

THE RED MADAM

By

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Chapter One

Los Angeles had been through an unmerciful heat wave in the last two weeks, so it didn't surprise me when the cool newscaster on the Channel 5 Morning News announced that William Arthur Rathgart had died in the night at the age of 87. It did surprise me to see old Knobby Cassidy interviewed at his newsstand. Knobby rarely talks to anybody, but he did know everybody in the glorious days of Hollywood and probably was one of the few residents remaining who could remember Rathgart from the beginning.

"Yeah. I knew Rathgart," old Knobby confirmed to a reporter with mirrored sunglasses. "Since I was playing keys for the Red Madam. He was supposed to be ruthless, but he never forgot his friends when he got big."

It was probably the damned heat, I thought to myself. Bill Rathgart had always hated air conditioning. He claimed it dried out his sinuses, and made it hard to breathe in his Beverly Hills house. He used ordinary electric fans instead. Contrary to logic, Rathgart also refused to attribute any shortness of breath to his emphysemic lungs or the fifteen Cubans he had smoked daily since his retirement from the acting profession ten years earlier.

"Excess, my dear Yellowflower," he once told me, "is the main point of being stinking rich. I smoke the stinking Cubanos to remind myself that I am entitled to vast excess!" His voice boomed in the grand style that had sold a million tickets for almost every one of the fifty-five feature films starring William Arthur Rathgart and shot in the Golden Era of movies.

Now he was dead. Channel 5 said natural causes.

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I had met Bill Rathgart on a murder case back in 1989. He had been a character witness, not directly involved in the murder, which was also typical of the kind of parts he had grown used to landing in his later years. His expensive hairpiece no longer hid his age,

although he still looked himself and sported the bristling mustache that had always been his trademark. He was a jolly, affable man, and he seemed perfectly resigned to his gentle fall from stardom.

I interviewed him successfully, agreed to stay for a drink, and got the eye from his nurse, Alicia Lloyd. She lived in at the house, along with an elderly housekeeper named Bessie and a two-year-old Irish setter called Hayworth.

Alicia was over twenty-one, pretty and blonde, so I gave her the eye right back. As I was leaving, she took me aside and made an odd proposition. She could see I was a fan of Mr. Rathgart's, she said, and he seemed to like me. She confided that she was concerned about the reclusive lifestyle brought on by his bad lungs. Perhaps I could help by dropping by from time to time?

The serious sparkle in those emerald green eyes convinced me that it was a genuine request, as well as a nice come-on. William Arthur Rathgart and I became drinking buddies, and Alicia Lloyd and I became lovers at the end of my very next visit.

After that I'd show up at the Beverly Hills house a couple of days a week. Bill supplied the booze. We'd play a few hands of cards, or watch a game, and Bessie would make us all dinner. Then he'd ramble on about the good old days. Considering his former stature, this was not as boring as you might think: Bill had a reputation for unhealthy excesses of all kinds, not just the Cubanos. He spun many fascinating tales in those two years, often indelicate in the telling and downright disgusting. The ladies kept to themselves once he got started.

Bill sometimes punctuated his stories with various props and mementos he had kept from his film career. He had carefully catalogued and enshrined these on a shelved wall of his living room. Even to a fan of his era, many of these objects were hopelessly obscure, but others were as famous as Garland's ruby slippers. A black ivory statuette of Anubis, from the 1939 classic "Cairo", was the centerpiece and most valuable. Commissioned in the days before elephants were endangered, and detailed in real gold, it had once been appraised at about three times what I could hope to make in a single year.

Even when I was on some grueling case, time out for a visit with Bill Rathgart was a journey into Hollywood history. I enjoyed his company, and Alicia was never shy about what she wanted from me after Bill passed out or went up to his room.

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Knobby Cassidy, the newsvendor, hobbled out of his dugout and gave me change for my buck. I was honored. He pointed a long, withered finger at the picture of Bill:

"Shame, ain't it, Frank? He was the last of the great ones. They're all gone - Barrymore, Flynn, Bogie, Tracey and Cagney. Now Rathgart. Goin' to the funeral?"

I glanced down the front-page obit and noted that the Forest Lawn spectacle would be the following afternoon. "Don't know if I can stomach it, Knobby. You?"

"No. Bad luck. Bad luck at my age. But you should, Frank. You were probably closer to him than anybody the last few years."

"How long did you know him, Knobby?"

"Oh, Christ. Forever, I guess. Met him when I was playin' the keys at Red Madam. Lecherous son of a bitch, I'll tell yuh. Later on I played poker with him once a week. In those days it was a group of us every Thursday at Benny's. Rathgart never missed a game 'til Mr. Benny died." Knobby wiped accumulating sweat off his bald head. "Only saw him Sundays after that, when he came by for the paper and magazines. Spoke highly of you, Frank. You should go."

"Ok, Knobby. Maybe you're right." I knew Bill wouldn't have cared. I was thinking that Alicia would get mad if I didn't show up at Forest Lawn. Our relationship had always been casual, but it was still ongoing and I didn't want to blow it.

"Put a red flower on his grave for me," Knobby said as I was walking away. I looked back, and I was surprised to see that he was serious. He gave me a tight smile and pulled himself back into his cubbyhole.

*

Bill Rathgart had been married less than Liz or Mickey, but he still had an impressive list of five ex-wives. A stubborn man, he had outlived each of them and immediately remarried. The romantic in him hated to sleep alone. He bought a mausoleum with his third wife, actress Marion Beeker, and he secretly promised her on her deathbed that he would be buried in it. It had been no secret to Alicia, or me as he had bemoaned it often enough as a bad bargain, and it was no longer a secret to the denizens of Tinseltown gathered in Forest Lawn for Rathgart's funeral.

The ceremony was at twilight, and the little hill was lit up in neon like a novelty shop on Hollywood Boulevard. On the roadway there was a guy selling maps to the stars homes, and another with inappropriate James Dean t-shirts. Life-size cardboard cutouts of ancient black and white photos of Bill and Marion had been propped up against an arch at the foot of the white gravel path to the Beeker crypt. There were no balloons, so I suppose it was a conservative affair by Forest Lawn standards.

The press was there - ready to catch Bill if he tried to rise from the dead in regret. I skirted the mini-cameras and tourists, and worked my way to the edge of the ceremonial ring. A Forest Lawn employee blocked my way.

"Only family and friends beyond this point, sir," the guy said. I was about to argue, when a familiar shriek sounded behind him.

"Frank! Frank Yellowflower!"

I waved weakly at Jenny Parkhurst, the columnist, who was descending upon us from within the sanctioned area.

"Frank! Oh, my! It's so good to see you! Alicia insisted that they wait for you." Jenny pulled me past the attendant, who whimpered something. "Never mind, young man!" she snapped. "Mr. Yellowflower is a dear friend of the departed!"

"What do you mean about Alicia?" I asked as we jogged up the white gravel to the marble mausoleum. "How could she have made them wait?"

"Why, Frank!" Jenny exclaimed, yanking my arm to slow me to a more intimate pace.

"Didn't you know? Bill left Alicia almost everything."

"But that's crazy! I know he liked having her around, but they were strictly nurse and patient. Bill had kids, didn't he?"

"By his first two, yes. I think he disowned them years ago. There hasn't been an actual reading of the will yet, of course, but I know Lawrence Durgby, the lawyer..."

"I bet you do, Jenny. How much was Bill worth?"

"Three million, I hear. Maybe more. Let's get up there. Poor girl's a nervous wreck."

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Jenny was usually right, but Alicia Lloyd appeared calm in a tight blue dress that Bill would have liked. As I got closer I noticed dark circles under her eyes. She did seem a bit distant, standing there alone in the crowd. She was tastefully hatless. Strands of her soft long hair drifted in the warm evening wind. Her gaze was fixed somewhere off in the distant hills. She obviously knew none of the people surrounding her in dark suits and mourning veils.

Jenny called out to her and Alicia saw us and walked over. She took my arm, kissing me shyly on the cheek with a glance at Jenny.

"Don't worry about me, child," Jenny said. "I've known about you two since your first night together. That Bessie is a treasure, isn't she? Oh, look!" She pointed at a middle-aged couple: a woman in a rumpled gray suit seated next to a thin, handsome man with white at the temples. "That's Faye Rathgart over there," Jenny whispered, "and her step-brother Fielding. Faye is Bill's daughter by his first wife, Maureen Todd. Fielding Rathgart is his son by Lucille Stewart."

The columnist moved away to talk to a fat studio executive I recognized. I took Alicia by the arm and steered her behind the crypt. She threw both arms around my neck and pressed close to give me what I wanted.

"That's better. You look tired."

"It's been awful, Frank. Where the hell have you been?"

"I found out about this yesterday. Why didn't you call me?"

"I did the night he...when the doctor got there. You had your phone off. I meant to try again. The rest has been such a blur. Oh, God. Something's wrong, Frank. Something's very wrong."

"About the money, you mean? Bill liked you, that's all."

"No. Not the damned money. He...never told me about that, but..." She got that distant look again, and it occurred to me that she was in a mild state of shock. "He was murdered, Frank. I'm sure Mr. Rathgart was murdered!"

I was thinking of Jenny's "nervous wreck" comment, I guess. I knew Alicia well enough between the sheets, but I'd never seen her under any other kind of stress. Life at the house in Beverly Hills had been quiet and orderly, except when Bill Rathgart got himself really drunk. He liked to replay famous scenes from his action pictures, shouting his lines at the top of his voice, and he occasionally knocked over a lamp.

"Come on, sweetheart. That's crazy," I said in what I hoped was a soothing tone. "Who would murder Bill?" She gave me a look that I will never forget, reminding me that anybody can get himself murdered just by using the wrong soothing tone.

"Don't you patronize me, Frank Yellowflower! I'm a nurse remember? The emphysema wasn't that advanced. He was in great shape, as a matter of fact."

"He was 87, Alicia, and he smoked like Fidel Castro. You didn't answer my question: who would want to knock off a nice old actor?" She was pulling me toward the crowd.

"The Red Madam," she said, in a low growl, "and he was murdered." She tightened her grip on my arm, and I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck.

"Who is the Red Madam?" I asked. She frowned and yanked me back to the ceremony and the final resting place of William Arthur Rathgart.

"Later," Alicia whispered. "I brought my own car. Meet me back at the house tonight."

Alicia refused to say anything more during the show, which included several speeches from actors half Bill's age, a prayer from a preacher he wouldn't have liked, and a rambling goodbye from Milt Garrison. Milt was Bill's agent, and he said Bill was a saint.

Bill had usually referred to Milt as a "lazy, worthless, second-generation son of a bitch". There was certain evidence to support this: Milt Garrison's father, who had also been Bill's agent, had started The Garrison Agency. Bill reasoned that the agency had been founded on commissions he paid the elder Garrison, but Bill hadn't landed more than a featured role since Milt took over.

When we were all filing out, I grabbed a red rose from a wreath and bent to put it on the silver and marble box like Knobby Cassidy had asked. I thought nobody would notice, but I heard a sharp intake of breath and looked up to see the woman Jenny had identified as Bill's daughter staring at me.

"Who told you to do that?" Faye Rathgart barked. She was an unappealing, average-sized matron in her fifties, but she had a mean look on her face. I noticed that she was gripping her oversize purse for all it was worth. I wondered what to do if she took a swing at me.

"An old friend of your father's," I answered truthfully. Faye Rathgart went dead white, teetered a bit where she stood glaring at me, and then marched away. The sight of the angry little woman must have triggered a loose synapse, because I suddenly remembered that Knobby Cassidy had said: "playin' the keys at Red Madam". Funny how the mind works sometimes.

I lost track of Alicia and Jenny in the Forest Lawn parking lots and headed back to town. I stopped to get the lowdown on the Red Madam from Knobby before I met Alicia at Bill's house in Beverly Hills, but the relief guy at the newsstand said Knobby hadn't been in that day and I should try Hollywood Park. I'm off the ponies myself, so I passed.

*

The driveway torches weren't lit, but I could see Alicia's little orange Carmen Ghia in the circle, so I pulled up and parked my old Dodge next to it. I rang the bell twice and knocked before opening the polished door. Not even Hayworth answered my call, which was unusual: the Irish setter was frisky and she never missed a chance to try to knock me over when I arrived.

The study and other rooms on the first floor were dark and cold without their illustrious former resident. Bessie was absent from the kitchen. I was heading up the long front staircase, when I heard a sound from above. It was a long, low howl. I took the steps two at a time. The sound stopped as I reached the top landing.

The upper floor of Bill Rathgart's house was an elegant throwback to Victorian decor. The walls of each of the five bedrooms were covered with dark red or royal blue silk, and thick pile carpets matched them. The woodwork was stained and highly polished, and original classic oil paintings of high monetary but questionable moral value were hung in antique gold frames on every wall. Lamps and furniture were of the same period or excellent reproductions, and all of the beds were four-posters with billowing silk canopies. Alicia and Bessie each had a room, and Bill had the master bedroom at the back. The remaining two bedrooms had been unoccupied on all of my previous visits.

I ran along the hall, and was about to make the turn toward the door to Alicia's room, when I saw light flooding out of the door to the master bedroom.

I made a sharp swerve and managed to skid gracelessly on the soft pile, slam my shoulder into the doorframe, and fall to one knee in an attempt to regain my balance. The accident was fortunate. Hayworth was poised just inside the door and sprang for me with a growl as I went down. I had never noticed her teeth before. She was not her usual, friendly self.

"Hey..." I managed, wrestling the setter down. She calmed and whined when she recognized me, then took a submissive posture to avoid reprisal. She was too soft and dumb to be an effective attack dog, and I bore her no grudge. "Ok, girl. Ok. I know I should have called ahead for reservations..."

Hayworth wasn't listening. She was on her feet, moving toward the bed, moaning the low howl I had heard from downstairs. I stood and followed. There was a body on the mattress, limp on top of the red silk coverlet. It was Alicia Lloyd, and the bedding around her appeared to be soaked in her blood.

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Appearances, as anyone in Hollywood can attest, can be deceiving. Alicia wasn't dead, but she was dead drunk, and that was also why Hayworth was upset. The Irish setter had probably found her former master in the same condition often enough, although it is doubtful that Bill would have spilled a freshly opened bottle of Johnny Walker next to himself when he passed out. Bill knew the difference between excess and waste, even when nearly unconscious.

I guessed the strain had gotten to Alicia. She'd downed what was left of the JW in Bill's favorite decanter and had then decided to raid the liquor cabinet for more. My previous experience with what a couple of glasses of wine could encourage her to do sexually explained the rest. I decided to let her sleep, removed the empty bottle, and tried to make her comfortable in her drunkard's nest. I encouraged Hayworth to accompany me, and we went back downstairs.

The dog followed me into the kitchen and I poured some kibble in her dish. There was a note from old Bessie which told me that she had gone to stay with a relative and would be back in a couple of days. She had been with Bill for years, and was probably depressed. I made a sandwich from some leftover pot roast and went into the study to do some snooping.

All of the ground floor rooms of Bill's house were decorated and furnished in an expensive modern fashion. Nothing on this floor hinted at the late owner's preference for the antiques upstairs: the floors were bare except for throw rugs; the chairs, tables and couches were metallic Danish; and the steel-framed art on the walls would have been welcome at MOMA in New York.

His huge study had a wide-screen TV, videodisc and videotape players, a mammoth CD and tape stereo system, and racks of records and tapes that were all evidence of Rathgart's maintained interest in the entertainment business. I knew for a fact that he rarely listened to modern pop music, but he had a complete Doors catalog in there with Crosby and Sinatra, and all of Madonna's albums and videos. There were also plenty of books, old screenplays, and tapes of hundreds of movies. Bill spent most of his time here, and I had been a guest often enough to feel at home even without him.

I had never opened Bill's desk or seen his files, and I don't know what I expected to find, but I've been a private detective too long to ignore an opportunity. I wasn't putting any credence in Alicia's murder story, but I did look for anything that might suggest a Red Madam. There was nothing, but I was surprised at some of what I did find.

Even for a self-proclaimed hedonist, William Arthur Rathgart had an unhealthy collection of pornographic 8X10s in his files. Not that it was particularly sick stuff - no child porno or S&M - but there were many very familiar faces among the contortionists, and they weren't doing anything they could fake. The negatives were there too, which suggested that Bill took the pictures himself. It was the sort of collection on which Hollywood empires might be built by the unscrupulous.

Unhealthy for old Bill if he was a blackmailer and somebody found out. Most blackmailers get paid off with death eventually.

I looked through his tapes, but the titles were all in good taste. Porno didn't fit the Bill Rathgart I'd known, I told myself. He had always claimed to be a doer, not a watcher, but his family album indicated otherwise. I was getting that tip of the iceberg feeling: Alicia was right: there was something very wrong.

I flipped through the Rolodex next to the phone. It was a Hollywood Who's Who. Knobby's home number was there, so I punched it in. I almost hung up on the fifth ring, but a woman answered. Her voice was weak and muffled:

"Yes?"

"Is Knobby Cassidy there?" I asked. There was a long beat, and the woman cleared her throat.

"Who is this?"

"Frank Yellowflower. I tried the stand, but they said..."

"Just a minute." Another long beat, and a man came on the line. It wasn't Knobby:

"Frank? This is Quinoles." The small knot in my gut grew and tightened. Knobby knew everybody, but Homicide detectives don't make social calls on newsvendors.

"What's up, Quin?"

"Knobby Cassidy's number is up, Frank. How are you involved in this?"

"I don't even know what 'this' is yet."

"You got the address?"

"Yeah. How'd it happen, Quin?"

"I'll ask the questions, if you don't mind. Get your Indian ass over here."

Captain Quinoles clicked off abruptly. He was irritated, which meant things might be messy at Knobby's. He was a good cop with a heart, and he'd known Knobby for years. I took the front stairs two at a time again and found Alicia vomiting in her own bathroom. She had stripped off her soaked dress, but was not in a sexy mood.

"You tried to kill yourself with Johnny Walker?"

"Fuck off. Leave me alone."

"Your wish is my command, sweetheart. I got an appointment with Homicide. You'll be ok?" She looked up from the floor and brushed her hair back from her face. She gave me a crooked little smile.

"You believe me about poor Mr. Rathgart?"

"Not exactly, but I do smell trouble. No pun intended." I thought she was ready to fight about it, so I laid it on the line: "What do you know about this Red Madam?" She began to cry. I've never claimed to be a great judge of women.

"Oh, Frank," she sobbed. "I was holding him when he went. It was so sad."

"You were there when he had the stroke?"

"It wasn't...he said it wasn't a stroke. He told me it was murder, Frank. Then he said: 'The damned Red Madam did it.' A second later the paramedics were there with their equipment, but he was dead." The tears stopped.

"But the coroner's report said natural causes. His heart stopped because of his emphysema."

"There are plenty of poisons that can stop breathing and induce heart failure," Alicia snapped. Then she shook her head. "I know, I know. It sounds melodramatic. The paramedics thought I was hysterical, and I guess I was. They told me to get dressed and the police would take my statement...but the cops didn't believe me either."

"Get dressed?"

"Uh, yes..." Alicia looked up into my eyes. "There's something you ought to know, Frank."

"You and Bill were lovers?"

"No, of course not. You knew him, but...well, Mr. Rathgart was..."

"I give up." I wasn't jealous: you don't call a lover mister. "How was he?" She stood up and leaned against the wall with a sigh. I handed her a robe that was hanging on a hook behind the door. "Did he ever take any pictures?" Alicia looked at me hard.

"I don't know how you could know that, Frank, but he wasn't evil. He was just a nice old guy who still got turned on, you know? They...the pictures were harmless - kind of our

private fun. He walked in on me one day when I was changing. He asked if he could watch. I let him."

"And?"

"He liked it. I liked it. I asked him if he wanted to...do more, but he said no."

"But you wanted to?"

"Sure. I guess I always wanted to do it with a legend." She frowned. "Oh, come on! You weren't coming around all that often! I was bored, and a girl has fantasies... Anyway, I bought some stuff at Fredericks and went to Mr. Rathgart's room one night. He loved it, but he still didn't want to do anything but watch. The next time he asked me if he could take pictures. He said he'd done it a few times in the old days."

I knew she hadn't seen the photo file downstairs. "You did this often?"

"Once a month or so. On Bessie's night off, of course." She did a cute little pout and curled up against me. "You're not mad, are you Frank?"

"Not particularly. I don't own you." It would have been a lot cuter if she hadn't just puked. "So you were doing your little show when..."

"I was posing on the rug. He was sitting in bed with the camera. I thought he was kidding at first. I knew he was healthy as a horse. He started hyperventilating. He clutched at his throat and then his chest. He could hardly speak. Then he was gone." A tear ran down her cheek. I brushed at it.

"Did he ever say anything else about this Red Madam?"

"Yeah. It was one of his stories. You know, the kind he was always telling you? I don't remember it very well, but it had to do with a Hollywood nightclub that burned down in the 1930s. The place was a whorehouse upstairs. The woman who ran it was called The Red Madam, and the club was named after her."

"How did Bill figure into it?"

"From the way he told it, Mr. Rathgart and a lot of the stars hung out there. Not just the guys, either. It must have been a pretty wild place. Like those swing clubs in the seventies, you know?"

"Before AIDS?"

"Yeah. Anyway, Mr. Rathgart was there the night it burned down, and it was a big scandal. There was this vigilante committee in Hollywood. They were trying to change the image of the picture business - the Hayes Klux Klan, Mr. Rathgart called them - and they wanted to make sure that The Red Madam never reopened."

"So?"

"So they paid off the cops to let the working girls burn with the club..."

"Jesus! What?"

"They let all the patrons out, but they trapped twenty girls and the Red Madam herself inside. The police covered it up, and the papers didn't say anything about who had died or how."

I was pretty much speechless.

"Mr. Rathgart said that the story goes that the Red Madam screamed out horribly before she burned. She put a curse on everybody - the cops, the firemen, and the patrons who had deserted her and her girls."

"Wait a minute! You think Bill was murdered by a curse?"

"I don't know, Frank. But he thought so."

Chapter Two

I knew one thing for sure: no curse had killed Knobby Cassidy. Somebody had bludgeoned the little guy in his own living room, and it had been messy. There was a good deal of blood, and Knobby's wife was now under sedation in the bedroom. She had been playing cards at the neighbors. When she came home, her husband was dead. The cops thought it was a robbery until I told Captain Quinoles that Knobby's murder was possibly connected to the death of William Arthur Rathgart. He wasn't happy.

"Goddamned son of a bitch!" the Captain shouted at the ceiling of the Cassidy apartment on Harvard Street. "You're the third one today that thinks I'm calling Rathgart a murder victim. He's not. Understand? It was a heart attack. The guy was a mythic god in his time, but he was just an old goat with bad lungs and a bum ticker as far as Homicide is concerned."

"He was a friend of mine, Quin," I said.

"Oh? Well, no offense."

"You said 'third one today'. Who were the other two?"

"His lawyer. Dugby, or something.."

"Lawrence Durgby."

"Yeah, Dugby. And Milton Garrison of the Garrison Agency."

"Interesting," I said. Quinoles was building up steam again.

"Why? What's interesting?"

"Have you ever heard of The Red Madam, Quin?"

"Red what?"

"Never mind. I've got a strong hunch for you though: old Knobby's dead because he knew William Arthur Rathgart. Or something about him."

"Bull shit! Get out of here. I got a murder to solve." He turned back to the lab technicians who were dusting the place.

"Ok," I said. I headed for the door. "I don't suppose you'd consider an autopsy on Rathgart's body?" One of the technicians snickered. The Captain pulled himself up to his full height, which was rarely impressive, and ushered me outside.

"Look, Frank," Quinoles said softly. "If you have something on old Rathgart, why don't you just spill it now? I know you like to do things your own way, but you're no glory hunter. Why don't you just tell me everything and go home? Let the department sort it out this time?"

"Not enough to go on, Quin. I'll tell you all when I figure it out. You know that."

"But you think there's something wrong, right?"

"Yep." I smiled. He was hooked.

"Ok. He's in Forest Lawn. Still waxed and pretty. I'll see what I can do."

"But I'd better not be wrong?"

"Right."

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I went back to Bill's house and Hayworth was happy to see me. A quick trip upstairs found Alicia freshly showered and sleeping peacefully in her own bed. There was no sign that Bessie had returned. I got a frozen pizza out of the freezer, popped it in the microwave, and went back to the study with Hayworth in tow.

I retrieved the file of famous stars doing bad things from the desk and looked through it again. It seemed tamer somehow, when I noted that all of the pictures were at least fifty years old. Most of the participants were probably in cinema hell. This was not an active file, I told myself. I decided to look for the pictures of Alicia that Bill had been taking for the last couple of years.

I checked everywhere in the study and living room, but turned up nothing, not even a camera. "Maybe they're in the bedroom," I suggested to Hayworth. She had been following, diligently checking under chairs and couches. We went back upstairs and into Bill's room. I had just located an empty Polaroid Swinger in the one of five enormous closets when Hayworth barked.

The setter had her front paws up on the sill of an open window looking out into the back yard, which was about an acre of unkempt gardens and small trees. She turned to me, snorted, and then barked again out the window.

We made it to the back door in the kitchen just in time to see a dark figure scurry around the corner of the house. I let Hayworth chase, and followed cautiously. As I reached the front, I heard a yelp and the sound of a car pulling down the drive. Hayworth appeared, somewhat depressed by her failure to stop the intruder. She was limping slightly.

"It's ok, girl," I said as we retraced our route to the back of the house. "You did your best." I started inside, but she didn't follow. She gave a little yip instead and trotted off into the yard. I waited, and after a while she returned uttering little growls and dragging a dark object by her teeth. She laid it at my feet with a happy smile. It was the black ivory statuette of Anubis.

"I've underestimated you, Hayworth," I told her, and I gave her a piece of the microwaved pizza.

Quinoles and his boys showed up soon afterwards to arrest Alicia Lloyd.

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It was ridiculous, and I told Quinoles, but they'd had a tip and, as it turned out, Hayworth had just located their "evidence". An anonymous caller said that Alicia Lloyd murdered William Arthur Rathgart for his money. The caller also claimed Alicia later hit Knobby Cassidy over the head because he knew the killer's identity. The weapon could be found hidden on the Rathgart property. It was a small statue, belonging to the first victim.

"The call was made directly to the District Attorney at his home about an hour ago," Quinoles told us when we got to the Sixth Precinct Station. "The DA was mad as hell. He had a major fund raising rally last night, and he needs his beauty sleep. Otherwise I would have let it go until after lunch."

"Was the tipster male or female?"

"DA wasn't sure. Voice was disguised. The line has a tap, though, so we can run a voice ID if we find the caller."

I had already volunteered the statue Hayworth dragged out of the garden. Quinoles got a night lab attendant to do a test and it did show traces of Knobby's blood type, hair, my prints, and a generous slobbering of Hayworth's saliva. The latter half-convinced Quinoles that the intruder part of my story was true.

"No prints?" I asked. "So we can go?"

"Coulda' wiped them, Frank. You got to admit your girlfriend has no alibi, millions in motive, and this Red Madam thing of yours is nowhere," Quinoles said. He hadn't booked her yet, and he was as tired as we were.

"It's a frame, Quin. Somebody lifted the Anubis..."

"What?"

"The dog statue, ok? Somebody got into the house and lifted it. Nobody noticed, 'cause of the funeral, and Bessie wasn't home..."

"Who?"

"Bessie. The housekeeper. So then the thief takes the statue to Knobby's place and brains him."

"Why?"

"You'd make a good reporter, Quinoles. What, who and why. Maybe the caller told the truth about the 'why': Knobby knew too much about William Arthur Rathgart's murder - or murderer."

"Your Indian nose tells you it's not the nurse?"

"Of course not, and it's not my nose that tells me. You don't see any of her prints on the Anubis, do you? The person who tossed the statue back into the garden and called the DA is probably the murderer."

"Go home! Take the nurse and go back to bed. Before I change my mind. I'll call you in the morning about what the coroner said - hell, it is morning. I may want to talk to Miss Lloyd again."

*

I spent the rest of an uneventful night with Alicia and went downtown around noon. The coroner's report wasn't in, and Quinoles had gone home, so I headed over to The Times to check out their microfilm.

It turned out that there had been a club called The Red Madam in Hollywood. It began as a speakeasy in the Twenties, before William Arthur Rathgart was a household name. The club had outlasted prohibition and, if Bill's tale was true, I knew why.

Other microfilm agreed that The Red Madam had burned to the ground one busy evening in 1933. There was no reference to a brothel or madam. There were some fuzzy pictures of the building and a shot of Deanna Trepton, a silent film comedienne who was rescued from the fire. There were no deaths, according to the headline story. I got hard copy of the page.

Knobby Cassidy had been there, I assumed, playing piano. William Arthur Rathgart had been there. I wondered if anyone else in Hollywood had survived the Curse of The Red Madam into the 1990s. I decided to consult one person who might know.

*

"It was before my time," Jenny Parkhurst told me. "I'm afraid Deanna Trepton would be hard to find - if she's still alive. She only made two-reelers." We were brunching at Patsy's in Burbank. I had eggs benedict, and she had blintzes with fresh strawberries. "It is an interesting story..."

"You hadn't heard it before?" I was amazed, and she was reluctant to admit it. Jenny was the godmother of Hollywood gossip. She had inherited the Parsons and Hopper territory before they were even gone.

"I'll check it out with my sources, Frank, but the Curse of the Red Madam may just be a tall tale that Bill invented to entertain your nurse while he took off her bra." I winced and she laughed. "Oh, don't cry about your girlfriend. Bill Rathgart wouldn't have even touched her."

"I'm not so sure."

"Be sure. Bill may have been a Don Juan in the old days, but he reverted to a side he never told you about."

"What do you mean?"

"He was a known bisexual, and a voyeur. Oh, he had his share of pretty wives, but he was a regular old fairy in private. He also liked to watch people doing it. Men and women. Don't look so shocked, Frank! That Hemingway machismo of his was a just a device to keep getting male leads." She swallowed a last drop of Patsy's excellent coffee and stood. "Got an interview with a kid star who can't act worth a damn. In ten minutes."

"Ok, Jenny," I said. I must have appeared dazed.

"Did I burst a male bubble, Frank? I'm sorry." She put a maternal hand on my shoulder. My brain stopped churning.

"No. That's not it. As a matter of fact, I think you just gave me an idea that might break the case, but I'm still short on motive."

"We make an interesting team, Frank. I suppose it's natural enough for two professional snoops to work together. This Red Madam story will be an exclusive, won't it?"

"Of course. One more thing, Jenny: what exactly did Bill leave Alicia Lloyd in his will?"

"Why, the house, of course! What else would old Bill still have of any value? By the way, the reading is at five today at Lawrence Durgby's office. You'd better make sure your girlfriend shows up for it. It should be quite a party. Milt Garrison will be there, along with Faye and Fielding Rathgart. They are planning to contest your Miss Lloyd's claim. At the very least I'd like you to be there to keep me informed, Frank."

*

On my way back to Beverly Hills, I stopped at a local video store. I wasn't all that surprised to find a dozen video releases of William Arthur Rathgart's old films for rent and for sale. The young clerk had never even heard of Bill, but she said that classics sold as well as anything else on the racks. I made a call to Quinoles, and then I spent hours sorting out the papers in Bill's desk. I had most of the answers by the time Alicia was dressed and ready to go. I armed myself with a Manila envelope containing my hard copy from the Times.

Alicia wore black on my advice - with a single strand of pearls Bill had given her. She drove us to Lawrence Durgby's office in Century City. I confirmed a suspicion along the way:

"Bill didn't keep the Polaroids he took of you, did he?"

"Of course not," Alicia laughed. "That would have been stupid of me, wouldn't it? I've got them all." She looked at me with a leer. "You can see them if you want. Later."

"You've come a long way, baby," I said, shaking my head.

*

The vultures had already gathered in Durgby's office on the thirtieth floor of the Circle Building, which is also the headquarters for an ailing major TV network. Lawrence

Durgby was a short guy in an overpriced suit with a Brooklyn accent and Columbia University degrees on the wall. Milton Garrison dressed for the occasion in blue executive pinstripe. Faye Rathgart seemed to be wearing the exact same nondescript outfit she had worn at Forest Lawn. Fielding Rathgart was Beverly Hills casual in penny loafers, tennis shorts and an off-white sweater.

"Come in, Miss Lloyd," Durgby said, tapping his pipe in an ashtray and offering her a chair. He wasn't extending the invitation to me, so I pulled up one next to her and leaned the Manila envelope against my leg. "Ah, Mr...?"

"Yellowflower. Frank Yellowflower. I'm Miss Lloyd's consulting detective."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Yellow..."

"Call me Frank, Larry. Think of me as Alicia Lloyd's protector. We understood there might be some fireworks here today."

"There certainly will," Faye Rathgart growled. She motioned to Durgby with an irritated wave. "Get on with it, Mr. Durgby!"

Durgby sat down and went through a preamble about Bill changing his will a year earlier to make a bequest to Alicia. Faye growled again, but neither Fielding nor Milton Garrison showed any concern.

"I think I can skip through the technicalities. It is a standard will. Mr. Rathgart left his house and properties and all the contents thereof to Alicia Lloyd. He also allocated a generous pension to Bessie Marshall, his longtime employee, which is to be paid monthly. The necessary taxes on these bequests will be recovered from Mr. Rathgart's personal savings, and are not to be paid by Miss Lloyd or Miss Marshall. Mr. Rathgart also made donations of other monies to the Actor's Fund, AIDS research, and several charitable foundations."

"And the rest?" Fielding Rathgart spoke for the first time. Milton Garrison leaned forward in his chair.

"I believe you are aware of your father's holdings. He formed a corporation twenty years ago with Mr. Garrison's father to acquire the rights to motion pictures he had made over the years, many of which had fallen out of copyright. As the survivor of that partnership, he was the sole owner when he died."

"Yes, yes!" Faye Rathgart snapped. She was watching me for a reaction, but I was stone faced. She almost shrieked at the lawyer. "We know that. Who did he leave it to, you fool? The gardener? The dog, perhaps?"

"No, Miss Rathgart. It was left to you and your brother - including the corporate building on Sunset - with the wish that the late Mr. Garrison's company should share in its management."

"Thank God!" Garrison said. He rose from his chair. "Well, that's all I'm here for. I'll leave it to you two to battle for the rest."

"Excuse me," I said. They all froze in place and turned. "I have a question, Larry."

"Uh...yes, er, Frank?"

"The corporation that Mr. Rathgart and Mr. Garrison senior formed is RMC Video, I believe. This company holds the international copyrights and video marketing rights to how many of Mr. Rathgart's films?"

"All of them," Garrison interrupted. "Not that it is any of your..."

"And who would inherit that company if all of the assigned beneficiaries were, say, guilty of murder?"

Durgy frowned. Everyone but Alicia turned a new color. Fielding Rathgart was the first to collapse. He slumped forward, his head in his hands.

"Oh, my God..."

"Shut up, you fool!" Faye Rathgart was on her feet. She faced the attorney. "This is libel, Durgy. If she thinks she can get the company..."

"The will would be thrown into probate," Durgby said to me, ignoring Faye. She flustered and sat back down. "Your friend Miss Lloyd would probably inherit, but I think you had better explain that question." I reached for the envelope and withdrew the hard copy from the Times microfilm office.

"Pictures speak louder, Larry. Got a pen?" I took the one offered and made a necessary alteration to the 1933 news photo of Deanna Trepton. "Some of my people believe that the camera captures the very soul. Look closely. What do you see?"

"My God!" Durgby said. "It's Bill Rathgart!"

Fielding let out a groan and Faye's eyelids fluttered. Alicia stood and looked at the face in the photo: I had drawn the trademark mustache on the upper lip.

"It is!" Alicia exclaimed. She turned to me, but I was watching Garrison, who was edging toward the door.

"Don't bother, Mr. Garrison," I told him. "The LAPD is in the lobby."

"You haven't got anything on me!" Garrison blurted out. He returned to his seat, and attempted to regain his composure. "What's all this about?"

"It's about the murder of a little old guy named Knobby Cassidy," I said. "Knobby used to play piano." Fielding Rathgart stood. He was pale and red-eyed. I almost felt sorry for him.

"It's no good, Faye," he said. "I don't have an alibi."

"Shut up, shut up..." Faye moaned, but she didn't stir from her trance. Fielding took a deep breath and looked at her. It was not a loving expression.

"Call them, Mr. Yellowflower. I killed him. I killed him and I want to confess."

*

"But what about Bill? Who killed Bill?" Alicia asked. We were sitting at Bill's dining room table with Jenny Parkhurst later that evening. Bessie had returned and cooked us up a final meal before heading for a well-deserved retirement.

"No one did, honey." I smiled at her: she had never called him anything but Mr. Rathgart when he was alive. "Bill killed himself with those damned Cubanos. The autopsy confirmed it."

"But he said..."

"He was on his way out," Jenny put in. "People get guilty when they're about to go - especially an old evil like Bill Rathgart. He had a lot to be guilty about."

"We'll never know for sure, now that Knobby's dead," I told them. "Knobby really was the only one left in Hollywood who knew the firsthand truth about that night. Too bad he talked to those TV guys. Faye or Fielding must have heard him mention the Red Madam when he was interviewed. They were afraid he'd link Bill with the club. They took their concern to junior Garrison. He suggested that they would be safer with Knobby out of the way."

"I suspected that Fielding killed Knobby. Garrison is too effete for violence, and the statuette is fairly heavy. Faye has the temper, but Fielding is the only athlete in the group."

"But it was so long ago," Alicia said. "Why would they care?"

"My question exactly," Jenny added. "One of them could have written a book. Or sold it to TV."

"I'm getting to that, ladies. I found the answer on the back of a videocassette. The address of the video distribution company owned by Rathgart and Garrison: it's the same lot where The Red Madam stood at the time of the fire in 1933."

"You mean Bill owned The Red Madam Club?" Jenny asked.

"Could have. Either Bill or the senior Garrison, but I'm betting on Bill. The video Company is called RMC, but there is nothing anywhere that tells what the letters stand for."

"Red Madam Corporation," Jenny suggested.

"Yes. That's what I think. I also suspect Bill - or Deanna Trepton, if you prefer - was the real Red Madam. If we were to dig far enough, we might find out that Bill cooperated with the reformers and the police when the place burned down."

"And the working girls inside?" Alicia asked.

"I think that part is true, horrible as it seems. Bill never told me that story, but he told you. I was a manifestation of his machismo side. A pal he watched sports with and got drunk with. When you let him take those Polaroids, you became part of his secret sexual sins. He could tell a sexual partner things he couldn't tell a pal."

"But we never..." She had never considered it as anything but fun.

"It was a token sexuality with him, honey," Jenny added. "It wasn't the doing, it was the watching."

"Anyway," I said, "I think Fielding, Faye, and Garrison were worried that the story might resurface at Bill's death. That's why Fielding killed Knobby: Bill's old films were the Rathgarts' gold mine. Fifty-five gold mines if they were marketed right. Knobby knew the truth about The Red Madam. If it came out that Bill was a transvestite connected with a mass murder..."

"It would have been lousy box-office," Jenny said. "And that's what Hollywood is all about, after all."

The End