



STARLET



SOPHIE LARK

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PROLOGUE

It was near lunchtime, but Mr. DeMille refused to let anybody eat.

“We’re going to start the next scene,” he declared, ignoring the pained faces of everyone in the room, and the audible rumbling coming from the stomach of Emmet Walsch, the lead camera operator.

DeMille’s assistant held back her groan. Ruby was starving as well, but her hunger hardly compared to her dread of how Ms. Bloom and Mr. Gable would react to this news. Mr. Gable had only just completed a difficult sword-fighting scene, in which he had to swing around a great blunted saber while sweating under the weight of an elaborate embroidered coat.

With trepidation, Ruby hurried over to the actors’ trailers to warn them. She knocked on Clark Gable’s door first. Mr. Gable was laying on the sofa with a wet towel over his eyes—it was his assistant Willie White who opened the door.

Ruby gave the announcement in a hesitant tone, and as she expected, Mr. Gable flung his towel against the wall and called the director a bloody tyrant.

“I’m not leaving here till I’ve had food and a good, stiff drink,” he declared. “A drink with ice, mind. Mrs. Fischer hasn’t let Willie into the kitchen all morning.”

“She’s been horribly busy,” Ruby said, rubbing her temples. “We’re all behind on everything. I’ll make sure you get your ice, Mr. Gable.”

“Thank you Ruby. You’re an angel,” he said gallantly, smoothing back his dark hair. He looked very handsome of course, but also a little sinister with his eyes smeared with kohl and his skin darkened with cork. It was all very fitting for the character of the Shahryar, but it made Ruby more hesitant than usual to annoy him.

She went to tap on Clara Bloom’s door next. She stood outside waiting, but there was no reply from within.

Ruby saw Lucille, the makeup artist, rinsing her brushes at the outdoor sink.

“Is Ms. Bloom ready?” Ruby asked her. “Mr. DeMille says he wants to start the tea ceremony scene.”

“No, she isn’t,” Lucille said, shaking the brushes so that droplets of water flung off in every direction, sparkling in the sunshine. “I’m sorry, I haven’t done a thing to her yet. I haven’t even seen her all morning.”

Ruby cursed silently. Mr. DeMille was going to blow his top when he heard Clara was late again.

There was a phone in the main office—she could try ringing Clara’s apartment. Perhaps if she dashed over quick enough while everyone was setting up, Mr. DeMille would not even need to know.

Ruby took a shortcut through the prop room, skirting piles of carpets and stacked tables, hurrying past the ornate saddles they had used on the camels last week, through the hodgepodge of vases and scarves and plaster statues that looked heavy but would topple and shatter if you so much as bumped them with your hip.

She came out in the hallway, at the end of which stood the main office—locked at the moment, but Ruby had the key on the jumbled ring hanging from her belt. The hall was unusually dark. Someone had forgotten to switch on the lights, or perhaps the bulb had burnt out again.

As Ruby hurried forward, she tripped over something large, heavy, and soft. She went sprawling, only just stopping short of bashing her face on the ground by flinging out her hands,

skinning her palms on the concrete. Her glasses, however, skidded across the floor. Ruby was blind without them.

Tears sprang up in her eyes as she crawled about, groping for the missing spectacles in the gloom. What a horrid morning it had been, with Mr. DeMille in a towering mood and everyone grumpy about working on a Saturday. They were behind schedule on the film—three weeks behind—not to mention the ballooning budget. They knew Mr. Heller was likely to turn up any time now to lecture and threaten, and maybe even fire someone to set an example.

Everybody was exhausted and sloppy, leaving things laying around. What was it that had tripped her, a sandbag?

Ruby located her glasses at last, thrusting them back on her face. She turned around, thinking she must now drag this unknown object back to wherever it belonged.

She saw pale limbs sprawled out on the ground, a yellow cotton dress, ink-black hair. A girl. Ruby had tripped over a girl.

And not just any girl—even in the gloom, Ruby recognized the star of the film, Clara Bloom.

Ruby knew at once something was terribly wrong. Clara was laying on her back with her eyes wide open, staring up at the ceiling. Those eyes were her trademark—the papers sometimes called her The Black Cat, and indeed she did look like a cat with her impish little face, her sleek dark hair, and those thickly-lashed green eyes that slanted up at the corners.

But her eyes were fixed, unblinking, and there was something wrong with the color of them. Hardly daring to breathe, Ruby leaned over to look into Clara's face. Clara's eyes were dark with blood, the whole surface of them—no white at all.

Ruby let out a scream. Once she started screaming, she couldn't stop. She staggered back against the wall and huddled there howling, until people came running from all sides.



I was washing dishes in my tiny apartment on Hutchinson Street in Chicago. I had the radio playing—“Address Unknown” just coming to an end. When the song stopped, the evening news bulletin began. It was difficult to hear it over the running water and clinking plates.

British cargo liner the Domala has been bombed off the Isle of Wight—no word yet on the 291 persons aboard ... Cambridge has won this year’s boat race at Henley-on-Thames ... Cart overturned at the Union Stock Yards, one man crushed, two more injured ...

I didn’t particularly like listening to the news. It was becoming more and more alarming, especially the bulletins out of Europe. I finished scrubbing up the few dishes a single person makes, then stripped the rubber gloves off my hands and set my water glass upside down on the draining board to air dry.

Shocking news out of Hollywood today, the radio said.

I perked up a little. I didn’t care about gossip, but I thought if something interesting had happened, Clara would want to talk about it when she called me on Sunday. We spoke every Sunday afternoon for at least an hour. It was the best time to catch each other, since neither of us worked that day.

I untied my apron from around my waist, listening.

Actress Clara Bloom, half of the comedy duo Clara and Lillie, star of Who’s In Charge and The Little Empress, was found dead this afternoon on the Paramount Pictures studio lot. Cause of death is yet unknown, but police suspect foul play.

Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles has gone to Germany on a fact-finding mission to ...

I stood frozen in the kitchen, the balled-up apron still in my hand.

What I heard seemed impossible.

It seemed like an auditory hallucination. Like my bored brain had invented something shocking.

It couldn't be real, because everything else in the world was exactly the same. I could hear the heavy tread of Mr. Welnick walking around upstairs in his welder's boots, and the yaps and happy shrieks of the Delphino children playing with their puppy next door.

The last of the evening light was still coming through the window over my kitchen sink, filtered by the iron fire escape and the taller buildings all around, no different than any other night.

I could still smell the tomato soup I'd made for dinner and see the open butter dish on my tiny kitchen table, speckled with crumbs from my toast.

All those things were too mundane and too utterly normal to coexist with the idea of my sister being dead.

I sat down hard on the kitchen chair.

There was no way to play back what the radio had said. The words had evaporated into the air.

I told myself, *Someone would have called you if something happened to Clara. You've got a telephone now—there it is in the hallway.*

It was the new rotary model, where the headset lay horizontally across the base, instead of the old upright candlestick style. When Mr. Welnick had borrowed it the week before to call his mother, he had tried to hold the receiver to his ear while shouting into the base. I had to hold the headset at an angle to his face so he could both speak and listen.

The silence of my phone comforted me.

I was Clara's only family. I knew I'd be the one to receive a phone call if something had actually happened.

But then, with nightmarish timing, the phone began to rattle on its stand, right before my eyes. Three times it rang, while I stared at it in horror.

My body seemed to stand and walk forward without my consent. I watched my hand lift the receiver and raise it to my ear.

"Ms. Bloom speaking," I said.

I couldn't tell if my voice was steady or not. I couldn't tell if the silence on the other end of the line was really as long as it seemed.

"Alice Bloom?" a voice said at last. "This is Sergeant Palmer. Are you the sister of Clara Bloom?"

"I am," I said.

I waited. And waited.

He cleared his throat.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news."



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I caught the new Super Chief diesel train, nonstop from Chicago to Los Angeles. Under any other circumstance, this would have been a fascinating journey. They called it "The Train of the Stars": an impossibly sleek steel bullet with gold and red trim, private sleeper cabins, air-conditioned cars, and the attentive service of the finest hotel.

In the morning, the steward brought me a steaming cup of coffee at precisely 8:35 as a wake-up call. For lunch, I dined on grilled fish and chilled salad at a linen-swathed table. My supper came accompanied by a china dish of caviar and a slender glass of champagne, while a violinist serenaded the tables.

I couldn't enjoy any of it. I booked the room only because it was the quickest way to get to Clara—other than flying, which I couldn't afford. Actually, even the train wiped out most of my savings. I took the express route because it saved two days' travel.

I knew it was pointless to hurry. If Clara was really dead, then time meant nothing to her. It was my own anxiety I was trying to soothe. Rushing felt like doing something. Getting Clara out of the morgue felt like helping her.

I was furious that nobody from the studio called me. Instead, it was some lackey from the L.A. County Sheriff's Department that found my number in Clara's notebook and announced the news to me in his flat, fumbling tone. He never met Clara. He had no idea what a loss this was, that he was talking about the most gorgeous and talented woman on the planet.

I didn't think that just because Clara was my sister.

Anybody who met her thought the same. She was funny and charming and brimming with confidence. She thought she could do anything, and she made you believe it too.

Clara was only two years older than me.

She always took care of me, though. Even after she moved to California, she still sent as much money as she could spare.

The sergeant didn't want to tell me how she died. He said it would only upset me, that it was better not to know.

I kept my voice calm and stern as I said, "You will tell me the circumstances immediately, or I will hang up this phone and call your superior officer."

Sergeant Palmer said that Clara had been strangled.

I couldn't understand that at all.

Who would want to do it?

Who would dare to do it?

I cried almost the entire journey. I was grateful for my private room. Even when I had to come out to the public dining cars,

my swollen face was enough to keep the other passengers away.

It made me particularly miserable to think how much Clara would have enjoyed the scenery and the food, and the fancy passengers in their elegant clothes.

On the second night, the waiter tried to cheer me up by telling me that Judy Garland had been on the train the week before.

“She said the Peach Charlotte was the best she’d ever tasted! Shall I bring you a dish?” he asked kindly.

“No, thank you,” I said.

I couldn’t help thinking that if Clara had been on the journey with me, the next week he would have been telling his passengers that Clara Bloom sat in that very chair.

I tipped him a dollar to try to make up for how gloomy I’d been. Then I regretted it afterward, realizing I was almost out of cash.

When the train arrived in Los Angeles three days later, I disembarked into relentless sunshine. Palm trees waving, convertibles cruising by with their tops rolled down and their whitewalls gleaming. No one would share my low mood here—L.A. was the city of optimism and ambition. Perfect for Clara.

I had been to Los Angeles once before, for the premiere of Clara’s first feature film, *All the Girls Love Bobby Brown*. I was only nineteen at the time, and the city dazzled me. I stood next to Clara on the red carpet, wearing her borrowed gown and shoes, almost jumping out of my skin every time a flashbulb exploded by my ear and a reporter shouted a question:

“Ms. Bloom, have you got a sweetheart?”

“Ms. Bloom, where do you get your hair done?”

“Ms. Bloom, how did you like working with Chico Marx?”

I’d seen every film my sister appeared in, from her first roles as an extra where I could barely spot her in the background, then on to her one- and two-line speaking parts in B-movies

where she played the ditzy waitress, the lovelorn teenager, or the shy schoolgirl.

Clara looked young when she started. She was slim, three inches shorter than me, and exuded a kind of manic, comic energy that emphasized her youthfulness.

It was this edge of daffiness that got her a break. Paramount Pictures wanted to make a female comedic duo in the mold of Laurel and Hardy, or Thelma Todd and ZaSu Pitts.

They paired Clara with a young actress from the vaudeville circuit, Lillie LaShay. Together they shot a dozen comedy shorts, and then three forty-five-minute films, which made full use of Clara's charm and rapid-fire dialogue delivery, and Lillie's remarkable skills at juggling, acrobatics, pratfalls, balancing acts, and roller skating.

The girls played hapless bank robbers, desperate debutantes, pirate princesses, harassed secretaries, and maids who flooded the top floor of their hotel. They were wildly successful in the darkest days of the depression, when people would pay their last dime for a laugh.

Recently, Clara had been branching into more serious dramatic roles. She'd been given a full-time contract with Paramount, who planned to make her one of their A-list stars. Her most recent role was her biggest yet, second-billed to The King of Hollywood himself, Clark Gable. Clara had screamed into the phone when she called to tell me all about it. It took twenty minutes to get her calmed down enough that I could hear the details.

"It's an epic," Clara told me. "They say it'll be bigger than *Gone with the Wind!*"

Of course the reality was less glamorous than Clara expected—long hours, unseasonable heat, complicated sets with hundreds of extras, insane pressure from the producers, and the autocratic rages of the director, Mr. Cecil B. DeMille.

"He's a monster," Clara moaned. "He's inhuman. Raging around at everybody, seizing on the tiniest stumble in a

twenty-line speech, hurling his lunch at his assistant's head if he doesn't like the potatoes."

"Why don't you complain to someone?" I asked her.

"Well he's also a genius!" Clara said. "I really am lucky to be working with him. And anyway, you know all artists are off their rocker."

"I'm worried about you," I told her.

"Don't be worried about me! I'm happy as a clam. Just a little tired, that's all."

"Be careful," I said.

I didn't have to remind her that she had asthma and was prone to vicious colds or even pneumonia if she didn't take proper care of herself.

"I'm very careful," Clara said blithely.

But that wasn't always true, not really.



As soon as I got off the train, I went to the Forest Lawn Mortuary to make arrangements for Clara's funeral.

I came out to California thinking, *I'll take Clara home.*

But I soon remembered that Clara and I didn't really have a home.

We were born in Brooklyn. We lived there till we were six and eight, until our father was killed in an explosion at his brewery. Our mother took us to stay with her aunt in Danville, then she got a job as a teacher in Cincinnati.

Clara never liked either of those places. After our mother died, she couldn't wait to get away. She only stayed in Cincinnati another year to help support me while I finished school. She worked as a typist, loathing every minute of it. The moment she was free, she caught the train to Los Angeles.

She asked me to come with her, but I had just received my acceptance to the Linguistics department at the University of Chicago. Clara wished me luck, and as soon as she started getting work on film sets, she sent as much cash as she could spare to help pay for my books and tuition.

Now I was faced with the question of where I should bury my sister.

Clara loved New York, but we never went back after our father died. We had family in Danville, but Clara hated how conservative and dull it was—she wouldn't want to rest

forever on our aunt's farm. We didn't know anyone in Cincinnati anymore.

I could take her back to Chicago with me. That's what I was most inclined to do, so I could at least visit her grave. The problem was that I had just graduated that spring. I had stayed put because I was in the process of translating a bunch of old family journals for my employer, Mr. Bates. When that job ended, I had no idea where I'd go.

The whole world was in chaos. People said America might enter the war. I spoke French, Italian, and German fluently, so I had considered seeking a job with the state department.

In the end, I thought I better hold the funeral and burial in California. Clara had been happy there. It had been her home for eight years.

Mr. Campbell was waiting for me at the mortuary. He was short and balding, with a mournful, sympathetic face—a necessity in his industry, I supposed. He offered his condolences, then took me to the room where Clara had been laid out. His staff had already performed the embalming and other preparations, as we discussed over the phone.

Still, even with all that time to prepare, it was an ugly shock. Clara's energy and animation were such an integral part of her personality that to see her so flat and still, so robbed of the qualities that defined her ... it made me wonder for a moment if a mistake had been made. Could that really be my sister caked in ugly white face powder, wearing that awful high-necked gown?

"Apologies," Mr. Campbell said quietly. "We had to make some accommodations in light of your sister's injuries."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"There was some discoloration of the face ... and the throat ... we weren't able to conceal enough to allow for the dress you requested."

"Oh," I said dully. "Thank you. I'm sure you did your best."

"What a terrible thing," Mr. Campbell said. "My wife enjoyed your sister's films very much."

“Thank you,” I said.

“Whenever you’re ready, we can go over the arrangements for the service,” Mr. Campbell said. “Take your time.”

He left me alone with Clara.

I came all this way wanting to see my sister once more. Now I almost wished I hadn’t. I didn’t want the image of the stiff, garish figure in the casket to imprint over my memories of Clara as I always knew her: brash, mischievous, laughing.

I walked closer to the casket to touch Clara’s hand where it lay folded on her breast. Then I wished I hadn’t done that either—it was as waxy and lifeless as a doll’s.

I went back to Mr. Campbell’s office to review the details for the funeral: Clara’s favorite flower (lilies), her favorite hymn (“All Creatures of Our God and King”), her favorite color (green).

“And what denomination of minister would you prefer?” he asked.

Our family had never been religious. Actually, Clara could be quite derisive on the subject. I tried to think what would offend her least.

Seeing my hesitation, Mr. Campbell said “Father Brennan of the Episcopal church is a very gentle man—no fire and brimstone.”

“That sounds fine,” I said.

When Mr. Campbell showed me the balance for what all that would cost, including the plot in the Forest Lawn Cemetery, I wrote a check for the deposit, promising to pay the balance promptly.

I didn’t actually have the money to pay the rest, but I hoped I would soon. I intended for Paramount Pictures to pay at least part of it. In fact, I had a meeting with Mr. Heller next, to address that very point.

I took a cab to the Paramount Pictures studio lot at 5451 Marathon Street. It was a long, low, sprawling complex, almost like a tiny city unto itself—building after building, all

uniformly plain from the exterior so it was difficult to tell how it might be divided on the inside.

A security guard kept watch from a booth at the entrance of the parking lot. He was reading a newspaper and only looked up when I asked him the way to Mr. Heller's office. I was quite certain I could have strolled right past him without the guard noticing a thing.

I gave my name to Mr. Heller's secretary, then waited on the little sofa just outside his office. I could hear Mr. Heller shouting at somebody over the phone. Since the secretary continued typing without batting an eyelash at the blazing row going on behind her, I could only assume that was a regular occurrence.

I had come in near the end of the harangue—some kind of contract dispute, something about percentages only to be paid out under certain eventualities. It wound up without any clear resolution that I could hear, and Mr. Heller slammed down the receiver. His secretary took the opportunity to press the buzzer on her desk, saying in a calm and robotic tone, "Mr. Heller, Alice Bloom is here to see you."

"Send her in," Heller barked.

He stood up from his desk to shake my hand. He was medium height, a little stout, with a three-piece pinstriped suit and a pocket square. His hair was parted on the left, heavily Brylcreemed to remove as much of the curl as possible, and slicked over to the right. He had a round face in which his long, bulbous nose came down to the lipless vertical line that was his mouth. He wore a pinky ring and a gold wristwatch.

"So sorry about your sister," he said without much sincerity.

Then he actually looked at me, and his expression changed completely.

He squeezed my hand hard, pulling me closer to him so he could peer into my face. He looked me over, head to toe, his eyes gleaming with interest and his breath quickening.

"By god," he said, not letting go of my hand. "You look just like her."

“Yes,” I said.

I was too used to hearing it to be surprised.

People thought Clara and I were twins from the time we were small—her a little short and me a little tall, so we were almost the same size. My mother used to dress us matching to encourage it.

Once Clara started appearing in films, people would stop me on the street, thinking I was her.

“You’re taller,” Heller said. “Not so skinny. And your hair is lighter.”

“Mm,” I said.

I never minded looking like Clara, because she was so pretty. But Heller saying it gave me a pang. I realized that before long, in the not-too-distant future, people would stop saying that. They’d forget about Clara. I wouldn’t look like anyone anymore.

“Sit down,” Heller said, offering me the chair across from his desk. It was lower and less padded than his own chair.

“Mr. Heller,” I said, “I want to know what happened to my sister.”

“Well, it appears she was killed,” Mr. Heller said uncomfortably.

“I’m aware of that,” I said. “Who did it?”

“The police are investigating.”

“And what have they found?”

“Well ... well it’s difficult to say.”

“That’s unacceptable,” I told him. “My sister was murdered. She was strangled to death, four days ago, on your studio lot.”

“I’m well aware!” Heller said, his temper rising. “I’ve had reporters and cops swarming everywhere, not to mention the little problem that we’re two-thirds of the way through one of the most expensive movies ever made, and we’ve just lost our star!”

“How inconvenient for you,” I said coldly.

“Well, it is a consideration,” Heller said. He was squinting at me again, his dark eyes sharp and appraising. “Have you ever acted?” he asked abruptly.

“No,” I said.

“Would you like to?”

“What?” I frowned at him. “I’m trying to discuss—”

He interrupted me. “What if you were to finish the film? Take your sister’s place?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I snapped.

“We can’t re-shoot all the scenes she’s in,” Heller coaxed. “It would ruin us. We’ve got to use a double. But there’s still so many speaking parts. You could do it—you look like her, and you sound like her too, or close enough.”

“I have no interest in acting,” I said. “I came here to make arrangements for my sister. And to see justice done. I know how things are done here—I won’t allow this to be swept under a rug.”

“No one’s trying to sweep it under a rug!” Heller said, getting red in the face. “These sets are enormous, you have no idea. There’s hundreds of people all around. We had a hundred extras just for the battle scene.”

“And I notice security isn’t particularly tight,” I said, thinking of the guard reading his magazine.

Heller turned redder still. “There’s usually no need!” he cried. “This is hardly a common occurrence.”

I could see he was flustered and defensive, which seemed like the perfect time to make my request.

“My sister’s funeral will be held tomorrow at St. Mark’s cathedral,” I told him.

“I’m sure all of the crew will want to attend,” he said. “Your sister was very well-liked.”

He was trying to pacify me.

“I’ll need a check for eight hundred dollars to cover the expenses,” I said. “Made out to Forest Lawn Mortuary.”

“Eight hundred—” Heller sputtered.

My mother always told us that when you meet a hard man, you have to be harder. She used to say, *Strength only respects strength.*

“My sister was killed at your studio,” I repeated. “While filming your movie. I’m sure you don’t want her buried in a pine box in a pauper’s lot? What a story that would make for all those rabid reporters.”

Mr. Heller stared at me. He was flushed all the way up to the razor-straight part in his hair. But his dark eyes were still keen and calculating.

He took out his checkbook and an expensive-looking pen. He laid them on his desk and even uncapped the pen. But he did not immediately begin to write. After all, he hadn’t made it to the top echelons of Hollywood by taking the first deal offered.

“Of course I’d like to help with your sister’s funeral,” he said. “But I really think we could do so much more for her. You know what a big film this was for her—for all of us! *Arabian Nights!* A two-thousand-year-old story. It would have been the role of her lifetime—her legacy! We can’t let it go unfinished. Why don’t you and I make a deal? You take your sister’s place, finish the movie, and I’ll pay for the funeral, and give you a salary besides—a hundred dollars a week, what do you think of that?”

I thought it sounded bloody awful. I had no interest in appearing in a movie. In fact, the idea terrified me. It made me feel sick to my stomach.

I never thrived off attention like Clara did. I was always happy to let her have the spotlight, so I could watch and listen in peace.

However, what Mr. Heller had said was true—in the days since my sister’s death, the police seemed to have made little progress. No one saw anything, no one heard anything. If I intended to be sure that progress was made, that Clara’s

murder didn't simply become another gossip headline, crumpled up and forgotten when the next story broke, then I had to stay in California. I could harass the police much more effectively in person than over the phone.

And even better than that—if I worked on the set where Clara died, I could look around myself. I could meet people, I could ask questions.

I had no illusions that I could do detective work better than the professionals, but I would certainly be in a unique position to see or hear things they might miss.

I might be working with the very person who killed my sister.

That thought hit me like a blow—sudden and unpleasant.

If Clara was killed by a Paramount employee, then that person, most likely, was still coming to work each day as if nothing had happened.

If I refused to finish the movie, the crew might disband, they might be split up to work on a dozen new films spread across the city.

But if I agreed to take my sister's place, it might well be that whoever had killed Clara would have to stay exactly where they were, they would have to keep doing their job. They might even have to work side by side with me as they had once done with Clara. Maybe, just maybe, the stress and pressure of that scenario might crack the killer's facade.

I looked at Mr. Heller's round, ruddy face, his thin lips pressed tight together. He was trying not to look too eager.

Determined not to be bullied by him, I wouldn't agree too easily either.

"You paid my sister two hundred dollars a week," I said.

"Your sister was a professional."

I shrugged. "She wanted to do this. She didn't have responsibilities back in Chicago."

Mr. Heller twisted the cap of his pen.

"One-fifty a week," he said reluctantly.

“Agreed.” I nodded. “And don’t forget the check for the mortuary.”

Once we shook hands, and I had signed my name to a temporary work contract that Mr. Heller conjured out of nowhere with the speed of a magician, Heller became much more affable, even offering to book me a room at The Georgian Hotel, which he assured me would be much superior to the cheap motel I’d reserved.

“You’ll want to be close to the set,” he told me. “The Georgian is where everybody stays. Every room has a view of the ocean. You’ll love it.”

I guessed what he really wanted was to keep an eye on me. Maybe he thought I’d renege on our agreement as soon as the funeral finished.

There was no chance of that happening. But I was happy to let him spend the studio’s money on my room.

“Thank you,” I told him. “That would be nice.”

I strode out of the studio, equal parts pleased and terrified.

I’d gotten what I wanted out of Heller ... but I’d also committed myself to something that might be sheer insanity.

I passed the security guard in his booth. He still had his nose deep in his newspaper, barely glancing up as I walked by.

It was easy to hail a cab once I was out on the street. And the cabbie knew exactly where to find my hotel.

“This is it,” he said, pulling up in front of the steps. “The Georgian.”

He need hardly have announced it—the bright turquoise exterior would have been impossible to miss, even without the lemon-yellow trim and striped awnings.

The doorman came rushing out to take my suitcase. He was an older man, about sixty, skinny and wiry. I felt a little guilty handing over my heavy bag, but he heaved it up the steps easily enough. He introduced himself as Walter.

“Would you like a tour of the facilities?” he said. “We have a pool, a beauty parlor, a lounge ...”

“No thank you.” I shook my head.

The relentless glamor of Hollywood was making me feel low once more. I was exhausted from seeing Clara and then arguing with Mr. Heller.

Tomorrow would be the funeral. The next day, with no break at all, I’d start work on *Arabian Nights*. It had all happened so suddenly that it hardly seemed real.

Walter took me straight up to my room on the fifth floor. As Mr. Heller promised, I did indeed have a direct view of the ocean, flat and sparkling, dotted by distant white sails.

The room itself was small, but nicer in every way than my cheap apartment in Chicago. The furniture looked clean and new, the bedspread immaculate, and the walls papered in a pretty floral print.

I saw a large radio sitting on an end table, and a telephone with a cord that looked like it could stretch all the way across the room.

“Would you like me to show you how to switch that on?” Walter said, nodding to the radio.

“No thank you,” I said. “I’m sure I can figure it out.”

“There’s nobody in the room below you, so feel free to Jitterbug as much as you please.”

Walter gave me a little salute and left me alone in the room.

I flopped down on the tightly-stretched coverlet without even taking off my shoes. I knew I should probably brush my teeth and maybe even take a shower before I got too tired. But it felt too delicious to lay down.

There I was, with my cheek pressed against a fancy linen pillowcase, smelling the tang of salt in the air, hearing the distant rhythm of waves breaking against the shore. With no idea of when I’d be back in Chicago.

The stranger the pathway unfolding before me, the more I felt compelled to follow it. I wasn't a great believer in luck, but I did believe in opportunity.



I chose St. Mark's cathedral for Clara's funeral because it was one of the largest in the area. Still, I underestimated how many people would turn out to mourn the tragic and gruesome death of a starlet.

The chapel was so crammed with people that they stood six deep behind the pews, with many more crowded in the open doorways and down the stone steps out into the yard.

Reporters snapped pictures of every celebrity in attendance, shouting questions to the uniformed police officers directing the crowd as if they were at a press conference.

"Sheriff Biscailuz! Sheriff Biscailuz! Any leads yet?"

"None that we're willing to share with the public," the sheriff repeated again and again, his expression stoic.

"Is it true that you're looking into Ms. Bloom's ties to organized crime?" one young man shouted at the police chief.

I looked over in surprise. The young reporter was standing next to an elegant woman wearing a smart suede cap with an eagle feather trim. The woman had eyes that turned down at the corners and a mouth that turned up at the edges. She smiled toothily, calling out, "How about it, Chief? Are you looking at Ms. Bloom's boyfriend, Bugsy Siegel?"

The sheriff folded his arms across his chest. He was wearing a suit, not a uniform like the other officers.

"Ms. Hopper," he said in a calm and monotone voice, "we are currently following all avenues of inquiry, and that's all I have

to say on the matter.”

“So you *have* talked to Buggy?” Ms. Hopper persisted.

“We are talking to *all* Ms. Bloom’s friends and acquaintances,” the sheriff repeated.

“Don’t pay any attention to her,” Ruby Ikes said, taking my arm. “She writes for the *Times*. She’s a gossip columnist.”

Ruby had been sent over by Paramount that morning to help me with the funeral arrangements. She told me that she had been the one to find Clara’s body.

“It was the worst moment of my life,” she said, her big blue eyes full of tears behind her thick glasses.

Ruby was remarkably helpful—after all, her job was to fulfill the exacting and unreasonable demands of directors and actors on set. She had useful suggestions on how to seat the guests for the service, and who I should allow to say a few words on Clara’s behalf.

I had my own motives in placing myself at the front of the chapel, at an angle to the mourners. I wanted to watch their faces during the service. I wanted to see whose tears were real and whose might be fake. I’d be watching for signs of stress, guilt, or even glee.

When I first heard the news of Clara’s death, I felt a black hole of despair open up inside of me. A sucking vortex that took in all attempts at comfort and allowed no joy to escape.

But I had never been able to stay miserable for long. I was a practical person, a stubborn person. I liked to puzzle things over and pick them apart. That was why I’d always been good at languages—I never tired of the endless lists of nouns and verbs, conjugations and tenses.

As soon as I decided to stay in California, my focus shifted from mourning to seeking. I wanted to know who killed Clara. I wanted to see them punished.

I made sure that Ruby sat right next to me, so she could provide names for anyone who caught my attention.

Many of the attendees needed no introduction. Clara's co-star was seated right in the front row with his equally famous wife: Clark Gable and Carole Lombard. Gable looked suave and dapper, his mustache freshly trimmed. Ms. Lombard had her pretty blond curls pinned up under a stylish black hat with a veil. Though both looked somber and respectful, I noticed that they held hands throughout the service and that Ms. Lombard sometimes leaned her head on Gable's shoulder.

Next to them, another blonde actress sat sobbing and wailing in a manner that struck me as false. Though the girl borrowed a handkerchief from Mr. Gable and repeatedly dabbed her eyes with it, it never seemed to become damp.

"Who's that bawling over there?" I whispered to Ruby.

"That's Deedee Blanche," Ruby said. "She plays the Shahryar's daughter in the film."

I vaguely remembered Clara mentioning Deedee—she said she was a bit of a pill.

As I watched, Deedee cast a quick glance toward the photographers at the back of the church, checking to see if any had taken a picture of her looking prettily distraught.

I put Deedee on my mental list of people I needed to speak with.

Down the row from Deedee sat Mr. Heller with his wife and two young children. Next to them, a man that Ruby said was Barney Balaban, the president of Paramount. Ruby seemed surprised that Mr. Balaban had come—she didn't think he knew Clara personally.

"I suppose he thought it wouldn't look right if he didn't attend," Ruby said.

Apparently the director of the film, Mr. Cecil B. DeMille, didn't share the same concern. Ruby said he was at the studio, making arrangements for the scene we'd be shooting the next day.

"I know it's awful," she said. "But it's nothing personal to Clara. He's completely mad. He works twenty hours a day sometimes, and sleeps in his office."

“Did he and Clara get along?” I asked.

“As much as he gets along with anyone,” Ruby said, shrugging. “They had a few blow-ups, but they were the usual disagreements. He goes in a rage if you don’t do exactly what he wants for the scene. He fights with Mr. Gable the most, because Mr. Gable has his own ideas about his character and he doesn’t take orders very well.”

I winced, realizing that I might be on the receiving end of one of those blow-ups myself come the following day. In fact, it was almost certain, because I had no acting experience and was most likely about to make a complete fool of myself.

Seeing my face, Ruby said, “Don’t worry—I’m sure he won’t be so hard on you, since you’re just filling in.”

Her amendment wasn’t very convincing. I didn’t want to think about how I would soon be standing in front of a camera being hollered at by Mr. DeMille, so I went back to examining the attendees instead.

In the next row back sat a few more famous people that Ruby said all had contracts with Paramount and had worked with Clara before: two of the Marx Brothers, Bob Hope, and Dorothy Lamour. Next to Dorothy sat a skinny dark-haired girl that I recognized. The girl looked pale and wretched, with heavy circles under her eyes. It was Lillie LaShay, the other half of Clara’s comedy duo.

I had met her before, when I came to Los Angeles to visit Clara. We all ate lunch together at a cafe by the water. The last time Clara switched apartments, she and Lillie became roommates. In fact, I’d have to speak to Lillie about packing up Clara’s belongings.

The thought of that task made me feel sad and tired. But it would be good to speak to Lillie either way—she was close friends with Clara, and as her roommate, she would likely have a good idea of Clara’s activities in the months before her death.

I hadn’t forgotten Hedda Hopper’s assertion that Clara was involved with the gangster Bugsy Siegel. It might be tabloid

nonsense, but if there were any truth to it, Lillie would know.

Ruby mentioned a few other actors who would have wanted to come if they weren't out of the city on various projects.

"It doesn't matter," I assured her. "We can't even fit everyone who came today."

In a sort of self-organized hierarchy, behind the more famous and important mourners sat the other members of the cast and crew who had known and loved Clara: the camera operators, prop masters, makeup artists, costume designers, screenwriters, and so forth.

Ruby pointed out as many as she could before the service began, but it was difficult for me to keep all their names straight. I knew I'd meet most of them again once filming began, so I simply tried to attune myself to any odd behavior amongst the bunch.

The congregation sang the opening hymn—"All Creatures of Our God and King," as I'd chosen the day before. It was probably too cheerful for a funeral; a more typical choice would have been something like "Abide with Me," or "Lead Kindly Light," but Clara didn't like anything pious or mournful. The only part of the Bible she ever cared for was the part where God created the animals and Adam named them. Clara loved animals.

Father Brennan got up to speak. I was glad Mr. Campbell recommended him. The priest didn't take the opportunity to drone on in front of all these famous people, or to try to peddle his religion. Instead he spoke simply and kindly about the joy that Clara had brought to people's lives, what a great sorrow it was to lose her so soon, and how we should all take her best qualities as an inspiration for ourselves moving forward, so that her spirit and her influence might never die.

Then Mr. Heller got up to speak. He had "requested" that, via Ruby, when she brought the \$800 check that morning. Mr. Heller was not as eloquent or as selfless as Father Brennan—he seemed to be speaking primarily for the benefit of the horde of reporters clustered outside the open doors. He assured everyone that though Clara might be gone, *Arabian Nights*

would proceed on schedule, and it would indeed be Clara's masterpiece, well worth the price of a ticket to see in theaters in the fall.

Mr. Heller looked to Mr. Balaban for a nod of approval, then sat down.

I swallowed hard, because it was my turn.

I didn't like public speaking. In fact, in the fifth grade I fainted when my teacher made me recite the Pledge of Allegiance at a school assembly.

However, I was determined not to embarrass Clara, wherever she might be.

I took Heller's place at the podium.

My sister never cared for sentimentality, so I kept my eulogy simple and to the point.

"Clara was the bravest person I ever met," I said. "She came to Los Angeles with five dollars in her pocket, because she had ambition, determination, and confidence in herself. She was kind—all of you who knew her have, I'm sure, been recipients of that kindness."

I saw nods of agreement across the audience.

"She was talented—when you saw her on the screen, you couldn't take your eyes off her. She worked hard—she never would have come to set without her lines memorized, without having practiced a thousand times. She was the best sister I could ever have asked for. She took care of me, all our lives."

Here I had to pause, to stop my voice from breaking.

I looked down at the casket, which I had asked Mr. Campbell to close, so no one would stare at Clara in the horrible thick makeup intended to cover her swollen, purpled face, and the unflattering, unfashionable high-necked dress that Clara never would have tolerated in life, meant to conceal the ugly ligature marks around her throat.

"I will miss Clara forever," I said.

I stepped down from the dais and took my seat again. Father Brennan signaled the soloist to sing “Ave Maria,” and the pallbearers rose to carry Clara’s casket to the hearse, where it would be transported to Forest Lawn Cemetery.

As I exited the chapel, I felt a claw-like hand clutch my arm, long lacquered fingernails digging into my flesh. It was Hedda Hopper, the reporter with the eagle feather hat.

“Ms. Bloom!” she said. “I would love to set a time to meet with you this week. I hear you’re taking your sister’s place in *Arabian Nights*. How about an exclusive interview about your first film role, how you’re fulfilling your sister’s legacy, how you’re soldiering through your sorrow to make her proud?”

Though Ms. Hopper’s turned-down eyes gave her a sleepy, indolent expression, it didn’t fool me for a second. I could hear the clever quickness in her voice, and I saw how her eyes flicked over me from head to toe—noticing, most likely, the cheapness of my purse, the simplicity of my dress, and my threadbare gloves.

I had no interest in becoming the subject of one of Ms. Hopper’s articles. However, the woman was the queen of gossip. A trove of information. If Hedda wanted to question me, then I could question her in return.

“Alright,” I said. “I’m staying at The Georgian. I’ll call on you this week for an interview.”

“Excellent,” Ms. Hopper said, smiling.

“You’d better be careful with her,” Ruby said, following me down the walkway. “She’s a snake.”

“I’m sure she is,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean she can’t be useful.”

At that moment I saw Lillie LaShay trying to escape the crowds outside the cathedral.

“Lillie!” I cried, catching her slim arm. “Do you remember me?”

“Of course,” Lillie said. “We had lunch on the boardwalk with Clara.”

“That’s right.” I nodded.

Since I’d watched every one of Clara’s movies, I’d also seen many of Lillie LaShay’s performances. I was struck again with how different she appeared in person—nothing like her manic, hectic screen persona. As a comedy team, Clara supplied the quips while Lillie was more of a silent partner, her skills almost entirely physical.

I remembered one short in particular, where the girls played waitresses behind a soda counter, trying to make a massive order of banana splits for a child’s birthday party. Lillie kept slipping again and again on banana peels, her wild flailing flinging up scoop after scoop of ice cream that landed with perfect precision in its intended bowl. It looked crazed and accidental, but of course required an immense amount of acrobatic skill.

Standing in front of the cathedral, Lillie didn’t look coordinated in the slightest. She was skinny in the extreme, with gangly arms and legs, and long, paddle-like hands and feet. She had a narrow, elongated face, and a soft voice that rarely rose above a whisper. She could barely meet my eye as we spoke, preferring to look down at her own feet.

“Clara was your roommate, wasn’t she?” I asked her.

Lillie nodded.

“Would it be alright if I came by later this afternoon, to get some of her things?”

“Yes, of course,” Lillie said quietly.

“I can pay any rent Clara owed as well.”

“That’s not necessary,” Lillie said, shaking her head. “She didn’t owe anything.”

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll see you this afternoon, then.”

As Lillie hurried away, I thought she seemed nervous and awkward. But that’s also how she’d been when we went out for lunch with Clara, so it likely didn’t mean anything.



After I saw Clara's casket laid to rest at the Forest Lawn Cemetery, I stopped for a late lunch before heading over to Clara and Lillie's apartment.

I ate at the counter at Schwab's Drugstore on Sunset Boulevard, because it was close to Clara's flat and because Clara told me that all sorts of deals were done here by agents and producers.

The more time I spent in Hollywood, the more I was beginning to realize it was a world unto itself, with its own rules and norms. I wouldn't be able to discover anything as an outsider. I needed to immerse myself in it. Just like learning a language, I needed to understand the vocabulary and the subtle insinuations that would only be comprehensible to someone in the know.

I ordered a grilled cheese sandwich with tomato soup, pulling out a leather notebook from my purse. Clara had a very similar one—we bought them together at Marshall Field's the last time Clara came to visit me in Chicago. Clara used hers for appointments and phone numbers. I liked to make lists.

I began a new list now, entitled *Who Killed Clara?*

I had no background in investigation, but I'd read enough Sherlock Holmes novels to understand the basic principles of deductive reasoning.

I thought it might help to make a list of the types of people who might want to kill my sister.

1. A Stranger, A Maniac

It was possible that the person who killed Clara had been someone unknown, a man who just wanted to murder a pretty girl. He could have snuck into the studio lot, happened upon Clara first, and strangled her.

I didn't consider this the most likely option, because random killings were rare, and as far as I knew, no one had noticed a stranger on the Paramount lot. However, the killer might have remained unseen. And as Mr. Heller said, *Arabian Nights* had a large cast, a huge number of extras. The crew might have become used to seeing unknown persons wandering around.

2. A Crazy Fan

Clara was becoming increasingly famous. While she loved the letters she received from fans, some were more persistent than others. They sent her gifts as well—usually chocolates or flowers. But occasionally stranger things, like a freshly-baked banana cream pie, or a full set of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

I was aware that fans could become obsessed with actresses to a dangerous degree. Only the year before, a woman tried to shoot Shirley Temple during a radio performance of "Silent Night." Apparently the woman believed that Shirley had "stolen her daughter's soul," and thought the remedy was to assassinate the child star.

Clara had never mentioned anyone harassing her. But that was something I could confirm with Lillie.

I turned back to my list:

3. A Person Connected to Organized Crime

Ms. Hopper accused Clara of fraternizing with notorious gangster Bugsy Siegel. She asked the sheriff if he were looking at Siegel's gang as potential perpetrators of the murder. If Clara indeed had dealings with Siegel, which I considered a very big *if*, since Clara had never mentioned

anything of the sort, it was possible the gangster was responsible for her death.

Did gangsters strangle people quietly in hallways? I always pictured them driving by and shooting you out of the windows of their car. That had certainly been the *modus operandi* in the wild days of Prohibition. But from what I had read in the papers, they weren't behaving as brazenly as they had ten years prior. They might not want the publicity of killing a young starlet. So the method of the crime didn't necessarily rule them out.

Again, no one had seen a suspicious character lurking about the studio lot, but a practiced criminal might be even less likely to be spotted than some kind of maniac.

4. Someone on The Film Crew

To me, this seemed like a more likely scenario. Those were the people that Clara had been working with every day, the ones most likely to have a grudge against her. They were the ones that would have known where to find her, the people that would have passed unnoticed, going about their day as normal.

I needed to learn which crew members had been present the morning Clara had been killed.

5. A Friend or Acquaintance

I had no particular suspects to add to this category yet, but I wanted to consider all options.

In truth, the only friend of Clara's I had met was Lillie LaShay. She seemed too quiet and gentle to be a murderer. And Clara had nothing but the kindest things to say about her. She had loved working with Lillie, and seemed to like living with her, too.

Still, you never really knew what people were like, deep down inside. Isn't that what neighbors always said, when the police interviewed them in the wake of some horrific crime? *I can't believe it ... he seemed like such a nice, normal man ...*

Frowning and scribbling in my notebook, I added one last category:

6. *A Lover*

Also from reading the paper, I saw how many women met a violent end at the hands of their boyfriend, husband, or lover. Strangulation was an intimate and rageful way to murder someone. It fit the mode of a jilted or jealous lover.

As far as I knew, Clara hadn't been dating anyone recently, but she had certainly had her share of paramours in the past.

Clara dated a wide variety of men, from other actors, to handsome waiters, to established older men. Some had been married, and most of the relationships had been tempestuous in one way or another. It was not out of the realm of possibility that some had been criminals, like Hedda Hopper had said. Clara loved to meet people of all kinds. She liked excitement. Even danger.

So this was perhaps the most likely scenario of all.

Since Clara hadn't mentioned any of her recent boyfriends, I would have to figure out who they had been. That was the information I hoped to glean from Ms. Hopper.

I finished my lunch, tucking my little notebook back into my handbag. I paid the bill with coins from my purse, then walked the few blocks north from Sunset Boulevard to my sister's apartment on Hillcrest Road.

Clara had changed houses several times in the eight years she lived in Los Angeles. As her fortunes improved, she had moved from a squalid shared flat into this pretty Spanish Colonial-style building on the hillside. The words *Villa Bonita* were written across the facade in cursive, and ivy sprawled thickly across the stucco.

I took the elevator up to the apartment on the third floor. I knocked, and Lillie LaShay opened the door immediately, as if she'd been standing there waiting.

Lillie didn't appear any more at ease in her own home than she had outside the cathedral. She had changed out of the plain black dress she'd worn to the funeral. Now she wore a long cotton smock, which hung on her skinny frame under a knit cardigan.

"Thanks for letting me come by," I said. "You have a lovely home."

It was true—many of Clara's past apartments had been ramshackle messes, a jumble of second-hand furniture with dirty clothes and empty glasses piled on every surface. This was a proper home.

I saw a reading nook next to the window, with a Moroccan rug under the chaise lounge, and a small end table with a fringed lamp. More chairs clustered around a low table that carried a silver tray, a martini shaker, and clean glasses. The shelves were full of all sorts of books, both paperback novels and leather-bound volumes. On the walls, framed lithographs and prints.

Lillie looked pleased by my compliment—all this was undoubtedly her handiwork.

"This was Clara's room," she said, opening the first door off the hallway.

I expected to find the sort of mess I was accustomed to seeing from my sister, but instead the room was tidy and bare. It had an oddly sterile feel. There were no pictures on the wall, and the bed was made with tight, smooth corners. Only a few dresses hung in the wardrobe. The objects on the nightstand were neatly stacked—Clara's brush and mirror set, her music box, and her favorite book of poems by Emily Dickinson.

This struck me as odd because I knew, for instance, that Clara usually kept her music box in her underwear drawer. Had Lillie tidied the room because she knew I was coming?

"Here," Lillie said. "You can use these cartons for Clara's things."

She indicated a stack of small cardboard cartons, the kind that grocers used for apples or bananas.

She left me alone so I could pack up Clara's belongings. I slowly emptied the contents of the drawers into the boxes. Everything had been folded neatly away, something that Clara would never have bothered to do.

Something else strange: Clara's drawers contained fancy nylon stockings and new jewelry I'd never seen before. They could have been gifts from her admirers, but they looked expensive, and untouched. This discovery of riches was compounded when I fished Clara's bankbook out of her dresser drawer. The balance was almost \$3000. I saw regular deposits over the last few months, most in the amount of \$400.

Clara was making good money with her new contract at Paramount, but her expenses had always been high. I was surprised to see she had so much money saved. Plus, the deposits didn't really accord with her weekly paychecks from Paramount.

I slipped the bankbook inside my purse. Once I found Clara's leather notebook, I stowed it safely in the same place, intending to read through it once I was back at the hotel.

It didn't take long for me to finish packing up the room. When I came back out, I found Lillie making tea in the kitchen.

"I'll have this ready in just a moment if you'd like a cup," Lillie said in her soft, low voice.

"I'll just use the powder room, if that's alright," I said.

"It's at the end of the hall." Lillie pointed.

I didn't actually need the toilet at all.

What I really wanted, rudely, was to sneak a look at Lillie's room.

Lillie seemed both kind and sincere, and had been a friend of Clara's for a long time, but I had already decided that every person I met would be a suspect.

Instead of going into the powder room, I took the door to the left. Lillie's room was larger and more fully furnished than Clara's. It had more of the lived-in elements one would expect

—a dress flung over the back of a chair, a pair of shoes tossed in the corner, and a lap blanket hanging off the end of the bed.

A little silver bowl sat at the foot of the bed—the kind one might use to feed a dog or a cat. But there was no sign of a pet in the apartment.

And something else—as I examined the jumble of cosmetics atop the vanity, I spotted a lipstick that I was certain belonged to Clara. I opened it up. It was definitely *Summer Memories*, the color Clara always wore.

Emboldened, I quickly opened the top drawer of the dresser and looked through the underthings. Back in the corner, half-hidden, was a small perfume bottle I recognized. I had given it to Clara two Christmases ago: the scent Clara always wore, *Je Reviens*. I sniffed it to be certain.

Had Lillie stolen these things from Clara? Maybe Clara had loaned them to her, but I didn't think so—particularly not the perfume, which Clara considered her signature scent. She wouldn't have wanted anyone else to wear it.

Lillie and Clara had risen to fame together as a comedic duo. They started at the bottom, climbing the Hollywood ladder side by side. Then Clara, with her beauty and charm, floated up to a new level of stardom.

Was Lillie jealous? Had she taken Clara's cosmetics out of spite?

“What are you doing?” Lillie asked. She stood in the doorway, watching me.

I jumped, dropping the perfume bottle back in the open drawer. Face burning, I looked around for a plausible excuse why I had come into Lillie's room.

My eyes fixed on the framed photograph next to her bed.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I saw this picture as I was passing, and I was curious.”

Lillie crossed the room to pick it up. “That's my family,” she said.

She looked at the photograph for a moment, her dark eyes somber. Then she held the frame out to me so I could examine it more closely.

It was a black and white photo, a little faded. It showed a man and a woman, both plain and skinny like Lillie, and a little boy with Lillie's dark, curly hair. They were all dressed in suits and top hats in the exaggerated proportions common in vaudeville.

"Are they all performers like you?" I asked her.

"They were," Lillie said. "They were killed twelve years ago. Their train derailed outside Detroit."

"I'm so sorry," I said.

I did feel sorry. I could see the sadness in Lillie's face as she gazed at the photograph. It was as real as her unhappiness as Clara's funeral.

"It was a long time ago," Lillie said, setting the picture frame back down again. "The tea is ready."

I followed her back out to the living room. We sat in matching striped upholstered chairs, a small table between us. The tea set had a pretty blue rose pattern, old fashioned. Lillie made the tea strong and put out thick cold cream, sliced lemon wedges, honey, and sugar, as well as a small plate of cookies.

"Thank you," I said. "This is very kind."

Lillie sipped her tea silently. I got the impression that she didn't speak much unless it was necessary. But I didn't think Lillie was dull, not at all. The refinement of her home, the books on the shelves and the prints on the walls, all spoke of an intelligent mind.

"Lillie," I said, "you and Clara were close friends, weren't you?"

Lillie colored a little and looked down at the teacup in her lap.

"Yes, very close," she whispered.

"I found her bankbook in her drawer. She had more money than I expected. Do you know why that would be?"

Lillie glanced up sharply.

“I—I’m not sure,” she said. “I did think the same thing, the last month or two. I had to have a tooth out unexpectedly, and she insisted on paying for it. And for drinks and meals too.”

“But you don’t know where the money was coming from?” I asked.

“No.”

“Was it just the better contract with Paramount?”

“It could have been,” Lillie said slowly, “but she’d had that contract a year now. There seemed to be a difference more recently.”

“Could the money have been coming from a man?” I asked.

Lillie flushed again. “What do you mean?”

“I thought she might have a wealthy lover.”

“No. Definitely not.”

“Did she have any boyfriend at all? Had she been seeing anyone?”

“No,” Lillie said, “I’m quite certain she wasn’t.”

“Hedda Hopper said she was dating Bugsy Siegel.”

“What nonsense!” Lillie cried, the tea sloshing over the rim of her cup into the saucer below. “That old witch, she doesn’t know anything. She’s always making things up, trying to cause trouble. Always poking around.”

There were tears in Lillie’s eyes. She looked absolutely furious at the mention of Hedda. I didn’t want to push any further on that angle.

“So you’re certain Clara wasn’t seeing anyone?” I asked gently.

“Yes,” Lillie said. “I saw her every day, I would know.”

“Alright,” I said soothingly. “Thank you, Lillie. As I’m sure you know, I only want to find out what happened to Clara. I intend to find whoever hurt her, if the police don’t do it first.”

“They’re not even looking,” Lillie said bitterly. “They pretend that they are, because she was famous, but you know what

they think of actors and Hollywood people in general. They think we're all wild and likely to come to a bad end one way or another."

"Well it doesn't matter what they think," I said. "We're the ones who knew Clara, so we're the ones best suited to find out what happened to her. Will you help me?"

"Yes," Lillie said, nodding fervently, looking me in the face at last. "I will."

"You said she didn't have a boyfriend. What about an admirer? A fan, who maybe was a little too fixated on her?"

Lillie frowned, thinking. "She did get strange letters sometimes," she admitted.

"From any one person in particular?"

Lillie chewed her bottom lip, trying to remember. "There was this one ... I can't remember his name."

I waited patiently.

"He sent her ... a box of beetles."

"Beetles?" I said, in surprise.

"That's right. She didn't know what was inside, and when she opened it, they spilled all over her. They were still alive, most of them. She came home and showered for an hour."

Clara might have loved animals, but she wouldn't have enjoyed a lap full of beetles, not in the slightest.

"Was the package sent here, or to the studio?"

"All the fan mail goes to Paramount," Lillie said.

I would have to ask Ruby, then—she might know who had sent the beetles.

"Did the same person send Clara jewelry?" I asked. "Or stockings?"

Lillie frowned, her head tilted to the side.

"What do you mean?" she said.

“I saw earrings in her drawer, and fancy silk stockings. They hadn’t been taken from the box. So I thought maybe they were sent by someone she didn’t like ...”

“I ... well ...” Lillie faltered. “Maybe,” she said, looking down at her tea again.

It was so hard to read her. Sometimes I felt like I could trust her completely, and at other moments, she skittered off in a direction I couldn’t follow.

“I’ve heard of fans doing crazy things,” I said. “I read about the woman who almost shot Shirley Temple ...”

“The fans aren’t the ones you have to worry about,” Lillie said darkly.

“What do you mean?”

“The ones who prey on you most are the agents, the directors, the producers,” Lillie said, a spark of anger in her dark eyes. “The things they did to Shirley, from the time she was a toddler ... dressing her up as a burlesque dancer at four years old. Making her dance on a broken foot. Forcing her to work the day after they lanced her eardrum. Those kids are just assets, like anyone else ...”

She set her tea down on the little table next to her, mostly untouched.

“You know Charles Lamont?” she said.

I nodded. He was a prolific filmmaker who often worked with child stars.

“He keeps this soundproof black box. It’s called the ‘punishment box.’ Six feet long, like a coffin, but taller, with a block of ice at one end. If the children don’t behave how he likes, he locks them in the box. They have to stand there shivering, or else sit on the ice if he’s really wound up. Even Shirley Temple was locked in the box.”

I stared at her, open-mouthed. Despite all I’d heard from Clara about the sleazy side of Hollywood, I never would have guessed it applied to the princess of the silver screen, little miss Bright Eyes herself.

“It’s true,” Lillie said, softly. “This is an ugly place, for all its beauty.”

“Did Mr. Heller do anything to Clara?” I said. “Or Mr. DeMille?”

“I don’t know,” Lillie said. “I don’t know if she’d tell me if they did. There isn’t an actress in this city that hasn’t at least been groped or propositioned, or had to jump over a desk to avoid a man who won’t take no for an answer. Anita Colby—she’s an artistic director—told me that when she worked on *Gone with the Wind*, the producer David Selznick had a little button hidden under his desk. It was a switch that locked his office door. He could press it to trap you in the room with him, so you couldn’t get away.”

My head was spinning.

I was starting to think that Clara had shielded me from the reality of her life in Los Angeles, as she’d always tried to protect me when we were small. I still believed she loved working here. But it wasn’t necessarily the dream-come-true that I’d imagined.

At first I had wondered how I’d find any suspects. Now I was afraid I had too many. In a den of vipers, how could you ever know which one had bitten?

Slowly, I said, “Well, you’ve given me a lot to think about. Thank you, Lillie. I won’t take much more of your time. But if you can think, was there anything else strange with Clara over the last few months? Anything at all?”

“Well ...” Lillie did think, for two or three minutes. Then at last she said, “She was sick. You know her asthma?”

“Yes.” I nodded. Clara had suffered from it from the time we were little. It was worse when we lived in the city, a little better when we stayed on our aunt’s farm.

“All the smoking on set and at parties bothered her. It was getting worse. She was coughing, sometimes so much she would vomit.”

“Did she see a doctor about it?”

“I told her she should,” Lillie said. “But she was worried about the studio finding out about it. She had the contract negotiation, and then she wanted the lead in *Arabian Nights*. You know they treat us like racehorses—the slightest flaw and you’re ruined.”

“She didn’t tell me that either,” I said, my stomach sinking. I always thought Clara and I were so close, but the more I was digging into my sister’s life, the more I was realizing that Clara had secrets.

And so does Lillie, I thought, as I thanked her for the tea, and exited her apartment at last.

I believed that Lillie cared about Clara, but I also felt that she was hiding something. So for that reason, before I hailed a cab outside the building, I took out my little notebook and made a new list, entitled *Suspects*.

First on the list I wrote:

Lillie LaShay.



Though it was getting late in the day and I was tired, I went directly from Lillie's apartment to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office.

I had spoken with the police over the phone several times. From their vague and disorganized manner, I felt the same as Lillie—that they weren't taking the investigation of Clara's death seriously. I intended to go there in person to make my position plain.

I asked to speak to Sheriff Biscailuz but was informed that he was busy.

"That's fine," I told the officer behind the reception desk. "I'll sit here to wait."

Wait I did, for over an hour.

I spent the time watching every officer that came in and out, how they interacted with one another, how they looked over at me and whispered amongst themselves. A few gave me the type of appreciative glance always given by men who don't work much around women. Others seemed to know who I was.

One officer seemed to be watching me more than anyone, though not with the same disdainful or leering manner of the others. He was on the younger side, with a lean, wolfish face, and shaggy, sun-bleached hair. He had his jacket off, slung over the back of his chair, and his sleeves rolled up so he could write more freely. He was making notes in a folder by hand, ignoring the typewriter on his desk.

The next time he looked over at me, I met his gaze and held it, frowning slightly. He locked his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair, giving me a slow, lazy smile that showed teeth much nicer than the rest of his appearance.

I didn't want to smile back at him. Not at all. But his grin was so genuine that it was hard not to respond. I felt the corner of my mouth twitching, and I had to look away from him quickly.

At that moment Sheriff Biscailuz came out of his office, with no suggestion of hurry. He was still wearing his suit from the funeral. Maybe he dressed that way every day. He seemed like someone who spent most of his time in the office, not in the field.

He had thick black eyebrows, spectacles, and an expression of unflappable calm.

"Ms. Bloom," he said politely, "how can I help you?"

"I'm here to get information about the investigation into my sister's murder," I said.

He raised those heavy eyebrows. "Come in my office," he said.

As I seated myself before his desk, the sheriff said, "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I'm fine, thank you," I said.

He sat down, folding his hands on the desk in front of him.

"Ms. Bloom," he said, "I'm sure you're very upset over your sister's death."

"Obviously," I said, startling him a little.

"But," he pressed on, "it would neither be appropriate, nor conducive to the investigation for me to provide details to anyone, even yourself."

"I disagree," I said.

"You ... disagree?"

"Yes. Did you know I'll be taking my sister's place in the film? I'll be working on the same set where she was killed."

The sheriff's thick brows contracted into a single line. They were stern and intimidating, the only point of expression on his otherwise taciturn face. I thought he must use them to great effect on suspects and subordinates. Right now they seemed to express how little he thought of my plan.

"I think I'll be in a good position to gather information," I said.

"That's not your job," Sheriff Biscailuz said. "That's *our* job."

"Of course." I nodded. "But still, I think it would be helpful if we communicated. For instance, when going through my sister's things, I noticed that Clara had more money than I would have expected. That's an interesting piece of information, don't you think?"

The sheriff didn't seem to find it interesting at all.

"She was an actress," he said flatly. "I hear they get paid pretty well. Better than us cops."

I tried a different tack.

"I'm the only family Clara had," I said. "I have a right to know what happened to her."

"As I believe one of my officers told you, she was strangled."

"How? In what way?" I demanded.

The sheriff stared at me with the slight look of disgust that men always gave when they didn't think you were being ladylike.

"We don't know exactly," he said. "According to the coroner's report, some type of ligature was used."

"And that was her only injury?" I asked. "She wasn't hurt in any other way?"

"No," the sheriff said. "It would appear that she was taken by surprise."

"So she was strangled, and that was all?" I persisted. "She wasn't ... she wasn't interfered with?"

That was a possibility that had preyed on my mind. If my sister had been raped, I doubted the police would tell me.

I wanted to know the truth. No matter how bad it might hurt.

“Not as far as we can tell,” the sheriff said.

I scowled at him, searching his face for signs of misplaced consideration. The sheriff didn’t look considerate. Only annoyed.

“Have you interviewed everyone who was at Paramount that day?” I asked.

“We’re still in the process,” the sheriff said.

“What about Bugsy Siegel? Ms. Hopper said—”

He cut me off. “I’m not going to discuss the ongoing aspects of the investigation with you,”

“But—”

“Ms. Bloom, I have sympathy for you. I have a sister myself, and a daughter. But you are not a detective. Allow us to do our job, and don’t interfere.”

He stood up, opening the door to his office to usher me out.

It was pointless to argue. I gathered up my bag and left. I could feel eyes on my back, and I heard a few of the officers muttering to each other. One even let out a low, derisive whistle.

I stomped out to the street, hot with frustration. I had no friends in Los Angeles. No one I could even vent to, let alone ask for help.

Clara was the person I always called when I needed to talk.

I was hit with a fresh wave of missing her. Another realization of what I had lost.

I wondered how many times it would strike me. Again and again, like the ocean hitting the beach. Waves of grief, trying to wear me down like sand.

I hadn’t gotten far down the street when I realized someone was following me. I heard footsteps jogging after me, quick

and light.

I turned around, seeing the officer with the rolled-up sleeves, the one who had smiled at me. He was still without his jacket, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“What do you want?” I asked him rudely.

I was disappointed with how my conversation with the sheriff had gone. I hadn’t managed to get any new information. The cops seemed arrogant and disinterested.

“It’s getting dark,” the officer said. “I thought I should get a cab for you.”

“I’m perfectly capable of hailing a taxi,” I said.

“Sure,” he replied easily. “I just felt bad for you. The sheriff’s alright, but he can be a bit of a hardass.”

The officer had pale blue eyes and tanned skin. He wasn’t exactly handsome, but he had the kind of lean, rangy body that made me think he could probably move quickly when he wanted to. I could see the muscle and sinew running down his bare, brown forearms. He also had that highly attractive smile, which he was attempting to use on me once more.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

“Jack Woods,” he said.

“Well, Officer Woods—”

“It’s Patrol Sergeant Woods, actually,” he said.

“Patrol—”

“Jack’s fine, though.”

“Jack.”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me, are the police actually taking this investigation seriously? Is Sheriff Biscailuz actually expending the full effort of your office to find out who killed my sister?”

“Well,” Jack said, “yeah. But the trouble is, we’re not the LAPD. Hollywood is under the jurisdiction of the sheriff’s

department and we don't have the same kind of resources. That's why a lot of things go on here that you wouldn't see in other parts of Los Angeles."

"Really," I said. I was surprised by his honesty.

"Yeah, it's kind of a circus—if the monkeys were in charge and the tigers were roaming around free. I just finished a case, though," Jack said. "I could ask to be put on this one."

"Why would you do that?" I asked.

"I want to find out what happened to your sister, too. I'm a curious guy. Ninety percent of the time, when somebody knocks somebody off, it's pretty obvious what happened. Cheating husband and the wife still has the gun in her hand. House burns down a week after somebody takes out an insurance policy. Most people aren't that creative. This one might actually take some work."

I didn't appreciate his flippant attitude, but nobody else was lining up to help me.

"You think they'll put you on the case?" I said.

"Nobody else wants it. It's high profile enough that you'll look bad if you don't solve it, but no one's pulling strings to get top brass on it."

I stared at him, trying to figure him out. He was blunt—almost too honest, which I didn't expect from a cop. Forward, but also relaxed, like he didn't really care whether I accepted his offer of help or not. His pale eyes peered out intently from his tanned face, keen and fierce, like a husky.

"Alright," I said. "So you'll help me?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Good. I want to see the autopsy report."

He laughed. "Buy me dinner before you take advantage of me," he said.

"I'll buy you breakfast. I want to see it first thing tomorrow before I have to go into work."

He thought about it, then shrugged his shoulders.

“Alright. I’ll sneak it out when I leave tonight.”

“Perfect. See you tomorrow, at seven. The Brightwater Cafe.”

“What about that cab?” Jack asked.

“I told you, I can get one myself.”

“Alright,” he said, turning back around toward the police station, strolling back the way he came. “Night, Ms. Bloom,” he called over his shoulder.

I didn’t answer, but I did find myself smiling, now that Jack wasn’t there to see.



The next morning I waited at the Brightwater Cafe, wondering if Sergeant Woods would come, and if he'd actually bring the autopsy report. I couldn't get a firm read on him—if he was genuine, or simply a flake.

I came to the cafe early, too nervous about the obligations of the day to sleep in. Still, I didn't have long to wait. At ten minutes to seven, Jack Woods strolled through the door, a folder tucked under his arm. He hadn't shaved. There was blond scruff all over his lean face. But when he came closer I could smell shampoo and soap—plain, clean and masculine.

"Is that all you're eating?" he asked, pointing to my coffee and untouched croissant.

I didn't want to admit how anxious I was at the idea of taking Clara's place on set.

"It's plenty," I said shortly.

Jack ordered bacon and eggs with toast, coffee, and fruit.

"Let's see the folder," I said.

"The notes are dense," Jack said. "Let me know if there's any abbreviations that don't make sense."

The pages were, indeed, full of cramped inky handwriting. I saw a diagram of a generalized female body, upon which were marked the specific injuries Clara had suffered. The strangulation was indicated by an ugly slash mark in red ink.

Subject: caucasian female, 28 years old.

Cause of death: anoxic encephalopathy as a result of strangulation.

No evidence of defensive wounds.

Abrasions on throat in pattern of horizontal circumscription indicate the use of a ligature. Internal damage to tissues of neck indicates moderate to strong level of force applied to ligature. Hyoid bone fractured.

Superficially incised curvilinear abrasions also present on throat, likely from victim's own fingernails while trying to remove ligature.

Extensive petechia visible above strangulation point, as well as conjunctiva of the eyes.

“Does it all make sense so far?” Jack asked gently.

“I—I think so,” I said, my voice shaking slightly. “Curvilinear abrasions ... they’re saying that my sister clawed at her throat, trying to get the cord off.”

“Yes,” Jack said. “That’s right.”

I took a deep breath. My stomach was heaving. Clara had been terrified of suffocating. That’s what she used to say, when she had an asthma attack: *I’m choking, I’m choking*. She would curl up in a ball and clutch her throat and gasp and gasp for air. To think that she died that way, desperately trying to breathe ... I would have preferred almost anything else.

I was about to turn the page, but Jack put his hand over mine to stop me.

“Wait,” he said. “There’s something else ... I read the report last night, when I got home. Did you know that Clara was pregnant?”

“Preg—she was pregnant?”

Shaking off his hand, I turned the page, scanning down.

At time of death, subject was pregnant. Examination of fetus indicates approximate 12-16 weeks duration. Fetus left in place. Child was female.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me before I buried them?” I demanded, furious.

“I don’t know if the sheriff had the coroner’s report yet,” Jack said. “And if he did ... when the victim is unmarried, we often don’t tell the family. It just makes things worse for everyone.”

“You had no right,” I hissed.

My brain was in an uproar.

Clara had been pregnant.

That meant she had a boyfriend after all. If she lived, she would have had a daughter. I would have been an aunt.

At three or four months along, Clara surely knew about the baby. Why hadn’t she told me? Was she embarrassed? She should have known that I would never have judged her.

“I’m sorry,” Jack was saying. “I know it’s a terrible thing to find out.”

“That she was pregnant?” I snapped.

“No,” Jack said, holding up his hands to ward off my fury. “I meant it’s terrible that the baby died too.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my clenched-up stomach.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t mean to be so touchy.”

“I understand,” Jack said with a sympathetic look. “It’s your sister.”

I dropped my eyes to read the remainder of the report.

Gastric contents unable to be examined. Subject may not have eaten that day, or may have vomited previously.

Animal hair found on subject’s shoe. Could be canine.

Trace amounts of soot found in subject’s hair and on her right arm.

Liver temperature taken at 4:28 pm, March 2nd. Time of death estimated between 11:00 am—1:00 pm, March 2nd.

“Why such a wide range of time?” I asked, pointing it out to Jack.

“It’s just an estimate,” he said. “Ruby found the body—found Clara I mean—at about 12:40. It took the paramedics another twenty minutes to get there—they were out on another call. But I would guess she was killed close to 12:30, because people had been in and out of that hallway frequently, and Ruby said she was still warm when she touched her, as warm as you or I. She thought Clara might still be alive until Lucille Verranski checked for a pulse.”

“Lucille ...”

“Clara’s makeup artist.”

“Oh. But nobody saw or heard anything.”

“No one’s admitted to it so far,” Jack said. “Granted, we could only interview the crew that afternoon. Heller was putting pressure on Sheriff Biscailuz to get the cops out of the studio. We roped everything off. It shut down a bunch of other sets that were filming, not just *Arabian Nights*. Anyway, now that I’m on lead, I want to go back and pin down exactly who was there and what they were doing when Clara was killed.”

“So you’re officially assigned?” I asked him.

“Yeah, but don’t get too excited—it’s just me, and then Sergeant Palmer part-time. And Palmer’s an idiot.”

Sergeant Palmer was the one who called me in Chicago. He definitely hadn’t made the best impression on me, bumbling through his explanation of what had happened to my sister.

“I’m starting work today,” I said. “On set. What do you think I should keep an eye out for?”

“Dynamics,” Jack said. “Who seems shifty, who seems uncomfortable around you. Who’s whispering together, who’s avoiding you. But don’t be too obvious about it. Better if nobody knows that you’re looking. Act like you’re just there to finish your sister’s movie.”

I nodded. I’d been thinking the same thing. I had already told my real purpose to Lillie LaShay, but Lillie wasn’t working on

Arabian Nights, so hopefully it would stay between us.

“Well,” I said, “I’d better go. I don’t want to be late. Thank you for bringing this, Sergeant Woods.”

I handed the autopsy folder back to him.

“No problem,” he said. “Keep in touch, and I’ll do the same.”



I ARRIVED at the Paramount Pictures studio lot at 8:25 am. Ruby was already waiting for me by the security guard’s booth. Today the guard was reading *Of Mice and Men* and eating a sandwich.

Ruby was wearing wide-leg wool pants with braces, which I supposed was her usual attire for work—more practical than a skirt. She had her straw-colored hair pulled into two childish plaits, and she wore her round-rimmed spectacles as usual.

“What will we be doing today?” I asked her nervously.

“No filming until tomorrow,” Ruby said. “Today we’re just going to get you ready.”

“You mean, rehearse lines or something?” I said.

“Not exactly,” Ruby said.

We walked past a couple of productions in progress: one set in an artificial kitchen, where all the food looked impossibly glossy and bright, and another made to look like an art studio, complete with canvases in the slightly distorted Expressionist style I had seen in galleries in Chicago.

It was incredible how these sets looked like a normal room, but completely open on one side to allow for the movement of the crew and the cameras. It was like a dollhouse, but life-sized.

Each shoot had its own distinct crew working rapidly and efficiently together. Ruby explained that most of the time, the crew stayed together through multiple productions. They might swap a member here or there, but when a crew was

working well together, they tried to maintain consistency as much as possible.

“That’s also true with the actors and writers and directors,” Ruby said. “If a film does well with a certain pairing, then the studio will try to reunite them for more movies. Like Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland for example—Warner Brothers put them together for *Captain Blood* and it made a boatload of money. So they figured, ‘This is great, these two are a sure thing,’ and they stuck them together again for *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Whaddaya know, it’s the biggest movie of the year. Errol and Olivia did a couple of films apart, then they made *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Instant smash again! The movie biz is all about surprising the audience a little bit, but mostly giving them what they want.”

“Like Clara and Lillie LaShay,” I said. “They made fifteen films together, if you count the shorts.”

“That’s right,” Ruby said. “Of course, it only works if the actors get along.”

“Did Clara and Lillie always get along?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” Ruby said. “They were best friends. I hardly ever saw them apart, until they started working on different movies. Even then, they always met for lunch if they could.”

“Do you think Lillie was upset? When Clara started making movies without her?” I said.

“Not that I ever noticed,” Ruby said. “There was one time I saw Clara crying about something. This was when we first started filming *Arabian Nights*. It was between scenes and Lillie had stopped by to see her. But Lillie had her arm around Clara, she was comforting her. So I never saw any resentment between them.”

“Hmm.” It fit with what I knew. Clara never complained about Lillie to me. “What does a movie like this make, Ruby? What’s the profit on something like *Robin Hood* or *Arabian Nights*?”

“I don’t know the profit exactly, once you take out all the expenses,” Ruby said. “But they gross about one to two

million in America, and about the same again overseas.”

“That’s a lot of money,” I said.

“It sure is.”

“And it costs a lot to make a film like *Arabian Nights*.”

“A whole hell of a lot,” Ruby said fervently.

“So Paramount would have lost a bundle if they couldn’t replace Clara.”

“Well ...” Ruby said, “I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, they have insurance on all the main actors. Especially for a movie this big. Mr. Heller got a pretty hefty payout when Clara was killed.” Ruby looked around to make sure no one was close. “I heard it was almost \$100,000.”

“But the movie will make a lot more than that,” I mused.

“Sure, unless it’s a flop.” Ruby said, hastening to add, “But it won’t be!”

Did it make sense to kill your star to collect the insurance? Maybe it did, if you thought the movie was going to fail. Or maybe it did if the film was close enough to finished that you thought you could complete it either way.

Who did the payment go to exactly? Did it fall into the Paramount Pictures coffers, or could it be skimmed by an individual? Like Mr. Balaban, the current president, or maybe Mr. Heller himself?

I couldn’t follow that train of thought any further, because we’d arrived at a row of trailers. I could see various names on the doors as we passed: Gable, Blanche, O’Neil, Bloom.

They won’t have to change the nameplate for my trailer, I thought. Clara had never used a stage name.

“Who’s O’Neil?” I asked Ruby.

“He plays the Vizier,” Ruby said. “The villain in *Arabian Nights*. Trenton O’Neil is an old stage actor—he’s worked

with Mr. DeMille for a long time. He writes scripts sometimes too.”

Ruby unlocked the door to the trailer with “Bloom” on the door.

“Wait here,” she said. “I’m going to grab Lucille and Freida.”

She returned a few minutes later with two women: Lucille Verranski, who had tinted red hair and a perfectly painted Cupid’s-bow mouth in a wide, creamy face, and Freida Kantor, who was tall and slim, rather beautiful in a severe way, with her unfashionably-long hair pinned up around her head like a crown.

Ruby explained that Lucille was a makeup artist, and Freida the head costume designer.

“What do you think?” Ruby asked the two women.

They examined me critically.

“We’ll have to cut her hair, and color it,” Lucille said.

“She’s taller,” Freida said. “But I can alter the costumes.”

“Let’s get to it, then,” Ruby said. “Mr. DeMille wants to start shooting her scenes by tomorrow.”

None of them asked my opinion on these alterations, but after all, it’s what I agreed to when I signed the contract with Mr. Heller.

Freida took my measurements first. She used a seamstress’s tape, which hung round her shoulders like a snake charmer’s pet. She wrapped the band around my chest, waist, hips, thighs, upper arms, even my calves, noting each measurement to the millimeter but not bothering to write any of it down, simply remembering each one.

“You’re bigger than your sister,” she said brusquely, removing the tape.

“Clara was always skinny,” I said, feeling guilty all the same. I had an athletic build, not the slim hourglass-figure that was currently popular.

“I know,” Freida said. “I’ve made costumes for your sister for three films.”

“Did you?” I asked, curiously. “Did you make the dresses Clara and Lillie LaShay wore in *Rich Girl, Poor Girl*?”

That was one of my favorite movies, not least because the gowns Clara had worn as the titular “rich girl” had been as colorful and fanciful as confectionary.

“I made Clara’s costumes,” Freida said. “Lillie makes her own. She doesn’t allow anyone else to dress her.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Anyway,” Lucille said, returning to the main point, “don’t worry about the difference in size. It won’t make much difference on film. You can make things look any way you like for a movie. Like if an actor’s not tall enough, we just have him stand on a box. Mae West had special shoes made, sort of a shoe on top of a shoe, ten inches high! From a distance they looked normal, she had them in all kinds of colors.”

“Maybe you’ll stand in a ditch,” Freida said.

I couldn’t tell if she was joking.

Freida hurried off to begin work on the costumes, and Lucille took me to an outdoor sink where she could color and rinse my hair. She had a barber’s chair with a mirrored vanity all set up, like a beauty parlor out in the California sunshine.

“Is it always like this?” I asked, looking up at the flawless blue sky, unmarked by a single cloud.

“Only three hundred days a year,” Lucille said with a laugh.

“That’s about two hundred more than Chicago,” I said. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s a great city. So much history and culture—I mean, by American standards. I guess in Europe they wouldn’t say a city had history unless it was a thousand years old.”

“Those thousand-year-old cities might not be standing much longer,” Lucille said somberly, as she mixed up the hair dye in a little dish. “I wish I would have visited Paris when I had the chance. Who knows how long it will be until I can go now. Or what will be there.”

“Hopefully not the German eagle,” I said.

Lucille began to paint sections of my hair with the dark dye. I had never colored my hair before. Its natural shade was a sort of deep honey, not as trendy as the platinum-blondes you saw so often, but I liked it well enough.

Lucille let the color sit, then rinsed it out. She began to trim and shape my hair, using heated tongs to approximate Clara’s natural wave.

“There,” she said at last.

She turned me to face the mirror. We both stared, amazed and slightly horrified at what she had done.

“God in heaven,” Lucille said, laughing nervously. “We’ve brought Clara back.”

She had certainly increased the likeness very much. She had captured Clara’s hair color exactly: black, but not a flat, dull black—a vibrant, living, multifaceted black. The contrast of that dark color somehow changed the appearance of my eyes, which were normally golden brown, bringing out the bits of green in them.

I could have stared at myself for an hour. I wanted to try to smile like Clara did, mysterious and mischievous. Then it really would be like seeing my sister again. But I didn’t want to attempt it with Lucille watching.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” Ruby cried, putting her hand over her heart. She had come back from whatever errand she was running for Mr. DeMille. “You’re a miracle worker, Lucille.”

“She’ll pass,” Lucille said modestly. “Especially once we put the makeup on her.”

“I brought the script for tomorrow,” Ruby said, passing a stack of loose sheets over to me. “I marked your lines with pen, the ones you have to memorize.”

I flipped through the pages nervously.

“Don’t worry,” Ruby said. “There’s not too many. I wanted Mr. Gable to read through them with you this afternoon, but Mr. DeMille has him filming a scene with the Vizier. Mr.

O’Neil, I mean. He likes for us to call him the Vizier all the time. He says he has to stay in character.”

“Is that everything for today, then?” I asked. I was thinking there was someone else I’d like to meet up with, if I had time.

“Yes,” Ruby said, “Come back early tomorrow, eight am. Mr. DeMille wants to start filming by ten, and it takes a while to get everything ready.”

“I’ll be there,” I promised.

I checked my watch—only 11:48. If I hurried, I could probably catch Hedda Hopper on her lunch break.



I called up to Hedda's office at the *Los Angeles Times*, and Hedda eagerly agreed to meet me at a small Italian restaurant across the street.

I guessed Hedda chose that particular place not only because it was close to her office, but because each of the high-backed padded booths was almost entirely enclosed from those around it, providing privacy for Hedda's sources to spill their secrets.

Through the plate-glass window, I saw Hedda hurrying across the street, as if she were afraid I'd change my mind and run away. Hedda hadn't taken the time to put on her feathered hat, but she was smartly dressed in a silk blouse with a large bow at the neck, a pearl necklace and earrings, a wool skirt, and expensive-looking stockings with seams up the back. Her brown hair was as freshly waved as if she'd just been to the salon that morning.

As she came inside the restaurant and waved to me, I saw that she wore too much makeup. Her painted cheeks and lips, combined with those drooping eyes, gave her the look of a sad clown. Hedda reminded me of the girls I knew who were not popular at school, but desperately wanted to be.

I felt an uncomfortable swoop of sympathy and reminded myself not to be swayed by it. I had to be careful. Hedda hadn't become one of the top gossip columnists in the country by accident.

"Goodness, look at you!" Hedda exclaimed, taking the seat across from me.

“Oh, yes,” I touched my newly waved and colored hair. I’d forgotten about it already.

“You look much more like her now,” Hedda said. “I take back what I wrote this morning, that having you replace your sister would be a disaster. Though I suppose you could still be awful at acting,” she added cheerfully.

Our waiter approached, balancing two glasses of water on a tray.

“Do you want food?” Hedda asked me.

“No, I’m fine,” I said. “Just a coffee please.”

I preferred to eat later—I wanted to focus on my conversation with Hedda.

“Same for me,” Hedda told the waiter, waving him away. “You don’t keep this figure eating spaghetti for lunch.”

She smiled at me across the table, cocking her head slightly to the side as she sized me up. “I’m so glad you decided to call me!” she said.

“I think we can be helpful to each other,” I replied. “But I want to make myself clear—I’m not interested in being written about personally. I solely want information. If you answer my questions, I’ll answer yours. That’s the trade.”

“Certainly.” Hedda nodded, clasping her hands together on the table in front of her. “But you go first, my dear. What do you have to tell me?”

I took a deep breath. I had agonized over this all night. I hated to betray Clara’s trust to Hedda Hopper, but what was more important? Clara’s secrets ... or finding her killer?

“Clara was pregnant at the time of her murder,” I said at last.

Hedda actually gasped. Her excitement was palpable, but she didn’t want me to see it. In a moment she had recovered her composure, smiling as serenely as ever.

“She was? How do you know?”

“It was in the autopsy report,” I said.

“What else did it say?”

“Just that the cause of death was strangulation. And that Clara was about four months along.”

“That poor, innocent baby,” Hedda said, with no trace of sincerity. I ignored her, pressing on.

“What I want to know is, who was the father?”

“Who indeed?” Hedda said, tapping a long, lacquered fingernail against her chin.

She paused while the server returned with a pot of coffee, filling the mugs that had already been sitting upside down on small saucers at the table.

“Cream, ladies?” he asked in a heavily accented voice.

“No thank you,” I said, and Hedda waved him away again.

“You were saying?” I prodded.

“Well,” Hedda mused, “I don’t know for certain of course, but I have a few ideas.”

“Tell me,” I said.

“Bugsy Siegel, to start.”

“You told Sheriff Biscailuz that you thought there was a connection between him and Clara.”

“I don’t think it, I know it.”

“How?”

“I’ve seen the two of them together at the Trocadero, and at Santa Anita Park.”

“What are those?”

“Mind if I smoke?” Hedda asked.

I hated the smell of smoke, but I wanted to keep Hedda chatty, so I said, “Go ahead.”

Hedda took a silver case from her purse and extracted a long, slender cigarette. She lit the tip and puffed delicately with the cigarette resting between her index and middle fingers.

“The Trocadero is a supper club—black tie,” she said, “It’s the place to be seen for celebrities and gangsters. Santa Anita Park is the racetrack in Arcadia.”

“And you’ve seen Clara and Bugsy Siegel together, in both those places?”

“Yes, I have. I’ve seen Clara at Bugsy’s table at the Trocadero at least three or four times, and just a couple of weeks ago she was sitting in his box during the Santa Anita Derby.”

“Did they seem like they were together?” I asked. “I mean, were they kissing or holding hands or anything like that?”

“Well, Bugsy Siegel is married, so I don’t know if he’d be so brash at an event as public as the derby,” Hedda said. “Though maybe he would. God knows those gangsters have a dozen mistresses each and no shame whatsoever.”

“But you didn’t actually see them being romantic.”

“No,” Hedda said. “Still, I think the implication is clear. Bugsy doesn’t keep pretty girls around for the scintillating conversation.”

“Okay,” I said. “Bugsy is some big-time gangster. So what’s he doing in Hollywood?”

“Same thing his type does everywhere they go,” Hedda said. “Gambling, prostitution, protection rackets.”

“He’s part of the Italian mafia?”

“No.” Hedda shook her head impatiently at my ignorance. “He’s in the Jewish Mob.”

Though the restaurant was near empty and there was no one within twenty feet of us—our waiter having disappeared back into the kitchen—still Hedda leaned forward across the table and lowered her voice to make sure we weren’t overheard.

“Bugsy Siegel and his partner Meyer Lansky are part of the National Crime Syndicate. Here in California, Bugsy works under Jack Dragna—he’s the head honcho in LA—and Bugsy’s main lieutenant is Mickey Cohen. He’s also backed by Lucky Luciano, who’s currently in prison in New York, but is still pulling the strings same as ever.”

I nodded slowly, trying to keep all this straight.

“What you have to understand,” Hedda said, exhaling slowly, “is that these guys have their fingers in pies all over Los Angeles. All these trendy nightclubs and restaurants are partially owned by them, or pay money to them. Like the Trocadero, for instance. It used to be owned by Wilkerson, who also owns my main rival paper, *The Hollywood Reporter*. Wilkerson sold the Troc two years ago to Nola Hahn, who also owns casinos in Glendale, which are operated by the mob. Then the Troc got passed to Felix Young, another gambler who’s connected to Schulberg, a movie producer who used to work for Paramount. So you see, it’s all intertwined, they’re all in bed with each other.”

I got the sense that Hedda was giving me these generalities because she didn’t want to reveal the specifics of how this pertained to Clara.

“So what’s the real connection with Clara and Bugsy Siegel?” I pressed. “What makes you think he’d want to kill her?”

Hedda paused, unaccustomed to being on the receiving end of an interrogation.

“Well,” she said, flicking the ash off her cigarette. “It’s just a theory really. Nothing I would put in print without evidence.”

“Let’s hear it,” I said doggedly.

“Have you heard of Thelma Todd? ‘The Ice Cream Blonde’?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding. Thelma Todd was an actress, part of a female comedy duo similar to Clara and Lillie.

“Well, she died four years ago. She was found in her garage, killed by carbon monoxide poisoning. The police said it could have been because she was locked out of her house by her lover Roland West, that she was just trying to keep warm. Or they thought she might have done it on purpose. Suicide.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Well, if you read my article I wrote at the time, there was a lot more to it. First off, she was found with a broken nose. The police said she might have fallen forward when she passed out

in the car, but my sources say there wasn't any blood in the car. Second, why would Roland West lock her out at all? She was always staying out late, that was nothing new for him to pitch a fit about. But here's the real kicker—Thelma owned *Thelma Todd's Sidewalk Cafe*. Have you seen it?"

I shook my head.

"It's in the Pacific Palisades. From what I hear, Lucky Luciano wanted to put a casino upstairs of the cafe. Luciano and Thelma Todd used to go around together, before she started seeing West. But Thelma didn't want the mob running a casino out of her cafe, because the business was her baby, and she wanted to keep it for herself, free and clear. So she turned him down flat.

"Next thing you know, she's dead in her car, no suicide note, and an autopsy report that says 'no marks of violence upon the body' even though the cops that found her told me there were bruises all over her arms, besides that broken nose.

"And to cap it all off, she was at the Trocadero that night, before she died. So Luciano and any of his little stooges in the joint would have seen exactly when she left."

Hedda leaned back, trying to read the persuasiveness of her theory on my face.

"So that's what makes you think Bugsy Siegel might have killed Clara," I said slowly. "The similarities in the cases—two actresses killed after running afoul of two gangsters that knew each other."

"Yeah. And the fact that they were both at the Trocadero the night before their deaths."

"They were?" I said in surprise. I hadn't heard that yet. "Clara was at the Trocadero the night before she was killed?"

"The whole cast was," Hedda said. "It was a birthday party for one of the crew."

"Was Bugsy Siegel there too?" I asked.

"He sure was," Hedda said. "Sitting right at his usual table."

“Huh,” I said, also leaning back against the high padded back of the booth. Now I felt a little more convinced. But what would be the motive? Clara hadn’t owned a restaurant like Thelma Todd. Could Bugsy have been upset because Clara broke up with him?

“Now that’s my primary theory about the murder,” Hedda said. “But I do have an alternate idea of who the father might be.”

“You do?” I asked.

“I noticed somebody else chatting to Clara at the birthday party. Her co-star.”

“Clark Gable?”

“That’s right. They looked plenty friendly.”

“He’s married to Carole Lombard.”

“That never stopped him before. You know he married Carole the same month his divorce came through from Rhea Langham.”

“They seem happy, though,” I said, remembering how Gable and Lombard had held hands all through Clara’s funeral service.

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time Gable impregnated some young starlet.”

“What do you mean?”

“You really don’t read my column,” Hedda said, grinning toothily. “You should. Five years ago he knocked up Loretta Young while they were filming *The Call of the Wild*. Loretta was only twenty-two at the time. She disappeared for a few months to have the baby, then hid it in an orphanage. Eighteen months later, she pretended to adopt it. They call the baby Judy Lewis, since Loretta married Tom Lewis in the meantime, but anybody who’s seen the ape ears on the kid’s head knows that it belongs to Gable.”

“So we know Clark likes young co-stars, and he’s not too careful about it,” I said.

“Right.”

“And he was friendly with Clara, but not necessarily romantic.”

“I suppose.”

I sipped my coffee, which was surprisingly good. Italians knew food, or at least the ones in Chicago and New York certainly did. I sat quietly for a moment, mulling over everything that Hedda had said.

Hedda was not so patient. She finished her cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray on the table.

“Have you got anything else for me?” she said. “I gave you two pieces of information, you only gave me one.”

“You gave me two pieces of speculation,” I said. “I told you a solid and valuable fact.”

Hedda snorted. “It will be more valuable when we know for certain who the father was. Though I suppose my readers will relish the mystery in the meantime.”

Her satisfied smirk made me feel ill. I hated that I had betrayed something so personal to my sister, but it seemed like the only way to get Hedda to tell everything she knew. Besides, as horrible as it was to admit, Clara was gone now, and so was the baby. Hedda’s snippy little columns couldn’t hurt them. Meanwhile, the killer was still walking free, with the very real power to continue doing harm.

“I want to know if you find out anything else about my sister,” I said.

“Of course.” Hedda smiled. “I love to share. But remember, it’s always a trade. Nothing comes for free in Hollywood.”

I nodded.

“Well, better dash. Coffee’s on you, right, my sweet?” Hedda said, gathering up her purse.

I nodded again. I was glad Hedda was leaving, because I wanted to make some notes before I forgot what had been said.

I watched Hedda scuttle across the road in her very high heels, hurrying back into her office building. Only once Hedda disappeared behind the glass doors did I pull out my little leather notebook from my purse.

Under my list of suspects, I added two names:

Bugsy Siegel.

Clark Gable.

Then I made short bullet point notes of everything Hedda had said.

Once this was done, I took out Clara's matching notebook. I hadn't gone through it the night before as I'd planned, because I'd been too exhausted by the time I got back from the police station.

I opened it now. It was nowhere near as neat as my own book: there were no explanatory page headings, no obvious themes to the pages at all. They appeared to be jumbled in terms of subjects and dates, as if Clara had opened the book at random and written in any blank space available when she wanted to make a note.

Most of the notes were addresses and phone numbers, as well as a few appointments -

Nov 2 11:30 Dentist.

June 28 Dinner Bernie and V, Brown Derby.

Jan 12th screen test 4:00.

But then closer to the back of the book, I found something more organized: a sort of list, or chart. It was a vertical row of initials, and to the right of that, two corresponding rows of numbers.

GB95386

LP40477

AK15480

CG435232

MM200853

AV580842

PT30667

EW1150454

WW220894

OM180777

After that, I saw torn edges from pages that had been removed from the notebook, about a dozen in total.

I puzzled over it all. Were the initials people? Places? Was it a code? What did the numbers signify?

I knew enough about codes to know that you generally had to have the key to decipher them.

I flipped through the pages again, trying to see if there were any notes that looked like they might be a key (A=3, or something of the like). That seemed childish, like something out of a Nancy Drew book, and in any case I didn't find anything useful.

I noticed that the numbers in the center column seemed to be in regular increments—usually ending in a 0 or a 5. They ranged from two to four digits. The numbers in the far right column were irregular in sum, but all were three digits.

The waiter returned, offering a refill for my coffee cup.

“No, thank you,” I said. “Just the bill, please.”

I paid and started my long walk back to The Georgian Hotel.

I wondered if I should ring Jack Woods to tell him what Hedda had said about Bugsy Siegel and Clark Gable. Hedda had offered no real evidence, only speculation, and Jack—*Sergeant Woods, I mean*—might not appreciate Hedda's assertion that the police had covered up details of Thelma Todd's death.

I decided I'd wait to tell him until we spoke next, whenever that might be. Then I might have something concrete to share. Or, at the very least, it would give me information to provide in response to whatever Jack might have found out.



The next morning, I reported to the Paramount Pictures studio bright and early, as Ruby had requested. This time I found my own way to my trailer, where I was met by Lucille.

Lucille refreshed my waves from the day before, and then unloaded a large case of cosmetics—more pots and brushes and creams and powders than I could ever have imagined.

“Don’t be frightened,” Lucille said, as she began to paint my face. “The makeup you use for the camera is different than what you’d put on to go to a party. It’s a lot heavier, a lot more intense. But it looks right on film. And of course this will be a more exotic look than most, since you’re playing an Arabian princess.”

Some of the things Lucille did felt quite nice—the lotion she massaged into my skin to start, and some of the powders that she brushed on with large, soft poufs. The part I most disliked was the fake lashes. They were so heavy that I could feel them every time I blinked, and they seemed to take up half my field of vision.

“You’ll get used to them,” Lucille promised.

It took close to an hour to apply the makeup. I used the time to question Lucille as casually as I could.

“I heard there was a party at the Trocadero the night before Clara died,” I said.

“That’s right,” Lucille said, dabbing rouge on my cheeks.

“Who was it for?”

“It was a surprise party, for Azriel Kantor.”

“Who’s that?”

“He builds most of the sets. He’s quite a genius at it, especially the historical sets. He’s from Europe, so he knows what all that stuff actually looks like.”

“It was his birthday?”

“That’s right. I think he was embarrassed. He’s pretty quiet—the modest type. That’s the divide in Hollywood—the vain people are in front of the cameras, the shy people stay behind them.”

“You’re not shy,” I said.

“No!” Lucille laughed. “I’ve got the chutzpah, I’m just not pretty enough to be in movies.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said.

“Oh no, you don’t have to flatter me,” Lucille said. “I see enough beautiful people to know the difference. I wasn’t even the prettiest in my own family, probably third or fourth at best.”

“Neither was I,” I said, with a bit of a laugh.

“Well,” Lucille said sadly, “nobody was as pretty as Clara.”

To change the subject, Lucille asked, “Do you know the story of *Arabian Nights*?”

“I read the bit of the script Ruby gave me,” I said. “I’ll be playing Scheherazade. She’s married to the Shahryar, played by Clark Gable. He plans to execute her, so she has to trick him into keeping her alive by telling him a new story each night.”

“That’s right,” Lucille said. “So you have the bits that are real life, so to speak, and then you have kind of a movie within a movie, whenever you tell him a story.”

“Won’t that be confusing to the audience?” I asked.

“It’s something new, that’s for certain,” Lucille said. “But they’ve seen flashbacks before, so I think they’ll figure it out. Mr. DeMille will make it all work; he’s a visionary.”

“I hear he’s awful to work with, though,” I said, dreading the very little time left before I’d find out for myself.

“Well, he’s not thrilled about working with an amateur, that’s true,” Lucille said. “But he knows as well as everybody else that we’ve got to make do since we’ve lost Clara. He won’t dare be too nasty to you.”

“That’s encouraging ... I guess,” I said.

There was a knock on the door. Without waiting for an answer, Freida Kantor entered, her arms full of costumes. She began to hang them up on a rack along the trailer wall.

“Did you finish all those already?” Lucille asked in wonder.

Freida shrugged. “I worked all night,” she said, as if that was only to be expected.

“Try this on,” she commanded, thrusting a flimsy chiffon garment at me.

I looked around for somewhere to try it on in private, but soon realized that the trailer *was* the private place, or at least as much as one was likely to get on a film set. Lucille and Freida watched expectantly. They clearly thought no more of stripping naked in company than they did of working all night.

I sighed and began to kick off my shoes and unhook my stockings.

Once I’d undressed to my knickers, I tried to puzzle out the garment that Freida had handed me, but it was complicated. Freida made a tsking sound and came forward to help.

“No, no!” she barked. “Be careful, you’ll tear the fabric. I’ll do it.”

She helped me to dress with strong, capable hands, calloused at the fingertips from constant needlework.

The costume was a sort of transparent, gauzy shift, sleeveless, with a breast-piece and straps made of silver covered in

dazzling paste jewels. It had a belt, similarly bejeweled, and then a shawl that wrapped around my waist, which likewise bore a silver hem of beadwork that sparkled with every movement. The shift was mostly white, with a purple patterned hem around the base of the skirt, the shawl patterned in lavender and gray like an exotic rug.

Once I was dressed, Freida bedecked me with a plethora of jewelry: a silver headdress, armbands, bracelets, anklets, and rings.

Though the outfit looked like something that would tinkle when you walked, I noticed that it had been made to stay perfectly silent, so as not to interrupt the sound on set. It was beautiful, and masterfully made. I admired Freida's skill.

Thanks to Freida's exactness, it all fit perfectly—the only thing that didn't fit were the silver slippers. Though Clara was shorter than me, she had an average-sized foot. I wore an unusually small size of 5 1/2.

"It can't be helped," Freida said, watching me shuffle in the shoes. "It takes three weeks to have those made."

The costume was far more revealing than what I would usually wear in public. I blushed at the thought of walking outside the trailer in it. Yet I knew that was exactly what I had signed up to do.

Ruby came inside the trailer to check Freida's handiwork.

"That's perfect!" she said. "Mr. DeMille isn't quite ready for us, so, Alice, why don't you come read your lines with Mr. Gable first?"

I followed Ruby to Clark Gable's trailer, taking care not to tread on the hem of the costume and ruin Freida's work.

"Enter!" Gable called when Ruby knocked on the door.

He was sitting at his vanity, a white towel draped around his neck to protect his costume from the makeup his assistant was dabbing on his face. The sponge was stained brown—the assistant seemed to be darkening Gable's face with some cosmetic akin to shoe polish. His eyes had been lined with kohl and his mustache drawn in thicker.

He still looked extremely handsome. When he smiled at me, his teeth flashed white against the browned skin.

“Ah, my new co-star!” he said, rising to shake my hand. “By god they have done you up, haven’t they? I could have taken you for a ghost. Of course, I’m terribly sorry about Clara. She was an absolute doll. We all loved her.”

“She was wonderful,” I said, swallowing hard.

“The show must go on, though, isn’t that what they say?” Gable said.

“Are you free to run lines with Alice?” Ruby asked. “Warm her up a little before we shoot?”

“I’m at your disposal,” Gable said with a bow. He whipped the towel off from around his neck, tossing it to his assistant. “You were finished, weren’t you, Willie?”

“Close enough,” Willie said in a resigned voice, putting down his sponge.

Gable’s assistant was a thin, fastidious-looking man, who styled his hair and mustache in obvious imitation of his boss. It didn’t have quite the same effect on Willie’s pallid face.

“Let’s go outside,” Gable said. “It’s so damned crowded in here.”

As he was over six feet tall, he had to crouch just to walk around at the sloped edge of the trailer. I followed him outside to the open air.

“Much better!” he said. “Do you need your script?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I memorized it last night.”

I had always had a good head for memorization. Most things I read, I could remember. Even things that were odd or useless—for instance, I wished I hadn’t consumed so many *Tin Tin* comic strips, as I still had far too many details of Tin Tin and Snowy and Captain Haddock’s adventures rattling around in my brain.

“Well done,” Gable said approvingly. “You won’t judge if I keep mine handy up till the bitter end.”

“Not at all,” I said.

“Let’s begin then,” Gable said. “Tell me your tale! But I must warn you: I’m in a most wretched mood this evening!”

I could tell immediately that he had begun the scene, because something very odd had happened to Gable. It happened all at once, in the blink of an eye, like a glamour had been thrown over him: he threw back his shoulders and puffed out his chest, tilted his chin upward ever so slightly and cocked one eyebrow. His walk became a swagger, his voice grew deeper and more imperious. Gable had disappeared, a haughty sultan stood before me.

It was so fascinating that I nearly forgot I was supposed to reply.

“I will tell you a wretched tale then, my lord,” I said. “A tale of betrayal and intrigue, that will shock you to your very core.”

“That’s not bad!” Gable said, himself once more. I noticed how much higher his voice was in its natural tone, a tenor instead of a bass. He must have worked a long time to make it sound so fluid in the lower register. “Don’t rush, though! Wring every bit of drama that you can out of your lines.”

We continued on in the scene, running through the whole of it three times over before Gable was satisfied. Just in time, since Mr. DeMille sent Willie White to call us to the set.

“Hurry, hurry!” Ruby urged us on. She was looking peaky, clearly desperate for me to perform my part well enough that she wouldn’t get in trouble—or the rest of the crew who had been tasked with getting me ready.

I gasped when I saw the set. It was incredibly elaborate, much more so than any I’d seen so far. Azriel Kantor had built a Persian-style palace up on a platform, complete with marble pillars, statues and plaster friezes on the walls, tall vases overflowing with reeds, extras dressed as slaves and musicians and warriors, and even two live cheetahs standing sentinel on either side of an immense golden throne.

My first glimpse of Cecil B. DeMille was nearly as intimidating. He was striding about barking orders, dressed in a short jacket and jodhpurs with knee-high boots. He carried a device like a shortened spyglass he could peer through to approximate what the camera would see, which he used to examine both the sets and the actors milling about. He had heavily hooded eyes under fierce eyebrows, and curly hair on the sides of his bald head. His voice was booming and irritable.

“You!” he shouted, spotting me. “Do you know what a mark is?”

“N-no,” I stammered.

“It’s a little piece of tape on the floor,” he said. “When I tell you to go to your mark, you walk to the tape and you don’t step an inch past it, you understand?”

“Yes,” I said.

“You don’t look at the cameras either, unless I tell you to. Just look at Gable. You’re in the palace, and you’re speaking to Gable—the rest of us don’t exist.”

“I understand,” I said.

“Then go to your mark!”

He pointed to a very small piece of black tape on the false tile of the palace floor. I went to it at once. Gable took his place as well, smiling at me encouragingly.

There were two cameras set up on tripods on the open side of the set, one operated by a broad-shouldered, burly man with reddish sideburns and a pageboy cap. The other was run by a young, freckled fellow who was obviously the subordinate.

Mr. DeMille checked the light once more with a meter, then he spoke quietly with the burly cameraman. At last he ordered the clapperboard brought forth, and with a snap, he cried, “Action!”

“Tell me your tale!” Gable said to me. “But I must warn you, I’m in a most wretched mood this evening ...”



THE MORNING'S filming passed in a blur. I had suffered nightmares all night long that I would stumble and stutter and forget every line. But when it came down to it, I performed well enough.

I could keep a cool head under pressure, and really Mr. DeMille was right that with the bright lights drowning out my view of the crew, it wasn't so hard to pretend that I was speaking to Gable alone, and not to an entire host of people.

Mr. DeMille had us film the scene over and over with slight alterations of where we stood, and how we delivered our lines. At one point he got into a tiff with Gable, who was determined to have me feed him grapes while he lolled on a chaise. DeMille flatly refused to allow it.

He did cut me off twice, telling me I was too dull, that I needed to exude energy and sensuality.

"Your life depends upon keeping this man entranced by your words," he said.

All in all, I remembered my lines and made no glaring mistakes. The most difficult thing was maneuvering around the live cheetahs, who became restless after three or four takes and began flicking their tails where Clark and I were supposed to be walking.

The time flew by. I was surprised when we broke for lunch and Ruby told me it was almost 2:30 pm.

"That's past lunchtime," I said.

"It doesn't matter," Ruby said. "Mrs. Fischer keeps it warm for us. She always has the lunch ready for noon, but we never actually eat it then. We're always running late."

"Which is arkymalarky," Willie White said, brushing past us. "It says in our contract they're supposed to break for lunch and dinner within a reasonable window. I don't call two and half hours late 'reasonable.' "

“Willie.” Ruby rolled her eyes. “Always complaining about something.”

“That’s the dining room over there,” Ruby said, pointing. “But let’s eat in the kitchen. Mrs. Fischer will make us fresh tea if we do.”

Mrs. Fischer was already having tea with Freida Kantor when we came into the kitchen. The two were sitting across from each other at a small wooden table in the corner. When Freida saw us come in, she drained the last of her mug and stood up to leave.

“You don’t need to go on our account!” Ruby said.

“I’m already finished,” Freida said. “Take my chair.”

“Mrs. Fischer,” Ruby said, “have you met Alice yet?”

“No, I haven’t,” Mrs. Fischer said, wiping her hands on a dishtowel before she shook with me.

“Mrs. Fischer and Freida are sisters,” Ruby said to me.

“Oh yes,” I said, nodding. I could see the resemblance—Mrs. Fischer was tall like Freida, with the same rough and capable hands, and strong, regal features. She was a good deal heavier than her sister, and about ten years older, which is probably why everyone called her ‘Mrs. Fischer’ but used Freida’s first name.

“You want tea?” Mrs. Fischer asked us.

“Please,” said Ruby. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” she said. “The kettle is still warm.”

She dumped the leaves from the pot she had been sharing with Freida, then refilled the infuser with fresh tea before pouring boiling water from the kettle.

Ruby and I sat ourselves at the solid wooden table. Mrs. Fischer brought us clean mugs, spoons, and the teapot, and refilled the carafe of cream.

Her assistant came into the kitchen—a short, plump girl with chapped hands.

“We need at least twenty more meals,” the assistant said.

Mrs. Fischer opened the large warming oven next to the sink and wheeled out a trolley with a dozen shelves, each of which carried a double stack of covered dishes.

“Wait, now,” Mrs. Fischer said, removing two of the dishes before her assistant took the trolley to the dining room. She set the covered dishes in front of Ruby and me. We pulled back the lids to reveal roast and vegetables, thick brown gravy and mashed potatoes.

I could feel the saliva flooding into my mouth. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was.

“Mrs. Fischer, you’re a marvel,” Ruby said. She dug into the lunch like a wild animal, and I did the same. Mrs. Fischer snorted, but looked pleased by our enthusiasm.

“What are you filming this afternoon?” she asked.

“It’s one of the fantasy sequences,” Ruby said, and then to clarify for me, “One of the bits where you act out the story you’re telling.”

“Yeah? And what’s the fantasy?” Mrs. Fischer said, moving to the butcher block countertop where she had a large ball of pastry sitting ready to be rolled out. She floured the counter, her hands, and the exterior of the rolling pin, then began to press the dough flat with her palms.

“In this scene, Mr. Gable and Alice will be escaping across the desert on the back of two camels. We’ve got real camels on loan from the San Diego Zoo.”

“Camels!” Mrs. Fischer said derisively, rolling the pin back and forth over the dough. “Sounds more like a nightmare to me. You know they spit.”

As we were eating, the burly cameraman with the ginger sideburns came into the kitchen.

“Mrs. Fischer,” he was saying, “have you got any—”

He stopped short when he saw Ruby and me eating our lunch at the wooden table.

“Emmet,” Ruby said, “have you met Alice?”

“Not officially, no,” he said, but he didn’t step forward to shake my hand.

“This is Emmet Walsch,” Ruby said. “He’s the head camera operator. One of the best in the business. Mr. DeMille always requests Emmet above anybody else.”

Emmet nodded his head at the compliment, but he wasn’t quite looking at us, and seemed keen to get out of the kitchen.

“What was it you needed?” Mrs. Fischer asked.

“We’re out of the rolls in the dining hall,” he said, turning to leave.

“Well, wait a moment!” Mrs. Fischer said. “I have more, I’ll get them for you.”

He paused in the doorway.

Mrs. Fischer located a large bag of dinner rolls in the depths of the massive pantry and thrust it into his hands. I noticed, beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt, Emmet had tattoos running up both arms. It looked like he had been a sailor once.

“Put those out,” Mrs. Fischer commanded.

“Thanks,” Emmet said.

After Emmet had left the kitchen, Ruby said serenely, “Emmet’s funny. He’s a bit of a wild man. Get some liquor in him and he’ll do almost anything on a dare.”

“Was he at Mr. Kantor’s party?” I asked.

“Of course,” Ruby said. “He never misses a shindig.”

I returned to my roast beef, chewing thoughtfully.

So far, most everyone on set had reacted to me with politeness, saying how sorry they were about Clara. Emmet was the first one who had seemed uncomfortable. It wasn’t anything concrete, of course, but I made a mental note to add him to my list.



The next scene to be filmed involved only Clark Gable and Trenton O’Neil, so I was given a short break after lunch.

I intended to use the time to seek out Azriel Kantor. He was the set maker whose birthday party had taken place the night before Clara’s death, at the ill-fated Trocadero.

Ruby was too busy running around on Mr. DeMille’s orders to introduce us, but it didn’t take me long to find Mr. Kantor, based off Ruby’s description.

Azriel was working on the set we’d be using later that afternoon, when I would shoot my first scene with Deedee Blanche. The set was meant to be the interior of Scheherazade’s boudoir, so Azriel was draping exotic, flowing fabric all around a low bed and a sumptuously upholstered chaise lounge.

The hanging swaths of fabric gave the set a tent-like feeling, tinting the light a pretty rose color. Azriel was working alone. He had a gramophone rigged up to play a Billie Holliday album. Quietly, of course, so as not to disturb Gable and O’Neil’s shoot on the next stage over.

I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm—Billie Holiday (Spotify).

I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm—Billie Holiday (Apple).

“Hello,” I said.

Azriel sat up from where he crouched on hands and knees, stapling down a bolt of fabric. He wiped his face, which was

damp from the exertion of crawling about.

“Hello,” he said.

He had a thin, intelligent face, warm brown eyes behind spectacles, and a thatch of dark, untidy hair. He had a melancholy look to him, and he appeared tired.

“I’m Alice,” I said. “Clara’s sister.”

Azriel held out his hand to shake. He had slim artist’s hands with nicely trimmed nails.

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “I’m so sorry about Clara.”

“Me too,” I said. “This is beautiful, what you’re doing here.”

“Thank you,” Azriel said. “I try to make the sets as detailed as possible. Sometimes Mr. DeMille is annoyed because I take too long—he says that certain things won’t be visible in the film anyway. Like this,” he showed me an ornate teapot on a gold tray, surrounded by gilded glasses with patterns round the rims. “These are a hundred years old, I found them at a flea market. It will only be in frame for a second, perhaps not even in focus, so I suppose I might as well have used any old tea set. But I can’t help but think that if the set feels real, it will provide a certain energy to the actors and to the film itself, that it will create a more immersive world, even if its elements are not perceived consciously.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” I said. “This morning when we shot the throne room scene, I did feel as if I really was in a palace.”

“Did you?” said Azriel, with delight. “I’m so glad to hear it. The palace set was one of the most expensive Paramount has ever made, so we did get in a little trouble about it. The box office receipts will justify us, I hope.”

He had a gentle, cultured voice, slightly accented.

“Have you always done this?” I asked him. “Worked on movies?”

“Oh no,” he said, taking off his spectacles and cleaning them on his shirt. “I was a doctor in Berlin. But they banned Jews from holding professional jobs in ‘36, so I had to close my office. My wife Freida—have you met her?”

I nodded.

“She said we needed to leave. She’s not Ashkenazi, but she said it wouldn’t matter to them. She closed her dressmaker’s shop. Her sister, Gerda Fischer, she was already here in Los Angeles. She said we could come stay with her, that she could help us get work.”

Azriel sighed. “I thought it was a temporary madness, that the move was too drastic. I thought in a year or two, things would go back to normal. But Freida was right, of course. Within a year they had Kristallnacht, and my wife’s old shop was smashed to pieces. The building where I had my office was burned to the ground.”

“God, I’m so sorry,” I said. “How horrible. You’re right, the Germans have gone mad.”

“Not just the Germans,” Azriel said grimly. But his face soon softened. “Ah, well,” he said. “Freida and I are the lucky ones. We’re safe here. Some of our family has not been so lucky.”

“Do you—do you have any children?” I said, afraid to ask, in case they had been left behind in Germany.

“No,” Azriel said, shaking his head. “We wanted to, for a long time. But God did not grant it, and perhaps this is why.”

“The world does seem to be in flux,” I said. Not so much in Hollywood, which was its own golden city by the ocean, where movies were made in spite of the depression, or of war. But its imperviousness might not last forever.

“Anyway,” Azriel said, shaking his head again, “why am I talking about such gloomy things? You came to introduce yourself, not to hear my tale of woe.”

“Well actually,” I said, “I did have a question for you.”

“Oh yes?” Azriel asked, his expression open and pleasant.

It felt frivolous to ask about a party after what we had been talking about, but I pressed on.

“I wanted to ask about your birthday party,” I said.

“Oh, yes!” Azriel said. “Last Friday.”

“My sister was there?”

“Yes, she came,” Azriel said. “Almost the whole crew came. It was very kind.”

“Was anyone not there?”

Azriel paused, thinking.

“Mr. O’Neil didn’t attend—he said he’s too old to be carousing. He has in his contract that he never has to film past eight o’clock at night.”

“Anyone else?” I said.

“Emmet Walsch came, but left almost immediately.”

“Do you know why?” I asked.

Azriel shook his head.

“And Clara was there,” I said.

“That’s right. She brought a cake from a bakery. It was a lovely surprise—I told her I had not had a birthday cake since I was a small boy.”

I had to stop for a moment to swallow the obstruction in my throat. Clara had made almost every one of my birthday cakes herself, since our mother couldn’t bake.

“Did anything seem strange with Clara?” I asked. “Did anything unusual happen at the party?”

Here Azriel paused again, and I got the distinct sense that there was something he was considering saying.

“No,” he said at last, “I didn’t notice anything.”

“Nothing at all?” I persisted. “Did Clara leave early too?”

“Nobody stayed as late as we might usually,” Azriel said. “We all knew we had to work the next morning.”

I nodded. “Well, thank you,” I said. “I was just wondering. Since she was killed the next morning”

“Yes,” Azriel said quietly, “I’ve thought of that often since—for most of us, that was the last time we saw her alive.”



I LET Azriel get back to his set design, planning to return to my trailer to review my lines once more before my scene with Deedee Blanche. But as I turned the corner into the long hallway running past the kitchen and the dining hall, I bumped smack into Jack Woods.

“Alice!” he said, catching my arm before I could stumble.

“Sergeant Woods!”

I saw he was in full uniform today, his shirt tucked neatly into his slacks, and his shaggy blond hair contained by his cap. He still hadn’t shaved, however.

His hand felt extremely warm against the bare skin of my arm. As he looked down at me with his eyebrows raised, I remembered that I was still wearing the revealing Arabian princess costume, and I had the strong urge to run away.

However, I refused to give in to embarrassment. I squared my shoulders, saying as boldly as I could, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m interviewing your colleagues,” he said. “Or, as many as I can catch with a minute to spare. Sheriff Biscailuz promised Heller that I wouldn’t bung up the filming, and in return I’ve got free rein to nose around the place. Sergeant Palmer’s here too, but I’m pretty sure he got waylaid by that cook in the kitchen—she offered him pie. She doesn’t know that Palmer treats free food like an all-you-can-eat contest at a fair.”

“What have you heard so far?” I asked him.

“I’m pinning down who exactly was here when Clara was killed, and what they were doing at the time.”

“Where did Ruby find her anyway?” I asked.

“Right over here,” Jack said.

He led me down the long hallway, indicating the spot in front of the main office where Ruby had tripped over Clara’s body.

“I didn’t realize it was right there,” I said, with a sick feeling of unease. I had walked past that spot a dozen times already, without knowing it. There was no marker of course, no dark aura hanging around.

“Here,” Jack said, talking out his notepad. “Help me make a diagram.”

He sketched the hallway, and after counting quickly, the doorways leading off on either side.

“What do we have around this spot?” he said, marking an X where Clara’s body had been found.

The hallway essentially made a T-shape, with Clara being found just shy of the place where the long hallway met the short crossbar of the T.

“Well, that’s the main office there where all the secretaries work,” I said, pointing to the junction of the long and short hallways. “To the right is Heller’s office.” I pointed to the right-hand side of the crossbar of the T. “And to the left is Mr. DeMille’s office.”

“What about along here?” Jack said, pointing to the long hallway.

“The kitchen and dining hall are on this side,” I said, pointing to the right side of the T. “On the left is the break room, the costume room, and the prop room.”

“And on the other side of the prop room—outside, that’s where all the actor’s trailers are.”

“Right.” I nodded.

“Well, that doesn’t help much,” Jack said. “Almost anyone would have access to the hallway, or Clara could have been killed in any of those rooms and then her body left in the hallway.”

“Right,” I said. “Especially since the whole place was emptier than usual—it was a Saturday, there weren’t any secretaries in the main office, or Mr. Heller or Mr. DeMille’s offices.”

“So we’ll have to figure out who it was by motive, and by pinning down who was unobserved directly before Clara was

killed.”

“I’ve got some ideas for motive,” I said.

“Good. I’ll figure out where everybody was that morning. We can meet up to talk about it—say tonight? Over dinner?”

“I doubt I’ll be finished here early enough for dinner,” I said. “We’ve got another scene to shoot yet.”

“Drinks, then.”

“Alright,” I said. Getting an idea, I added, “Meet me at ten o’clock, at the Trocadero.”

“You want to see where Clara was the night before she was killed,” Jack said.

“Yes.” I nodded.

That wasn’t the only reason I wanted to go to the Trocadero, but I didn’t want to tell Jack my intentions in case he kicked up a fuss.

“See you at ten, then,” Jack said. “Good luck with shooting.”

“Good luck to you too,” I said.



I HAD LOST my opportunity to look over my lines prior to my next scene, but somehow I didn’t seem to mind. I felt warm and elated after seeing Sergeant Woods, maybe because it was nice to have someone working with me to figure out what had happened to Clara. Detective work was lonely, I was discovering. You had to be suspicious of everybody, and you couldn’t share your thoughts with anyone.

My next scene was with Deedee Blanche, the blonde actress who had sobbed so unconvincingly through Clara’s funeral.

I only just had time for Lucille to touch up my hair and makeup, and Freida to swap my previous costume for a long scarlet robe with matching slippers. Then I hurried to the set Azriel had been working on—the tent-like boudoir.

Deedee was already waiting, dressed in poison-green harem pants and a gold top, with a green turban atop her blonde curls. She lounged on the chaise, kicking her feet in their curly-toed slippers.

“There you are,” she said as I approached. “I didn’t get a chance to speak to you at the funeral. Deedee Blanche.”

“Alice,” I said, shaking her hand.

“Look what they’ve done to you!” Deedee cried, eyebrows raised. “I would hardly have recognized you.”

“I feel the same way when I look in the mirror,” I said.

“Poor, poor Clara!” Deedee said, dramatically. “I can’t believe what happened to her! And on our set! I’ve been terrified ever since. I was almost too afraid to come to work the rest of the week. I hope that handsome policeman catches whoever did it.”

“You mean Sergeant Woods?” I asked.

“The one who looks like a cowboy. I don’t usually like blonds, but those eyes! Like chips of ice! I wouldn’t mind if he arrested me.”

Deedee didn’t seem to care that her comments were being overheard by Emmet Walsch and the rest of the crew setting up the cameras and tinkering with the lights. Emmet scowled as he adjusted his tripod—because of Deedee’s raptures or because he resented the presence of Sergeant Woods, I couldn’t tell which.

Mr. DeMille arrived on set, and Deedee snapped to attention, rolling off the chaise and standing at the ready. Mr. DeMille didn’t greet either of us. He immediately began ordering us about.

“You’ll stand here,” he said curtly to Deedee, “and you”—he grabbed my shoulders and positioned me like a piece of furniture—“you’ll be right there. Make sure your face is turned to catch the light. Remember, you don’t trust Deedee, so keep your eye on her all the time.”

The idea was that Deedee would pretend to be friendly toward my character, while secretly poisoning my tea. I wasn't supposed to be fooled, and would calmly switch the glasses, then encourage Deedee to drink, while Deedee tried to think of excuses not to.

We ran through the scene once. After Mr. DeMille made his corrections, we prepared to shoot.

We did three, four, five takes, but none of them were right. Twice Deedee flubbed her lines, and once she knocked over her glass of tea. Mr. DeMille became frustrated.

"Why is it that my seasoned actress is making mistakes, while the amateur manages to muddle through the scene?" he demanded.

"She's throwing me off!" Deedee cried, with tears in her eyes. "She's not doing it the way that Clara and I practiced. She looks like Clara and sounds like her, but it's different. It's disorienting."

I didn't know how to respond to that. Losing confidence in what I was supposed to be doing, I became flustered too.

We did four more takes, and at last Mr. DeMille pronounced the scene acceptable, though he didn't seem pleased.

"Take a break," he barked. "I may want to run it once more."

Deedee flung herself back down on the chaise, glaring at me.

"You know, I was supposed to have the role of Scheherazade," she snapped. "The daughter only has what, forty lines? I've been in more films than Clara. I think they cast her because they thought she looked more Arabian. Or maybe because she's *chummy* with everybody."

"What do you mean?" I asked, fighting to keep my cool instead of telling Deedee that even forty lines seemed to be a struggle for her to remember, and that she delivered them with the pizzazz of a week-old sponge cake.

"Oh, nothing," Deedee said, smiling maliciously. "Just, you know, Clara was friendly with *so* many people."

"Like who?" I said. "Are you talking about Clark Gable?"

“Gable?” Deedee said, thrown off-kilter. “No. I mean, they were friendly enough, but nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Oh,” I said, “I heard there might be something between him and Clara.”

“Are you talking about what Hedda Hopper wrote?” Deedee asked, her eyes sparkling with interest.

“What did Hedda write?” I asked.

“Oooh, haven’t you read it?” Deedee scrambled to retrieve a newspaper from her purse, which had been stashed just off the set under a chair. The paper was already folded to the right page: *Hedda’s Hollywood Report*.

I took the paper from Deedee’s hand and scanned down the column.

Double Murder: Slain Starlet Clara Bloom Was Pregnant at Time of Death

The mysterious murder of Clara Bloom on Saturday morning has become all the more tragic now that autopsy reports have revealed that Bloom was pregnant when she was killed. The ruthless murderer claimed two victims at once, snuffing out an innocent baby in their zeal to extinguish the star’s life.

Doubtless Ms. Bloom fought her killer with all her might, knowing that the life of her unborn child was at stake, but it was all for naught.

Of course the question on everyone’s lips is, who is the father now mourning the loss of his lover and his child?

Ms. Bloom has had a string of high-profile boyfriends, including James Cagney and Jack LaRue. Most recently, she’d been spotted with handsome gangster Bugsy Siegel. And of course, at the time of her death, she was filming her newest movie with noted lothario Clark Gable.

No one has yet stepped forward to claim responsibility for the child. Perhaps under the circumstances, they never will.

I practically threw the newspaper back at Deedee.

She looked so smug that I wanted to slap her.

“That Hedda,” Deedee said in mock disapproval. “She gets her nose into everything, doesn’t she?”

“Is it true then?” I asked, through gritted teeth. “About Clara and Gable?”

To my surprise, Deedee shook her head.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Gable is a ladies’ man, but now that he’s married Carole I really think he’s turned over a new leaf.”

“He does have a track record with younger co-stars though,” I said.

“He’s better than most of the punters around here,” Deedee said. “I worked with him on *Gone with the Wind* last year—you know they had a segregated set? Well he walked off the set and said he wouldn’t come back until they took down the signs! And then when they wouldn’t let Hattie McDaniel attend the Academy Awards, even though she was nominated, he said he wouldn’t go either, until she begged him not to stay home on her account.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes,” Deedee said, “Gable’s alright.”

Just because he was kind in one way didn’t mean he couldn’t be a heel in another. But it did sound like he had a level of compassion that wouldn’t have allowed him to strangle a woman in cold blood. Plus, it was clear Deedee didn’t believe he was romantically involved with Clara.

“Anyway,” Deedee said, lowering her voice so none of the crew could hear, “Hedda’s off the mark this time. It wasn’t *Gable* and Clara that everybody was whispering about.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I don’t know if I should say,” Deedee said with pretend discretion, fiddling with the bracelets on her wrist.

I was starting to feel like I might want to strangle someone myself, starting with her, but I worked to stay calm. Deedee was spiteful and jealous of my sister, that much was obvious.

In fact, I wondered if she might have been jealous enough to attack Clara. She might have believed that she’d be recast in the starring role if they had to film Clara’s scenes over again.

The only problem with that idea was that Deedee was petite in the extreme—only a little over five feet tall, delicate and slim, with hands that might have belonged to an eight-year-old. I couldn’t imagine Deedee overpowering anybody, even with surprise on her side.

Whoever attacked my sister must have been strong. Because there’s no way Clara would have given up without a fight.

Deedee was still smirking up at me, delighting in withholding whatever juicy piece of gossip she thought she knew.

Rather than begging her for information, I figured I might have more luck goading it out of her.

“You probably *shouldn’t* say,” I told her. “If you don’t really know ...”

“Oh, I do know!” Deedee said, sitting up straight with her cheeks flushed. “I saw Clara coming out of his workroom with her dress buttoned wrong.”

“Whose workroom?” I demanded.

“Azriel Kantor,” Deedee said with a smirk. “The set designer.”

I didn’t want to believe that at all, but Deedee looked triumphant and certain.

“Are you sure he was even in the room with Clara?” I said.

“He came out two minutes later. I happened to be standing close by the door,” Deedee said.

Happened to be spying, I thought.

“I know,” Deedee said, reading the disbelief on my face, “he doesn’t seem the type. It’s always the quiet ones. But if you’re wondering who could be the mystery father, I think Kantor is more likely than Gable.”

“You were at his birthday party last Friday, weren’t you?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Did you see him and Clara talking? Or ... doing anything else?”

“No,” Deedee said. “Of course I wasn’t paying much attention—I had a few drinks early on in the night.”

“Did you see anything strange at all?” I asked.

“No,” Deedee said, then pouting a little. “Only I didn’t get any birthday cake.”

“Why not?”

“Someone knocked it off the table—I came over to take a piece, and it was smashed all over the ground.”



It was almost 9:30 at night by the time Mr. DeMille was satisfied with our scene, so I had to change clothes quickly and wipe as much makeup off my face as I could manage with a damp cloth before hurrying out the door to meet Sergeant Woods at the Trocadero.

As I was hurrying off the Paramount lot, I saw a familiar skinny, flat-footed figure waiting at the bus stop across the street.

“Lillie!” I called, walking toward her.

Lillie glanced up, looking startled. She smiled when she saw it was me.

“Oh, hello,” she said. “Working late?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “And you?”

“The same. It’s just a comedy short. They’ve paired me with this new girl—she’s alright I guess. Not as good as Clara, of course.”

I thought that Lillie looked in poor health—dark circles under her eyes, and lines of misery etched into her face, though she was trying hard to be cheerful.

“Anyway,” Lillie said, “how’s the filming going? They threw you in the deep end, didn’t they?”

“They did,” I said. “I’m paddling alright. Luckily Clara had filmed most of the difficult scenes already. The ones I’m in are quite short. So I hope I won’t tarnish her work too much.”

“You couldn’t let Clara down,” Lillie said quietly. “She would have appreciated what you’re doing for her.”

Given the opportunity of bumping into Lillie, I wanted to ask her about Azriel Kantor. So I said, hesitantly, “Lillie, have you been reading Hedda Hopper’s articles in the *Times*?”

“No,” said Lillie, “I never read that trash—prying into other people’s business. It’s just wrong.”

“Well,” I said, “it turns out that Clara was pregnant when she died.”

Whatever reaction I had been expecting from Lillie, this wasn’t it. Lillie turned white as chalk. It looked like a hundred years had fallen over her face.

“No,” she said.

“It’s quite certain, I’m afraid,” I said. “It was in the autopsy report.”

I had intended to tell Lillie that there were rumors that Clara had been romantically involved with someone on set, but I found I couldn’t say that now because tears were pouring down Lillie’s cheeks, absolutely pouring. She looked as though she’d been stabbed.

“I can’t believe it,” Lillie said. “It’s not true.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know it makes it so much worse—”

Before I could say another word, Lillie turned and walked away, abandoning the bus stop, going who knows where all alone in the dark.

“Lillie, wait!” I called, but Lillie was striding swiftly away, and she didn’t look back.

I stood still, dumbfounded. Why had Lillie reacted so violently to that information? She seemed ... devastated.

An icy thought crept into my mind. Could it be because Lillie was responsible for Clara’s death? Had Lillie just realized that she had killed an innocent child as well?

It was possible. Lillie always seemed like she had cared for Clara very much, but crimes of passion were predicated on

strong attachments.

And yet ... I still felt that I was missing something about Lillie. There was an air of mystery around her, of something unresolved.

I didn't have time to ponder on it now. Stopping to speak to Lillie had already made me late.

I ran as quickly as I could to the main road where I could hail a cab.

"8610 Sunset Boulevard, please," I told the cabbie.

We pulled up in front of a long, low building with *Cafe Trocadero* written in illuminated lights above the striped awning.

Hedda Hopper had told me that the dress code was black tie, so I borrowed a gown and gloves from the costume room at Paramount. I had asked Ruby's permission to do it, being a little too intimidated by Freida to ask her for any favors. Ruby seemed to feel the same, because she had hustled the dress out while Freida was in O'Neil's trailer making adjustments to his robes.

I had changed into the gown before leaving for the night. It didn't fit perfectly—a bit loose at the bust, and slightly too short in the skirt, but it was still far and away the most glamorous thing I'd ever worn. Silver-gray silk, with a sweetheart neckline and shirred cap sleeves that left half my shoulders bare.

I looked nice enough that the Trocadero doorman waved me inside without asking me to pay any cover.

Most of the tables were already full of elegantly dressed people. The room was sumptuously decorated in moss-green velvet and dark wood. A jazz singer crooned softly from the stage in front of a full band. A dozen waiters hurried from table to table, bringing chilled drinks from the bar and hot food from the kitchen.

I spotted Jack waiting on a stool pulled up to the long, polished wood bar. I had wondered if he owned a proper suit and was surprised by his spruce appearance. His black suit was

a little old fashioned, but of good quality, and he had combed his hair back sleekly and even shaved. With his hair brushed back, his cool blue eyes looked all the more striking in his tanned face.

“Ah!” he said when I approached. “I was hoping you’d wear the Arabian dress. But this is even nicer.”

“I don’t think we want to be that conspicuous,” I laughed.

“Maybe not,” Jack said. “But I’m afraid a girl who looks like you is never going to blend in.”

I colored a little and turned away from him to order a drink from the bartender.

The bartender was sharply dressed and impressively skilled at mixing the drinks—the lemon peel rosette he fashioned for my gin and tonic was a tiny work of art. He seemed a little too interested in our conversation, however, lingering close by as he pretended to polish the glassware.

“Come on,” Jack said, once we had our drinks in hand, “let’s move to a table so we can talk.”

We found a small table near a window with a potted plant on one side and a noisy group of drunks on the other. It seemed like the best place to converse without being overheard.

“Alright,” Jack said as soon as we sat down. “What have you found out so far?”

“Let me get my notebook,” I said. I retrieved it from my purse and turned to the page entitled *Suspects*.

“You have a literal list of suspects?” Jack asked, grinning.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m trying to be methodical.”

“Well, let’s hear it.”

“First, there’s Lillie LaShay. She was Clara’s roommate and they worked on a lot of comedy films together. When I visited the apartment, she had moved some of Clara’s things around, and some of Clara’s makeup was in her room. Also, she seemed *really* upset when I told her Clara was pregnant at the time that she was killed. She had a breakdown about it.”

“So what are you thinking?”

“A few possibilities: she might have been jealous of Clara moving on to feature films. She might have been strangely attached to Clara. And she might feel responsible for hurting an unborn child.”

“Okay,” Jack said, nodding. “Anybody else?”

“Well, Ruby told me that Heller had a big insurance policy on Clara. So that could be reason to kill her. But it seems like he’d risk losing a lot more money if the movie couldn’t be finished. He didn’t know I’d show up to stand in. So I might scrub that theory.”

“I can ask him about the insurance when we talk tomorrow,” Jack said, making a note in his own little book. “I have an appointment with him in the afternoon. What else?”

“Well, there’s this cameraman named Emmet Walsch who’s been acting squirrely. I don’t have anything solid there, he’s just the only person on set who seems to want to avoid me.”

“I’ll check to see if he has any prior arrests,” Jack said, making a note of Emmet’s name as well.

“Then there’s Deedee Blanche. She’s sort of a rival of Clara’s—they were up for the same part in this film, and Clara took the better role. Deedee’s dramatic, so she could be the type to seek revenge, but she’s awfully small. I don’t know if she’d be strong enough to overpower Clara without making any noise.”

“Don’t underestimate the element of surprise,” Jack said.

“Well, I’d put her as someone with motive, but there’s no evidence to suggest anything else, at least not yet.”

“So who’s the person you’re really considering,” Jack said. “I know you saved the best for last.”

“Well, I can’t help but feel this has to be connected in some way to Clara’s baby. It seems too coincidental that she happened to be pregnant. So I guess the person I suspect most is the father of the child, whoever that might be.”

“Have you asked around about Clara’s boyfriends?”

“Hedda Hopper suggested Bugsy Siegel or Clark Gable, but Deedee said it’s definitely not Gable. Actually, she thought it might be Azriel Kantor, the set designer. She said she saw them alone in a room together once, and Clara came out looking disheveled.”

“Workplace romances,” Jack said. “It wouldn’t be unusual, especially in Hollywood. What’s this Kantor like? I haven’t spoken to him yet.”

“He’s not bad looking,” I said. “He seems like a decent person, mild-mannered as far as I could tell. But he’s married.”

“That doesn’t stop most people,” Jack said.

“Well his wife works right on set—Freida Kantor, she’s the costume designer. So it would be a pretty big risk to carry on an affair.”

“Which leaves us with the reason you wanted to come to the Troc so badly,” Jack said, narrowing his eyes and shaking his head at me as he figured it out.

“That’s right,” I admitted.

“He’s sitting right over there,” Jack said, jerking his head to indicate the table at our three o’clock.

I took a sip of my drink, shifting in my seat so I could get a better view of Bugsy Siegel. He was sitting at the largest table in the place, set back against the wall for privacy and, I supposed, so nobody could sneak up on him from behind. From his vantage point, he had a full view of the entrance, everybody in the club, and the swinging double doors leading into the kitchen. He was surrounded by a dozen men in suits, plus a handful of girls in low-cut dresses and heavy makeup.

Though I hadn’t seen his picture in the papers, I could tell which one was Bugsy, since he sat in the exact center of the group and all the others seemed to revolve around him like planets around the sun. Everyone looked to him for approval when they told a joke. When a fresh bottle of champagne was brought to the table, his drink was poured first.

He was a good-looking man of about forty, his handsome face marred only by a nose that looked like it had been broken at

least once. He wore a tan suit with a wide silk tie. He was smoking his cigar moodily, and he didn't seem interested in the blonde on his right who was trying to hang on his arm.

"I don't mind asking him a few questions," Jack said, "but I don't think this is the place to do it, and I don't think I'm going to be able to get much out of him."

"Because he's the real deal," I said.

"That's right. He'd as soon shoot you as look at you."

"Doesn't that make it all the more likely that Clara might have crossed him, and he killed her?"

"Maybe," Jack said. "It wasn't a normal mob-style hit, though."

"Nothing says they can't get creative," I said.

"I suppose."

"But you think he won't tell you anything because you're a cop. Whether he was involved in Clara's death or not, he's going to stonewall you."

"That's about it," Jack said. "If I had some kind of leverage on him I might have better luck, but even then you can't trust a word he says. Most gangsters lie as easy as breathing, and they'd rather go to jail than squeal."

"Well," I said, "that's all my ideas so far. What did you get from your interviews?"

"I haven't met with everybody yet," Jack said. "Sergeant Palmer and I are splitting it up—I'm doing most of the interviews; he's confirming the alibis. My main problem is pinning down the timeline. It seems like Clara was killed right before she was found, about 12:40. She could have been killed in the hallway or the adjoining rooms. Almost everybody in the crew was on set at the time.

"The trouble is, no one seems to know where Clara was. Nobody knows what time she arrived, or what she was doing beforehand. Lucille hadn't done her makeup yet, Freida Kantor hadn't gotten her costume out, nobody has admitted to seeing her at all. So we don't know what time she got to

Paramount, or what she was doing directly before she was killed.”

“You should talk to Lillie,” I said. “She could probably tell us what time Clara left the house that morning.”

“I will,” Jack said, making another note.

“So who has an airtight alibi for, say, 11:40-12:40?”

“Almost everyone,” Jack said. “Most of the crew was in the process of filming—Trenton O’Neil and Deedee Blanche were on set, as were DeMille and the camera crew. Gable was in his trailer with his assistant Willie White. Freida Kantor wasn’t on set—she had been there earlier in the morning, but she left at ten to buy some fabric. That’s confirmed by the security guard, because she spoke to him on the way out. Gerda Fischer and her assistant Emma Brown swear that they weren’t out of each other’s sight for more than ten minutes since they were getting everything ready for lunch. And Heller wasn’t there at all, he was at home with his family.”

“What about Emmet Walsch?” I asked. “Was he definitely filming the whole time?”

“I’ll check again tomorrow to make sure,” Jack said. “I’ll ask around if he took any long breaks. Technically Lucille is unaccounted for—she touched up Deedee’s makeup right before they started filming, but she didn’t do Gable’s. Willie did. She said she was cleaning out her kit and washing her brushes during that time.”

“But Lucille has no motive to hurt Clara,” I said.

“Not that we know of, no.”

“What about Azriel Kantor?”

“I haven’t talked to him yet, he’s on my list for tomorrow.”

I sat quietly for a minute, thinking. At last I said, “Did you ask anyone about the party here the night before?”

“Yeah—they had a big table over there.” Jack pointed to the stage where the jazz singer was still going strong. “They ordered a couple dozen bottles of champagne, and a whole lot

of other drinks besides. The kitchen put out some appetizer trays for them, and somebody brought a cake.”

“Clara brought the cake,” I said. “But someone smashed it.”

“Really?” Jack said with interest.

“Well, maybe it was an accident,” I said. “They were all pretty tipsy, after all.”

“Maybe it wasn’t,” Jack said.

“Deedee said that Emmet Walsch came, but he left after only a minute.”

“Maybe he had an argument with someone at the party?” Jack said. “I definitely need to speak to him again tomorrow. Put the gears to him.”

Jack stirred his drink meditatively. I noticed that he didn’t smoke, which I appreciated. That probably meant he would be pleasant to kiss. Now that he had shaved finally, I couldn’t help noticing the sharp line of his jaw, and the shape of his lips against the rim of his glass.

I quickly turned my attention back to my own drink to avoid those kinds of thoughts. I needed to focus.

“I’d like to know more about the party,” Jack said at last. “It may have been coincidence that it took place the night before Clara was killed, but there also might have been an inciting incident—something that happened that night that made somebody come after her at work the next day.”

“Who could tell us that?” I mused.

“I know a couple of people here at the Troc,” Jack said. “The doorman and one of the waiters. Maybe I’ll go see if they were working last Friday, if they overheard anything. The waiter in particular. People say a lot of things around the waitstaff—they think they’re deaf or something. You want to come with me?”

“I’ll wait here,” I said. “Order another drink, maybe.”

“Probably for the best,” Jack said easily. “You don’t want to get that pretty dress stained in the kitchen.”

I watched him push through the double doors that led to the kitchen, then I got up. I had an idea, probably a stupid idea, and one that I knew Jack wouldn't approve of.

I abandoned our table, seating myself at a different one directly across from Bugsy Siegel's, in the center of his field of view. I leaned back against my chair, crossing my legs in such a way as to pull up the skirt of my gown, showing off a long slice of my thigh.

It was a cheap maneuver, but I had already decided that I would do whatever it took to figure out what had happened to Clara. If that included flaunting myself like a floozy for a dangerous gangster, so be it.

Indeed, it only took a few minutes for Bugsy to glance over and catch sight of me. I watched his eyes travel up from my legs to my body to my head. When he saw my face, he gave a start. He seemed to recognize me, and he looked confused.

I held his gaze coolly as he registered that it was not actually Clara he was looking at, but only someone who resembled her. I slowly, languorously sipped my drink, pretending to be bored.

Nothing happened for about ten minutes, during which time I worried that I didn't look quite alluring enough. Jack was likely to come back any minute, so I might have to do something more obvious to get the ball rolling.

As I was pondering what that might be, somebody tapped me on the shoulder, making me jump.

It was one of Bugsy Siegel's goons, a heavysset man with a florid face and a fedora too small for his head.

"Excuse me, Miss," he said. "Mr. Siegel was wondering if you'd like to join him at his table."

I looked over at Bugsy Siegel. He was watching me, unsmiling.

"Alright," I said.

I followed the bodyguard back to Bugsy's table, where Bugsy made space for me by unceremoniously ejecting the blonde

who had been sidling up to him. The girl glared at me but hustled to the other side of the table without complaint.

“Hello,” Buggy said, in a low, smooth voice. He had a deceptively placid face, with hooded eyes. He exuded the kind of charm that powerful men seemed to possess, where every word they spoke seemed significant.

“Hello,” I said. “I’m Alice.”

“Alice,” Buggy said. “I couldn’t help but notice you over there. You look like somebody I know.”

“Probably my sister Clara,” I said. “Everyone says we look alike.”

“Of course,” Buggy said softly, “Caaaaaaarol.” He drew her name out long and slow. Buggy reminded me of a hypnotist I’d once seen at a fair. Every nerve in my body was screaming at me to be careful, not to let him lull me into security.

“Did you hear someone killed her?” I asked him.

“I did,” Buggy said. “Terrible shame, a girl so young and pretty.”

I watched his face for any sort of reaction—anger, if he had held a grudge against Clara. Satisfaction, if he’d been the one to order the hit.

He didn’t betray the slightest flicker of emotion. His expression was as tightly controlled as his smooth, silky voice.

“Did you know Clara well?” I asked.

“Well enough,” Buggy said.

I decided to take a chance.

“Clara told me you two were very close,” I lied.

“Maybe we were,” Buggy said. “Why are you so interested?”

“She was pregnant when she was killed,” I said, throwing all caution out the window. “Did you know that?”

I was certain this would garner some kind of reaction, but Buggy had the ultimate poker face.

“Why don’t you come upstairs with me?” he said with a smile, “We can talk privately.”

I was aware that going anywhere alone with Bugsy Siegel was a very bad idea. But there was no way he was going to give me information here, in front of his lieutenants and assorted hangers-on.

“Okay,” I agreed.

Two of Bugsy’s men followed as he led me through a side door and up the stairs to a suite of private rooms. With every step we took, the noise of the club faded away behind us. I knew that Jack would have no idea where I’d gone. He wouldn’t be able to hear me if I screamed for help.

When we reached Bugsy’s room, he told the men to wait outside the door.

“Can you send them off?” I asked sweetly. “I don’t want them standing there just listening to us.”

Bugsy paused for a moment, sizing me up.

“Check her over,” he commanded the heavysset lieutenant.

The man did a quick pat-down of my body, though it should have been obvious from the flimsy material of my dress that I wasn’t carrying a weapon. His big, meaty hands ran down my sides, up my thighs, and even under my breasts, while Bugsy looked on, smirking.

The lieutenant looked through my purse as well. He searched it thoroughly before nodding to Bugsy.

“Alright, take off,” Bugsy told his men.

The heavysset goon looked like he wanted to argue, but instead he snapped his fingers at his associate, and the two shuffled off toward the stairs.

“Thanks,” I said. “They kinda give me the creeps.”

“They’re alright,” Bugsy said. “The big one could tear your arms off like an ape, but other than that he’s a sweetheart.”

The way he said that so casually made me feel sick, but I forced myself to smile at Bugsy.

“Can I have a drink?” I asked him.

“Of course,” he said.

Before he walked toward the minibar, he shut the door and locked it, pocketing the key.

I pretended not to notice that as I looked around the room. It was on the smaller side, but opulently decorated. It held a large couch nearly as wide as a bed, two armchairs, and a low table, all arranged in front of a fireplace. Though it wasn't really cold enough to warrant it, a fire burned in the grate. The air was thick with the scent of birchwood, and hothouse roses from the vase next to the door.

“Have a seat,” Bugsy said, indicating the sofa.

I would have preferred one of the armchairs, but he watched me until I sat down where he had pointed.

Meanwhile, Bugsy started to mix our drinks. He dropped the ice in the glasses, poured the liquor, and, using a small knife, pared a perfect, thin rind off a fresh lemon for each of our glasses. I noted how deft and quick his movements were. Though he wasn't nearly as large as his lieutenants, he was physically intimidating.

He handed me my glass, seating himself on the small table in front of me. I sipped slowly, hoping he would drink his liquor down. If I could get him tipsy enough, he might become talkative. But if anything, he drank even slower than I did.

“So,” Bugsy said. “You're trying to figure out who iced your sister?”

I could feel my cheeks getting hot from the liquor, the fire, and how easily Bugsy could see through me.

“Yes,” I said, deciding it was pointless to deny it.

“And you think it was me.”

“I considered the possibility,” I said.

“But you came up here anyway.”

“Yes,” I said. “I loved my sister.”

“That’s pretty gutsy,” Bugsy said. “Unfortunately—or maybe fortunately for you—I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“I’m sure you can appreciate why I might doubt your word on that,” I said.

“Sure,” Bugsy said calmly. “I’d lie about it if I wanted to. But in this case, I don’t have to. I didn’t hurt Clara.”

“And you don’t know who did?”

“No,” he said, setting his drink down on the table a little too hard. It was the first time I’d seen a hint of emotion from him. Could it be annoyance that something so significant had happened in his city without his knowledge?

“So you and Clara weren’t romantically involved?” I pressed.

“No,” Bugsy said. “She was cute enough, but not exactly my type.”

That didn’t make sense to me. After all, Bugsy seemed plenty interested in me, and I looked almost just like Clara.

Smiling a little, Bugsy pushed his drink aside and said, “May I?”

I was confused—he seemed to be pointing at my shoes.

“Al-alright,” I stammered.

Bugsy bent down and lifted my feet up into his lap. One at a time, he undid the buckles on my shoes and slid them from my feet, dropping them onto the carpet. Now my stockinged feet were resting on the fine material of his suit pants, right above his crotch.

Very, very gently, he reached up my left leg to undo the clasp of my garter. I almost jumped out of my seat as his fingers slid up the inside of my thigh, but I forced myself to remain still, though my heart hammered against my ribs.

Bugsy rolled down my stocking, pulling it off my toes and letting it fall to the floor beside my shoes. He repeated the same action on my right side, unclasping the two fastening points on my garter, then slowly sliding down the stocking so that my bare skin glowed in the warm light of the fire.

Now that he had my bare feet resting in his lap, he began to massage my left foot. With strong pressure, he pressed his thumb into the ball of my foot, and then up and down the arch. Then he began to slide his fingers between my toes.

All the time that he was doing this, he was looking into my eyes with his hypnotist's gaze, gauging my reaction. I knew that he could see my anxiety, my heightened color and quickened pulse. At the same time, the soothing and pleasurable effect of his skilled hands working on my feet could not be entirely ignored. He seemed to like how I was enjoying the sensation despite myself.

He caressed my foot with long, steady strokes, pressing my heel into his lap.

At last I began to understand what had really captured Buggy's attention.

It wasn't the first time I'd attracted the interest of a man with a certain kind of predilection. It was unusual for a girl as tall as me to have such small feet. I'd seen men staring on the streetcar. Even one of my professors at the University of Chicago had been enthralled and had gone so far as to present me with an expensive pair of leather boots at the end of the semester.

I had never understood the fixation. But I recognized the look in Buggy's eye—the manic gleam as he examined my dainty heels and my delicate little toes. The way his tongue crept out to moisten his lips, and how he even raised my foot up to his face so he could inhale deeply, his nose pressed against the arch.

Now Buggy moved to my right foot, massaging and manipulating it with both hands. He was no longer watching my face, having become distracted by the flawless garnet-painted pedicure Lucille had applied to my toes that morning. Buggy was becoming quite flushed himself, his eyes glittering in the firelight.

This was my opportunity to act, my one moment of leverage.

“So why was Clara hanging around?” I demanded. “Hedda Hopper said she saw you two together, here at the Trocadero, and also at the racecourse.”

“That nosy bitch,” Bugsy muttered, completely focused on my feet, tugging gently on my toes. I could feel his erection pressing up against my heel.

“Why was Clara coming around?” I persisted. “Did she like the glamour? The free drinks?”

“She was working for me, alright?” Bugsy said.

This was not at all what I expected.

“Working for you?”

“Nothing major,” Bugsy said. “She ran the numbers game for me at Paramount. Took the wagers.”

“How long had she been doing that?”

“About three months.”

“And you paid her for it,” I said, understanding at last. “Four hundred dollars, every two weeks.”

“That’s right,” Bugsy said, sounding surprised. “How’d you know that?”

“I saw her bankbook.”

“She needed the money. It’s always easier for me to have somebody on the inside so I don’t have to send my guys somewhere they’ll attract attention.”

That made sense to me. Clara had nothing against gambling and would place a small bet herself if she happened to be at a racetrack.

“And nothing went wrong?” I said. “She was doing a good job?”

“Yeah,” Bugsy said. “I mean, sometimes people don’t pay up, but we handle that. Clara just took the bets.”

“And what—” I began, but Bugsy cut me off.

“Enough of that,” he growled, pushing me back down on the couch. “I answered your questions.”

Taking up my foot again, he ran his tongue up the arch of my foot, then began to suck on my toes. His mouth was wet, hot, and eager, his tongue lapping at my big toe.

I yanked my foot away from him and jumped up off the couch.

“You know,” I said, “I really don’t think I should—”

Bugsy silenced me by seizing me and kissing me hard on the mouth. He was extremely strong, as I had feared, his hands like manacles wrapped around my upper arms. Though his mouth tasted of liquor, he didn’t seem the least bit inebriated.

All I could think was that his tongue had been on my foot a moment before. I jerked away from him, slapping him hard across the face.

That didn’t stop him for a minute. He kissed me again, even harder than before. He yanked at the neck of my dress, trying to get my breasts loose, ripping one of the cap sleeves along its seam. I responded by kneeling him hard in the groin.

I sprinted for the door, barefoot but snatching up my purse and throwing it over my shoulder as I ran.

I grabbed the brass doorknob only to find it locked—the key was in Bugsy’s pocket.

Well, I wasn’t going back for that. He was already straightening up, a look of fury in his eyes.

I grabbed the heavy vase of roses off the end table, bringing it down on the doorknob with all my strength. The vase shattered and the doorknob popped clean off. I kicked the door open and raced down the hallway, dashing down the stairs as fast as I could.

Bugsy’s two goons were loitering around at the bottom of the stairs. Jack was arguing with one of them, trying to come up. It looked like things were getting heated.

When they saw me, the heavysset guard reached out a hand to grab me, but his associate restrained him, muttering something about Jack being a cop. They allowed me to pass by, and I grabbed Jack’s hand and dragged him away.



““**A**lice!” Jack cried. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Come on,” I gasped, continuing to pull him right out of the Trocadero. “Let’s get out of here.”

I would have kept going all the way down the street, but once we were outside Jack made me stop.

“Alice, what happened? Where are your shoes?” he demanded.

“I was talking to Bugsy,” I said.

Jack’s face went white, and he looked furious. He was still holding my hand, but now his grip was tight around my wrist.

“That was extremely stupid,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “But I had to go upstairs with him. It was the only way to get him to talk.”

“Are you alright? Did he ...?”

I saw his eyes sweep down over the torn sleeve of my dress, and the tops of my breasts that were now bared to the evening air. His jaw clenched, and his fingers dug into my wrist harder than ever.

“No,” I said. “I mean, he tried, but he didn’t do anything to me.”

Jack looked relieved, but still furious.

“You lied to me,” he said. “You planned to go talk to him all along.”

“I did,” I admitted. “If I had told you that, you would have tried to stop me.”

“Damn right I would have! He’s a gangster, Alice. I know you’re having fun playing detective, but that was idiotic.”

I wrenched my wrist out of his grasp, glaring up at him. My heart was still racing a mile a minute from my sprint out of the club, and somehow the heat of my conflict with Bugsy was all turning on Jack.

“I’m not playing at anything!” I shouted. “My sister was killed, and I’m going to do whatever I have to to find out who did it. I’ll talk to fifty gangsters if that’s what it takes!”

“Then you’ll get yourself killed just like she did!” Jack snarled back at me.

Our faces were inches apart, both of us red in the face and breathing hard.

I wanted to slap him for bringing up Clara like that, and I could tell he wanted to grab me and give me a good hard shake.

He had better self-control than I did.

He stepped back from me, shaking his head.

“I’m not going to be a part of that,” Jack said. “If you’re going to be reckless, then you’re on your own.”

He turned around to walk away from me.

I was still angry with him. But he had only taken a few steps away from me before guilt began to creep in, too. Jack was my only ally at the moment. I had put him in a bad position, coming to the Troc with him and then sneaking off to speak with Bugsy. I was used to doing things on my own, in my own way. That wasn’t how you treated a friend.

“Jack, wait!” I called after him. “Look, I’m sorry. I couldn’t see any way around it—I didn’t think he’d tell you anything because you’re a cop, but I figured he might talk to me.”

Jack looked back at me, his jaw still clenched. I knew what wounded pride looked like. That wasn’t what I saw on his

face. He'd been genuinely worried about me.

"I won't go behind your back again," I said.

"We're supposed to be working together," Jack said. "You won't help your sister any by getting yourself killed."

"I know," I said.

"Well," Jack said grudgingly. "Did he?"

"Did he what?"

"Talk to you."

"Actually, yes," I said.

Jack couldn't keep the smile from spreading over his face. It lit him up like a candle, it was completely irresistible. It made me grin back at him.

"He said that he and Clara were never an item. He said she was just working for him. Taking bets on set for the numbers game."

"Oh really," Jack said. "And how did you read him—did it seem like he was giving you the straight goods?"

"I think so," I said. "Especially because of this."

I pulled Clara's leather notebook out of my purse, flipping to the page near the back that contained the list of initials and numbers.

"Look," I said, showing it to Jack. "I think this must be a list of names, and the middle column could be how much each person owed—those look like dollar amounts. \$95, \$40, \$15, \$435. I don't know what the three-digit numbers on the right represent."

"That's the numbers they were betting on," Jack said. "You can pick any number you like, but it's always three digits."

"Why are there pages ripped out of the book?"

"Those could be from the previous weeks?" Jack guessed.

"Clara only kept the most current numbers."

"Ohhhh," I breathed, scanning down the list of initials with fresh eyes. "I know who some of these are—or I think I do."

Look ... AK, CG, EW, WW ... I think that's Azriel Kantor, Clark Gable, Emmet Walsch, and Willie White. And if it is ..."

"Then Emmet Walsch owed a lot," Jack said. "\$1150. On a cameraman's salary. Plus I doubt that's his only debt if he's a gambler."

"Maybe that's why he left the birthday party so early," I said. "If he showed up at the Trocadero and saw Bugsy Siegel there, he might have taken off before some of Bugsy's guys could shake him down for the money."

"Could be," Jack said. "The question is, would he want to hurt Clara over that kind of debt?"

"Possibly," I said. "If Clara's notebook was the only record of the debt."

"I'm not going to wait for tomorrow to talk to him," Jack said. "I'm going to go pick him up now, bring him to the station."

"Can I come?" I asked.

"No," Jack said. "It's not a field trip—there's no telling how he's going to act. But I can drop you off at home first."

I was glad to take him up on that offer. It was fully dark, and my lack of shoes would look strange to a taxi driver.

I followed Jack to his car, which was an old Ford coupe. He opened the door for me and took my hand to help me inside, not in a suave and showy way, but with simple masculine kindness.

He did chuckle a little when he noticed my bare feet stepping up into the car.

"Are you going to explain that to me?" he said.

"I don't know if you'd believe me," I said.

Jack started the engine.

"When you've been a cop for a while, almost nothing seems strange anymore," he assured me.

So I told him exactly what had happened, moment by moment.

I could tell he was furious about Bugsy kissing me. His hands tightened on the steering wheel, and he looked back over his shoulder, back in the direction of the Trocadero, as if he had a mind to turn the car around and go storming back in there.

He did snort a little about the foot rub.

“That’s what he wanted most of all?” Jack said in disbelief.

“Some men seem to like it,” I said, blushing furiously.

Jack leaned over to peer at my bare feet.

“I mean, they’re real nice,” he said. “But in my opinion, you’ve got plenty of features nicer than that.”

I wanted to know exactly which features he liked best, but of course I couldn’t ask him. I could only shake my head at him, as if I didn’t believe him at all.

The farther we got from the Trocadero, and the closer to The Georgian Hotel, Jack’s hand became steady on the wheel, and his rangy frame relaxed against his worn seat.

The palm trees unspooled along either side of us, their heavy heads bending their slender trunks.

I could hear the ocean long before we reached it and smell the salt in the air. Jack had his window rolled down, to let the sea breeze into the car.

“It’s so beautiful,” I said. “Sometimes it’s hard to believe anything awful happens here.”

“It’s the best place and the worst place,” Jack said, glancing over at me.

“Chicago can be like that, too.”

Jack had his arm laid over the back of the seat. Not touching my shoulders, but close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating off his skin.

He cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry for losing my temper,” he said. “I’m not used to working with someone who ... well, somebody I have to

worry about. I might actually prefer it if Palmer got himself shot.”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” I said. “I’m not a damsel in distress. I live on my own. I take care of myself.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I figured that from the way you marched into the police station. And I admire it, I do. But there’s something in me that wants to help you, all the same.”

He was watching me out of the corner of his eye.

“Is that why you became a cop?” I asked him. “You like helping people?”

“No,” Jack said, with a short laugh. “I picked that job for the dumbest reason in the world—to piss off my dad. He hated cops.”

“You like it now, though,” I said.

“Not really.” Jack shook his head. “I’ve got a decent record. But I’m never gonna move up in the ranks. I don’t say the right things to the right people.”

“What would you rather be doing?” I asked him.

“I don’t know.”

He took his eyes off the road to fix them on me instead. I felt hot and cold at the same time. Wanting him to stop looking at me, and also never to stop.

“I’m a hunter, not a planner,” he said.

“So that’s what you’re really enjoying,” I said. “Hunting a killer.”

“I guess so,” he said, his voice a low growl.

I could feel goosebumps rising on my arms, and I crossed them swiftly so Jack wouldn’t notice.

I’d never felt so unbalanced by a man. Usually, I was in control of myself. Usually, I knew exactly what I wanted.

“What about you?” Jack said. “What’s your plan, Alice Bloom?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s so hard to plan anything right now. If America were to join the war ... I might join, too. When something truly evil is happening, you can’t just stand by. And that’s what Hitler is, I think. Truly evil.”

“Ah,” Jack said softly. Looking at me again. “So it’s not just about your sister. You’re always a warrior for justice.”

I could feel my cheeks flushing.

“I’m not a warrior,” I said. “But if there’s a choice between do something and do nothing ... I’ll always choose to do something.”

“I knew I liked you.” Jack smiled. “And not just ‘cause you were telling off Biscailuz.”

We had pulled up in front of my hotel.

I didn’t want to get out of the car, but I knew Jack had to hurry off to find Emmet Walsch.

I could see the doorman waiting just inside the lobby. I looked down at my torn dress and generally disheveled appearance, grimacing at what Walter was sure to think.

“How bad is it?” I said to Jack.

He reached out and tucked a strand of hair back behind my ear. His fingers were warm and slightly rough, like a cat’s tongue on the rim of my ear. It made me shiver.

“You’re perfect,” he said.

I hurried out of the car, my skin burning—not just where he’d touched me, but over every inch of my body.



The next morning as I waited for the streetcar to take me to the Paramount Pictures studio lot, I couldn't help looking back over my shoulder every few minutes, tensing up whenever I saw a man walking in my direction.

I was only too aware that I had slapped a gangster across the face, besides kneeing him in the groin. If Bugsy was still feeling sore this morning—both literally and figuratively—he might be in the mood for revenge.

Instead, when I arrived at my trailer, I was greeted by an overflowing vase of hothouse roses, the same shade of scarlet as the flowers in Bugsy's room. Next to that sat a large box wrapped in gold paper and tied with a bow.

Ruby was hanging around to watch me open it, too curious to see what was inside to pretend otherwise.

I already had an idea of what I would find, but I opened the card anyway.

You're quite the little wildcat, it read. Wear these next time you come round for a visit.

I opened the box. Inside was a pair of crimson velvet shoes, with an unusually high heel and open toes. Size 5 1/2 exactly.

"Shoes!" Ruby cried in surprise. "That's a new one. I've only ever gotten chocolates."

“I’d prefer chocolates,” I told her.

“I bet you have a lot of admirers,” Ruby said wistfully.

“None that I admire back,” I said.

“I’m not too particular,” Ruby said. “As long as he’s good and clean—I couldn’t bear dirty fingernails.”

Bugsy’s unwanted package reminded me to ask Ruby if Clara had ever received anything similar.

“Ruby,” I said, “Lillie LaShay told me that someone sent Clara a box of beetles.”

“Ugh,” Ruby said, shivering atavistically. “I was there when she opened it. God, how we screamed. They were crawling and flying everywhere with those awful wings. I had to beg one of the key grips to clean out the trailer—I couldn’t stand to do it.”

“Do you know who sent them?” I said eagerly.

“I don’t remember his name. But that wasn’t the only thing he sent her. He wrote Clara letters every week.”

“Do you have any of the letters?”

“Maybe,” Ruby said. “Clara usually kept them in those drawers. She kept all her fan mail.”

Ruby pointed to the bank of drawers set under the bench seats that ran along the interior wall of the trailer.

I squatted down so I could open the drawers.

They were stuffed with letters, all of which had been opened and read before Clara put them back in their envelopes. There must have been a hundred or more. I pulled them all out, setting them on the trailer table so I could sort through them.

“How do I know which ones are from the beetle guy?” I asked Ruby.

“He always wrote in green ink,” Ruby said at once.

I flipped through the envelopes, looking for any that had been addressed in colored ink. Ruby did the same. After a few minutes she said, “Here we go!” and held an envelope aloft.

I took it from her, surprised at the neat, slightly feminine script with which it was addressed. To say nothing of the brilliant emerald ink.

“A man wrote this?” I said.

Ruby shrugged. “So he said.”

I slipped the letter out of the envelope, unfolding the single sheet.

It read:

Dear Clara,

I went to see Age of Aces again at Grauman's Egyptian Theater. I think that was the seventh time. Lucky number seven.

Do you feel like a movie gets better every time you see it?

That's how I feel.

I always see things I didn't see before. This time I saw you wink when you caught that baseball so nice. Not a lot of girls can catch a baseball.

I'm surprised you never got married yet.

Do you believe in soulmates?

Maybe some people stay single so long cause they haven't bumped into the right person yet. It could be hard to find them. Maybe they don't look like what you expect.

I hope you got my gift. I figured you would write me back if you got it ...

It's hard to find Rose Chafers here. They're from Great Britain you know.

That's my favorite color, that green. Same as your eyes.

You must be busy. I heard that movie you're filming is the biggest ever. I'm sure I'll hear back from you when you get a chance.

Fondly,

Herman Bouchette

I stared at the letter with its strange garish ink.

Ruby had been reading it over my shoulder, obviously not for the first time.

“That’s him alright,” she said with a shiver. “Isn’t he creepy? Imagining thinking a box of bugs was a good gift.”

I was more disturbed by the familiar language of the letter and its delusional implications. This man obviously believed that he had some connection to my sister.

“Did Clara ever write him back?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” Ruby said, shaking her head emphatically. “She only wrote back to kids, mostly. And once in a while to an adult, if they wrote something really kind, or if they had a sad story. Like if they were sick or something.”

I had flipped over the envelope and was scanning the return address.

“He lives here,” I said. “In Los Angeles.”

“I figured,” Ruby said. “Since he said he went to the Egyptian Theater. That’s right on Hollywood Boulevard.”

“Hm,” I said, stuffing Herman Bouchette’s letter in my purse. I wanted to have his address handy.

Ruby started to gather up the rest of the letters, saying, “That’s not even the craziest letter I’ve heard about. All kinds of married men write to starlets, begging them to send back a piece of paper with a spritz of their perfume, or an item even less mentionable. Sometimes I wonder if there’s any good men at all in the world.”

“I think there’s a few,” I said, the image of Jack’s lean, tanned face flashing into my mind unbidden.

“Well, I sure haven’t found any,” Ruby scowled.

Freida Kantor came into my trailer without knocking, my costume for the next scene draped over her arm. She didn’t so

much as glance at the flowers or the opened gift box, or the letters spread out on the table. She seemed distracted, glancing repeatedly out the trailer window.

“Freida, how did you meet Azriel?” Ruby asked.

“We knew each other as children,” Freida said, still looking out. “There was a garden between our two buildings, we would play in it together. Once we started school, my parents didn’t want me to speak to him anymore because he was a Jew. But I already loved him.”

“That’s so romantic,” Ruby said, clutching her hands together.

Freida stopped looking out the window and fixed her steady gaze on Ruby instead.

“Love and romance have nothing to do with each other,” she said. “Romance is a choice, it’s for amusement. When you love someone, they become rooted to your soul, and you could no sooner stop loving them than you could tear your soul out of your body.”

Both Ruby and I were a little awed by this, as neither of us had yet been in a position to make authoritative statements about love. Besides, Freida didn’t usually talk much. That was the most words I’d ever heard her say at once.

“Be careful with this one,” Freida said, laying my dress over a chair. “The material is vintage; it tears easy.”

“I’ll help her put it on,” Lucille said, pushing open the door and attempting to haul her chest of pots and brushes into the trailer.

“Let me get the door,” Ruby said, holding it wide so Freida could go out and Lucille could come in. Ruby followed Freida outside, and Lucille began to set up her kit on the vanity.

While Lucille was applying my makeup she asked, “Will you be glad or sad when the movie wraps?”

“I—I’m not sure,” I said.

I was thinking that would depend on whether I had figured out what happened to Clara.

“Well, not long now,” Lucille said.

“What do you mean?”

“Mr. DeMille said this morning if we keep on this pace, there’s probably only a week of shooting left.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Will you be glad to get back home to Chicago?”

“Sure,” I said. But I wasn’t sure, not really. I liked Chicago, but I’d been more captivated by the beauty and sunshine and sparkle of California than I’d expected.

Besides, dressing as Clara every day, working at her job, had allowed me to stay close to her, to think of her every hour of the day. Once I went back to Chicago, the tie between us would be cut, once and for all. Clara would really be gone.

I could hear shouting outside the trailer, a voice that was becoming familiar to me: Mr. DeMille on a tear. Ruby came back inside looking flustered.

“Here’s the script for today,” she handed it to me. “Sorry I couldn’t get it to you sooner—I thought we’d be doing a different scene.”

Lucille glanced at the pages. “Why’d we switch?” she said.

“Emmet didn’t show up this morning,” Ruby said. “I’ve tried to call him a dozen times but there’s no answer at his house. Without him, Mr. DeMille doesn’t want to do the desert scene. We’ve got to shoot something simpler.”

I wondered if Emmet hadn’t come to work because he was still being held at the police station. That idea was dashed a few minutes later when I exited my trailer to see Jack speaking to Azriel Kantor over by a pile of lumber odds and ends. That had probably been why Freida kept looking out the window—she was worried that her husband might be in trouble.

I had no intention of interrupting the conversation, but they were just finishing up. Azriel walked back in the direction of his workshop, carrying a few lengths of wood under his arm. Jack came over to speak to me.

“Where’s Emmet Walsch?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” Jack said. “He wasn’t at his apartment last night, and he didn’t show up here this morning. Looks like he ran off somewhere.”

“Did he know you were coming to talk to him?” I asked, frowning.

“Maybe—or maybe he thought Bugsy was coming to collect,” Jack said.

“What did Azriel have to say?” I said.

“I was asking him what he was doing the morning Clara was killed.”

“And?”

“He said he was building a set. But nobody can confirm that because he was alone. For almost three hours.”

“That’s not good,” I said.

“No, it isn’t. And if Bugsy wasn’t dating Clara, Azriel is our most likely candidate for the father of her baby, isn’t he? If the father and the murderer are one and the same, that points to him.”

Jack didn’t look convinced, however.

“What?” I said.

“I dunno,” Jack frowned. “I don’t like hunches, or going off instinct. Everybody gets fooled. But the guy doesn’t strike me as a killer.”

“I agree,” I said. “He doesn’t seem violent in the slightest. Did you ask him if he was involved with Clara?”

“I did. He completely denied it.”

“Did he explain why they were alone together?”

“No. He said Deedee’s a gossip. Still, I noticed he didn’t contradict all of it—just the part about them having an affair.”

“Alright. What about Lillie?”

“I caught up with her this morning, gave her a ride over here. I asked her what time Clara left the house that Saturday morning.”

“And?”

“She said she left early, around 8:30.”

“Wait, that doesn’t make sense,” I said. “Nobody saw Clara before 12:40, so she couldn’t have been here that whole time. Where did she go before she came to the studio?”

“That’s the question,” Jack said.

“Unless ...”

“What?”

“Unless Lillie’s lying about when Clara left the house.”

“Why would she lie about that?”

“What if they both left the house together, say around noon. They might have come to Paramount together, and Lillie might have killed Clara here, right after they arrived.”

“Why wouldn’t she just have killed her at home?” Jack said. “That would have been less risky, no witnesses around.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe they got in an argument after they arrived.”

Jack looked skeptical.

“Well I don’t think it was Lillie either,” I said. “Not really, but why would she say Clara came to work so early? Clara might have been here twenty or thirty minutes without bumping into anybody, but you can’t hang around this place for four hours without anybody noticing you.”

“Clara must have gone somewhere else.” Jack shrugged. “She might have told Lillie she was on her way to Paramount but stopped someplace else first.”

Neither of us could think where that place might be.

“What’s the next step?” I asked him.

“I’ve got to speak to Heller, and then I’m going to try to track down Emmet Walsch,” he said. “What about you?”

“I’m going to try to dig up some dirt on Lillie LaShay,” I said. “Something isn’t quite coming together with her.”

“Good luck with that,” Jack said. “People come to Hollywood from all over the country to reinvent themselves. They leave their small town in the dust and they change their clothes and dye their hair and take a stage name and never look back. It’s not a place with a lot of history.”

Jack’s comment tickled a particular part of my brain, the part responsible for *deja vu* and words that dance on the tip of your tongue. It sparked an idea, but I couldn’t verbalize it, not just yet.

I needed to go over my lines with Gable and O’Neil, so I let Jack get along to his interview with Heller.

I found my co-stars in Gable’s trailer, already going through the scene.

Trenton O’Neil was an old stage actor, grizzled and gruff, with a deep, booming voice, and a map of lines and scars on his face that made him an interesting character actor, and in this role as the Vizier, an excellent villain. He was bald with a beard, the mustache of which had stayed dark while the beard itself had turned white.

Upon first meeting me, O’Neil had given me a long lecture on the Realist Movement created by Constantin Stanislavsky, which required the actor to fabricate an entire emotional inner life for their character, populating it with their own memories to create the ultimate realistic performance.

“Then,” O’Neil said, “building on this, I use the Strasberg System, which is full Substitution where you do not simply *play* the character, but rather must *become* them.”

“How can you become them?” I asked him. “And how can you use memories for a character if you don’t have a memory that aligns with what they’re doing or feeling?”

“Excellent questions!” O’Neil cried, rubbing his gnarled hands together. “That is why you must attempt to experience, as much as possible, the same circumstances as your character prior to filming! For example, say that I were to play a great

hunter. To truly embrace Substitution, I ought to go and live in the woods for a time, to learn to track and shoot and dress meat as a hunter would do.”

To me, that sounded slightly insane, and I wondered for a moment if O’Neil might have been tempted to harm Clara if he were truly embodying the character of the murderous Vizier. But then I thought that with a career as long as O’Neil’s, he would have left a string of bodies in his wake if he were to truly behave like all the characters he had played.

Since that conversation, I had come to quite like Mr. O’Neil. He was extraordinarily well-read and interested in all sorts of theories and philosophies besides those related to acting.

Lately he’d been reading about B.F. Skinner’s work on Behaviorism. He liked to opine how most human behavior was a result of stimulus and could be controlled via Operant Conditioning. He enjoyed using our fellow co-stars as examples, much to Clark Gable’s displeasure.

“We’re just like the pigeons and rats these studies examine,” O’Neil said. “We like to think that humans are special, but we respond to incentives and punishments just like animals do. Take Mr. Gable for example.”

“Please don’t,” Gable groaned, trying to make notes on his script.

“He’s in trouble with Ms. Lombard this morning because he went out to the races last night and lost all his pocket money.”

“Yes,” said Gable. “And pigeons don’t bet on ponies, so that has nothing to do with your psychological experiments.”

“But it does!” O’Neil said. “Here you see reinforcement at play—when Gable wins, he has a rush of elation, he gets a nice payout, he is positively reinforced! And as we know from tests with pigeons, the very fact that this reinforcement is random instead of consistently applied, means that he will pursue it all the more intently!”

“So how is Ms. Lombard supposed to counteract that?” I asked, trying not to laugh.

“Well, she cannot use negative reinforcement, because she has no ability to make Mr. Gable lose all his bets. But she could apply punishment!”

“What’s that tongue-lashing I got this morning, if not a punishment?” Gable said, turning the page of his script.

“The punishment isn’t strong enough!” O’Neil said. “Gable knows he’ll be in trouble if he loses his bet, but he also knows that when he goes home tonight with flowers, and he says a few charming things and he makes Carole laugh, all will be forgiven again. So the punishment is not strong enough to outweigh the positive reinforcement.”

That reminded me of Gable’s other outlet for gambling.

“Clark,” I said, “you used to play the numbers game, didn’t you? Through Clara?”

“Yes,” he said, “but please don’t mention that to Carole, I really am in enough trouble already.”

“How did it work?” I asked.

“Every week we’d tell Clara the amount we wanted to wager, and what numbers we wanted to play. They draw the numbers, and if you win you get the payout, if not you lose your wager. Simple enough—just a lottery, really.”

“How is it all tracked?”

“You get a ticket when you place your bet.”

“And what about the amount you owe?”

“Clara used to write it down in a little book and collect the following week.”

“What if you don’t pay?”

“Nobody’s that stupid,” Gable said, turning the page of his script, “knowing who runs the game.”

“Did you play too, Mr. O’Neil?”

“Goodness no,” O’Neil said. “What a racket. I’d sooner set my money on fire, at least that would keep me warm.”

As Gable had finished marking his script, we all began to run through our lines together for the upcoming scene. O'Neil and Gable gave me a few gentle suggestions for how I could improve my delivery, and as I tried to incorporate them, O'Neil said, "You've come a long way! You might actually make a career of this, Ms. Bloom, if you were so inclined."

"I don't know about that," I said. "I'll just be glad if I don't embarrass everyone. Everybody has worked so hard on this movie."

It was true—no conversation I had had with Clara over the years had given me any real idea of the complexity, the creativity, and the difficulty of making a movie.

Take someone like Gable—I had watched him in many films before meeting him, and I had assumed that he was essentially playing himself onscreen, that he need only do what came naturally in front of the camera. In truth, he was as much a craftsman as O'Neil, constantly poring over his scripts, trying each take in a different way to achieve the vision of the character he saw in his mind.

Though Gable was indeed charming in person, he was also quite different than his screen presence. His voice was higher, his movements less smooth, his attitude less assured. He had to work hard to achieve his suave onscreen persona.

The same was true of everyone on set—they were deeply invested in the quality of their work. Lucille, Freida, Azriel, Mr. DeMille: each one was an artist, intent upon perfecting the puzzle piece they would bring to the film.

"I'm not sure what I'll do after this," I said honestly. "I was working as a translator in Chicago, but it was only a temporary job. If the war keeps on, there may be need for a lot more work in that vein."

"What languages do you speak?" Gable asked curiously.

"French was my first," I said. "My mother was French-Canadian. From that, it was easy to pick up Italian. And then I was curious about the other progenitor of English, so I learned German as well."

“That could be of use indeed,” O’Neil said.

Ruby knocked on the door to give us a ten-minute warning for the next scene. Then Willie White came in to touch up Gable’s makeup. Lucille did most of the makeup on set, but Willie was territorial of anything to do with Gable, even insisting on picking up his lunch from the kitchen, though it was on the way to the dining hall.

As I exited Gable’s trailer, I saw Jack coming back from his meeting with Heller.

“Anything useful?” I asked him.

Jack shook his head. “I made Heller show me the insurance policy he carried on Clara, but it paid out to Paramount like you’d expect. Plus, Sergeant Palmer checked up on his finances and there’s no obvious signs that he’s hurting for money. I don’t think there’s any angle there.”

“I only have this one scene to film,” I said. “I want to go to the library afterward. Do you want to come with me?”

“I have to look for Emmet,” Jack reminded me. “But I’ll meet you after that if I can.”

I felt a disproportionate surge of hope that he would indeed be able to come.

I noticed that he hadn’t shaved again, but I was beginning to like the way the blond stubble looked against his lean, tanned jawline. I also liked the way his narrow blue eyes looked like they were laughing at me, but in a nice way, as if we shared the joke together. As if he could hear what I was thinking right now.

“Good luck with your scene,” Jack said, smiling at me.

“Good luck with your pursuit.”

We did laugh together then, quietly.

“See you later, maybe,” I said.

Catching up to Ruby, I said, “Ruby, I’m so sorry, but I ripped the sleeve on the dress you loaned me. I can pay to have it repaired.”

“Oh, don’t fret about it,” Ruby said, tucking her pen behind her ear. “There’s a thousand dresses in storage and most of them never get used again. Leave it in your trailer and I’ll sneak it back where it belongs. Just don’t let Freida see it—she’s wound up enough as it is. Deedee’s saying she’s not going to wear pink anymore because Hedda Hopper compared her to a prize piglet in some pink dress she wore to some party, and of course Freida already made her next gown and it’s fuchsia.”

“Thank you, Ruby,” I said. “You really are an angel.”

Ruby waved me off, pushing her glasses up on her nose.

“Don’t be complementary,” she said. “I’m much more used to being hollered at.”



The morning's scene with Gable and O'Neil did indeed go remarkably smoothly. Even Mr. DeMille couldn't find much to criticize. In fact, over our lunch break, DeMille actually stopped working long enough to partake of Mrs. Fischer's chicken with rice, instead of holing up in his office as usual or picking apart the setup for the next scene.

He came to the dining hall and sat directly across from me, which made my own consumption of said chicken and rice decidedly uncomfortable under his excruciating stare. Though I respected DeMille, I found him intimidating. He had the kind of single-minded artistic sociopathy that made me think that, had the cheetahs decided to eat me in the first scene I filmed, Mr. DeMille would probably have kept the cameras rolling.

"I had another movie I was going to make with Clara," DeMille said abruptly. "After this one. It's a love triangle, a romantic rivalry. Carole Lombard is playing the other female lead—Gable's wife, have you met her?"

I shook my head.

"You two would play well off each other," he said. "You're not as funny as Clara, but you have a decent screen presence, and you've got that husky voice. Men like that. It might work well with Lombard, she has the zaniness and the energy. Plus I always like to pair a redhead with a brunette."

"Oh," I said, caught completely off guard.

"We could shoot a screen test next week, once we wrap *Arabian Nights*."

“I’m not an actor,” I said.

“You are if I say you are,” DeMille said, frowning at me.

It wasn’t an option I’d considered in the slightest. I always assumed that when *Arabian Nights* wrapped, that would be the end of my short-lived career in the film industry.

It might be an opportunity to keep digging into what had happened to Clara. After all, DeMille kept most of the same crew with him wherever he worked. But I felt a strange surety that if I couldn’t figure it out on the current set, then I never would.

“Can I think about it?” I asked him.

“Sure,” DeMille said. “Until the end of the week.”

He wolfed down the rest of his chicken and stood up.

“We’ll run the scene a few more times after lunch,” he said. “Gable has another way he wants to do it, and so do I.”

I nodded. I finished my own lunch at a slower pace. When I was done, I walked back to my trailer to lay down for the remaining half-hour or so, as I’d been hit with a wave of afternoon sleepiness.

As I passed the kitchen, I saw Freida and Gerda Fischer having tea together at the small wooden table, as they often did over the lunch hour. It gave me a small pang of envy, to see them talking with their heads close together. There was a particular kind of intimacy that only sisters could share. I had been lucky enough to have that with Clara. I wondered if it was now something that would always remind me of my loss wherever I saw it.

As I watched, Freida leaned her head on Gerda’s shoulder and said, “*Ich bin fix und alle.*” I had never heard the sisters speaking German together before. Understandable, since it was hardly popular to display that particular nationality at the moment.

I understood the statement—it was similar to “*I’m all wiped out,*” in English. The literal meaning was “*I am fixed and empty.*”

Gerda glanced up and saw me watching at them.

“She’s very tired,” she said. “This has been a long shoot. So many elaborate costumes.”

“Only a week to go now, I hear,” I said, trying to be comforting.

“Thank god for that,” Freida said, drinking the last of her tea.

I took the full thirty minutes in my trailer to lay down on my chaise, a damp towel across my eyes.

I was starting to become discouraged. At first I had felt so confident that I would discover who had hurt Clara. If I believed in such things, I would have thought fate was on my side—being asked to take Clara’s place in *Arabian Nights* was an unparalleled stroke of luck, allowing me to poke around where Clara had lived and worked.

Initially there had seemed to be so many useful pieces of information. But one by one they were all coming to nothing, all turning out to be false gossip or misleading circumstances or contradictory facts that I couldn’t reconcile.

I was realizing how foolish I had been to think I could solve a murder simply because I wanted to so badly. Jack had been right in accusing me of treating this like a puzzle or a game. People were far more complicated.

For that thirty minutes, I wallowed in self-pity. But before Ruby came to knock on my door, my natural optimism was already beginning to rise again. My search had been frustrating, but to quit would be worse. I simply needed to think of a new avenue of investigation.

I had Herman Bouchette’s address. I could look for him—maybe with Jack’s help. I hoped Jack would agree to accompany me, because Herman was more likely to open the door to a police officer, and I had a feeling Jack would be almost as angry if I visited the fixated fan as he had been at me chatting up Bugsy Siegel.

With this thought in mind, I waited while Lucille touched up my face, then joined Gable and O’Neil on set again. As I suspected, Mr. DeMille made us run the scene eight more

times in total, but we still finished by 4:00, giving me plenty of time to visit the library before it closed.

“Finished for the day?” Gable asked as I began to strip off my bracelets and rings.

“Yes,” I said.

“Lucky,” he said enviously. “I’ve got a scene with Deedee before I can go home.”

“What about me?” Deedee said, skipping over in her street clothes.

“I was just saying how excited I am for our scene together,” Gable said, winking at me.

“You’re late!” Mr. DeMille bellowed at Deedee. “Get your costume on, we’re starting in ten minutes.”

I hurried away before I could get roped into anything else. DeMille was not above making the actors hold reflectors or clapboards if he thought we had spare time on our hands.

After changing clothes and scrubbing my face, I took a cab over to the Central Library on Flower Street. It was a grand sandstone edifice, which looked like an ancient temple from the exterior. Its pillars were carved with sphinxes, snakes, and patterns of constellations. Inside, the vast archways were painted with intricate murals in red, brown, and turquoise.

I knew I’d need help finding anything in this massive place, so I went in search of the librarian. I found a clerk instead, a slim young man with thick suspenders and inky fingers who seemed only too glad to help me find what I needed.

“I’m looking for newspapers from the Detroit area,” I said. “From 1928.”

“We keep that sort of thing in the internal stacks,” the clerk said. “We only have about ten percent of our materials out here on the floor. You’re supposed to submit a request slip, but no need to do it today. What you’re asking for is simple enough, I can find it. Just wait in the reading room and I’ll bring it to you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “You’re very kind.”

The clerk hurried away. I found an empty table in the reading room. It wasn't hard—most of the tables were empty, aside from an old man flipping through an illustrated folio of American waterfowl, and a teenage girl who appeared to be taking notes for a paper on Napoleon.

The clerk took close to a half hour to return. When I saw his heavily-burdened trolley full of newspapers, I was surprised it hadn't been longer.

“This is what I found so far,” the clerk said. “If they don't have what you're looking for, I can get more.”

“This should be enough to start with,” I said.

The clerk hung around for a minute, as if hoping I would explain what I needed and enlist him in the search. I smiled at him blandly until he gave up and went away. Then I started pulling newspapers off the stack, flipping through each one in turn.

Though the library preserved the papers as carefully as possible, the pages were still frail and discolored. I mostly looked at the front pages—the event I wanted to find would have been headline news.

It might all be a fool's errand, but my idea was to check the one piece of concrete information that Lillie had given me—that her family had been killed in a train crash outside Detroit twelve years earlier. I thought that if I could prove or disprove what Lillie had said, it would show whether she was actually honest.

The headlines flashed by in a blur:

Tigers Finish 6th in the American League.

Customs Inspectors Accused of Graft as Rum Flows in from Canada.

Fire Destroys Eight Buildings in Wayne County.

Construction of the Ambassador Bridge Delayed.

Then, about three-quarters of the way through the trolley, I picked up an issue of the *Detroit News* from May of 1928. I saw what I was looking for immediately, taking up almost the entirety of the front page:

CK&S Train Derails Outside Hastings - 128 Killed.

The photograph beneath, though grainy and colorless, showed a horrific tangle of burned and twisted cars, torn-up track, and a jumble of debris.

Subsequent photos across six more pages of the paper portrayed the carnage in far more detail than the pithy language of the news article. I saw rows of stretchers with dark stains leaking through the white sheets covering the bodies. I saw dirty, disheveled survivors crying as they tried to dig through the wreckage for family members not yet found. I saw police officers and passersby staring hopelessly at the mess.

On the last page devoted to the crash, I found a list of the deceased, as many as had been identified at that point. Scanning down alphabetically, I found Bernice LaShay and Martin LaShay—presumably Lillie’s parents. But no third family member. Where was Lillie’s little brother, the one with the dark curly hair I had seen in the photograph?

My eyes were pulled irresistibly back to the pictures, the awful pictures. Though this had happened twelve years earlier, I couldn’t stop the tears burning my eyes. I winced at the expressions of grief permanently stamped on every face.

And then, a slightly more hopeful picture: a child being lifted from the rubble. A skinny boy in torn pants and a newsboy cap.

I stared.

Running back to the main desk, I found the clerk again and said, “Do you have a magnifying glass?”

The clerk brought it out from his drawer, handing it over to me.

“It can be hard to read the small print,” he said.

I didn’t answer, already dashing back to the reading room. I held up the magnifying glass, peering through at the tiny photograph, only as large as the palm of my hand.

The child leaned against the medic, his face partly covered by his cap, only one eye visible, as well as his dark, curly hair. He was a few years older than he had been in the photograph I saw in Lillie’s bedroom, but I was sure it was him: Lillie’s little brother.

Why had Lillie lied? She said her entire family had been killed when the train derailed. Where was this brother now?

And then all at once it clicked.

I understood.

I remembered each moment of my visit to Clara’s apartment. Everything that had seemed odd or out of place now fit perfectly.

Abandoning the magnifying glass and the newspapers, I snatched up my purse and pushed through the doors of the reading room. I had to go see Lillie LaShay.

I had completely forgotten that Jack was coming to the library to meet me. I would have walked right out of the place had he not at that moment been wandering through the main floor looking for me.

“Alice!” he called, heedless of the requirement for silence.

The clerk looked up from his desk. His face fell when he saw the handsome blond police officer waving at me.

“Jack!” I said. “I think I’ve figured it out.”

“You did?” he said eagerly, “You know what happened to Clara?”

“No,” I said, “not that—not yet at least. But I think I’ve got part of it now. Come outside with me, I can’t breathe in here.”

My heart was racing, and the library suddenly seemed stuffy and warm.

“Did you find Emmet?” I asked distractedly as Jack followed me down the long flight of steps outside the library, down to the courtyard.

“No,” he said in frustration. “I’ve been to his apartment, his mother’s house, his favorite pub—nobody’s seen him. He’s gotta be holed up like a rat somewhere, or he might be lying at the bottom of a river. But never mind that, come sit down.”

He led me over to a wrought iron bench, held my arm as I took a seat, and then sat down directly beside me.

“What do you know?” he said, looking eagerly into my face.

“I think I know who the father of Clara’s baby was.”

“Who was it?”

“I think it was Lillie LaShay.”

Jack stared at me as if I’d gone mad.

“Lillie LaShay ... Alice ...”

“I know it sounds crazy,” I said.

“How could Lillie LaShay be a father to anybody?”

“Because I think Lillie used to be a man.”

This silenced Jack completely. He squinted his eyes, trying to comprehend.

“When I went to their apartment, Lillie showed me Clara’s room. But it was strange, because it was practically empty and much too clean. The things that were in there weren’t in the right place. I thought it was because Lillie had tidied up, but I realize now it was because that wasn’t Clara’s room at all. Lillie only put her things in there because she knew I was coming over.”

Jack nodded to encourage me to go on, but he obviously didn’t see what I meant yet.

“While Lillie was making the tea, I pretended to go to the bathroom so I could peek in her room. That bedroom was much larger, and more like what Clara’s room usually looked like, with clothes and books all over the place. I saw Clara’s

lipstick on the vanity, and her perfume. I thought Lillie had taken them, but really Clara had left them there. Because it was her room too—she and Lillie were lovers. They were only posing as roommates.”

“Alright,” Jack said slowly. “That all fits, I suppose.”

“In Lillie’s room I saw a photograph of a family: a father, mother, and a little boy. Lillie told me it was her family, but they’d been killed in a train crash. That’s what I wanted to look up at the library—I thought if she’d made it all up, it might give us an idea of whether she was lying about other things too, like what time Clara left the house.”

Jack nodded again, still following.

“Well, I found the newspaper article about the crash, and I saw her parents really had been killed. But there was no little brother listed among the deceased. Instead there was a picture of a boy still alive, a boy with curly dark hair just like Lillie. I think it *was* Lillie. She would have had a different name then, of course. After her parents were killed, she must have come to California. They had all worked in vaudeville—she came out here to be a performer. But sometime before or shortly after she moved, she changed her name and her appearance, just like you said.”

“I didn’t mean—” Jack began, but I cut across him, too excited to pause.

“I know,” I said, “but you were right anyway. At some point she must have decided she wanted to live as a woman. And that’s how she presented herself here, and how she made her career—as half of a female comedy duo, along with Clara. Clara must have known the truth, of course—I don’t know when she learned it. But she obviously didn’t care. I think she and Lillie were in love. They were living together for two years.”

“I’ve never heard of anything quite like that,” Jack said slowly. “But stranger things have happened in Hollywood.”

“Oh!” I cried, realizing something else. “That’s why Lillie was so upset. When I told her that Clara had been pregnant when

she was killed.”

A wave of guilt washed over me, realizing how callously I had delivered the news.

“Lillie was devastated,” I said quietly. “Because that was her baby. She didn’t know Clara was pregnant. She realized she had lost her lover and her child.”

“But you don’t think any of that means she would have hurt Clara.”

“No,” I said. “Quite the opposite. We still need to speak to Lillie, though. It may be that she’s hiding something about where Clara was that morning, because it’s part of her secret. Of their secret together, I should say.”

“When do you want to talk to her?” Jack asked.

I checked my wristwatch. It was only twenty-past six.

“Let’s go right now,” I said.

“Alright,” Jack agreed. “Wait here, I’ll pull the car around.”



Jack parked in front of Clara and Lillie’s apartment building.

“Are you sure you want me to come up with you?” he said. “She may talk more openly just to you.”

“I think it will be alright,” I said. “We’re not here to accuse her. Actually, I think she might be relieved that someone knows the truth about her and Clara. It must have been horrible for her at Clara’s funeral—grieving for the person she loved, but only able to behave as a friend.”

We walked up the three flights of stairs to Lillie’s floor, knocking gently on her door. After a long pause—so long that I worried she wasn’t at home—I saw the shadow of feet moving beneath the door as Lillie paused to peer through the peephole. After a little more hesitation, she opened the door.

Not expecting anyone, Lillie was dressed in a robe with no makeup on her face. I could see much more clearly the androgyny of her features. Now that I was looking for it, I could also see the flatness of Lillie’s figure. I remembered with a jolt Freida’s comment that Lillie wouldn’t allow anyone else to sew her clothes or dress her. It must be because she couldn’t allow anyone to take her measurements, or to see her disrobed.

And yet I could also see the loveliness of Lillie: her large, dark eyes, her low, soft voice. The gentleness that radiated from her. I understood why Clara, pursued by dozens of men, had chosen Lillie instead.

Lillie stood still in the doorway, afraid to ask why we'd come. She had spoken to Jack before and knew he was a police officer.

"Lillie, may we come in?" I asked. "We wanted to ask you one more question about Clara."

I tried to look as non-threatening as possible.

After a moment, Lillie opened the door to let us through.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked quietly.

"No, thank you," I said. "We won't keep you long, I know it's late to drop by like this."

Lillie led us back to the pretty sitting room. We all took seats around the low table.

"Lillie," I said without preamble, "you were the father of Clara's baby, weren't you?"

Lillie went pale as milk. She began to physically tremble where she sat in her chair.

"How—how did you know that?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"It's a long story," I said. "But we're the only ones that know, and don't worry, we're not going to tell anybody. I'm very happy for Clara, Lillie. I'm happy that she was in love. I wish she would have told me."

Lillie's eyes filled with tears. She pressed her hand to her lips.

"She wanted to," Lillie said. "The day we all went for lunch together. She wanted to tell you the truth. I begged her not to. I didn't want anyone to know. Clara was the only person who knew my secret."

"It's alright," I said. "I understand. And I'm very sorry for how I told you about the baby. I didn't know then that it was yours."

Lillie closed her eyes and the tears overflowed, rolling silently down her cheeks. Her hands were folded in her lap—large, slim hands with long fingers. I saw that her ring finger was

slightly longer than her index finger, something that would have tipped me off earlier had I noticed it.

“I didn’t know she was pregnant,” Lillie said. “She was probably afraid to tell me. I would have been so happy—but people would ask questions. If anyone found out ... someone like Hedda ... it would have been the end of my career. Clara would have wanted to protect me from that.”

I remembered something.

“Lillie—Ruby said she saw Clara crying at work once, and you were comforting her. Can you tell me what she was upset about?”

“Oh,” Lillie said, knowing at once what I was talking about. “I had given Clara a puppy for her birthday. But it got sick and died only a few weeks later, even though she took such good care of it. The vet said there was nothing we could do, it just happens sometimes with puppies. Clara was so unhappy about it. I tried to get her some other gifts instead—earrings and stockings. She didn’t wear any of it. I think it just reminded her of Cinnamon. That’s what we named the puppy, Cinnamon.”

That explained the silver bowl I’d seen in Lillie’s room. And the unworn jewelry and stockings in Clara’s drawer, still in their boxes.

“Did you know Clara was running the numbers game at Paramount for Bugsy Siegel?” I asked.

Lillie shook her head. “I knew she went around with Bugsy’s crowd now and then. Clara was a lot more social than me. She went to a lot of parties without me. I didn’t mind. She’d tell me all about it when she came home.”

“I think she was working for Bugsy because she was trying to put aside money for when the baby came,” I said. “She was depositing it all in the bank. She had almost three thousand dollars saved. It really should go to you now, Lillie.”

I took the bankbook out of my purse and tried to hand it to Lillie, but Lillie shook her head.

“No,” she said. “No thank you. If it can’t go to the baby, Clara would have wanted you to have it. It was very important to her that you were always taken care of.”

“She did always take care of me,” I said.

“Well, let her do it once more,” Lillie insisted, refusing to take the bankbook.

Jack cleared his throat. “Lillie,” he said. “We did want to ask you one other question. You said that Clara left the house around 8:30 in the morning the day she was killed. Is that true?”

Lillie nodded her head vehemently. “Yes,” she said, “I saw her leave.”

“And are you certain she was going to Paramount?”

“Yes,” Lillie said. “She told me she wanted to be there early. She’d already been late a few other days because she was sick —” Lillie broke off, realizing the real reason why Clara had been ill. She swallowed hard, then forced herself to continue.

“Since she’d already gotten in trouble for being late, she was adamant that she wanted to be there early for the Saturday filming. She wanted to make a good impression on DeMille so he would use her again in the future.”

“The reason we ask,” I said, “is that Clara was killed close to 12:40, but nobody saw her before that. So I can’t see how she could have been at Paramount all that time. Can you think of any other place she might have gone first?”

Lillie sat and thought for a long time, but in the end she could only shake her head.

“No,” she said. “I don’t know anywhere else she would go except straight to work.”

With nothing else to ask, Jack and I thanked Lillie for letting us come in and bid her goodnight. As she opened the door to let us out, I hugged her impulsively. Lillie stiffened for a moment. But then she hugged me back hard.

We had both loved Clara. In that moment I felt closer to Lillie than to anybody else.

At last we let go of each other, and I followed Jack down the stairs and outside to his car.

“Well that was a hell of a thing,” Jack said as he started the engine.

“Do you think it’s very strange?” I asked. “Lillie and Clara?”

“No,” Jack said, shaking his head. “I guess not. Love is the most natural thing in the world.”

It was natural to be attracted to another human, like two magnets coming together. Though I had tried so hard not to let it distract me, I couldn’t ignore, for instance, how at that moment I could smell the clean, masculine scent of Jack’s soap, and the pure, warm essence of his skin. I could see the tendons moving under the tanned skin of his forearm as he shifted gears, and the long muscles on his thigh contract as he pressed the pedals with his foot. The last of the evening light coming in through the window hit his irises, making his eyes look the exact color of the California sea.

“I’m glad it wasn’t Lillie,” I said. “I’d rather find out about secret love, instead of secret hate.”

That made me wonder, though. I wondered if Herman Bouchette’s professed love might actually be hate.

“Can you drive me one more place?” I asked Jack.

He glanced over at me, eyebrow raised.

“Where?” he said, already suspicious.

I pulled the slightly-crumpled envelope out of my purse.

“It’s on Alameda Street,” I said.

Jack frowned. “That’s in Skid Row,” he said.

“What’s Skid Row?”

“Only one of the worst damn neighborhoods in the whole city,” he said. “You really know how to pick ‘em.”

“One of Clara’s fans lives there,” I said. “Possibly an over-obsessed fan.”

Jack sighed and turned the car in what I assumed was the right direction.

“You’re going to take me there?” I said.

“Yeah. If I don’t, you’ll probably just run on over by yourself.”

I glared at him. “I told you I wouldn’t do that anymore.”

“Oh yeah?” Jack said. “How long would that last? If I told you no way, no how was I gonna take you to visit some lunatic in a shack?”

I pressed my lips together, not wanting to admit that he was probably right. I would do whatever it took to find out who killed Clara. Even if it meant putting myself in harm’s way again. But I’d rather investigate with Jack, if he was willing to be reasonable.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jack said, resting his hand ever so briefly on my knee. Though it only lasted a moment, the warmth and pressure seemed to travel all the way up my thigh. “I’m taking you, aren’t I? And I’ve got my service pistol if anything goes hinky.”

“Thank you,” I said stiffly. Then, my curiosity getting the better of me, I asked, “Why do they call it Skid Row?”

“It comes from loggers,” Jack said. “You know how they slide logs down greased skids to get them to a river? Then they have to wait for somebody to drive them back up again. So I guess ‘skid row’ means a place where people without much money or much of anything to do just kinda ... wait.”

As we drove further into Skid Row, I could see that people were doing plenty more than waiting. The streets were crowded with pawnshops and second-hand clothing stores, beer parlors and rooming houses.

Jack looked stiff and alert, his eyes scanning the sidewalks relentlessly.

It was getting late, some of the buildings dark and shuttered for the night, others alight with raucous noise.

Most of the structures looked dingy and broken-down—some in such a state of disrepair that it looked as if a single spark might set them ablaze.

I saw people huddled in doorways and on park benches. It didn't look as if they had any plan to go home for the night.

We seemed to be in a completely different city than the one where The Georgian was situated.

“How did this area get so ... crowded?” I asked Jack.

“Los Angeles has doubled in size over the last two decades,” he said. “People flooded in here, without a lot of money, or enough apartments to house them all. You'd be surprised how many people are living without electricity or running water. You've got five families crammed in a tiny house meant for one. If they've got a house at all.”

“I didn't realize ...” I said.

I should have guessed that all of Los Angeles wasn't uniformly wealthy. After all, Chicago had its tenements as well as its gilded mansions.

“The Department of Health is trying to demolish the slums,” Jack said. “Build low-cost public housing instead. I dunno how successful it will be. I don't think everybody can afford even a cheap house.”

Clara probably lived in a place like this when she first moved to Los Angeles. I never saw her first apartment, but she told me it was awful. Rats would steal her food at night, if she had any food in the cupboards.

Luckily, Alameda Street was at the edge of Skid Row, better lit than some of the other roads we had passed. Herman Bouchette's address took us to a low brick building next to a laundry service. It looked more like a garage than a house.

“You're sure this is it?” Jack said.

“That's the address he wrote,” I replied, not certain at all.

“Let me see that letter,” Jack said.

He took the single sheet of stationery out of the envelope and looked it over, reading every word. His eyes narrowed.

“Creepy, right?”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Let’s go talk to him.”

He briefly touched the gun at his hip, as if for reassurance, then climbed out of the car.

I followed him up to the dented metal door. The grimy brick building had almost no windows, so it was difficult to tell if there were any lights on inside.

Jack knocked on the door, the hollow sound echoing through the space on the other side.

We waited for what seemed like forever. Then, right as I thought no one would answer, I heard a bolt turn.

The door creaked open just a crack, one pale eye peering out.

“What is it?” a husky voice demanded.

“I’m Patrol Sergeant Jack Woods,” Jack said, steady and confident. “I’d like to ask you a few questions about Clara Bloom.”

“Clara?” the man said, his voice rising with excitement.

He pulled the door open wide.

Only then did he see me standing next to Jack. His expression changed entirely—from curiosity to awe. His jaw hung open and he stared at me with a dazed expression.

Herman Bouchette was a big man, taller even than Jack, with a thick layer of insulation over a muscular frame. His head was enormous and egg-shaped. He was younger than I expected—thirty at most—with a soft, doughy face.

He wasn’t ugly, but there was something off-putting in the heavy breaths that came from his mouth, not his nose, and the way his fleshy lips hung moist and slack.

“Clara ...” he moaned, his eyes fixed on my face.

“No,” I said sharply. “I’m Alice.”

He blinked, closing his mouth and squinting at me. After a long moment he said, “You look like Clara.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m her sister.”

“Can we come in?” Jack said. “We have a few questions to ask you.”

There was another long pause before Herman answered. “Fine,” he said, stepping back so we could enter.

Jack and I stepped into a dim, open space. It really did seem like a garage—only instead of cars, the walls were lined with tall glass boxes, like aquariums set on their ends. It was so dark inside that I couldn’t see what the glass boxes really were. I heard buzzing and snapping sounds, which I assumed were coming from the paltry overhead lights.

“This way,” Herman said, leading us down the open space.

Jack stayed close to me, keeping himself between me and Herman.

As we passed between the double rows of glass boxes, I saw motion inside. Dark, fluttering objects, hitting against the glass.

“What is that?” I said, drawing closer to the boxes, though I didn’t really want to.

“My pets,” Herman said.

As I peered through the dusty glass, I saw that this particular box was full of large moths with feathery antennae. They brushed against the glass with mindless intensity. Their wingspan was six inches across, and the weight of their fat bodies bumping the glass made my skin crawl.

“Cecropia,” Herman said, his voice hushed and reverent. “Giant Silk Moths.”

The moths looked dark and sinister, with eye-like spots on their wings. I didn’t think they were beautiful at all, but I had never liked insects.

“I use lilac or cherry for the host plant,” Herman said, pointing to the scraggly trees planted at the bottom of the box. “That’s

what the caterpillars like to eat best. You can't change plants, once they start eatin'. They like to stick to the same kinda leaf."

"What's in the other boxes?" Jack asked. I could tell he didn't like this any more than I did, though he was trying to hide it.

"Rhinoceros Beetles. A Brazilian Black Tarantula. And Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches," Herman said with great satisfaction.

"Cockroaches?" I said weakly.

"Yeah," Herman said, as if I'd spoken with enthusiasm to match his own. "Some of my favorites. No wings. Most cockroaches have wings. These guys make up for it by climbing. They can run up that glass like it's a step-ladder."

My stomach rolled. The sounds of hissing, clicking, and scrabbling filled my ears. The thought of deliberately feeding and raising insects, of keeping hundreds of them inside your home, was upsetting to me.

"You sent a box of Rose Chafers to Clara Bloom, didn't you?" Jack asked in a friendly and casual tone, as if it wasn't strange in the slightest.

"Yeah!" Herman said eagerly. "I thought she'd love 'em. They're iridescent—you know what that means?"

Jack nodded.

"Green like her eyes," Herman said. The dreamy expression on his face faded away, replaced by a slow scowl that spread across his features like a storm. "She didn't write me back, though. She didn't write to thank me."

"Did Clara *ever* write to you?" Jack asked.

"I didn't get the letters," Herman said. "They mighta got lost. The mail doesn't always come here like it's 'sposed to."

He continued on down the open space, leading us to the far end of the room. Here he took us through another door into what looked like a normal apartment—filled with a dusty couch, a small kitchenette, and a narrow bed, all crammed together in one room.

Herman threw himself down on the couch. Because he was so big, that left nowhere for Jack and me to sit, except on the bed. We seated ourselves gingerly, right on the edge of the stiff mattress.

Now that we were in the apartment, with better lighting, Herman returned to staring at me with his mouth open.

“Did you ever see Clara in person?” Jack asked him.

It took a second for Herman to refocus his attention on Jack, instead of on me.

“I saw her a hundred times,” he said. “Maybe more.”

“Where?” Jack said.

“At the cinema, of course.”

“You went to see all her movies?” Jack said.

“Every single one. For as long as they played,” Herman said proudly.

“But you never saw her in real life,” Jack said. “Or talked to her in person.”

Herman pouted, his thick lower lip poking out. “No,” he admitted. “It’s only a matter of time, though.”

“Why do you say that?” I demanded.

Jack gave me a sharp look, warning me to stay calm. He was obviously trying a friendly approach. He didn’t want to put Herman on his guard. But I didn’t like how Bouchette was talking about my sister. As if he knew her. As if they had a relationship.

“We have a connection,” Herman said. “I felt it the very first time I saw her, in *My Man Freddie*. She looked right at me, and she said, ‘*You and me are gonna be friends for a long time, aren’t we?*’ I knew she saw me, just the same as I was seeing her.”

I knew exactly the scene he was talking about. Clara looked right at the camera as she said the line, as if she was speaking to the viewer and not her co-star John Barrymore.

I could picture her almost as clearly as Herman apparently could—her wide green eyes, the high arches of her brows, so dark that they almost looked painted on her face. Her expression of delight.

Clara was captivating. Apparently she had cast a spell on this man. Enough that he believed she was truly speaking right to him.

“Did you know my sister was killed?” I asked him coldly.

Herman’s face darkened. He looked much more than pouty now—he was sullen, and angry.

“The papers said that,” he muttered. “I don’t really believe it, though.”

“Why not?” Jack asked.

“I just don’t believe she’s dead,” Herman said. He clenched his ham-like fists at his side, combative and stubborn.

“Where do you think she is?” Jack said.

“I dunno,” Herman said. “They’re still making her movie, aren’t they? I heard they’re still making it. They couldn’t do that without Clara.”

“Have you ever been to the Paramount studio?” I asked. “Did you go there to see her movie being made? To see Clara?”

Herman shifted uneasily on the couch, making the springs groan. He couldn’t quite meet my eye.

“Well ... I did go there once. To give her my gift—the Rose Chafers. I knew she would like ‘em. I read one of her interviews in *Picture Play*. She said she loved animals better than people. All kinds of animals, she said. That means Chafers, too. Not everybody likes beetles. The guys at work said they’d stomp on all my beetles if they got the chance. I said I’d break their fuckin’ backs if they tried it. I knew Clara wouldn’t be like that. She’d love ‘em, just like I do. So I raised a nice set of ‘em for her. Then that guard in the booth wouldn’t let me inside. He said only official deliveries were allowed. So I had to mail the Chafers instead.”

My chest felt tight. Herman admitted that he had come to the studio to see Clara. Maybe he came back the day Clara was killed. Maybe the guard in the booth wasn't paying attention the second time.

Herman was obviously delusional—maybe he didn't want to believe Clara was dead because he didn't want to remember that he had been the one who strangled her. He was certainly big enough to do it. No woman Clara's size could fight off a man that huge.

"Did you hurt her?" I demanded. My voice was low but shaking with tension. "Did you hurt Clara?"

"No," Herman said, dumbfounded. "Why would I?"

I didn't believe him. I didn't believe the stupid blankness of his face.

I leaped up from the bed and was only prevented from rushing forward by Jack seizing the back of my dress and yanking me down again.

His fingers dug into my thigh as he held me in place.

"*Don't,*" he hissed at me.

"Tell me the truth!" I cried. "Did you hurt my sister?"

"I don't like what you're sayin'," Herman growled.

Now he was the one who rose from the sofa, his head almost hitting the low roof of the tiny apartment.

"Hold on," Jack said, holding out one hand to keep Herman where he was, and squeezing my thigh hard with the other. "No need for anybody to get upset. We believe you, Herman. Can you tell me where you were last Saturday? Around noon?"

"At work," Herman said, still scowling.

"Where do you work?"

"I've been working on the new airfield. I'm a welder. You know they bought Mines Field? It's gonna be the Los Angeles Airport. I work there six days a week, eight in the morning to six at night."

“How did you go to the studio to see Clara, then?” I said.

“Had to take a long lunch that day. Boss took an hour off my pay.”

“What about that Saturday?” Jack said. “Did you go anywhere over lunch?”

“No. Didn’t have any lunch at all. Half the time we don’t.”

“Could your coworkers confirm that?”

“My boss could.”

“What’s his name?”

Herman gave a quick shake of his head, fists balled up again against the sides of his thick canvas trousers. He wore wide-legged pants, rolled up at the hem above his battered work boots. His shirt was made of a thick, rough material the same shade of gray as the trousers. His hands were calloused and thick-skinned, with shiny patches on the skin that might have been old burns.

“I ain’t telling you that. You’ll go to the airport and get me in trouble.”

“I don’t want to get you in any trouble,” Jack said smoothly. “We just want to cross people off the list so we can focus our efforts in the right area. If you were working, then we can cross you off the list and not bother you anymore.”

When Herman still hesitated, Jack added, “All I’ll say to your boss is that you were a friend of Clara’s. We need to check in with all her friends.”

Now a gleam of pleasure showed in Herman’s puffy little eyes.

“You’ll tell him that Clara and me were friends?”

“Of course,” Jack said.

“His name’s John Wilbur,” Herman said. “Everybody just calls him Wilbur.”

“Thank you,” Jack said. He let go of my leg so he could make a note of the name.

I was still feeling extremely irritated with both Jack and Herman Bouchette, but I didn't take the opportunity to jump up again. Instead, I stayed silent while Jack slipped his notebook back in his pocket and stood up from the bed, taking my arm and pulling me up alongside him.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Bouchette," Jack said. "We'll be going now."

He hustled me out of the apartment, back down the aisle between the insect cages, all the way back to the dented metal door.

Herman still looked disgruntled as we left. Part of me thought he might come charging after us, and I almost wished that he would. I didn't believe him, and I wanted to force him to tell the truth.



Only once we were safely back in Jack's car did he let out the breath he'd been holding.

"You can't do that," he said to me.

"Do what?"

"Escalate a situation like that."

"He was lying!" I cried.

"How do you know that?"

"Because he's crazy! And he was obsessed with Clara! He came to the studio to see her, he admitted that. I'll bet you anything he came back that Saturday—"

"You have no evidence of that," Jack said flatly.

"You saw his house! You saw what he was like!"

"He was weird, sure. But that doesn't make him a killer. I'll follow up with his boss and check his alibi. But if he really was out at the airport all day long, I doubt he could sneak away long enough to kill Clara. Not to mention, nobody could miss seeing a guy that big. He's not slipping past the guards on set any more than one of those camels could."

Jack took the pistol off his waist, still in its holster, and shut it up in the glove compartment. He started the engine and pulled away from the curb, heading back toward my hotel.

I wanted to scream with frustration.

“You better not actually say that Bouchette and Clara were friends,” I muttered.

“Of course not,” Jack said, shaking his head at me. “But you’ve got to apply a little artifice—not everything can be a headlong battle.”

“I don’t like artifice,” I said.

“I understand,” Jack said, fixing me with his wolfish blue eyes. “But honesty won’t always get you the truth.”

“What will?” I said, resting my forehead against the dash of the car. “We always assumed the most likely suspect in Clara’s murder was the father of her child. But we were wrong. And it seems like every other idea we had has come to a dead end. Unless we find Emmet—but that could be nothing too.”

“I do have one more thought,” Jack said. “I don’t like it, though.”

“What is it?”

“The only person who doesn’t have an alibi for the morning Clara was killed is Azriel Kantor.”

“I thought you didn’t think it was him?”

“I didn’t. But then I remembered something—did Azriel tell you his job back in Berlin?”

“He was a doctor,” I said quietly.

“That’s right. I think that’s why he and Clara were alone together the day that Deedee saw them.”

“He was examining her.”

“I believe so.”

“But why would he kill her?”

“I don’t know,” Jack said. “The three things a detective has to establish are means, motive, and opportunity. So far, Azriel Kantor is the only suspect we’ve found with the means and opportunity. Everybody else has motive ... but no way to pull it off in the established timeframe.”

I sat quiet, pondering.

“He lost his business, his home, all ties to his family in Germany,” Jack said. “He had nothing to lose. And an enormous amount of stress on his shoulders.”

“I don’t know ...” I said.

“Well, it’s just a theory,” Jack said, turning onto Ocean Ave. “It’s no good without evidence.”

We had arrived at The Georgian. Jack pulled up to the curb to let me out.

“That was good work today,” he said. “Figuring that out about Lillie and Clara. It’s not a connection I would have made.”

“I’m sure you would have come round to it one way or another,” I said. Then, grudgingly, I added, “You did well getting info out of Bouchette.”

“You have to spend a lot of time talking to people you don’t like as a cop,” Jack said. “Honey works better than vinegar most of the time, as unpleasant as it might be. You did pretty damn well yourself, talking to Hedda Hopper. I know that couldn’t have been easy.”

I shook my head. I still didn’t feel great about telling Hedda about Clara’s baby. Jack was right—you had to make compromises to find the truth.

Jack smiled at me.

“I’m just saying, if you get tired of this acting thing, you could have a career in my line of work,” he said.

“That’s my second job offer today,” I replied, laughing. “I wish I was as certain about what I should be doing as everybody else seems to be.”

We sat in the car looking at one another.

Jack had shown up for me again today: at the library, and then taking me to see Lillie and Herman Bouchette. I sure as hell wouldn’t have wanted to visit Bouchette’s house by myself. Who knows what would have happened.

I felt safe going anywhere with Jack.

He was a quick thinker and a fast actor. But he wasn't impulsive—I'd never seen him lose his head yet.

I admired him. I flushed, realizing it. I wanted him to admire me, too.

He was looking at me, steady and unembarrassed.

I thought that we both wanted the same thing: to lean across the gap separating us. It was only two feet of space. It seemed even shorter with the palpable energy that crackled across it, the warmth I could feel radiating from Jack's body toward mine.

I would have moved, but I was afraid to damage the partnership we'd built. I didn't want to fracture our focus on the single-minded pursuit of Clara's killer.

"Goodnight then," I said to Jack, reaching for the door handle.

He let out his breath, as if he'd been holding it again.

"Goodnight, Alice," he said.

As I walked up to the hotel, I could feel Jack's eyes on my back. He hadn't started the car engine to drive away again.

I noticed that the doorman Walter didn't hurry out to open the door for me as he usually did. Also, it was darker than normal in the lobby. Maybe Walter was taking a smoke break since it was such a quiet night.

As I pulled open the door myself, I was seized by a pair of strong, burly arms. I tried to scream and kick, but my attacker had one hand over my mouth and one arm wrapped round my neck. He squeezed so hard that I thought my back might break, like a gazelle in the grip of an anaconda. Black sparks burst in front of my eyes. I felt warm wetness running down my lips and chin as my nose began to bleed.

With a roar, Jack crashed through the door, launching himself on my assailant. The three of us fell to the floor, tumbling over broken glass. Jack had hit the door with such force that the plate-glass window had exploded inward.

The man released me. I rolled away from him, my head ringing. Small shards of glass were sticking out of my bare

forearms. I felt as if I were moving through molasses. It seemed to take an age just to turn over.

I saw Jack and my attacker tussling on the Persian rug. They too were cut and bleeding from a dozen small wounds. Jack was lighter by thirty pounds, but he soon had the upper hand, pummeling the man's face from above.

Something metallic flashed between them. Jack let out a yell, clutching at his side. The assailant took the opportunity to roll on top, trying to force his knife down again while Jack gripped his wrists to try to push it away. Through the gloom and the commotion, I saw tattooed arms, and a thatch of red hair. It was Emmet Walsch.

Crawling because I couldn't yet stand, I seized the nearest object, which was a small decorative statue of Cupid and Psyche in an embrace. It had been knocked off its stand in the scuffle. I picked it up and brought it down on the back of Emmet's head. Emmet went limp.

Jack rolled Emmet off of him, and before Emmet had begun to stir, Jack had bent his arms behind his back and snapped cuffs on his wrists.

As Emmet came to, he moaned, "Please! I just want the book. That's all I want."

"What are you talking about?" Jack demanded.

"The book. I know you have it. I've seen you writing in it."

He was addressing me. He was talking about my notebook. But he really wanted Clara's notebook. He had seen me writing in my own—he didn't know my sister and I had two the same.

"You want the list," I said. "For the numbers game."

"I can't pay the debt," Emmet sobbed. "I owe too much."

"Is that why you attacked Clara?" Jack growled at him.

"I didn't!" Emmet cried. "I never touched Clara. But once she was gone I thought ... I thought I might be saved, if she hadn't turned the list in yet. Then I saw you had the book, and I got worried."

“That’s your story?” Jack said.

“That’s the truth!”

“We’ll see,” Jack growled. He used the lobby phone to call his station and request a squad car. I could tell by now he was in no state to take Emmet in himself. He was pale and sweating. When he pulled his hand away from his side, I saw his palm gleam bright with blood.

“Jack!” I cried, “Sit down! You’re bleeding!”

“He just slashed me is all,” Jack said. “It might need stitching though. Palmer might have to do the interview on his own.”

As he said this, he sank down on his knees and leaned against the back of an armchair. I helped him to lay down with his head in my lap. I stroked his hair back from his sweating brow.

“That feels nice,” Jack said.

“I’ll call an ambulance too,” I said.

“Don’t bother,” Jack said. “The guys will be here in a minute. They can drop me off on the way back to the station. For now, just let me look at you.”

That’s what he did—he gazed up at my face contentedly like we were sitting on a blanket in a park.

“Jack,” I said. “Are you going to be alright?”

I couldn’t stand the sight of him so pale and pained, and I couldn’t even look at the dark, spreading stain on his side.

“Let me get a towel for that at least,” I said. “It needs pressure.”

“Don’t worry,” Jack said. “I promise you, it’s just a cut, he didn’t get me too deep. I’ve had worse.”

After what seemed an age, two cars pulled up in front of the hotel and three sergeants jumped out. One of them was Perry Palmer. He had a long, taciturn face, and he wore his pants too high and his cap pushed way back on his head. I wanted to smack him for how slowly he came strolling in through the doors of the hotel.

“Jeez, Jack,” he said mildly, when he saw all the blood leaking out of his partner.

The officers stowed Emmet in the back of one of the cars, and also managed to locate Walter, who had been knocked over the head by Emmet and locked up in his own office. Since Emmet had been skulking in the lobby for the better part of three hours waiting for me, Walter was in little better shape than Jack, and had to be taken to the hospital as well.

Jack wouldn’t let me come with them.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “You go get some sleep. You’ve got work tomorrow.”

“I’m not going to let you stay there alone,” I said.

“I won’t be alone—the sheriff is sure to come to chew me out and make me fill out a hundred pages of paperwork. Besides,” he said, seeing that I still wanted to argue, “I don’t want you to see me cry if they have to give me a shot.”

I watched Perry and the others help Jack into the car, and then I waited while they all drove out of sight in the direction of the hospital.

It was only once I was upstairs in my room that I realized that I was likewise a mess. The blood from my nose had stained the front of my blouse, and my throat was swollen and aching where Emmet had put me in a headlock. Every muscle up and down the length of my spine was screaming at me.

The terror of being grabbed like that out of nowhere—well, it was exactly what Clara must have felt. I couldn’t stop reliving it over and over again, sometimes as myself standing in the dark lobby, and sometimes as my sister walking down the dim hallway outside Heller’s office.

It took an hour or more until the adrenaline dissipated and my heart rate went back to normal. I had time for a long bath, and an even longer period of laying in my bed in the dark with my eyes wide open.

But at last I did sleep.



The next morning when I woke, my voice was even raspier than usual, and I could see dark bruises blooming across the front of my throat. I debated whether I ought to call in to work, but on the balance decided that if I drank plenty of tea and enlisted Lucille to cover the marks, I might be able to film tolerably well. I was keen to go in because I wanted to speak to Azriel Kantor.

I stopped at the front desk on my way out to see if the doorman was back at work. Walter had indeed returned, with a bandage wrapped round his head beneath his valet-style cap. With his overgrown eyebrows and a droopy mustache, the addition of the bandage made him look like a pirate.

“Walter,” I said. “I’m so sorry about last night. Is your head alright?”

“It’s me that’s sorry, Ms. Bloom,” he said ruefully. “I’m supposed to watch the door, especially at night, for the exact purpose of keeping out ruffians like that.”

“They make you do a lot of things around here,” I said. “You can’t be everywhere at once.”

“Good lord, look at your neck,” Walter said in dismay. “You ought to have come to the hospital with us.”

“It’s not bad,” I said, touching my throat gingerly with the tips of my fingers. Actually, even that slight touch was uncomfortable, but I had no intention of allowing it to slow me down.

“Are you going to work?” Walter asked. “Do you want me to call a cab for you?”

“Thank you, but no,” I said, checking my watch. “If I hurry I can hop the streetcar.”

I wanted to be early to give Lucille plenty of time to cake on the makeup. I was surprised to see Ruby hanging around my trailer as if she were waiting for me.

“Alice!” Ruby cried. “I tried to call up to your room, but there was no answer. I didn’t know if you’d be able to come in today. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m completely fine.”

“No you’re not!” Ruby said in horror. “Look at your neck!”

“It’s nothing Lucille can’t fix,” I said.

Lucille, who had likewise come over to see how I was doing, looked at my throat skeptically.

“I think I can cover it up,” she said. “And maybe Freida has a good thick necklace to go over it as well. But should you really be working?”

“I can’t believe Emmet!” Ruby said in a scandalized tone. “I knew he was a little wild, but I can’t believe he would do something like that.”

“Do you think he was the one who killed Clara?” Lucille asked me in a hushed tone.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I haven’t heard from Jack—from Sergeant Woods, I mean—how the interrogation went. I don’t know if Emmet admitted to anything. He told me he didn’t touch Clara.”

“Well he’s an animal,” Ruby said with unusual bitterness, “so we can’t believe a word he says.”

“How do you know about all this anyway?” I asked. “Did someone call you?”

“It’s in the *Times!*” Ruby said, thrusting the rolled-up newspaper into my hand. “In Hedda’s column. It’s a little

dashed off—she must have written it in five minutes to get it into the morning edition.”

I opened the newspaper and turned to *Hedda's Hollywood Report*. It read:

Deranged Cameraman Attacks Starlet

Lead camera operator Emmet Walsch is alleged to have attacked ingenue actress Alice Bloom last night in the lobby of The Georgian Hotel. Walsch was lying in wait for the actress, after having subdued the doorman and tied him up in the broom closet.

Walsch throttled Bloom and was only prevented from killing her by the heroic actions of Sergeant Jack Woods, who had been escorting Bloom home. Woods maintains that he was not coming inside with Ms. Bloom, but only dropping her at the door. Since there were no witnesses to the scuffle, I guess we'll have to take his word for it.

My little birds tell me the couple has been in close contact since the brutal murder of Clara Bloom, Alice Bloom's sister, which happened only last Saturday on the Paramount Pictures set. Sergeant Woods and Alice Bloom were spotted together at the nighttime hotspot the Trocadero earlier in the week. Did sparks fly during the investigation? Or could it be that Ms. Bloom is looking for the man who murdered her sister?

She may have found him—it looks like Emmet Walsch intended to make Alice Bloom his second victim. He is currently in police custody. My sources at the precinct say he won't be out anytime soon, as he stabbed Sergeant Woods during the desperate struggle. Woods is recovering at the Los Angeles County Medical Center.

Paramount executive Vincent Heller refused to comment for this story. All I can say is, he'd better have a plan in place to protect his actors, or they may

soon be seeking contracts at other studios with a lower fatality rate.

“How on earth!” I cried. “How does she find these things out so fast?”

“She has spies everywhere,” Ruby said. “She pays her informants, and she knows every waiter, valet, cop, and hospital orderly in town.”

“Well, she got her facts wrong,” I said. “Poor Walter was in the office, not the broom closet.”

“What about the rest of it?” Lucille asked slyly. “Are you having a fling with Sergeant Woods?”

“No!” I said, but I could tell the other two girls didn’t believe me.

“Alright,” Lucille said. “Now that we know you’re alive and relatively well, we’d better get to work—I’ll need some time to sort out those bruises.”

Ruby turned to leave, but I stopped her.

“Ruby, did any letters arrive for Clara after she was killed?”

“I’m sure some did,” she said. “It took a while for everyone to hear what happened. And some were probably already in the mail ...”

“Can you check for me?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said.

“Come on,” Lucille chided me, pulling me over to the vanity. She had me unbutton the top of my blouse to give her full access to the affected area. I noticed that Lucille was looking more tired than usual, and not in as cheerful a mood. She didn’t make conversation as she set to work or sing little snatches of songs as she usually did.

As Lucille was beginning to dab on a flesh-toned concealer, Freida came into the trailer with my costume for the day—a gauzy aquamarine concoction with bronze-colored embroidery. She stared in horror at my neck.

“It’s alright,” I hastened to assure her, “it looks worse than it feels. Lucille is going to cover it up.”

“Have you got any necklaces that could help?” Lucille asked. “Maybe some sort of bib or collar style?”

“I might have one with turquoise stones that would work,” Freida said doubtfully. “I’ll go check.”

Lucille finished my hair and makeup and helped me to put on Freida’s creation without smudging anything. Freida returned with the necklace, studded with smooth turquoise stones. It did indeed help to conceal the marks that had resisted Lucille’s best efforts.

Ruby pushed her way through the trailer door once more, carrying a little packet of letters.

“I’m pretty sure that’s all of them,” she said, pushing the packet into my hands.

I waited for the three women to leave, then I flipped through the envelopes.

I found what I was looking for immediately: a letter addressed in bright emerald ink, in Herman Bouchette’s neat, careful script.

Dear Clara,

I’m not sore about the beetles. I realized later you probably didn’t have a good tank for them. Maybe you didn’t know what to feed them.

I hope you’re not mad, either.

Some guys at work said it wasn’t a great gift after all.

But I never know if I can trust them, cause they’re always trying to wind me up.

When you’re a big guy, people try to make you mad on purpose.

I’ve never seen you mad. You’re always so happy in your movies. You make me laugh. Nobody makes me laugh in real life.

I heard a strange story about you on the radio the other day. That's what made me think you might be mad, and trying to play a trick on me.

I hope not. That would make me sad.

Talk to you soon,

Herman Bouchette

I checked the date in the upper right corner of the letter, and the postmark, too:

Sunday, April 28th, 1940

The day after Clara was killed.

It could be a trick. Herman could have sent the letter the next day, to throw the police off the scent.

But Herman didn't strike me as strategic. He seemed delusional, not conniving.

As much as I wanted to believe otherwise, I suspected that when Jack was well enough to visit the airport, Bouchette's boss would confirm his alibi.

Which meant that the only person I had left on my list ... was Azriel Kantor.

I sighed with frustration. I was a terrible detective. I had people with motive but no opportunity, and people with opportunity but no motive. I couldn't string together a single viable suspect.

To make matters worse, the scene that morning was one that I had been nervous to film. It was one of the fantasy sequences where Scheherazade told a story—in this case, a Romeo and Juliet-style tale of a prince and princess from rival families. I would enact the part of the princess, Gable the prince. We would sneak away from our respective palaces to meet in secret and share a kiss.

As there had not yet been any explicit lovemaking in any of their prior scenes, it felt odd that I'd be kissing Gable that

morning, probably dozens of times, while closely watched by Mr. DeMille and the rest of the crew. At least Carole Lombard was busy filming her own movie in a different wing of the studio, and thus was unlikely to drop by. I knew that onscreen canoodling was an expected part of Carole and Gable's job, but it still made me uncomfortable.

Gable was obviously thinking along the same lines, because as soon as he saw me he said, "Ready for our scene? I've been eating onions all morning in preparation."

"Oh really?" I said. "I went with sardines."

"You win," Gable laughed.

Azriel Kantor had truly outdone himself with the day's set—he had built a real, flowing artificial river, surrounded by live palm trees and an incredible amount of sand.

"They brought it in by trucks last night after you left," Gable told me.

"Were you here very late?" I asked.

"Almost till midnight," Gable said sourly. "Deedee got in a row with Lucille halfway through the scene and locked herself in her trailer until DeMille said if she didn't come out that instant, he'd fire her on the spot."

"What was the fight about?" I asked.

Gable rolled his eyes. "Lucille touched up the color on Deedee's hair and it came out brassy. Deedee said Lucille left it on too long, and Lucille got upset that Deedee was criticizing her work. It should have all blown over, but then this morning Deedee went too far."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"God, listen to me, I'm turning into as big a gossip as that Hopper woman," Gable said. Still, he went on, "When Lucille came into work this morning, someone had dumped out all the makeup in her bag. Smashed the bottles, unscrewed the lids, spoiled the lot of it. Luckily Lucille had spares for most things, but it made a huge mess."

"You think Deedee did it?" I asked.

“She’s spiteful,” Gable said. “I should know—she and I went out a couple of times. Before Carole, of course,” he added hastily. “Anyway, she likes to get revenge when she feels she’s been wronged.”

“Deedee thought Clara had wronged her,” I said slowly. “When Clara got the role Deedee wanted in *Arabian Nights*.”

“Well, yes,” Gable said awkwardly, “but I didn’t mean ... I only meant that she ruined one of my favorite shirts once, and hid my scripts.”

I didn’t answer because I was thinking of the cake Clara brought to Azriel’s birthday party, the one that had been smashed on the floor. Did Deedee do that? It was very similar to what had happened to Lucille’s makeup. But Deedee had complained of not getting any cake. Was she like a child that ruined something and then pouted about it afterward?

I didn’t have time to think about it any longer because Mr. DeMille was ready to shoot.

We began the scene.

All in all, it wasn’t nearly as awkward as I had feared. Clark Gable had not actually been eating any onions, and he remained as pleasant and professional as always. He was also as good a kisser as one would expect from someone so experienced.

Only one thing surprised me.

Even though Gable was handsome and suave, with strong hands and soft lips and all the prerequisites one would desire for a magical, sensual experience, when he kissed me I somehow felt ... nothing.

We were missing that spark, that elemental something. In fact, if I thought about it ... I felt ten times the butterflies when Jack simply tucked that strand of hair behind my ear.

When the scene wrapped, I skipped lunch to go find Azriel Kantor. Azriel, like Mr. DeMille, often eschewed the dining hall in favor of getting extra work done, or simply avoiding the boisterousness of the pent-up crew.

As I passed the kitchen, I heard Willie White arguing with Emma Brown, Gerda Fischer's assistant.

"I already brought Mr. Gable his lunch!" Emma was saying. "He wanted it in his trailer today."

"I know that," Willie said angrily, "but I wanted to bring it to him."

"I'm perfectly capable of bringing him a lunch tray!" Emma said in outrage, her freckled cheeks flushed, and her chapped hands balled at her sides.

"If that's the case," Willie said with the deepest sarcasm, "then please explain why his lunch was stone-cold last week."

"That wasn't my fault!" Emma shouted.

I hurried past the doorway to the kitchen, not wanting to be seen listening in on their confrontation. I was already familiar with Willie's persnickiness, and his slavish devotion to Gable, so my feelings were on the side of the oft-abused Emma, who had to do all the worst and messiest kitchen jobs, as well as taking the complaints about the food that no one would dare address to Mrs. Fischer.

Azriel's workshop was in the absolute farthest corner of our wing of the studio. He had two or three carpenters and assistants under his command, but he often sent them out on errands so he could focus on the more intricate details of the sets on his own.

His workmanship was unparalleled. I was already able to spot the parts of the sets he had done himself. I supposed that was one of the things that had drawn Azriel and Freida together: the beauty and perfection of their respective crafts.

Azriel smiled when he looked up and saw me standing in the doorway. Though he liked to be alone, he never seemed annoyed at interruptions.

"Azriel, you were a doctor in Berlin you said?"

"Yes." He nodded.

"How did you learn to do all this?" I gestured at the large, oval mirror on which he was currently working.

“My father and grandfather made furniture,” Azriel said. “I worked in their shop before my father sent me to medical school. He didn’t want me to be a laborer.”

“Wouldn’t he be proud, though—seeing the beautiful things you make?” I asked. “Since he taught you how to do it.”

“It makes me feel close to him,” Azriel said. “But no, he would not be proud. He idolized the professions. There was a strong class system within our community. My mother was embarrassed by things like callouses on our hands, and tools on the table. There is a greater emphasis on intellectualism in Europe—they don’t appreciate the manly virtues as much as you Americans.”

“Thank Theodore Roosevelt for that, I suppose,” I said. “Or all the Westerns we make here.”

“I notice you’re saying ‘we’ now,” Azriel said with a small smile. “I heard rumors you might be staying on with DeMille after *Arabian Nights* wraps.”

“I have been considering it,” I admitted. “I’ve been enjoying all this more than I expected.”

“It seduces us all,” Azriel said.

I liked talking to Azriel, but I hadn’t come there to chat. I decided to just question him directly.

“Azriel,” I said, “you knew Clara was pregnant, didn’t you?”

Azriel put down the chisel he’d been using to incise scrollwork along the frame of the mirror. He studied my face.

“Yes,” he admitted. “I knew.”

“She asked you to be her doctor, didn’t she?”

“That’s right,” he said. “They have a doctor on staff here at the studio, but of course Clara knew he would tell Heller about the baby. She wanted to finish this film before she started showing, and also the next one with DeMille if she had time. She wanted to save as much money as possible before she had to take a break.”

“Was everything alright with the pregnancy?” I asked. “Lillie said Clara was sick.”

“Her asthma was causing trouble,” Azriel said. “It flared up as soon as she fell pregnant. She was worried that it would hurt the baby. In the last few weeks, she came to me often so I could listen to the heartbeat with my stethoscope. It comforted her.”

“Did you tell anyone she was pregnant?”

“No,” Azriel said firmly. “I didn’t tell anyone at all. She asked me to keep her secret, and I gave her my word.”

“Did she tell you who the father was?”

“No,” he said. “I never asked. I respected Clara. She had always been kind to me and to everyone else on set. I could tell this baby was important to her, that it was about to change her world. The baby would have been lucky to have her for a mother. The father was irrelevant.”

“The father was a good person too,” I assured him.

“All the better, then,” Azriel said.

“Azriel,” I said, “I’m trying to figure out where Clara was the morning she was killed. There’s three hours missing between when she left the house and when her body was found. Do you know where she could have gone before she came here?”

“No,” Azriel said, mystified, using his index finger to push his spectacles up the bridge of his nose.

“Was she coming here early so you could examine her before the shoot started?”

“We had no plans to do that,” Azriel said. “I had listened to the heartbeat only the day before.”

“So you didn’t see her at all on Saturday, all morning long?”

“I know I’m one of the only ones without an alibi,” Azriel said. “I wish I could be more helpful, but I was here alone. I had no assistants that day, because it was Saturday. I was making this.”

He showed me a large carriage that would be used in one of the final scenes. It was complicated, and beautifully made. It would certainly have taken the morning and much longer to make.

I sighed. "I'm missing something," I said.

"I wish I could help," Azriel said again.

I believed him. I knew a good detective should look at the evidence only, but if I were allowed to use instinct, mine was telling me that Azriel was being truthful.

I thanked Azriel for talking to me again and went to find Ruby so I could see how long I had before the next scene.

Ruby consulted her clipboard.

"You've got quite a long break yet," she said. "We're going to do the market scene with Gable and a few extras next."

"How long will that take?" I asked.

"A couple of hours at least," Ruby said.

That would give me enough time to check on Jack at the hospital. I had been thinking of him often throughout the morning, and I couldn't be easy until I saw that his injury really was as mild as he'd claimed.



I took a cab to the Los Angeles County Hospital to save time. I only stopped at my trailer briefly to remove my costume, changing into a simple blue dress with a belt and buttons up the front.

The hospital was housed in a tall gray stone building, grand but a little depressing. I asked the nurses at the reception desk where I might find Sergeant Woods.

“He’s on the fifth floor,” one of the girls said, eyeing me closely.

As soon as I turned toward the elevators, the girl whispered to her fellow nurse, who giggled and responded with a sentence that I was fairly certain included the phrase “Hedda says ...”

I sighed. Apparently it wasn’t only actors who read *Hedda’s Hollywood Report*.

I took the elevator up to the fifth floor, finding Jack’s room without much trouble. He had his bed propped up in an inclined position so he could read the folder on his lap, and he looked extremely glad to see me. I couldn’t help but notice that he still looked paler than usual, and that he was shirtless beneath the blankets pulled up under his arms, probably to provide access to his bandages.

“What a sight you are,” Jack said, smiling at me.

“How are you doing?” I asked. “Will you be able to leave here soon?”

“Very soon,” Jack said, though I didn’t know if the doctors had actually told him that or if he was just determined that it be true.

“How many stitches did they have to give you?” I asked.

“About forty,” Jack admitted. “I’ll say one thing for our boy Emmet, he did keep his knife well sharpened. He was a fastidious fellow, other than being a degenerate gambler.”

“Did he admit to anything when they interrogated him?” I asked.

“Only attacking us,” Jack said. “He swears up and down he only wanted the notebook. Which is idiotic, because Bugsy has his own records of the bets—he already knows what Emmet owes. In fact, I’ve got half a mind to release him out in the wild and let Bugsy have at him.”

“You wouldn’t really do that,” I said.

“No,” Jack said, wincing. “But when I’m sore I feel like I want to.”

“Are you in pain?”

“These nurses keep bringing me a shot every so often—it’s a beautiful invention. I’ll be alright in a minute when they come round again.”

“Should I call someone now?”

“No,” Jack said. “Stay with me. Here, pull up that chair.”

He indicated a flimsy-looking metal-backed chair. I brought it close beside the bed like he wanted.

“I brought you something,” I said.

“You did?”

“Just a book—one I read recently. It’s called *The Hobbit*. Have you ever seen it?” I took it out of my bag and handed it to him.

Jack examined the jade green cover with its border of mountains stamped along the top, and a stylized dragon in the bottom right corner.

“What’s it about?” he asked.

“It’s about this, well, *Hobbit*, this little person that gets swept up in an adventure. It’s a children’s book really, but I thought it was so lovely. It has its own distinct world, like nothing I’ve read before. I thought it might distract you. The only other book I brought with me from Chicago was *Grapes of Wrath*, which seemed too depressing.”

“Thank you,” Jack said sincerely. “Do you know, nobody’s ever given me a book before. Maybe I don’t look like I can read.”

He gave me that dangerous smile again, and I felt a shiver run over my skin.

“Obviously you can,” I said, finding it hard to meet his eyes. “What have you got there?” I pointed to the file on his lap.

“I thought you were right,” Jack said. “We got a bit stuck. Sometimes when you’re stuck on a case, you have to go back to the beginning and look at all the evidence over again. So that’s what I’ve been doing, I’ve been looking at everything from the very start.”

“Looking with fresh eyes,” I said.

“That’s right.”

“Did you see anything new?”

“Only one thing,” Jack said. “Maybe related to where Clara went before she came to Paramount that morning.”

“What is it?”

He pulled out the autopsy report again, the one he had shown me when they first met at the cafe for breakfast. I didn’t like to look at its cold, impersonal language—the way it described Clara only as a caucasian female, aged twenty-eight, and listed her awful injuries in such a mundane way. But I picked it up anyway, scanning for the part Jack had marked neatly with his pen. A single line: *Trace amounts of soot found in subject’s hair and on her right arm.*

“Soot,” I said.

“Yup,” Jack said.

“In her hair.”

“And on her arm,” he nodded.

“What does it mean?”

He shrugged. “That I don’t know. Was she close to a fire? Was she someplace dirty or crowded? Someplace abandoned?”

I pointed to the line directly above the one Jack had underlined:

Animal hair found on subject’s shoe. Could be canine.

“What about that?” I said.

“Maybe Clara still had dog hair in her apartment, from the puppy Lillie bought her,” Jack said.

“Oh, right,” I said. “Cinnamon.”

I read the line before that as well, working my way backward up the page:

Gastric contents unable to be examined. Subject may not have eaten that day, or may have vomited previously.

“So she couldn’t have gone to a cafe before she came to the studio ...” I said. “Because her stomach was empty.”

“Or she did go to a cafe, and then threw up right after,” Jack said. “Because of morning sickness.”

I let out a hiss of frustration. How could we know? How could we know which possibility had actually happened?

We were interrupted by a nurse—not one of the ones from the reception desk, but an older woman in a crisp, clean uniform. A gray-blue dress with a white apron and cap.

“Time for your shot,” she said to Jack.

“God bless you,” Jack said.

I noticed the sheen of sweat on his face. I realized he must have been in pain while we were speaking. He hadn’t allowed it to derail him. As casual and playful as Jack might seem, at his core he was iron.

The nurse drew down the blanket, applying a little iodine to disinfect Jack's shoulder before she gave the injection. As Jack leaned forward, I saw that his back was covered in a hash of crisscrossing scars. There must have been hundreds of them.

"Jack!" I blurted out without thinking, "your back ..."

"Oh, that," he said.

The nurse put the needle in his arm and depressed the plunger. Jack gave an audible sigh as the solution surged into him.

"You'll feel much better in a moment," the nurse told him kindly. To me she whispered, "That's morphine—he may become loopy."

"Oh," I said. "I'll let him sleep then."

Before I could follow the nurse out of the room, Jack caught my wrist and pulled me back toward him.

"Stay just a minute more," he said. His voice was already softening, and the sharp look in his eye had faded away, replaced with surprising gentleness.

"Don't you want to rest?" I asked him.

"I rested all morning."

"No you didn't," I laughed. "You went through the whole case file again."

"Yeah, but I was laying down while I did it ..." Jack sighed.

He looked strangely youthful, barely more than a boy, with his drooping eyelids and his head sinking into the pillow. Maybe it was wrong to take advantage of him in that state, but I couldn't help asking, "What are those scars from? What happened to you?"

Jack closed his eyes. I thought he wasn't going to answer.

Then, with his lids still shut, he said, "My father did it. The Depression was hard on him. My mom left us. We lost our land and our house. We moved to the city. My father couldn't find work. He drank and he whipped me. A classic story. You can probably find it word for word in that *Grapes of Wrath* book."

I thought there was nothing common at all about those scars, but I kept quiet.

“I never let him hit my sister though,” Jack said. “Did I tell you I have a sister too? That’s why I understood about Clara. I know what it’s like when you’ll do anything for your sister ...”

His voice trailed off.

“Where is she now?” I asked. “I’d love to meet her.”

“She got married young,” Jack said. “Moved to London. I think she’s happy now.”

“That’s good,” I said.

“I saw you at the funeral,” Jack said, his voice getting slower and sleepier still. “Did I tell you that?”

“You were at Clara’s funeral?” I said. I hadn’t seen him there, but I’d mostly been examining the guests. I hadn’t looked at the officers corralling the crowd.

“I was there,” Jack said in a whisper. “You got up to speak. And I thought ... I thought, that is the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

I laughed quietly. “Come on,” I said. “You live in Hollywood. Carole Lombard was sitting in the front row!”

“Carole Lombard,” Jack scoffed. “I was looking at an actual angel.”

“How much did that nurse give you?” I said, shaking my head at him.

Jack ignored me and continued his story. “You got up to speak and I thought, she’s not just beautiful, she’s intelligent ... determined ... maybe she won’t even need it, but I’ll help her ... if I can ...”

His voice drifted off as his eyes closed.

I took the folder off his lap and moved it to the bedside table, then pulled up the blankets so he’d be warm while he slept. I leaned forward to brush the unruly blond hair back from his forehead. I thought it would be coarse—it had a rough, shaggy look to it. But it was soft, and so was his skin.

I paused, looking at him. It was strange how a face could change the longer you knew someone. When I first saw Jack at the police station, I thought he looked rakish, sardonic, clever but unreliable. Wearing a uniform but looking as if he hated every minute of it. A wild thing forced to be civilized.

Now I realized how surface-level my observations had been. There was so much more to him. He was brave. When he saw Emmet Walsch grab me in the hotel lobby, he didn't even pause long enough to grab his gun. And he was constant. He'd promised to help me, and he'd never flagged in that. Even now, in a hospital bed, he was still searching for clues with a dedication to Clara's case that matched my own.

Something I had noticed with the beautiful people at Paramount: you got used to their prettiness. While at first it captivated your eye, over time that effect faded, and your opinion of their looks came to be dominated by what you knew of their personalities.

Take Clark Gable, for example. At first all I saw was glamour and charm. Now when I looked at him, I saw his perpetual look of concentration, the focus required to maintain his persona for the screen. And Deedee Blanche—her pretty features were almost always distorted by a pout or a sneer.

As I watched Jack sleeping on the hospital bed, I thought his face had somehow become the most attractive I'd ever seen. His features had come to epitomize strength, warmth, humor, and fidelity.

Just looking at him filled me with confidence and purpose.

I leaned forward and kissed him, very lightly, on the cheek.

Then I picked up my purse and headed back to the studio.



I was filming the last scene of the day with O’Neil, Gable, and Deedee Blanche. It was dialogue-heavy, and for once it was me and not Deedee who kept forgetting my lines. Deedee smirked as I stumbled over my words yet again, ruining the take and causing Mr. DeMille to fling down his megaphone in disgust.

He did not actually need the megaphone, since it was usually employed when directing scenes with large numbers of extras, but he’d taken to using it whenever he happened to be in a sour mood and wanted to yell with greater amplitude.

He made Ruby pick it up again so he could use it to holler at me.

“MS. BLOOM!” he shrieked. “THERE ARE EXACTLY EIGHT WORDS IN THAT LINE, AND YET YOU’VE MANAGED TO SAY THEM WRONG IN NINE DIFFERENT WAYS! HOW IS THAT MATHEMATICALLY POSSIBLE?”

That was, of course, an exaggeration—I had only flubbed the line three times. And I was tempted to tell Mr. DeMille that eight words could actually be arranged in 40,320 different permutations, but I doubted that little factoid was likely to improve his temper.

“Apologies, Mr. DeMille,” I said. “I’ve got it this time.”

Gable shot me a sympathetic smile. O’Neil did not, because he was in character as the Vizier until filming was complete, and thus could only glower or swirl his cloak.

The lights were adjusted, the clapboard scrawled with “Take 4,” and DeMille bellowed “ACTION!” into the megaphone.

This time I managed to speak my parts perfectly, but DeMille decided he didn’t like our positions relative to each other, so he called for a ten-minute break to rearrange the blocking.

Gable and DeMille began to argue over which side of the set Gable ought to enter. I sat down out of the way to let them hash it out. My body was present on the set, but my mind was far away.

I liked puzzles of all kinds. I had since I was a child. My mother used to make anagrams and logic quizzes for Clara and me, moving on to cryptographs and crosswords as we got older. Usually, I’d try to build a grid or equation to work out the answer, but every once in a while, when I found myself stymied, I would sit back and close my eyes, letting it all float through my brain instead.

I could see the words or numbers in a jumble, like they were forming one huge, swirling cloud. And sometimes, if I waited and watched, the disparate parts would mix and swirl and then separate again, this time rearranged in their proper order. What had been chaotic would at last come clear.

While DeMille and Gable continued to argue beside me, I sat back in my chair, closed my eyes, and tried to picture every piece of information I knew about Clara’s death. The pregnancy, her relationship with Lillie, the numbers game, the birthday party, the time Clara left the house the morning she was killed, her appointments with Azriel Kantor, and the soot in Clara’s hair ...

Two things kept rising to the front of my mind, proclaiming their importance:

First, the argument between Willie White and Emma Brown:

“Please explain why his lunch was stone-cold last week,” Willie said ...

And then Jack’s comment in the hospital:

“I know what it’s like when you’ll do anything for your sister ...”

Slowly, slowly, the facts I knew began to reform themselves into a new pattern. The cloud became one, long, linear narrative: a new timeline of events.

I sat up in my chair.

“Let’s run it again,” DeMille said.

We ran through the scene six more times. I stood where he told me to stand and said what I was supposed to say. But internally, I was examining my new theory from all sides, looking for weaknesses.

When at last we wrapped for the day, it was almost ten o’clock at night. The camera operators packed up their equipment sloppily, eager to get home and free from the overseeing eye of Emmet Walsch, who was presumably still at the police station, or else sitting in the county jail.

O’Neil was grumbling at DeMille, reminding him that his contract stated that he was never required to shoot this late at night.

“Oh hang your contract,” DeMille said crossly. “I never signed that.”

“Mr. Heller did.”

“Do I look like Mr. Heller to you?”

“Let’s all get some dinner,” Gable interrupted, in his smooth, soothing voice. “What do you say, Deedee? Alice? You girls want to join us?”

“I’ve got a date,” Deedee said.

“Thanks, but I’d better get home, too,” I said.

I hurried back to my trailer to strip off my costume as quickly as possible. I didn’t bother to wash the makeup off my face—I wanted to swing by the kitchen before I left for the night to see if Emma Brown was still there.

Emma was just leaving, hat and gloves already on and purse slung over her shoulder. I stopped her halfway down the hallway.

“Emma,” I said. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Alright,” Emma said reluctantly, obviously eager to leave.

“I heard you arguing with Willie earlier,” I said. “About Gable’s meal.”

“Oh, that,” Emma’s freckled cheeks went pink with outrage again at the memory of it. “He’s always giving me trouble about the food, or the drinks, or the ice, or the dishes! Saying I’ve sent the wrong fork, or not enough napkins, or the chicken was dry. Mr. Gable isn’t that picky, it’s Willie himself!”

“He said the food was cold one day, was that true?” I asked.

“Well ...” Emma looked embarrassed. “It might have been true, but it was only that one time, and it wasn’t my fault!”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Mrs. Fischer wouldn’t let me put the trays in the warming oven. As I dished everything up, she said just put it on the trolley right in the middle of the kitchen and keep it there. She said it would be fine, that it wouldn’t get cold. But then filming went long, and I’m afraid it did cool off, even with the covers on the dishes.”

“What day was that?” I asked. “Was it Saturday?”

Emma nodded. “That’s right,” she said. “It was Saturday lunch. How did you know?”

“Did Sergeant Woods come to talk to you? About where you were before Clara was found?”

“Yes ...” Emma said hesitantly.

“What did you tell him?”

“I said Mrs. Fischer and I were together all morning, which was true—from ten o’clock on, we were chopping and cooking, and getting everything ready.”

“Ten o’clock is when you came into work.”

“Yes.”

“And Mrs. Fischer was already there.”

“That’s right, she comes in earlier to start the dough for rolls and make coffee for anybody that wants it.”

“And from ten o’clock until Clara was found, you were together every minute?”

“Yes,” Emma said. “Except ...”

“Except what?”

“Except when she told me to take that tray to Mr. Gable’s trailer.”

“Usually Willie comes to get it?”

“That’s right. But she said Mr. Gable wanted it right away. So I took it over.”

“How long did that take?”

“Less than ten minutes.”

“And what did Mr. Gable say?”

“Well ...” Emma said.

“What?”

“He seemed surprised.”

“Why was he surprised?”

“I guess he expected Willie to bring it like normal.”

I nodded. It all confirmed what I had suspected. There was just one more thing I needed to check.

“Thank you, Emma,” I said.

“I don’t want anyone to get in trouble,” Emma said miserably.

“And I don’t want to be in trouble myself.”

“You won’t be,” I said. “Goodnight, Emma.”

“Goodnight.”

I waited until Emma had left, then I made my way back toward the kitchen.

The door to the kitchen was closed, but not locked. I opened it quietly, slipping inside. The lights were still on, and dishes lay drying on the draining board. I didn’t know if Mrs. Fischer was still around, but what I wanted to do would only take a moment.

I crossed the kitchen to the warming oven. I grabbed the handle in both hands and pulled open the heavy door. The door opened outward on a horizontal axis with the oven set flush to the floor so the trolleys full of food could easily be wheeled in and out. With the trolleys removed, there was about four feet of space in each direction, or about sixty-four cubic feet total.

I crouched down in front of the oven. I ran the tip of my index finger along the floor and walls of the interior space, then examined it. Mrs. Fischer kept her kitchen very clean—near spotless. Still, a smear of black soot stained my fingertip.

“Still hungry, Ms. Bloom?” a voice said from behind me.

I spun around.

Mrs. Fischer was standing by the drying rack, arms crossed over her chest. She was still wearing her apron, with a dishtowel tucked in the waistband.

“I ... I didn’t see you,” I stammered.

“I was in the pantry,” Mrs. Fischer said calmly. “Are you looking for something to eat?”

I could have said yes. Maybe Mrs. Fischer would have given me an apple and sent me on my way.

But instead I said, “I was looking at the warming oven.”

“Really,” Mrs. Fischer said.

She gave no hint of alarm. Instead, she began to pick up the remaining dishes scattered across the draining board, wiping them dry with her dishtowel. She picked up a measuring cup, dried it, and put it down again.

Like her sister, she was tall, taller even than me, and much heavier. Her arms were round and firm under the sleeves of her dress, well-muscled from hours of chopping, stirring, rolling, scrubbing. She wore her iron-gray hair pinned up in a crown, like Freida.

“You could set this oven to most any temperature, couldn’t you?” I said.

“Well, it’s for warming, not cooking,” Mrs. Fischer said. “It doesn’t get very hot.”

“But you could set it to, say, a hundred degrees,” I said.

“You could.”

“A human body is usually about ninety-eight degrees, isn’t it?” I said.

Mrs. Fischer didn’t answer. She dried a large serving spoon, set it down. Then she picked up a cleaver.

“That’s how they judge time of death, mostly,” I said. “From the temperature of the body. When they found Clara, they thought she’d been killed right before. Because she was so warm still. But that wasn’t right, was it?”

Mrs. Fischer still wasn’t answering. She was drying the blade of the heavy knife. The wooden handle was worn, but the blade looked freshly sharpened. It glinted in the bright light of the immaculate kitchen.

“I kept asking myself, where had Clara been all morning? Lillie LaShay said she left the house at 8:30 in the morning. But her body wasn’t found until almost 12:40. No one had seen her around the studio. So I thought she must have gone someplace else first. I kept basing all my assumptions around where she could have been, and who could have killed her between noon and 12:40. When you make a mistake early in an equation, everything that comes after is wrong. You have to go back and reexamine your premise.”

Mrs. Fischer’s expression was stone. She didn’t so much as blink.

“Clara was here the whole time,” I said. “You hid her body. You wouldn’t let Emma put the trays of food in the warming oven, because Clara was in there. Then you sent Emma to Mr. Gable’s trailer to get her out of the kitchen, and you dragged Clara out in the hall and left her there for Ruby to trip over.”

Mrs. Fischer put down the dishtowel but continued to hold the cleaver lightly in her right hand.

“I don’t think you killed Clara, though,” I said. “Otherwise, why hide her all morning? You wanted to give an alibi to the person who actually killed her.”

The kitchen door closed with a soft click. Freida Kantor had come inside, shutting it behind her. She was dressed in a plain black dress that made her skin paler and her eyes darker than ever. As usual, she had her seamstress’s tape slung around her shoulders.

She walked over to the sink to stand beside her sister. Like Clara and me, their resemblance was undeniable. One a beauty, the other not, but alike in their expressions of pride and intensity.

“You’re accusing my sister of a very serious crime,” Freida said. “You have no proof.”

“There was soot on Clara’s body,” I told her. “From the oven.”

“That proves nothing,” Freida said. “Except that your sister was dirty.”

Her tone of disgust sent a blaze of anger through my body. It made me reckless.

“Circumstantial evidence adds up,” I said. “You went to the fabric store that morning to get away from the studio—and you stopped to talk to the security guard, so he’d notice you leaving. I bet you’ve never bothered to do that before.”

“So?” Freida said, shrugging.

“And the night before Clara was killed, you smashed the cake she brought to the party on the floor. Because you were jealous that she brought it for Azriel.”

Freida flinched at the mention of her husband’s name, but otherwise her face remained stoic.

“Ruining a cake means nothing,” Gerda Fischer said, moving closer to her sister so their shoulders were almost touching.

“But the thing that really should have tipped me off,” I pressed on, “is that you were the only person that knew Clara was pregnant. Besides Azriel.”

“Preposterous!” Gerda burst out. “How could she know that?”

I could see that Gerda’s disbelief was real—Freida hadn’t told her about the pregnancy.

“You measured Clara regularly,” I said. “You fit all her clothes to the millimeter. When her costumes started to become tight on the waist, on the chest, you would have been the first to notice. Maybe you saw it even before Clara did.”

Gerda’s glance darted toward her sister’s face. Those were things she didn’t know.

“I suppose you were curious—or maybe you were already suspicious.”

I could see Freida’s face darkening, the anger building beneath her calm surface as she was forced to remember.

“Maybe you saw Azriel and Clara together ... or maybe Deedee told you.”

It was just a guess, but I saw that I was right. I saw that flinch again, as if Freida had been jabbed with one of her own sewing needles.

“Deedee was jealous of Clara taking the part she wanted. She wanted revenge, so she came to tell you a story about seeing Azriel and Clara alone together.”

“It wasn’t a story!” Freida cried.

“*Sag nichts mehr,*” Gerda hissed at her sister. *Don’t say anything else.*

“You strangled her,” I said coldly. “You killed Clara and her baby.”

“It should have been my baby!” Freida cried in anguish, “For years we tried to have a child—ten years! We lost our home, our businesses, our family, our country. We came to this place with everything taken from us, and I thought if we had a child here, none of that would matter. We’d raise it in this new country, in this new life, and I would forgive everything that came before. But your sister stole even that from me. She took Azriel’s baby, which should have been mine. I saw the changes, I saw her growing his child day by day.”

“Schwester, sei still!” Gerda cried. *Sister, be quiet!*

But Freida couldn't stop.

“She came in early that morning, almost no one was there yet, no one had seen her but me. I told her I needed to measure her again. I stood behind her. I wrapped the tape around her throat, and I pulled it tight.”

My hand jumped involuntarily to my own throat. I tried desperately to remain calm, but hot tears burned my eyes as I imagined Clara's shock, her confusion as the familiar measuring tape became a vise.

Gerda put her hand on her sister's shoulder. She was still holding the cleaver.

“Wir können sie auch töten,” she said. *We can kill her too.*

“Nein,” Freida shook her head. *“Sie ist unschuldig.”* *She is innocent.*

“So war meine Schwester!” I shouted, shocking them both. “So was my sister! Clara was never having an affair with Azriel. He wasn't the father of her child!”

“You're lying,” Gerda said, clenching the knife in her hand.

“No I'm not! Clara only came to Azriel because he was her friend, and because he was a doctor. She was worried about the baby. She had asthma.”

Gerda was searching her sister's face again, wondering if this could be true. I couldn't tell what Freida was thinking—her eyes were fixed, her expression frozen.

“How do you know that?” Gerda demanded.

“Clara had a partner,” I said. “They were in love. She never cared for Azriel as anything but a friend. You can ask him yourself! But you never did that, did you?”

I was the one looking into Freida's face now, looking for the answer to this question. I could read it clearly.

“You never talked to Azriel at all,” I said.

“I didn’t want him to lie to me,” Freida whispered through bloodless lips.

“Clara was innocent,” I repeated. “You killed an innocent woman and her child.”

Freida’s knees buckled beneath her. She would have fallen to the floor had Gerda not dropped her knife and caught her sister in her arms. They sank down on the kitchen tiles together. Freida buried her face in Gerda’s neck and began to sob.

I thought that I would feel a sense of triumph when I discovered my sister’s murderer. I expected rage, vindication, satisfaction. But I felt none of these.

Instead, I was full of sadness.

Clara had been killed over a misunderstanding.

People who had already lost so much would now lose more—Freida her freedom, and Azriel his wife.

There was no victory in any of it, no sense of accomplishment.

I left the two sisters alone in the kitchen.

I walked down the long, dim hallway to Mr. DeMille’s office. He was scribbling notes at his desk, glancing up in surprise when I knocked on his door.

“Can I use your phone?” I asked him. “I need to call the sheriff’s office.”



My last day of filming at Paramount was one of chaos and exhaustion. The crew was now missing its lead cameraman, costume designer, cook, and set designer.

Azriel had left to secure legal representation for his wife and support her as best he could at the Los Angeles County Jail. He wrote me a long note, apologizing profusely for what had happened to Clara. He castigated himself for not perceiving his wife's jealousy, for not explaining the truth of the situation. Still, he said, because of his own fault in the matter, and because of all that Freida had been through, and because he loved her still, he felt bound to help her in any way he could.

I couldn't blame him. I even felt a measure of sympathy for Freida.

Despite that, I could neither forgive nor forget that Clara had been killed in a horrible way, and that her life had been snuffed out forever, along with the life of her baby. No amount of misunderstanding or regret on Freida's part could ever change that.

With the crew in disarray, DeMille had been forced to bring in temporary workers from other crews, all of whom were keen to stare at me and gossip openly about what had taken place.

It didn't help that Hedda had put out her most recent article in record time:

Brutal Murder of Clara Bloom Solved by Starlet's Sister

Just two short weeks ago, comedic actress and rising star Clara Bloom was brutally strangled on the Paramount Pictures studio lot. As my faithful readers will recall, I speculated that Clara might have been slain by one of her co-stars. But even I couldn't have guessed that the vicious murderer would turn out to be a woman—celebrated designer Freida Kantor, whose costumes have been honored with Academy Awards in films like Last One Standing and Blue June.

When Paramount Pictures hired doppelgänger Alice Bloom to take her sister's place in the film Arabian Nights, they little could have guessed that they were also hiring the gumshoe Nancy Drew that would solve the case.

Bloom discovered that Kantor conspired with cook Gerda Fischer to kill Clara and hide her body. Until the trial commences, we can only guess at the killer's motives, but my sources tell me that Kantor's rage was inflamed when Clara Bloom had an affair with Kantor's husband and fell pregnant ...

I crumpled up the paper and threw it in the trash. I hated to see Clara slandered by Hedda Hopper. My only consolation was that at least Lillie LaShay wasn't mentioned anywhere. The only person besides me who had learned Lillie's secret was Jack, and he had promised to leave it out of his report.

I wasn't enjoying the notoriety the article was bringing me. I had to suffer the intrusive questions of the new crew members, and even a certain awkwardness from people like Lucille and Ruby who, after all, had been friends and colleagues of Freida and Gerda for years. Of course they all felt terrible for Clara, but they couldn't help resenting that I'd been investigating them all this time.

It was, I supposed, the same discomfort people always felt around police officers—the guilt and paranoia that even the

innocent experience. And very few people in Hollywood were innocent.

I had been placed in the category of examiner, of snooper. It made my otherness apparent. After all, I wasn't really an actor like the rest of them.

Mr. DeMille hadn't renewed his offer to cast me in another film—probably out of annoyance at how I'd decimated the crew of this one. He was in a foul mood trying to salvage the last few scenes, to wrap what he called “This abominable, cursed picture.”

It was probably for the best. I'd decided that acting wasn't really my cup of tea. While I could memorize the lines easily enough, I didn't seem to have the passion to embody them, to become someone else. I found the repeated takes tedious, not to mention the lengthy process of hair, makeup, and costumes, and the interminable rearrangement of lighting and props.

Really, my favorite thing about acting had been the people I worked with. Even when they were tyrannical like DeMille, or when their jobs were menial, like Ruby's, I couldn't help but admire their cleverness and creativity.

I also enjoyed the free spirit of California. Hollywood was no longer the hotspot of hedonism it had been in the 20s—not since the Hays Code had cracked down on sex and violence in films, forcing at least an increase in the *appearance* of propriety. But still, it was a great deal more progressive than Chicago, where a girl could hardly be seen outside the house without a hat and gloves.

All those things made me sorry at the prospect of leaving. But I was still paying rent on my apartment back in Chicago, and Chicago was where I had contacts for linguistics work. Going home was the responsible choice. The safe choice.



THE LAST SCENE we would film for *Arabian Nights* featured Gable and me in the hand-carved carriage Azriel Kantor had built. I should have been wearing a voluminous wedding gown

sewed by Freida, but Freida's team of assistants had to finish it alone. I noticed the poor fit in the arms.

It was a grand scene, with dozens of extras and an elaborate set, just the sort of thing to invigorate Mr. DeMille. This was his forte, his signature. But he seemed strangely lethargic, barely mustering the outrage to dress down a grip who knocked over a lighting rig, sending broken bulbs skittering across the floor.

"What's up with him?" I asked Gable. I inclined my head toward Mr. DeMille, who wasn't even carrying around his megaphone, despite the presence of so many delightfully incompetent extras.

"Oh, he's always like this on the last day of filming," Gable said. "Has an existential crisis every time—thinks the movie's no good, he's a failure, the whole endeavor is pointless. He'll be ready to start fresh tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" I said.

"Yup," Gable nodded. "One film wraps, another begins. No rest for the wicked. That's why they pay us by the week, you know, not by the movie."

When DeMille called "Cut!" on the final take, he did have the grace to provide the crew with a dozen bottles of chilled champagne and an entire free hour to pop the corks and fill our glasses to the brim with bubbly.

I took a few sips from my glass. I didn't care much for champagne, or for the continued mutters and glances sent my way. Instead, I used the time to bid a quiet goodbye to Ruby and Lucille, hugging them each in turn.

"Thank you for everything you did for me," I said to Ruby. Ruby had been my guide to all things Hollywood, to the ins and outs of all the people at Paramount. I knew I wouldn't have gotten anywhere without her.

Ruby seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"I'm glad you came," she whispered to me. "And I'm glad you've put Clara to rest."

“You know, you work harder than anyone here,” I said. “I expect to see your name in the director’s credits someday.”

Ruby blushed. “Maybe,” she said. “If I finally get mad enough to murder DeMille.”

She clapped her hands over her mouth. “Oh god!” she said. “I guess I can’t make that kind of joke anymore!”

I laughed softly. “Nothing will ever stop us wanting to murder Mr. DeMille,” I assured Ruby.

As I packed up the last of my belongings from my trailer, I saw that someone had already scraped the name “Bloom” off the door. I guessed it would bear a new name by the following morning.

It all made me feel so hollow.

Full of melancholy, I exited the Paramount Pictures lot for the last time. I was set adrift.

As I walked toward the street, I heard a familiar voice say, “Shouldn’t you be smiling?”

I turned. There was Jack Woods, leaning against the trunk of an oak tree, his hands in his pockets. The sun filtered down through the leaves, making the blond in his hair shine like threads of copper. The tan had come back to his skin. When he grinned, I saw his clean white teeth and a dimple on the right side of his mouth, just visible through the stubble on his cheeks.

“There you are!” I cried.

I had gone to the hospital the previous evening to speak to him, but the nurses told me that he’d checked himself out, presumably to participate in Freida Kantor’s interrogation at the police station.

“I’m just saying, I expected to see you skipping down the road. You figured it out! You caught the killer!”

“I know,” I said. “But somehow I don’t feel much better.”

“Oh,” Jack said, coming over to stand closer to me. “The old ‘It won’t bring them back.’ ” His face was full of sympathy.

“I guess I should have seen it coming,” I said.

“How could you?” Jack said. “Everybody wants justice. Unfortunately, justice isn’t the same thing as repair. But, Alice, what you did was incredible. And it was the right thing to do. It’s just that some things can’t be fixed.”

He put his hand gently on my shoulder.

“Clara would be proud of you,” he said.

“Well,” I said, smiling just a little, “I did have a pretty good partner to help me.”

“Did you think about making that official?” Jack asked.

“What do you mean?”

“The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department does hire female officers. I mean, we don’t have any in my department, but I’m not the only one who’d like to see it. You have a knack for this kind of work.”

I sighed. “It’s all been so outside of anything I’d ever imagined,” I said. “I always saw Clara as the adventurous one. I was the practical sister. I guess that was her last gift to me, to force me to find the more audacious part of myself.”

“But you’re not sure you want to be a cop,” Jack said.

I paused to think about it.

As always in Los Angeles, it was immaculately sunny, with the softest hint of a sea breeze. The oak leaves whispered gently over our heads. But there was a pall over me, an ominous threat larger and heavier than one single tragedy in one single city.

“What is it?” Jack asked.

“It’s just ... it seems so futile to embark on anything right now,” I said. “Did you see the paper this morning?”

“You mean that thing Hedda wrote? She—”

“No,” I said, “not her. I meant the front page. They’re calling it the Blitzkrieg. Germany has invaded Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Neville Chamberlin

resigned in the UK, and Winston Churchill has taken over the Prime Ministry. They say the Nazis will be coming for Britain next.”

“You think we’ll all be swept up in it,” Jack said.

“I do.” I nodded.

Jack looked troubled. I remembered that his sister was living in London.

“What can we do though?” he said. “America is neutral.”

“I know,” I sighed. “Maybe it will stay that way.”

“It does make planning for the future difficult,” Jack said.

“Exactly. Anyway,” I said, “come what may, I need to go back home, at least for a while. Paramount isn’t paying my room at The Georgian past tonight, now that I’m not on the payroll anymore. I was planning to catch the train back to Chicago in the morning.”

“You won’t stay to see the trial through?” Jack asked.

“No,” I said. “That could take months. Sergeant Palmer said Freida confessed to it all, but her lawyer is trying to plead temporary derangement. Whether she ends up in a jail cell or an asylum, I’m not sure it matters.”

“Ah.”

Jack looked like he wanted to say more, but I said, “Did you bring your car?”

“It’s parked around the corner,” Jack said.

“I thought you might give me a ride back to the hotel.”

“Of course.”

He went and got the car, holding my door open for me. We drove in silence, but there was no awkwardness about it. In fact, though we weren’t speaking, there seemed to be a clear intention building between the two of us. I was extraordinarily conscious of the sound of Jack’s breathing, of the steady rise and fall of his chest, and even the metronome of his heart. Fine

gold hairs gleamed on his bare forearms, and I could see how smooth his skin was, how richly, uniformly brown.

My own heart was beating faster by the moment. As we drew closer to the hotel, I thought that Jack must hear it, that he must know how the blood was coursing through my body, how every part of me was warm and thrumming like a plucked string.

“Will you ... will you come inside with me?” I asked in a choked voice.

Jack didn't answer. He just took my hand in his and pulled me out of the car, up the steps to the hotel.

“Good afternoon, Miss,” Walter said. He tipped his cap to Jack but didn't say anything about the two of us going inside together. I knew he wouldn't give us any trouble. He liked me, and besides, discretion was the primary requirement of employment at The Georgian.

We took the elevator up to my floor. I was beginning to tremble, and I struggled to fit my key in the lock. Jack had to take it from my hand and turn it.

As soon as we were inside, Jack kissed me. He took my face between his hands and kissed me like I'd never been kissed in my life. As soon as his mouth was on mine, it sent a flame surging through me, igniting every nerve in my body. I became hypersensitive to his hands thrusting into my hair, his chest pressed against mine, our thighs intertwined. Every millimeter of contact between us was amplified until I could hardly stand it, until I thought I would collapse under the intensity of it.

His kiss contained everything that my kiss with Gable had lacked. The taste of Jack's mouth, the scent of his skin, the heat radiating off of him—it was completely intoxicating, it made my head spin.

We were undressing each other as quickly as we could, me trying to unbutton his shirt, Jack doing the same to my dress. He swept me up in his arms and laid me down on the bed. Every inch of skin that he freed from my clothing, he covered

with his lips and tongue, sending jolts of pleasure running down my body.

When he had my dress opened, and had come to the waistlette bra, he quickly became frustrated with the endless row of tiny hooks. In one smooth movement he tore it apart as if it were paper. This was the part of Jack that both fascinated and unnerved me—the wild, animal part that lay beneath his amiable exterior. He was frightfully strong. He ripped off my garter and stockings with ease.

But he didn't hurt me. It was with utter gentleness that he kissed me again, then took my breast in his mouth while he cupped the other in his hand and rubbed the nipple between his finger and thumb until it was stiff and longing for his lips. Right when I would have begged him to do it, he moved his mouth to the other breast and licked and sucked until I could have cried from the pleasure.

As he did that, he slipped his hand between my legs and began to stroke me softly. I wasn't a virgin, but I had never imagined that a man could touch me like that, better than I could touch myself. He moved his fingers over me, never too rough, never too light, always slightly increasing the intensity. In minutes he had me shaking and pressing against his hand in an explosion that seemed to go on and on and on.

It was so much more than an orgasm. It felt like a gift. Like a bond between us. It felt like he was showing me a glimpse of all he could do for me, if I'd only let him ...

While I was still recovering, he dropped his trousers to the floor and pushed himself inside of me. I was still clenching on the last waves of my climax, and the tightness of the fit, the friction it created, was almost unbearable. He stayed still at first, just looking down into my eyes, running his hands through my hair, kissing my mouth and breathing in and out together.

Then he began to move, gently at first, then faster and harder. He had his arms wrapped around me so every inch of us was pressed tight together. His arms were like iron, his chest and back were nothing but lean, hard muscle.

As I pressed my palms against his back, I felt the raised lines of the scars on his skin. I thought that was the source of the wildness in him. A thing like that either killed the spirit inside of a person or roused it to feverish fury.

Jack rolled over, pulling me on top of him. I felt the bandage on his side rubbing against my forearm, and I remembered his stitches.

“Is this alright?” I asked, touching the bandage gently.

“It doesn’t matter at all,” Jack said.

He put his hands on either side of my waist and bucked his hips to rock me up and down on top of him. The inside of me was exquisitely warm and sensitive.

His movement began to build that feeling again—that sensation of pleasure that seemed to grow and grow like a catalytic reaction. This time the pleasure was deep inside, in a place I had never managed to touch before. It built and built, in waves that began to radiate outward, up to my scalp, outward from my spine, all the way down my legs to my toes.

I knew I was crying out, but I couldn’t stop myself. I kept riding the waves until I collapsed on top of Jack, limp and shaking.

He turned me over and took me from behind, then he lifted me up, so we were both standing, my arms around his neck and my legs wrapped round his waist. He bounced me like that until it happened again, a climax that started on the inside and spread outward like a shockwave to every extremity of my body.

It went on for hours. The more he took me, the more he seemed to want from me.

I thought it was too much, he was sure to hurt himself, but every time I protested he kissed me ferociously, silencing my concerns.

When at last we both lay on top of the sheets, exhausted and sweating, I was so spent that I could barely have lifted my head from where it lay on his chest.

It was fully dark. I was completely drained, as limp as a rag. And finally, I had achieved what the culmination of this case had not done so far: I was satisfied. I was at peace.

I thought that Jack would sleep beside me, but in my dozing, semi-conscious state, I felt him get up from the bed and begin to dress.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“There’s some things I need to do still tonight,” he said.

I could see the bandage on his side, stained with a few dark spots.

“We ripped your stitches,” I said in dismay.

“I’m fine,” Jack assured me. “Better than fine. That was the best night of my life, Alice.”

He smiled down on me, his teeth glinting like pearl in the dim room.

“It was my favorite night, too,” I told him. “Will you be back tomorrow? Before I catch the train?”

“Yes,” Jack promised. “I’ll see you before you leave.”

I heard him tying his shoes. But I didn’t hear him open the door and slip out, because I had already fallen into a deep and dreamless sleep.



The following morning, I packed my suitcase. I emptied the wardrobe and the drawers of all the clothing I'd brought and took my toiletries from the vanity under the window. I made sure to pack the few things of Clara's that I had taken from her and Lillie's apartment. I wondered briefly if I ought to return some of them, but it struck me that Lillie had already retained the items that she wanted to remember Clara by—the lipstick, the perfume, and probably other gifts and mementos that I had never known existed.

I had called on Lillie, the morning after Freida had been arrested. I had explained everything, while sitting in the lovely, comfortable living room that had once been the home of a happy couple.

Lillie had cried bitterly, as much from shock and dismay as from the gruesome details themselves.

She had known Freida, Gerda, and Azriel well—had worked with them on multiple films and shorts.

"It's my fault," Lillie said over and over again. "It was all because Clara had to keep my secret."

"Lillie," I said, gently rubbing her back. "Clara loved you. And you know she didn't believe in regrets."

It had been painful for me, recounting it all aloud from beginning to end. But in many ways, it had been as necessary for me as it was for Lillie.

Before I left, I reached into the deep pocket of my coat and brought out the little cocker spaniel puppy I'd bought at the Fisherman's Wharf early that morning, when the sun was just coming up. The puppy had been one of three sold out of a cardboard box. It had inky black hair that reminded me of Clara, and big dark eyes that reminded me of Lillie.

I knew it was a risk to buy a pet for someone else, but I thought the continued presence of the silver bowl in Lillie's room meant that she would welcome it.

Lillie took the puppy in her slender-fingered hands and held it to her chest, nuzzling her cheek against its silky fur.

"The sweetest thing in the world," she whispered, breathing in its milky scent. "What should I name it?"

I thought for a moment.

"What about Daisy?"

"I like that," Lillie said, smiling just a little.

I hugged Lillie tight before I left.

"Please write to me," I said.

"I will," Lillie promised.

Now I nestled Clara's music box down amongst my stockings and underthings, so it would be padded and safe from damage. I added her book of poems—the ones by Emily Dickinson. Our mother gave them to Clara for her sixteenth birthday.

Impulsively, I took the poems out again, flipping through the pages.

Clara had marked her favorite lines with ink.

I let the pages fall open as they may.

Perhaps it was just the break in the spine, or perhaps it was the last breath of Clara's ghost, but of the many marked lines, the ones the lay before my eyes were these:

Unable are the Loved to die

For Love is Immortality.

I shut the book, blinking hard, and stowed it carefully with the music box.

When I had cleared everything from the room, I took the key down to Walter and asked him to bring down my bags as well, while I called a taxi.

I sat in the cafe for breakfast first, dawdling a little over my coffee and fruit, thinking that Jack might come to join me. He did not arrive, however.

At last it was getting close to 10:00 a.m. I had to call the cab. Walter helped stow my suitcases in the trunk, instructing the driver to take me to the train station.

On the drive, I allowed myself to admit that I was surprised that Jack hadn't come to see me off. For a moment I considered that he might be the sort of man whose passion is extinguished once the novelty of an encounter is complete, but I knew that couldn't actually be true.

From the moment I met Jack, I had felt a connection with him, as if we were already friends. The attraction between us had grown, not as a weedy infatuation grows, but as a tree grows, with deep, spreading roots.

And what had happened last night—it was like nothing I had ever imagined, let alone experienced. It was no spark, flaring up and dying away again just as quickly. It was more like a fireworks show on the Fourth of July—the culmination of something immense, filling the whole sky with light. It could never have happened by chance, without something real and deep behind it.

Still, I was sorry to not see him again before I left. It brought back the hollowness of the day before, sharper than ever—the feeling that of all the options before me, all the paths I might now take, none were right, all were empty at the end.

When I gave my ticket to the conductor, he led me to the first-class carriages at the front of the train.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I think there’s a mistake—I didn’t pay for a private carriage.”

“No mistake,” he assured me. “Your bags are already waiting for you inside.”

The conductor opened the door, and Jack held out his hand to help me climb up.

“Jack!” I laughed. “Is it necessary to be so unexpected all the time?”

“Did you really not expect me?” he said, looking into my eyes. I looked back into the endless blue of his.

“No,” I said honestly. “I thought you would come.”

“Do you know this train goes on to New York?” Jack asked. “I thought about what you said. It’s true, we have no idea what’s coming our way, and it’s likely to be horrible. But we may have a little time left. We could go to New York City, then catch a boat south. There’s a thousand places I’ve never been. What interests you? Did you know they’re building new locks in the Panama Canal? Big enough for the largest ships in the world. That would be something to see.”

“Don’t you have to work?” I asked.

“I have leave coming, and money saved,” Jack said.

“I still have to stop in Chicago,” I said. “To pack up my apartment.”

“But then will you come with me?” Jack asked. “Will you come see what we can see before the whole world falls apart?”

I looked down that path—one that was uncertain, and unconventional, and liable to branch in a hundred different directions.

In that moment, it was the only one that seemed right to me.

“I’ll come with you,” I said.

“Good,” Jack said, his voice full of happiness. “Now let’s put up those blinds so we can enjoy the view.”

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She has a slight obsession with hiking, bodybuilding, and live comedy shows. Her perfect day would be taking the kids to Harry Potter World, going dancing with Mr. Lark, then relaxing with a good book and a monster bag of salt and vinegar chips.

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