

AND INTRODUCING DEXTER GAINES

A Novel of Old Hollywood

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### Author's Note

This is a work of fiction. All characters and situations depicted herein are entirely fictitious, other than actual historical persons and firms who are portrayed or referenced in entirely fictional scenes and dialogue.

For Mark and Cayce,  
who both inspire in their  
own inimitable ways

“My mother thought Hollywood was a den of iniquity,  
and people came to terrible bad ends there.”

—Kitty Carlisle Hart

ONE

*Entertainment Tonight* barely gave a passing nod to the news Milford Langen had died of a heart attack outside a liquor store on Melrose Avenue. Mary Hart, her eyes scanning the words on her teleprompter, delivered the announcement of his passing with the somber tone she reserved for such obituaries, listing a handful of titles Langen produced at 20th Century Fox in the '40s and '50s before she filled the remaining few seconds with a litany of the innocuous television series he had either created and/or produced up until the late '70s. The only mention of Lillian Sinclair, his actress wife of some forty-one years, was the same tired line about her suicide in 1982. No reference was made to Langen's brief association with a once promising young actor named Dexter Gaines.

Milly, as his inner-circle called him, had always hated to be upstaged, so he had chosen the worst possible time to drop dead, the bulk of the telecast being devoted to the low-speed O.J. Simpson police chase. For a moment, as I listened to Mary's recitation which ended with "Academy Award-winner Milford Langen, dead at seventy-five," a long pent-up rage tightened my stomach, threatening to linger and consume me. I muted the television and sat in the ensuing silence of stuttering blue light in my shabby apartment, trying to breathe into the knot, calling on the relaxation techniques I'd learned after years of therapy. But these feelings were deep seated

and stubborn, an unhealed wound in my soul now salted by the news he was dead. Recent events hadn't helped, as I was still struggling with my newfound status as widower at the reality-altering age of sixty-three.

Impossible after forty some years just the mention of Milly's name could still trigger emotions that should have been long dead. Impossible how the sight of his smiling face from a studio photograph taken sometime in the mid-1960s, inset over Mary's left shoulder, could still cause my hands to tremble even more than usual—so much I had to set down the fork I had been using to eat my Lean Cuisine and fold them in my lap.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

*God. Damn. It.*

The anger was still there, nearly as raw and horrible as it had been my last day in Hollywood when I'd smashed most of Milly's Steuben glassware and then tried to strangle him on the imported marble floor of his Hancock Park mansion.

Breathe out.

I was losing to the now familiar dark shroud of one of my "spells" as it crept over me, blocking out the dwindling light in my apartment and the surreal tableau of the never-ending aerial shot of the infamous white Ford Bronco. They were less frequent now, these episodes, but had never really left me. My life since that autumn in 1953 had been a frantic escape, running from place to place, seeking anonymity while contemplating suicide, until, that is, I had met Carol some twenty-one years ago and discovered the bliss of healing. Death had landed me here, scars and baggage intact, in a one-bedroom at the Briarwood Arms in San Jose. Not as far from Hollywood as I would have liked, but enough that I'm no longer recognized by self-styled film

buffs who've actually heard of Dexter Gaines or perhaps even seen one of the three films I did while being mentored by a powerful young producer at 20th Century Fox named Milford Langen.

I had neither seen nor spoken to Milly since the day I'd tried to kill him, and the pain had gone unresolved in all the gaping, empty years that followed. I looked down at my quivering hands, searching for the faint scars from Lillian Sinclair's claw-like fingernails, almost as if for reassurance my current life had not begun with some disturbed dream. Weeping and hysterical, she had tried to pull me off of her husband, gouging three parallel slashes of blood in the back of my right hand before I at last succeeded in hurling her across the floor where she cowered, her legendary face contorted into a mask of despair made all the more convincing by the rivulets of black mascara washing down her perfect cheeks as she sobbed over and over again, "I don't understand, I don't understand." It was her eyes, desperate and childlike, that snapped me to my senses. In them, I saw the enormous horror of what I had become—of what we all had become. I stared at her in disgrace as Milly gagged, choking on the words, "Get out." Lillian then met my gaze and nodded, hugging herself, still splayed against the wall where I'd thrown her like a discarded doll.

It was to be the last time I would see him, his wife crawling over to her coughing husband as I wailed, "Oh no oh no," before turning to run out the front door and headlong into all the silent years that lay ahead. Until Milly's smirk popped up over Mary Hart's shoulder, taunting me with the knowledge he had died on his own, of natural causes no less, in his ultimate declaration of victory over me.

Just one more reason to hate him.

And so it went, my obsessive thoughts of Milly pulling me in a downward whorl. I was

too tired to resist, and Carol was no longer around to nurse me through, so instead I gave in to my weary ritual of closing the yellowed shades, unplugging the phone, and burrowing into the relative calm of darkness and the smell of unwashed sheets.

I would remain that way for two days.

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In the nightmare fervor of my spells come the visions. Milly's face from the *ET* segment, his smile incapable of masking the haunted madness in his eyes. The vivid memories of moonlight glinting off the prisms of a crystal ice bucket set neatly on the drink cart next to the lawn chair where I sat wearing my sailing clothes, utterly alone and wallowing in my childish yearning for an unattainable love, watching three toy steamships cut their tiny wake across the surface of a still pool glowing blue in the night as the laughter and swing of some ancient Hollywood party lilted from the open doors of the exquisite mansion behind me. The indelible vision of Barbara Stanwyck's pitying look as I stood over her, now in a uniform, holding a silver tray neatly set with china cups of steaming broth, my hands shaking—goddamned hands always shaking—now the squeaking of my mother's wheelchair as she rolled into my bedroom and caught me masturbating. Her gin-ravaged voice a cruel rasp as she commanded, "Put your hands flat on the floor, you dirty boy." The indescribable agony as she ran her wheels over my fingers to ensure I wouldn't touch myself again for almost a year. The stench of the holding cell where I spent my first night in Los Angeles, New Year's Eve, 1951. The bald humiliation of that evening which had been my welcome to the promise of Hollywood. Now Lillian Sinclair's sad, dead eyes as the weight of her soaked sable coat pulled her spiraling down toward the bottom of the sea, the last



tiny spray of bubbles bursting from her red, full lips. Did she think of me in those final moments as death clouded over her? Now Carol gasping for that last breath, too, both without me there to comfort them as they gave up and moved on. A kaleidoscopic pastiche of faces and words and feelings, like something out of a B horror movie when the protagonist slips into madness and his life is superimposed in spinning vignettes around his horrified features, looking for all the world like that painting *The Scream*.

I still had a lifetime of lurid visions, and in the darkness, alone, they are as vivid as yesterday.