

Chapter 1

New York City

December 1946

Helen said, “You have to come back to Los Angeles.” And that was all it took.

I figured I was better off in Los Angeles, where I’d been shot at, than in New York, where I’d been shot.

As it turned out, going back would put me face to face with another killer with a gun. But of course I didn’t know that when my best friend, Helen Ross, marched past me and tossed her handbag onto the sofa of my hotel suite.

“You don’t belong in New York,” she said. “It’s cold, it’s dirty, it’s no place to recuperate.”

I closed the door. “It’s nice to see you again, too.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry.” She hurried back over, took both my hands in her gloved ones, and planted a kiss near my cheek. She held on to my hands. “How are you?”

“Fine.” I was two weeks out of the hospital, five weeks and four days after being shot.

“I figured if you weren’t doing as well as your letters said, Mr. Winslow would have told me.”

“The doctor says I’m a miracle.”

“Well, you look good. A lot better than you did last time I saw you.”

That would not have been hard to achieve. When she last saw me I was lying in a hospital bed.

I’d come to New York in September to hide out from the publicity of a scandalous murder case back in Hollywood. Peter Winslow, the private detective who’d helped solve the case—and with whom I’d fallen head over heels—had come with me as my “bodyguard.” We ended up in the middle of another murder. And I ended up getting shot.

Peter called Helen, and she’d jumped on an airplane (despite being terrified of them) and sat at my hospital bedside with him, neither of them talking about how close I’d come to leaving them both.

Finally, the doctor declared I’d live, and after a few days convincing herself he knew what he was talking about, she’d gone home to Los Angeles. Now, she’d flown back, for a quick bit of Christmas shopping and a visit.

She let go of my hands and stripped off her gauntlet gloves. “In fact,” she said, “you look damn good. Where is Mr. Winslow?”

“Working. His agency had a job for him to do here.” And thank God. Peter was bored to death. He didn’t know New York well enough to do much work as a private investigator. He was in New York because of me. I didn’t want him to get confused and start thinking he was bored with me. Another reason to go home.

“Let me take your coat,” I said.

As always, Helen Ross was perfectly turned out: an impeccable navy traveling suit piped with silver-gray at the edges of the lapels and pockets; a dark-gray velvet hat with an arc of rolled brim framing her blonde head. Her makeup was flawless, if perhaps a touch heavy, the sort that made her still look thirty-five from thirty feet away. I wasn’t sure how old Helen actually was, somewhere in her early forties, I supposed, six or seven years older than me. I’d never asked, of course.

She held her hands out to the merry hiss of the radiator.

“I’ll make some coffee,” I said. “You’re not used to New York winters.”

I went off into the tiny space the hotel with considerable optimism called a kitchen. But then guests at the Marquette didn’t cook. They ordered up from the restaurant. The kitchen was for parties, during which the maid could use the oven to warm up hors d’oeuvres. It was just wide enough to accommodate a baking sheet.

I removed the percolator's basket, poured in four cups of water, and replaced the basket on the rod. I took the coffee canister off the shelf.

"When you're ready to get rid of the scar," Helen called to me, "let me know. I've got the doctor for you."

"It doesn't show."

"To whom?"

"How's Sam?" Sam Ross was her husband, a producer at Marathon Studios, for which I'd done most of my screenwriting in my career.

"Fine. He sends his love."

"He could send some work my way."

"Are you well enough to work?"

"Of course."

"And travel?"

"Sure."

"Soon?"

I set down the measuring spoon and went back into the living room. "What's going on?"

"What?"

“When you said you were getting on an airplane again, I should have known it wasn’t just Christmas shopping and a visit.”

She dropped onto the sofa. “Why don’t you make that a whiskey?”

I poured her a short Scotch from the sideboard. She said, “I’d have made a rotten spy.” She took a healthy sip and crossed her ex-showgirl legs. “Mala Demara’s missing.”

“Missing?”

“No one has any idea where she is. She went away for the weekend and hasn’t come back.”

Mala Demara was a gold strike for Marathon. She’d appeared practically out of nowhere after the war ended, a beautiful Hungarian refugee, at least that was what the studio publicity said. She’d got a job singing at a local nightclub—the publicity left out the part about it belonging to Ramon Elizondo, who used to be a gangster and probably still was. Studio bosses saw her, gave her a screen test, then a contract. Her first film, in which she’d played the second female lead, had done far better at the box office than expected, largely because of her. Marathon had pulled her out of her next scheduled project, and gave her a lead. The film had been a smash, making over a million dollars in profit.

She had that European glamour audiences craved, having heard and read so much about Europe over the last years from war correspondents and returning soldiers. Of course, much of Europe was in ruins now, but maybe that only enhanced the allure. Her smoldering eyes pulled men into the theater in droves. Yet women liked her; she wasn't a man-trap. She wouldn't steal your husband.

Of course, "Mala Demara" was an image the studio had scrupulously crafted. And movie reporters had been willing collaborators. If Hollywood thrived, so did they. And Hollywood was thriving. Americans flocked to theaters. They were still flush with wartime salaries and didn't have much to spend the money on. Factories were catching up on consumer production after years of being retooled for war matériel. This year was going to be the biggest box-office year in movie history.

Still, for all the canny work Marathon had done, there was no disputing she was magnetic on screen. No one can explain why some actresses have it and some, equally beautiful—and sometimes far more talented—don't. You couldn't take your eyes off her. And that's what the studio paid for, what the audiences paid for.

She was Marathon's new golden princess. And she was gone.

I said, "Does it have anything to do with that Mickey Triton?"

"We think she might have killed him."

Chapter 2

“I thought Mr. Winslow would be here.” Helen never called him Peter. Not that long ago, he’d saved her from a scandal. The formality helped her deal with how much she owed him. How much he knew.

Helen hadn’t had that high an opinion of private detectives before she met Peter. Neither had I. I’d written fictional ones and given them guts, conscience and no small amount of intelligence. I hadn’t thought any like that actually existed.

I heard the key in the lock and met Peter at the door. As he closed it with one hand, the other slid around my waist. “Helen’s here,” I said. His hand moved quickly, though smoothly, off my body. Peter was downright prudish about my reputation. As if Helen hadn’t figured out he wasn’t sleeping in the suite’s second bedroom.

“Mrs. Ross,” he said and took off his hat.

“She needs to talk to you.” I put his hat and coat away while he poured himself a bourbon. He was wearing his smaller gun, so it didn’t show when he

unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat down in the armchair. I took a place at the other end of the sofa.

Helen told him as much as she'd told me. Then she said, "Do you know who Mickey Triton is?"

"Yes," Peter said. From long habit interviewing witnesses, he was cautious about telling people more than they might tell him. He waited for her to continue.

She said, "Mala's been seeing him, on the quiet, since she came to the States. Their picture got in the papers a few times, so the studio told her they couldn't go out in public anymore. The studio's worked hard on her career, and one bad move could be fatal. You never know how the public will react."

Peter said, "Especially to a foreigner."

"Yes, exactly. So the studio arranged for her to be escorted by other men, actors who have good reputations with the public. But she never stopped seeing Mickey Triton. Do you know much about him?"

"Good boxer in his time, welterweight champ for a year," Peter said. "Started out as a 'mooch' with Jack Dragna's mob. That's a kid who hangs out with them, runs errands, laughs at their jokes. Later, he did some enforcement for Julie Scarza, Dragna's lieutenant, till he made a name fighting. When that was over, Scarza bought him a gym out on Sunset and set him up as a trainer. It gave Scarza

a place to put the dirty money in and bring it out clean. Triton got drafted and spent a couple of years in the Pacific, then came back to his gym. He trains mostly welterweights now, some light-heavies. He's pretty good at it. And he doesn't make his boys take more dives than they have to. He gets his picture in the papers sometimes, because he's an ex-champ and a trainer. But he's also good friends with Scarza and that means there are a lot of people he can't be photographed with—baseball players, politicians and starlets like Mala Demara whose images are being controlled by the studio.”

Sometimes, Peter likes to show off a little.

Helen said, “Mala's not the first actress to find men like that attractive.”

She was right about that. Gangsters appealed to plenty of Hollywood women. I was in no position to judge them. I was in love with a man who probably started out pretty much like Mickey Triton had.

Helen went on. “Mickey rented a cabin out somewhere past Malibu under a phony name, and they used that for whatever they wanted to get up to, and never went out in public. This weekend it burned down. They found a body in it.”

Helen opened her handbag, pulled out a fold of newspaper clippings and handed it to Peter. I perched on the arm of his chair. They were clippings from

several editions of all the Los Angeles papers. He scanned them, and I tried to keep up. He'd had a lot more practice pulling important details out of newspaper stories.

From the pictures, it was impossible to tell what the cabin had looked like. Last Friday, it had burned to the ground. The only thing left standing was the stone fireplace and chimney. Everything else had collapsed to a scorched black heap of blistered rubble. According to the stories, the fire had fortunately been contained because of light winds and the ground being soaked from the recent unusually heavy rains. By the time the fire trucks arrived, though, the cabin was engulfed. It had taken three hours to put the fire out, and another day for it to cool sufficiently for a search. In the debris, they found a man's body, so badly burned, the articles said, as to be not immediately identifiable.

I thought about what the body must have looked like after that inferno. Once, for a script, I'd done some research about the effects of fire. Quickly I'd discovered it was so horrific I would never be able to put anything about it into a screenplay and get it past the censors.

When he finished reading, Peter asked Helen, "Are you sure the body's Triton's?"

"Who else could it be?"

“The arsonist, caught in his own crime. It took three hours to put the fire out, it says here. If that’s accurate, it’s arson. It wasn’t a gas explosion. The chimney’s intact. The owner might have burned it down for the insurance and set himself on fire doing it. It happens. Triton and Miss Demara could be in Tijuana on a bender.”

“The man’s skull had a bullet hole in it.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Mack Pace told Sam. Mack’s the studio’s chief of security. He has police contacts.”

“He better be careful who he talks to. Some cops can be bought, but not all the time. One of them might tip the investigators the studio’s asking questions. Are you sure the cops haven’t identified the body yet?”

“Yes. I called Sam from my hotel before I came over here. There’s nothing new.”

“Triton must have done a good job concealing his identity from the owner. But if the cops don’t know it’s his cabin, how did the studio find out?”

“Mala’s cousin called Sam when she saw the papers. She knew about the cabin, recognized the address. She and Mala live together. She said Mala packed a bag Friday and went away for the weekend, but didn’t say where she was going.

Then she didn't come home. The cousin calls herself a spiritualist, but apparently she can't see into her crystal ball well enough to tell where Mala's gone."

"There's the possibility Miss Demara's dead, too. Whoever killed Triton took her."

"That's too awful to think about."

"But if she's still alive, why hasn't she come home?"

"If the papers find out they were using that place as a love nest, that he's dead and she's missing, it will look like she did it. Her career will never recover."

"Who else knows what's going on, besides your husband, the cousin and the security chief?"

"Sam had to tell the head of the studio, Sol Noble. And Alastair Bishop, who's directing Mala's new picture. That's all, as far as I know."

"You want to keep that number as low as possible." Peter laid the clippings on the side table. "Mrs. Ross, why did you come all the way to New York?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The studio's security chief could have told your husband everything I just did, probably already has."

"Sam wants you to find her. Can you, before the police?"

“Your husband could have asked me to do that over the phone, and he could have told me things I’m now getting secondhand. Yet you flew here, and you hate airplanes.”

“Sam doesn’t know you that well.” Helen glanced at me.

“This isn’t up to Mrs. Atwill,” Peter said. “I have a job here, as her bodyguard, and you and your husband know that.”

Helen said, “I know you’re worried about Lauren. Sam knows that. But it’s all over, that other thing. There hasn’t been anything in the papers for weeks.”

After all the delays, the killer who’d started the avalanche of publicity that had driven me out of Los Angeles had made a deal with the DA. Pled guilty to one count of manslaughter. Five years in prison. The DA didn’t want the blackmail and police corruption that lay behind the other crimes to end up in the courtroom, and the killer’s lawyers knew it. Five years. One count. Four people dead. And if Peter and I hadn’t stopped it, two more would have died.

Peter said, “Why’s your husband looking for an outsider? Does he want someone not on the Marathon payroll to find her, then hide her from the cops?”

“Of course not.”

“Or fix her up with an alibi?”

“Peter,” I said. But I said it quietly. I knew the real reason he was angry.

I stood up and said to Helen, “Why don’t you let us talk about this, then I’ll call you at your hotel later.” She was at the Plaza. The Marquette was a fine hotel if you’re hiding out from the press, but she wasn’t.

“Sure.” She snatched up her handbag and marched to the door, briskly tugging her gloves on. I retrieved her coat. When I’d closed the door after her, Peter was pouring himself more bourbon.

He said, “I’m not going to fight about this. She’s using you, and you know it.”

“She’s presuming on our friendship, and maybe she shouldn’t have done it, but she loves Sam, and his picture will be in big trouble if the press gets hold of this. He doesn’t know you that well, so she offered to come here and use our friendship to talk you into it.” I laid my hand on his arm. “But she thinks the only danger to me is from publicity. You still think about how somebody out in Los Angeles might want to exact a little revenge. Helen would never ask me to come back if she thought she was putting me in that kind of danger. Make me a drink.”

I sat down on the sofa. He took the lid off the ice bucket, shot some cubes into a glass and poured me a gin and tonic.

I said, “Part of the DA’s deal was that no witnesses—by which he meant me—would ever be touched.”

“A deal he couldn’t enforce, and everybody knew it.”

“We also know you made it personally very plain to the killer that if anything at all ever happened to me, the killer would die a painful death. I’m not saying take the job. But you’re bored out of your mind here.”

He handed me the drink. “You know anything about this girl?”

“Not much. The studio says she’s Hungarian, maybe she is. I heard she’d had a screen test with Marathon over in Europe before the war, when she was just a kid. They told her to improve her English and get in touch. Then the war came. Last summer, she turns up, gets a job as a singer out at Elizondo’s. She got a screen test, a contract. Every young girl’s Hollywood dream. Of course, most young girls don’t look like Mala. She did two movies fast, and they were hits. She’s beautiful, she’s popular. Alastair Bishop is directing her new picture. I can’t imagine why she’d disappear, and I don’t know anything that would help you find her.”

“Would a lot of people know she was seeing Triton?”

“You can’t keep something like that quiet in Hollywood. But plenty of actresses see men they shouldn’t, and the press generally cooperates.”

“Until it’s a story that’ll sell a lot of papers, like a murder. Why does Sam Ross want me?”

“He doesn’t want you to get her an alibi if that’s what you mean. He needs somebody who knows how to get information without making things worse. Asking around, if it’s not done right, could make her look like she did something, when she could be completely innocent. Studio security’s good at hushing things up. But they’re not—and don’t take this the wrong way—delicate.”

He laughed and sat down beside me. I crossed my legs and pressed them against him. He slipped his hand beneath my skirt with a touch that was gentle but not what you’d call delicate.

“It won’t be long before the cops find out whose body that is,” he said. “And as soon as it’s public, somebody will tell them he was seeing Miss Demara. If she wants to stay missing, I’d have practically no chance of finding her before they start looking for her. It’s an impossible job, and Ross has to know that. Yet he wants me to come back. Didn’t ask me to recommend other men who are already out there, men who could do as much as I could. He wants me. Something’s not right here.”

“What do you say we go back home, and you can find out what it is.”