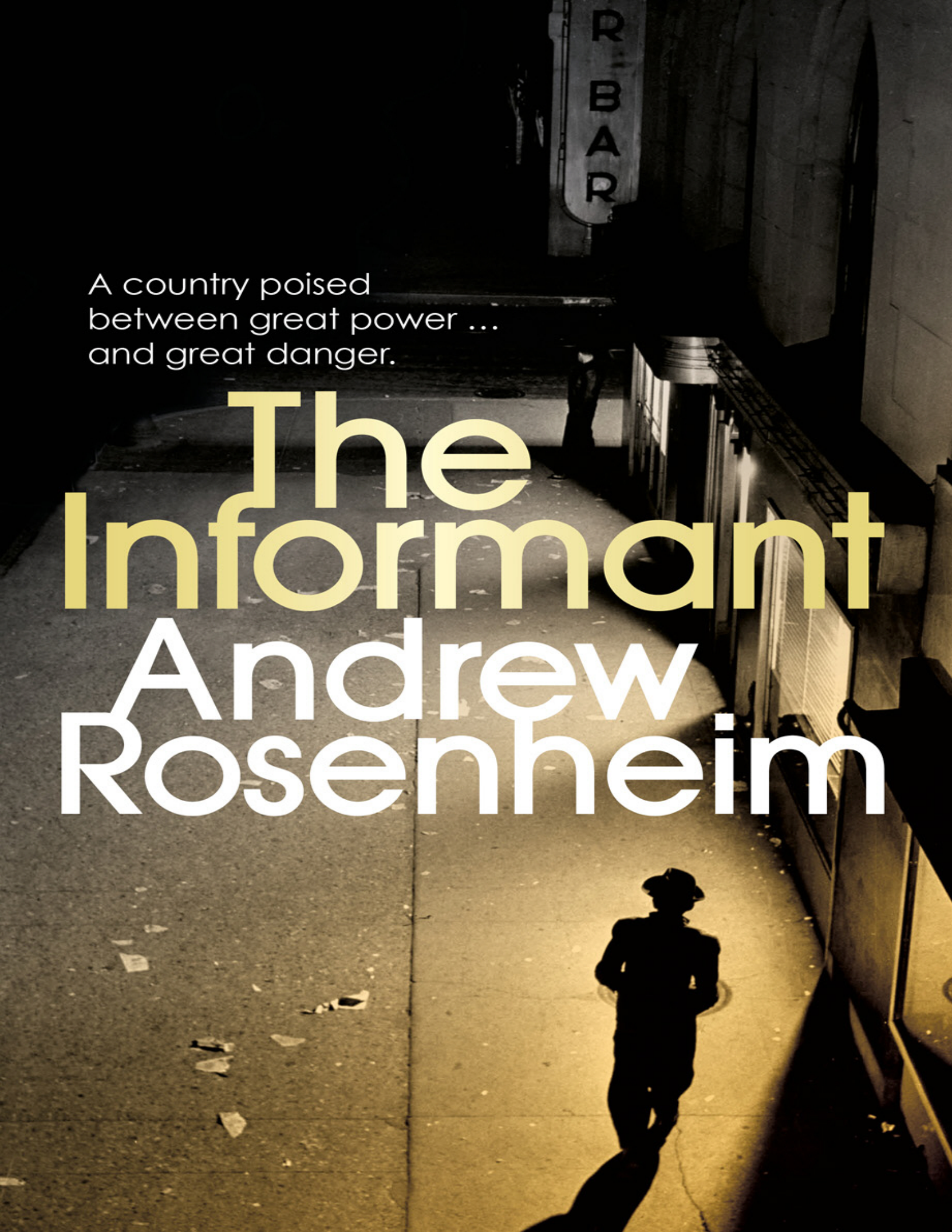

A country poised
between great power …
and great danger.

The Informant

Andrew Rosenheim

Contents

About the Book

Los Angeles, September 1941.

With the Nazis occupying Europe, and their armies now halfway across Russia, America hovers on the brink of war. Tensions are also rising in the Far East, and in California fears grow of a Pacific Coast invasion. There is mounting anxiety about the loyalty of the state's own Japanese population.

But back in Washington D.C., Director J. Edgar Hoover is more concerned about promoting the image of the FBI than about preparing for war, and dispatches Special Agent Nessheim to Hollywood to help make pro-FBI movies.

Then in a clandestine meeting with Nessheim's boss, Harry Guttman, a State Department official reveals that he has been asked by the Russians to pass on classified information. Guttman uncovers a California connection to this espionage attempt, and assigns Nessheim to investigate.

Nessheim's mission is complicated by the disappearance of his key informant, Billy Osaka. Other people are looking for Osaka too. The search for him takes Nessheim to a studio head's mansion in Beverly Hills, a high-class gambling club, LA's Little Tokyo, and the Santa Barbara ranch of wealthy Communist sympathisers. With his own life under threat, Nessheim discovers a deadly conspiracy designed to push America into the War.

Set in the last remaining months of peace, *The Informant* is a gripping thriller, immersed in the history it vividly depicts of a country poised between great power … and great danger.

About the Author

Andrew Rosenheim came to England from America as a Rhodes Scholar in 1977 and has lived near Oxford ever since. He is the author of six novels, including *Stillriver*, *Keeping Secrets*, *Without Prejudice* and *Fear Itself*. He is married and has twin daughters.

Also by Andrew Rosenheim

Stillriver
Keeping Secrets
Without Prejudice
Fear Itself

The Informant

Andrew Rosenheim

For Laura and Sabrina

Part One

Los Angeles
Late September 1941

1

BILLY OSAKA WAS missing.

He hadn’t punched in at Northrop near Hawthorne Airport where he worked the occasional night shift for extra dough – the airplane production lines had ramped up threefold in the last year. He hadn’t gone by the offices of *Rafu Shimpo*, the Japanese-American newspaper, not even to say he wasn’t filing that week. He hadn’t answered Nessheim’s knock on the flimsy door of his three-room railway apartment in Boyle Heights, and he hadn’t been seen by his neighbours – or those who spoke English at any rate. There’d been no sightings of him locally: at the drugstore on the corner or Curley’s bar, where Billy drank a beer now and then and sometimes cashed a cheque, or at the grocery store, where even Billy had been known to buy a quart of milk.

Normally Nessheim would not have been surprised. Billy was easygoing but also impetuous, like a classy thoroughbred who sometimes didn’t want to race. Once he’d disappeared for two weeks without letting Nessheim know where he was going; when he finally appeared he said he’d been up in Portland, helping out his cousin with the salmon catch. When Nessheim had looked sceptical, Billy had shrugged and admitted that he’d been touring the Sierra with a girl.

But this time was different. Three nights before, when Nessheim had gone home after a long day at the studio lot, he’d found an envelope slid under the front door of his rented ranch house above North Hollywood. Inside there was a note, written in thick pencil: Urgent. *Meet me at the Blue Fedora at 5.30 tomorrow.*

It’s important. Billy O.

But Billy Osaka hadn’t shown.

In the bleached morning sunlight of Los Angeles, Nessheim turned off Hollywood Boulevard and moved south on Argyle Avenue, wondering why Billy had wanted to see him so badly. He was only an occasional help to the Bureau, usually when a Japanese translator was required, and though he seemed to know everybody, the information Billy provided was never worth a lot. Raw ore rather than gold.

Nessheim slowed down and pulled into the lot of American Motion Pictures, driving through the flimsy gates, feeble imitations of the grander ones at MGM. He stopped at the barrier and Ernie the guard came out of his sentry box, gimpy on his pins. He had thinning hair and sloping shoulders and a handshake soft as pie. A retired cop from the Pasadena force who had come to California from Minnesota thirty years before, he got a kick out of talking to a fellow Midwesterner who still carried a gun.

‘You packing today?’ he asked with a smile.

‘Sure thing,’ said Nessheim.

‘I do miss my sidearm,’ Ernie said wistfully.

‘And it misses you,’ said Nessheim in what was an established routine. Ernie chuckled as if he’d never heard it before.

There was a sudden revving of an engine. Through the windscreen Nessheim saw a convertible speeding towards them down the lot. Nearing the barrier, it braked sharply and came to a halt on the other side of the sentry box. The car, a deluxe Packard coupé, was a vivid green chartreuse with whitewall tyres and too much chrome. Nessheim figured it belonged to one of the new actors. They would arrive like a rocket in a burst of vainglory; a month on the AMP studio’s factory-like production line usually brought them back down to earth.

From the car a male voice shouted: ‘Hurry up, Pops, and open the gate!’

‘Hold your horses, I’ll be there in a minute,’ Ernie said amiably.

‘I’ll push your horses right up your ass if you don’t get a move on!’

Ernie was old and slow and utterly harmless, and Nessheim leaned over to get a look at the speaker. He could make out the profile of a young man’s square-chinned face, a blue short-sleeved shirt and two hands drumming impatiently on the steering wheel.

‘Take it easy,’ Nessheim called out through the passenger side window.

‘Says who?’

‘Says me,’ said Nessheim.

‘Does Me want to have horses shoved up *his* ass too?’

Nessheim was usually slow to anger, but this guy had jump-started the process. He opened his door and got out to confront him, but just as he stood upright again the other driver accelerated. His car was so close to the wooden barrier that at first it bent slowly back like a hunting bow, then suddenly snapped like a toothpick. The car surged through. As it sped out the gates, the driver extended his middle finger in farewell.

Nessheim looked at Ernie. ‘Who the hell was that?’

Ernie shrugged. ‘Some smart-ass kid. He parked in Mr Pearl’s place, but when I asked Rose said it was okay.’ Rose was Pearl’s secretary.

‘Well, Pearl’s the boss.’ Nessheim pointed to the ragged wooden stub, all that was left of the exit barrier. ‘Though I don’t think he’s going to be happy about that.’

He waited while Ernie lifted the entry bar, then drove into the studio grounds. He went past the long windowless wall of Studio One, then by the executive offices. They were housed in a three-storied stucco building with wide gables and two decorative but entirely redundant chimneys. In

front there was a short strip of carefully tended lawn and a row of small palm trees, planted the spring before. In the distance, at the back of the lot, sat Studio Two, recently built to help the fledgling studio's push into A-movies. It was immense, the size of an airplane hangar: sixty feet high and a football field long, with vast doors that slid open on tracks.

Its sheer size made it easy to overlook the low-slung building that ran between it and the executives offices, and was more like a Nissen hut than a proper building: single-storey, it had a foundation of concrete blocks supporting painted walls of metal sheets and a slanted tin roof. Here worked the studio's roster of writers, as well as Nessheim. If you could call it work.

Parking in front, he paused at the entrance to let a workman come out first. He was carrying a stuffed armchair and Nessheim watched as he dumped it unceremoniously on the pavement outside, where it would sit until the owner, some writer whose contract hadn't been renewed, came to collect it. Nessheim had seen it happen often enough: there was a high turnover among the scriptwriting ranks. As Teitz, a long-term survivor, had remarked, the bad ones got canned and the good ones left for better places to work.

Nessheim walked down the thin central corridor which a resident wit had nicknamed the Ink Well. It split the offices, from which he heard the sporadic clack of typewriters and the more consistent noise of people talking. He stopped halfway down at an open door. Looking in, he saw that Lolly Baker, the single secretary for the entire roster, wasn't there – otherwise half the writers would have been there too, gathered around the coffee urn, flirting with her. Less than fifty yards away in either of the two studio sound buildings, there were women galore – chorines and showgirls, child star wannabes and romantic heroines, secretaries and make-up artists and assistants – but since the writers were banned from going on set, these women might as well have been a mile away.

The writers occupied tiny cubicle-sized offices and were made to double up, working in conditions so cramped that one of them had once complained he had to go outside just to change his mind. By contrast, Nessheim's room at end of the corridor was embarrassingly spacious. Entering it, he closed the door behind him. He took off his suit jacket and hung it and his gun and holster from the hook on the back of the door. He didn't like taking his gun with him to work, but when he'd asked if he could go without it, the answer had been a flat no. R.B. Hood, the Special Agent in Charge of the LA Field Office, was a stickler for Bureau regulations, and he liked making Nessheim toe the line.

Nessheim sat down and looked out the window, where he saw a man in a clown suit trying to pull a donkey with a rope through the open doors of Studio Two. Mornings inside Two were currently occupied by the filming of a family farm picture, set in the Civil War, intended to replicate the success of *Gone with the Wind.* There were only two problems with this plan: every other studio was doing the same thing, and every other studio was doing it in colour – which AMP's budget didn't run to. In the afternoon the main sound stage was used for *The Red Herring*. Nessheim would be there in his role as adviser, ostensibly to ensure the accuracy of its depiction of FBI men at work. The truth was, though, that accuracy was not his real priority. *You're just there to make sure the movie makes the Bureau look good.* Tolson himself had said this when he'd agreed to move to LA.

There was a tap on the door. He sat up straight as it swung open.

'Gee, did I startle you?' It was Lolly. 'You looked a million miles away. What's her name?'

He laughed. 'Billy Osaka – sound like a girl to you?'

'Sounds like a Jap.'

'He is, sort of.' Billy's dad had been Japanese all right and Billy had inherited his Oriental colouring, and spiky dark

hair. But he was tall, over six feet, as tall as Nessheim, with high cheekbones and a jaw and dark-blue eyes he himself attributed to his dead Irish mother.

'I don't like Japs,' Lolly said without malice.

'Yeah, but I bet you'd like Billy.' He knew that women admired the kid's striking looks and liked his easy, cheerful manner. 'Say, do you know who owns a new green convertible?'

'No, but I'd like to.'

Lolly stood there smiling in her gawky but attractive way. She wore a cotton dress, eggshell blue with white polka dots that didn't line up where the side hems met. Nessheim figured Lolly must have made it herself. She was tallish, maybe five foot seven, with a pretty face framed with blonde ringlets the size of silver dollars. Together with pale blue eyes and a good figure, the effect was striking – if Lolly's looks might go in ten years' time, their allure was immediate enough to make anyone forget about the passage of time.

Like any girl who'd moved to LA, Lolly wanted to be in the pictures, though she didn't talk about it much, since when she opened her mouth her Hollywood prospects receded. The sight wasn't appalling, but it wasn't that good either: her two front teeth overlapped like the X of a railroad crossing sign.

Finally she recalled the purpose of her visit. 'Mr Pearl's office called.'

'What about?' Nessheim asked mildly.

'You're invited to lunch at his house on Sunday.'

Nessheim stifled a groan. In nine months at the studio he hadn't broken bread with the owner, and he saw no reason to spoil an unblemished record.

'Here's the address,' said Lolly, putting a slip on his desk. 'Rose says don't dress up, and bring your trunks if the weather's nice. She says he's got a humdinger of a pool. Even Johnny Weissmuller's swum there.'

‘I bet,’ he said, wondering if there was any way to get out of it.

He noticed that despite having delivered her message, Lolly wasn’t going anywhere. She stood in front of him, nervous as a filly. ‘You’ve got another invite,’ she said, pointing to his desk.

On one corner he noticed something new – a card the size of a jumbo postcard. He held it up and read:

Help Your Comrades in Arms

You are invited to an evening of entertainment and education to help support our Soviet brothers in their struggle against the Nazi enemy.

Monday October 13 at 8 p.m.

The Arabia Ballroom Cash Bar
All proceeds to *Help the Soviets Fund*
Organized by *Writers for a Free World*

‘This is for me?’ he asked. Lolly nodded and he looked at the invitation again. ‘Who are the Writers for a Free World?’ He wondered if there were writers *against* a free world. Presumably Goebbels had some on his staff.

Lolly shrugged. ‘I think they’re Guild guys, but they’d get in trouble if they used the Guild name for this.’

‘You bet they would. Who sent it?’

‘Waverley.’

‘He did?’

Lolly said, ‘Teitz told me Waverley used to make fifteen hundred a week when he was at MGM. Could that be true?’

‘Probably.’ John Waverley had an ear for dialogue and a sense of pace that had once put him in the top drawer of screenwriters. A tall, good-looking man with a wave of hair he swept back as if it were an inheritance, he came from a

high-toned family out East. He had a natural grace (just bordering on hauteur) that had once inspired awe in studio owners, immigrants virtually to a man. But politics had proved his Achilles heel. He had joined the Party early and had worked hard to radicalise his fellow writers; when, briefly, the Guild had been broken, Waverley had been a prominent casualty of the victors' hit list. Thereafter he had found work only on the most humiliating terms – and finally ended up at AMP, content to work on the company's second-rate productions for second-rate pay as long as he was left alone to continue the struggle for a better world. Which for Waverley meant a Communist world.

Nessheim pointed to the invitation. 'Are you going to this thing?'

Lolly flushed. 'I don't know.' Flustered, she pointed wildly at the Ink Well corridor. 'Half those guys have asked me.'

'I bet they have, Lolly. You're a good-looking girl, despite your age . . .'

'I'm twenty next May,' she protested.

'That's what I mean,' teased Nessheim. 'You're getting a bit long in the tooth. You ought to take one of these guys' offers before it's too late.'

Her face swung from outrage to hurt; for a terrible moment Nessheim thought she was going to cry. So much for banter, he thought.

'I better get going,' Lolly said. 'Don't forget about Mr Pearl's invitation.'

When she'd gone he looked out the window again. The donkey was still there, but now two grips had come out from Studio Two to help pull the recalcitrant animal inside. The donkey had its feet braced in the dust and would not budge. There seemed something admirable about its refusal.

He knew he should go to the benefit, yet Nessheim could think of nothing more dire than an evening of Communist propaganda disguised as entertainment, even if Lolly seemed to want him to take her there. He thought about

how good she looked in her thinning cotton dress – and how young, for all her nineteen years. If he took her out, and maybe took her in, he'd feel like a creep. Thank God he was spoken for.

There was a knock on the door, but this time it didn't open.

'Come in!' he called impatiently, wondering who was being so polite. The door finally opened and a woman peered in. She wore a forget-me-not-blue linen jacket and skirt and looked out of place in the studio – more like a businessman's wife than an actress.

'Are you John Waverley?' She had an accent Nessheim couldn't place.

'You've come too far. He's two doors down – on the left of course.'

'Naturally,' she said with an amused smile. 'Many thanks – I am sorry to disturb you.' She stared at him with deep-set eyes the colour of chocolate.

'No big deal. I wasn't up to much.'

She continued to look at him, long enough for it to start to seem peculiar. Then her face suddenly creased into a transforming smile and she laughed. 'That's honest of you,' she said.

It was his turn to laugh. 'Honesty in Hollywood. Remember this moment.'

'I will,' she said, still smiling, and closed the door.

Back to work. He took a form from the drawer and started to fill out his expenses, which putatively went through the LA office, where Hood had spotted them – and been flabbergasted. 'Fifteen years in the Bureau,' the SAC had complained, 'and I've never had to complain that an agent's expenses were too *small*.' What Hood didn't know was that any expense of consequence went through the Bureau's office in Mexico City, then got rerouted for approval by Assistant Director Guttman back in D.C. It was just one more strange aspect of this odd posting.

He pushed his expenses away, deciding he'd do them later, and wondered where next to look for Billy Osaka, and why Billy needed to see him.

When Nessheim had arrived here eight months before, he'd been given a list of four paid contacts from the Japanese-American community, used mainly for translation. One had died, one had returned to Japan, and one had told Nessheim that he wasn't interested in working for the FBI any more. This left Osaka, though Hood had not been encouraging: 'He's not even a real Jap,' the SAC had complained. And now Billy had gone missing, even though with his mishmashed blood lines he stood out in LA like a split nail in a manicure bar.

Nessheim thought he had better tell Guttman that he had a missing informant. He considered calling him; he'd had a phone installed, which collected dust on the window sill, since he rarely used it and it never rang. But calls through it went out through a switchboard, where it had been known for some nail-buffing bored operator to listen in.

Nessheim got up and took his jacket and gun, then left the building. In Lolly's office a crowd of writers had gathered round her desk, and she was laughing.

He walked out past Eddie in his booth, who seemed surprised to find anyone leaving the lot on foot. Western Union was only half a mile away, an easy walk, despite the heat that had hung over from summer. But then it was always summer here, he thought irritably, his mood darkening as he started to sweat.

He didn't like LA.

He didn't like the fact that its most famous product, the movies, was a mirage, put together in a soulless town that pretended it was glamorous as well – like a snake-oil salesman claiming the magic of his elixir made him magic too. He didn't like the low-lying smell of gasoline and hamburger grease the minute you took a drive downtown. Which was every minute if you wanted to get anywhere.

He didn’t like the way that some mornings’ daylight was the colour of bone, some the colour of late corn, or that the city had hills in some parts and was as flat as a map in others. It was a jellyfish of a city, translucent in the middle because there wasn’t one. He didn’t like the trapped heat, held in by the minor mountains to the north and east, unrelieved by the ocean south and west of town, or how the clouds could hang low like a dropped ceiling. He felt hemmed in.

He didn’t like the fact that the place had been settled by conmen and illusionists, and that its population was so heterogeneous and yet so unequal – he had a natural curiosity about the Mexicans and Orientals, but the bigotry of everybody else made his interest seem subversive. He didn’t like the place’s disconnect with the country he had grown up in; LA never felt to him like it belonged to the rest of the nation, and made him yearn for his native Midwest. He missed seasons, fresh water and trees that were made for snow – maples, birches, beech and oaks, the trees of Wisconsin. Here the trees seemed alien – juniper, pepper trees and eucalyptus, even the palms he’d always thought were confined to the South Sea Islands.

And no one here seemed to know where Europe was, or what was going on there. No one seemed to understand or even sense the menace of Nazism, though as for Japan, California seemed to think the Pacific Ocean was an Oriental carpet the sons of Nippon were about to walk across.

Finally, he didn’t like LA because he didn’t choose to be there – unlike other recent arrivals, who came West to leave a wounding world behind. Hopes had been crushed everywhere else for a decade, but here optimism spread like mint, a phoney optimism since people were merely buying time before being let down again. Unlike everyone else, Nessheim wasn’t fleeing anything or looking for something. He’d come here because he’d been pushed, but at some point he would push back.

He'd do that after Annie Ryerson came – she was due out at Christmas with her son Jeff. He hadn't seen her since January, after he had gone to Washington and accepted Guttman's offer of this cockamamie job. He had spent time then with Annie – good calm time. She wouldn't sleep with him, which took some getting used to, yet it was kind of nice to wait; or so he told himself, wondering if he should put saltpetre in his cereal. He felt confident he was going to be with her, and confident that would get him out of LA.

Western Union was in a squat, light-grey granite building with four tellers, older men wearing eyeshade caps like bookies, with pencil stubs by their side. He filled out a form at the counter, and paid his forty cents. His message was simple:

OSAKA GONE AWOL. N

He looked at his watch. It was 12.30. He retraced his steps, but at Vine he turned right and walked away from the studio for a block, until he came to Elsie's Diner on the corner of Hollywood Boulevard. The studio didn't run to a canteen; if you didn't bring a packed lunch Elsie's was the closest bet, if not a good one. It was already crowded and he headed for the one free stool at the counter, until a shout came from a corner booth.

'G-Man!'

It was Teitz, motioning him to join his party, even though from their empty plates it looked like they had finished lunch. Waverley was there, and Nessheim hesitated, but Teitz kept beckoning him. He went over and saw that Stuckey, a rewrite man, and Debts Grenebaum, who was fresh from another Broadway failure, were also sitting on the dark-brown leather banquettes.

'Have a seat,' Teitz said, moving over to make room. An ex-reporter, perky and full of the gossip he called news, he

was a self-confessedly mediocre writer who had carved out a collaborative career – functioning as a junior partner with anyone he could hook up with; when he couldn't find a partner he transferred to shorts, the little documentaries the theatres ran as trailers for their shorter pictures.

'We were talking about the war,' said Grenebaum. Like Teitz he was a studio veteran, though he returned to New York whenever he could get a play produced. His work was 'progressive' and often compared, usually unfavourably, with that of Clifford Odets. 'Just drop the O from Odets and you've got our boy,' Waverley had once declared, and after that Grenebaum was known as Debts.

Waverley himself was sitting at the end of the table, against the window, dressed in a coal-coloured turtleneck and a fawn blazer. Teitz was wearing a madras jacket and his standard jaunty bow tie (this one was green) but none of the other writers ever dressed up – they either wore ties pulled down an inch or two or didn't wear a tie at all. They liked to tease Nessheim for his G-Man uniform – the Bureau's dress code set a high bar and, like the gun, the banker's suit came with the job.

'You got to hand it to the Brits,' Stuckey was saying, as Nessheim sat down and picked up a menu. The special, chalked up on a board above the counter, was corned-beef hash, poached egg on top a nickel extra. 'Everybody thought they'd cave in by now. But I don't see how the Germans are going to invade. They've lost the air war, so if they try to cross the Channel the Royal Navy will make mincemeat of them.'

Waverley dismissed this with a wave of his hand. 'Frankly, if one fading colonial power is taken over by its fascist progeny, it doesn't matter very much – except to the capitalists. But if the Soviets lose, that will be a disaster for everyone.'

Nessheim looked up from the menu. 'I'd have thought you'd be happy to have anyone fight the Nazis. Even the

fading colonial Brits.'

Waverley looked at him as if he were a flea who had jumped the wrong way. 'You think my enemy's enemy is my friend? That's absurd. Where were the British when the Republicans needed help in Spain? Where were they back in July when Nazi Germany invaded the Ukraine?'

'Hang on a minute. Three months ago the Soviets were *allies* of the Nazis.'

'What else could they do? The West wouldn't lift a finger to help our comrades. The Russians had to protect themselves.'

'Fat lot of good it did them,' said Stuckey. He was tall and heavy set, but his black-rimmed glasses made him look more contemplative than tough. He had none of Teitz's bounciness, but he carried himself with a calm modesty which Nessheim admired.

Waverley shook his head impatiently. 'Stalin knew who the enemy was. But with the rest of the world undermining him, he needed to buy time.'

'By sleeping with the enemy, I suppose,' said Stuckey. He took a toothpick and began working it between his two front teeth. Somehow he managed to do this gracefully.

The waitress came with a pitcher of ice tea. As she refilled glasses, Nessheim ordered the corned-beef hash without the egg and Teitz used the interruption to change the subject – he was keener on people than politics. 'So tell us, G-Man, what's new in the world of interstate crime? Have you found another Lindbergh baby?'

Nessheim said, 'Taste, Teitz, taste.'

Grenebaum, normally silent, spoke up. 'Too late,' he said glumly. 'Taste is a Teitz-free zone.'

Even Waverley laughed at this. Nessheim said, 'I'll leave Lindbergh to Hoover. I'm looking for somebody else.'

'Who's that, some Red?' asked Teitz, and Waverley gave a derisory snort.

Nessheim said, 'A kid named Osaka.'

‘Billy Osaka,’ said Teitz, his face lighting up. ‘Everybody knows Billy.’

‘Sounds like a Jap to me,’ said Waverley sourly.

‘Can’t a Jap be a comrade too? I thought you were a democrat at heart,’ said Nessheim.

‘I am. Unlike the Japs.’

When Nessheim’s food came the others paid and left for the studio. Except for Stuckey, who stayed behind and ordered a cup of coffee. When it came he lit a Camel and looked at Nessheim.

‘So what are you working on now?’

‘*The Red Herring*,’ he said.

Stuckey gave a small smile. ‘It’s art of course, not “propergander”. With the added bonus of letting the public know all that you FBI guys are doing on its behalf.’

‘Yeah,’ Nessheim said without enthusiasm.

‘Don’t let the Count fool you. He’s a peasant from Puglia, even if he quotes Vorkapich and Eisenstein.’

‘But I thought he was an Italian nobleman.’

‘I think you’d find on close inspection that the title was acquired the day he got off the *Super Chief* and arrived in Hollywood.’ He took a final drag on his cigarette and stubbed it out in the table’s ashtray. ‘But what else are you up to, Nessheim?’

‘Oh, you know, helping out with this and that. Mainly that.’

‘Do you see much of Buddy Pearl?’

‘Very little,’ said Nessheim.

‘He’s a Jew of course.’

‘Of course,’ Nessheim said, though he had never given it much thought. He hadn’t mistaken Pearl for a Mayflower descendant, but for Nessheim, growing up in rural Wisconsin, the only important distinction had been between Lutherans and Catholics.

‘A Jew, but of the tough rather than sweet rabbinical kind. Don’t get me wrong, I haven’t anything against them – those guys are my pals.’ Stuckey gestured at the seats Teitz

and Grenebaum had just vacated, then took another toothpick from the little cup that held them and twirled it lightly between his fingers. ‘In my experience, the Jews are good to work with – all bluster at first, then perfectly reasonable when you stand your ground. But I imagine Pearl is different: it can’t be easy to do business with him.’

‘I’m not doing business with Pearl,’ Nessheim said firmly.

Stuckey nodded. ‘I know – the Bureau’s your boss. But I still don’t envy you.’

‘He’s invited me to lunch.’

‘That means he wants something. I’d watch your back. What Buddy wants he usually gets, though I think he’s finding the movie business a little tough to crack. I mean, who starts a studio in the middle of the Depression?’

The Count was on loan from Warners, which was thought to be a coup by AMP executives, since he shot fast and didn’t use a lot of film. His Italian accent grew stronger when he was stressed, but today he was not only perfectly intelligible, he was actually friendly to Nessheim. Normally he ignored him. ‘Art,’ he had declared when Nessheim had first appeared, ‘I make Art, not proper-gander.’

Nessheim had repeated this to the residents of the Ink Well, who’d all laughed. Teitz had said they should call the Count ‘Goose’. Grenebaum had broken his standard silence and been more scornful. ‘This guy doesn’t make art *or* propaganda. He’s no Leni Riefenstahl, that’s for sure. This guy makes *junk*.’

They were in the final three days of the eighteen-day shoot of *The Red Herring*, the fourth in a series of Bureau-endorsed movies featuring Special Agent Edward Parker – played by a tall, lantern-jawed actor named Harry Dedway, who had begun his acting career as a horse-riding extra in cowboy movies. There had been bigger FBI-loving pictures made by bigger studios, but these were some years back. Hoover, who had not been pleased by James Cagney’s

playful portrayal of a Special Agent in *G-Men*, was now on a mission. He was determined to show the FBI as a team of crime-busters, a force of integrity, relying on the clinical science of forensics, which was why, in the interests of 'accuracy', Nessheim was here. AMP's FBI pictures were all B-movies, using two cameras at most, but they had made good if not spectacular money so far, largely because they were cheap to make – the budget for this one was sixty grand, Nessheim had overheard one of the Count's assistants say, and they were bang on target and a day ahead of time.

There hadn't been much for Nessheim to do during filming – they'd shot on location in the Valley the week before, where he had driven out just in time to point out that no one could fire a tommy-gun with one hand. Now they were filming the movie's climax – the arrest by Special Agent Parker of a young woman who had murdered her fiancé, embezzled $20,000 from a bank and done her unsuccessful best to seduce the FBI man. Presumably her crimes involved crossing state lines, as otherwise young Parker would not have been called in to solve the case. But this was the kind of nit-picking (*neet-pecking* as the Count called it) which Nessheim had learned – if only for the sake of an easy life – to forgo.

The Count sat throughout the afternoon on a dolly, right behind the cameraman, who drove it up and down for trucking shots, while a second but static camera focused on the femme fatale and Agent Parker as they had their final showdown. Periodically, the Count would call Nessheim over and ask if the scene was realistic, especially when Parker disarmed the suspect. Nessheim, wanting to justify his presence, demonstrated how this would be done and the Count filmed the scene three times.

At last Nessheim managed to escape back to his office, where he finished his expenses while the writers wound down for the day – the sound of popping corks and loud

laughter replacing the erratic clack-clack of typewriter keys. He waited around until six o’clock in case Guttman replied to his telegram, but nothing arrived. It didn’t seem to matter very much; he was used to waiting around these days.

Part Two

Washington, D.C.
Late September 1941