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Hollywood Sinners

Written by Victoria Fox

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Victoria Fox

HOLLYWOOD Sinners

PROLOGUE

The Parthenon Hotel,
Las Vegas, Summer 2011

The woman studied her reflection in the bathroom mirror. To an onlooker she was flawless, but close, much closer, there was an uncertainty in her eyes that gave her away. Fear was a dangerous thing. However hard you pushed it down, it always found a way back.

Turning her head to one side, she attempted a practised smile and almost convinced herself. She was a professional–it was her job to make people believe.

In a white toga-style dress amid the stylised opulence of one of Vegas's most renowned hotels, the woman resembled a Greek goddess. Tomorrow morning her image would appear in magazines all across the world. Fashion editors would appraise her gown. Reviewers would dissect her performance. Gossip columnists would speculate on the man she was with. Fame. Celebrity. Stardom. She had imagined this moment for a long time, and now she had arrived.

It's one night, she told herself. *Nobody knows.*

The woman stood back. Blood rushed to her head and she struggled to focus. A hot wave of sickness washed over her.

It was karma. Everybody had to pay for the mistakes they made.

This is what you deserve.

She touched the palm of one hand flat against the marble wall. It felt cool.

'Just not tonight,' she begged, her lips cracked and dry. 'Please, not tonight.'

'Are you OK?'

The woman jumped, less at the shock of remembering he was out there as at the concern in his voice. But the second time he spoke it was with the familiar bitterness.

'Limo's here in five. Let's move.'

She breathed deeply, smoothed down her dress for a final time and reached for the lock on the door. It was show time.

The Parthenon Tower Suite was vast. Four lavishly designed bedrooms backed on to a sprawling living area complete with champagne bar and wall-to-wall plasma television, a private games room and sumptuous spa. Floor-to-ceiling windows boasted a panorama of the glittering Vegas Strip, its pink and gold lights laid out below like a chain of jewels. On both sides multi-billion-dollar hotels stood shoulder to shoulder like giants, each one more impressive than the last. The Mirage, the Luxor, the Palazzo, the Desert Jewel. Fountains of fire and water set the night sky ablaze and billboards dazzled with news of the hottest show in town. In

the casinos, players and hustlers vied for the big time. This was Sin City, the pounding heart of the desert. Everybody was working a game of chance.

And in the middle of it all, the man she was supposed to be in love with. He was standing at the panorama, adjusting his tie.

When he turned to her, his eyes were cold.

'Is everything all right now?' he asked quietly.

'Everything's fine.' What was the point in telling the truth? They had gone way beyond honesty a long time ago.

The man took a step forward. For a crazy moment she thought he might kiss her.

'Tonight matters,' he said instead. 'You understand why.'

She nodded. In a matter of minutes they would appear together at the Orient Hotel, host to tonight's movie premiere. The world's press would be gathered on the red carpet, everybody who was anybody in the business walking the runway, and they all wanted a super-couple at the top of their game. Paparazzi had camped out for days for their hundred-thousand-dollar shot. If they could expose what nobody else saw–the faltering smile, the glimmer of doubt in a moment of privacy–then they'd be looking at the big money. She imagined the flashing lights, the waiting crowd. For one night their performance had to be flawless; their kisses for real.

'I'm ready,' she told him.

'Good. Don't let me down.'

Unexpectedly her phone shrilled to life. Reaching to re-

trieve it from her clutch, she noticed a flash of unease pass across his face.

'Who is it?' he demanded.

It was a private number.

'I'll take it outside.' She crossed to the sliding doors and stepped out on to the terrace. The fresh air was invigorating and she experienced a rush of hope.

It's just one night. How much can go wrong?

She flipped it open. 'Hello?'

At first, only silence. Then the voice began to speak. It was low and distinctive. She recognised it immediately.

Fighting a wave of panic, the woman gripped the balcony rail, her knuckles bleeding white in the darkness. Forty storeys below traffic throbbed down the Strip.

'I know about you, sweetheart. Remember? I know everything. Get ready, baby–because now it's payback time.'

PART ONE

Autumn
One year earlier

1

Venice

‘Lana, over here! Lana, Cole! How’s the marriage?’

Lana Falcon adjusted her pose for the cameras, hand on hip, shoulders back, and delivered her trademark megawatt smile. She held it in place and counted the seconds, careful not to let it drop. Against the red carpet her midnight-blue gown trailed like dark water.

She took pity on the reporter, who was slightly overweight and sported a beard that looked like he had drawn it on himself.

‘You’re half of America’s most famous couple,’ he gasped, scarcely believing his luck as Lana came to the side. ‘How does it feel?’ The film festival was a hive of energy: paparazzi and TV crews lined the carpet in thick numbers; fans with arms outstretched reached helplessly for their heroes–catching these two together was the biggest coup of his career.

On cue Lana felt an arm slide round her waist, smooth as a

snake. She turned to the man next to her, caught the familiar line of his profile and the gleam of his teeth, the charcoal-grey of his immaculate hair. Cole Steel. Her husband.

Cameras flashed and sparked in throbs of light. He didn't blink.

'It feels great,' she told the reporter with a friendly smile. 'We're very happy.'

Paparazzi jostled for the best shot. 'Cole! Lana, Cole, let's see you together!'

'Any plans to add to the family?' The reporter was sweating now.

'Watch this space,' said Cole, with a startlingly white grin. He planted a dry kiss on Lana's neck, just below her ear. The photographers went wild.

'Let's move on,' he instructed, just loud enough for her to hear.

Lana obliged. The smell of Cole's skin lingered–sweet, slightly minty. When he took her hand it was cold.

'Tell us about your new movie!' the reporter babbled, craning the mike after her, knowing he'd already lost them. 'Tell us about *Eastern Sky*!'

Lana moved into her customary position on the carpet, a little in front of Cole, his hands at her waist, steering her forward. At twenty-seven she was Hollywood's most desirable young actress. Regularly voted one of the world's most beautiful women, she was, with her burnt-chestnut hair, wide green eyes and warm smile, a killer combination of sex siren and girl-next-door. Women wanted to be her friend. Boys wanted to take her home to their mothers. Men jacked off over her, torn between fantasies of white cotton panties and

crimson-red lingerie–the fascination was that Lana Falcon could pull off either. And, boy, did they dream she did.

'Cole, Lana, this way!'

Cole guided his wife into a series of poses, his hands moving round her body with the precision and grace of a dancer.

'Beautiful!' came the approving clamour.

Somebody shouted, 'Could we get a kiss?'

Cole laughed with the press like chums. Lana observed as he shot at them with pretend pistols, firing from the first two fingers of each hand.

Lana followed direction. Tilting her chin to meet his, she saw her surroundings–the deep reds and pure, billowing whites; the rich, syrupy gold of the event's majestic lions–taper sharply into her husband's approaching features until her view was suffocated entirely by his face, and the sad rub of his lips.

Cole Steel. Hollywood's highest grossing actor and a giant of the American film industry. Cole Steel. At the top of his game after nearly thirty years and tipped here to take a Volpi Cup. Cole Steel. The husband with whom Lana Falcon lived, attended parties, posed for photographs, but had never, had never…

All around, bulbs popped and flared. As Lana pulled away she searched her husband's eyes. As a good actor he could fill them with every emotion a role required–he was at his most convincing when assuming a character. As a man, as himself, he was blank. Cole's eyes were like a shark's: flat and empty. When she looked into them, Lana saw nothing.

'Let's get on the line,' said Katharine Elliot, Lana's publicist,

discreetly ushering her client forward. 'They're queuing for a word.'

'We're not done here yet,' snapped Cole through gritted teeth. His smile didn't move.

Katharine stepped back. Cole was a man she did not want to piss off.

Together he and Lana refreshed their poses, the jewel in the crown of megastars gracing the Venice carpet, floating like creatures from another world, delighting with a look or a smile.

'Assholes,' muttered Cole, clapping eyes on a young, handsome actor and his Mother Earth wife. Cole claimed not to like the man because he'd beaten him to a part last year, though Lana suspected it was more because the couple paraded a soccer team of children, a brood to which they were still adding. It was something she and Cole could never achieve.

Beyond the press pit Lana caught sight of a young female fan, her desperate face streaked with tears as she was pushed and shoved amid the throng of people trying to catch a glimpse of the action. Lana took care to catch her eye, smiling warmly and giving her a wave.

Toughen up she thought, remembering herself at that age. *It's the only way to survive. Trust me.* She blinked against the memories. Too often they kept her awake at night.

'It's time,' Cole told her, placing a small, pale hand on her back. The cameras followed every move. Together, husband and wife were the ultimate American love story. He, one of the greatest actors of his generation; she, the girl who had come from nothing, from tragedy, to having it all.

Linking her arm with his, Lana walked alongside, nodding and smiling her way into the Palazzo del Cinema. She glanced at her wedding ring, a great cluster of diamonds that weighed heavy on her hand. In the frenzy of snapping bulbs it winked back, as if they shared a terrible secret.

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