

DARE THE DEVIL

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Bugsy beat me to the punch. Literally. I walked to my car after work the next day, a block away on Georgia Street near the trolley-car barns. I'd found a space there with no parking meters.

As I approached, two punks were standing by my car, beefy guys, Mob guys if I'd ever seen any. One of them had scar tissue in his right eyebrow, a sure sign of an ex-boxer. The other wore a watch cap and had gold chains around his neck. Both had blacksmith arms. My gut quivered at the sight of them. No one else was around.

"Hi fellas," I said. "Can I help you?"

The ex-boxer type launched a bolo punch at my midsection. I dodged it and drove a left to his chin, my own boxing days coming back to me. Followed with a right cross to his gut. I'd drawn first blood, but I knew I was overmatched.

From the side the other guy slammed me with a kidney punch that sent an electric shock spinning up my spine. Still, I twisted and hammered a couple of body blows at the first guy. But the kidney puncher grabbed me from behind and locked up my arms. I squirmed and kicked but took punch after punch to chest and stomach. Then a stinging blow to my cheek. A galaxy of stars exploded in my eyes.

"Not the face, not the face," Watch Cap shouted. "Don't mark him up." Now came a rain of blows to my midsection. I was queasy, dizzy.

Finally, they stopped. I bent over and wretched up my lunch right there on the sidewalk. "The message is stop writin' stuff!" the ex-boxer snarled. I sank to my knees, inches from the puddle of vomit.

They straightened up, the guy I'd hit rubbing at his stomach. At least I'd hurt him some. "Remember the message," Watch Cap said. They stalked off.

I dry-heaved a couple of times, then managed to get to my feet and lean against the car. The trolley barns across the street were spinning around in slow motion. When those buildings finally dropped anchor, I realized these guys had made one mistake. I'd seen one of them before. He was the guy on Siegel's porch when I'd left his house that day. The one who'd given me his version of the evil eye. I now knew for certain this dirty work had been Siegel's.

Their warning had the opposite effect of what was intended. Yeah, I'll write something, something that'll burn Siegel's ass.

I ached all over as I drove home. Slowly, carefully. Each breath caused a hurt inside my chest. My ribs ached. I hoped none of them were broken, but they sure were sore. One knee on my slacks was torn. I checked my face in the rear-view mirror and saw a purple and black bruise blossoming on my right cheek. Little rivers of blood seemed to fill that eye.

When I dragged in, Valerie and Ilse were shocked at my appearance. “Oh, my Lord, what on earth happened?” Valerie asked, rushing toward me.

“A couple of Siegel’s punks worked me over. Told me to stop writing.”

“But you *have* stopped,” Valerie said. “Those bastards!”

“These guys don’t know the Unholy Trinity’s out of business, Val. We didn’t publicize that, just let it go away quietly. Hell, the only story I’ve written about mobsters lately was the follow-up I did on Cohen’s car bombing.”

Ilse got a cold, wet cloth and held it to my cheek and Valerie brought me a strong drink. “How do you know these were Siegel’s men?” she asked.

“Because I’d seen one of them at Bugsy’s house when I was there. Guess he thought I wouldn’t remember that.” I took a gulp of Scotch. Then another.

“*Vater*, I want to take a baseball bat,” Ilse said, “and pay a visit to Mr. Siegel.”

“Thanks, *Liebchen*, I appreciate the thought, but you’d best leave Mr. Siegel to me.”

“Let’s call the doctor,” Valerie said.

“Nah, another one of these”—raising my glass—“and a hot bath will do the trick.”

But of course they didn’t. I had trouble sleeping that night, just couldn’t find a comfortable way to lie. I hurt in places I hadn’t known I had.

It was during that tossing and turning that I reached my decision. The story I’d write would say Bugsy was connected to a vicious Nazi criminal who’d been on the lam in the U.S., a sadistic murderer known as the Buchenwald Butcher. This Nazi had Siegel’s unlisted number in his possession, and they had met. The article would speculate that Siegel was sheltering this murderer. I didn’t like writing such flimsy stories, but this was a special case. This piece would finish the bastard. Hearst would love it. And I would have a soaring sense of satisfaction.