



A NOVEL

IN A
FAR-OFF
LAND

STEPHANIE LANDSEM

PRAISE FOR *IN A FAR-OFF LAND*

Talented writer Stephanie Landsem brings to vivid life the glamour and grit of old Hollywood in this moving story of ambition and secrets, forgiveness and love.

JULIE KLASSEN, author of *A Castaway in Cornwall*

The stage is set perfectly with beautiful prose as Stephanie Landsem takes readers back behind the glamorous curtain of Hollywood, exposing the corruption on the other side. Like an enchanting, enduring motion picture, *In a Far-Off Land* will grip your heart with its timeless truth and captivate the theater of your mind.

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *Memories of Glass* and *Catching the Wind*

Isn't it powerful how we can get it all wrong, yet God can make it all right? Landsem brings this to life in the retelling of the Prodigal Son. Set in 1930s Hollywood, our heroine goes on the difficult journey of being the prodigal daughter. Decades gone by but relevant still on so many levels. This is a story I'll read again soon, knowing many more life lessons are there waiting to be discovered.

T. I. LOWE, bestselling author of *Lulu's Café* and *Under the Magnolias*

Both gritty and glamorous, Stephanie Landsem's *In a Far-Off Land* digs beneath the sparkle of gilded Hollywood to uncover the true gold of love, mercy, and forgiveness. Don't miss this unforgettable story.

REGINA JENNINGS, author of *Courting Misfortune*

Depression-era Hollywood provides the perfect stage for the desperate and colorful cast of *In a Far-Off Land*. This tale is that of a journey from brokenness to healing, from emptiness to wholeness. Through the eyes of two characters who could not be more different, Stephanie Landsem gives us a timeless story of the prodigal traveling far from home and finding the way back again. Fans of Francine Rivers's *Bridge to Haven* will not want to miss this.

JOCELYN GREEN, Christy Award-winning author of *Shadows of the White City*

From the first page, this remarkable story set in glittering Hollywood during the Great Depression captured my imagination. Aspiring actress Mina Sinclair's amazing pilgrimage from the dark hollows of her despair into the light of unconditional Love will offer hope to anyone who has ever believed themselves beyond redemption. Bravo!

KATE BRESLIN, bestselling author of *Far Side of the Sea*

One of the best books I've read this year! *In A Far-Off Land* is a beautiful story echoing the power of mercy, forgiveness, and love as it peels back the multifaceted layers of those living in Hollywood during the Great Depression. Stephanie Landsem weaves a heroine with as much spunk and edge as heart and soul. Just a gorgeous, page-turning novel.

HEIDI CHIAVARELLI, Carol Award-winning author of *Freedom's Ring* and *The Orchard House*

With her signature blend of luminous prose and immersive historical detail, Stephanie Landsem draws readers into the dazzle

and darkness of 1930s Hollywood. From beginning to end, I was riveted by this masterful retelling of the parable of the Prodigal Son and moved by the poignant exploration of the power of grace in the midst of shame. Superbly written and absolutely stunning!

AMANDA BARRATT, author of *The White Rose Resists: A Novel of the German Students Who Defied Hitler*

Fans of Susan Meissner and Kristina McMorris will be spellbound by Landsem's gorgeously researched historical. Told with heart-wrenching conviction, *In a Far-Off Land* is a lyrical and thematic treatise on redemption, loss, and love and wielded with such surprising grace the reader will have many breath-catching moments. Landsem is a treasure of inspirational historical fiction and *In a Far-Off Land* is no less than a masterpiece.

RACHEL McMILLAN, author of *The London Restoration* and *The Mozart Code*

With everything I crave in historical fiction, Landsem's *In a Far-Off Land* immerses the reader in a world long forgotten yet achingly familiar. Old Hollywood meets *Grapes of Wrath*, and the redemption, romance, and regret are all beautifully written and deliciously authentic. It's still dancing in my head and will be for a while.

AMY HARMON, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Where the Lost Wander*

In a Far-Off Land—an engaging story set in a fresh era—deftly threads themes from the biblical story of the Lost Son through

the burlap of the Great Depression and Hollywood's silk. In every age, a distant glitter promising fame, fortune, and self-indulgence tempts us to trade in the gold of family, contentment, and conscience. Thankfully, there is always a way back, as the talented Ms. Landsem shows us, to a happy ending provided through grace.

SANDRA BYRD, author of *Lady of a Thousand Treasures*

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Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois

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Designed by Eva M. Winters

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

Published in association with Foundry Literary + Media, 33 West 17th Street PH, New York, NY 10011.

In a Far-Off Land is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-4964-5042-5 (HC)

ISBN 978-1-4964-5043-2 (SC)

Printed in the United States of America

27	26	25	24	23	22	21
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

CHAPTER I

Los Angeles, California
1931

MINA

Roy Lester's mansion was as ritzy a place as I'd ever seen. I had to pinch myself to make sure I was really there—me, Minerva Sinclair—at one of the most glamorous parties in Hollywood. This was the moment I'd been waiting for. The part of the story right before the happy ending.

At least that's what I thought at the time.

When the towering mahogany doors swung open, it was like stepping into *The Hollywood Revue*. The high-ceilinged great room sparkled, lit by a chandelier as bright as any studio set. Women in jewel-toned silk took their places with men in midnight-blue evening jackets, all in glorious Technicolor. In the center of the room, a grand piano provided the score, accompanied by the swell of conversation and the clink of ice against glasses. Toward the back

of the room, a champagne cork popped, and a woman shrieked a laugh. I half expected to see a cameraman on a moving platform or hear a director with a megaphone call, "Cut!"

Max joined me at the top of three marble steps that led down into the room filled with music and color. "Mark my words, Mina. This is a mistake."

"Don't start."

Max had been grouching since he picked me up at my boarding-house an hour ago. "You're still my agent," I'd told him on the telephone, "and a girl can't show up at the door alone." With how things were between us, I couldn't tell him the truth that I needed him beside me. The thing that had happened between us over a month ago—what I called the New Year's Day Incident—had been a mistake and best forgotten. If only Max were more forgetful. But if Max wanted his 20 percent of the contract I was signing tomorrow, he'd help me out tonight.

Earlier, he'd helped me into his lemon-yellow LaSalle roadster like we were on our way to San Quentin instead of the gladdest party in Los Angeles. He drove into the hills like a madman—as if driving faster could get the party over with. He twitched a cigarette in one hand as we chased the half moon, headlights dancing ahead of us, the roadster spitting gravel behind. When we pulled through the gated entrance to Roy Lester's place, it was too unbelievable. Like one of those English estates had dropped out of the sky and onto the brown foothills of the Santa Monica mountains.

Max threw the stub of his smoke out the window and shifted to low gear on the smooth, winding driveway. He stopped sulking long enough to tell me about the place. "Twenty bedrooms, a theater that seats thirty, and a walk-in fur vault. There's a formal English rose garden and greenhouses, and behind there—"

he motioned past an unnaturally perfect lake lit by an illuminated fountain—“is a maze you could get lost in for days.”

We sped past sculpted box hedges, giant rabbits, and teapots casting moon shadows on a vast manicured lawn. Sodium lights blazed over two red-clay tennis courts.

“Your friend Roy has a cellar filled with real whisky and gin—the good stuff from Scotland and England. And champagne imported from France. He’s got a switch upstairs that locks it up tight if the feds come calling.” Max snorted. “As if the law would raid Roy Lester’s little haven. They’re paid off too well for that.”

Max’s glum take was starting to rub me the wrong way. “Since when is bankroll and booze a problem for you?” In the four months I’d known Max, he’d never taken offense at other people’s cash—or turned down their liquor.

I watched his profile as he maneuvered the roadster around the circular driveway and came to a rolling stop. His scowl really did mar that handsome face. His hair was neatly combed back and his black fedora set at an angle. A dark lock curled over his forehead, giving him a touch of boyish charm, which he used plenty well. He had a jaw worthy of any leading man and a nose with a hint of a crook, as if he’d broken it years ago. His amber eyes, with lashes that would make Greta Garbo jealous, were guarded as he turned to me. “I don’t like Roy Lester.”

Max played his cards close, and usually I let him keep his secrets, but this time I pushed. “Then how do you know so much about him?” I waved a hand. “And about his place?”

“I just do.” The roadster sputtered and went silent. “Be careful with these people, you got me?”

I got him, all right. What was good for the gander and all that applesauce. But my time was running out. I’d learned plenty in the

ten months I'd been in Hollywood—to dance, to act, to pretend I fit in. I'd even learned to drink bootlegged whisky—not legally, of course, but nobody cared about that. And I'd learned to take my breaks where I found them—with or without Max's blessing.

Now, faced with a roomful of Hollywood's elite, I wasn't so nervy. My knees wobbled and my palms went damp. A Chinese butler in an embroidered silk robe and satin-tasseled hat greeted us with, "Good evening." I'd heard Oriental butlers were all the rage, but I'd never actually seen one.

I slipped off my fox wrap as if it were a full-length mink. Act like you belong, that's what everybody else is doing. I took a deep breath and passed the fur to Max. Acting had got me this far, and it would have to take me the rest of the way.

"I'm not the coat-check girl," Max muttered, but he took my fur just the same.

"Be careful—it's rented," I whispered.

Max took off his crisp fedora and leaned closer. "At least promise me you'll follow the rules."

That was rich, and I wasn't so nervous that I couldn't fire back at him. "Maybe you should try following them yourself, Max."

At least he had the grace to flush. He turned away, giving his fedora and my fox to the celestial butler, whose expression didn't flicker a jot.

With or without Max's help, this night was going my way. Granted, my plan since I left Odessa hadn't come off without a hitch. I'd stepped off the bus at Central Station as green and innocent as a South Dakota spring. Well, I wasn't green anymore, and I sure as sugar wasn't innocent. But I was at the end of my rope.

I glanced into the ceiling-to-floor mirrors that flanked the entrance. If mirrors told the truth, I would have seen a small-town

girl with her knees knocking and stomach churning. But—thank the stars above—mirrors lie, too. The woman looking back at me wasn't a nervous Nelly but a sophisticated Hollywood ingénue. And with any luck at all, Cosmopolitan Productions' next leading lady.

My hair was somewhere between a brunette and redhead—in Hollywood they called it auburn. Bobbed, waved, and as smooth as glass, it was absolutely the thing. Garnet lipstick set off my blue eyes and milk-white skin—no freckles, thank you very much.

Then there was the dress that had cost me my last nickel.

It was an emerald-green sheath, sleeveless and cut on the bias. Pearl beads weighted the cowl neckline and set off my ivory skin—and plenty of it. The slim cut skimmed over my hips and clung to my legs, all the way down to my matching satin heels. An armband of gold wire and pearls—cultured, of course—wrapped above my elbow, and a matching spray gleamed behind my ear. I turned slightly and looked over my shoulder. The back plunged indecently low. Penny would be shocked. In fact, all of Odessa would be shocked.

Max gave me a look that said exactly what he thought of the dress. He knew how much a frock like this cost, and he knew my situation as well as I did. But it wasn't an extravagance. It was an investment. Max was sore because I'd got to this party—the one that would make me a star—without his help. Not only that, but I'd been invited by Louella Parsons herself. The Queen of Gossip, they called her. If she gave a girl the nod in one of her *Examiner* columns or on her radio show, that girl was on her way up. But if Louella took a dislike to a new actress—didn't matter why—she might as well go back to Kansas.

You could have knocked me over with a horsefeather this

morning at the Brown Derby, where I made about enough to keep my cockroaches alive. I brought Louella her breakfast of oatmeal and cream, and she gave me her usual scowl. I won't go into that whole story right now; let's just say Louella and I had got off on the wrong foot.

I poured coffee all around and tried not to look like I was listening to Louella and William Randolph Hearst talking about a party at Roy Lester's that night. I pretended not to notice Louella's husband, Docky Martin, slip a flask from his pocket and dose his coffee. Suddenly, Louella turned on me like she was seeing me for the first time. "Minerva! My dear. Aren't you just the cat's pajamas?" She looked me up and down. "And that hair. Such a pretty shade."

"Thank you, Mrs. Parsons," I managed, clutching the coffeepot.

"Dearest Minerva, how long have you been working here?" she asked, almost like she cared.

I told her four months and waited for her other size-ten T-strap to drop.

"You poor thing," she cooed. "What you need is someone to take you under her wing, like a mother hen." She smoothed a hand over her tan tweed suit. With her matching cloche hat and a spray of crimson feathers, she did resemble a hen I'd known back at the farm—one who'd kept the other hens in line with her sharp beak. "Tell me now, do you know Roy Lester?"

Every red-blooded citizen in America knew Roy Lester. America's Hero, they called him. And everyone in Hollywood knew he was the highest-paid actor in history. "I can't say I've met him, Mrs. Parsons."

"Call me Lolly, darling. And that's going to change tonight. Isn't that right, Docky?" She went on without an answer from her husband. "A soirée at Roy's estate, and you, my dearest, are going

to be. My. Guest.” She tapped the table with each of the last three words like it was a headline on one of her columns.

I stammered something; I don't even know what. I scooted around the table before Docky could pinch my bottom, while Louella put cream and two sugars in her coffee. Me, Louella Parsons's guest?

She shifted to a stage whisper. “Roy himself told me he's looking for a fresh face for his next leading lady.” Her gaze slipped to Docky, who had tipped slightly to eye my backside. He grunted as her foot connected with his ankle. “He'll love you. Leave it to me.”

I was speechless. This was what I'd been waiting for. Across the room, Norb, the owner of the joint, was staring at me. He didn't like the help hanging around the guests, especially the big names. I took a cloth out of my apron and wiped an invisible spill.

“Terrific, Lolly,” I managed as if I were invited to a millionaire actor's house every day of the week. “I'll be there with bells on.” Now Norb was weaving through the tables, his eyes on me, his brow furrowed.

Louella smiled, her bright eyes narrowing to slits. She scribbled the address on a scrap of paper and tucked it into my apron with a plump, jeweled hand. “Trust me, dearest, you won't regret it.”

The minute my shift ended, I'd hightailed it back to the boardinghouse I called home. My roommate, Lana, was putting in an early shift at the dance hall so I had the place to myself. Rent was due, and my cupboard held nothing but mouse droppings and a can of sardines, but it didn't matter, not this time.

I changed into my best street dress, a cardinal-red wool number that hugged my figure and fell exactly between my knees and ankles. With a dove-gray roll brim dipped over one eye and suede shoes trimmed in lizard, I looked the part. I pulled my rent money

out of the tea tin marked *Do Not Spend!*, tugged on my gloves, and hopped the streetcar for Bullock's on Seventh and Broadway.

Two hours later, I left Bullock's with the emerald dress, boxed and wrapped in tissue. Smaller packages held the matching kitten heels, the pearl armband, and the hair comb. It's an investment, I said to Max as if he were there. I talked a lot to Max in my head. Those days, they were the only civil conversations we had.

I'd made a final stop in Bullock's discreetly placed lingerie department. If Penny could see the rose silk panties with the ruffled petal hem and the new-fashioned brassiere, she'd pitch a fit, but white cotton bloomers and a modest camisole wouldn't do under this gown. And besides, pretty underthings give you confidence—that's what all the magazines said—and I needed all I could get.

I had about enough change for a sandwich and a cup of coffee if I walked home instead of taking the tram, and by the time I got to Broadway and First, my feet were killing me. I didn't give a hoot. I tip-tapped down the street, humming one of those sappy songs I'd heard on the radio.

At the corner, a handful of the down-on-their-luck men stepped to the side, lifting their hats to me. Hand-lettered signs around their necks or propped beside them on the curb told their sad stories.

Will Work for Food.

My Family Is Starving.

My gown and shoes suddenly felt heavier in my arms. Since the crash and what came after, men got off the bus in LA every day to find the same hard truth I'd learned ten months ago: jobs were as hard to come by in the Golden State as they were in the rest of the country. From what the headlines said, it was only getting

worse. The lucky men sold apples for two cents each. The unlucky men—and their families—slowly starved to death.

I should have moved on, but I didn't. I couldn't. An old man, his face creased like a well-read newspaper and his pale eyes desperate, stood in the hard sun, a barrel of apples at his feet. He looked like a farmer. Like Papa.

He picked through his bin of apples and chose one, polishing it on his sleeve before offering it to me. "Please, miss."

I looked at the packages in my arms. This man had nothing and would probably have nothing again tomorrow. One more day with an empty stomach wouldn't kill me. Not anymore.

I dumped the entire contents of my purse in his cup. Two bits and a couple of dimes would get him a square meal. I took the apple and turned away as quick as I could, but not fast enough. Eyes bright with tears and a whispered "bless you" gave me a stab of homesickness. Was Papa hungry tonight? Was Penny making ends meet?

When I got home, I wrote to Penny.

Maybe my luck is changing, Penny. Maybe this story will have a happy ending after all. Even if I don't deserve it.

I sealed up the letter and told myself it wouldn't be long now before I could go home to Odessa. First thing, I'd pay off the mortgage and the taxes so Papa would never have to worry again. Then I'd get one of those newfangled tractors that practically planted the corn for you. Maybe I'd buy a closetful of dowdy dresses and the sensible shoes Penny liked. We'd have steak every night of the week and twice on Sundays. That's what I'd do. I'd make everything up to Papa. Even Penny would have to admit I'd come through.

And it would all start tonight—right now—at Roy Lester’s party.

Max waited at the top of the marble steps, looking like he was about to get a tooth pulled. The piano swelled to the chorus of “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” and a trio of men began to sing off-key. I took a deep breath and lifted my chin.

This was it, what I’d been waiting for. So why were my legs wobbling like a soused sailor?

Max looked down at me with what could have been a hint of compassion and tucked my hand in the crook of his arm. “Let’s get this over with.”

We stepped down, entering the whirl of color and sound. Max’s arm under his midnight-blue evening jacket was rigid, his jaw set as if he were going into battle. Was he sore because of what happened between us, or was it something else? You never could tell with Max.

He guided me smoothly through the crowd. The women, all beautiful, moved as gracefully as if they were choreographed dancers. The men made elegance look effortless. Everyone held a glass—dainty bowls of champagne, tumblers of dark whisky, martini glasses of clear gin with the occasional olive. Like everywhere else in the country, the Eighteenth Amendment had not only failed to curb the consumption of liquor, it had made drinking a national pastime.

A maid, a lovely Mexican girl probably no more than eighteen in a black below-the-knee dress and a shapeless white apron, stopped short in front of us, glasses teetering on her tray. She stared at Max. I was used to it—women ogled him wherever we went—but the way her mouth dropped open looked like astonishment. Max took two champagnes and said something to her in a low voice.

She hurried away as if she were being chased.

“What was that about?” I asked.

He gave me one of the glasses and shrugged. “This joint is a waste of time, Mina.”

“A waste of—” Changing the subject was one of his specialties, but I fell for it. “Says you.” I turned on him, whispering furiously and jerking a nod at the piano. “That’s John Gilbert over there.” Gilbert, dubbed the Great Lover, earned more in one picture than my father’s farm was worth.

Max downed his champagne in one gulp, then put a hand at the small of my back, guiding me toward the center of the room. “Gilbert’s a liability. The drinking’s one thing, but the women . . . He’s probably traded pajama bottoms with every Jane in this room, except maybe your dear friend Louella.” Max didn’t hide his disdain. “Not to mention his voice. Gilbert’s first talkie was his last.”

I’d seen Gilbert’s debut in talkies and couldn’t help but laugh at his high, effeminate voice like the rest of the people in the picture house. I took a sip of my champagne, letting the bubbles dissolve on my tongue. “But look! John Barrymore.” My voice fairly squeaked. Me, in the same room as an icon.

Max harrumphed as if the man leaning against the crowded bar wasn’t Hollywood royalty. “Barrymore’s downed enough gin to sink the *Titanic*, and it’s starting to show. The suits in New York—the ones who hold the purse strings—they don’t want that kind of trouble, not anymore. If they could break his contract, believe me, they would.”

I looked closer at the man they called the Great Profile. Yes, there was a telltale slackening around his jaw. The eyes thousands of women had fallen in love with were bloodshot and puffy. But Max didn’t need to be such a sourpuss.

Max guided me around the throng at the bar, to an alcove where

we could see most of the room. “See those birds?” He jerked his head toward a trio of women dancing next to a crackling phonograph. Billie Dove, known by every filmgoer as the American Beauty, leaned against Colleen Moore, who had transformed girls’ hair across the country with her Dutch boy bob. I’d seen every film either of them had made, sitting in the tiny Odessa Picture House, so caught up in the films I hardly noticed my beaux trying to hold my hand or sneak a kiss. Beside Billie, Norma Talmadge—the most glamorous flapper of all—whispered in the ear of a kid half her age.

“Between the crash, budget cuts, and talkies, they’re washed up.” Max kept at his lecture. “Rumor has it none of them will work again, unless it’s at the Macy’s perfume counter.”

That brought me up short. Could Max be right? I watched them over the rim of my champagne glass. Their laughs were a bit overloud. And yes, their eyes under the heavy liner and fake lashes held a desperate cheerfulness I knew too well.

“These people aren’t who you want to rub elbows with, Mina. The ones who do—” he dipped his head at a set of walleyed young things stumbling through the Charleston—“crash and burn before they get anywhere.”

I wanted to ask him how he knew so much, but the hoofers started singing along with the phonograph, and the piano player raised the ante, pounding the keys like he was trying to win a contest. Max leaned closer so I could hear him over the din. “Mina, you need to wise up. Tell me something. Who isn’t here?”

He was close enough for me to smell the cologne he always used, clean and lemony. I pushed the memory of the New Year’s Incident away and tried to follow. “Mary Pickford,” I answered. America’s Sweetheart, they called her, and she wasn’t here. If she were, she’d be the center of attention.

He nodded. “And?”

I shook my head. What was he getting at? “Douglas Fairbanks?” Pickford’s husband. They went everywhere together and unlike some film couples, they were mad about each other.

He acted like I was a schoolgirl finally understanding her lesson. “Buster Keaton, Carole Lombard.” He looked at me, his dark brows raised. “The real high-hats, Mina.” His eyes ran over the crowd as if assessing them. “Gable and Crawford wouldn’t set foot in this place. Not that they don’t drink or sleep around—they all do—but not with people like Lester. And your heartthrob, Mr. Chaplin? Wild horses couldn’t drag him here.”

That was low. I’d only confessed to him my infatuation with Charlie Chaplin in a moment of weakness. It was ungentlemanly to use it against me, but Max always dug deep to make his point.

Max kept at it. “They stay away for good reason, Mina. Nothing but trouble waiting to happen here. And your friend Louella, waiting to jam somebody up on tomorrow’s radio show while her husband supplies pills to most of the men in the room and abortions to half the women.”

I flushed. Max was worked up, and maybe he was right. But his way hadn’t panned out and I was desperate. And desperation put me in a fighting mood. That’s when my winning argument perched her famous backside on top of the bar in front of us. “What about Clara?”

Clara Bow, vamped up in thick black eyeliner and a clingy scarlet dress, the three-inch fringe well above her knees. Pencil-thin eyebrows gave her a sad-eyed look, and her hair, a bobbed halo of dark-red curls, caught the glow of the lights. She crossed her shapely legs and raised a highball glass to a gaggle of adoring men.

I’d seen every one of her pictures, from *The Daring Years*, when

I was barely fourteen, to *The Wild Party*, Clara's first talkie. She was the cat's meow. The It Girl. The woman who not only made her own choices but made more coin in one picture than I'd seen in three years of working at the diner in Odessa. Even Max couldn't argue with fame like hers.

Max followed my gaze, saw Clara, and quickly turned his back to the bar, as if he didn't want to look at her. "Do you even read the news rags?" he whispered.

Well, yes. I'd seen the photos of her in court with her current boyfriend, Rex Bell, at her side. "But she's not on trial, her secretary is." Her secretary, Daisy DeVoe, had tried to blackmail her for over a hundred thousand dollars.

"Sure, but it's Clara being raked over the coals." Max kept his head turned away, but his expression was grim and a little sad.

What came out at trial was shocking, even for Hollywood. Drunken parties, cocaine, plenty of men—Gary Cooper, Victor Fleming, the entire USC football team, or so they said—all of it written in letters so explicit, they couldn't be printed even in the seediest tabloid. The newspapers jumped on Clara Bow like hyenas ripping up a carcass. *IT Girl Exposed! Singed Starlet in Ruins!*

Max went on. "Paramount can't handle her mess of a personal life, especially now that it's no longer personal. Not to mention she's the last word in self-destruction. Between the men, booze, and drugs, they won't put up with much more of her, not when she can't even remember her lines." Max snorted. "For the life, I can't understand why these people have to write it all down. They keep letters and diaries like trophies, then they're shocked when some mug finds them and wants a payoff."

Max was a lot of things—stubborn, overbearing, bossy . . . I could go on. But he was rarely wrong about the business. Could

the It Girl really be finished? Then I heard her. She'd only been in one talkie, but I'd recognize her voice anywhere. Throaty, with a tinge of a Brooklyn accent.

"Maximilian. Are you going to hide out over there all night, or are you going to come on over and say hello?"

My mouth dropped open. Was she talking to *my* Max?

Max let out a long breath and gave me what seemed to be an apologetic look. He turned toward the bar. "Clara. It's been a long time." He sounded none too pleased.

Max, on a first-name basis with Clara Bow?

Max's grip on my elbow tightened as the circle of men reluctantly parted for us. Clara didn't spare me a glance as she handed Max her empty glass. "Fill that for me, will ya, Maxi?" She turned to the men lounging beside her. "Fellas, this is Max Clark. His father was Dusty Clark, the Kissing Cowboy." She smiled and swayed a bit. "As fine a man as you chumps could ever hope to meet."

Max refilled her glass with a splash from the bottle on the bar. His jaw was rigid, and he didn't even try to look like he was glad to see the most famous woman in Hollywood. "How you holding up, Clara?" He held the glass out of her reach, forcing her to look at him.

She gave him a sultry smile instead of an answer. "So this is who you're spending your time with now?" She kept her eyes on Max. "Isn't she a pretty little thing." It sure didn't sound like a compliment, so I didn't thank her.

Max introduced me with precious little enthusiasm. Close up, I could see what he'd meant. Clara looked worn, like a dollar bill that had passed through too many hands. Her heavy makeup couldn't conceal the bruised circles under her notorious bedroom eyes.

IN A FAR-OFF LAND

“It’s a pleasure, Miss Bow,” I got out before she turned away, bellowing for more glasses.

She filled them herself, almost to the rim, and passed one to Max and one to me. “Any friend of Max’s” was all she said before raising her glass. “To Dusty Clark.” All the men followed suit. “He could drink any of you cake-eaters straight under the table. Didn’t matter what there was, gin, whisky, or moonshine.” She clinked her glass with Max’s and gave him a slow wink. “Down the hatch,” she said, throwing back the glass in one go.

I took a gulp from mine. It burned all the way down and made my eyes water.

Max set down his empty glass and took Clara’s hand. It was small and pale in his. “Take care of yourself, will you, Clara?”

She looked at him blearily. “I’d rather if you took care of me, Maxi,” she whispered with a look that could melt steel.

My cheeks burned as hot as my throat. Was Max one of the long line of Clara’s men? I was hardly as pure as the driven snow, but the notion of Clara and Max together made a little fire flare up in the back of my brain.

Without another word, Max moved me through the crowded room.

“You know her?” I whispered, staring up at his tight jaw. Max kept a lot to himself, but when he did talk, he told it straight. I liked that about him, even if sometimes I didn’t want to hear it. But at the moment he was looking anywhere but at me.

“My father was part of this crowd.” That answer was bushwah, but he had that look on his face that told me not to push it. “Mina, please. Let’s go.”

Max didn’t beg, so I must have misheard that plea in his voice. Besides, I’d just met Clara Bow, and I still hadn’t found Louella or

Roy Lester. “Max, I’m not leaving here until I do what I came to do, and that’s get this part.”

Max turned, grabbing my elbow just below my faux pearls and whispering furiously, “Mina, listen to me for once. These people—” he jerked his head at the whole room—“people like Clara, like Barrymore. They’re looking for something—happiness, meaning, I don’t know what. They think they can find it in the bottom of a bottle, or with dope, or in somebody else’s bed.” His honey-gold eyes were bright and close. “They keep looking and looking.” His voice hardened. “And then they end up destroying themselves.” He put his hands on my bare shoulders. “I’m telling you, Mina, this is a bad idea.”

I stared up at him. Honestly, where had this come from? Was this about his father? What happened to Dusty Clark—star roper and rider and in at least a hundred films—had been a tragedy. “Max.” I swallowed hard. “I’m not like your father. I can handle this.”

Max shook his head, blowing a frustrated breath. “No,” he said firmly. “You can’t.”

Max knew plenty about the business, but he didn’t know beans about me. He thought I wanted to make it big, live in a fancy mansion like Lester’s, wear furs and designer dresses. But he was wrong.

I had no intention of staying in Hollywood any longer than I had to.

The studios loved new faces and they paid them well. Why, Joan Crawford, the most elegant of all the flappers, had started at seventy-five dollars a week at MGM. My plan was to make my money then get out. A six-month contract as Roy Lester’s leading lady would make me enough coin to leave California with ten

times what I'd taken from Papa. Enough to make up for everything and keep Papa in peaches and pipe tobacco for the rest of his life. I'd left the farm almost a year ago, and by now the mortgage and taxes were past due. If I didn't make it soon . . . I'd never be able to go home.

But I wasn't about to tell Max that.

My name, sung out in a familiar bleating voice, broke through the tension wrapped around us. Max's hands dropped from my shoulders. Louella Parsons's stout frame pushed through the slim women and swellegant men like a freighter through frothy waves.

"Minerva, my dearest! You came. I knew you would." She was wearing a flowing gown of burgundy silk trimmed in black marabou. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes overbright. She fluttered her lashes at Max. "It's been a long time, Maximilian."

"Louella." The look on his face said not long enough.

So Max knew Louella as well as Clara Bow, and hadn't even told me? He was a dark horse, but this was the clincher. How else had he been holding out on me?

Louella lifted one of my hands, twirling me around. "You. Look. Divine." She linked her arm through mine. "You don't mind if I steal your little friend for a bit, do you, Maximilian?"

Max held out his hand to me, as if giving me one last chance to change my mind. I shook my head. Ever since the New Year's Incident, he'd been in a mood. Sure, he'd got me some auditions, even the promise of a contract with Cosmo, but everything he'd done had fallen through. Sometimes he acted like he didn't even want me to make it in Hollywood.

I let Louella turn me away from him, a lump in my throat. Max was my agent and he wasn't doing his job. That's all there was to

it. The crowd closed around me, and the last I saw of Max was his worried eyes watching me walk away.

Louella steered me toward the back of the house like a force of nature, her fingers digging into my arm like talons. “Minerva, dearest,” Louella said, “I can put you right up on the screen. You know that, don’t you?” I didn’t know what to say, but it didn’t matter because she went on. “I just need you to do a little thing for me.”

“But, what—?” A little thing?

“It’s nothing. Just keep Roy Lester busy tonight. And by tomorrow, you’ll be signing a contract with Cosmo. I guarantee it.”

“But doesn’t Mr. Lester make the decisions about his leading ladies? And Mr. Hearst?”

She stopped midstride and turned to me, her voice sticky-sweet. “Don’t you worry. I have Mr. Hearst right in my pocket.” She patted her breast as if she had a pocket with a miniature William Randolph Hearst trapped inside.

I tried to clear my muddled head. I do this for her, and she gets me a contract with Cosmo? With Louella’s help, I could be bringing in hundreds of dollars a week in no time at all. Enough to wire to Papa and keep him in the clear. And what was the harm in keeping Roy Lester company, anyway?

Then, through a tall double door, we entered a party that was far more intimate than the crush in the other room. Half a dozen people lounged on red velvet divans and tufted chairs in front of a massive stone fireplace. The lights were dim, the music muted. A white bearskin lay on the floor, the mouth gaping open to show enormous ivory teeth.

A shiver ran over my bare back.

Louella turned to me, her eyes bright with more than the gin I

smelled on her breath. “Here we are, Minerva. I’m telling you, Roy is just going to eat you up.”

I ignored the herd of butterflies stampeding in my stomach and plucked up my courage. Roy Lester, get ready to meet your next leading lady.

The murmur of conversation fell silent as we approached, the music and wild laughter of the other room muted and distant. Louella gushed like a little girl, “Minerva, dearest, you remember my friends, William and Marion?”

How could I not? Hearst was propped in one corner of the plush red divan, a full tumbler of whisky in hand. He was forty if he was a day, and Marion had left her twenties behind long ago. Marion was draped over him like a blanket, her famous blonde bob mussed and her lids at half-mast. A champagne bottle dangled from one dainty hand.

I stammered my hello, trying not to gape at how Marion’s sapphire dress, with a plunging V-neck and plenty of spangles, had slipped up her thigh, followed closely by Hearst’s hand. Marion murmured a greeting, took a swig from her bottle, and hiccupped. Hearst raised his glass to me and winked broadly at Louella’s husband, who moved over to make room on the divan. Louella’s eyes narrowed and I hoped to heaven she wasn’t thinking of the Docky Disaster at this moment.

Louella took my arm in her clawlike grasp and turned me to the man seated on the other end of the divan. Roy Lester wore a white dinner jacket, unbuttoned, and his bow tie was already undone. His classic features blurred behind the smoke of a fat cigar. “Roy, I’d like you to meet Minerva Sinclair,” Louella simpered. “I think you two will just adore each other.”

Let me tell you something. Back at the farm, we had a rooster

I'd named Blackie the Pirate, on account of the way he strutted around, his red gobbles wobbling, his swordlike beak ready to strike at any out-of-line hen. Roy Lester made me think of him right off. Roy's dark hair was combed over a thinning crown, and a narrow mustache outlined razor-thin lips. He even had a fold of red-flushed skin inching over his collar. But mostly, it was his eyes. They were sharp and quick, as if looking for a weak spot.

I held out my hand. I didn't have to like him; I just had to keep him company, like Louella said. Roy didn't stand for the introduction, but I guess someone under contract for a million bills a year doesn't have to stand if he doesn't want to. He took my hand and jerked me down into his lap. I yelped in surprise and struggled a bit. He laughed, his hand snaking around my waist as I awkwardly rearranged myself to sit beside him and put my dress back to rights while avoiding the hot ash of his cigar. "Pleased to meet you." I found my voice and gave him a look from under my lashes.

"Miss Sinclaire," he crowed, his eyes swiveling over me. "Louella's told me all about you." His whisky-and-tobacco breath made my eyes water.

I inched away, but Louella settled her bulky form on my other side, trapping me.

"You're dry," Lester bellowed, as if it were a crime. "This won't do at all." He signaled to a waiter—a kid bearing a striking resemblance to the girl Max had spoken to—who proffered a tray of martinis. I tried to remember how many drinks I'd had. Clara's whisky, two glasses of champagne, or was it three? Then I reminded myself I wasn't following Max's rules tonight, accepted a martini, and took a sip. The gin slipped down my throat like a sharp knife, but I figured it would give me courage. Roy settled back, and

Louella started in on who we'd seen in the other room, who they were with, and what they said.

I made small talk and took Roy's hand in mine so it couldn't go any further up my thigh. He wasn't so bad, I told myself, if slurred words and cigar breath were your thing.

Louella leaned into our conversation. "Didn't I tell you? Couldn't you just eat her up?" She laughed as if it weren't the tenth time tonight she'd used the phrase.

Roy buried his face in my neck. I tried to wiggle away as he traced a moist path toward my ear. A flicker of panic started in my chest and I pushed at him. This was too much. Roy leaned back, eyeing me with a hint of disappointment. "Come on, sweet thing, you know the game." He snagged another martini from a passing tray and put it in my hands. His look gave me the heebie-jeebies. Yes, I knew the game. I wished to heaven I didn't. I took a sip, even though I didn't want it.

The party in the other room was getting louder, the singing more off-key, the laughter rowdier. The music on the phonograph competed with the pounding piano. A gal who seemed to be wearing only her underslip scampered past, letting out a small scream and laughing uncontrollably as a man chased her. He caught her up in his arms and carried her out, shouting about the pool.

The room closed in on me, thick with smoke and unnamed expectations. I was definitely in over my head. Oh, how I hated when Max was right. I needed to think, and I couldn't think with Roy so close, with Louella watching me with those bright eyes. "I need to powder my nose." I pasted on a sweet smile and got to my feet. The floor swayed in an alarming way.

Roy grabbed my hand and eyed me suspiciously. "You aren't running out on me, are you, doll?"

“Oh, believe me, Roy, she’ll be back.” Louella jumped in. She gave me a look that said I better be back.

“In two shakes,” I assured Roy, my voice wobbling.

“Lucky man,” Docky slurred, and Louella gave him a glare.

I lurched away, my satin heels sinking into the sprawling bearskin. I imagined the bear’s glassy eyes watching me as I stumbled out of the room. Panic crept up my throat as I veered around a swarm of dancers. I could hear Max’s “I told you so,” but I wasn’t about to accept defeat. I needed air, then I’d come up with some way to see this through.

Once, when I was a kid, Penny and I dared each other to swim across the lake behind the back forty. Whoever lost had to clean the chicken coop. Penny was older but I was the better swimmer and itching to prove it. I started out strong and was soon yards ahead. By the time I reached the middle of the lake, I was exhausted. Penny turned back, but I pushed on. I made it, but only barely. Penny—the tattletale—told Papa the whole story that night, and I had to clean the chicken coop for a month, even though I’d won the bet. With every shovelful, I reminded myself I’d done what I had set out to do—and I’d do it again.

Sink or swim, isn’t that how the saying goes? But how far would I have to swim with Roy Lester? All the way? It wasn’t like this was my first time, I reminded myself. It wasn’t even my first time with someone I’d just met. I’d thought—and hoped and prayed and promised myself— those days and ways were behind me, but I’d come too far and was in too deep to give up now.

I pushed through the crowd, making a beeline for a set of French doors draped in heavy damask. I could leave now and lose my chance or stay and see this thing through. Papa and Penny were fast running out of time.

Sink or swim? I didn’t have a choice anymore.

OSCAR

Oscar plunged his hands into the sink full of hot soapy water. How many more glasses would he have to wash before those *americanos* passed out or ran out of liquor? He hadn't eaten since morning, his hands were as red as a hot pepper, and his head pounded harder than the hammering piano in the big room outside the kitchen door.

"*Ay, ay, my feet,*" Francesca complained, shifting her weight from one sturdy leg to the other as she dried a crystal highball glass. "He does not pay me enough for these nights."

Alonso pushed through the swinging door with another tray of dirty glasses, setting them on the counter next to Oscar's elbow. "You should try walking through that crowd with a tray of martini." He spoke in Spanish, as they all did when they worked in the kitchen. Francesca's kitchen meant Francesca's rules.

Oscar took care with the delicate stems as he transferred the dirty martini glasses to the sink. He'd never make a good waiter. He was too big to weave through a crowded room like Alonso, and he'd probably hit the first drunk who spilled their expensive liquor on him.

"They're winding up in there." Alonso splashed bourbon into three sparkling tumblers. "Clara Bow is dancing on the top of the bar." His mouth curled in what looked a lot like envy. "That blonde, she took off her dress and says she's going swimming. Someday soon, I'll have as much money as John Gilbert. And a swimming pool full of beautiful women."

"Alonso!" Francesca scolded, crossing herself automatically and kissing her thumbnail.

Oscar's headache moved to the back of his eyes. It was always the same with Alonso—to be like the *americanos* with money to

burn. Maybe, Oscar thought with a flash of annoyance, if Alonso didn't spend every spare nickel on the picture shows and get-rich-quick schemes, his family would have money enough for rent.

Why did he want to be like the idiots out there? These *americanos* had everything, but they were only happy when they were destroying something—their homes, their bodies, their families. He read enough of their newspapers to see they didn't know the meaning of honor. Give him trees and hedges—no matter how hot and sweaty the work—instead of women dressed like tarts and rich men on the prowl.

Oscar handed Alonso two clean glasses. “*Ándale!* If Señor Lester sees you lazing, you'll be out of a job.”

Alonso scowled. “If Señor Lester wants his liquor faster, he should hire more staff.” He filled the glasses with champagne. “And someone to help with the gardens.”

Oscar didn't disagree. There had been three gardeners when he got this job a year ago, but for months now, Oscar had cared for the grounds alone. Still, a job was a job and he'd take it. As the newspapers said every day, plenty of real Americans were lined up to take his place.

Francesca rolled her eyes. “May God hear you. I've said to the *señora*, I can't keep up with so little help, but she doesn't listen. Ah, my back is aching.”

Lupita pushed through the door. Slender and graceful, she moved like a shadow in and out of the kitchen. She was Alonso's little sister, but the similarities ended with their slight builds, curly dark hair, and wide brown eyes. Lupita was as serene as Alonso was discontent. Usually. Tonight, though, her hands trembled as she transferred glasses from her tray to the sideboard.

“Are you feeling all right, Lupita?” Oscar asked. She was only

eighteen, too young to be serving drunks, but he knew the Garcias needed the money as much as he did.

“*Sí*, Oscar. I’m fine.” She glanced behind her at the door as if a villain lurked outside.

She wasn’t fine. And Mamá would expect him to protect a girl her age. Oscar dried his hands on a towel. “Let me go out there this time. You take over here.”

Lupita almost dropped a glass, then threw a frightened glance toward Alonso. “No, no, Oscar. I mean, thank you, but I can go.”

Oscar eyed her. What was wrong now?

“You need a break, Oscar.” Lupita went to the icebox and pulled out a jar of milk. “And you’re hungry, I know. Take this.” She sliced a wedge from a loaf of bread and pushed him through the door with surprising force.

Oscar could have protested, but he’d been up before dawn, driven his brothers to their jobs at the packing house, then was here by first light trimming the hedges and the ridiculous expanse of green lawn, cutting armloads of flowers for the house arrangements, and making sure the pool sparkled. Another three hours helping in the kitchen for extra pay had done him in. He’d take food and a rest if it would make Lupita happy.

He welcomed the cool night air and the sudden quiet after the noisy kitchen. The English garden stretched out behind the sprawling house—the scent of roses and calla lilies thick and cloying. Paths of crushed oyster shell glowed yellow in the murky light of sodium lamps, and the trimmed hedges took on sinister shapes, like predators stalking through the night.

He slipped behind a copse of rhododendrons, their half-spent blossoms drooping, and settled on the edge of a low wall, away from the spill of lights from the ballroom windows. He took a swig of

milk and a bite of the soft bread and rolled his shoulders, loosening the tension in his neck. A muffled giggle came from somewhere in the dark. Guests were no doubt pairing up and finding private hideaways—and not with their wives or husbands. A shriek sounded from the direction of the pool, then a splash and wild laughter.

These people.

He'd be cleaning up broken glass and finding discarded clothing in the shrubbery for days. If there was any justice in the world, these *gringos* would have headaches the size of watermelons tomorrow morning.

He swallowed the last of his bread. Justice. It had no place in this world. At least tomorrow, when Señor Lester paid up, he'd be able to make the rent. Another month knowing Mamá and his brothers had a place to call home.

The patio door opened, letting out the light and noise of the party for a moment, then closed, muffling it again. Oscar leaned back into the shadows. *Por favor*, not a couple looking for privacy. Through the screen of flickering leaves, he saw a woman alone. Her back was to him, long and barely covered in shimmering green wisps. She was slim, her hair dark in the shadows but gleaming like copper when she stepped into the moonlight. She turned, clasping her arms around herself. Her face was the kind of beautiful the *americanos* preferred—deep red lips and flawless milk-white skin. She looked fragile, like the delicate orchids he looked after in the hothouse.

Her shoulders lifted and fell, as if she'd taken a deep breath. Then her fingers brushed at her eyes. She looked up into the stars, her long lashes fluttering as she blinked. What did a woman like her have to cry about?

The door opened again, and this time a man came through, tall, white trousers, dark evening jacket. The light was dim, but his

familiar profile—the sharp jaw and slightly crooked nose—made Oscar draw back into the shrubs and hold his breath. The last time he'd seen Max, he'd broken that nose.

The milk soured in his mouth as Lupita's nerves made sense. She'd seen Max and wanted to make sure Oscar didn't. She needn't have worried. The last person on earth he wanted to speak to was Max Perez, or did he call himself Clark now?

Max took a silver case from the inside pocket of his dinner jacket and snapped it open. His mother would be so proud, Oscar thought bitterly. Max even looked like an *americano*. Max drew out a cigarette and put it between his lips. A match flared against the stone wall and he cupped it close to his mouth. He took a deep pull, then handed the cigarette to the silent woman. "Had enough yet?"

She tossed her head, then turned away, putting the cigarette to her red lips. "I'm having the time of my life, no thanks to you."

Oscar watched the scene. It was like a film, the moon turning the colors to sepia, the muted music and the faces of the two actors intense and focused.

"You don't have to go back there." Max jerked his head toward the party.

She let out a small sigh that sounded a bit like a sob. "He's waiting for me. And so is Louella."

"You and Louella good friends now?" His eyebrows went up.

"She's going to see that I get a part in the new film, if that's what you mean."

"That so?" Max didn't sound convinced. "They played you like a piano, Mina." He took the cigarette from her limp hand, dragged in a breath, and turned his head to blow the smoke toward Oscar. "Louella set you up like some kind of pimp."

The girl didn't argue. "Why didn't you tell me about Clara? And Louella? You could have introduced me months ago."

He didn't answer.

Oscar knew Max's silences well. He didn't answer questions unless he felt like it.

She glanced up at him. "I need this part, Max. I need this break."

"I'll get you another part." He offered her the glowing cigarette.

She shook her head. "I'm out of cash and this dress took all my rent." She let out a frustrated breath. "Honestly, it's like you don't even want me to make it in this town. Like you've given up on me."

Max looked away like he had something to hide. "It's a slow time."

"Don't give me that line."

Oscar's hands tightened on the cold bottle. What exactly was he, her lover? Max always could pick the beauties. And break their hearts.

Max blew out a curtain of smoke that veiled them in silver. "Don't tell me you like being pawed by that clown."

"Of course not," she spat out.

"Then wise up. This isn't the place for you."

"Says you." She snatched the cigarette and put it between her lips. The tip glowed bright between them. "Listen. I have a chance with Roy. A big chance." She swallowed hard.

Even in the dim light, Oscar could see Max's jaw clench. "Sure. For a price."

So that was it. *Caramba*, these *americanos*. No marriage, no commitment. Where was this girl's father? Max would stop her if he were any kind of man.

"For a picture," she said firmly. "A big part, like you always say

I need. *Start out at the top, Mina. Bit parts are the beginning of the end.*” She mimicked Max’s deep voice pretty neatly.

“Don’t fall for that old trick, Mina. You’re better than that.”

She threw the cigarette on the ground between them. “I know what I’m doing.”

He looked at the glowing ember and shook his head slowly. “You don’t. I’ve seen—”

“Oh, you’ve seen it all. You know it all.” Her voice rose and she fluttered a long white hand. “You and your rules. You don’t even follow them. Why should I?”

That seemed to stop him in his tracks. Oscar almost leaned right out of his secluded hiding place. He’d never seen Max at a loss for words.

Max rubbed his hand over his face, and in the dim light, his eyes looked like those of a man twice his age. “Mina, if this is about that night—”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” she snapped.

Max ground the smoldering cigarette out with the toe of his expensive-looking shoe.

The girl turned away from him. Oscar could see her face, but Max couldn’t. She looked like she was fighting back tears, blinking her eyes fast.

A prick of conscience surprised him. She didn’t want to do this—whatever it was, though he figured he knew. Couldn’t Max see she was practically begging him to stop her? If it was something to do with Lester, she was sure to regret it.

She took a deep breath and turned back to him. “I came here to get the part, and that’s what I’m going to do.” Her voice was sure now.

Oscar hadn’t been raised to let women fall prey to wolves—and

neither had Max. He wanted to step out of the shadows and tell her about the women who paraded in and out of Lester's bedroom—women with no shame. She didn't want to be one of them, he'd tell her. But why would she listen to him—a Mexican man she didn't even know—when she wouldn't listen to Max? Besides, she wasn't his responsibility. She wasn't even one of his people.

"You give him what he wants, and he'll give you what you want?" Max's voice was like the grind of stone on stone.

She swallowed and eyed the door to the ballroom where a tinny phonograph player screeched. Splashes and laughter came from the pool. "That's how it works."

Max shook his head, his face in the shadows. "Sure. That's how it works." His voice was heavy. He turned away from her. "Don't come crying to me when it goes to the dogs, Mina."

Max walked slowly into the house, opening the door to a burst of noise and slamming it behind him. The record player stopped, and for a moment, it was almost quiet. The moonlight played over the girl's face. She looked sad and young and scared. "Don't worry, I won't," she said in a small voice, as if Max were still there.

Oscar had the feeling he'd just watched something go terribly wrong.

MINA

I cracked open one eye. Sunlight sliced like a sharp blade, and I squeezed it closed again. My body was leaden. My head felt like a fence post taking a pounding. What happened last night?

Think, Mina. The party. Max. Max walking out on me . . .

I moved my hand, as heavy as stone. I was on a bed—I knew that at least. A breeze chilled my clammy skin and I shivered. Why wasn't I wearing my dress?

Roy Lester.

My breath stopped. Oh my stars, don't remember. But it was too late.

Max left me on the patio . . . and I went back to Roy and Louella. Marion snored softly in the corner of the divan, her mouth open to show perfect tiny teeth. The Chinese butler brought a tray of drinks and bent close to Hearst, who whispered in his ear, then handed around the gin and tonics—mostly gin, so I barely took a sip.

Lester pulled me to him. "She's too much," he said, his hands sliding over my bare back and down to my waist.

Louella looked smug. "I knew you'd like her."

I didn't like the way they talked about me like I was a Christmas present and Roy Lester got to do the unwrapping. As if he'd read my thoughts, Roy stood and pulled me to my feet. "Let's take our party upstairs." His words were slurred, but I knew what he meant.

"No, no, no." Mr. Hearst jumped up and grabbed Roy's arm. "The party's just starting, isn't that right, Maryanne?"

Relief almost knocked me over. "It's Minerva," I said, but I didn't care what he called me, as long as he kept Roy downstairs.

"Of course. Here—" He signaled to the pretty maid. "Bring Roy here one of his specials."

"Sure, Billy-boy," Roy said, easy enough to convince. "One for the old road." Roy danced me around the room as the gramophone rasped, the needle stuck on the groove, singing along, his breath hot and moist in my ear, "All I want is just one kiss, and I have to have one kiss."

One kiss? And then . . . what?

I remember we went outside, Roy swaying—lurching—around the courtyard with me in his arms. I felt woozy; the courtyard

spun. That's when everything started to run together. Roy dragging me up a stairway, laughing like it was a lark. I guess it was to him. But what happened after?

A familiar shame burned through me.

Had I been what they call "a good sport"? Had we . . . ? Don't be a dope, Mina, what do you think we did, play gin rummy? My stomach turned, from a hangover or what I'd done with Roy, I didn't know.

I tried to breathe, to think. How had I come to this? Small steps, small strokes taking me into deeper and deeper water until I couldn't turn back. Now, here I was . . . drowning.

I pried my eyes open. Hard light slashed through dark velvet curtains and glinted off of dozens of lifeless eyes. Antelope, zebra, a huge pig with enormous tusks—all staring at me reproachfully. Roy Lester's trophy room. The silence—the deep, exhausted morning silence—was broken by the low buzz of a fly, bouncing against a window, caught between the heavy velvet drapes and the glass, relentlessly trying to escape.

I'd done what I needed to do. I'd done what Louella had asked, and then some. She owed me, and from here on out, I'd go straight. Follow the rules. I'd sign on with Lester at Cosmo and make all I needed in a few months. Then go home. I'd be home in time for spring thunderstorms, June bugs, the bright green of sprouting corn.

That's what I'd do, I told myself. No one would know.

I sat up, gingerly holding my head.

First I noticed the smell—sharp and metallic—like the chicken house on slaughtering day. Then I saw the body.

On the floor in the middle of the room. And . . . blood, soaking the pale carpet.

I scrambled back, tumbling off the far side of the bed, my knees sinking into thick carpet. I crawled backwards until my back hit the wall. Took a breath. Had I imagined it? I inched around the side of the bed and covered my mouth to stop a scream.

Roy lay on his back, his pale face mottled with blue veins, his mouth sagged open. Those eyes that had charmed women in countless films stared at the ceiling, as glassy as the animals on the wall. I choked. A knife—covered with blood—with a wicked long blade lay beside him.

He was dead. Dead. Roy Lester, America's Hero, was dead.

A rushing sound filled my ears, a drumming in my throat, behind my eyes. The room spun around me. "Think. Think, Minnie." My whisper was queer-sounding in the silent room.

Finally, my brain starting ticking. I couldn't do anything for him now. I needed to get far away, as fast as I could. Out of the house. Home. I'd say I left him alive, late at night. My dress. Shoes. Where were they? I scrambled around the bed. Saw only blood and Roy. There. Green silk in a puddle by the door. I pulled it on. I couldn't be in this room—with him—another second.

Oh, Max, you were right. *Don't come crying to me when it goes to the dogs, Mina.* You were right and I was wrong. I admit it. Please help me. Please help me, Max. Get me out of this horrid fix I got myself into.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear reader,

My hope for this story is that, when the last page is turned, you might say, “Wasn’t that like the story in the Bible, the one about the Prodigal Son?” For that beautiful parable of compassion has been my inspiration.

Jesus was a teacher with radical ideas and unconventional ways. The Parable of the Lost Son, which he told to his disciples and the Pharisees, started out as a story they all knew well: a story of justice—of a bad son who did bad things and got his comeuppance, and a good son who followed the law and in return received his father’s favor. But to the Pharisees’ shock—and, no doubt, dismay—Jesus turned the story on its head. In his upside-down version, the terrible son who squandered his father’s money on a life of dissipation was forgiven! And not only forgiven but welcomed home with rejoicing. What kind of father, they surely asked themselves, would reward a sinful son with the father’s own cloak, the ring from his finger, and a feast? The wayward son didn’t deserve forgiveness, they surely argued. He wasn’t entitled to mercy.

IN A FAR-OFF LAND

And yet he received them just the same. Because the Father Jesus showed us in the parable defies our understanding. His mercy is infinite. His forgiveness is without measure. His love is beyond all reason.

My hope is that through this reimagining of the Parable of the Lost Son, we can see ourselves in one—or all—of the characters: Max, seeking redemption and forgiveness; Oscar, obsessed with justice; Penny, unable to forgive; Ephraim, a parent faithfully waiting for the return of a wayward child. And most of all, Mina, who longs to return to her father and be forgiven.

For aren't we all wayward children hoping to return to the arms of our Father? And don't we long for him to say, "I forgive you, my child. I love you. Always. No matter what"?

*With love,
Stephanie Landsem*