiskey.

“You’re my best friend, Broomstick,” he said. “You know that, right?”

Then Belle walked up behind him, jerked the bottle from his hands and told him to follow her upstairs to his office. “You get this back when I get answers, Rick,” she had said.



So he followed them both, Belle and the booze, while Evelyn sang something about a “no-account drunk” and a “cheating heart.”

“Rick Ruby, dear sweet heavens above, what’s wrong with you, boy?” Belle helped him over to a chair that sat opposite Edie’s desk in the front room.

“Thanks, Belle. I love you too,” Rick said, slumping into the chair.

“Don’t you try to butter me up, boy, not when you insist on coming into my club looking like the bad end of a boxing match. What happened?”

Rick coughed. “I lost a boxing match.”

“Rick…” Belle didn’t lose her smile, but its tone changed in a way that Rick could recognize instantly. “Don’t sass me, boy.”

“With the ground. I lost. It won.” Rick grinned. “But I plan to demand a rematch next week when I wake up.”

Belle pulled Edie’s chair opposite him and sat down. She planted her hands on his knees, then locked her eyes on his.

“No more malarkey, Rick. What happened?”

“The new case. I was at the dock checking out a lead, and things turned out bad.”

“And?”

“And I fell.”

“You fell?”

“I fell hard.”

“You fell?”

“Well, there may have been guns involved too.”

Belle stood up. “Rick, baby, you worry me so.”

“Aw, thanks, Mom, but I’m a big boy now.”

“But it ain’t me you’re gonna have to be worried about. It’s Evelyn. She’s been on about that woman you left with earlier just about all night. You just better hope you’re hurting bad enough to get on her good side again when she finishes.”

“Tell her it’s just a job,” Rick said.

“Tell her yourself,” Belle said.

“Good idea. Tell me yourself, Rick.”

Evelyn stood in the doorway, and the hallway light behind her cast her in a silhouette of slender sex that tapered out into a fringed gown. She took a step inside and Rick could swear he heard drums beating out the swagger.

“I’m waiting.”

“Hey, Evelyn. You sounded great tonight. What I was able to hear.”

Another step. More drums in his head.

“I’m still waiting.”

“She’s a client.”

“You’ve said that before.”

And you’ve always taken me back, Rick thought, but he knew better than to say it. “And they were.”

“But not just clients.”

“Come on, baby. There’s no need to be—”

“I will be how I damn well want to be, Rick.”

“Have I told you lately how beautiful you look when you’re angry?”

“Oh, Lord,” Belle said.

“What?” Rick said. “It’s true.”

“Just take you lumps, Rick, so you can take your loving.” Belle turned the Evelyn. “You both know as well as I do how and where this night’s going to end.”

“I don’t know if I’m up for—”

“What if you don’t have a choice?” Evelyn said.

Rick sighed. “I got shot at tonight, baby.”

“You’ve get shot at a lot.”

“I think I broke my hand.”

“I don’t plan to make you use your hand.”

“I have a client to check on.”

“I have a client you need to check on too.”

Another step. More drums. Less Belle. She was walking toward the door, becoming less and less as Evelyn was becoming more and more.

“If you ever want to be with me again, Rick, you will be with me tonight. Show me tonight I’m more important to you than that German singer you went off with.”

“You know her?”

The door closed with a click. The room got darker without the hallway light to brighten up the joint. Good ol’ Belle, Rick thought.

“We run in the same circles, even though a fair-skinned German wouldn’t stoop to compare herself with someone of my color.” Evelyn stood in front of Rick. “There are only so many clubs here in New York, and eventually we all get around.”

“She’s a client.”

“She’s bad news.” Evelyn sat down on Rick’s knees. “I’ve got good news.”

“She’s a client.”

Evelyn wiggled her legs and the slits in the dress fell away to reveal her bare mocha knees pressing up against his thighs. “Want to hear the good news?”

Rick nodded.

“I forgive you for thinking about Gerta that way.”

“Listen...”

She leaned in, her face tilted, her lips brushing his own. “I’m listening.”

“Really, I’ve got something important—”

“I know,” she said, “and I’m right here.”

She kissed him, not like courting kisses or friendly kisses, but with something deep and soulful and needy escaping from her open mouth into his own along the curves of her tongue as she wrestled his into submission and he finally returned the passion.

“Mmm. Nice.”

“And there’s more with that came from.”

“Wow.”

Evelyn smiled. “Maybe one day we can take that trip to Paris where we might even be able to hold hands and go to a restaurant together in public.”

“That was nice.”

“Don’t change the subject, Rick.”

“Who’s changing the subject? I’m up for more of that kissing, and you’re talking about vacations.”

“Come to my place tonight. Now. With me.”

“I…”

“Where is she?”

“At Edie’s place.” At the mention of Edie’s name, Evelyn lips turned down slightly.

“Then she’s fine. As tight as she is with God, he wouldn’t let nothing happen to them at her place.”

“Don’t be mean.”

“She’s sweet on you, Rick.”

Rick smiled. “She’s a good kid.”

“You’re a bad man, Rick Ruby.” Evelyn shifted forward an inch or so on Rick’s lap. “But I just can’t stay away from bad men, I guess. You’re a weakness of mine, Rick, and you’d better pray I never find the strength to get over it.”

Evelyn all but jumped out of his lap when the phone rang.

“Damn,” Rick said.

“Don’t answer it,” Evelyn said. “Come with me.”

“Just let me get this, and then we’ll…” He picked up the phone. “Rick Ruby’s office. We can find it or shoot it. Your choice. Best rates in town.”

Then he grew silent. It was Edie. She was crying.

“I need you here, Rick. I need you. It’s…”

“What’s wrong, Edie? What’s going on, honey?”

“They had guns. I couldn’t do anything but watch. Oh God, Rick.”

“Who had guns?” Rick asked.

Even Evelyn's expression took on a worried tension at the mention of guns. She stepped forward and put her hand on Rick's shoulder.

"Some Germans."

"Are you okay?"

Edie sniffled more than spoke, but managed to mumble that she was okay.

"And Gerta?"

"They..." Edie coughed and sucked in a loud sniffle. "They kidnapped her."

"They took her?! Damn Nazi bastards!"

"But that's not all, Rick."

"What else, honey?"

"It's Oskar. He's dead."

+ + +

The death count had begun.

The bucks with badges didn't have to say it. Rick could see it in their stares. Just another Rick Ruby interference with dead bodies raining down to complicate the case.

Rick watched them going over the scene and holding back the crowds already gathering outside Edie's high-rise apartment building. Edie looked at little more than Rick's lapel, her face plastered there as she wept.

"So let's go over this again, Ms. Adams. You say two Germans broke in and—"

"No," she said, and Rick felt her face move across his chest as she shook her head. "They were waiting outside."

"I told you to keep them inside, Edie." Rick draped his arm over her shoulder, pulling her closer. Like a kid sister, he told himself, but even he knew it was a lie. In spite of the situation and the dead scientist, he couldn't help but like the way she felt against him. Crazy religious stuff and all, she was still all girl.

“Don’t scold me, Rick.”

“And why were you heading outside, Ms. Adams?”

“I told them we needed to stay in, but the woman, Gerta, insisted on going out for a paper. The old man, Oskar, he went with her to convince her to come back.”

“And you?” asked the copper.

“I was with them to keep an eye on them. You see, I promised Rick that I would, and—”

The cop cut him a glare. “Ah, yes. Mr. Ruby. We’ll get to him later. Please continue.”

“Cut her a break,” Rick said, pausing long enough to try to remember the badge’s name. But it just wasn’t there. “She’s told you the story twice already. Can’t you see the kid’s not in any shape to go through it again?”

Edie looked up slightly. “I’m not a kid, Rick.”

I know, Rick thought. Dear God, I know. But he pushed the thought away. Not now. Get a hold of yourself, Rick. Think of Gerta at the mercy of the two Krauts.

The cop only kept his gaze for a few seconds then returned to the notepad in his hand. “So, Ms. Adams, after that?”

“They stepped outside and the two Germans—”

“And how did you know they were German?”

“I... Well.. Rick said that...”

“I see. Please continue.”

“Wait a minute,” Rick interrupted. “She knew they were Germans because I had a run-in with them before and warned her. She must have recognized them from my description.”

“Sure, or had the idea planted in her head by your description. You do remember how real police work goes, don’t you, Mr. Ruby?”

“I was doing real police work when you were begging your Mama for candy from the five and dime,” Rick said, not letting go of Edie. “We’re done here.”

“We’re not done until—”

A thick, meaty hand on the cop's shoulder shut him down.

"We'll contact Ms. Adams later if we need further information, Cooper." The man attached to the meaty hand wore a suit that fit like it was made for a larger man, and his dark hair lay mostly hidden beneath a brown fedora. Jack McGinnis, the man who had once agreed to be Rick's best man before Greer's death.

Rick waited for Cooper to make himself scarce.

"Thanks, Mac," he said when Cooper was out of earshot.

"Don't mention it. Young punks think they run the force sometimes." Mac cupped his hands on Edie's shoulders. "You okay, Edie?"

"I'm okay."

"Good girl," Mac said.

"I didn't mind answering the questions," she mumbled into Rick's chest.

"I know, honey, but I didn't like the way he was badgering you."

"Thanks, Rick."

"Don't mention it. Say, Mac, can you make sure Edie gets home okay?"

Jack nodded. "I'll put a man at the door too."

"You're the best."

"What's on your mind, Rick? Where are you heading?"

"Diner. I was thinking about some of Ernie Biggs's flatcakes."

"Don't give me that. You're going back to the fish place, aren't you?"

"Read me like a book, Mac."

"That's only because you don't go any deeper than third grade, Rick."

"I need answers, and that's the only place I've got left to find 'em."

Mac grabbed Rick's shoulder. "Let me send some men with you."

Rick shook his head. "You know they'd only get in my way."

"Or you'd get in their way."

“Don’t you start that noise, too.”

“I’m serious, Rick. I’m sending some guys.”

Rick finally let go of Edie and she looked up at him first, then at Mac, and back to Rick. “Don’t let him talk you out of it, Mac.”

“Not a chance, Edie.”

“At least get her home first. I’ll wait if you’re serious about cramping my style.”

“Saving your life,” Edie said.

“Potato, potahto.”

“Please, Rick.”

“Okay, doll. I’m just going to run by the office for some more ammunition and wait for Mac to call once you’re safe at home.”

“Promise?”

“On my honor.”

“Like that means something,” Jack laughed.

“Okay. On Edie’s honor then.”

“Rick?” she asked.

“Purest thing I could think of, honey.”

She smiled. “Find Gerta.”

Rick nodded.

+ + +

He had expected to find the warehouse empty. With the kidnapping and the murder, he was sure Killian, Bernard and the two Germans would have found a new place to hide. He was wrong. Killian and Bernard sat across from each other at a table they had made from a tarp and a crate of fish.

Playing cards.

They stopped when they saw him walk in.

“Where’s Gerta?” Rick asked. Once.

His only answer was Killian pushing against the table and knocking over the chair. Bernard grabbed a pistol from the tarp and



pointed it at Rick, but Rick was already diving out of the way behind a barrel.

Okay, he thought, once Edie found out he had lied on her honor, she'd be cross, but it wasn't like she hadn't expected it. If she could count on him for anything, it was to know that she couldn't count on him. Not when a case was stuck in his head. And especially not when a dame's life was on the line.

Bernard wasted two shots, neither of which was remotely close to him. One hit the window above him, and the other popped into the pavement a few feet away.

"You'll have to do better than that, Bernard," Rick shouted, just as another shot whizzed a few inches by his right ear. He ducked again behind the barrel.

Apparently Killian had a better aim. Good to know.

"Hey, Killian. I don't know what the game is, but I don't see how killing the old man helps the Nazis at all."

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it, Ruby. All you need to worry about it what color suit do you want your friends to see you in at your funeral."

"If you knew me at all," Rick said, "You'd know that I only wear gray or blue, and my secretary usually picks 'em out for me."

Another shot. This one grazing the side of the barrel.

"Say, Killian, not bad. Think you could give Bernard lessons?"

Bernard wasted another shot in response.

"See what I mean?"

"Laugh it up, Ruby." Bernard this time. "Bet you won't laugh so hard with a hole in your skull."

Rick watched as Bernard stepped into the open. Dumb move, he thought, and he raised the Colt and fired a shot at the idiot's knee. Blood and bone splattered and shattered, and Bernard dropped his pistol and hit the floor howling and crying.

Rick wanted to make a smart-ass comment, but he kept his damn mouth shut this time. Killian was too dangerous an opponent to take chances with now that the comic relief was out of action.

About a minute crawled by without a sound, not even a shot or the shuffle of feet, it seemed.

“So tell me this, Killian. Why would Nazis need a bean counter like Bernard just to keep a scientist loyal to the cause?”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree, Ruby, but then again, I always figured you gumshoes were overrated. I blame Hammett and Latimer for stirring up the public and making your type into street legends.”

Great, Rick thought. A smart criminal. Those were never as easy as the muscle and the goons. But vanity might be a tact he could use.

“You’re too smart to be a crook. You know the bad guy always loses.”

“You read too many novels, Ruby.”

Rick examined the warehouse. Mostly crates and fish parts. A few boxes and some tool scattered around, but none close enough to be useful.

Fish parts.

It hit him like a bullet in the brain.

Where there’s smoke there’s fire, and where there’s fish guts, there’s slippery, dark goo all over the floor, the kind of stuff that would make a dangerous path for someone in a firefight that got moving and didn’t stay stuck behind barrels and crates.

Not that the plan didn’t come without risk.

Not with Killian being a decent shot and Rick having to be the one to instigate the footfalls.

He took a deep breath, held it, and ran from behind his barrel for the nearest crate.

He waited for the shot, but nothing came.

He peeked above the crate.

No sign of Killian. Nothing moving around the crate he was hiding behind.

Rick let the held breath go finally.

Then took another and ran for the next crate.

Still no shots.

So much for a moving shoot-out. Killian was smarter than he gave him credit.

“Still with me here, Killian?”

The only response came from Bernard, a grunt.

“Radio silence, huh?”

Nothing.

Damn.

Only about ten feet between him and Killian’s spot, and not the slightest indication if Killian was still there. For all he knew, Killian could be gone. Or worse, hiding in another spot and getting ready to line up a bullet with the back of Rick’s brain.

In for a penny, in for a pound, Rick thought, and left the safety of the crate. Six steps across the concrete. No shots fired. Seven more steps and he all but fell in front of Killian’s crate.

He heard it, but not from where he thought Killian was. A trigger clicked, and in the moment of the sound it roared with an echo in the empty warehouse. Rick spun toward the sound like a top.

Bernard.

The idiot was propped on his elbows holding the pistol he’d dropped when Rick shot him. The idiot smiled. Rick could almost see the miniscule movement of his finger.

The cannon-like sound reverberated in the warehouse.

He was dead to rights, and there was no time to move.

I’m sorry, Edie, he felt more than thought. I’m sorry Evelyn. I should have stayed with you tonight. And I’m sorry I couldn’t save you, Gerta.

Moments passed, and Rick realized he was still breathing.

Thank God, he thought, that Bernard was a horrible shot.

Bernard targeted him again.

This time Rick was ready.

He twitched his trigger finger on the Colt and blasted Bernard in the face, bringing the death count to two for the case. The cops would have a field day with that. And he’d have to justify lethal

force to Mac. But he was alive. And being alive meant he wouldn't have to honor any of those apologies. Yet.

After Bernard lay dead, Rick waited as the warehouse grew quiet again.

Killian either missed his opportunity to get the drop on him or was long gone.

Rick breathed. Once. Twice. A third gasping breath.

Then he settled into the regular rhythm of in and out again.

"Damn," he said. "Damn, damn, damn."

+ + +

"Rick, honey, you need to relax." Belle stood at the bar dealing a game of solitaire. "Broomstick," she said to the tall, skeletal Negro behind the bar. "Get Rick a shot of gin. No. Make it two shots."

"Make it three," Rick said. "It's been a hell of a night."

Evelyn slinked onto the stool beside him. "And one for me too, Bruce."

"It's okay," the tall shadow of a man said. "I like the nickname."

"It's demeaning," she said.

"Does it bother you, Bruce?" Belle asked.

"Nope, ma'am. I like it. It fits me."

"Then it's not demeaning." Belle smiled at Evelyn. "Fight your own battles, baby." She cut her eyes at Rick. "Or you'll lose out."

"Why do I suddenly feel like I'm some kind of prize?" Rick said after downing the first shot of gin. He set the glass on the bar with a loud clink.

"You may be plenty of things, Rick, but one thing you ain't is a prize." Belle smiled.

"Don't I know it, Belle."

"I don't know about that, Rick," Evelyn said, brushing her knee against his thigh.

"Give the boy some room, baby," Belle said. "He killed a man tonight and that never goes down easy."

Rick downed the second shot and placed the second glass with a second clink.

“Got another one of those, Broomstick?”

The bartender nodded and filled both glasses again.

“Thanks.”

“Rick?” Evelyn said, no longer touching him.

“Yes, honey?”

“I know I was kinda hard on you earlier, but seriously, are you okay? It scares the hell outta me.”

“Didn’t do a lot for my nerves either, honey.”

“No sign of that other guy?”

Rick shook his head. “I checked. I don’t know how he cleaned out without me knowing it, but sure enough, he was long gone.”

Rick sighed. “Along with my last clue.”

“You could always go back to the hotel and make a scene.”

“Sure, marching in and knocking around Nazis would be as much fun as anything else I could think of, but my hands are tied. I can’t prove they’re involved.”

“Well, tell Mac what you’ve seen. He’ll believe you. At least he could search for those two tall Germans.”

“It’s political, baby. Mac’s hands are tied too. Unless I have some physical proof...”

“So go back to the warehouse and get photos. Take Mac with you. That’ll be proof.”

“That warehouse is clean now. They won’t be back there.”

“Oh.”

“It’s okay. I know you’re trying to help.”

“You don’t see Rick slipping on sequins and singing, do you, Evelyn?”

Evelyn cut her eyes toward Belle. “What?”

“Then don’t try on his suit and his job either.”

“It’s okay, Belle. It helps me think.”

“It’s your call, Rick,” said Belle.

“Thanks, Rick,” said Evelyn.

The phone under the bar clanged, and Rick jumped. Evelyn leaned over quickly and rested one hand on his shoulder and one on his chest. “It’s okay, baby. It’s just the telephone.”

Broomstick reached under the bar and came back up with the split cup handset of the 202. A few years old, but it still worked just fine. “Belle’s,” he said. “But we closed now.”

Rick cocked his head toward Evelyn. “Sorry, honey. I’m a little jumpy.”

“Coulda fooled me, baby.” She grinned.

Rick smiled.

“Well, you ain’t gotta be like that. I’m just telling you that—” Broomstick stopped, his eyes rounding out like huge saucers on his face. “Yes, sir. He’s right here.”

Everyone was staring at Broomstick now.

He handed the handset toward Nick. “He said he wants to talk to you. It’s about that singer, the German woman.”

+ + +

Evelyn paced the floor like a jungle cat stalking a meal.

“You should go home,” Rick said. “This is no place for —”

“If you say ‘a woman,’ Rick, I’m gonna box your ears,” Belle intoned from her seat at the bar.

“Yes, ma’am.” Rick motioned for Broomstick to pour him another shot of whiskey. “But I was going to say ‘you.’ I don’t think it’s safe for Evelyn here.”

Evelyn stopped pacing and turned to glare at him. “I’m staying.” She locked her hands in place on her wide, curvy hips. “And that’s that.”

Belle laughed.

“It’s dangerous.”

“What’s dangerous,” Evelyn said, “is you putting down that whiskey like the cops are coming to take it away forever. If you’re too drunk to keep your head screwed on straight...”

“I do my best thinking when I’m drunk, baby.”

“You don’t do your best *anything* when you’re drunk, Rick.”

“So what’s the plan?” Broomstick asked as opened a fresh bottle of whiskey and slid it across the bar to rest beside Rick’s two glasses.

Rick took the bottle, tilted it and watched the dark brew drain out until both shots were full again. “There is no plan,” Rick said, putting the bottle down. “Something about this just isn’t right. They have no reason to come to me. I’m all out of cards. No aces, no kings, not even a damn three in my hand.” Rick took a sip. “It smells funny.”

“So why agree to the meet up?” Evelyn asked.

“Because I *don’t* have anything, that’s why.”

“It’s a set-up,” Broomstick said.

Rick nodded. “Of course it’s a set up. But I don’t have a choice.” He took another sip of the whiskey. “You still got my Sweet Angel behind the bar?”

Broomstick reached beneath the bar, but Rick stopped him. “Don’t get her out. Just in case they’re watching. Sweet Angel may be the only surprise I have left in this game.”

Broomstick grinned.

The door opened.

Everyone shut up and stared at the entrance.

The shortest of the two German Rick had seen earlier stood highlighted by the midnight glow of lights from down the avenue. He wore dark trousers and a brown sweater and matching cap. A gun-shaped bulge at his side under the bottom of the sweater at the waist of his trousers told Rick he wasn’t fooling around. He stepped inside but said nothing. Instead he examined the room, his eyes lingering on doors and the edges of chairs and tables, anywhere someone might be hiding for an ambush.

“Hello,” Rick said. “Welcome to Belle’s.” He tapped out a cigarette and lit it. Belle glared at him. He put it out.

The German still refused to speak. Instead he walked further inside and went directly to the door opposite the bar, opened it and disappeared into the hallway for a few moments. Rick waited, and soon he returned, shutting and locking the door behind him. Then he did the same at the door beside the bar, leading to the storeroom. After that, the giant Nazi started to kick up rugs and check under them for panels in the floor.

“If you want to meet, that’s fine, but if you just want to come in and trash my joint, I’d really rather you not.”

The German stopped, glared at Belle, then looked away again as if she weren’t worth his time or effort.

“There’s a panel to the cellar,” she said, but it’s in the hallway, out there where you locked it. The last thing I need is people accidentally falling through my floor in here while they’re dancing.”

The man ignored her and kept searching. Rick watched him work and downed the remainder of the first shot glass, followed quickly by the contents of the second glass.

After nearly two minutes more of silent searching, the German left the bar and let the doors clink shut behind him.

Rick looked at Belle. Belle looked back at him. Evelyn stopped pacing and stood behind Rick, her head at his right shoulder and arm around his left.

“Is it just me, or does anybody else think that was strange?” she asked.

“Just doing his work, baby.”

“Just messing up my floor is more like it,” Belle said.

Rick forced a smile.

“I’d feel a lot better if you weren’t here, honey,” Rick whispered to Evelyn.

“If I left now, after tall, white and blonde just did all that work, I’m sure it wouldn’t be appreciated.”

“I suppose.” Rick felt her hand tighter on his shoulder. “But I can’t help feeling like it’s a bad idea, you being here.”



She rose up on her tip-toes and whispered directly into his ear, her breath raising the tiny hairs on his ear. “I’ve been taking care of myself long before I met you, Rick Ruby. Don’t you worry none. I can handle myself in all kinds of trouble.” She took a seat at the bar beside him.

The doors opened again and the German re-entered the club. Only he wasn’t alone this time. Behind him was Killian, in a navy blue double-breasted suit with the gray Fedora from the warehouse. The next to enter was another German, the tallest of the two trees, in a brown suit. He held tightly onto Gerta’s arm and pushed her inside over the threshold as much as guided her. She clutched her black purse like a vise.

“Gerta?” Rick asked when he saw her.

“I’m okay, Rick. They don’t want to ki—”

The German spun her around to face him then slapped her hard on the jaw. “No talking. The next one could ruin your singing voice, so I’d advise you to remember the rules.”

“Take it easy, Otto,” Rick said, enjoying the look of surprise that lit up the Nazi’s face. “I’m a good listener. I know more than you think,” Rick added. Maybe I can bluff a straight even without cards, he thought.

Otto took Gerta to a table in the middle of the room, and pushed her into a chair. Then he sat down beside her without easing his grip on her arm. Killian tipped his hat at Rick, then took a seat beside Otto. The tallest German stood by the door, his hand at his side, near the pistol at his waist.

“I admit I’m curious why you’d call, Otto. And I’m even more curious where you’re boss is, the one who called and turned you and Silent Treatment over there loose on me at the warehouse.”

Otto didn’t answer.

“Don’t like it,” Killian said. “Too many people here.”

“Too many people Mr. Ruby cares about,” Otto said. “It will keep him...” He turned and caught Rick’s eyes, then smiled as he said, “compliant.”

Rick felt the lump in his throat and took a deep breath to swallow it.

“I want music,” Otto said, turning to Belle. “Tell the Negro harlot I want her to sing.”

Evelyn would have gotten up off her stool and made the situation worse, no doubt, if Rick hadn't gripped her thigh hard enough to make her wince. She looked at him and he shook his head. “Just play along.”

“I'm not a harlot, and I will not have anyone—”

“Save it for the right time, honey.” Rick loosened his grip. “Please.”

“The band's gone home,” Evelyn said.

“The skinny one at the bar, do you play?” Otto asked. “Don't all of your kind play jazz?”

Rick's hand latched onto Evelyn's leg again.

“No, sir,” Broomstick said. “I guess I'm part German.”

The German at the door pulled his pistol and trained it on Broomstick.

“Mr. Ruby?”

“Yeah, Otto?”

“Tell your Negro to apologize before my brother shoots him.”

“Broomstick?” Rick said, then added. “But he's not my anything other than my bartender. Pours a hell of a Scotch too. Would you like one?”

“Sorry, sir,” Broomstick said, his grin threatening to get him shot in the face anyway.

“Can't sing without music,” Evelyn said smugly.

“Oh hell,” Killian said, pushing his chair away from the table and standing. “Do you know ‘The Varsity Drag’?”

Evelyn nodded.

“It's a happy song, I trust,” Otto said. “I never liked the blues. No appropriate for...” He stroked his barren chin. “...Germans.”

“I'll just bet,” Evelyn said.

“Cool it, honey. Don't pull the trigger yourself.”

“I’m not doing this for you, Otto,” she said as she rose from the stool and followed Killian to the stage. The gangster sat at the piano, cracked his knuckles and began to play.

“Damn,” Rick said. “He’s good. Didn’t expect that.”

Killian lit up. “Thank ya, Rick. There’s more to life than shooting and stealing, sometimes. Even a man like me needs a hobby.”

Evelyn picked up the rhythm and bit into it with her usual gusto. “We’ve always thought knowledge is naught, we should be taught to dance,” she sang. In spite of herself, it looked to Rick, she let the music seep into her and with Killian banging away on the piano, who would just as soon shoot her in the back as well as back her up as a pianist, she started to sway and all but make love to the melody. For nearly a minute and a half, no one said a word. They just watched as Evelyn commanded their attention.

That’s my girl, Rick thought, and he knew he had to make sure she survived the night. For his sake as much as any other reason.

It was Otto who broke the silence. “Very nice,” was all he said.

“A round of the good stuff, Broomstick,” Belle said.

Otto shook his head. “A beer. German beer. And one for my brother.”

The man at the door shook his head.

“And for you, Ms. Gerta?” Belle asked.

“Give her nothing.”

“You’re the man with the gun, honey,” Belle said.

“Have Mr. Ruby bring it to me. You and the other…” He clearly was fighting his natural choice of words. “...person stay at the bar.”

Rick took a deep breath and grabbed the drink, winked at Belle, whispered “Trust me,” and carried the beer and his own fresh shot of liquor to the table where Otto and Gerta sat.

“Hello, doll,” he said as he sat opposite the German-born singer. A little worse for wear, but her legs and make-up were still doing their job, as far as he was concerned. But those eyes of hers, they had lost their dark fire. She hadn’t had it easy.

“How are you holding up?”

She looked at Otto, waiting for his permission to speak, Rick guessed. Otto nodded.

“I’m okay, Rick, but my uncle...” She fell to the table, sobbing.

“Plenty of time for the waterworks later, honey. Let’s just see what Otto wants first.” Rick popped his neck and gave Otto his full attention. “So, as I see it, you want to buy my silence about everything I saw at the warehouse in exchange for Ms. Stein’s safety.”

Otto smirked.

“Or I could be wrong,” Rick said, smiling. “It’s rare, but it’s been known to happen occasionally.”

“A joker until the end, I see.”

“A man can die with a smile or a grimace,” Rick said.

Gerta sobbed quietly opposite him.

The music stopped, then Killian started to play something equally bouncy.

Evelyn began to croon again. “I’ve got the world on a string, sitting on a rainbow...” As she sang she stepped from the stage and began her act in earnest, just like it the club was full of drunks and other customers. She walked toward them with her hips swinging like jungle drums, and walked past them to continue slink around the club from empty table to empty table.

Even the German at the door started to watch her, Rick noticed.

I’ll be damned, he thought. He looked at the bar. Broomstick had one hand on the bar and the other beneath it, presumably on Sweet Angel. Belle had her eyes closed, praying to the Good Lord that Evelyn knew what she was doing, he thought.

“Otto?” Rick asked.

“What?”

Rick scanned the room. The tree at the door had his eyes on Evelyn’s jungle drums as they traced sex among the tables.

“I’d be a silly so-and-so if I should ever let you go,” she sang, cocking her elegant profile over her shoulder to bat her eyes at the tree, and Rick knew it was now or never.

He stomped Gerta's foot under the table, and when she cried out and jerked up, Otto turned to see what happened. When he did, Rick flipped the table against Otto, pushing Gerta away to his side.

The tree at the door pointed his pistol at Rick, but it was too late. Broomstick had both barrels of Sweet Angel locked onto him. One blow from the hand-cannon sent the man down in a crumbled lump of Aryan flesh.

The music stopped and Killian reached at his back for his own firearm, but Rick swung wide with one of his .38s and Killian thought better of the idea and dropped his arms at his side. Otto lay under the table, with Rick's weight pushing it down on him and locking his arms crossed on his chest, unable to draw his own weapon.

"Looks like the tables have turned, Nazi," Rick said

Otto grunted beneath the weight of both Rick and the table.

"Stay still, because I don't have a single reason not to blow a hole in your face. Understand me?"

"I think you have a very good reason not to do that, Rick."

He jerked to the side where Gerta's voice pulled him. She stood with her arm locked around Evelyn's neck. His missing .38 gripped in her hand and pointing at Evelyn's temple. Her purse lay discarded in the floor.

"Oh hell."

"Yes." Gerta grinned and called out to Killian. "Come out from behind the piano, you coward."

He did.

"Take Rick's gun."

Rick handed his new .38 to Killian.

"And I wouldn't reload the shotgun, Mr. Broomstick," Gerta said. "At least not if you like seeing this whore in one piece."

"Put it down, Bruce," Rick said. "It's not worth Evelyn's life."

"What the hell is going on here?" Belle yelled. "We were trying to save your life, girl."

Gerta grinned. “And while I do appreciate it the effort, I really do, it wouldn’t help me get what I’m looking for.”

“She was never in any danger,” Rick said. “Damn it. How could I have missed it? It was a set-up from the beginning.”

“Distracting you is easy as pie, my dear. A flash of leg. A kiss. A little jealousy to stir up the other women in your life and keep you unfocused.”

“Rick...” Evelyn choked out the words through the grip Gerta had on her thin neck.

“Ssshh, girl. I’m talking.” Gerta turned to Rick, who was helping Otto to his feet. “You see, Rick, the best lies are based on truth. My uncle really was truly looking to leave the Nazis and come to the United States. But because of his importance to the Reich, Uncle Oskar was worth a great deal of money, money that would come to his only surviving heirs when he died.”

Rick laughed. “And if he left Germany’s favor, he’d have forfeited all the dough.”

“So you see why we couldn’t let that happen.”

Gerta pushed Evelyn to Otto. “Watch her, but not like Hans did.”

“Her kind does not interest me, Gerta.”

“I like to think that I—” Evelyn started, but stopped when Otto’s arm cut off her breath.

“I told you to hush, whore,” Gerta said. “Now, where were we, Rick?” Gerta motioned for him to sit in the chair even though the table was no longer there.

“It all makes sense. You needed a patsy. That’s the only reason your ‘kidnappers’ would have had to contact me out of the blue.”

Gerta smiled. “You are a very handsome man, Rick Ruby, but you’re not particularly smart.” She knelt beside him and let her words ride her breath into his ear. He shuddered. “If only you hadn’t left me with your secretary, you could have gotten something out of the arrangement too.” She closed the already tiny gap between her lips and his ear. “We both could have.”

“I guess I’ll have to live with the disappointment.”

She stood up. “Fortunately for you, darling. You won’t have to live with the disappointment long.” As she walked away, she traced a line from his waist down the top of this thigh all the way to his kneecap.

“Let’s move this show along, can we?” Killian chimed in. “I’d like to be able to spend my share before I’m too old to enjoy it.”

“Very well, Mr. Killian. Please hand me Rick’s gun.”

He did.

“The matching set,” she said. “It’s such a shame.”

“What’s that, doll?” Rick asked.

She raised the .38. “That Mr. Killian was tragically killed in the firefight.”

Rick saw the flush rise in Killian’s face when he realized he’d been played for a patsy too. And that he had just given his own murderer the weapon she would use to kill him.

He tried to turn toward the door, but it was too late. One .38 caliber bullet entered above his eye and exited the other side of his head, just behind his ear. Blood and brains exited with the bullet, and Killian’s soulless corpse fell to the ground on buckled knees.

“You were very fortunate to manage to kill one of your assailants, darling.” Gerta traced Rick’s jawline with the barrel of the pistol.

“Just let them go. You can kill me, but they’ve got nothing to do with it.”

“Don’t be stupid, Rick. Witnesses.”

“At least make it painless. For me. Please.”

Gerta scrunched up her eyes in thought. “Perhaps,” she said. “Except for your whore.”

Rick saw the rage in Evelyn’s eyes even though her voice was cut short by Otto’s arm.

“I don’t like the way she looked at me earlier. She genuinely loves you, darling, but she’s also smart enough to know she can’t have you to herself.”

“Just make it painless, please.”

“Not for her.”

“Please.”

“She has lived her whole life in pain, Rick. Why should that change now?”

Rick locked his eyes onto Evelyn’s. He was so focused that it took another gunshot to draw him away.

“Bruce!”

It was Belle. Broomstick was nowhere to be seen.

“She killed Bruce! The—”

I’d choose your next words carefully, Belle,” Gerta said. “But first...” She raised the .38. “Move the girl, Otto, unless you want to share her bullet.”

“Yes, Gerta.”

“Good boy.”

Evelyn squinched her eyes tightly. Rick kept his on Gerta, looking for the extra seconds he needed to get out of the damn chair and stop her from killing the woman he... loved? Did he love anyone but himself? Could he? Regardless, she deserved better than this. Better than him, for damn sure.

His shoes pushed against the floor as he watched Gerta’s finger pull the trigger of his own damn gun. The boom thundered in his ears, followed by Belle’s scream. He collapses, his knees suddenly as weak as milk.

The room fell quiet.

“What?” came the surprising sound of Evelyn’s voice.

Rick lurched up, but the .38 spun around in Gerta’s hand and stopped at his forehead.

“Sit down, darling. The show is still going.”

Rick took in the sight of Evelyn standing, her eyes wide and dark, her skin as pale as he’d ever seen it. But alive. Somehow wonderfully alive.

“Do you think I wasn’t going to save this whore for last, Rick? I want you to see everyone else go first. Then her. Then and only then will it be your turn, darling.”



Rick examined the room. A dead lump of brown tweed lay beside the spot where Evelyn was riveted to the floor. Otto.

“Why share the wealth?” Rick asked with more inflection that he had intended.

Gerta nodded. “Family is overrated.”

Rick had seen enough. There was only Gerta and the gun left. It was the best opportunity he was going to get, and he knew it. He dove from the chair for the murderous singer, but she moved like lightning and put two shots through his shin, and he screeched and hit the floor, blood thickening the dark material of his trousers.

“I’m sorry, Evelyn,” he said.

“Tell Broomstick hello,” Gerta said and pointed the pistol at Belle. The older woman didn’t cry or beg and even change her expression. All she did was take one step closer.

“Damn it,” Rick grunted, trying to put weight on his knee.

“Ugh.”

A weak sound. Behind the bar. Broomstick. In pain, but still alive. Just how alive, Rick had no idea. Belle’s face relaxed.

“What?” Gerta scowled. “Still alive?”

Rick grabbed the chair beside him and pressed his weight against it to pull himself to his knees.

Gerta walked to the bar.

“Hello, Broomstick,” Belle said.

Gerta swung the pistol, catching Belle in the jaw, and the older woman went down. “Just wait. Your turn is coming.”

Rick looked at Evelyn. The color was returning to her face. Her breathing was deepening, but she was still in shock.

“Broomstick!”

“Rick?”

Rick saw the twin barrels of Sweet Angel peek over the top of the bar and stop Gerta cold.

Rick stood up, grimacing, but doing his best to ignore the hell that was burning in his leg.

“Shoot her!” Belle yelled.

Rick grabbed the chair that had helped him up.  
Sweet Angel's trigger clicked.  
Gerta's breathing locked up.  
But only for a moment.  
The barrel was empty. Sweet Angel wasn't ready to sing.  
Gerta's own finger twitched on the .38.  
Rick's breathing stopped.  
But the .38 said nothing either.  
"Gerta," Rick said weakly.  
She turned.

"You should have put the bullets in my head," he said and swung the chair like a caveman's club.

The legs connected with her face and dug tracks of dirt and blood across her pale skin. She stood for a mere moment—just long enough for him to see the dark eyes roll go dim and roll back—before she flew back and crashed into the bar.

Rick swung what was left of the chair and hit her on the other side of her face. This time she fell away from the bar and crumpled into the floor beside Belle.

Rick raised the remaining leg for another strike, but two mocha hands slithered over his shoulders and rested on his chest. Warmth pushed against his back. He felt his breathing return.

"It's over, baby."

The curve of a familiar cheek rested against his shoulder.

"She's out cold."

"Evelyn," he said. Not asked. "Is Broomstick..."

Belle answered. "He's in better shape than you, Rick. The bullet just grazed his arm."

"Lucky me," Rick said.

"Baby," Evelyn said, her hands leaving his chest and her warmth slinking around his side until she rested under his arm and supported his weight. "Let go. I've got you."

And he did. His knee buckled beneath him and he dropped. Evelyn caught him but the effort it took her was evident on the lines of her face.

“Call the cops,” he said.

“Belle’s already doin’ it.”

His eyes felt black. Like the pain in his leg. “It’s bad, ain’t it?”

“You gonna need new suit pants, that’s for sure.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You rest now, baby.”

And he did.

+ + +

“Hey, baby.”

Rick felt the kiss push his lips apart but didn’t see it. He refused to open his eyes.

“How’s the leg?”

“Hurts like hell.”

“I bet.”

Another kiss.

Eyes still closed.

“What day is it?”

“Sunday. Wanna sleep in?”

“Well, except for maybe the sleeping.”

“You’re a bad man, Rick Ruby.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s a good thing you ain’t strong enough yet to get over me.”

“You’re cute when you’re right, baby.”

He felt a leg slip between his own. Bare. Not a trace of silk anywhere.

“Evelyn?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Where’s your nightgown?”

“On the dresser.”

“And where’s your leg?”

“You know damn well where my leg is.”

“Thought so.”

Another kiss. This one leaving his lips parted just slightly.

“You gonna open your eyes this morning?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“What time is it?”

Evelyn moved, and he felt her weight shift on top of him.

“Seven a.m.”

“In that case, no.” He grinned. “It’s too damn early to open my eyes.”

“You’re loss, baby.”

He felt Evelyn push her chest against his own. He opened his eyes.

Her face came into focus above his. Her lips gently caressing the tip of his nose. Her eyes smiling at his bleary eyes. Her hair brushed back straight and long so that it cascaded from the side of her face onto his face.

“Be careful.”

“Ain’t I always?”

“No.”

She smiled. “I thought you liked dangerous women, Rick Ruby.”

“Evelyn?” he asked. “Is this…”

Judging from her eyes, she didn’t like the serious tone in his question.

Her knee shifted up. Her toes tickled his good knee. He shut up.

“How ‘bout another one of those kisses?” he asked. “I like those.”

She smiled. “I’m glad.”

“You’re one hell of a nurse.”

“I’m an awful nurse.” She pressed her lips against his.  
“Would a good nurse do this?” she asked after the kiss.

“Not many of them.”

She pushed up and smacked his chest. “Rick Ruby!”

“C’ mere.” He wrapped his hands around her shoulders and pulled her down again.

“Mmm,” she mumbled.

The phone rang.

She broke the kiss.

“Let it ring,” he said.

“It might be news about Bruce.”

“It’ll keep.”

She smiled, then rose from the bed and got the phone.

“Hello,” she said. Then, “Yeah, he’s here. Hold on.”

She pulled the phone as far as it would reach. Rick met her at the edge of the bed. “Who calls this time of morning?”

Evelyn scowled. “Your secretary.”

“Oh. I’ll make it quick.” He spoke to the receiver. “It’s Rick, honey.”

“Good morning, Rick,” Edie said. “And you will not make this quick. You’ll do no such thing.”

“What’s the noise, honey?”

“I was just calling to tell you that Carla’s back in town. Remember her? Remember her daddy who hates your guts?”

“Oh.”

“Well, she read about your incident in the paper and came all the way back here from Washington to, and I quote, ‘nurse you back to health.’”

“Oh.”

“She’s meeting you at your place after lunch.”

“Good, that gives me—”

“That gives you no time at all. I need you to be ready and waiting for me with your crutches in hand in twenty minutes.”

“I don’t get it, baby.”

“Oh, no, Rick. You will not get out of your promise that easily this time, hurt leg or not.”

“Oh damn.”

“Language, Rick. We’re going to God’s house.”

“The mission. I forgot.”

“That’s why I reminded you.”

“Good ol’ Edie.”

He was sure he could hear her smile through the phone.

“And Rick?”

“Yeah, Edie?”

“I forgive you.”

“For forgetting?”

“Not only that.”

“What’s she saying?” Evelyn asked, her arms slinking around his waist.

“Yeah, okay, whatever. I’ll be ready.” Rick tossed the receiver toward the cradle and missed. It hit the floor with a clank.

“Well?”

“What are you doing later tonight, honey?”

“Rick.”

“Sorry, honey. I’ve got to get ready for church.” Rick stood up, felt the pain in his knee, and reached for his crutches. “Damn.”

Evelyn watched without smiling.

“You’re a bad man, Rick Ruby, an awful bad man.”

“I know, baby. I know. But even I’m not bad enough to break a date with God.”

Rick knew he’d be okay when he saw the corners of Evelyn’s mouth turn up. He returned the smile.

“I’ve got a few minutes to spare though,” he said.

“Oh, no,” Evelyn said. “I’m going with you.” She smiled and went into the bathroom.

Rick let go of the crutch and fell back onto her bed.

“Oh boy. I should’ve tried harder to get killed.”

“Like I’d let you get off that easy.”

**Previews  
of other  
Rick Ruby  
stories**

## **From "Wounds"** **by Andrew Salmon**

The grey pall of early twilight muffled the city's raging at the gradual dying of the light. Thick pewter clouds spanned the horizon, giving the sky the appearance of an inverted bed of coals as they were touched, here and there, with the last rays of the setting



December sun between the New York skyscrapers. Such skies always reminded Rick Ruby of his father and the cancerous death dreams die.

His old man had told him once, while on leave before shipping out forever twenty years ago, that overcast skies were a reminder to us down here on earth that sometimes evil is in the air, brewing hate in a cauldron as broad as the human heart, and how easy it was to forget that when the sun was shining and the sky was so blue you felt moved to tears.

However the reasons for Ruby's mood ran deeper than that. The Christmas season always brought him back to how his father had spent his last Christmas Eve: in a stinking trench in France. That evening, December 24th, 1917, the enemy overran the position and one son of a bitch had buried a bayonet in his father's chest before the attack was beaten back. His father's platoon was on the fringe of the battle and was cut off. So his father had lain there, leaking life through a pierced lung while carols were sung and the two armies crossed no man's land to show family photos, share wine and easy talk until dawn when stretcher bearers finally reached the muddy hole and carted his father off to die at the aid station.

Christmas was a time of hate for Rick Ruby. Hate for the enemy bastard who had murdered his father and hate for cruel fate



that had put his dad in that position in the first place. It was irrational, he knew, but years growing up in a foster home, without a real family, skewed things a certain way and Ruby's hate was the only thing that was truly his.

Three double whiskies glowed like hot coals in Ruby's gut, stoking his ire as he strode along between the knee-high snowdrifts frosting the streets. He missed the light at the intersection and passed the seconds thinking of the old man, heavy skies and the isolation of the deserted street corner.

The distant tinkle of broken glass made him turn his gaze slightly to an alley across the street. On the third floor fire escape between two blocky tenements rubbing shoulders, he saw fractions of shadowed figures engaged in what appeared to be a tug of war. One side worked from inside an open window, obscured by billowing curtains and the closeness of the neighboring building, the other fought for purchase on the slick, grilled metal floor of the fire escape landing. The light changed, but Ruby stood transfixed. The guy on the landing—it was a guy he could see now, although the alley was draped in shadow—was losing the battle and was being hauled through the window.

*This story continued in the full version of the book.*

## **From "The Case of the Wounded Brother" by Bobby Nash**

Richard Ruby was having one of those days.

After the hassles he'd already faced that afternoon, and they had been numerous, the only thing he had wanted from his evening was to be left alone to drink until he couldn't see straight. And he



really wanted to do so in peace. He was in no mood to be sociable, not even to the regulars whom he saw nightly. He had decided to start slow and was on his third beer since he had bellied up to his usual spot at the bar. The brew was cold and stung the fresh split in his lip, and he winced every time the bottle touched it. One more and he would switch to the hard stuff.

After a few quick "Hey! How are you?" and hurried excuses about being late and in a hurry, he made a beeline for his usual spot at the bar where he had shared a few words with the bartender, his friend, Bruce Strickland, a rail thin man that everyone called Broom Stick. Before Rick, the abbreviated name by which his friends called him, had even taken his seat, Broom Stick dropped the first bottle of beer on the polished oak at the far end of the bar where he always perched. A student of human nature, he noted Rick's mood right off and went ahead and dropped a second open bottle in front of him before he asked for it. Rick assumed his friend could easily read his mood and reacted accordingly. Broom Stick was the manager, bartender, stock boy, handyman, and all-around jack-of-all-trades at Belle's, which would have been Rick's regular haunt even if he weren't on the payroll. Although Belle's was a jazz club, calling it just a jazz club seemed a disservice not only to the grand old

building that the place called its home, but also to the club's owner, May Belle Williams, another friend of his.

The office that housed his private investigation business was just upstairs, but it wasn't all that unusual for Rick to conduct business while sidled up to the bar as the sweet jazz music serenaded him. The laid back atmosphere of the club had also eased a client through bad news on more than one occasion. After downing his first two beers quickly, the P. I. nursed his third while Evelyn Johnson belted out a throaty jazz standard on the stage. As usual, when Evelyn sang, he got lost in the sound of her angelic voice and the world around him vanished in a smoky haze. However, it was when she was offstage that he got lost in the rest of her. Rick could easily drown in Evelyn's deep brown eyes as he caressed her long, slender legs that felt like satin to the touch. Rick would buy her a drink once her set was finished, if he was still sober enough.

Rick liked to sit at the far end of the bar. He told everyone it was his favorite seat, but the truth of the matter was that it was the best seat in the house because from that perch he could easily see the entirety of Belle's main room. In his line of work you weren't considered successful unless you made yourself an enemy or twelve.

*This story continued in the full version of the book.*

## **From "Tulsa Blackie's Last Dive" by William Patrick Maynard**

Jasmine... he could smell Jasmine in the air as he looked up at the stars glittering in the night sky. The toughest part about acting for the cameras was when there was no dialogue or action...like now. He could get his tongue around the two-bit dialogue J. C. wrote and he could handle himself well enough with his fists, jump on a horse, ride and take a tumble like the best of them, but standing still or walking took concentration. At times like this he had to imagine the smell of Jasmine and let it carry him through the scene. He would glide like the wind.



He was gliding now as he undid the tassel of his monogrammed terrycloth bathrobe. His shoulders slumped as he let the robe slip effortlessly down his back and crumple at his feet. He stood there buck naked smelling that Jasmine. The stars were bright tonight, but not as bright as the heat from the arc lamps. He could feel them sizzling down on his spine. He was a big man, muscular with great dense limbs and a barrel chest. His width made him look far taller than his 5 feet, 9 inches.

Best ass in Hollywood, wasn't that what they called him? There might have been a joke there, but he didn't care so long as the money was green and plentiful. It didn't matter how corny the scripts were or that he was stuck at a rundown studio instead of with one of the majors. He had been with Fox for awhile, it was no big thing. Of course, he was only doubling for that song and dance feller, but still at least now he was a star even if it was in a little pond.

Tulsa Blackie, hero of every boy between the ages of three and nine. Once they got to the double digits, they yearned to see something more sophisticated than Tulsa Blackie riding ol' Buck, but he didn't give a damn what anybody thought of him. He was just like Ma. Ma didn't care one whit what folks thought of her when she left his Pappy and all that oil money to come to Hollywood. Things didn't work out like she planned, but she got by. He was just like Ma.

He stumbled on his feet a bit. That Jasmine was intoxicating tonight! Good thing there weren't any cameras about or that damn fool director would be yelling cut and cussing at him for ruining the take. Of course there weren't any picture theaters that would show a picture with Tulsa Blackie prancing around naked as a baby like he was tonight. Back at the studio, the Old Man might run that sort of picture during his gin parties, but no respectable theaters would show them.

*This story continued in the full version of the book.*

# OFFICIAL PRESS RELEASE

Airship 27 Productions dons its tough-guy mantle, as it premieres its newest pulp star in *The Ruby Files*.

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Created by pulp masters, Bobby Nash & Sean Taylor, Rick Ruby echoes the tales of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe while offering up his own brand of two-fisted action. Joined by fellow pulp smiths Andrew Salmon & William Patrick Maynard, these modern scribes of purple prose present a quartet of tales to delight any true lover of private eye fiction. This instant classic features a gorgeous Mark Wheatley cover and eight evocative black and white illustrations by Rob Moran.

This is a book that harkens back to the classic black and white Warner Brothers gangster movies that featured James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart and Edward G. Robinson to name a few. The atmosphere is gritty with a no-nonsense hero pulp fans are going to applaud from the first story to the last. And when that last tale comes to a close, you can bet we haven't seen the last of Rick Ruby, Private Eye.

To purchase a copy of *The Ruby Files*, please visit [www.airship27hangar.com](http://www.airship27hangar.com) for a digital version. For printed versions visit [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or [www.indyplanet.com](http://www.indyplanet.com).

For more information about *The Ruby Files*, visit the official Rick Ruby website at [rickruby.blogspot.com](http://rickruby.blogspot.com).

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