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*For Mia, when you're a lot older,*
*love from your yiayia x*

# PROLOGUE

At night, when we're strapped to our beds, the lights have clicked off and the screams have settled into sleepy moans, that's when I see it. The Hollywood sign. I close my eyes and picture the towering white letters winking down at me through the violet-sore sky. That one word: H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D. Promising so much, stealing everything.

And now here I am, in this place of wild women, where the rats grow fat as my hope wastes away. Where orderlies pinch and slap at whim, and if you retaliate you'll disappear for hours – days perhaps – and come back broken and spent. Disobedient women are punished here, just as they are out there. They dragged Jean away last week because she'd thrown a cup at Matron. I haven't seen her since.

I've stopped complaining about being tied down at night. There's one nurse who, when she's on duty, leaves my buckles a little loose. What does she want? Is it a trap? I don't know who's good or bad anymore, and yet I'm grateful for her flashes of kindness.

Today was Matron's birthday. I watched through the bars as an orderly pinned a large grey sheet to the wall of the nurses' station. Then a sound from my other life made me jump: the familiar clack of film rolling through a projector. Distorted music boomed and everyone rushed up behind me, pushing to see whatever they could.

As the picture sprang to life on the wall, the first words writ large, with an extravagant flourish, were his name – above the title, of course. His agent would've made sure of that. A few women started shouting and laughing, excited as they reeled off the cast of famous actors. I gripped the bars throughout, ignoring the shoves and pokes at my back, keeping my spot as the story unfurled. Every movement he made, every line he spoke, I drank it all in, mesmerised. That face, that smile, as devastating as the first day I saw him. A glance from him and you can come undone.

During a misjudged musical number, I turned to Nancy who was wedged next to me.

'I know him,' I whispered.

She looked at me and laughed. 'Of course you do.'

'No, I *know* him.'

'It's Max Whitman, you idiot – everyone knows him.'

I started to say something, but the whole cast began tap-dancing as if their lives depended on it. To hell with it. Who'd believe me anyway?

But the truth is I *do* know him. I know that he likes his martinis strong and his women weak. That he has a birthmark, the shape of a crescent, on the inside of his arm. That he owns the world yet is terrified of losing it all. And I know that when he yearns for something, nothing will stand in his way. He's destroyed people like this.

Up on the screen, I watched as he embraced his leading lady for their final kiss. As he tilted his head, I tilted mine and stared at his ridiculously straight nose, those elegant cheekbones, the perfectly dimpled chin. Then I remembered what he'd looked like, the last time I'd seen him, the night of the Oscars party. And the nausea rose in me again. The chaos, the screams, the blood.

During the dark hours when I cannot sleep, the memory of what happened that night prowls my bedside like a hungry tiger. I daren't move in case it pounces. Maybe this is what will drive me mad in the end, the fear that I will open the door to that night and lose myself forever.

But this can't be how my scene ends. No. My story isn't over yet. There are scores to be settled, secrets to be told, players to be destroyed. First, I need to get out.

# CHAPTER ONE

Ealing Studios, London
*July 1954*

Stella Hope checked her watch and lit her third Lucky Strike of the morning. She'd brought twelve packs with her from Hollywood and was down to the last one. It was only half past seven but her shoulders were already tight and her temper rising. Johnny hadn't turned up. He'd promised he'd do her face this morning, said he'd cleared it with the union. Where was he?

She took a long drag of her cigarette, straightened her back in the make-up chair and glanced at the people rushing around her. How had it come to this? Back home, she'd had her own dressing room, an assistant and a little privacy. But not here. Here in London, they were all equal. Apparently. Even an Oscar-nominated actress like herself had to sit on display while she was primped and prodded.

'Excuse me… Stella?'

A hesitant, willowy woman in a red wrap-dress appeared by her side.

'Yes?' said Stella. 'I'm Miss Stella Hope.' Was nobody ever going to respectfully call her 'Miss Hope' again?

'Hello,' the woman said, holding out her hand. 'I'm Maggie. Johnny's not well – I'm covering for him.'

'*You're* a make-up artist?'

Maggie nodded, her hand left hanging in the air.

Stella finally accepted it, bestowing a half-hearted shake while she gave her a long up-down stare. Then she blew smoke into the air and said, 'Well, I'm glad to see they let women do the job here. At Star Studios, it was men-only for years.'

'Well, there's only me,' said Maggie, placing her sturdy vanity case on the trolley next to the makeshift dressing table. She flipped the clasp and pulled up the tan leather lid. 'I've been Johnny's assistant for ages, but they've just recently allowed me to run jobs by myself. The union finally agreed.'

'Well, good for you,' said Stella, as she watched three step-like tiers pop out of each side of Maggie's case. Brushes, sponges, eyeshadows, pencils, lipsticks – an Aladdin's cave of possibilities. 'Are you any good?' she asked, her soft Greek accent audible. It had more or less disappeared over the years, but re-emerged occasionally, especially when she was nervous or asserting herself.

Maggie laughed. 'Yes, I'm good. And I know it's a big day for you, and I promise the results will be wonderful.'

Stella nodded.

'I'm glad to hear it,' she said. 'Because I'm used to the best, you know.' She took another leisurely drag of her cigarette. 'You've heard of Dottie Ponedel?'

'Marlene Dietrich's make-up artist?' asked Maggie, unpacking some pots of cream.

'And Judy Garland's,' said Stella. 'Well, she did my face

once, too. I've had my pick of make-up artists, costume designers and even directors. Back in Hollywood.'

'Really?' said Maggie, with a smile. 'Back in Hollywood…' She ran her finger along the eyeshadows and plucked a few compacts and brushes for that morning's work. Then she selected some panstick and lipstick.

Stella flicked her cigarette ash into a saucer. 'Yes,' she said, 'before they sent me to this godforsaken place. No offence.'

'None taken,' said Maggie. 'I'd choose Hollywood over Ealing any day. Shall we get the cold cream on?'

Stella nodded, left her ciggie burning in the saucer and leaned back.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' she said, sitting up again. She opened the cupboard under the dressing table mirror. 'Would you mind, darling?'

Maggie bent down to see what was inside and let out a delighted laugh. 'Champagne!'

'Why not?' said Stella, smiling for the first time that morning. 'And not just any champagne – Dom Pérignon. I ask Fortnum's to deliver a chilled one every now and then, on days I need a perk. There are glasses there, too. Would you be an angel and pour?'

Maggie took the ice bucket from the cupboard, held a small cloth over the cork and opened it with a gentle pop.

'Johnny sometimes has a drop too,' said Stella. 'So if you want a drop…'

'Oh, no thank you,' said Maggie, pouring her a glass.

'Let's get the cold cream on,' said Stella, 'then I'll have some.'

Maggie smeared a thick layer of cream over Stella's face

and watched as the actress leaned back in the make-up chair. With her eyes shut, she slowly reached out for her glass.

'Here you are,' said Maggie, laughing as she carefully handed her the drink. 'Your little pick-me-up, madam.'

'Well, I hope it's freshly brewed,' joked Stella, suddenly in a better mood.

Her hand was steady – it was her first performance of the day, sipping the bubbles without looking. She made quick work of it, and once she'd drained the glass, Maggie took it from her and placed it back on the tray.

Then she set to work. Using a soft, damp muslin cloth, she gently wiped the cream off Stella's face: from chin to cheek, the nose area, carefully around the eyes, then the forehead last. Upward sweeps, of course.

'You're much gentler than Johnny,' said Stella. 'I don't know how many times I've had to say *no downward strokes, Johnny – ever!* You'd think he'd know. It's not as if any of us are getting any younger. Men just don't understand.'

Maggie began to pat Stella's skin dry with a soft towel.

'You know what it's like,' continued Stella, 'trying to fight off the years. It's just what this business does to us. To women anyway.'

'Oh, I know,' said Maggie. 'I was forty-two last week.'

'Well, I'm not quite *that* age yet!'

'Oh, I didn't mean…'

Stella shifted in her chair. 'I'm not even forty, darling. Well, not for a while anyway.' She was actually forty-one, but nobody need know.

Maggie's face dropped and she stopped what she was doing, shaking her head.

'Oh dear, I've upset you now,' she said. 'I'm so sorry. The truth is, Stella… Miss Hope… I'm a bit nervous – I've been on tenterhooks all morning.'

Stella frowned. 'What do you mean?' she said impatiently. 'I thought you said you were good at this?'

'I am,' said Maggie. 'I'm one of the best. But… well, I'm also a fan.'

'Of *me*?'

Maggie nodded. 'A huge fan. I've seen every film you've made. I've loved you for years.'

Stella's face lit up.

'It's such an honour to be doing this today,' continued Maggie. 'But I think my nerves have made me speak out of turn. I'm sorry, Miss Hope. Truly.'

Stella smiled. 'Nonsense, nonsense, darling,' she said. 'And enough of this "Miss Hope". Call me Stella. Now, tell me. Which of my films is your favourite?'

And so they started chatting while Maggie prepared Stella's skin. It was lovely to talk about herself again. Ten minutes later, Stella glanced at her watch.

'Goodness – now let's discuss this screen test,' she said. 'We're due on set in an hour. Will we have time?'

'Don't worry,' said Maggie. 'I've been briefed. You're playing two roles – a mother and a daughter, that's right? For *My True Life*. The mother is early fifties, the daughter twenty-five.'

*My True Life* was one of Ealing's more serious social-realism films. If Stella pulled this off, it could be a way back for her. The producer and director had seemed less convinced, but after weeks of cajoling, she'd worn them down and they'd agreed to let her test for it.

'It was my idea, you know,' said Stella, smiling, 'to play both roles. I went into that meeting room full of men in suits to plead my case. I made them listen. They were all sitting around that famous round table, and Michael Balcon was there, too. It's never been done before. The English accents I can deal with – I've been doing American for years – but can I pass for twenty-five?'

'Of course,' said Maggie, not missing a beat. 'We'll do the daughter first. I've already pre-selected some shades for your approval, look.'

Stella glanced at the soft pastels.

'Wonderful!' she said. 'Johnny never prepares anything.'

She lifted her heart-shaped face to the large rectangular mirror in front of her, which was surrounded on each side by bright white light bulbs, examining her skin with a critical eye. Possibly softening just a little around that fine jawline, but with clever shading and the right lighting, Stella Hope was still a beauty. But *twenty-five*?

'Maggie, a dewy look, I think. What do you say?' she asked. 'Not too matte? And nothing harsh. I like the Pink Blush for nails and lips.'

'Exactly what I had in mind,' said Maggie, as she set to work. After a few minutes of silence between the two of them, she asked, 'Do you miss it? Hollywood?'

'Well, of course,' said Stella, letting out a weary sigh. 'Being a star in England just isn't the same. But in the end, it wasn't up to me.'

She held out her hand for the mirror to examine Maggie's work so far: a pale foundation, light enough to lift her skin a little, and Elizabeth Arden Eight Hour Cream on her cheekbones for a dewy look.

'Lovely,' she said leaning back into the chair again.

Maggie resumed her work.

'What the studio wants the studio gets,' Stella continued.

'I still don't see why you had to leave, though,' said Maggie, shaping Stella's eyebrows in a soft, warm shade of brown.

'The press blamed me for everything,' Stella said. 'Max's accident, his injuries.'

'But it wasn't your fault,' said Maggie, a note of injustice in her voice. 'I mean, you were in the car too, weren't you? And wasn't he the one driving?'

'Yes, but unlike him, I came away unscathed,' said Stella. 'His fans never forgave me. Now, had I died? Well, we would have cleaned up at the box office!'

Maggie gasped. 'Don't say that!'

'It's true.' She laughed. 'Then the studio was furious, because once he'd had plastic surgery for his broken jaw and fractured cheekbone, and recuperated, I said I still wanted a divorce. It was the final straw. They wanted a reunion – they said it could make us a fortune – but I was adamant. As soon as I'd finished my scenes on *Queen of Desire*, they made me leave. They didn't even let me see the final cut. By then, Ealing had expressed an interest, so Star Studios were happy to loan me out, and here I am. They can do what they want. You know what these contracts are like.'

She reached out her hand and pointed at the empty champagne glass.

'Just another small one, Maggie, to set me straight.'

Maggie poured a splash and handed it to her and she downed it in one.

'The funny thing is,' Stella continued, 'they were

convinced the crash and the divorce would finish off both of our careers. We *were* Hollywood's Golden Couple, after all. But the surgeons did a great job – he may no longer look perfect, but he has this brooding quality about him now – and he's reinvented himself as a "serious" actor, in earnest films.' She handed Maggie her glass. 'I, on the other hand, am stuck here… again, no offence intended.'

'None taken,' said Maggie. 'Nails, while your face sets?'

Stella put her hands out and Maggie pulled up a stool, sat and began to quickly, expertly paint Stella's nails with a first coat of Pink Blush polish.

'You know, Maggie,' said Stella. 'I have a good feeling about today. Will you run through my lines with me? I think we have time, and I just want to give it my absolute best shot. I mean, this could be—'

'Stella Hope?' It was Peter, the mail boy. 'Excuse me, are you Stella Hope?'

'Of course she is,' said Maggie, rolling her eyes.

'Your letters, miss.'

Stella waved her wet nails, so Maggie took the small bundle of envelopes.

'Anything interesting?' she asked.

Maggie rifled through them. 'All fan letters, I think,' she said. She pulled one out from the bottom. 'This one's got an American stamp. Hollywood postmark.'

'Really?' asked Stella. 'Open it, would you?'

Maggie took her metal hairdressing comb and slipped the sharp tail under the flap.

'Take it out,' said Stella, 'or you'll have to do my nails all over again.'

Opening the envelope, Maggie couldn't help but read it. She stared at the letter, then at Stella.

'Well? What is it?' asked Stella.

Slowly, Maggie handed it to her.

Stella took the single sheet of paper, read it, then twisted away from Maggie. She gasped as she leaned over the letter, clutching it so tightly her nails were now ruined.

After a few seconds she flattened it out on her lap and re-read it. The words, written in a heavy hand in blue pencil, lurched across the page.

*$50,000 CASH*
*OR I SEND THESE PHOTOS TO THE PRESS*
*WAIT FOR INSTRUCTIONS*

Stella turned the sheet over again and again, frantically searching for a hint as to who had written it. Nothing. She snatched the envelope from Maggie's hand to do the same, and a small grey square fell out onto the floor. Maggie bent down to retrieve it, had her hand on it, when Stella bolted forward, scrabbling at Maggie's feet.

'Give it to me!' Stella shouted, on her knees now.

She snatched it away, but Maggie had already seen it: a photo of a naked girl in a shocking pose. It had been taken years ago, and the flashlight had bleached out her features a little, but yes. It was her. It was Stella Hope.

Stella's face collapsed. 'How… I… I… what…'

Jessie, the wardrobe girl walked past slowly and stared at Stella, who was still kneeling, sticky pink nail polish all over her hands. Maggie turned her back to Jessie, shielding Stella in the process.

'Shall we go somewhere private?' Maggie whispered.

Stella stumbled back into her chair, photo in hand. 'Who'd do this?' Her eyes filled up. 'Who'd want to hurt me like this?'

Maggie didn't answer.

'I just don't understand,' Stella continued, in a hushed voice.

They were known as French photos, sold under the counter. The girls' faces were usually obscured or cropped out. The photographer had promised her. Stella sat, slack-mouthed, stunned, then became aware of Maggie gently but forcibly taking the letter and the photo from her hand.

'Let's put these away,' Maggie said, and placed them both in her vanity case, then quickly packed everything on top and clicked it shut. She shook Stella gently by the shoulder.

'Come on. We'll take a taxi to my flat. I'm not far.'

'The screen test,' said Stella, in a daze.

'We'll say you're not well. Perhaps you can do it tomorrow. I'll ask.'

She touched Stella's shoulder again, and Stella rose slowly. Maggie linked her arm through Stella's and, grabbing her case, pulled her at a smart pace through the make-up department and Stage Two to the gate. A cameraman stopped what he was doing and stared at Stella's ruined face and obvious distress. He began to come over, but Maggie shook her head to warn him off, Stella oblivious to it all.

After a few minutes, they finally reached the gate, and seconds later, they were in a black taxi, heading to Ealing Village. Maggie clasped Stella's sticky hand as they sat on

the back seat. Stella turned and stared into her face, her mouth trembling.

'What will happen to me?' she whispered. 'I don't have that kind of money. If this gets out, it'll ruin me.' Her foundation was streaked with tears, her face wild with fear. 'I mean, I was young, everyone did it.'

'Shh…' said Maggie, stroking her arm, trying to calm her.

'No faces, they said. I was broke. What choice did I have?'

'I know,' said Maggie.

'*Who?*' asked Stella. 'Who'd do this? Who hates me so much that they'd want to see me ruined?'

Maggie didn't answer but held Stella's hand tight and stared out of the window.

It only took five minutes to get to Maggie's, and once upstairs, she sat Stella down on the worn red couch, took off her shoes and brought her a cup of tea.

'I've put three sugars in it,' said Maggie. 'For the shock.'

Stella reached out for the cup and saucer, but her hands wouldn't stop trembling.

'Here,' said Maggie, and drew up a stool to place them on.

'Let me have the letter again,' Stella said, and Maggie put her make-up box in front of them on the floor and snapped it open. She passed her the envelope and watched as Stella stared at the writing, turning it over in her hands.

Slipping her hand inside, Stella touched the contents but didn't pull them out.

'I can't,' she said, shaking her head. 'This will be the end of me, Maggie.' She lay down on the sofa, curled into a tight ball as protection against the world, and began to sob.

For the next hour, Maggie stroked her hair and shoulder,

shushing her and reassuring her that everything would be alright. Eventually, Stella fell asleep.

Later, when she woke, she had a knitted shawl draped over her shoulders and the curtains had been drawn. Two table lights were casting a soft yellow glow over the small, charming apartment. She watched as Maggie tidied away some magazines and rearranged some books on a shelf. *How wonderful to live so simply*, thought Stella. *No worries in the world, no terrible surprises around the corner*.

'Have I been sleeping long?' she asked.

Maggie nodded. 'All day. It's six now.'

'What about the screen test? Did they agree to see me another time?'

'I rang earlier and asked,' said Maggie. 'We just have to wait and see. You must be famished.' She walked out to the galley kitchen and returned with a bowl of soup on a tray and a piece of buttered toast. 'I just had some. It's only tinned, I'm afraid, but it's still hot.'

She placed the tray on Stella's lap. It was a curious orange colour and looked a bit greasy.

'It's Heinz tomato,' said Maggie. 'Give it a try.'

Stella dipped her spoon in and took a sip. It was surprisingly tasty, and she polished it off quickly.

'I'm not sure why you're being so kind to me,' said Stella, as she dabbed her mouth with the napkin. 'But it's lovely of you. We only met this morning, and look at us now.'

Maggie shrugged, blushing. 'It's nothing, really. How are you feeling?'

'A little better.'

'Shall I call you a taxi to take you home? Where do you live? Are you nearby?'

'I… er… well, Soho,' said Stella hesitantly.

There was a pause.

'You could stay here,' Maggie said, in a matter-of-fact tone. 'I mean, if you'd rather not be by yourself tonight?' She picked up the tray. 'You'd be very welcome.' She looked around her flat. 'I'm sure it's not what you're used to, but—'

'Oh, Maggie! Could I?' Stella asked, her face brightening immediately. 'That would be wonderful. Thank you. I'll just take the couch.'

'Nonsense,' said Maggie, carrying the things out. 'You're Stella Hope,' she called from the kitchen. 'You'll take my bed.' She walked back and gave her a smile. 'I changed the sheets just this morning. I'll take the couch. I hardly sleep anyway. Here.' She handed Stella an ice-cold flannel. 'Put this over your eyes for ten minutes. It'll stop them looking puffy tomorrow.'

Stella took the washcloth from her, sat back, closed her eyes and did as she was told. 'I think I've found my guardian angel,' she said, smiling.