MURDER in TINSEL TOWN

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Max Nightingale

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FOR AM, H AND B – HERE'S LOOKING

AT YOU, KIDS

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CHAPTER ONE

Blanche Aikerman stares blankly at the last meal she's ever going to eat. There's not much to it, just a simple salad. A bottle of champagne – Dom Perignon, naturally – is sitting cooling in an ice bucket beside the table. She's not hungry. Not thirsty. She's got no appetite at all.

This was supposed to be a happy weekend, a chance to celebrate. She is, after all, the most famous woman in the world. What was it *Variety* said about her? 'An actor of generational talent and looks to die for.' The thought makes her cringe. Yes, she may be Hollywood's flavour of the month, but it's lonely at the top.

She gets up from the edge of the bed. Her penthouse suite at the top of the Royale Premiere overlooks Los Angeles. Above the city's hazy cloud of smog and fumes, on the famous hills *that* sign looks down. Blanche stares at it. 'Hollywood' in huge, crumbling, tattered letters stares back, like a giant eye, silently laughing at her. Blanche had read *The Great Gatsby* when she was a teenager – one of the few fond memories of her time growing up. Giant eyes were always there, looking down on the characters, it had creeped her out. Now here she was, in Tinseltown, being watched by her own Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. Seeing it in disrepair, she knows all too well how it feels. Being famous, being a star, comes at a price.

'Here's looking at you, kid,' she says with a mocking laugh.

A knock at the door distracts her. She turns away from the balcony door and walks through the suite. The place is a mess, she's not bothered to clean and asked not to be disturbed. She can do what she likes – she's Blanche Aikerman, after all.

The knocking continues, getting louder and more frantic. She pulls the door open, ready to scream at whatever unsuspecting fool has dared interrupt her dinner.

'Where the hell have you been?'

It's Peter von Hiltz, director extraordinaire, the man who's brought all of this on Blanche over the last five, stellar, years.

'Everyone is waiting for you, you should have been downstairs thirty minutes ago,' he says, storming into the suite.

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'I'm trying to have dinner,' says Blanche, running a hand through her long dark hair. 'Why don't you come in, Peter, take a load off, stay a while.'

The director stops in the middle of the suite and looks at the mess. He tuts loudly.

'I see you're enjoying the all-expenses-paid hospitality,' he says, kicking an empty champagne bottle with his over-polished riding boot. 'Nice to see the studio is getting its money's worth.'

'If you're here to tell me how bad a person I am, you're too late,' says Blanche. 'My mom already has that covered. She'll be here in a minute, maybe you two can make a team.'

'I'm here to make sure you're on time, Blanche. There's the small matter of you becoming the toast of the Hollywood glitterati. Remember?'

'How could I forget?' she says under her breath.

Peter hears her but he chooses to ignore her. He rounds and stares at her, his face getting redder with anger. He keeps his temper in check and reaches into his pocket. He pulls out an envelope and hands it to her.

'What's this, Peter, a Valentine's Card?' she asks with a smirk.

'It's a contract,' he says.

'For what?'

'For more money than either of us can count, Blanche,' he snaps. 'Thundersaga Pictures wants you and me on lifetime deals. Sign on the dotted line and we become theirs for life; any movie, any fee, you name it, sweetheart. This is what you've always wanted.'

'What *I've* always wanted; yeah right,' she snorts.

'Don't be a hero, Blanche, it doesn't suit you,' he says scornfully. 'Just sign the contract and we can argue about your self-loathing afterwards. Mr Ramsay is an impatient man, he doesn't give actors and directors a lot of time to make up their minds.'

Blanche looks at the envelope in Peter's hands. She lets him stew for a minute, his face so red it's turning purple. Money always does that to the director. She's known him for a long time, for as long as she's been in Hollywood. He has a reputation as a hitmaker but it's not about the art for Peter von Hiltz, no matter what he says to the press. He's in it for the money. And it gets his blood pressure going, has him fit to burst; stretched, like a balloon pumped with too much air. She snatches the envelope from him.

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'I'll think about it,' she says, strolling confidently past him.

'You'll *think* about it?' he sneers.

'That's what I said, Peter.' She waves the envelope around in her hand. 'I'll think about it. I've got a busy schedule, as you know. I'll see about taking a look when I've got a couple of minutes.'

Peter is furious. He bunches his hands into fists, but he can't bring himself to say anything. He stops short of stomping his feet like a petulant child and instead marches to the door of the suite.

'Don't let that thing hit you on the way out, darling,' she calls back to him from the bedroom.

The director slams the door closed as hard as he can. When he's gone, Blanche sits back down on the edge of the bed and stares out of the balcony doors again at Los Angeles beyond.

Everything she ever wanted. The words go around and around in her head. Everything she ever wanted. If only that were true. Here she was, with more fame and money than anyone would ever know what to do with. She was no different to the people out there. She was just a country girl from the sticks who got lucky. Good looks, a little bit of talent and a dogged determination was what got her here, now, on top of the world. So why wasn't she happy?

Another knock at the door interrupts her daydream. She rolls her eyes.

'I'll read the contract when I'm ready, Peter,' she shouts.

The knocking continues. Blanche's malaise gives way to anger of her own. She throws the contract onto the bed and storms out of the bedroom. Cursing under her breath, she makes her way to the door of the penthouse and pulls it open. It's a decision she'll regret for the rest of her life and the final few minutes of it.

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