

Chapter 1

March 1947

Normally, when I get really angry, I'll throw a few unbreakable things around my study.

Not this time.

I snatched up another ashtray and flung it into the fireplace. The green glass exploded against the firebox, the emerald shards showering the flames and joining the layer already under the grate.

But now I'd run out of ashtrays. I yanked open another cabinet in the bookcase, grabbed a couple of ceramic candlesticks and slung them in too, one after the other.

"You could try swearing, save some china," Peter Winslow suggested, calmly. But then, he'd been shot at all over the Pacific during the war, and since then a few times on the streets of Los Angeles, so he wasn't likely to be intimidated by ricochet, from temper or tableware.

Nevertheless, he stayed where he was, in the chair behind my desk, his hat still in his hands.

But I wasn't taking orders from anybody right now, not me, so I grabbed another candlestick and whipped it into the fire. Then I prowled the hearth rug, glaring at the painted rosebuds on the candlestick as they slowly curled and melted in the heat.

Peter just sat there. He didn't tell me to calm down, didn't tell me to stop acting like a hysterical female, didn't ask who the hell I was so mad at. Didn't ask what the hell he'd walked into when he'd come all the way out to Pasadena for a quiet dinner. He waited.

Finally, I threw myself down on the sofa and slung my arms across my chest, holding my hands in check because they were still twitching to find something to throw. Like a punch.

But the object of my fury was twelve miles away, in Hollywood.

It was my boss, Sol Noble, head of Marathon Studios.

"I just got a call from the studio," I said. "I've been loaned out. Loaned out! To *Epic*! Sol Noble promises me my first screen credit in years, then he sends me to Epic to crank out another Mary Ann McDowell picture. My first screen credit in three years is going to be on a Mary Ann McDowell picture. Take a look. There, there on the floor." I released one hand long enough to jab a finger at the copy of the *Los Angeles Eagle* lying where I'd thrown it, along with a few other unbreakable items, before I'd moved on to bigger game.

"Page eight," I said. "Savannah Masters's column. Look at what it says about Mary Ann McDowell's latest picture. 'A coed romp,' that's what she calls it. 'Miss McDowell is flirtatious and charming as always in this coed romp, a feather-light amusement about three lovelies out to win degrees and husbands.' She's a friend of the head of Epic and that's the best she could do. I know what this is. Sol Noble's a superstitious bastard. He's loaning me out to do a coed romp, for which Marathon will get paid more than he's paying me. Meanwhile, he gets to find out if it's true that whenever Lauren Atwill signs on to a picture, somebody gets killed."

Peter slid his fedora onto the blotter, rose slowly to his six-two, and walked over to the table under the window where Juanita, my housekeeper, had laid out a bar for us. He mixed me a

stout gin and tonic, scooped ice into it from the bucket, then twisted the lime while I thought about twisting Sol Noble's neck.

He poured himself a bourbon and came over to the sofa. He handed me my glass.

"Is that the word?" he asked, looking down at me with his hard, dark eyes. "How far has it gone?"

I shrugged. "A couple of cracks lately, around Marathon. Maybe not too far because most people have no idea how true it is."

"Most people have no idea because when you find a body, you go ahead and find out who left it there. Then you let the cops take the credit, and that's a secret they're glad to keep." He sat down beside me. "You know that whatever the latest thing is going around the Hollywood track, it's lucky to make the backstretch before the next thing overtakes it."

I looked at him. "You're going to keep being rational, aren't you?"

He smiled. And, as always, it did remarkable things to those eyes.

I decided to calm down. None of this was Peter's fault. He was an innocent bystander. Which can't often be said about Peter Winslow.

"I guess you talked to Ross," he said.

Sam Ross was a producer at Marathon, where I'd done most of my work as a screenwriter. He and his wife, Helen, were also my friends.

"They're in Hawaii," I said. "I'm not ruining a second honeymoon. Besides, there's nothing Sam can do." I took a healthy sip of my drink. "Juanita's making that roasted pork for you."

"Tell her I had nothing to do with this mess in here."

Juanita didn't care too much for men, believing they were, by and large, swine. But she liked Peter. Of course, she had reason. He'd saved my life, twice, while he and I had solved some cases in which people had left bodies lying around.

"I'll clean it all up," I said. "Usually, I just throw pillows."

"You had a half-dozen ashtrays in that cabinet all set to go, and you don't smoke."

"You're a pretty good detective, aren't you?"

"Enough to keep the license."

"All right, I keep some cheap, breakable stuff. Just in case." I kicked off my shoes and drew my legs onto the sofa. "You're not scared of me, are you?"

"I'm scared of Juanita."

I laid my head on his shoulder. It's a nice shoulder. He shifted his drink to the other hand, put his arm around me and kissed my hair. I snuggled against him. Since I was on his right side, there was no gun to get in the way, and I took full advantage. He didn't seem to mind.

"So what are you going to do?" he asked.

"Go work for Epic."

"How bad will it be?"

"Twenty years ago, they were a major studio, but they almost went bankrupt in the Depression. For a while, seven, eight years ago, they were one step up from Poverty Row. A boss at a major could keep a star in line by threatening to loan him to Epic. Just before the war, they got a new boss, Ben Bracker. He merged them with a couple of small studios, built up their B picture thrillers, turned out more A pictures, branched out into musicals. Still, their budgets are low." I lifted my cheek and repositioned it against his lapel. "It's been a long time since I had a

screen credit. Longer since I had anything I was proud of. That story treatment I wrote. It's pretty damned good. I'm afraid Sol liked it so much he'll give it to someone else while I'm gone, off writing the coed romp. And if he does, I've got nothing to say about it. The story belongs to the studio. Maybe I should have read the fine print."

He said, "It wouldn't have made any difference."

He was right. Not many of even the biggest Hollywood stars got to call their shots. And I certainly didn't qualify as anyone's star. I'd had something of a career before the war, then cut back my work, confined myself mostly to fixing up other writers' work anonymously, in an attempt to save a crumbling marriage. I'd been sure that, if I just spent more time being a proper wife to my movie star husband, he wouldn't have so many affairs. I'd actually been aiming for no affairs at all, which shows you how little I'd learned about Hollywood in over a dozen years of working there. I turned out to be a very good script doctor, a complete failure at saving the marriage.

Peter said, "What do you say we have a couple of drinks, eat dinner, and then I'll spend a long time taking your mind off Sol Noble."

"How did you know that was exactly what I was thinking? You *are* a good detective."

He pressed his lips into my hair, then whispered, "Don't worry. Nobody's going to die."

Chapter 2

The next morning, I drove over to my office at Marathon Studios, which is out on Melrose. I pulled through the tall, wrought iron gates, waved in by the guard. Now that I was a regular, I didn't have to stop and remind him who I was. At least *someone* knew I was a writer.

The main avenue stretched back to the sound stages, lined with Spanish-style buildings of heavy-cream stucco, red tile roofs, and narrow balconies. The first set belonged to the people who help keep the studio running and hardly ever get any credit for it: accountants, bookkeepers, and the art, research, and advertising departments. Then, suddenly on the right, appeared an expanse of sparkling lawn and glistening palms. Glaring at you from the center of it was the executive office building, known to most of us who don't labor inside it as the Ice House. It's a white box in a style someone with more power than taste had considered the latest thing a decade ago, cut down the center with a wall of glass to give you a full view of the white-white-white lobby, so you could be sure its interior ugliness did indeed match the inspiration of the exterior design.

Past that, we returned abruptly to Spanish and the offices of the cinematographers, art directors, and set designers. Then just opposite a sound stage, the Tate Building, where most of the studio's writers are housed behind chipped desks and doors with rattling hardware in offices reached by a groaning elevator.

It's old and cranky, pretty much the way I was feeling.

Not that Peter hadn't kept his promise, but a man's skill can only distract a woman for so long, then she has to go back to work. And sometimes she has to do it after soothing her ego with too many gin and tonics the night before. As I'd left my house in Pasadena, I'd pressed a pair of sunglasses to my face and snapped down the visor on my Lincoln convertible. I'd driven into Hollywood with the top up, despite the glorious late-winter sunshine.

I parked in the Tate's narrow lot and went up to what is now my regular office, on the fifth floor. Before I even took off my hat, I cranked the awnings out to cut down on the glare.

I sat down in the sprung desk chair, still in my sunglasses, opened the middle drawer, and pulled out a bottle of aspirin. I unscrewed the lid and tapped out a few tablets, as the ones I'd taken at home seemed to have had no effect. I washed them down with a cup of strong coffee I'd purchased from the wagon downstairs, which was on its start-of-day rounds. It was well supplied. It had to be, given the number of writers who regularly showed up at work in my condition.

"Atwill!" Eleanor Hawkins said, rather too loudly. She stood in my doorway, her shoulder leaned against its frame. She tapped her forehead in a salute.

"Hawkins," I said, blearily. If you wanted Hawkins to think well of you, you called her by her last name.

"I thought I heard your tread. The news is out around here, about the loan-out. I've come to offer condolence and to ask a favor if you're in the mood to grant one."

I said, "As long as it doesn't involve clear thinking. I had a late night of not celebrating."

I took off the sunglasses. She flinched, then dropped onto my sofa. It was a comfortable old thing, its cushions swayed and frayed from long years of writers throwing their legs up and

lounging until an idea struck them, or the writer they'd come to visit bailed them out with the loan of one. Most ideas in Hollywood are only on loan.

Hawkins sported her usual attire: high-waisted pleated slacks and a blouse styled like a man's shirt and tailored for her. Today, she had a long scarf under the open collar, knotted at her throat. Often she wore a waistcoat, but today it was a thick, amber-colored cardigan. The Tate Building holds the morning chill extremely well. Her short black hair was sharply parted on the side and smoothed with a bit of hair oil.

Reclined, she crossed her ankles and shoved her hands into the sweater's pockets. She said, "I do believe all the bathtub gin they drank in their misspent youth rendered every future studio magnate an imbecile. Alas, the condition only reveals itself in the high fever of power."

I laughed. "Well, at least Sol didn't have his secretary call me."

"I heard it was Mickels. That's not an improvement."

Mickels is the assistant to one of Marathon's vice presidents, and his sole mission seems to be harassing writers into appearing to be hard at work, which to him means hunched over a typewriter. When an artist is actually working, it can result in long periods of thinking, something with which Mickels is not well acquainted and therefore cannot recognize.

Hawkins said, "Want some whiskey for that coffee, to help take the edge off?"

"No, thanks. I should probably be sober for whatever lies ahead. I might have something on that very subject right here." I opened my handbag and pulled out a message slip I'd retrieved from my mailbox in the lobby. I unfolded it. I read it. I stared at it.

"What's wrong?" Hawkins asked.

"It's from Ben Bracker."

“Himself?” She pulled her hands from her pockets and sat up.

I turned it over as if the answer could lie on the other side. “I didn’t look at it when I picked it up. It would seem so.” I held it out for her inspection.

“Well, well.”

“It has to be from someone who works for him,” I said. “This can’t be his number.”

I dialed 0, and when the switchboard operator downstairs answered, I asked her to give me an outside line, which she had to do, because none of the Tate Building phones allow dialing numbers outside the studio lot otherwise. Mickles believes it helps keep us focused on our work. I got the line and dialed the number on the message. After two rings, the secretary to Benjamin Bracker, the head of Epic Pictures, answered. I took a second, then told her who I was and that I was returning Mr. Bracker’s call, fully expecting her to huffily connect me to some Epic Pictures version of Mickles. But she politely asked if I could meet with Mr. Bracker at noon.

I said of course, repeated the time, thanked her, and set down the phone. Hawkins’s eyebrows were halfway up her forehead.

“Help me,” I said. “I’ve seen *one* Mary Ann McDowell picture. What are her strengths, do you know?”

“She’s cute.”

“Oh, dear God.”

“She’s a nice kid,” Hawkins said. “I met her at a party last month. But I don’t think she knows yet how much work acting should be. She’s just done what she’s told through all her bobby-soxer flicks, which, though you and I might scorn them, are very popular. She has some talent, which I’m sure you’ll mine expertly. Bracker won’t expect you to talk. All you have to do

is smile, nod, and let him look at your legs. It's not every day he gets to see a writer who's a good-looking blonde."

"Thank you," I said, "but if he's meeting with me himself, something's up."

"Maybe he wants you to promise not to find any more dead bodies."

"What?" I asked sharply.

"I was joking, Atwill. Or have you found another one?"

"Is that what they're saying, that people turn up dead when I'm around?"

"Maybe a crack here and there about how you'd make a swell dinner guest, sit you next to somebody they want to drop dead. Everybody in Hollywood wants somebody to drop dead. Your social life might get a boost."

I sighed. "I've been wondering if Sol thinks I'm Typhoid Mary."

"If he did, he'd never have given you a contract."

It was oddly reassuring that writers are generally held to be of so little importance, we're easily dispensed with. If Sol were superstitious about me, he would just have banned me from the lot.

Maybe.

I said, "You needed a favor?"

"Would you have time to talk later?"

"Sure. About what?"

"Not your career as Lady Doom," she said.

"I should be back by two."

"It can't be here."

“Why?”

“How about Madison’s?” she offered. “I’ll drop by around five, we can walk over.”

“This is mysterious,” I said.

“Well,” she said, “right up your alley then.”