

THE  
STARLETS

*a novel*



LEE KELLY  
JENNIFER THORNE



*The Starlets*

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# STAR POWER

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## *SPOTTED: Vivienne Rhodes letting loose with new beau, Teddy Walters!*

Screen queen Vivienne Rhodes is known for a lot of things—her stunning looks, athletic prowess, and undeniable acting talent being just a few of them.

But “life of the party”? Most certainly not.

Unlike her man-about-town father, Olympic-swimmer-turned-leading-man Damien Rhodes, and her tobacco heiress mother, wild beauty Lia Braithwaite Rhodes, who were both L.A. nightlife royalty in their day (and can occasionally still be caught closing down Chasen’s), Vivienne has al-

ways struck *Star Power* as far more serious, taking pains to avoid the Hollywood social scene. Looks like we’re getting another side to her . . . with all credit owed to her dreamy Apex Pictures’ costar, Teddy Walters.

“They danced the night away, kept ordering a rum cocktail they concocted,” said a bartender at Ciro’s who served the couple on Saturday night. “Told me I should name the drink after *Beach Holiday*, in their honor. You ever see Miss Rhodes smile in person? I tell ya, it can light up a room.”

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# Variety

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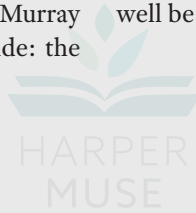
25 CENTS

## SHAKE-UP AT SHAKY APEX

Fresh off a string of box office disasters and with ballooning budgets for their current slate of pictures, including disaster-fraught intended tentpole *A Thousand Ships* currently prepping at Pinewood in London, Apex Pictures board members voted to oust longtime chairman Murray Steiner. Also out on the tide: the

studio's general counsel and vice president of finance, with more resignations mounting by the day.

Insiders claim board efforts now focus on courting potential buyers for the studio. Without new money fast, the days of the once mighty Apex Pictures may well be numbered...



Apex Pictures' long-awaited epic, *A Thousand Ships*, may recount one of history's dreamiest romances, but countless sources contend production's been a nightmare—a runaway budget, Lina Belmont's departure, and reported creative differences between the studio and producer William Wagner—and if *Ships* doesn't smash at the box office, the major studio may find itself in deeper trouble.

Fortunately for Apex's new president and owner, seasoned businessman and Hollywood newcomer Jack Gallo, the former stu-

dio talent Vivienne Rhodes is now officially attached to the blockbuster. Rumors have been swirling on which character Rhodes will be playing, but who else other than the picture's regal star?

Things have been looking up for swimmer-turned-actress Rhodes, who scored an Oscar nod in March for her entrancing turn in last year's swashbuckling biopic, *Bonny*. Is her ex, Teddy Walters, eating his heart out yet, or is he too enamored with his latest leading lady to care? Let's just say his reps have declined to comment . . .

# 1

*Friday, June 6, 1958*

The synchrony of the waves feels reminiscent of a grand musical finale, a choreographed celebratory number, white caps rolling into the bow, parting, splitting in time. Vivienne leans back against the ferry's bench, affording herself a rare moment to relax. To revel in the rightness, the earned inevitability of this moment.

"Helen," she whispers to herself, trying on the role for size again. She can't help the stupid, giddy smile that breaks across her face. The princess of Troy is one of the most influential, remembered, beautiful women *of all time*, and she, Vivienne Rhodes, has been entrusted with the part. A role that will finally break the world open for her. Jack Gallo himself promised Vivienne she'd become "America's golden girl" if she returned to Apex for *A Thousand Ships*. Buster Smith, the head of production, told her agent that this film would turn Vivienne "radioactive," whatever that meant. And the pay . . .

Well, if money really talks, her promised *Ships'* salary is a battle cry. A new standard. Her old Apex contract-player checks were

peanuts by comparison.

She adjusts her headscarf, tucking in a few flyaways of her long brunette hair, and lets the soft wind propel her to her feet, toward the boat's railing. All those years spent waking up for crack-of-dawn swim calls, playing bit parts and villainesses, the unforeseen heartache and drama with Teddy, the Oscar snub—it was all worth its weight in gold, she decides, because it led her right here.

Breathing in the salt-scented air, she revels in the rocky, green island of Tavalli taking shape before her. No wonder the studio moved production here from London's Pinewood Studios a few weeks ago. The Italian island's jaw-dropping, jagged panorama will be the perfect backdrop for the film's battle scenes, for the lush, emotional saga of the Trojan War. Two months of filming on this island, and when it wraps, Vivienne will have unequivocally made it. On her own terms, and on her own.

"Papa!" The voice cuts through her mellifluous moment like the screech of a needle on a record.

Vivienne turns to find a little girl with a dark bowl cut and a big smile emerging from the cabin, now squirming near the ferry's sun-hardened skipper. Since they left the shores of Corsica, the captain has dutifully played the role of stoic witness to Vivienne's introspective voyage, so she's surprised to find him grinning now at the girl squealing beside him.

"*Papa, es le strega de mare!*" The child giggles wildly, pointing at Vivienne. "*Sta per tuffarsi in mare!*"

"Me daughter adore the movies," the captain says apologetically.

Vivienne lets out a knowing laugh. What an auspicious sign—the girl wants an autograph. "Don't we all."

"She says you are . . ." He winces. "She says you are the sea witch."

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The corners of Vivienne's practiced smile pucker.

"She says you should, ah, go back to the sea."

The girl points toward the waves, delighted. "Medusa *da* Poseidon's Depths!"

"She calls you—"

"I got that bit, thank you."

Blinking away her annoyance, Vivienne cranks up her smile wattage and with a finger motions the girl forward. She stoops to meet her eye to eye.

"Those aquatic picture days are long gone for me, my darling," she tells the confused, wide-eyed little thing. "Today Medusa's face is going to launch *A Thousand Ships*."

The ferry slows and curls around a craggy curve in the coastline. Vivienne stands, her breath catching.

Nestled between two emerald-capped cliffs is the most stunning production set she has ever seen. A matrix of blanched, planked docks extends from a smiling lip of sand, where a skinny man in a patterned bow tie already awaits. In the distance, she can just make out a small, charming town hued in white and coral. In the foreground, a few dirt roads peppered with donkey carts and bicycles wind past giant tents and dozens of custom stage sets. And at the top of the hills, casting a long shadow across the maquis brush, is a majestic hotel with balconies and arched windows.

It is all, fittingly, epic.

Her eyes are watering furiously from the glare—she underestimated the searing Italian sun, having packed her favorite pair of cat-eyes in her luggage—but she still manages to keep her chin high and her hands firm on the railing as the boat nudges the dock. An entrance is everything, after all.

The waiting gentleman hurries forward, extending his hand to assist her. He's shockingly young, no more than twenty or so, with

a big grin above that somewhat absurd bow tie.

“Miss Rhodes,” he says breathlessly as a few strapping Italian teenagers slip by to assist with her luggage. “Welcome, welcome to Tavalli!”

Vivienne nods, heels slipping as she steps onto the planks, the balmy wind whipping the hem of her floral swing dress.

“Johnny Preem, *A Thousand Ships* producer. Er, assistant, um, producer. Oh wow, are you crying?”

She lets out a dismissive laugh. “Just the sun.”

Johnny blushes and waves her toward the donkey cart waiting on the beach.

“You’ll get used to the glare out here. Though I think most of Cassandra’s scenes are interior, at least to start.”

Vivienne balks at the odd comment. Why bother telling her about the priestess’s scenes? She makes a mental note—he’s most definitely the assistant—and takes to setting the pace.

“Mr. Gallo is so thrilled you’ve joined the cast,” Johnny gushes, scrambling to keep up with her. “And I’ve been a fan of yours ever since your aquatic picture days. Since I was a little boy. Er, not that I’m implying you’re old.”

She rolls her eyes as Johnny helps her onto the cart. He slides beside her on the bench, snaps the reins, and they are off, trotting toward the hotel.

“So many production changes since Mr. Gallo took over.” Johnny fiddles with his bow tie as the donkeys plod up the path. “Set’s been a whirlwind, I tell ya. Mr. Durand is doing his darnedest keeping up, but—”

“Syd. Yes, I’d like to speak with him straightaway,” Vivienne says, scanning the valley as they bump along the dirt lane. So many grand, sprawling set designs—obviously the gossip columns weren’t wrong about *Ships*’ budget. Is that a rendition of King Pri-

am's palace? A Grecian temple beside it? There's a boxy, massive warehouse atop the distant cliff too—perhaps a remnant of the war?—into which a team of burly men are heaving a gleaming statue of Aphrodite.

“I want to discuss his directorial vision for Helen,” she says absently. “Her inner life specifically, over and above her beauty.”

Johnny leans forward, obstructing her view. “What do you mean?”

“I'd like to make a few changes to her dialogue,” she says. “Well, perhaps more than a few changes. A creative overhaul.”

“A Helen overhaul?”

“This is what actors do, Johnny.” She laughs at his confused expression. He must be very new to this. “I analyzed her scenes on the trip over from Los Angeles. The dialogue between her and Paris needs to be completely reworked. Perhaps George can join the meeting too? This will impact him as Paris, of course.”

“George Carvel?” Johnny's face falls. “But he can't join, Miss Rhodes, he's—”

“Of course he can. Georgie and I go way back, you know, to *Cabana Girls*. What a fun picture. Lots of those lines were mine, if you can believe it. That director, Ed Mann, trusted his stars. I do hope Syd will do the same.”

The assistant begins feverishly pulling at his collar.

“George will make a fine Paris,” Vivienne adds. “Once our scenes are tweaked.”

They turn into the impressive entrance of the Albergo Tavalli, the hotel's expansive stone terrace bordered by archways, looming facades and balconies, ellipse windows adorned with flower boxes teeming with tulips. Johnny jerks the reins with a *whoa*.

“Miss Rhodes, I think, well, there have been . . . lots of changes. Very last-minute changes. Maybe we should see Mr. Du-

rand straightaway—”

But Vivienne has already hopped down from the cart and is pacing toward the hotel’s spacious, column-checked lobby and what looks to be a bustling bar inside. She can hear laughter, the hum of conversation, clinking glass.

“Just a few moments to freshen up,” she tosses over her shoulder. “Can you be a love and arrange a hair and makeup touch-up? Whoever’s on hand will do. Then we can be off to see Syd.”

“Miss Rhodes.” Johnny hurries after her. “Miss Rhodes, wait, I really have this sense you’re uninfor—”

“Vivienne! Hello! Or should I say *buon giorno*?”

Vivienne freezes. That familiar, distinctive, perky voice . . . no, it’s just her imagination. She’s on a tiny island in the middle of the Ligurian Sea, for God’s sake, halfway around the world from Hollywood.

Still, she turns . . . and finds her.

Lottie Lawrence, in the flesh.

*Lottie. Lawrence.*

Vivienne lets out a tiny whimper. What the hell is she doing here?

The last time Vivienne saw Lottie was in March at the Academy Awards, arm in arm with the man Vivienne had convinced herself was her soulmate. Turns out Teddy Walters is quite a convincing actor after all, despite all those rags that insist he’s just a pretty face. In January, Vivienne would have bet her career that Teddy was planning to propose when he returned from filming *Madame Bovary* overseas. He’d seemed every bit as smitten as she was, with their long strolls down Sunset Boulevard, talking about anything and everything, the little ways he’d surprise her with candlelit dinners and dancing at *Ciro’s*. Instead, Teddy’s daily calls from the *Bovary* set quickly dwindled to once a week and

then to never, before he had the gall to show up at the Oscar pre-party with that woman, a notorious floozy, his only pathetic explanation offered that he'd finally found "true love." And Lottie hadn't even taken the high road after that. Oh no, she'd followed Vivienne around all night, firing little digs about how "fine" Vivienne looked, what "serious competition" she was (for Best Actress, ostensibly, but Vivienne knew what she really meant) as all of Hollywood looked on.

That night Vivienne swore to herself that she'd do whatever it took to never cross paths with Lottie again. Catalyst of heartbreak, merciless homewrecker. And yet here the girl is—all flushed apple cheeks and perfect blonde bob and those freckles, for Pete's sake—running out of the hotel toward Vivienne like a long-lost school chum.

"Welcome to Tavalli, Cassandra, soothsayer extraordinaire!" Lottie squeals louder than the little girl on the boat.

She kisses Vivienne's cheek and, beaming, drapes a necklace of fresh, heady-smelling orchids around Vivienne's neck.

"I had these welcome flowers made in town this morning. Only a ten-minute donkey ride away. The most darling people, I tell you, and the language, ah, I could listen for hours. *Orchidee, più soldi.*" Lottie laughs out her annoyingly smooth improvisation of an Italian accent, her big blue eyes twinkling. "Can you foretell we're all going to be very successful here? I'm thrilled at playing Helen, though I'm not sure this face could launch a single ship," she chirps, pointing to her gorgeous mug. "These bags under my eyes! I've hardly slept between the Cannes premiere, promoting *Bovary*, then touring the Riviera. More of a Grand Prix than a vacation, right? I suppose Ginger will work her magic with makeup. She's already here too. Isn't that grand?"

The palazzo cracks open, the ground splitting wide. Vivienne

must be falling through the world. Lottie. Here, in Tavalli, on *her* picture.

And . . . wait.

Did she just say *she* was Helen?

Vivienne latches onto Johnny with a glare. “What’s the meaning of this?”

The assistant raises his hands. “Miss Rhodes, as I was, um, I’m getting the sense you may be a step behind—”

She tears off the necklace, thrusting it at Lottie. “Allergic.”

“Oh.” Lottie blinks rapidly. “I didn’t—”

But Vivienne is in motion again, hurtling through the lobby, past a blurred throng: The gray-haired theater actor Charles Brinkwater, lecturing with a heavy slur two young actors on the importance of voice lessons. A few bellmen in uniform. A collection of unrecognizable actors—bit players, maybe, or even extras, as they all appear a little starstruck. One of whom is such an effective wallflower, she nearly trips over his boot.

“*Excusez-moi*,” the middle-aged fellow mumbles, straightening the lapel of his tattered tweed jacket.

“I need a phone,” Vivienne barks as she can sense Johnny still nipping at her heels. “In my room! I was specifically and unmistakably told I was cast as—”

She barrels straight into a man’s firm chest as she rounds into the hallway.

“Viv?”

Vivienne steps back.

Her heart plunges down, down, down.

“They told me you were coming in today.” Teddy Walters scoops her into a hug before she can get her bearings. “Island’s gorgeous, right? Beyond anything I could’ve dreamed.”

She stiffens into stone.

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“Haven’t seen you since the Oscars.” Teddy pulls away, suddenly sheepish. “You look well, Viv, really well.”

She can’t quite meet his eyes—it might be worse than staring into the sun—so she focuses on his smile and his hard, right-angle jaw. She swallows, beyond flustered. How many times had she longed to run her fingers along that jaw? Her lips?

“How are you here?” she whispers.

“I tried calling, you know. A couple times, after.” Teddy clears his throat. “We never finished that conversation, Viv. I—I want to explain. It’s part of the reason I said yes, when the studio called about Georgie not working out—”

“Wait, George Carvel isn’t . . .” She huffs. “Are you saying you’re—”

“The new Paris? Of course.” Teddy laughs, eyes wide with excitement. “You should have seen these crowds in Cannes, Viv. It was unreal, the reception we got for *Bovary*. Can’t blame Apex for wanting to keep a good thing going. They flew me and Lottie down straight from the Riviera.”

“I . . . wasn’t aware you were on the picture.”

Teddy’s face contorts at that—with guilt, or disappointment, she can’t be sure.

“Oh God, yes, this is,” Johnny huffs, catching up, “all above my pay grade. Miss Rhodes, I was led to believe you were aware of the latest changes to the cast.”

She blinks, sobered, freshly mortified. “Won’t you excuse us, Teddy?”

Spinning on her heel, she beelines for the cage elevator. Stabs the button. “My room.”

Johnny winces. “That’s broken.”

“Which one is mine?” Vivienne throws up her hands and stomps to the marble staircase opposite.

Around them, the lobby has gone curiously silent.

“Miss Rhodes, please—”

“Room!” she snaps again. Just like a damn sea witch after all.

“Number 305, but wait, just hold on a minute. You don’t have the keys!”

Vivienne finds the room in question at the end of the long, narrow hall, seething as Johnny fumbles with a large ring of mismatched keys. He stammers all the while about how very pleased Mr. Gallo was when she signed on, how essential she is to the production. Garbage. Typical Hollywood bullshit.

“I’m calling my agent.” She hurries into the spare, though admittedly beautiful, suite containing a cotton-sheeted bed and cherrywood furniture. White curtains rustle from the breeze as she plops down at the desk.

“Miss Rhodes, if I may?”

“Please leave.”

He does.

Her fingers fumble as she tries once, twice, three times to remember the correct way to call international. She dials Lew’s home, given the late hour in Los Angeles.

“*She was made to play the world’s greatest beauty,*” Buster Smith had assured them. She was in the room when he said it!

Vivienne snaps a bitter laugh as the trill Italian ring morphs into a hollow drone.

“*America’s screen siren,*” Jack Gallo had said. So earnestly. So damn convincingly.

“What a joke.” She puts the phone in a choke hold, now pathetically crying as she waits for Lew to answer. Has she really traveled thirty hours on planes, trains, and ferries only to play the handmaiden to her fiancé-stealing archnemesi? In the biggest picture of the decade, no less?

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“Hello?” Lew’s voice is soft and muffled. What is it—4:00 a.m.?

“Did you know?”

“Ah . . . who is this?”

“Did you know I’ve been cast as that weird fortune teller in the Troy film while two-bit Lottie Lawrence is Helen, *and the kicker*, Lew, the kicker: Teddy Walters is her Trojan in shining armor!”

Silence.

“Lew!”

“Oh dear.”

“What are our options?” Vivienne’s voice cracks like a shell and she takes a breath, collecting herself. “Tell me you can get me out.”

Lew, more awake: “I don’t know, Viv. We signed. But I can try.”

“How bad would it look?”

“The papers have run your involvement. No mention yet of Teddy and Lottie. It must have just happened.” Lew lets out a weighty sigh. “I could beat their agents to the punch, give a call to Hedda Hopper. Tell her your part wasn’t up to snuff. Gallo will be livid, though, and—”

“I don’t care.” She pinches her eyes shut with a groan. “Though Hedda will find a way to cast me as the scorned woman, I’m sure of it. Again.”

“Hey, you liked Sam Zimbalist when you met with him, didn’t you?” Lew says, livelier now. “The producer of *Ben-Hur*, your lunch back in December? They’ve just started shooting in Rome. I could make a call, see if they’ve got a part for you—”

“I’m done with ‘parts.’ This was supposed to be it, Lew, the beginning of a new era. Ten years in the business, all the hard work, ups and downs, dedication! I want epic leading lady, damn

it—”

“This *is* a leading role, Vivienne.”

The new voice, from mere feet behind her, startles her cold.

Vivienne turns around, phone still in hand, to find Jack Gallo himself leaning against her hotel room doorframe.

She hurries to stand from the desk.

“Lew,” she murmurs, “I’m going to have to call you back.”

As she nestles the phone in its cradle, the president of Apex Pictures crosses the room.

“Vivienne Rhodes.” Gallo gently takes her hand. “I’m so very glad you’ve arrived.”

Vivienne’s thoughts swarm, then flutter away. She knew Jack Gallo had been taking a very involved role on *Ships*, considering it’s his first picture as president. And Lew had mentioned before she left that he was technically standing in as producer, seeing as William Wagner had apparently stormed off set soon after the picture was moved here. But she hadn’t pieced together that meant the new studio mogul was actually here.

She’s met Jack before, last month, back on Apex’s Burbank lot, days after he had taken over the studio. She’d noted his looks then in an abstract, disassociated way, like one might register the beauty of an Oscar statuette. *Yes, yes, he’s handsome, attractive*, she’d thought at the time. *But what does this shiny man signify? How is he going to catapult my career?*

Now that Gallo’s standing in her hotel room, it’s a bit harder to dismiss his charisma. He takes off his fedora, his wide brown eyes never wavering from hers, his tan physique accentuated by the loose, white linen shirt he’s rolled to his elbows. He’s got a certain physical ease, a comfort in his own skin. She’d peg him as late thirties, maybe early forties.

He smiles at her, a lopsided, charming smile that reveals

pearly whites and a dimple. It nearly takes her breath away.

She backs up a step, breaking their contact, refocusing.

“No need to buzz Lew when I’m right here.” There’s a playful note to his tone. “The last thing Apex needs is a runaway phone bill.”

“You’ve made a grave mistake.”

“Funny, from where I stand, everything finally feels picture-perfect.”

“Oh really?” Vivienne snaps. “Were there *two* Helens of Troy in the history books?”

“Vivienne,” he purrs her name, closing the space between them. “Cassandra *is* a leading role. A far better role for you, I realized. A more complicated, memorable role than Helen. More than a face. A presence, a force. We needed a real actress to play her. Thus . . . you.”

She shakes her head, still ablaze with frustration. “I can count the priestess scenes on one hand.”

“Not after our pinch hitter is done rewriting the script,” Gallo presses. “He’s an underutilized ace. Snatched him up between projects. And when he’s done with it, the picture might as well be called *Cassandra of Troy*.”

“No, I—I can’t, I won’t.” Vivienne paces away. “I can’t be here, trapped on set, for months, with the two of them as Paris and Helen, and—”

“Is that what this is about? Lottie and Teddy?” Gallo laughs, surprised, his dark eyes sparkling now. “The execs told me you and Ted were a set-up romance promo for *Beach Holiday*. Am I misinformed?”

She falters, then gives a little shake of her head. Because he’s not wrong. Not technically.

“Oldest trick in the book, am I right?” Gallo continues.

“Though not necessarily fair, forcing you to play the happy couple. Pairing and switching and swapping you all like bride dolls.” His expression warms as he gazes at her. “You of all people deserve true romance, Vivienne. A partner. The real deal.”

Silence stretches a beat too long between them, until an errant butterfly flutters in her chest.

“Things are going to change,” Gallo says. “Now that I’m at the helm, I swear, I’m going to turn this money pit of a picture into an honest-to-God blockbuster. And I plan to be right here, every moment of every day, to make sure it’s a smashing success. To turn Apex’s luck around.”

He edges closer now, leaning on the desk. She can smell his aftershave. Notes of vanilla. Pine. She can see flecks of amber in those wide, dark eyes.

“And . . . yes, we’ve secured more talent, more glamour, to make that happen,” Gallo adds. “Lottie and Teddy, riding the tide of *Bovary*’s success. Household names like Clay Cooper. Charles Brinkwater. But most of all, we need you, Viv. You’re our brightest star. As soon as I came on board, I told them: ‘I can’t make this without her.’” His tone is as soft as the Italian breeze nipping at her neck. “I’ll be damned if this doesn’t land you that Oscar I know you’re gunning for. The Oscar you deserve.”

*Please. This is an obvious snow job, right? The typical Hollywood BS, once again.*

And yet the way he’s staring at her . . . she can’t be sure. There’s a spark there. Belief. In her, or else in the magic they might make together: a true, unprecedented epic. A few hours of total enchantment that could reach millions of viewers, change lives. And that can still change hers. Perhaps Gallo’s right, *if* she can put her pride aside. Recalibrate her plan. Allow herself to soar.

“Will you knock this out of the park with me, Vivienne?”

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Gallo murmurs. “Will you stay and do what I know you can do?”

She lifts her chin, mind racing. “I’ll . . . need more creative control over the role.”

He flashes that show-stopping smile once more, broadcasting relief. “I’d expect nothing less.”

She sighs, weightily, and then nods. Just once.

“Good,” he says, shoulders loosening fully. He gives her a wink and a quick squeeze of her forearm that spreads tingles across her skin. “All right then. I’ll let you settle in.”



# *A Thousand Ships*

An Apex Pictures Film

(Cast and Crew—Working List—June 1958)

## **Produced by:**

Jack Gallo, president of Apex Pictures

## **Directed by:**

Sydney Durand

## **Writing credits:**

~~Max Montrose~~ Matthew Rose

## **Cast:**

Lottie Lawrence—*Helen*

Vivienne Rhodes—*Cassandra*

Teddy Walters—*Paris*

Clay Cooper—*Hector*

Charles Brinkwater—*King Priam*

# 2

Lottie sprawls inelegantly on the hotel bed, staring at sea light dancing on the ceiling. “Heya, Teddy?”

“Hmm?” he answers from the armchair across the room, his face obscured by script pages.

She wrinkles her nose. “I don’t suppose you remember Vivienne having a flower allergy?”

A pitying snort is his only reply.

She sits up with a groan, adjusting her sundress. “I know, I know. I’m a born dupe, but I have to try, right? We’re gonna be on this island together for two months. She’s got to warm up sometime, and the sooner the better as far as I’m concerned.”

Teddy sets his marked-up screenplay to the side with a sigh. “I’m with you, Lottie-girl, but I don’t know. It’s starting to look like she’s never going to forgive us.”

“For what? For doing what the studio tells us? She might be a free agent, for goodness’ sake, but some of us are still locked into contracts.” Lottie flounces off the bed and stalks to the window. “I know you said there were feelings involved on her part, and I can’t say I blame her; you are *you* after all. But surely when Buster told

her your arrangement was ending—”

“Buster didn’t tell her.” Teddy furrows his forehead like a guilty child. “We’d become pals, you know. I was fond of her. Still am. So I thought it should come from me, not the studio. And then, I don’t know, it came time to shoot *Madame Bovary* five thousand miles away and it felt like maybe it might naturally just winnow—”

“But you did break things off with her.” Lottie perches on the window seat, gripping the sill hard.

“I mean . . . yes? I told her I’d met someone, as a matter of fact. Leveled with her as best I could under the circumstances.”

Lottie stares, horror dawning. “*When* exactly did you level with Vivienne, Teddy?”

He sits up straighter. “You have to understand, I felt like a real heel. I don’t think she’d ever been set up before, and I might have played my role too well. The more I kept things gallant, polite, the more eager she seemed. Started talking about marriage, little comments here and there, and—”

“And?” Lottie shoves herself off the windowsill. “Theodore Andrew Walters, please do not tell me it was—”

“It was Oscar night.” He hangs his head, waiting for punishment.

Lottie obliges, whapping him with his rolled-up script. “No wonder she was so awful. That little comment she made, how I looked like I’d already been given an award.”

“‘Omaha housewife wins Queen for a Day,’” Teddy recites, barely suppressing his chuckle. “You have to admit, that was a snappy one-liner.”

Lottie stomps her foot, but a giggle breaks through her scowl. “You are a beast.”

A telltale knock on the door interrupts, resounding musically:

*boom, badda, bop bop.*

“Open sesame,” Teddy calls, loud enough for their visitor to hear.

Max Montrose cracks open the door like a mouse checking to make sure the humans are asleep and slides inside just as furtively. “Oh dear, am I interrupting a lovers’ spat?”

Lottie rolls her eyes. “Hilarious.”

“Speaking of one-liners . . .” Teddy shoots Lottie a wink. “How long did it take you to work up that one up, Maxy? Is this why they pay you the big bucks?”

“The extremely middling bucks, I’ll have you know.” Max leans against the door with an apologetic grimace. “Dare I ask? Have you seen her?”

“You dare not,” Lottie lobs over her shoulder as she paces.

“It’s bad, Max.” Teddy’s smile drops away. “She was blind-sided, didn’t even know we were on the picture. Nobody told her.”

“Course they didn’t.” Max pushes his round glasses into place and claims an ottoman to perch on. “She’d have walked if she’d known. Smarter for Buster Smith to pull out his time-tested schmooze act, for Jack Gallo, our man of endless charms, to woo her all the way across the Atlantic, to get her here and *then* break the news. We’re on a remote Italian island. It’s a heck of a lot harder to take off than to just stay put and play nice.”

“Billy Wagner took off,” Lottie notes of the film’s erstwhile producer, just as Teddy cuts in, “Man of endless charms, huh,” a note of pique in his voice.

“Listen,” Max says. “Getting me to come out of my professional sepulcher writing dime novels in Montmartre and back onto an actual working set was no mean feat, but Gallo managed it.”

“I suppose I had nothing to do with it? Who do you suppose

told Jack about this swell screenwriter he met in Paris, an actual genius, an award-winner, who needs a little income these days to pay for his coffee and cigarette habit.”

Max smirks. “I always figured it was Lottie who recommended me.”

As the boys play-bicker, Lottie paces, trying not to bite her fingernails, the hardest of her bad habits to break. “You know, I think it’s worse than not knowing we were here. Vivienne seemed to think she’d be playing Helen.”

At that, Max lets out a full guffaw. Lottie and Teddy both glare at him.

He shrugs in self-defense. “Can you imagine it? From star swimmer to sea sorceress to pretty little princess? I’d have to change the plot to have her in battle armor, taking down Achilles in single combat. Don’t get me wrong, she’s dead gorgeous. She’s just not Helen.”

Lottie laughs, breathless. “And I am? Come on.”

“You’re plenty good-looking,” Teddy says, more dotingly than convincingly, but Lottie does believe Max when he squints appraisingly.

“You know, you’re lovable. Everybody likes you. That’s what makes you Helen.”

“Likable isn’t lovable.” Lottie peers out the window, at the waves, the sun, cheerful little boats bobbing in the distance—and a familiar, lissome figure stomping out to the shoreline, her face turned into the wind, dark hair billowing out behind her. “And not everybody likes me.”

She feels Max and Teddy exchanging a look behind her back but perks up with effort, whirling around, cheerfulness back in place.

“So Vivienne Rhodes isn’t a fan of flowers,” she says. “Fine

and dandy. I've got a back-up gift that simply can't fail. Nobody doesn't like See's."

"You have candy?" Max clutches his hands to his chest. "More candies? Don't waste them on glamour girl, she'll be watching her figure."

"Play nice," Teddy chides.

Max ignores him. "Give them to me. I'll love you even more than I do now."

Lottie flicks Max's glasses. "I already gave you your box."

"Which you ate in one sitting," Teddy deadpans.

"Anyway, it's worth another try." Lottie makes for the door. "And you two need some alone time to go over . . . dialogue notes, was it?"

She winks over her shoulder, but she can tell that as far as they're concerned, she's already gone. As she slides the door shut, she sees Max amble over to Teddy, leaving the script discarded on the floor.

Max is smart to be furtive, Lottie realizes, as she takes in the bustle of activity in the hotel halls. Studio crew, assistants, shipped-in extras chat in the stairwells and doorways, passing on their way to meetings and meals. The walls have ears and eyes in every production, and as far as sets go, you don't get more closed than a remote island location.

She spots Clay Cooper pacing the hall, squinting intently at his script.

"Hard at work already?" she calls.

"I dare not pour a libation to the immortals with unwashed hands," he recites, trying valiantly to hide his Texas accent, which has served him so well in his prior cowboy pictures. "Any idea what *libation* means?"

"It means a drink, which is where I'm headed." Lottie laughs,

swiveling just as Charles Brinkwater emerges from his room, adjusting his silk foulard robe and matching cravat.

Upon seeing her, he clutches his heart, and by now, she knows what's coming.

"O Lottie, 'she doth teach the torches to burn bright!'" Charles exclaims in a voice far too booming for the close proximity of the corridor. "'Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear.'"

"My goodness," Lottie coos, clutching her own heart. "You make a wonderful Romeo."

Just sixty years too old for the part, but Charles preens under the compliment. "I played the role five times, you know, once before the king. Say, shall I tell you about it over a dram of Scotch? Mr. Gallo, Jack, you know, gifted me a bottle of vintage Macallan, a very good year. Wait right there while I find the bottle . . ."

He doubles back into his room, but wait Lottie does not, seizing eagerly instead upon his momentary absence to escape down the stairs.

A pair of grips descending the steps stop mid-conversation to give Lottie a grin and a welcome when she trots past. The tall one is Hal, and the one who looks like a squirrel is Frank. By now she knows almost everybody from the American contingent staying at the hotel. Brought them all candy boxes this morning, establishing herself as the cast and crew's beloved kid sister. It's a familiar script, one she's played out many times before, from the studio school into the *Little Birdie Told Me* shorts, through the *Millie* movies, all the way up to the last shoot, *Madame Bovary*.

It's old hat, all of this. But this time, and she can't quite pinpoint why, Lottie feels off-kilter. In over her head.

*Is it Max?* she wonders. He's a complication, no question, principally because of him and Teddy, but even leaving that aside, Max is a liability. For the past three years, since popping up on

a list of Communist Party members, the name *Max Montrose* has sat ominously at the tippy-top of the Hollywood blacklist. Maybe things are finally changing, with new-breed moguls like Gallo willing to bend the rules and take some blessed risks. But as things stand right now, Max still has to doctor this script under a pseudonym—and, above all, hide any hint of his real relationship with the movie’s matinee idol.

Lottie’s been burdened with some pretty hefty secrets, but she can keep her trap shut. She’d have to be a real dummy not to. Teddy’s not only her meal ticket, their “whirlwind romance” hoisting her several rungs up the studio A-list; he’s also a pal. Quite possibly the best friend she’s ever had. And when they met Max in Paris back in January and the real romance of the century began, she found herself quite happily rolling along with them as a third wheel.

Lottie frowns now, digging a line into the oak banister with her fingernail. No, the source of her stress isn’t Teddy’s current love interest. It’s his “ex.”

Armed with her box of chocolates, Lottie rounds the next stairwell and fields a “What did you find, Millie?” joke from a freckle-faced gaffer, clearly a well-meaning fan, referencing Lottie’s recurring line from those popular “farmgirl and her clever spaniel” pictures.

“Nothing for you,” she teases, sliding past, quelling the urge to scream, “Do you see a dog? *Millie’s not here!*”

She takes a shortcut through the hotel bar, opting for the side door to the property’s picturesque gardens, and barrels straight into an unobtrusive middle-aged gentleman in a tatty tweed jacket.

“Goodness!” She laughs, patting his padded shoulders in apology. “I need to hold my horses.”

He's startled pallid by the attention. "Not at all, Miss Lawrence. Happens all the time."

Lottie's not surprised to hear that. Poor fellow must blend into the woodwork everywhere he goes. Maybe he's here as a background actor. Or a tourist. He's tucking a camera into his pocket now, a skinny metal one, not a brand Lottie's seen before. Maybe he's just sightseeing and got more than he bargained for.

He notices her staring and smiles tightly. "*Buona sera.*"

Lottie nods with a cheerful grin. "*Buona sera.*" She walks out into the gardens, dramatically cloaked now in the long shadows of early evening.

She finds Vivienne still lingering near the cliff edge, staring fixedly out at the sea as if contemplating throwing herself in, returning to her natural element. *The sea witch*, Lottie thinks with a smirk, Vivienne's jibe from the Oscars still smarting. Still, there's something so majestic about the taller woman, especially in this moment, that Lottie feels like she should be approaching with a paper and pen for an autograph rather than a box of candy.

Like an Omaha housewife who's won Queen for a Day.

Vivienne glances back, spotting her, and Lottie has to suppress a flinch at the ice in her new costar's expression. Vivienne looks the other way, clearly seeking an escape route, but Lottie starts to jog, hands tight around the box, keeping it from jostling.

"A little taste of home," she calls out. "I had some chocolates sent along. Didn't want you to miss out."

Vivienne looks down at the cardboard box as if Lottie has just announced it contains live cockroaches. But when she looks up, to Lottie's surprise, her lips are curved in a smile.

"You know, I get it," Vivienne says. "Why they cast you as Helen."

Lottie sees it. The trap behind the sudden pleasantness. But

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what can she do but smile back and say, “Oh?”

Vivienne starts away slowly, strolling the cliffside, an implicit demand for Lottie to follow. Lottie does, but makes sure she’s on the land side. One little shove could end it all.

“Well, if you think about Helen, everything she does, the recklessness, lack of foresight, selfishness big enough to shake the entire Western world to its foundations,” Vivienne muses, almost to herself. “It takes a certain quality to portray that, doesn’t it? A particular . . .” Here, she turns to Lottie, as if only now remembering she’s here. “Dimness.”

Lottie can’t stop color from rushing to her cheeks. Her studio school wasn’t exactly an academic setting so much as a crèche for kid actors, and as for Lottie’s education prior to signing with Apex, it could best be described as sporadic. Meanwhile, Vivienne Rhodes was LA royalty. The daughter of one of Apex’s biggest action heroes, the iconic star of *Robinson Crusoe* and so many other films. In Vivienne’s own right, a national teen swim champion who everybody thought was headed for the Olympics. According to the breathless profile in *Life* magazine, Vivienne also would have been up for valedictorian at the Westlake School for Girls if it weren’t for all the swim matches competing for her time.

An impressive personage. And doesn’t she know it.

“I see your point,” Lottie says, feigning affability. “I mean, I’m certainly no Joanne Woodward.” She turns to see Vivienne’s hard blink as the other woman remembers who beat them both for the Academy Award a few months back. “But then, neither are you.”

Vivienne freezes for a full three seconds, weathering the insult like a rung bell, before she smiles, shrugging her chestnut hair out of the wind. “There’s another quality to Helen, too, though, isn’t there, beyond her lack of intellect? The homewrecker element.”

Lottie breathes slowly through her nose. *Don’t react*, she

warns herself. *Visible anger is never the right play.*

Vivienne keeps strolling, casual as the breeze, kicking a pebble along as she goes. “I’m curious. When you heard Lina turned down Helen, who did you appeal to? Was it Jack Gallo himself? Did you go to his office on . . . bended knee?”

She glances back, pointedly arching an eyebrow, apparently pleased with herself for that bit of clumsy wordplay.

Lottie forces herself to keep walking. “I didn’t go to anybody. I’m still just a contract player, Vivienne. I do what they tell me to do.”

“Oh, gee whiz,” Vivienne snaps. “Is that what you said to Ken Winters’s wife? ‘Gosh, Betty, it’s not my fault, the studio made me do it.’”

Lottie’s eyes blur with instant tears. For Vivienne to bring up that damn *On the Q.T.* article now, *here*, a full ten years later. Of course Lottie knows that everyone knows, but the reminders never cease to pummel her.

An impulse strikes Lottie. A reckless one. The urge to step forward and slap, or better yet, shove. Vivienne’s on the wrong side of that cliff edge, after all.

Vivienne seems to realize it too, sweeping swiftly away past Lottie with a look of barely quelled alarm on her face.

Lottie clenches the still-unopened See’s box and wills her burgeoning tears to dry up before they so much as touch her mascara. She breathes, watching Vivienne beeline away, straight back to the safety of the Albergo Tavalli.

And once again, Lottie finds herself alone. Feels alone.

She can’t go back to the hotel, not yet, and not just because that’s where Vivienne will be. Lottie can’t face all those studio folks and wonder if they’ve called her a harlot behind her back.

She’ll do it soon—she damn well has to—but not yet.

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She worries at her fingernail, then lets her hand drop with a sigh of frustration. She will not let Vivienne Rhodes destroy her manicure on top of everything else. Lottie wants to partake in a worse vice than fingernail biting anyway. What she'd give for a cigarette. Even just a couple drags. She can trade chocolates if she has to. Truth is, she doesn't even like sweets.

She'd brought Billy Wagner one of his favorite Cubans as a thank-you gift for casting her, only to find he'd quit the picture before she arrived. Fleetinglly, she considers claiming the Cohiba for herself, but no. America's kid sister can't be caught smoking a cigar like a third-rate Marlene Dietrich. Her wholesome image is everything, so she'll have to be covert. And creative.

Looking for coconspirators, she scans the island's shallow central valley below, where they've built an entire studio town and a backlot in a matter of weeks. In the course of preproduction, the population of Tavalli has more than doubled. Biggest thing to hit this sleepy little island since the war, but judging by the prices at the village market this morning, Lottie supposes the locals don't need any lessons in how to make the best of a fluid situation.

Lottie expected to see an active set today, crew members milling about making last-minute alterations before filming begins tomorrow, but most of the staff seem to be congregated up near the entrance to the wartime hangar that might serve as one of their soundstages.

The hangar sits perched so close to the island's western cliff face that it looks like a strong wind might blow it into the sea. Only thirteen years since the end of the war, but the structure's already gone to rust. To the north of it, a little path has been trod through the grass straight off the edge of the island. As Lottie passes, she peers over, catching a glimpse of a cutback trail leading down to the water's edge. She spotted an idyllic little cove—might you call

it a grotto?—on the ferry ride to Tavalli. She'd bet dollars to donuts that's how you get down there.

First things first. She approaches one of the loiterers by the hangar, smile ready, mind trying to land on one of the phrases she remembers from her hastily purchased phrasebook: *Per piacere, fumare?* While most of this picture's crew is American, the entire property department was hired from mainland Italy, some kind of measure to foster goodwill with the Italian government, no doubt, in exchange for the opportunity to shoot here on Tavalli. Not only do most of these locals appear brand-new to the movie business; only one of them so far speaks a word of English, and this fellow, leaning on the hangar wall, isn't him.

He downright gulps at the sight of Lottie, tosses his smoke in the dirt, grinding it out with his heel before hurrying off inside, calling out something she's got no hope of translating and leaving her to curse herself for not miming "can I have a drag?" quickly enough.

Voices echo inside the soundstage. Curiosity strikes, but more than that. Wariness. Her stomach has clenched.

She can practically hear her mother: "*You get that feeling, Loretta, you know, the one in your tummy? Turn and run and you'll find me in our meeting place.*"

There hasn't been a parent to meet her anywhere since she was seven, but that feeling in her tummy has been a steadfast guardian all her life. Right now it's telling her that there is something not quite right about that hangar.

Swiftly, she edges around the side of the building, eyes and ears primed, but for nought. The only things she can see from this angle are crates and all she can hear is in overlapping Italian.

A spindly figure emerges quickly from the soundstage, hand resting on his pocket as if ready for a quick-draw duel. Lottie

instantly adjusts her stance, leaning against the building, legs crossed at the ankles, the picture of insouciance even as her heart races in her chest.

Then she lets out a breath. It's the prop master, Ludovico Despetti. The one Italian here who speaks English.

"*Principessa*," he calls. "What do you need? We are working hard here."

His voice is jovial, but there's an edge to his smile. Most people wouldn't notice it. Lottie does.

"Oh gosh, I didn't mean to intrude. I know you have so much to do to get ready for tomorrow. First day of filming. So jazzed."

That seems to appease him, but his eyes are narrowing on her in a way that's not entirely respectful, his hand rising up to stroke his impeccably trimmed mustache.

Lottie pushes off from the hangar wall. "I was actually on the hunt for a cigarette."

He cocks his head, surprised. Maybe impressed.

"I'm happy to barter for chocolates, if you promise not to tell anybody I smoke." She winks and leans in with a coquettish whisper. "Our little secret?"

Ludovico laughs hoarsely. "You are a naughty one, aren't you? Millie's girl smokes cigarettes, look at that."

As she laughs back in agreement, he shouts behind him in Italian. One of the set hands rushes to his side, Muratti cigarette in hand, lighter ready with a flame.

Lottie beams. "*Grazie mille*. And do take the chocolates. I was only teasing about trading. They're meant for you."

As Ludovico and his assistant open the See's box, peeking inside almost cautiously, Lottie steals a peek behind them, then puts in a casual, "So what are you fellas so busy with in there?"

There's a tense moment of silence, both men watching Lottie

with fresh alertness. She keeps innocently dragging on her cigarette until Ludovico smiles, wolfish.

“We are building a horse,” he says. “A very, very big one.”

Lottie claps. “The Trojan Horse! Of course. Can I see it?”

“No, no, no, you are too naughty, *principessa*.” Ludo chuckles, his eyes twinkling lasciviously. “Not until finished. A craftsman must keep his secrets. This is how we work.”

“In that case, I will respect your artistic sensibilities,” Lottie flirts back, even as the fine hairs on her neck stand up. There’s something about the glance the two men shared, as if they’re playing a joke at her expense.

She looks away to draw another drag, hiding her discomfort.

Another form appears on the track, south of the hangar. He’s unmistakable even from here, cutting a fine figure in his expensive suit, his handsome silhouette limned in gold by the setting sun. Jack Gallo looks more like a film star than a mogul to Lottie—either way, not an unpleasant face to see on set every day—but as she turns back to the set hands, she notes with surprise their very different reaction to his arrival.

Ludovico’s teasing smile has dropped into a tense scowl. He barks something behind him and the young man scurries away, shouting to the others, who hurriedly shut the two tall hangar doors.

Time to extract herself.

“*Buona sera*,” she calls to a distracted Ludovico, then she turns on her heel and walks away north, maintaining a sway in her hips in case there’s still an audience watching.

And as soon as she’s out of sightline, she fights the urge to run. She puffs on the cigarette and calms her pace.

Nothing feels safe lately. Her instincts keep telling her to get out of here. But if there’s one mounting threat Lottie’s prepared to

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confront head-on, it's her incredibly irritating costar.

Lottie squares her shoulders and makes for the hotel, determined to face whatever comes with dignity.

So Vivienne Rhodes insists on tearing her down? That's absolutely fine. Because Lottie Lawrence is far, far away from here. And in her place is a timeless, iconic, beautiful, powerful woman. A figure of legend.

From here on out, she's gonna be goddamned Helen of Troy.



June 11, 1958

# Hollywood Reporter

## *THE REPORT* ***Behind the Headlines***

### *APEX PICTURES COURSE-CORRECTS* *WITH GALLO AT HELM*

After a small parcel sell-off of the behemoth Apex Pictures campus in Burbank, as well as an influx of new money and enthusiasm from businessman and entrepreneur Jack Gallo, the major studio might live to fight another day. Newly minted board chairman Lex Augustine and head of production Buster Smith fully support the new president's progressive vision for the studio, which includes cutting the number of pictures per season and in-

stead focusing on a smaller slate of historical epics and big-budget sagas, like Apex's upcoming tent-pole *A Thousand Ships*.

"Mr. Gallo is precisely what Apex needs at this critical juncture: fresh blood with an inventive approach," Mr. Smith told the *Hollywood Reporter*. "His lifelong passion for this industry is palpable, and we're thrilled to have him at the helm, a maverick ready to steer Apex into its next era . . ."

# 3

*Friday, June 13, 1958*

Vivienne stares into the mirror while the set's makeup woman, Ginger, brushes glistening bronze powder across her hairline. Despite her young age, Ginger Banowski is clearly at the top of her game, a whiz with the brush and quite eager to collaborate. She barely batted her false lashes when Vivienne sat down in her chair this morning, on her first official day of shooting at long last, with a comprehensive visual overhaul for Cassandra, a way to elevate her character from “somber priestess” into “glamorous oracle.” Dark, theatrical makeup; sculpted cheekbones; cascading waves.

Maybe Ginger's such an ace because she has to be as a single, working mother. Vivienne had heard she was a war widow—likely true, as evidenced by the slew of joyful photographs taped around the mirror's frame, Ginger and the same smiling little girl taken during various milestones, and not one husband photo among the lot.

Ginger follows Vivienne's line of sight and smiles. “My pride

and joy. Jackie. She's ten."

Children really aren't Vivienne's thing, but she's eager for Ginger to warm to her. She doesn't have many allies on this island; plus, good hair and makeup people are essential. "Adorable. I don't think I've seen her around set."

"She's back home," Ginger explains. "With my mom. Easier for everyone, but golly, I miss her."

"Got to be hard."

Ginger pastes on a cheery smile. "The new doll and dresses that Mr. Gallo sent along helped to soften the blow," she says wistfully. "Such a thoughtful fellow, I tell ya. Though before you go askin', it's nothing like that. He's a gentleman, through and through. If I need to be away from my Jackie for two months, at least I know it's for a classy guy. Easy on the eyes, too, isn't he?"

"Is he?" Vivienne tries to keep her voice neutral. "Hadn't noticed."

Ginger laughs. "I suppose he's got some competition on this set."

"Oh. That's not what I—"

"Really, I've been dying to know, is it awkward? Working with Teddy again?"

Vivienne hardens into marble in her seat, though if Ginger notices, she doesn't let on.

"Everyone thought the two of you were gonna tie the knot," she continues, wrinkling her brow as she sweeps the brush down Vivienne's cheekbone. "Exquisite couple you made. The wedding . . . Ah, it would've been swoonworthy."

"Yes, well, not everything works out."

"Oh, come on. I know real love when I see it. And you, Viv, you were smitten."

Vivienne closes her eyes.

“Well.” Ginger sighs out the word when Vivienne stays silent. “Other fish in the sea. I could see you with someone far more sophisticated. Ooh, like Gregory Peck. He’s married, though, isn’t he? All the best ones are.”

While Ginger applies her eyeliner, Vivienne attempts to slow her breath, to regain control of her jumping pulse. Jack Gallo was right when they’d spoken in her hotel room last Friday evening, the night she’d arrived: her relationship with Teddy had begun as an arrangement, a strategic, romantic pairing to whet audiences’ interest in *Beach Holiday* during the picture’s opening weeks at the box office. And though it was her first setup, Vivienne was far from naive; she’d been in the film business long enough to know these sorts of relationships were arranged all the time. Besides, she’d grown up with performative parents—her celebrity father and Southern belle mother—whose brief infatuation morphed into fiery mutual hatred before Vivienne had been old enough to walk, and still, the pair relentlessly played the part of “Hollywood’s power couple” for decades. Vivienne had told Apex that of course she’d date Teddy Walters for the good of the picture. A few dutiful dinners out at LA hotspots, a handful of arranged public appearances together, and then they’d both say sayonara.

The trouble was, despite everything, Vivienne desperately wanted the “real deal,” as Gallo had so succinctly put it—the kind of cinematic, boneshaking romance at the heart of films like *His Girl Friday*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *Casablanca*. Those heady love stories she used to sneak out to watch at the Santa Monica Cinema when her parents were shrieking at each other; the kind of relationship she’d daydream about as she swam freestyle laps, hours upon hours perfecting technique, in the Athletic Club pool.

And Teddy Walters, it turned out, wasn’t just a looker; he was honest and kind, a rare combination in this business. An Iowa-

born track star with modesty and aw-shucks charm. And he had such a backstory, as interesting and tumultuous as Bogart's Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*. Teddy's days spent running track, he'd confessed to her, were more like running for his life, as he grew up dirt-poor, the fifth child of a drunken, destitute farmer. Moreover, Teddy seemed lonely, like she was Like he was searching for the real deal too. Their connection felt open and candid and surprisingly right. Vivienne fell for him easily, the whole affair as effortless as stepping off a ledge and plunging in.

So she hadn't worried, at least at first, when Teddy's check-in calls from France started dwindling. *Bovary* had a tight shooting schedule, after all, and their time zones were literally night and day. It didn't take long, though, before her worries turned all-encompassing, Teddy's name a constant mantra in her mind, her torturous mental games of "Why Isn't He Calling?" consuming most Saturday nights this past winter, along with multiple bottles of white Bordeaux. The next time she saw him was at the Oscar pre-party, when Vivienne literally smacked right into him, a tight turn in her floor-length piqué gown sending her colliding into Teddy's tux-clad chest. *What a perfect meet-cute*, she'd thought, swelling with happiness before registering Lottie Lawrence draped across his arm.

Of all people. Lottie. An actress who flirted with anything that moved, who everyone's whispered about since the girl hit puberty, who climbed the career ladder early on by having an affair with her married costar, Ken Winters. It had to be a setup for *Madame Bovary*. That was the only rational explanation.

But then Teddy confirmed her greatest fears, pulling her aside right in the damned middle of the red-carpet madness, stumbling through some kind of half-baked explanation for why he'd disappeared on her. Telling her that he had, in fact, finally found the

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real deal—just with someone else. As if she would be thrilled for him.

Losing Best Supporting Actress that night had been a breeze by comparison.

“Lips, love,” Ginger orders.

Startled from her recollective trance, Vivienne puckers. A few quick sweeps of color, then Ginger adds, “There,” and steps aside like a showgirl.

Vivienne blinks at her reflection in the mirror. “Glamorous oracle” indeed. The woman staring back is downright arresting, with piled brunette waves; wide, beguiling hazel eyes; razor-sharp cheekbones. A ruby-red mouth that somehow looks equally alluring and classic.

“Is this what you were imagining?” Ginger says.

“Even better.”

Ginger matches Vivienne’s smile through the mirror.

“Knock ’em dead out there.” The makeup artist winks before sauntering out the trailer’s flap door with a toss of her auburn hair.

Vivienne once more studies the stunning woman in the mirror.

“Cassandra,” she says aloud, trying on the new name again.

Playing the priestess still feels like a consolation prize—she can’t deny that, despite all of Gallo’s assurances—and yet she won something far more valuable in their exchange. She’s still electrified by the creative control Gallo promised her, buzzing with excitement to get to set. Vivienne’s never been handed *carte blanche* freedom over a role. That’s what he gave her, wasn’t it? Total authority over her character? She’s spent the last six days on the island holed up in her room, reworking her scenes and monologues, hand-delivering her pages to Max or Johnny to pass along to Syd Durand, while the rest of the cast has been busy filming the

opening sequence. After Vivienne's reimagining, Cassandra will no doubt be her finest role: a woman with vision, passion, and drive; a mastermind tragically ahead of her times. The oracle is her surefire ticket to that elusive Oscar, and *not* in a supporting category.

Vivienne bursts out of her trailer, humming from an undeniable feeling of destiny. She sets down the short dirt path, passing the wardrobe tents and the "promo room," as the crew's taken to calling it, where an assistant is arranging neat stacks of large glossy photos of every major cast member. Gallo really is pulling out all the stops. And he was right, the final *Ships* cast list is quite impressive, if a bit, er, eclectic. Veteran West End star Charles Brinkwater. The young king of the Hollywood Western, Clay Cooper. Lottie and Teddy, both beaming in their annoyingly perfect headshots. And Vivienne herself, a pile of parted red lips, eyes bewitched by some distant horizon.

She heads toward the custom sets tucked like a row of dioramas into the valley's fold. The gilded Grecian temple. The lavish bedroom interior set. Then a palace atrium checkered with marble columns and a gleaming, gilded floor. King Priam's palace, scene five, she recalls instantly, having read the script so many times.

The introduction of Cassandra.

Cast members and extras already cluster at the base of the set's elevated stage, the lot of them looking cut from a history book in their costumes: royal Trojan cloaks, chitons, servants in their togas. There's a crowd buzzing around Sydney Durand, who appears flustered even from here, his tufts of gray hair standing on end, his shirt untucked and sweat-stained. Syd's directing a group of cameramen with increasingly exasperated hand gestures while discussing something with Johnny and another assistant, Vivienne assumes, a tall, bald man with a long, crooked nose. Behind

them, set hands run back and forth across the stage.

Despite her lingering reservations, despite the clawing nerves digging into her insides, there is something wholly irresistible about the frenetic energy of a shooting set.

“Finally,” Syd huffs when he spots her. “Vivienne!” He storms toward her. “You’ve gotta be kidding me with this.”

“Goodness, Syd, I’m only five minutes late.” She laughs lightly. “Please don’t have a coronary—”

“The look, I mean. Your look is all wrong!”

Vivienne flinches. Just an instant. She’s in the right here, after all. “Syd. As I’ve been stressing, Cassandra needs a wholesale re-imagining if this picture’s ever going to soar. The Oracle of Troy cannot fade into the background—”

“Vivienne, what part of ‘budget constraints’ do you not understand?”

She grits her teeth. “Eyeshadow costs the same whether it’s purple or brown—”

“That Palladium prophecy scene you added? We don’t *have* a Palladium. No, we need to revert, revert, *revert*.” Syd spins on his heel, yanking on his hair, shouting, “Ginger? Can one of you putzes get me Ginger!”

Vivienne’s about to follow, argue her vision until it’s canon once and for all—didn’t Gallo explain the new state of affairs?—but Charles Brinkwater saunters in front of her path, looking disheveled in his King Priam cloak and feathered headpiece.

“Oh, Vivienne.” He teeters a bit, kissing her hand with a conspicuous wink. “Don’t you just look like this picture’s star?”

“Charles.” She nods, though that wink . . . it makes her uneasy. On Wednesday night, as she’d been working on the next round of pages, Vivienne had somehow polished off the bottle of Chianti she’d had sent up from the bar. As she was tipsily attempting to

deliver her latest reworked scene to Johnny, since Max was nowhere to be found, Charles had spotted and snared her on her way out the door.

Charles Brinkwater is most decidedly a bad influence. He'd cajoled her into another glass of wine, along with two gin martinis, while he'd rambled on about all his turns playing Romeo; about how *Ships* will turn him into an international star to rival "that hack Olivier." He even attempted to include the hotel's bartender in the discussion, oblivious to the fact that the poor guy spoke nary a word of English. At some point Clay Cooper joined them at the bar, at which point Vivienne had launched into her own diatribe about Lottie Lawrence not being highbrow enough to play Helen of Troy.

"The cast and crew agree with you about Lottie, you know." Charles takes Vivienne's arm, leading her through the crowd, up the steps and onto the stage. Goodness, it's not even 10:00 a.m. and she can already smell the booze on him. Around them, the lighting team shuffles about, putting the finishing touches on a mood piece: a green, otherworldly spotlight shining onto a gilded mosaic on the floor. The dozen or so extras have started filtering in, mulling about the columns, chatting, waiting for Syd's call.

Charles adds, in a much too loud whisper, "I did you the courtesy of taking a poll."

Vivienne snaps her head around, eyes narrowing. "What do you mean, a poll?"

"A survey of sorts. About whether Lottie is suited for the role." His British lilt dips into a slur. "More than fifty percent agree she's miscast as Helen."

"Oh, Charles, you didn't."

"All those rumors of her and Ken Winters, it's just so uncouth," Charles talks over her. "Shagging her way into the upper echelons."

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Not the kind of actress one imagines playing the Queen of Troy. Even Lottie herself seemed surprised by her selection when I put it to her—”

“What?” Vivienne hisses. “You told Lottie what I said?”

Charles furrows his brow. “Only seemed fair to include her in the official vote.”

“Talking about me again?” Lottie’s voice rings out. “Gosh, you two can’t seem to stop.”

Vivienne turns to find Lottie wearing a wide, clearly fabricated smile. Her swept-up hair and regal makeup are so perfect, so stunning, that all the words fall out of Vivienne’s head.

“My, what a glamorous priestess you are, Vivienne.” Lottie appraises her back with raised eyebrows. “Really, nothing says ‘virgin prophetess’ like a full mug of makeup.”

Vivienne stiffens. “We’re reimagining Cassandra. To be more of a central presence. A heroine. I’m sure you were made aware.”

Lottie smirks. “And here I thought Syd was the director. Silly me.”

Vivienne’s heart starts beating in race mode, a starting pistol cracked. “My changes are for the good of the picture, Lottie, nothing more.”

“Feels a little like mutiny. How exciting.” Lottie cocks her head. “And is everybody with you on this? Should we take a poll?”

“Too late to fix this, Ginger’s prepping the goddesses.” Syd huffs his way between them, oblivious. “Full body paint, gonna take a while. We’ll have to make do.”

He motions for Teddy, who’s joined them on the stage, to stand atop the mosaic.

Lottie sweeps next to Teddy. Possessively.

“All right, ladies, gentlemen.” Syd steps forward, manically clapping his hands. “Let’s lock it up! Rolling in five!”

Vivienne pinches her eyes closed, a headache blooming.

As she hits her mark on set, she inches toward Lottie to whisper, “I did not ask Charles to talk to everyone. For the record.”

Lottie doesn’t meet her eyes. “I just hope you know there’s absolutely no reason to feel jealous of me. We’re going to have equal billing. Or at least, close to it.”

“Jealous?” Vivienne squawks. “Of you?”

“You’re literally green.” Lottie gestures to the eerie, lime-colored spotlight with a sweet smile.

“Annnd action!” Syd calls from the director’s chair.

Vivienne’s mind goes as quiet as the set. That’s her cue, yes?

She looks around, trying to focus, to dash Lottie Lawrence and her passive-aggressive jibes from her mind. Charles has stumbled to sitting on King Priam’s throne. Teddy and Lottie are standing atop the mosaic. After Vivienne’s revisions, it should only be Lottie in the prophecy, but no matter, they can run it right next take. Time for her new monologue.

Vivienne pushes her cloak from her shoulders and turns away from her ex and his harlot. “I, Cassandra, am a mere conduit of the future. I foretell Paris’s rash actions will bring great pain upon our people, his ill-fated infatuation with a temptress across the sea—”

“And . . . ah, cut,” Syd calls. “Good start, Vivienne, but let’s stick with Max’s dialogue.”

Vivienne resists the urge to look in Max’s direction. Max Montrose, who’s still on the Hollywood blacklist, for goodness’ sake, is apparently Gallo’s pinch-hitter scribe. She’d thought a man who’d been handed such a golden opportunity to resurrect his career would be open to collaborating, had assumed he’d accepted her notes . . . Although Max had gaped at her, hadn’t he—looked horrified, really, now that she dwells on it—when she’d passed along her reworked scenes earlier this week, as if some Greek sea-

demon kraken had hand-delivered him pages.

In her peripheral vision now, Vivienne can see Max feverishly pacing behind Syd's chair, shaking his head of dark curly hair, adjusting his glasses.

"Let's run it again as written," Syd calls before Vivienne can interject. "Scene five, take two . . . action!"

Frustrated, Vivienne tilts her chin and swishes forward. "I have seen the great despair Paris will bring down upon our people, as he listens to the call of the siren across the sea—"

"Vivienne, cut!" Syd takes a long, audible breath and slides out of his chair. "That's not what the script says."

"It's what the script *should* say."

Syd's eyes bug wide. "As I mentioned, doll, we're holding to *Max's* script iteration—"

"And as *I* mentioned, that iteration needs rewrites."

"I'm not taking rewrites," Max growls. And then a low rumble, "I didn't upend my life to play secretary to a mermaid."

From the stage, Teddy shoots him an admonishing glare. It oddly fortifies her.

"Mr. Gallo gave me full creative control," Vivienne presses, "and I intend to use it to save this picture."

"Ooh, are we all in trouble?" Lottie effects a gasp. "Should we call the police?"

The extras titter with laughter.

The director's face grows redder. "Vivienne, I think you're misinfor—"

Vivienne spins. "And you know what, Syd, now I'm thinking of a different prophetic vision altogether. Perhaps Cassandra could be foretelling Helen's death."

"Hey, I like this game," Clay Cooper calls from his spot near the columns. "Are we all allowed to make rewrites? Let's give ol'

Hector a monologue.”

Max covers his face. “This is an actual waking nightmare. A Dali painting. A—”

“Mr. Durand,” Teddy cuts in, exuding friendliness with all his might. “Maybe we take five?”

Syd, flummoxed now beyond speech, simply gives a slow thumbs-up.

“Right.” Vivienne blinks rapidly. “Fine.”

She steps back with a clearing of her throat, then promptly takes the set steps two at a time. Past Syd, past Max—quickly before anyone can see her fully unravel.

Didn’t Gallo assure her this was her Oscar vehicle, her role to mold as she sees fit? So why is everyone treating her like she’s really Cassandra? Aka, a raving lunatic?

She careens up the dirt road before tears come on. Huffing, scalding, the indignity reaching boiling point. She needs water. Air. Space to think. But what looks to be the trio of sparkling, no-name young goddesses are heading down the path via Johnny’s donkey cart from the wardrobe tents.

She impulsively ducks onto the matted grass, weaving instead toward the warehouse on the island’s cliff, where she’d seen the Aphrodite statue being loaded yesterday. She spots Jack Gallo, president of Apex Pictures, of all people, here, out for a countryside walk. For heaven’s sake, couldn’t he have been on set, backing her up?

He looks tense. He’s staring at the hangar, his dreamy face stitched, as if concerned.

She approaches quietly, not wanting to startle him, but a twig snaps.

Gallo starts and turns. “Vivienne?”

He attempts that charming smile of his as she approaches. But

she can tell he's still unnerved, rattled by something.

"What are you doing off set?" he asks. "Wandering around over here?"

She could ask him the same thing. Instead, it all tumbles out.

"This isn't working," she croaks, wrenching a flyaway hair behind her ear. "I thought I could move forward, focus on the film. But this is the definition of slow torture, foretelling the tale of Lottie and Teddy's earth-shattering love. And Max and Syd are aggressively ignoring my notes, like I'm just some clueless actress, and Cassandra as envisioned now is a two-bit character. I know what you said about me and this film and I want, quite desperately, to believe you, but I'm getting that feeling I used to get in the water, when I'd hold my breath just a beat too long and—"

She swallows a gulp of air.

"And I can't tell if I'm sinking or this whole *Ships* is sinking, but I have this deep, undeniable, mounting sense that I should walk away. While I have the chance."

As she recovers from her monologue—not the one she'd intended to give today—Gallo softly cups her shoulders. At his touch, she feels her tension melting away. She peers up into his warm eyes.

"It's my fault," he finally says. "I framed your creative involvement as advice to Syd. I thought that might land better, but . . ." He sighs. "To be honest, the picture, this set, the crew, it's, well, there's more to do than I ever anticipated. Producing isn't for the faint of heart, is it?"

He lets out an unassuming laugh, then glances back at the hangar, all traces of his smile falling away.

"Tell you what," he says, brightening as he refocuses on her. "I chartered a private yacht from Corsica last week. Figured I'd need some space for myself away from the cast and crew from time to

time. A wise move or a foolish one, I'm not sure yet. Some of the local production crew are proving a bit hard to manage." His eyes flick to the hangar again. "Either way, useful to have a hiding spot. But for you, Vivienne, I will gladly extend an invitation."

He carefully covers her shoulders with the folds of her cloak. She nearly blushes at the tenderness of the gesture.

"Why don't you come to the docks around seven tonight?" he asks. "We'll have dinner, go scene by scene through your changes to the script to make sure I fully understand your new vision. Then I'll talk to Max and Syd, get them both in line. Give me one more chance. That's all I'm asking."

Now she's really blushing, in spite of it all.

Dinner. With the studio chief. She knows his offered meeting isn't just about the script. There's a force between her and Gallo she can't deny, like a magnetic charge.

And she can see it in his eyes: he'd like more from her.

She's been so burned from the Hollywood game of strategy masquerading as love, from playing it with Teddy and losing big. And she is not, nor will she ever be, a Lottie Lawrence-type, sleeping her way into a better role.

She stares into Gallo's eyes, their warmth now searing.

Then again, who's to say that whatever is building between them has to be an either-or situation? Who's to say things would go the same way as her fling with Teddy? Why *couldn't* this end like all those pictures she worshiped as a child?

Gallo drops his hands, almost reluctantly, from her shoulders. "What do you think, Viv?"

She swallows. "I believe my calendar's open."

His lips curve into a smile once more. "Then it's a date."

She allows herself a smile in return only when Gallo leaves, trailing toward the water. Then she leaves herself, heading back in

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the vague direction of set. Along the way, she hears a tiny thump, then a muffled curse.

She spins to find that extra she'd almost tripped over at the hotel when she'd first arrived in Tavalli. The inconspicuous middle-aged man in the tweed jacket, although now he's in his extra costume, a full-length toga, hiding behind a few marble statues clustered near the warehouse entrance. A strange, thin, metal device is in his hand. It's a camera, isn't it? The type they used back in the war.

The man takes off, camera in hand, toga flowing, darting back toward the set.

Leaving her completely bewildered in the maquis brush.

