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Written by Guy Bolton

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THE PICTURES

Guy Bolton

POINT BLANK

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For my mother

PROLOGUE

West Hollywood, Los Angeles
May 10th, 1939

The roads were busy for a Wednesday night. The evening sky was drawn and overcast and most Angelenos were heading home before the rain came. In a radio car smelling of cheap coffee and paper-bag dinners, Officers Becker and Cassidy took a disturbance call from Dispatch, a last pickup twenty minutes before the midnight changeover.

They were both local product, rare in the department, with over thirty years of service between them and a working partnership for almost half that. A disturbance report meant very little but the address was a tony neighborhood three miles west of Hollywood and Becker suspected nothing more than a domestic dispute, maybe assault and battery if they were unlucky. He slouched in the passenger seat, his partner steering slowly and carefully down a row of detached houses surrounded by neatly sheared hedgerows and freshly trimmed lawns.

"You got the house number?"

"One-ten. Looks like the third on the right."

Becker peered through the windshield. A porch light revealed a woman sitting hunched on the steps leading up to the front door.

They parked in the shadow of a coral tree, Becker pulling out his notebook before they'd even killed the engine. They could wrap this up in fifteen minutes easy, type it up in the morning.

They stepped out onto the asphalt, glancing sideways at the adjacent houses, noticing the curtains twitch and a second later the lights

go out. This was a quiet neighborhood and people weren't used to police cars pulling into driveways this late at night.

"You Mrs. Greer?" Cassidy asked the woman. She looked to be seventy or so, with thin, almost wispy hair and sharp elbows hiding beneath a woolen housecoat. When they stepped closer they could see her face was twisted in fright.

"Excuse me?" Cassidy repeated. "Are you Dolores Greer? You called the police a few minutes ago?"

The woman looked at each of them in turn without recognition or surprise. She blinked several times but said nothing.

Becker looked at Cassidy then back again. He had to hide the irritation in his voice. "Ma'am, are you Dolores Greer? Did you call the police department about a disturbance at one-ten Longbrook?"

"I called," she said at last. "Something terrible has happened." There was a shrill ring of fear in her voice.

"You live here? This your place?"

A shake, and then a nod. "This is my house. I own it."

"Can you tell us what happened? You reported a disturbance."

She looked back at the door and flinched, nervous by proximity.

Exasperated, Cassidy lit a cigarette. "Everything alright? You had an argument with your husband?"

"It's awful." Her voice sounded like a child's whisper. "Look at what they did. Dead. And for what?"

Becker's eyebrows arched. He wasn't sure he heard her correctly. He pointed his notepad at the doorway. "Someone's died in the house? There's a body inside?"

"Yes," she said. "Inside."

Becker pondered the possibility of murder. No—unlikely in these parts. He envisioned instead some old-timer rigored in his armchair. Mr. Greer, probably eighty years old, resting peacefully in a puddle of his own piss and shit.

He turned to his partner. "You want to stay with her?"

He went up without waiting for a response, stepping around the old lady as he made his way up to the front door.

The screen door was wide open, the front door unlocked. Inside, the house was dark, with only a dull tungsten glow coming in from the front windows facing the street. He reached for the light switch and the hallway lit up.

Becker left the front door ajar and moved through the house. The corridor was empty but picture frames had been pulled off the walls, glass and wood laying across soiled footprints on the floorboards. There was a soft hissing sound like running water but it didn't look like anyone was inside.

Becker put his hand on his pistol and tilted his head back toward the front door. "Looks like we got a robbery."

The first room he entered was the living room. The room had been turned over, that much was clear. The couch was cut open, more pictures broken from their frames. The floor was covered in shattered glass and one or two of the floorboards had been jimmied up.

He scanned the room but there was no dead body. The kitchen was the same, drawers and cupboards torn open but no corpse and no sign of blood. There was a bathroom at the end of the hall, some jewelry visible on a side cabinet, which seemed strange for a robbery.

He found the source of the noise at the end of the hallway, outside what must be the bedroom. On a dresser was a phonograph, the needle prodding aimlessly at the end of the record. He left it there and approached the bedroom door, taking out a handkerchief to turn the knob.

When the door opened his stomach concaved. His heart rose in his chest and he felt his pulse throbbing in his ears. For a long minute he saw red spots and dark concentric circles. Dizzy, he steadied himself on the doorway.

Officer Eric Becker had thought he was hardened to death. He had lost two fellow officers in his tenure and believed he'd seen enough dead hoods and dope peddlers to keep his head at the sight of blood. He was wrong.

The butchered remains of a pale, lithe body lay on a double bed in the middle of the room. A woman, if not a girl, was sprawled on her

back, surrounded by a pool of coagulating blood. She was naked but for the tattered remains of a once-white nightgown clinging to her midriff. Both arms and legs were extended into a spread-eagle, her ankles and wrists trussed tightly against each of the four bedposts. Her pale limbs and torso were swollen and bruised, her neck criss-crossed from a ligature. But where the body's head should be sat only a loose jaw with a small ovate hole in it. The body had no eyes, no nose, no face: the remains of her skull littered the pillow like bloody eggshells. Whoever she was and whatever she'd done to deserve such an end, the victim had been cuffed, beaten, strangled, and then finally killed.

After the shock receded, Becker looked back through the door at the needle dancing on the phonograph. They must have played the music to drown out the screams.

CHAPTER 1

Fred Astaire was performing at the Lilac Club.

A black tie supper club on the eastern end of Sunset Boulevard, the Lilac Club was a venue synonymous with stars and stardom. It was owned by William Wilson, the wealthy publisher of *The Hollywood Enquirer*. Not content with running Hollywood's most popular trade newspaper, Wilson had bought seven highly profitable clubs on the Sunset Strip, catering specifically to the Hollywood rich and famous. The Lilac Club was the largest and grandest of them all.

Jonathan Craine was sitting at a table not far from the bar. Resisting the recent trend for white jackets, he wore a plain black New York drape suit with the legs tapered at the ankle. To look at, he was at once both appealing and unremarkable. Standing a little under six feet, Craine was fairly tall and reasonably broad but not quite either. He remained to most people who met him quiet, measured and reserved, a harmless nobody.

The evening was in full swing, the room alive with chatter and laughter, but Craine sat alone. He bowed his head as a few familiar faces passed by, anxious to avoid their awkward nods and smiles. He tried to ignore the hushed whispers of strangers who knew him only by reputation, the hairs standing tall on the back of his neck as he imagined how they gossiped about the widower of the late actress Celia Raymond.

"Detective Craine?"

Craine looked up to see a waiter he recognized. Being referred to by his profession always put him on edge when he was off-duty.

"Hullo."

"Good to see you again. Have you been away?"

"I was in New York."

The waiter lowered his voice. "Are you back working the studios?"

Craine was a little taken aback by the directness of the question but he recovered his composure. "No," he answered truthfully. "I don't do that anymore."

"Well, it's nice to have you back, sir. And I wanted to say—" the waiter paused, trying to find the right words. "I wanted to say I was very sorry about your wife. She was a lovely lady."

Craine tilted his head to acknowledge what he'd said then replied simply, "I'll have a French 75 whenever you're ready."

The waiter stiffened. They returned to their roles as server and guest. "Oh, yessir, right away."

On stage "Cheek to Cheek" was brought to an end and the club audience broke into applause. A tall, olive-skinned man came on stage to shake Astaire's hand: the club manager, Benjamin Carell. They hadn't met before but Craine knew he was a Chicago-bred Italian with criminal ties. He wondered why William Wilson had ever hired him.

"Jonathan Craine? *Detective* Jonathan Craine?"

He was expecting his cocktail but when Craine turned around the concierge was standing over him. "Yes," he said.

"There's a call for you, sir."

Craine sighed. He knew exactly who it would be.

"Thank you, I'll be right over. Cancel my drinks order."

"Yes, sir, right away."

Craine took the call at the front desk. Two studio executives were moving through the foyer and Craine caught them staring at him. He heard his name mentioned and one of them laughed. His ears burned and Craine contemplated why, after almost five months away, he'd decided to come back from New York to a place that left him feeling injured and empty.

"This is Craine," he said after they'd gone.

"Good evening, Detective," said a young man's voice. As expected: it was Dispatch. "I apologize for calling you. Your secretary said you might be at the Lilac Club."

"Yes," added Craine impatiently.

"We have a report of a robbery-homicide in West Hollywood."

"Who's on duty? I'm not due in until nine."

"I'm afraid all our night officers are out on calls."

Craine sighed quietly. The homicide unit was understaffed and overstretched. It was little surprise Captain Simms had been so keen to have him back.

"Do you know the name of the first officer?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The first uniform officer on the scene."

"One second, please." The line went quiet and Craine heard a ruffle of papers. Outside, four security guards pushed back a rank of photographers gathering beside the double glass doors. Craine followed their gaze. A woman entered the foyer and walked briskly toward the main hall. He recognized her as the actress Gale Goodwin. Her latest picture, *The Tainted Feather*, had topped the box office—she must be celebrating.

The dispatcher came back on the line. "I'm sorry, I don't have that information, sir."

Craine rolled his eyes. "Do you have the address?"

"Yes, Detective, the address is—"

"Hold on one second." He cradled the receiver between cheek and neck and stretched across the desk for a pen and pad. "Go on."

"Address is one-ten Longbrook Avenue."

Craine scrawled it down then checked his watch. Just after midnight. He let out a long sigh. "Tell the first officer I'll be there in twenty minutes." He put the phone down, rubbed his eyes and asked the concierge to retrieve his coat and hat.

* * *

A gray and dusty Los Angeles reeled through the windows like a broken strip of celluloid. Although the motion picture industry had helped prop up Los Angeles in the lean years since the Wall Street Crash, visible shocks of depression were not in short supply. Craine wound up the window as he drove past a slum of tarpaper shacks and a group of homeless men fretting over a garbage fire. He passed vacant lots and filling stations, mile after mile of billboards selling God, bank loans and beauty creams.

He accelerated west down Sunset before turning south toward Hollywood, the neon nightlife receding in his rearview mirror. He was driving the V-16 Cadillac Fleetwood that Celia had bought him for their ten-year anniversary. The car radio was playing an Ella Fitzgerald record and he turned it up so loud that thoughts of Celia were buried in the song.

The slum receded, quickly forgotten to palm trees, flowering plants and the stucco-walled homes of the Hollywood middle class. This is a city of contradictions, Craine thought, a metropolis where sepia and Technicolor play side by side.

He turned into Longbrook where the roads were quiet now, almost empty, with barely a Buick or Packard in sight. Craine looked at the address Dispatch had given him, counting the house numbers on his right. He spotted a squad car parked outside a single-story and pulled up behind it in the driveway.

The porch light flicked on and the front door opened. A squat uniform officer with a thick mustache and a flashlight cradled under one arm stepped outside.

"Evening, Detective," he said as Craine got out of his car. His eyes widened when he caught a glimpse of the Fleetwood but he kept his thoughts to himself. He probably thought all detectives drove two-thousand-dollar Cadillacs.

"You the first officer?"

"Yes, sir. Becker. Arrived about an hour ago. My partner, Cassidy, went to take a statement from the neighbor. She called it in."

Craine took a pencil and notepad from his jacket pocket. "Did you touch the body, move it at all?"

"Didn't get further than her doorway."

"A woman?"

"Yessir. Shot dead."

He sighed inwardly. A dead girl meant unwanted media interest.

Craine paused to examine the door and windows on the front of the house. All intact, no signs of forced entry.

"Door was unlocked when I got here," said the uniform, taking off his hat to wipe his brow. "I went all around with the flashlight but there's no windows broken either."

"Make sure that's in your report."

Craine noticed Becker was staring at him. "Have we met before?" Becker asked. "Yeah, we have. That assault charge on that actor. They called you—"

"I remember."

"He beat her up real bad. Broke her nose, stitches across her cheek where he'd split it right open. What was she, sixteen? I'm surprised the charges didn't stick."

They didn't stick because the actor in question was two days away from shooting a million-dollar motion picture and City Hall had asked Craine to have the charges dropped.

"Why don't we concentrate on the task ahead, Officer Becker?" said Craine sharply. "Let's head inside."

Bare ceiling bulbs lit a wide hallway leading onto a checkered kitchen floor to their left and what must be the living room to their right. Craine could see the bathroom further down the corridor, opposite a white door. The house was spacious and well decorated inside but the kitchen and hallway had been ransacked.

The officer pushed open the living-room door. There were no lights on but the mess was evident in the half-light. Framed pictures had been pulled off the walls and the couches had been cut open. Even a wall clock lay on the floor in pieces. "All the rooms are the same."

"Looks like a botched robbery. Where is she?"

"Bedroom. Down the end there."

"You got her name?"

Becker pushed a cigarette between his teeth and lit it while talking: "Florence Lloyd. White female. Thirty years old."

Craine wrote down F/W/30 on a new page in his notepad.

"Did she live here alone?"

"Far as we know. Rents it from her neighbor, a Dolores Greer. Says she noticed the door open and went inside."

"What time?"

"A little after eleven."

"Did she hear the shot?"

"No, she didn't."

"Canvass the other houses here, see if anyone else saw anything or heard the shooting. Anyone else here yet?"

"Techs are on their way." Becker checked his watch. "Medical examiner should be here any minute."

Craine noted the kitchen in disarray: the pantry shelves swept clear, the canned food tossed on the kitchen floor. Broken dishes and pans were scattered across the sideboard and the refrigerator had been pulled away from the wall.

He didn't go into the bathroom but he could see the medicine cabinet had been pulled open. A bottle of pills was scattered across the floor. Sleeping pills. Must have been hundreds of them.

"Lot of pills she's got."

"Nothing unusual," Craine said. At times it felt like the whole town was existing in a narcotic delirium.

"There's a gold watch on the side of the sink there. Seems funny the intruder would leave it."

Craine wasn't listening. He flanked into the corridor. "Let's see it then."

Becker followed close behind, lighting a second cigarette from the first as they reached the bedroom door. "It's pretty messy. Not much left of her, that's for damn sure."

The door was ajar; Craine pushed the door back and surveyed the bedroom.

Florence Lloyd's remains were enough to make him gag. He suddenly felt hot, a bracing sweat forming on his forehead. He wiped his brow with his handkerchief and used it to protect his nose from the stench of fresh meat. Murder scenes never became easier, no matter what people said.

Becker was still loitering in the doorway. "Can I get you anything? Think there's some coffee back there on the kitchen floor. I can put a pot on?"

"That won't be necessary."

"I'll leave you to it, then." Becker didn't want to see the body. He left him alone in the bedroom.

Craine started working the crime scene from the periphery, walking around the perimeter of the bedroom and making notes. All her clothes had been pulled out of the drawers and lay scattered around the base of the bed. The burglar looking for a safe or money box, he reasoned.

There was a photo framed on the sideboard. Same fair hair, same skin tone. Must be the victim. She was attractive, stunning even. It was a professional photograph, a three-quarter shot of Florence Lloyd in a décolleté cocktail dress. White pearls hung low around her neckline. He imagined the budget lines: "BLOND BEAUTY BUTCHERED IN HOLLYWOOD." More fuel for the tabloids.

He looked for other signs of disturbance, anything that didn't fit in with the surroundings, before taking a long look at the body. The bleeding was still pronounced and the sheets were glistening crimson. Copper wire was wrapped tight around her wrists and feet, a ring shank nail pinning her palms against the bedposts. Bruising round her collarbone suggested her throat had been constricted and there were bloody ligature marks ribboned around her neck. The M.E. would determine if she was raped but there was no doubt she had been beaten and tortured—for what means he couldn't be sure. The papers would have a field day.

Shards of skull and brain matter framed a bullet hole in the headboard. Craine held his handkerchief to his face and breathed through his mouth. *God, this was awful.* He'd have the lab techs remove the bullet and run some ballistic tests. The damage done to the head indicated a large-caliber weapon and he wondered how the neighbors had failed to hear the gunfire.

Craine quickly sketched the position of the corpse in the room and the angle of fire before touching the back of the dead girl's arm. Cool. He looked at her hands. The fingers were rigid but the body had yet to fully enter rigor mortis. She had died less than two hours ago.

Leaning back against the wall, Craine went through the attack in his head. Robbery turned foul. The intruder, if indeed there was only one, had entered the bedroom when Florence Lloyd was asleep. He had tied her ankles and wrists to the bedposts, beaten her to a pulp then shot her dead. He must have ransacked the house for most of an hour, probably left not long before the uniforms arrived.

Craine flipped his notepad shut and breathed a sigh of relief.

He found Becker in the kitchen sipping coffee and writing up his case notes.

"All done, Detective?"

"Robbery-homicide. As expected."

"You don't think it was planned out? Maybe someone came here to kill her, I mean."

Craine tensed. He detested speculation, particularly from the lower ranks. Abstract theories and conjectures served no one. Most murder convictions were of young black men local to the area; consequently, it was logical to assume that this murder was committed by a young black male.

"No," he said. "The intruder saw Lloyd in bed, had his fun then shot her dead. He'll be a Negro male, twenties or early thirties. I'll ask Dispatch to put a call out for young Negroes known to the area."

"How can you be sure?"

Craine struggled to remain calm. "Because that's the typical profile," he said, his eyes drilling into him.

"What about the wire? The nails in her wrists? She was beaten half to death, raped probably—"

"Don't include it in your report."

Becker frowned. "Why wouldn't I—"

"It only complicates matters. She was shot in her bed, her house robbed. That's all you need to include."

Craine deposited the notepad in his outside jacket pocket and walked back into the hallway toward the front door. He was glad to get out of the house.

"Detective?"

Craine turned at the door. Becker stood in the hallway.

"I was thinking that it seems so odd the robber would leave that watch in the bathroom but go through the whole house like this. I also found a bit of cash in the freezer. Why would he take the time to turn over every room but not take all the money? And why torture the girl? I mean, Jesus, the things he did to her. Doesn't seem to fit to a botched robbery—"

"It fits perfectly," said Craine with finality. "Good night, Officer."

Craine walked out into the night and crossed the driveway toward his Fleetwood. He could be home in less than thirty minutes.

Pulling out of the driveway, he saw Becker staring at him from the front door, shaking his head. Years ago, when I was new to the Bureau, I used to be like that, thought Craine. I wanted every stone turned over, every fact and theory examined.

That time has long since passed.

CHAPTER 2

May 11th

Louis B. Mayer sat in the back seat of his Lincoln, drew a deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut. He had a headache.

He took a small bottle of aspirin from his jacket pocket and swallowed two pills dry. Christ, his head hurt. Too many Dubonnets last night. He didn't normally drink more than the occasional aperitif but Gable kept ordering round after round, and he hadn't the heart to turn them away. Still, Gable had a good night and that's all that mattered. Clark Gable and his new wife Carole Lombard were trying for a baby and Mayer was delighted—that kind of press did wonders for a man's image.

"Are you excited about your party, Mr. Mayer?" his driver asked through the divide.

"Absolutely. It's going to be terrific. We even have the Dandridge Sisters playing."

"Oh, my wife loves them," his driver said, particularly chatty this morning. "What M.G.M. has done for all of us, it means a lot."

"Well that's kind of you to say, Artie. Very kind indeed."

This weekend was M.G.M.'s fifteenth anniversary. Fifteen years since Louis Mayer had first walked onto the lot as head of the newly formed M.G.M. He'd started with six hundred employees, a few dozen actors and a handful of stars. Now he had six thousand employees and over one hundred contract players on his books, a third of whom he categorized as "stars." M.G.M. had come out of the recession as the only studio to make profits year on year and the anniversary was a great excuse to celebrate.

Mayer started to relax when they approached Culver City and saw the M.G.M. lot looming ahead. "You know," he said, feeling unusually generous, "why don't you and your wife come join us at Loew House for a glass of champagne? You can pick her up after you've dropped us off."

Mayer saw a wide smile through the rearview mirror. "Oh, that's so generous, sir. We'd be absolutely delighted. My wife, she'll be over the moon."

The car passed through the M.G.M. gate between two large Corinthian columns and pulled up outside the Thalberg Building, the home for all senior M.G.M. executives.

Ida, his executive secretary, met him from the elevator on the third floor. She looked pale and her mascara was running. She'd been crying.

"Morning, Ida. You look sick. Are you ill? Do you need to go home? Dr. Hendricks is downstairs."

Ida held back tears. "No, Mr. Mayer. It's—"

"It's what?"

They'd reached the walnut doors of Mayer's office. Ida reached for the doorknob and composed herself.

"I'm fine. Russell Peterson is inside waiting for you."

Good, thought Mayer. Peterson could set up a press release about Gable and Lombard trying for a baby.

Mayer's office was newly decorated in the Art Moderne style: the walls were white leather, a white floor carpet had only recently been laid and all the furniture was painted magnolia. The national flag and an atlas globe were almost the only items of color. Standing beside Mayer's white kidney-shaped desk was Russell Peterson, M.G.M.'s Publicity Chief and one of Mayer's closest confidants. He was tall but slight, with a thick pencil mustache that resembled Errol Flynn's.

Ida closed the door behind them. Peterson looked unusually anxious.

"How are you this morning, Mr. Mayer?"

"Peterson, why are you in my office?" Mayer barked, striding around his desk toward his chair.

Peterson didn't reply. He waited for Mayer to take a seat but Mayer stayed standing. Despite never reaching a height above five foot seven, he still hated the feeling of being smaller than someone else, especially in his own office.

"Well?" said Mayer, scanning the morning mail. "Come on, out with it, Peterson. I have a meeting with LeRoy in a quarter-hour."

Peterson spoke slowly, his voice low and even. "Ida had a phone call ten minutes ago from the maid at Herbert Stanley's home."

Mayer felt the blood drain from his face. He already knew what Peterson would say next.

"Sir, she found him . . . she found his body earlier this morning hanging from the ceiling fan. He's dead, Mr. Mayer."

Mayer steadied himself on his chair then sat down. Herbert Stanley was among Mayer's most talented producers. He was also married to Gale Goodwin, one of M.G.M.'s most valued movie stars.

"Has anyone been told?"

"Ida rang me as soon as she found out. She'd tried phoning you at home but you'd already left."

"What about anyone else?"

"Only Gale. She wasn't there."

"Jesus. She was with us at the Lilac Club. Where did she stay last night?"

"She's been staying at Joan Crawford's."

"She there now?"

"To my knowledge."

"I'll go over there this afternoon." Mayer ran through his options. *The Tainted Feather* was top of the box office this week but was a costly production that might struggle to recoup its costs if Gale got caught up in a scandal.

Peterson coughed. "Shall we call the police?"

"Not yet. Get Whitey Hendry and organize a car. We'll call the police after. Ask for Craine."

"He's back?"

"Margaret saw him at the Lilac Club last night. See if he's back at the Bureau."

Peterson seemed hesitant. "Are you sure you want Craine?" He shifted his weight between his feet. "After what happened . . . with Celia Raymond, I mean."

Mayer had always thought Jonathan Craine something of a fool but he'd consistently proven a loyal and invaluable supporter of the M.G.M. cause. For longer than he could remember, Craine had been tasked by City Hall to clear all indictments against studio employees by any means possible. He was, in essence, the studio "fixer," the man who made criminal charges disappear.

Then, five months ago, Celia Raymond had died at their home from a drugs overdose and Craine's swift departure after his wife's funeral had left everyone unsure of where his allegiances lay. Did he know that Mayer had ended Celia's contract with M.G.M. only a few days prior to her death?

"Ask for Craine—"

"Sir, is that wise?"

"Don't argue with me, Peterson, it doesn't suit you. Ask for Craine but make sure he stays out of the public eye. And I don't want any mention of Celia Raymond. We have enough on our plate with Stanley."

Peterson looked wounded. "Anything else?"

"Prep a statement."

"Same approach as Paul Bern? Homosexual. Depressed. Suicidal tendencies."

"Agreed," Mayer confirmed. "Something along those lines."

"Thank you, sir. I'll call Captain Simms immediately and have Craine assigned." Russell Peterson nodded and left the room.

Mayer twisted around in his seat until he faced the window. His headache was gone. Through the glass he could see a line of cars

pulling into the parking lot below. The working day was about to begin. He spotted Judy Garland's limousine approach the gates. He'd completely forgotten—they were doing reshoots on *The Wizard of Oz* today. Herbert had been one of the producers.