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Stars Over Sunset Boulevard

By Susan Meissner



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In this novel from the acclaimed author of *A Bridge Across the Ocean*, two women working in Hollywood during its Golden Age discover the joy and heartbreak of true friendship.

Los Angeles, Present Day. When an iconic hat worn by Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind* ends up in Christine McAllister's vintage clothing boutique by mistake, her efforts to return it to its owner take her on a journey more enchanting than any classic movie...

Los Angeles, 1938. Violet Mayfield sets out to reinvent herself in Hollywood after her dream of becoming a wife and mother falls apart, and lands a job on the film-set of *Gone With the Wind*. There, she meets enigmatic Audrey Duvall, a once-rising film star who is now a fellow secretary. Audrey's zest for life and their adventures together among Hollywood's glitterati enthrall Violet...until each woman's deepest desires collide. What Audrey and Violet are willing to risk, for themselves and for each other, to ensure their own happy endings will shape their friendship, and their lives, far into the future.

CONVERSATION GUIDE INCLUDED



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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Stars Over Sunset Boulevard*

“Susan Meissner tackles Old Hollywood with her trademark heart, depth, and lyrical style. A touching portrait of two memorable women who will remind readers of the friendships that shape us.”—Michelle Gable, International Bestselling Author

“Susan Meissner deftly casts a fascinating friendship between two complex women against a glittering 1930s Hollywood backdrop. You will love this book for its very human characters and for its inside look at one of the greatest movies ever made.”—Marisa de los Santos, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

More Praise for the Novels of Susan Meissner

“Rich with vividly drawn characters, places, and events...its themes of reinvention and redemption will strike a chord with readers.”—*Booklist*

“Meissner's prose is exquisite and she is a stunning storyteller.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Susan Meissner knits the past and the present with the seamless skill of a master storyteller.”—Kate Kerrigan, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Sympathetic, relatable characters that readers will applaud. Touching and inspirational.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

About the Author

Susan Meissner is a former managing editor of a weekly newspaper and an award-winning columnist. She is the award-winning author of *A Bridge Across the Ocean*, *Secrets of a Charmed Life*, *A Fall of Marigolds*, and *Stars Over Sunset Boulevard*, among other novels.

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Praise for the Novels of Susan Meissner

Other Novels by Susan Meissner

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Special Excerpt from A Fall of Marigolds

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About the Author

Hollywood

March 9, 2012

Christine unfolds the tissue paper inside the pink-striped hatbox and the odor of lost years floats upward. She is well acquainted with the fragrance of antiquity. Her vintage-clothing boutique off West Sunset overflows with stylish remnants from golden years long since passed.

“I thought you were going to hold off estimating that lot until this afternoon,” her business partner, Stella, says as she joins Christine in the shop’s back room. The two friends are surrounded on all sides by the wearable miscellany of spent lives.

“Mr. Garceau, the man who brought this stuff in last night, just called. There’s apparently a hat in one of these boxes that wasn’t supposed to be included. He told me what it looks like. I guess the family is anxious to have it back.”

Christine withdraws a paper-wrapped lump from inside the box, revealing at first just a flash of moss green and shimmers of gold. Then she pulls away the rest of the layers. The Robin Hood–style hat in folds of soft velvet, amber-hued fringe, and iridescent feathers feels ghostly in her hands, as though if she put it to her

ear, it might whisper a litany of old secrets.

She has seen this hat somewhere before, a long time ago.

“Is that it?” Stella asks.

“I think so. He said it was green with gold fringe and feathers.”

Stella moves closer, brow furrowed. “That hat looks familiar to me.”

“It does to me, too.” Christine turns the hat over to inspect its underside for signs of its designer—a label, a signature, a date. She sees only a single name in faded ink on a yellowed tag:

Scarlett #13

1938

ONE

December 1938

A brilliant California sun bathed Violet Mayfield in indulgent light as she neared the soaring palm tree and the woman seated on a bench underneath it. Legs crossed at the ankles, the woman rested her back lazily against the skinny trunk. She held a cigarette in her right hand, and it was as if the thin white tube were a part of her and the stylish smoke that swirled from it an extension of her body. The woman’s fingernails, satin red and glistening, were perfectly shaped. Toenails visible to Violet through peep-toes winked the same shade of crimson. The woman wore a formfitting sheath of celery green with a scoop neckline. A magazine lay open on her lap, but her tortoiseshell sunglasses hid her eyes, so Violet couldn’t tell whether the woman was reading the article on the left page or gazing at handsome Cary Grant, whose photograph graced the right. A wad of wax paper lay crumpled on the bench beside her handbag and a bit of bread crust poked out of it. She sat in front of the Mansion at Selznick International Studios, the stunning white edifice that moviemaker Thomas Ince had built back in the twenties to look like George Washington’s Mount Vernon.

The woman under the tree didn’t look at all like a fellow studio secretary, but rather a highly paid actress catching a few quiet moments of solitude between takes on the back lot. Violet glanced around to see whether there was someone else sitting outside the Mansion on her noon break. But the woman in front of her was the only one eating her lunch under a palm tree, and that was where Violet had been told she’d find Audrey Duvall. She suddenly looked familiar to Violet, which made no sense at all. Violet was two thousand miles away from anything remotely connected to home.

“Miss Duvall?” Violet said.

The woman looked up drowsily, as though Violet had awakened her from sleep. She cocked her head and pulled her sunglasses down slightly to peer at Violet over the rims. Her luminous eyes, beautiful and doelike, were fringed with long lashes she couldn’t have been born with. The casual glance was the wordless reply that she was indeed Audrey Duvall.

“My name’s Violet Mayfield. I’m new to the secretary pool. Millie in accounts payable told me you are

looking for a roommate. I was wondering if you'd found one yet."

Audrey smiled and her painted lips parted to reveal moon-white teeth. "Good Lord," she exclaimed, her voice rich and resonant, almost as deep as a man's. "Where are you from?"

"Pardon me?"

"You're not from around here."

"Um. No. I'm from Alabama. Originally."

Audrey's smile deepened. "Alabama. Never been to Alabama."

Violet didn't know what to say. Had the woman not heard what she asked?

Audrey patted the empty space next to her. "Have a seat. What did you say your name was?"

"Violet Mayfield." She sat down, and the cement beneath her was warm from the sun despite it being early December.

Audrey lifted the cigarette gently to her mouth and its end glowed red as she inhaled. When she tipped her head back and released the smoke it wafted over her head like a feathery length of gauze.

"Want one?" She nodded toward the pack of cigarettes peeking out of her handbag.

"No, thanks."

"Don't smoke?" Audrey puffed again on the cigarette and smiled as the smoke drifted past her lips.

Violet shook her head.

"My last roommate didn't, either. She was always leaving the windows open to let the smoke out."

"Did you not like it when she left the windows open? Is that why you need a new roommate?"

Audrey laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

Violet said nothing.

"She got married."

"Oh."

Audrey pushed the sunglasses up onto her head, fully revealing shining tea-brown eyes that complemented her shimmering brunette hair. She seemed to study for a moment Violet's navy blue dress with its plain white collar. Violet's mousy brown hair—far less wavy than Audrey's—was pulled back into a beaded barrette she had bought in a five-and-dime on the day she started heading west.

"So you just moved, then? From Alabama?"

"I came by way of Shreveport, actually. I've been working for my uncle the past year. He's an accountant."

"And how long have you been here?" Audrey asked.

“Two weeks.”

“And you found a job that quickly?” Her tone held a faint edge of sly admiration. “Good for you!”

“I’ve worked in an office before,” Violet said quickly. “And I went to secretary school.”

“I’ve heard there’s a school for what we do,” Audrey said, amused. “What are you? Nineteen? Twenty?”

“Twenty-two.”

“That will come in handy here, looking younger than you really are,” Audrey murmured. “I’m thirty and can still pass for a twenty-year-old if I need to.”

“Why would you need to do that?”

Audrey tossed back her head and laughed. Even her laugh was low and rich. “You seem to have a knack for humor, Violet from Alabama.” She arched one penciled eyebrow. “So. Did you come to Hollywood to be a movie star?”

Violet startled at the question. “No!”

“That’s why most girls your age come here.”

The thought of performing in front of people didn’t interest Violet in the least. Hollywood had beckoned her for a different reason. “That’s not why I moved here.”

“No?”

Her motivation for coming to California apparently mattered to Audrey Duvall. “I met one of Mr. Selznick’s talent scouts at an audition in Shreveport. He said he’d put in a good word for me if I wanted a secretarial job at the studio.”

“You went to that audition?” Audrey’s eyes widened in measurable interest.

“Only because my cousin Lucinda insisted I come with her. She found out people from Hollywood were coming to Shreveport to search for a young woman to play Scarlett O’Hara. I let her talk me into being interviewed along with everyone else. I think by the time Mr. Arnov got to me he was just relieved to talk to someone who had actually read Margaret Mitchell’s book and wasn’t fawning all over him.”

“You don’t say!”

“I told him I was a much better secretary than I was an actress and that I knew stenography, and that I’d lived in the South all my life. He told me if I wanted a job at Selznick International in Hollywood, he’d put in a good word for me. He said it would be handy to have a Southerner in the secretary pool during the filming. So I came.”

“Just like that?” Audrey seemed both intrigued and dubious.

Violet nodded.

“You have a family back there missing you right now?”

“Just my parents. And my two brothers, Jackson and Truman. They’re both married now and raising families. I doubt they think about me much.”

“But your parents?”

Violet’s thoughts somersaulted back to the strained phone call she had placed from Shreveport, telling her parents she’d been offered a job in Los Angeles and was taking it. They had begged her to reconsider.

“Come back home to Montgomery!” her mother had pleaded.

“Come back home to what?” Violet had responded. “There’s nothing for me there.”

Daddy had asked what California had that Alabama didn’t. She hadn’t known how to express that Hollywood didn’t have expectations of her.

Or sad memories of what might have been.

“I suppose they miss me,” Violet answered.

Audrey cocked her head. “So, what made you come all this way, if you don’t want to be a star?”

But Violet’s reason was too personal to share with a virtual stranger. She was not going to tell someone she’d only just met that fully realizing she could never have the life she’d been raised to live and wanted to live had sent her scrabbling for a new foothold on a meaningful existence.

“I was ready for a different life with new opportunities,” Violet said, with a slight shrug of her left shoulder.

For a stretched moment Audrey stared at her. “Then you came to the right place,” she finally said. “Are you allergic to cats?” She took a long pull on her cigarette.

Violet shook her head.

“You don’t have any furniture, do you?”

“Just a suitcase. I’ve been staying at a hotel.”

“The rent is sixty dollars a month. Plus half of the utilities.” Audrey dropped the stub of the cigarette to the pavement and ground it out with her shoe. “My place is a bit out of the way. Eight miles by way of bus and the red car. It’s a very pretty neighborhood, though. Close to the hills and the Hollywoodland sign. It was my aunt’s house. But now it’s mine.”

“The red car?”

“The trolley. The streetcar. It’s a good thirty minutes getting there in the morning and just as long or more at night. Still interested?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

Audrey smiled. “I’m on loan to one of the assistant art directors the next few days, so how about you meet me out front at quitting time? We can take the red car together so you can see the place and decide.” She rose from the bench, clutching the magazine and the handbag. “C’mon. You don’t want to be late getting back.”

Audrey strolled confidently to toss the wax paper into a trash can some yards away and Violet had to quicken her step to catch up. Audrey's attention was fixed on the people they passed, some wearing elaborate costumes, some street clothes, some moving leisurely, some rushing as though desperate to catch a departing train. A few of these people Audrey greeted by name; some she did not. But everyone was given a look.

• • •

At a few minutes after five, Violet was at the front gate, waiting for Audrey to join her. When fifteen minutes had passed and there was still no sign of her, Violet was ready to assume she'd been forgotten. She had just decided to head back to her hotel when she saw Audrey walking slowly toward the gate, in the company of a man in a suit. They were laughing as they sauntered in her direction. He broke away before they reached the gate to head to one of the sound stages.

"Sorry about that," Audrey said easily when she reached Violet. "But that fellow is not one to rush away from. Ready?"

They set out toward the Pacific Electric trolley stop, alighting onto a Venice Line car seconds before it set off east toward the Hollywood foothills. The streetcar had made a few stops before the two women were able to find two seats together. They sank into the last double seat at the rear.

"So, have you lived here a long time?" Violet asked as they settled more comfortably.

Audrey looked out the window at the passing scenery. "I suppose I have. I came when I was sixteen to live with my aunt." She turned with a half grin on her lips toward Violet. "I'm not from here, either. I was raised four hours north on a plum farm. I'm a farm girl."

The image of stunning Audrey Duvall as a pigtailed tomboy in dungarees made Violet smile for only a second. Sixteen seemed a young age to have left home. Violet's own parents had been distraught when she told them she was heading to Hollywood, and she was a grown woman.

"And your parents let you come?" Violet asked.

Audrey laughed lightly. "My father pretty much insisted on it."

Sorrow and disappointment laced Audrey's words despite the grin. Violet was instantly curious to know what had happened between Audrey and her father. But it would have been rude to ask.

"And your mother?" Violet said instead.

Again Audrey's gaze turned to the passing sights on the street. They were leaving the dull and drab neighborhoods of Culver City, where the studio was located, and entering the charm and glamour of Hollywood. "She died when I was ten."

"I'm so sorry."

Audrey was quiet for a moment. "I don't have any regrets about coming to Hollywood, but I do wonder sometimes where I would be right now if my mother had lived." She turned her head to face Violet again. "Do you ever wonder what your life would be like if different things had happened to you?"

Violet thought of her childhood friends back home who were all engaged, married, or pregnant, blissfully enjoying the existence she had always pictured herself living. It was such an ordinary life, but she had wanted it. She still wanted it.

“All the time,” Violet answered.

The streetcar stopped and a dozen passengers around them maneuvered their way off the trolley. A few others boarded.

“So . . . you never wanted to go back home?” Violet asked, hoping she wasn’t prying. But she needed to know. She had left home, too, and she wanted to know what made a person decide to remain so far from it.

“I had my reasons for staying here,” Audrey said after a pause. “First of all, Aunt Jo was happy to have me, and second, my father remarried and his new wife was a complete stranger to me. And third, I got discovered.”

“Discovered?”

She turned to Violet and a look of sweet reverie swept across her face.

“I almost starred in a movie when I was eighteen. I would have, if silent films hadn’t died away.”

“Really?”

Audrey leaned her head against the back of the seat. “I was working at a coffee shop on Vine, and one morning I was waiting on a man who was a Hollywood talent scout. He told me I looked just like Lillian Gish, and he asked me if I had ever thought of being in the movies.”

“You do look like Lillian Gish!” Violet said. “I knew you looked familiar to me.”

Audrey smiled. “Well, I hadn’t to that point imagined being a professional actress, but I knew I could be one if I wanted to. And the thought of being a sought-after star sure beat pouring coffee and taking orders for pancakes. Aunt Jo wasn’t overly in favor of it. She had lived in this town all her adult life and she wasn’t too keen on me getting sucked into the movie industry, but she knew it was my decision. I signed a contract to be represented by Mr. Stiles. He paid for acting lessons and a new hairstyle. And he bought me fancy clothes so that when he arranged for screen tests, the casting directors wouldn’t see some girl from the Central Valley they didn’t know; they’d see Lillian Gish. He got me a few bit parts, but finally, after a year, and after all the money Mr. Stiles had spent on me, I was cast in the lead for a movie based on the life of Pocahontas.”

She paused a moment and Violet could tell something bad had happened.

“But,” Audrey went on, “before they even started filming, *The Jazz Singer* came out. Do you remember that movie?”

Violet shook her head. She wasn’t sure she did.

“It was the first movie with sound,” Audrey went on. “Suddenly, all the movie producers wanted to make talking pictures. The director of the Pocahontas movie quit to make a talking picture with someone else. The financial backers left the movie, too, to put their money into productions with sound. The movie was scrapped. Mr. Stiles tried to get screen tests for me for other pictures, but I had such a deep voice, no one wanted me. Stiles finally let me go, and that was that.”

The streetcar rumbled on for a few moments before either one of them spoke.

“But you stayed here,” Violet said.

“I wanted to get back what had been taken from me. For a very short while I had been treated like a queen. It’s intoxicating to be treated like you’re a rare gem. There’s no other feeling in the world like it. I tried for a couple of years to get another agent and another part in a movie. It was . . . It was not a great time for me. And I’ll just leave it at that.” Audrey shook her head as if to dislodge a cobweb that had fallen onto her. “Then my sweet Aunt Jo got sick and died. She left me the bungalow, so it was even easier to just stay. By this time I’d figured out that I wasn’t getting anywhere with my career and I was going to have to do something different. I decided to get a job at a studio, so that I could be visible to all those men who had the power to change my life. Those people all have secretaries. And they are all fiercely dependent on their secretaries. So I taught myself typing and stenography and got a job at MGM, and then when Mr. Selznick left MGM to start his own studio, I came with him.”

“And?” Violet said.

“And what?”

“Has it worked? Being around all those studio people?”

Audrey frowned slightly. “You mean, is it working?”

The streetcar squealed to a stop and a host of passengers jostled around them as they got off.

“I guess.”

“Of course it’s working. Do you think I would still be there if I didn’t think it was?”

Violet wished she hadn’t asked. Words escaped her as she wondered if she had just blown her chance of rooming with this woman. And she liked Audrey. Something about her made Violet think old hopes could be given new shapes.

Audrey looked intently into Violet’s eyes. “You don’t just throw in the towel after a couple years here. This is not the kind of town to be in if you’re going to give up easily.”

Violet felt her face bloom crimson. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to insinuate—”

“No, I know what you meant. You want to know if working as a studio secretary for the past seven years has paid off for me. You’re thinking it should have by now.”

“No, I just—”

“And I want you to know that you can’t give in too soon here. You have to be smart. Clever. Patient. Do you hear what I’m saying?”

Violet nodded in assent even though she wasn’t sure what she was saying yes to.

Audrey took Violet’s hand and squeezed it. “Don’t forget I told you this. This is the city where everything is possible if you are patient. Don’t forget it.”

She sounded like a wise old sage giving counsel to a pilgrim preparing to embark on a difficult and harrowing journey.

“I won’t,” Violet said, and she knew she would not.

The streetcar lurched forward toward the foothills and the Hollywoodland sign as the first two stars of the night sky pierced the lavender horizon.

TWO

Dusk had settled over the hills as Audrey and her potential roommate stepped off the bus. A chilling wind had also crept over Hollywood. They started down Franklin Avenue to walk the four blocks to Audrey's bungalow, and pulled their lightweight coats tight around their middles.

Audrey glanced at the woman who walked beside her. Violet Mayfield seemed nice enough. A bit naïve, but in a sweet, comical way. Pretty but not beautiful. Charming but not alluring. Funny without trying to be. And a bit of a risk taker to have come so far from home without knowing a soul. Audrey found that reassuring. And though Violet was a good eight years younger, she had hinted that she was hungry for success in life, just like Audrey was. Yet unlike Audrey, she had no desire to be an actress, and this, too, was comforting. Most of the single women in Hollywood looking for a room to rent wanted exactly what Audrey wanted. A fellow aspiring actress would surely make for a terrible roommate.

Her previous renter, a former script girl at Selznick named Dinah, had gotten married in July to a dentist she'd met at the Cocoanut Grove. Audrey had been with Dinah the night her roommate met the man she would marry. Audrey and Dinah had gone to the fashionable nightclub—in satin and sequins—because Audrey knew that a certain assistant producer from Warner was a regular there on Friday nights. Audrey had met the dentist first and then had introduced him to Dinah so that she could subtly work the room without him on her arm. But the producer hadn't made a showing that night. Afterward, and as the months wore on, Dinah had been almost apologetic that she'd won the well-to-do dentist when Audrey had "had him first."

Dinah had never quite understood that Audrey wasn't looking for a husband. She was looking for the man who would discover her the way Stiles had.

Audrey hadn't been in a great rush to replace Dinah. The rent checks had been nice, but since Audrey owned the bungalow free and clear—the nicest thing Aunt Jo had ever done for her, among a string of nice things, was will her the little house—the extra money wasn't essential. But it was a bit lonely out on the edge of the city. All the clubs, theaters, and restaurants were a good ten blocks away. Aunt Jo's cat, Valentino, was only so much company. And while Audrey invited friends over often enough, it was too quiet and subdued when everyone left, and there was no one to talk to in the morning or sit next to on the bus and streetcar.

She liked having companionship in the house.

Her closest friend, Bert, whom she had known since her earliest days at MGM and who had also come over to Selznick International when she did, would have been the perfect roommate choice if only he wasn't a man. Not only was he polite and decent, but he would've also been able to tackle all the spiders, trim the bushes in the yard, fix the perpetually leaky faucet in the bathroom, and scare away would-be Peeping Toms. And since he worked in wardrobe at Selznick, he could have ridden the bus and streetcar with her. Bert was the most genuinely thoughtful person she knew in Hollywood, probably because, like her, he wasn't from there. He'd been born and raised in Santa Barbara. But a male roommate was out of the question.

If only appearances didn't matter.

She laughed out loud at the thought of steady Bert Redmond, the bighearted little brother she never had, explaining to his widowed mother that he'd moved to a new house and had a new roommate and her name

was Audrey.

At the sound of her giggle, Violet looked over at her, surely wondering what she had missed.

“Sorry,” Audrey said. “Just thought of something funny. It’s nothing.”

They walked in silence for a few steps.

“It’s nice out here,” Violet said, taking in the lay of the quaint shops, the older couples walking their dogs, the grocers bringing in their sidewalk displays for the night, the teenagers on bicycles heading home for dinner. “Even if it is a bit out of the way.”

“You can almost forget that just a mile behind us are streets that never sleep,” Audrey said, nodding toward the lights of Sunset and Hollywood boulevards off in the distance.

They turned up a side street with stucco houses on either side. A mother stood on the doorstep of one of the homes with a toddler on her hip and a dish towel over her shoulder, calling out into the twilight for an older child to come in.

Violet’s gaze seemed to linger on the mother, and then on the place where the woman had stood after she’d stepped back inside her house.

“So, did your aunt work in the movie business, too?” Violet asked when the house and the mother with her children were behind them.

“Not hardly,” Audrey answered. “She married a man from Los Angeles who was a professional gambler, for lack of a better word. She met him at a casino before I was even born. I think her job was keeping him out of trouble.”

“Oh.”

“Apparently Uncle Freddy habitually made a lot of money and habitually lost it. I never met him. He got himself killed when I was still little. Luckily for Aunt Jo, it was after he had just made a lot of money. She bought the bungalow with what he had hidden in their apartment and lived off the rest so she didn’t have to worry about taking a job at the library that barely paid her anything. My father wasn’t too impressed with whom his older sister had married. He’s always resented the fact that when he expected me to come back home to him, I didn’t. I stayed with Aunt Jo.”

“So why did he send you to live with her, then?”

“Let’s just say it was convenient for him.”

Violet opened her mouth to say something else, but they had arrived at the bungalow and Audrey filled the momentary silence. They could have that conversation later, if they had it at all.

“Well, here’s the house,” she said.

The bungalow, like many of the other houses on the street, was Spanish themed, one of the three architecture styles allowed in the bedroom community of Hollywoodland, with white stucco walls, a red tile roof, arched doorways, and terra-cotta pots of geraniums happily blooming on the porch, even though it was December. She slipped her key into the lock and they stepped inside.

Audrey hadn't replaced any of the furniture since Aunt Jo's death six years earlier. There had been no need. Jo had bought only quality pieces with the money she had found hidden in the floorboards of the apartment. There was a long sofa, coffee table, two armchairs, a Victrola, and a dining room set Audrey never used. The yellow-and-white-tile, eat-in kitchen had a door that opened onto a shaded patio and a laundry closet in the corner with an electric clothes washer. Two bedrooms, a bathroom, and the ten-year-old tabby cat completed the interior.

"This would be where you would sleep," Audrey said as she showed Violet the room that had been hers before Aunt Jo died. There was a bed, a dresser, and vanity inside. Lacy blue curtains hung at the windows. A hooked oval rug lay in the middle of the floor. A painting of the ocean decorated the longest wall. "It's fully furnished, as you can see, so it's a good thing you've only got a suitcase."

"It's perfect," Violet said, almost breathlessly.

"Not as big as your Southern plantation back home, though, right?"

Violet laughed. "I didn't live on a plantation. We lived in the city."

"In a big house?"

Violet hesitated before nodding. "It was. But . . . but I don't live there anymore."

Audrey sensed for a second time Violet's desire for something that for the moment was out of reach. This young woman from Alabama by way of Shreveport wanted something that life back home couldn't give her. She had come to the land of dreams to find it. "Do you have any bad habits I should know about?" Audrey said.

"Why? Do you?" Violet asked, and a tiny current of dread rippled across her face.

Audrey smiled. Violet didn't appear to be like any of the other Hollywood women she knew. Audrey liked her. "I tend to leave my shoes and clothes lying around. You?"

Violet smiled back at her. "I tend to put things away."

"Do you want to think on it?"

"I don't need to think about it. I would like very much to rent from you if you'll have me."

"Well, then. Shall we go get your suitcase?"

"Right now?"

"Why not right now? Do you want to go back to your hotel to sleep tonight?"

Violet shook her head.

Audrey moved away from the bedroom door. "C'mon. We'll catch a cab on Franklin and take the bus back."

A moment later, the two women were heading west toward the glittering lights of the city.

• • •

Audrey awakened the next morning to the aromas of coffee, cinnamon, and toasted bread. For a moment she could almost believe she was a little girl again and it was Christmas morning and her mother had made sticky buns.

She closed her eyes to hold the image captive for just a few seconds longer, but Valentino had noticed she'd stirred. He now rose from where he had been sleeping curled up at her elbow and nuzzled his feline face into hers—his way of communicating that he wanted his breakfast.

Audrey pushed the cat away gently and sat up. Dinah hadn't been a coffee drinker. Audrey couldn't remember the last time she had awakened to the fragrance of a freshly brewed pot. She reached for a silky robe on the armchair next to her bed and slipped it on. Valentino jumped down and meowed at the door. Audrey opened it, yawning as she tied the sash around her waist. After a quick stop in the bathroom, she walked into the kitchen, where her new roommate was sitting at the kitchen table in her nightgown with a cup of coffee, two slices of cinnamon toast, and Audrey's latest copy of *Variety* magazine open to the middle. The dirty dishes that had been piling up in the sink over the past few days had been washed and the countertops wiped clean of smudges, dried spills, and crumbs.

"I hope you don't mind that I made coffee for us. I found some Hills Bros. in the cupboard," Violet said, her thick Southern drawl elongating every syllable.

"Mind?" Audrey grabbed a coffee cup from the dish drainer and poured a cup. "Smelling it was like waking up in paradise."

Audrey pulled out a chair and sat down across from Violet. Valentino began to wind himself in and out her legs, meowing a reminder that he had not yet been fed. "I can't remember the last time I had cinnamon toast."

Violet pushed the plate toward her. "Have one. It's your cinnamon. Your bread. I promise I'll get my own groceries today."

"Don't worry about it." Audrey lifted one of the pieces of toast off the plate, brought it to her mouth, and took a bite. Violet had been liberal with both the butter and the cinnamon sugar. It was divine.

"I am in awe of how great this is. I usually skip breakfast. You might have noticed there's hardly much to make a meal with here."

"I like to cook," Violet said. "I can make us breakfast in the mornings. I don't mind."

Audrey took another bite. "You know how to make biscuits and gravy?" she asked as she chewed. "I've always wanted to try that."

Her roommate smiled wide. "Of course. Mama taught me how to make everything."

Audrey broke off a piece of the crust and tossed it down to Valentino. "Word gets out among the single men at the studio that you can cook, and I'll be looking for another roommate."

Violet laughed lightly.

Audrey looked up from the cat. "You think I'm kidding?"

Her new roommate shrugged. "I think men want more in a wife than just someone who can cook."

Audrey arched an eyebrow playfully. “And it’s a good thing they do! Can you imagine how terrible it would be if all a man wanted was someone to be his maid?”

Violet shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Audrey half laughed.

Her roommate chewed on her bottom lip for a second. “I don’t think too much about stuff like that.”

“Stuff like what?” Audrey laughed fully now.

“You know. Stuff about . . . men.”

A new thought stole across Audrey and she gasped slightly. “Violet! Do you . . . do you prefer other women?”

Violet’s face went crimson and a half bite of toast catapulted out of her mouth as she nearly choked on it. “What? No! No, I don’t. I’m not . . . No!”

“All right! Okay!” Audrey said in a reassuring tone. “I just thought for a second that maybe, you know. . . . Most women *do* think about stuff like that, Violet. You can’t fault me for wondering.”

Violet brought a hand up to her right cheek, as though to cool her discomfort with her palm. She exhaled heavily, forcing any remnant of toast from her windpipe. Her breath was feathery with alarm and embarrassment. “All I meant was I don’t like to think about that *right now*,” she said.

There was a trailing hint of sadness in Violet’s words. Audrey felt a tug of kinship toward her. Violet had been hurt. Recently, perhaps. It was why she had come to Hollywood for a fresh start. Audrey understood that unspoken thought perfectly.

“What happened to you?” Audrey asked softly. Respectfully.

Violet studied the empty plate in front of her for a moment. “I’d really rather not talk about it.” She rose from her chair. “I’ll make some more toast.”

Audrey knew as well as anyone that some wounds simply could not be spoken of easily. She would not press the matter. Not yet, anyway.

She stood as well and reached down to the floor for the cat’s dish.

THREE

The last of the day’s warmth had disappeared when Violet and Audrey arrived at the far end of the studio’s property, a dirt-covered expanse known as the Forty Acres, even though it measured closer to twenty-three acres. Studio employees called it simply the Forty. Violet could see her breath in white puffs, and her hands were already numb despite having been plunged into her pockets from the moment she’d stepped off the streetcar. She hadn’t thought it got this cold in Southern California, and she wished she had stayed in the warm bungalow instead of dashing out on a second’s notice. She had planned to use that Saturday evening to wash and set her hair, but Audrey had arrived home breathless after being away all day and told her to put on something warm. They were going out.

“Out to do what?” Violet had asked.

And Audrey had turned to her, eyes gleaming. “Do you want to go to a fire?”

“Like a bonfire?”

Audrey had laughed. “Like no other fire you’ve ever seen. Come on. Get your coat.”

On the way to the studio, half by cab, half by streetcar, Audrey had told Violet that her friend Bert knew someone who worked on the technical crew who could get the three of them onto the Forty for the filming spectacle of the decade.

“The what?” Violet had asked.

Audrey had leaned forward to whisper, lest any of the other streetcar passengers hear her. “They’re going to film the burning of Atlanta tonight.”

Many minutes later they found themselves joining a crowd of maybe two hundred people whose collective attention was riveted by a towering row of old sets at the edge of the back lot. A man of medium build, with a kind, clean-shaven face and dark curly hair under his cap, waved them over to where he stood just on the other side of a cordon.

“There’s Bert.” Audrey nodded toward the man.

They closed the distance to him. Bert looked to Violet to be about her age, maybe a little older, with pleasant features. Audrey had told her on the way over that Bert was her oldest friend in Hollywood. She had met him when they were both working at MGM. Bert Redmond had moved over to Selznick International not long after Audrey had. He was a wardrobe assistant, though he dreamed of one day being on the camera crew. He had grown up in Santa Barbara and he liked the outdoors—particularly hiking, fishing, and bird-watching.

Bert also apparently liked Audrey; at least that was how it appeared to Violet. His eyes had lit up as they neared him. Even in the shadowed light of dusk, Violet could see that Bert fancied Audrey. But, then, who wouldn’t? Audrey was beautiful and enchanting.

“Bert, this is Violet Mayfield, my new roommate,” Audrey said as soon as they were at his side. “Violet, this is Bert Redmond. The nicest guy you’ll ever meet.”

Bert seemed embarrassed by Audrey’s compliment. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Mayfield,” he said.

“Please, call me Violet.”

His mouth broke into a smile when she spoke, and Violet found herself feeling warmer, even though it had to be close to thirty degrees. Her accent had amused him.

“Audrey tells me you’re a long way from home,” Bert said.

Audrey put an arm around Violet. “Home is just where you hang your hat, Bert.”

“Well. Welcome to California, Violet.” Bert tipped the brim of his cap.

“See what I mean? Nicest guy you’ll ever meet.” Audrey dropped her arm from across Violet’s shoulders.

“So, do we have to stand right here or can we get closer?”

“Jim said if we stay put he will be able to vouch for us if anyone asks why we’re here.” Bert pointed to a group of men huddled around one of the seven Technicolor cameras set up beyond the cordon. “He’s right over there.” One of the men turned toward them and waved. Audrey waved back.

“Are all these people here to watch the fire?” Violet asked, looking around at the groups of people, all waiting with their hands in their pockets.

“Of course,” Audrey answered. “It’s going to be the talk of the town tomorrow. I can’t believe a million secret memos didn’t go out yesterday about it. You know how Mr. Selznick is about his memos.”

The day before, Violet had been stuck taking dictation for one of the accountants in another building. She had learned in just a few weeks at Selznick International that everyone in management had something to say, and everyone needed someone from the secretary pool to say it. Selznick himself, whom Violet hadn’t yet met face-to-face, apparently dictated memos morning, noon, and night.

“I wasn’t in the pool yesterday,” Violet answered.

“I wonder what they’re waiting for,” Bert said, looking toward the imposing facades from *The Gardens of Allah*, *King Kong*, and other completed Selznick and RKO films. The old sets, which had been taking up space needed to build the *Gone With the Wind* exteriors of Tara and Twelve Oaks, had been hastily repainted to look like an antebellum downtown. “It was supposed to start already. I was afraid you gals were going to miss it.”

“We had to find someone to hitch a ride with from the Mansion. There’s no chance we could have walked all the way out here in high heels,” Audrey said.

Minutes later, a man got onto a portable public address system and its speakers squawked in protest. A few introductory remarks were made and then the crowd was told that absolute quiet was required once the fire started burning and the cameras started rolling. No one was to make a sound.

Bert leaned toward Audrey and Violet. “They’ve only got one chance to do this,” he said quietly. “There’s no way they can stage another shot like this one.”

Fire engines that had been idling off to the side now moved into place, and men with hoses positioned themselves at the ready should the blaze get out of hand. Smoke machines were primed and the sweet, pungent odor of a flame accelerant tinged Violet’s nose.

One of the three stunt doubles for Clark Gable stood well past earshot, but he was listening intently to instructions being given him by another man, who pointed to the facades, then to a waiting wagon, and then to the bank of cameras. A horse hitched to a wagon whinnied and the man holding its reins reached up to pat the animal’s flank.

“I never would have guessed moviemakers would start a film with a scene from the story’s middle,” Violet said as a tractor was driven into position. “The burning of Atlanta doesn’t happen until nearly halfway through the book.”

“It will be like this the whole time they shoot,” Audrey replied, never taking her eyes off the elements of the spectacle that was about to transpire. “Selznick could very well film *Scarlett* and Ashley kissing in the paddock tomorrow—if they had a *Scarlett*.”

“And to start shooting before you have the entire cast in place? That just seems backward. How will *Scarlett*

even be in this scene?"

Bert turned to Violet. "Scarlett's double in the wagon won't be filmed in close-up. The camera will never show that woman's face. Then when there *is* a Scarlett, production can take scenes shot elsewhere and layer them on top of what's already in the can."

"In the can?"

Audrey smiled and took a step forward. "Finished. Done. Let's get closer."

She advanced toward more of the hubbub in front of them. Bert hung back a moment before he joined her. Somewhat reluctantly, Violet followed.

After moving up twenty yards or so, Audrey eased her way into a larger group of spectators. No one seemed to notice. Everyone's gaze was trained on the facades.

Someone shouted, "Action," and for a second there was no sound or movement. And then the jets supplying the gas flared to life. As if bewitched, the storefronts and warehouses burst into flame. The stunt doubles in the wagon began to make several passes in front of the massive wall of fire. The indigo sky was suddenly swathed in orange and rose and yellow. Thick smoke started to rise and wander, and the heat and roar of the flames reached those who watched. Violet was astounded by the hellish tableau in front of her. She would learn later that the local fire department had been flooded with calls from people who were sure all of Culver City was on fire.

The cameras kept rolling as the fire reached its zenith, and then the tractor at the edge of the burning sets began to move slowly forward, dragging chains behind it, which elongated and then grew taut. The engulfed facades began to tumble to the ground like a defeated dragon as the tractor slowly yanked them down. A few minutes later a director yelled, "Cut!"

Clusters of people began to cheer and applaud. The burning of Atlanta seemed to have been a success. The gas jets were switched off and the smoldering sets were allowed to be further consumed before the water trucks were at last released.

"I wish I could have brought my camera to this," Bert said, in awe. "I've never seen anything like that before in my life."

"Me, either," Violet replied.

She and Bert both looked to Audrey, but she seemed not to have heard them. Her gaze was fixed tightly on a small group of people closer to the platform on which David Selznick had been standing.

"Do you know those people or something?" Bert asked Audrey, and Violet could tell he was concerned that she was about to abandon him and Violet to go speak with them.

"That man over there is Laurence Olivier." Audrey nodded toward a man off in the distance. "I have no idea why he's here."

Violet craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the British stage star but the man stood too far away to be seen clearly.

"And that's David Selznick's brother, Myron," Audrey continued, pointing to a gentleman in a hat and overcoat not as far away as Mr. Olivier, but still not close enough for Violet to make out any facial features.

“But I can’t see who that is with him.”

The woman next to Myron Selznick was also wearing a hat, and the light from the fires was mostly gone now. It was far too dark and she stood many yards away.

After a few seconds of silence Violet suggested they go back to the place where Jim had told them to wait. Bert seemed immediately amenable but Audrey hesitated and so did he.

“Audrey?” Bert said.

But Audrey seemed lost in thought as she stared at the woman in the hat.

“I’m going back to where we were,” Violet announced. She didn’t like not being where they’d been told to wait.

Bert, obviously torn between wanting to stay with Audrey and wanting her to come with them, paused midstep before following Violet.

Several minutes passed before Audrey made her way back to Violet and Bert. She seemed to have recovered from the disappointment of not knowing who the woman in the hat was.

When tall, redheaded Jim joined them at the cordon, he suggested they go out for drinks and dancing and fun. Audrey turned to Violet and said, “Shall we?” but she didn’t wait for Violet to respond before facing Jim again. “We’re not exactly dressed for the Trocadero, you know.”

Jim grimaced. “Good thing you’re not. I’d much rather we go to a place where you don’t need to worry if your butler polished the underside of your shoe.” He laughed at his joke and poked Bert, who also laughed but with less vigor.

Audrey seemed to thoughtfully consider her response for a moment. “You have a better place in mind?” Her tone was coy and challenging.

“You bet I do.”

Jim led them to his car, a rusting ten-year-old Packard, and opened the front door for Audrey, leaving Bert to open the back door of the aging sedan for Violet and to share the backseat with her.

Jim talked the whole way down to the coast, giving the three of them a running commentary on how successful the evening’s shoot had been. Twenty minutes later they were stepping inside a seaside nightclub in nearby Venice, where couples danced in bare feet on a wooden floor dusted here and there with sand that had been tracked in off the beach. The four-piece band consisted of a man on an upright piano, a second on a bass fiddle, a third on a clarinet, and the last seated at a set of snare drums he played with brushes instead of sticks.

They chose a table near the sandy dance floor, and Audrey quickly ordered a round of Orange Blossoms, and then another. The vermouth-and-orange juice concoction was both refreshing and bracing on Violet’s tongue.

Jim, obviously attracted to Audrey, turned out to be adept on his feet, and he and Audrey spent dance after dance on the floor while Bert and Violet watched.

After five or six numbers, Violet finally asked Bert if he’d care to dance.

“Sure.” He smiled uncomfortably, as though he knew a true gentleman should have asked her first.

Bert’s hand was firm on her back and his palm, sandwiched with hers, was cool and strong. Violet hadn’t danced with a man since a friend’s wedding more than a year ago. She had been in Franklin’s arms that night and had been blissfully unaware of the dark enemy inside her body, nibbling away at her insides. She hadn’t yet felt the searing malice of the tumor; that would come a few weeks later when she collapsed into a puddle of her own blood and woke up hours later, emptied of purpose. Violet could smell Bert’s aftershave, woodsy and enticing, as they moved. The effect of the cocktails tempted her to rest her head on his shoulder and remember what it had been like to feel Franklin’s kisses on her neck.

A few feet away, Jim said something to Audrey. She tipped her head back and laughed like a starlet on a rich man’s yacht.

Bert watched them as they spun away.

“So, Audrey tells me you like to go bird-watching,” Violet said, eager to sweep away the memory of Franklin’s kisses and to get Bert to take his eyes off Audrey so that she might have a chance of having a good time.

He turned to her. “She told you that?”

“Is it a secret?”

“No,” Bert said quickly. “I guess I’m surprised she found that interesting enough to mention.”

“Have you always liked birds?”

Violet could sense Bert relaxing more as his attention was being diverted to something he enjoyed. “It was my father’s hobby before it was mine. He took it up after he got home from the war. When I was a kid, he and I would go out to the mountains and deserts with binoculars to look for certain birds, and we kept a little notebook of all the ones we found. It was like hunting, but without having to kill anything.”

“Sounds nice. Do you still go with him sometimes?”

“Not with him. He died when I was eighteen. I go on my own now, when I go.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”

“He had some lingering health issues from the war. They finally caught up with him.”

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