

## STORMY WEATHER

“Ad Lucem-Pax Tectum.”

“Into the light—Peace be with you.”

An ancient Roman phrase usually reserved for the most corrupt of a corrupted society.

Neon lights admired their shimmering reflections in a patchwork of rain-filled puddles, spread out across the dark, wet sidewalks of Hollywood’s legendary Sunset Boulevard.

It’s 5:15 a.m. on a cold January morning. L.A.’s rainy season was upon it and this year’s stormy El Nino was in full hell-raising, diva mode. The fierce thunderstorm slung heavy rain drops at full throttle, sideways, as it pounded deserted streets.

“The diner will be packed this morning. I’ve got to be super alert, I could really pick up some great tips today,” Hollywood waitress, Dotty Henderson, spoke to herself aloud while driving. A woman of many secrets and mysteries, some of which were unknown even to herself. One being that she had been a high-society, black market baby of the 1940’s.

Her reference to “tips” was not of the monetary kind. Although greed lurked just below the surface, information was the driving force behind her mental note.

Tinged with a little fear, and a healthy dose of suspicion, the long-time Schwab’s waitress cautiously drove her old, gray Volvo as if it were an exposed cat operating in stealth mode, slinking and surveying the dark lonely streets of Central Hollywood wound up and ready to pounce.

This realization sent an additional shock wave of fear through her.

“Someone knows,” she admitted to herself.

“I hope no one has found me out! I’ll be ruined ... and in a helluva lot of trouble.”

Dotty had covert reasons to be paranoid regardless of the time of day, or location for that matter.

“That’s it! I’ve made up my mind. I’ll tell Ralph I want a gun, and I want it this week.” Trying to calm her jittery nerves with the thought of a pistol for protection.

“I’ll just tell him it’s because I’m driving to work so early in the morning and I’d feel safer having one. No need to mention being followed, he might start asking too many questions and I can’t afford that right now.”

Truth is she had potential enemies ... lots of them. Her only safety net was clinging to an evaporating sense of anonymity.

“I’ve got to be extra careful from now on.”

“Someone in that car knows my secret.”

# BITTER FIGHT

Dotty sat in her car, stunned, more from the possibility of having been found out than the calculated death threat. Seeking to compose herself, she briefly entertained regret, “I should have stayed on my old work schedule along with everyone else. Is my secret deal-making becoming too risky?”

Following the angry, jealous confrontation with Vivien, the fiancée of Schwab’s manager, Sam O’Brien, Dotty had made the decision to avoid coming to work at her usual hour in an attempt to prevent any possible trouble caused by the two of them being alone together. Despite harboring feelings of uneasiness about the earlier hour, it was for the best.

“I can’t allow petty relationships to get in my way right now, there’s too much at stake. Besides, my relationship with Sam was only about fun sex.” A tawdry admission from such an under-the-radar, middle-aged waitress. One who had grown up being referred to as “not much in the looks department, but she has a great personality.” A universal kiss of death for dating.

The relentless thunderstorm and what appeared to be a purposeful threat from that mysterious black car made her feel like a target. The sum of the morning portended events to come.

Dotty tried shrugging off her jitters, but it just wasn’t working. Her nerves were on edge. Something just didn’t feel right this morning, and her “third eye” was trying to warn her.

“Has someone found me out? Some of the regulars have been a bit distant lately, especially the three girls. I’ll pay close attention to their behavior today to see if they are suspicious.”

Those were questions she posed to herself while killing time during her solitary half hour alone before the other employees arrived.

Life's dividends had always paid well for those that remained attuned to and respected natural intuition versus robotically adhering to the brain's logic. Repeated attempts to brush her

uneasiness off as just another angle of guilt that attempted to gnaw at her failed. There was no denying that the mysterious car had rattled her normally cool, calculating persona.

The Hollywood waitress, wet and nervous, dashed from the car to get out of the heavy rain. Sunset and Vine was eerily silent except for this morning's violent rumble of thunder accompanied by flashes of lightning bolts so bright they turned night into day. The storm terrified her almost as much as being followed.

Quickly closing the front door of the restaurant behind her, she simultaneously switched on the diner's front lights. The neon in the window made a sparking sound as its bright red and green "Schwab's Hollywood" sign came to life. Dotty then dove into her morning routine. People often find refuge in predictable habits when rattled. She was no different.

"Wow, this storm is terrible! I hope it lets up before its time to open." Talking aloud to herself for comfort and assurance that all was well, while mentally trying to fight off an increasing crescendo of fear.

She attempted to release some of the tension on her soaked raincoat and umbrella with an overtly aggressive shake to rid

them of as much moisture as possible. Tidying herself from the rain, she made her way to the diner's back kitchen; her mind still stubbornly focused on the car that had followed her to work, twice. Pondering if this could very well be the downfall of her very lucrative secret side job.

Glancing around the quiet, empty diner overwhelmed her with a momentary sense of profound loneliness that placed her on the edge of tears. Dotty's thoughts of redemption and remorse were as fleeting as the lightning flashes that filled the stormy sky that morning.

Making her way to the back of the kitchen. "I need a good strong cup of fresh coffee. That'll get my mind off this nonsense." As she began to sing her favorite feel good "happy song":

"Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high

There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby

Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue way up high

And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true"

Flipping the switch on to the back kitchen lights, she hummed and sang to herself.

Suddenly, a loud bang rang out from the direction of the front door.

Dotty jumped, swirled around towards the noise as her fingers lost their grip on the coffee cup she was holding, sending it crashing to the floor. Certain she heard what sounded like the front door open and shut. At first startled, then exhaling a sigh of relief, she assumed it was the arrival of Jacques, Schwab's Valet.

"Whoa, thank goodness someone else has finally arrived! I'm shaking like a leaf!" Assuming it was her French co-worker.

"I don't think I will ever be comfortable being in this place alone so early in the morning, even if it is for only 30 minutes."

It was still pitch black outside at this hour and her paranoia had gotten the best of her.

"Being here when it's this quiet just plain gives me the creeps." Admitting to herself, then calling out, "Good morning, Jacques, how are you."

Running her hands up and down her arms and shoulders in an attempt to sooth her raised goose bumps and shivering nerves.

Hesitating, then whispering to herself in a muffle, "It must be Jacques."

Once again raising her voice. "Good morning, Jacques!" Giving it a second try. Hoping for a reply in a relieved, upbeat happy tone. There was no answer.

"I'm sure I heard the door open and close."

"Hello, anybody there?"

Dotty's eyes suddenly grew large with an expression of fright when there was no response. Trying to reconcile in her mind what could only have been cold fresh air wafting through the kitchen doorway shortly after hearing the sound of the door open and close.

"I definitely felt a cold breeze blowing blow in from the front," Dotty thought to herself, her mind now working overtime in an attempt to rationalize what her senses had already acknowledged as fact, thus triggering that ancient part of the human brain known as the amygdala and it's primordial "Fight or Flight Response."

Her body responded by pumping itself full of epinephrine. Taking a deep sigh then filling her lungs with unneeded deep gasps of air, thus in turn triggering a sense of panic, her heavy breathing commanded her heartbeat to accelerate faster and faster. The color in her face alternated between pale and crimson, and her voice cracked.

“OK ... guys ... I heard you come in. I know you’re in there. Please stop joking, this is not funny. I’m already scared out of my wits just being alone here at this hour of the morning!” Secretly hoping Jacques or, out of desperation, even Sam was playing a cruel joke on her. There was no answer.

In an attempt to convince herself that there was nothing to worry about, “Could I have just imagined hearing the door open? Am I hearing things? Maybe your hearing’s going bad, ol’ girl.” Speaking to herself with a contrived, forced smile. An effort at soothing ragged nerves. Her subconscious wasn’t buying it, not for a second. It was not about to forget the fresh cold breeze that could only have come from the outside.

A few seconds later Dotty heard the sound of someone or something stumble into the side of a dining room table, followed by the sound of rolling glass salt and pepper shakers toppling over and shattering as they fell to the floor. The crashing sound was immediately followed by the diner’s front lights going black!

Frozen with fear, she stopped dead in her tracks, looking around for a weapon to protect herself. Her terrified eyes made contact with the cooking knives hanging on the wall on the other side of the kitchen. Unfortunately, they were near the doorway that led to the front of the diner.

“Dammit! Did I forget to lock the door? I’m so damned shaken up by that car following me this morning I can’t think straight. Dear Lord, please, please don’t let me get robbed.” Praying to herself in a hushed tone.

Searching for a safe place to hide, fear began to take hold of her entire being. Her hands became clammy and began to shake like those of a severe alcoholic who’s been without a drink for twenty-four hours. She tried not to breath too loudly, frightened that whoever it was might hear her, then know exactly where she was hiding.

“Oh God, what am I going to do? It’s a goddamn burglar!”

The only other exit from the kitchen to the outside was dead bolted and the key was in the cash register. If it was a robbery, she was trapped.

“Whoever you are ... I’ve got a gun and I’m not afraid to use it!” Lying through her teeth, something she definitely knew how to do. Running to the wall on the other side of the kitchen away from the doorway as silently as possible, she scrambled to click off the light switch.

“At least if it’s dark they won’t be able to find me right away.”

Just as she hit the off switch, background light from the outside filtered through the diner’s large front windows, creating a serene aura in the front dining area. The outside light cast a yellow flickering of shadows as the leaves danced wildly from the wind and rain in front of the street lamps. The echoing shadows shown through the doorway, casting a long, ominous path on the dark kitchen floor.

The strange image fleetingly reminded Dotty of a film noir movie or childhood memories of lying in bed and watching the light and shadows from outside her windows play on the floor while she drifted off to sleep.

Brought back to the danger of the moment by the sound of footsteps emanating from the front, she announced, “I don’t have any money here. Please, take whatever you want from the front. I haven’t see you! I’ll never say a word!”

Thinking quickly, “If he falls for that, I can make it to my coat where my cell phone is in my pocket, then call the police! That fucking dirty bastard!”

Allowing her devious, double crossing nature to momentarily surface.

That's when the voice spoke for the first time, confirming her worst nightmare. One she had tried to keep locked away.

"But I'm not after money, you low-life bitch! I've come for a bigger, more valuable prize. You've been a very, very bad girl, and lots of people really, really hate you, Dotty Henderson. I think I might be the one that hates you the most. And I'm here to serve up a big, sweet dish of revenge. bitch! By the way, It's one of my favorite recipes," the tauntingly low voice threatened with a mocking snicker.

Dotty struggled to recognize the voice as she fell shaking backwards then crouched further into the corner between the big stove and a large stainless steel cook's table. The darkest spot she could squeeze into.

"Please, I'm begging you, leave me alone. I haven't done anything to anyone!"

"Oh, but you have. You're rotten to the core and you've destroyed enough lives with your filthy, cheap little side job. No more! You're done with selling peoples' secrets and fucking up their lives! You've sold your last piece of trash, you bloodsucking vermin!" the raspy voiced intruder spits out.

"Who are you? What have I ever done to you? I'm ... just a little nobody waitress. I really don't know what you are talking about! I wouldn't hurt anybody. Whoever you are, please, you've mistaken me for someone else. I'm begging you, please don't hurt me, I have a young daughter and a husband!"

"Poor little Dotty, you obviously have me mixed up with someone who gives a shit about your stinking, miserable life! God, it's delicious to hear you beg! So, all of a sudden ... your family is important to you. You didn't seem to think so highly of them when you were busy screwing over others and destroying lives while peddling your filthy gossip for profit, did you?"

Now sobbing, Dotty mumbles, "But, I ... I don't understand. What are you talking about?" Using her most manipulative tone of self-pity.

"Your little secret is over! I'm gonna slit your evil throat from ear to ear like a pig on a barbecue pit, then watch with joy as every drop of blood drains from your evil corpse! You've taken everything from me, and I intend to take what's most precious to you: your ruthless, parasitic life!"

Realizing she had to do something other than beg if she was going to survive this ordeal, Dotty yelled out to remind whoever it was, "I told you, I've got a gun, don't make me use it! Stay away from me! I will shoot! People on the street will hear it and call the police! If you leave now I won't say word to anyone. I promise! I don't know who you are, but you are really messing with the wrong woman! I'll shoot if you come any closer!" Trying to convince herself that she might bluff her way out of this nightmare with a hollow threat.

The menacing stranger spit out through clinched teeth, "Greedy little Dotty, you are dumber than you are homely looking. You're out of your league with me, bitch, only you're too stupid to know it. Hollywood can be a very vengeful town when you fuck us over. Better get that gun ready 'cause I've come for revenge and I'm not leaving until I make sure you've breathed your last stinkin' breath of air in this world." Dotty struggled to control her whimpering.

"Is it money you want? I can give it to you, lots of it." Switching angles and hoping money was worshiped by the stranger as much as it was by her.

"Just let me go to the bank when it opens. I promise you, I'll never say another word to a tabloid again." Finally admitting out of life-threatening fear what she had suspected all along, that her dirty secret dealings had finally caught up with her.

“I didn’t mean to hurt anyone ... PLEASE, PLEASE you gotta believe me!”

Catching herself sobbing hysterically, she quickly threw her hands over her mouth in an attempt to conceal herself in her hiding place.

“Dear God!” she muffled as she inhaled the longest breath of fear she had ever known after seeing the outline of a shadow standing in the doorway. It cast a long silhouette across the dark room. That beautiful golden glow from the street lamps lit the nightmarish figure from behind.

Dotty still couldn’t make out the low, gravelly voice. Her mind raced through her past as she fell backwards, crouching beside the large steel cook’s table. What had she done? How could she have been so callous with people’s lives just for money? Who had tracked her down? The answers to these questions would follow her to her grave and beyond.

“Is this how I am going to die?” she asked herself as the reality of the stranger’s intent sank in.

Dotty was trapped with no escape, just like so many of the people whose lives she had ruined for selfish monetary gain in her devious, relentless pursuit of money.

A momentary ray of hope appeared when she remembered, “I’m sure Sam or Jacques will be here any minute now. All I have to do is keep talking, stall a little while longer until they get here.”

Once again turning to the Lord for something other than her usual prayer for more money, “I’m begging you, dear Lord, please give me one more chance. Just let them get here in time.”

“Aren’t you at least going to tell me who you are?” mustering to ask through her sniffing whimpers.

“That’s a good girl, you dragon-tongued bitch! Keep begging. I like hearing the sound of fear in your voice,” said the stranger.

“Oh, Dotty’s scared. It won’t do you any good! I want to see the pain and fear in your eyes while you suffer. In the same manner you caused so many of your victims to live through.”

Carefully eying the shadowy figure move into the kitchen, Dotty caught a glimpse of the huge, monstrous, shiny knife in the stranger’s hands. Backing herself further into the corner, she managed to squeeze in another inch. Just like a rat hiding from a big hungry alley cat in the dark. Dotty’s wailing only got worse as she tried to muffle her sounds by holding her hand over her nose and mouth out of fear of being heard. Her trembling was so bad she had to grab hold of the table’s cold steel leg to steady herself.

Keeping track of the time, the intruder moved quickly. Dotty had been stalked for the last month by the mysterious stranger and they who knew exactly when the rest of the morning staff would be arriving. It wasn’t hard really. They had attached a SAT NAV device to her car and knew the exact moment she left her house for work every morning. Then, they discreetly monitored her from across the street as she entered Schwab’s ... alone. Her stalker knew the earliest that either of the other two employees, Sam or Jacques, would arrive wasn’t until around 5:45 a.m., or later, allowing them plenty of time to dispatch their swift gift of murderous revenge.

Dotty wasn’t even sure if the intruder was a man or a woman. She couldn’t tell from the low whispering voice. The only thing she could make out was the trench coat, knit cap, and that terrifying long butcher knife in their hands.

With her eyes wide open and targeted in the direction of every sound or movement made in the darkness, her body’s million-year-old evolutionary human instincts were operating on full alert. She desperately tried to blend into the darkness and remain hidden, vowing to amend her ways if she

made it out alive. Her mind was half stuck in the limbo of expecting the lights to come on at any moment, thus instantly giving her location away, and trying to comprehend if this nightmare would be her last.

“I never dreamed this much fear could be real,” she thought to herself. But it was real and she was living every second of it.

Closing her eyes and praying for forgiveness, “My sweet merciful God, please give me one more chance. I am begging for your atonement. I promise I will live by your word if you spare me from this.” Making promises to the Lord that she

knew she was incapable of keeping. Her newly found religiosity had simply arrived too late.

A moment later, the dark room was quiet.

“Maybe they’ve left?” Hoping that some other-worldly miracle had driven whoever it was away. Confident, that her Lord savior had heard her prayers and kindly bestowed mercy upon her, Dotty opened her closed eyes in relief. It was at that frozen second in time that she saw the reflecting light from the street on the massive, long, shining steel blade in the shadowy dark and its life draining silver tip. At this very same moment the cold blade came thrusting down into her warm soft flesh. Dotty immediately thought about how time had slowed down as it was occurring, as if time had almost come to a halt.

The piercing, first stab seared through her body with the force of a falling piano onto her chest. It felt like the knife had been plunged all the way into her body, up to its handle. There was no more pondering or hope, she was going to die. Her life began to flash before her like pictures on a slide projector. Oddly enough, the first images were of the terrible tabloid headlines she had profited from:

“Starlet’s secret past as a PROSTITUTE revealed!”

“Hunky Leading man’s hidden HUSBAND identified!”

“Film Star commits suicide over secret revelations!”

Breaking through those images were those of a far more motherly vision:

“My poor baby is going to be without a mother.” Finally, realizing the unbearable cost of her deeds upon her beloved, beautiful 20-year-old daughter.

The long, thick, cold, steel blade sliced into her body like a hot knife into butter. She tried to scream but no sound came out. Lying in a state of shock from the searing pain, she couldn’t even throw her arms up to block the vicious attack or fight her attacker. Her body went limp and numb after the third strike. The strength behind the attack was of such rage she begins to pray for death to come quickly. The violent blade struck her body blow after blow ... until, finally, her world started to fade into what seemed like peaceful blackness. In a bizarre twist, Dotty begin to relish the feeling of the warm blood flowing over her body, as if it were cleansing away her horrible deeds.

The last words she was to hear in life were from her tormentor in a low, gratifying sense of delight.

“Goodbye, Dotty Henderson, and remember the distance from good to evil is but a thought. Say hello to Hell for me, you evil WHORE!”

Dotty Henderson’s reservation at Forest Lawn had been filled.

They found her that morning in a pool of blood, stabbed 23 times, her face covered by the bloodied, screaming headlines of a tabloid stuck to her forehead.

The resulting investigation would release a torrent of secrets and controversy that plunged Hollywood into a state of emergency. It also presented it at its finest. Nothing is as it appears in this town, and its reality is by far more intriguing and cinematic than its films.