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House of comedy

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HOUSE OF COMEDY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Edie L. Matthews

May 2006

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mitch Berman", written over a horizontal line.

Mitch Berman, M.F.A.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Barnaby Dallas", written over a horizontal line.

Barnaby Dallas, M.A.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Scott Sublett", written over a horizontal line.

Scott Sublett, M.F.A.

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Phea I. Williamson", written over a horizontal line.

ABSTRACT

HOUSE OF COMEDY

by Edie L. Matthews

This creative thesis is a novel set in the world of standup comedy. Maddie Quinn, a wife and mother, has made a deal with her husband; she has one year to succeed in Hollywood. She lives in a studio apartment in the Belvedere, an old Hollywood building. Eleven other comedians and quirky neighbors also reside there. With one month left, Maddie is on the verge of success, when it all collapses. Desperate, she manages to get a story in the *LA Times* about the dozen comics living in the Belvedere, and producers come wooing with offers of a sitcom deal. Not only does Maddie have to navigate the strife and struggles of the entertainment industry, a serial rapist is on the loose in the neighborhood, closer than she realizes. Ultimately, the story is a parable, where illusion and reality are blurred, appearances not what they seem to be.

DEDICATION

To Jim, who always makes me laugh.

Chapter 1

One year to succeed—one month to go. In a dimly lit alcove, Maddie Quinn waited for her turn to go on stage at Quip's Comedy Club and tried not to think about the bargain she made with her husband. She knew her material, line for line—jokes she had written and honed for a multitude of audiences in the best venues like the Punch Line in San Francisco to hell-gigs like the Truck Stop in Turlock, so she managed her nervousness by drawing curlicues with her fingertip on the tabletop. Her dreams would be realized if all went as planned tonight and next Tuesday. And just in time. Her husband had agreed that she could move to Hollywood for one year to try and succeed as a comedian. Now, with a month to spare, she was on the verge of landing a national commercial, and after tonight, becoming a regular at Quip's. Once she passed this final audition, the club would give her 15-20 minute paid spots several times a week. The money was minimal. More significantly, Quip's was the premiere room for comedians to showcase in Los Angeles. Hollywood power brokers—agents, managers and casting people—dropped in routinely during the workweek, scouting for new talent. With that kind of exposure, she would be on her way.

The commercial was equally important. Her nest egg was nearly gone, so when she booked this job, the residuals would easily support her for six months or a year. She could stay off the road, stay in town, and concentrate on auditioning.

Impatiently, Maddie bounced her fingers on the table. She was scheduled to perform at 10:20. She pressed the light on her wristwatch. Blue neon glinted 11:45.

She ran her fingernails along a scratch on the table and chipped her nail polish. “Damn.” First Jerry Seinfeld had dropped by, then Jay Leno, followed by a Seattle comedian just agented by William Morris—all of them bumping her and wearing out the crowd. Worst of all, Flip Checkers swaggered in like he was the next Mel Blanc. He’d just performed the voice of Duggie Dolphin in a new animated film. In his arrogance, Flip believed he was entitled to exceed the allotted time. As her frustration mounted, Maddie endured an eon of stock material on McDonald’s, Seven-Elevens, and fart jokes delivered in cartoon voices—Popeye to Porky Pig—each with its own slobbering speech impediment and disgusting flatulence. But the men in the audience howled as Flip sang out, “I’m Popeye the Sailor Man, FART. FART.” He ignored the red cue light in the back of the room signaling his time was up, even though it was now flashing on-off-on-off-on-off.

After a millennium, he left the stage, and Maddie stood and surveyed the audience: twenty-three people left, including a birthday party of women gathered at a large table down front. If they’d just hang in there, she could connect with them.

Maddie saw Roxanne Cooper slip into the showroom. Her hair, the color of Sunkist oranges and cut in a pixie was striking and highlighted her cherubic face. An orange scarf draped around her neck and orange Mary Janes on her feet matched her coiffure perfectly. Heads turned when she passed by.

She dropped into the chair next to Maddie. “Did Flip finish his fart routine?”

Maddie nodded. “That’s why he’ll always be a hack; he’s still doing fart jokes.”

They both laughed.

“Are you next, yet?”

“Yes—unless Rodney Dangerfield drops in.”

Roxanne grinned a dimpled smile. Four months earlier she moved from Miami to LA joining the army of comedians trying to conquer Hollywood. Each one maneuvered for precious stage time—striving for that magical appearance on *The Tonight Show* or *David Letterman*, which would lead to a network development deal and then victory. A starring role in a TV sitcom.

Maddie sympathized with Roxanne’s dilemma. It wasn’t that long ago that she also struggled to make connections, negotiating her way through the hierarchy of comedy clubs in LA.

Roxanne rested an elbow on the table. “I wish they’d hurry up.”

“That makes two of us.” Maddie leaned forward. “Does that stage seem higher tonight than usual?”

Roxanne pinched her chin. “Now that you mentioned it, it is higher than most.”

“I hate that.”

“You don’t like heights?”

“No.”

“It’s not *that* much higher.”

“I suppose not.”

“Are you staying in town tonight or driving home?”

“I’m driving tonight,” said Maddie. “My youngest has a basketball game tomorrow.”

“Your daughter, right?”

Maddie nodded and smiled.

“Why don’t you leave in the morning?”

Maddie checked her watch again. “It will be morning if I don’t get on soon.”

There was a spattering of applause as a stocky comic from Boston finished his set, and Maddie rose. “At last.”

“Break a lip,” said Roxanne.

Spider Byrnes, the house manager and emcee, took the stage. He was short with a tall ego. He wore a black fedora and diamond pinkie ring. He grabbed the mike stand and angled it downward, so he could speak into the microphone without lowering it. He called after the Boston comic, “Don’t quit your day job.”

The stocky comic gave him the one-finger salute and mumbled, “Asshole.”

Roxanne rested her chin on her fist. “Doesn’t Spider remind you of Buster Keaton?”

“But not that cheerful.” Maddie sipped some water and peeled off the napkin sticking to the bottom of the glass.

Spider took the microphone out of the stand.

“Oh, no,” groaned Roxanne. “He’s going to do material. I can’t wait any longer. I gotta go. Tomorrow I’m doing extra work on *90210*.”

“Don’t worry about it—I’ll catch you later.” Maddie put on a cheerful smile, but hated to see her leave. Roxanne had a contagious laugh, and it would have been reassuring to have her in the audience.

On stage Spider deadpanned. "My girlfriend's trying to lose weight, so I bought her a new gizmo for the refrigerator. Every time she opens the door it goes 'oink, oink, oink.'" A few men in the audience snickered. "Now all she eats is bacon."

The party of women exchanged withering looks. One stage whispered, "Let's go," and they began collecting their purses.

Spider followed with a few more lines, which all met with silence. He tapped on the microphone and said, "Knock, knock. Ding-dong. Hellooooo? Anybody home? What are you, an audience or an oil painting?"

Maddie shook her head; it's pretty sad when you have to steal save-lines from Henny Youngman. She watched the women leave. She counted. Fourteen people left. She crunched the cocktail napkin into a ball and dropped it in the glass.

Suddenly Spider cut his act short, and Maddie felt a chill of anticipation shoot through her. She stood up and moved towards the stage. "Our next performer has written scripts for *Night Court* and *Taxi*. Please welcome Glen Fowler."

She stopped and muttered, "What's going on?"

A comedian in a red jacket bounced onto the stage. "How many people here have been to Chicago?"

Maddie crossed to the control booth and spoke to a comic leaning against the wall. "Rod, I thought I was next?"

Rod perused the typed list taped to the wall. Another name had been penciled in above hers. "I guess you're on after this guy."

"Is he any good?"

Rod shrugged.

Spider came over to the sound booth and said to her, "You're next."

She buried her irritation and asked, "This guy's a sitcom writer?"

Spider smirked, "He wrote some scripts—nobody said he sold them."

Rod guffawed. "I'll see you later." He left through swinging doors into the restaurant-bar area of the club.

Maddie turned her attention to the stage, observing that the audience had not laughed yet.

"My boss complains that I don't listen. At least I think that's what he said. I couldn't understand him." Glen's ingratiating smile had no effect on the crowd.

"Doesn't it stink when you come out of the bathroom at your friend's house asking for the plunger?" The audience groaned.

For the first time that evening, Spider smiled. "That joke stinks, and so does he."

Two more people exited the showroom.

Maddie ran her fingers through her short blond hair. "He's going to walk the room!"

Spider snapped on the red light.

"I started taking kick-boxing where they teach you to fight with your feet. But I kept tripping."

"Oh, no," groaned Maddie, watching another couple leave.

"You want to give up your spot? I could get you on earlier next month."

“No way! I’ve *got* to go on tonight.” Maddie thought about the bargain with her husband. She had one year and time was running out. Prior to moving to LA, she had worked as a standup comic for five years mainly in the San Francisco Bay Area where she lived—although she had managed to squeeze in some road work and performed in twelve other states, usually a week or two at a time, then back home to Bret and the kids. Now where had the year in LA gone? She had planned so carefully. Before moving here she’d signed with a manager and an agent. They turned out to be a waste of time. The manager had no clout in Hollywood and booked her into retirement centers in Orlando. The audiences were comprised of seniors from New York who had moved to Florida for their Golden Years. Their idea of funny was Milton Berle in drag. What a nightmare! The agent was worse. She handled specialty acts—jugglers, hypnotists, contortionists. One day Maddie came into the office and found it crowded with dwarfs. She asked, “Are they looking for Snow White?” Maddie spent a bundle on new photos and over a six-month period, the agent sent her out on one audition—a non-union infomercial for fertilizer. That’s when Maddie started all over again in town, scrambling for stage time in the local clubs and looking for a new agent, finally signing with a commercial agent a few months ago.

Glen noticed the cue light. “Guess I gotta go folks. If you like my act, my name’s Glen Fowler. If you don’t, I’ve been George Carlin.”

There was another rustle of people leaving. Maddie fumed. If she’d gotten on at 10:20 like originally scheduled, she would have played to a full house. How was she

supposed to prove herself now? In the wilderness of chairs, she counted one, two, three people.

Spider didn't bother going back on stage. He clicked on the microphone in the sound booth and introduced her. "Now, for our final comic of the evening. Here's Martha Jones."

"*Quinn*, it's *Maddie Quinn*," she said and rushed to the stage to shorten that gap of silence. So many steps. *I hate high stages. Don't think about it. Concentrate on your act. I've paid my dues*, she reminded herself. She had gone on later, played to smaller crowds. When she first started performing, she rarely got spots before midnight. Once at the Holy City Zoo in San Francisco she didn't get on until two a.m. There were two people left in the audience, and one was snoring. A group of comedians congregated at the bar, watching, chuckling, relishing it was her and not one of them on stage. Maddie stayed positive. She figured if you got an "Ah ha," you were killing. Only tonight was critical, and she needed laughs, big laughs from the one man and two women remaining. *Energy. Lots of positive energy. Be happy—fake it.*

She lifted the microphone out of the stand and glanced down at the trio. The man's arms were crossed, and his legs were propped on another chair as if he was resting on a chaise lounge. One woman opened a mirror and began applying lipstick; the other covered her mouth and yawned.

Oh please, wake up! Maddie smiled brightly. "Hi. I know, you're looking at me and thinking who turned on *The Partridge Family*?"

A waitress drifted into the showroom and began clearing dirty glasses. *Great. Now I'm being upstaged by the clean-up crew. Acknowledge her, work with it.*

Maddie gestured to the waitress. "There's a chore that makes me feel at home—I'm married and have three kids. Of course, if the worst thing I have to do is dishes, it's my *lucky* day." *Good, lipstick lady is paying attention.* "And thanks to packing lunches for my family, I finally found a moisturizer that really works. You know that white cream in Twinkies? I figure, anything that has a shelf-life of seventeen years has got to be good for my skin." The two women exchanged nods. "It's so unfair because men don't have to worry about that. Everybody say, 'Yeah.'"

Miss Lipstick mumbled, "Yeah."

"There's a lot about women men don't understand. EVERYBODY say, 'YEAH!'"

The two women answered, "Yeah!"

"You see, most women were born under the sign of VISA with Mastercharge rising...."

The women giggled, and the man uncrossed his arms, sat up and bobbed his head.

"My husband found out what turns me on—a sign over the bed that says clearance....Gets me hot every time. Cause I *love* to shop. Especially for shoes—you always wear the same size no matter how big your butt gets. ... Men hate to shop. Ladies, let me clue you, after you're married they never buy another pair underwear. They may as well add that to the marriage vows, 'Do you promise to love, honor and buy his BVDs?' Because men will walk around in an elastic band." Maddie had a wide-eyed

astonished expression as though viewing her husband. "I'm wondering, don't you feel a draft?" Maddie spread her arms. "I don't know, maybe with that little opening, they're used to it."

The waitress laughed and sat down to listen while Maddie continued on about the trials and tribulations of marriage, then transitioned into getting into shape

"I try to stay fit. I'm always on a diet. I'm working very hard to get down to the weight on my license."

The waitress and the two women were laughing at every line.

"It would be scary if there was a scale at the DMV. You think their lines are slow now? But it would clear half the traffic. See women won't get weighed without taking off all our clothes. Oh, I've tried in my panties," Maddie acted out stepping on a scale. "Wow! These bikinis are heavy!"

The man slapped the table, his laughter louder than the women's, and Spider switched on the cue light.

Damn it, he's early. Never mind, it's late. I've proved I'm funny, two more jokes and say goodnight.

Maddie finished and Miss Lipstick jumped up to applaud and knocked over her drink. "Oops!"

"What did you do that for?" said the man. The two women searched for napkins and blotted up the liquid. Only the waitress in the back clapped. The sound reverberated in the cavernous showroom, reminding Maddie of the pitiful ending on *Laugh-In*.

Maddie left the stage and waved to the three people leaving. “Thanks for staying.” She walked back to Spider, trying to look positive. “What did you think?”

Spider’s face knotted in a pained expression, and he made a *tsk-tsk* sound like he was trying to dislodge a piece of meat stuck in his molars. “Is that your best material?”

“It was only seven minutes. I can do forty-five.”

The door swung open and Boyd Jackson, a comedian living in the same apartment building as Maddie, leaned in. “Spider, you going with us to Jugs?” Boyd recognized Maddie. “Hey, did you do a set tonight?”

Maddie nodded.

“How’d it go?”

Spider cut in. “I’ll be right there.”

“Okay, we’re leaving pretty quick.” With a lift of his chin, Boyd signaled goodbye to Maddie.

Behind her, she heard the clink of glasses being gathered, but she kept her focus on Spider, waiting.

“Your material’s not very edgy.” He switched off the sound system. “You ever watch Roseanne or Joan Rivers?”

Maddie wanted to scream, *That’s not my persona!* She watched him take a drink from his beer, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. She recalled one of her early performances at the Holy City Zoo when the Hell’s Angels had showed up. All the other comedians began peppering their material with profanity. The emcee introduced her, explaining she didn’t do “dick jokes.” A Hell’s Angel with a coiled rattlesnake tattooed

on his cheek hollered, "Come on, tell us a dick joke, Honey." Caught off guard for a moment, she stalled and repeated, "I don't do dick jokes." Then she smiled sweetly. "In fact, every joke I do tonight, you can go home and tell your mother." That got the biggest laughs of the evening. *Where were the Hell's Angels when you needed them?*

"There were only three people in the audience. I can't make the chairs crack up." She said, hoping she didn't sound defensive. "All I need is an earlier spot."

The waitress walked by lugging a tub of dirty glasses. "You're pretty funny," she said, heading out the door.

"Thanks." Maddi wished Quip's was like Ha Ha's in Phoenix where the owner relied on the opinions of the wait-staff.

Spider watched the waitress exit before responding. "If you had some spicier material, I might be able to get you in the showcase on Wednesday."

"Really? An industry showcase?"

"It's for women only."

"That's *me*. And there are a lot of mothers that can relate to my point of view. Men too. I'm kind of a cross between Erma Bombeck and Bill Cosby."

He slugged back the last of his beer and wiped his lips with his thumb. "It's for *Playboy*."

"*Playboy*?"

"They're doing a feature on women comics."

"I can't *pose* for *Playboy*."

His eyes darkened and he looked her up and down. "Why not? You're okay."

Scum-bucket! Maddie felt more annoyed than embarrassed. “I have kids.”

“*Tsk-tsk*, this could be a real break.”

“I’m married. I *have* a husband.”

“Doesn’t he want you to succeed?”

“Yes, but—”.

“If he can’t handle it, divorce him.”

Boyd opened the door and shouted, “Spider, we’re out of here.”

“I’m there!”

Maddie watched Spider click off the panel of switches, turning the showroom into darkness, except for a single pin light at the back of the stage.

He hurried by her and called over his shoulder. “Let me know by Monday.”

Chapter 2

By the time Roxanne left the showroom and passed through the restaurant, there were only a spattering of people remaining, mostly comics sitting around discussing their careers. She understood their reluctance to leave. Comedians became nocturnal creatures. They worked the late shift, and after revving up to perform, it took hours to decompress. As a result, many comics she knew didn't rise until noon—some slept later—two, three, four o'clock in the afternoon.

Roxanne said goodnight to the doorman, a thick-necked hulk of a man, looking awkward in a sports jacket. He was new—another person to schmooze. Part of her envied Maddie, who would be a regular after tonight, while she still had to establish herself in the LA clubs, each one with its own rigmarole.

At the Improv, you signed up on Sunday in person. Your name was dropped in a hat and out of forty or fifty, ten were selected.

At the Comedy Store, you phoned in on Thursday, called back on Friday to see if your name was on the list for Monday night in the Belly Room, a tiny stage in the bowels of the club that was lucky to draw a dozen people.

At Quip's, you dropped off an audition tape and resume, waited three or four months until they got around to viewing it. Then worked your way through the ranks by taking unpaid spots during the week, always after midnight, *if* there was anyone left in the audience, until finally you earned the right to audition as a regular. And there were

five more clubs in town. What a hassle! To keep it all straight, she had to keep track of the procedure on her calendar.

Outside the club, more comedians loitered on the sidewalk, smoking.

“That spaghetti bit sucks,” said one, gesticulating with his cigarette.

“It’s a good premise, a guy overcooking pasta till it chews like bubble gum,” said another, resettling a Dodger baseball cap on his head. “Keep working on it.”

A limousine like a huge black trawler cruised along Santa Monica Boulevard. Two squealing blondes poked their heads out of the opened sunroof and waved.

Mr. Baseball Cap yelled, “Hey honey! Come back!” He flicked his cigarette butt into the gutter.

Roxanne strolled past the fellows, sensing their eyes now watching her. No time for chatting or flirting tonight, she had to think about next morning. She would drive to a strip mall in the Valley where *90210* was shooting. Central Casting told her to come dressed like a high school shopper. Earlier that evening she had arranged three possible outfits, laying them across her bed. She turned the corner away from the busy street, deciding the black leather skirt and black blouse would go best with her hair. She wanted to be noticed but had to be careful not to wear anything too eye catching—they wouldn’t allow an extra to upstage the stars. Still, they knew about her orange hair, so she’d wear the matching scarf and shoes. Maybe they’d begin a scene with her strolling by Luke Perry.

She headed towards the alley where she was parked. The side street was shadowy and quiet, the temperature cooler than the boulevard. Usually she found a parking place

on the boulevard, but tonight she had driven around for fifteen minutes before circling back to the alley behind Quip's and pulling into an empty carport. Only earlier it hadn't been this dark.

She squinted, trying to adjust her vision to the unlit area. A back door crashed open and Roxanne's heart leaped. A shaft of light shot out, and a Hispanic busboy lugged a trashcan out.

"Hijo de perra! Sonna-a-beech!" he said, banging it against the dumpster as it emptied.

Roxanne inhaled deeply and calmed herself. She fished out her car keys. The busboy went back inside, the door slammed shut. Once again she was in darkness. She approached her dented Volkswagen van parked between two other cars and unlocked the door.

Suddenly a muscular arm seized her from behind. "Do you want to live?" he hissed.

The edge of a knife pressed on her throat. On her cheek, his breath smelled of garlic and spearmint. Instinctively, she started to nod, but the cold blade at her skin stopped her. She gasped, "Yes."

"Open the door."

She fumbled with the handle. Surely someone else would come along and see her and help her. The owners of the other cars. Where were they? The busboy. Why doesn't he come back? There had to be more trash. But there was only the intermittent growl of traffic on Santa Monica Boulevard.

“You’re taking too long.” Keeping the knife at her throat, he released the hold on her ribs, and opened the door. She banged her knee when he shoved her inside.

In the blackness she couldn’t distinguish his features, then she realized that he was wearing a ski mask. “Please,” she whispered, “don’t kill me.”

He yanked up her skirt. “Shuddup.”

Chapter 3

All weekend Maddie mulled over the *Playboy* audition. But how could she pose for that magazine? She considered mentioning it to Bret as a joke to get his reaction but changed her mind. Yet wasn't the female form painted and sculpted by art masters and displayed and admired in museums? Who was she kidding? *Playboy Magazine* was no Louvre Museum. Still, after taking a shower, she dried the steam from the bathroom mirror and scrutinized her body. Despite three pregnancies, her body had good tone from regular workouts. If she sucked in her stomach until it was entirely flat and did a three-quarter pose, and then held her arms up over her head—that slimmed her obliques and lifted her pectoralis majors—she didn't look half bad. Only, on closer examination, there were stretch marks and her bottom could be tighter. They could airbrush stretch marks. She tensed her gluteus maximi and pivoted on tiptoes from one side to the other, trying to determine her best angle. She bent her right leg and lifted it a few inches, pointing her toe, balancing on the tiptoes of her left foot, turning, posing. She congratulated herself, not bad for three children. A jolt of pain seized her. "Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!" A charley horse. She grabbed her calve and massaged. She straightened her leg, flexed and stretched the calf muscle. Oh, forget *Playboy*. She had to nail that commercial.

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Monday morning Maddie returned to LA, the commuter traffic on Highway 101 diminishing by the time she reached the Cahuenga Pass. On Mount Lee sunlight shimmered off the huge letters of the HOLLYWOOD sign. Just below, vestiges of

architectural wonders covered the hillside. No matter how often she approached the city by this route, she felt exhilarated. Spread out before her on flatlands were avenues lined with towering palms topped with spiky green fronds, looking like exotic parasols. She passed Capital Records, a circular building resembling a stack of 78s, the rooftop an immense turntable with a giant needle. She eased the blue Saturn to the right lane, watching for her exit, Sunset Boulevard.

She loved traveling home on weekends, reconnecting with her family, cooking their favorite meals: meatloaf, lasagna, stroganoff; watching her daughter play basketball; catching up with her son, home for the weekend from college; and doting on her husband. She realized that their arrangement was unconventional and was grateful for Bret's support. Yet even though her year was nearly up, she wasn't ready to give up and go home. Every time she returned to LA, she experienced a sense of adventure and freedom. After twenty-two years of marriage and three children, it was luxurious to have this respite and concentrate completely on herself. Here she didn't have to worry about the dreary minutia that dominated the routine of a wife and working mother. She didn't miss conjuring up dinner every evening at five, especially when she wasn't hungry. Most days in LA she was so pre-occupied writing material, attending acting classes, going to auditions or trying to book a gig at one of the peripheral clubs around town that she often forgot about eating until late in the afternoon, when she'd feel hunger pangs and realize she'd skipped lunch. Unless she was meeting up with a friend, dinner wasn't a big deal. A low-cal concoction like a baked potato topped with cottage cheese and a green salad would do. Unlike her cabinet at home, which bulged with snack food, Maddie was

Careful not to keep sweets in her apartment. She stocked up on rice cakes, yogurt, fruits, veggies and tonic water, and had trimmed down to a perfect size eight. Although she understood this was still heavy by Hollywood standards. Many actresses whittled down to a size two or one. Some were so emaciated Maddie often repressed the desire to say, "Sit down. Eat a sandwich!"

Maddie cruised along Bronson and managed to find a parking space across the street from her building. The Belvedere was an imposing three-story structure. Its Spanish façade, with embellishments over the entrance and upper corners, made it seem like it had wandered off the backlot of MGM Studios.

Yet the place was characteristic of the many unique structures throughout the city constructed during the heyday of the silver screen to accommodate dreamers flocking to LA, fervent to break into films. It was as though movie-set designers moonlighted as architects. Every conceivable type of design was evident from the more elaborate Mann's Chinese Theatre to Tail O' the Pup, a food stand shaped like a hot dog.

Maddie turned off the ignition and took a moment to gather her belongings. Across the street a young comedian she recognized approached the building with the eagerness of a lottery winner.

* * *

Inside the Belvedere Apartments sixty-six year old Cleo Burr smoothed her pastel polyester pantsuit, glanced in the mirror at her Marilyn-Monroe coiffure, and picked up

her cigarette before she stepped from her office to answer the doorbell. Two small flat-faced dogs trailed after her.

Cleo studied the young man on the porch through the heavy-glass door, flanked by glass panels, before finally opening it and inquiring, “What do you want?”

“Is this the apartment building where all of the comics live?”

Cleo adjusted her rhinestone spectacles. “This *is* the Belvedere Apartments,” she straightened to her full 5’9” height, “and *I’m* the manager.”

“Hi, I was wondering—do you have any openings?”

“No.”

“Oh,” he shifted from one foot to foot. “Well, in that case, can I fill out an application?”

“I have a stack of applications already, and I’m currently not accepting anymore.”

He pointed to himself. “But *I’m* a comic.”

Cleo wedged the cigarette between her lips and inhaled deeply. She turned her head and exhaled a plume of smoke. “I don’t recognize you. What TV shows have you been on?”

He straightened up. “*Silly Dillies, Guffaws, The Melvin Dooley Show.*”

“Hurumph.” She lifted an eyebrow penciled like Joan Crawford’s. “Never heard of them.”

“They’re real popular shows in Chicago. See, I just moved here. Look, even if you don’t have a vacancy, can’t I put in an application?”

Maddie approached the entrance encumbered with her purse, a blue plastic basket heaped with folded laundry and on a hanger an evening dress protected by plastic. “Hi, Cleo. Hi, Keith. Are you moving in?”

Before Keith could answer, Cleo asked, “Is he funny?”

“He’s a riot. We worked a week together in Portland.”

“Hurrumph.” Cleo eyed him suspiciously then pushed open the door, and the three moved inside. The lobby was like an agent’s office, with beige furniture and artificial ficus trees, down to the trade magazines arranged on the end tables. Above the couch, two rows of theatrical headshots of the comedians living in the building hung on the wall. Behind a counter on the opposite side was a bank of mailboxes. Maddie inhaled the smell of lemon polish and noticed the dark gleam on the sturdy oak banister leading upstairs.

“Nice pooches.” Keith stooped down and petted the animals. “Brussel griffons, right?”

“Yes. That’s Tinkerbelle, and Clark Gable with the wayward tooth.” One of Clark Gable’s fangs protruded, even when the animal’s mouth was closed. Cleo’s expression relaxed, watching the dogs wag their stubby tails and warm to Keith’s attention. “Wait here a minute.” The dogs followed Cleo back into her office.

“Thanks,” said Keith to Maddie. “This is great.” He perused the photographs. “Do all of these comics live here?”

“There’s twelve of us now, out of 36 units. They’re all studio apartments, by the way, except for Cleo’s. She’s got a double with an office in the front.” Maddie slid her

purse off her shoulder, set the basket on the coffee table, and carefully laid her dress on top. "There's a few actors and some production people here, too. Like Carol Allen upstairs, she scouts for movie locations. The rest are civilians, and a lot of old people." She lowered her voice. "Every time one of them kicks off, we try to move in another comic."

The elevator lurched into motion, and Maddie and Keith watched as the carriage came to a stop. An old lady rounded over like a capital C, smoothed her lavender hair and shuffled out.

"Hello, Mrs. Parker," said Maddie. "Are you going to bingo?"

"That's Tuesdays and Thursdays, Dear. Today's my class, *Sex for Seniors*."

"Oh," said Maddie, "have fun."

"Toodle-oo."

A taxi pulled up in front of the building and the driver came to the front door and escorted Mrs. Parker to his cab.

"Do you suppose she'll be moving on soon?" asked Keith.

Hard to say, she's been here the longest."

"Do you know if anybody else is moving?"

Maddie felt a stab of panic, realizing it might be her. She dreaded the thought of giving up the cute little apartment that she'd decorated in her favorite shade of blue. Initially she wasn't going to make an effort. Then she decided that since she was going to be in LA on her own, she needed to feel comfortable. She scrubbed the apartment thoroughly before settling in, even installing new contact paper in the cabinets. She

searched out discounts at places like the May Company outlet and found a deluxe, though mismatched, box spring and mattress and a luxurious white couch, eighty percent below what it sold for in the department store. She purchased a long remnant of blue and white linoleum to replace the worn floor covering in the kitchen, and a Mexican workman laid it in a few hours for \$75. Since she often exercised on the rug she couldn't bear the shabby brown carpeting, even though the owner offered to have it cleaned, so she had it ripped out and got new blue carpeting, purchased at a bargain price.

Maddie stared at the glossy photo of herself on the wall, radiating confidence, taken shortly after she moved to LA and had months ahead of her to succeed. Keith said something, but she didn't hear. "Pardon?"

"Were you on the waiting list very long?"

"I lucked out," said Maddie, the word luck sounding untimely now. "I learned about the building from Stu Patterson—we worked together in Sacramento—and he recommended me. My apartment was a disaster. The previous tenant moved out and his friend stayed on for three months and never paid the rent; then he left and his girlfriend squatted there. They tried to lock her out, but she climbed in and out of the window until they finally got rid of her. I think Cleo took one look at me and was relieved. I moved right in a week later."

"Where's Stu's apartment?"

"Across from me, in 110." She indicated down the hallway. "My place is next door to Cleo, 103."

Keith's eyes widened, "Yikes."

“I don’t mind. She guards this place like a pit bull. When I leave town, I never worry about anyone breaking in.”

“This a bad neighborhood?”

“A little dicey.” She shrugged one shoulder. “It’s LA. But I’m not afraid. You do need a car alarm. We joke that it’s like *Escape From New York*, once you’re inside the building, you’re safe.”

“I heard the rent’s really cheap.”

“Best deal in town. This building’s been in the same family since it was built in 1926. They’re careful about maintaining it, too, and they don’t try to gouge the tenants.” This was another reason that Maddie could afford to live in town. She felt obliged to pay her own expenses. Since there was the cost of college tuition for her two oldest children, she didn’t expect Bret to pay her rent as well. Besides, part of her justification for coming to town was that she earned a living as a comedienne. All year though, it had been a balancing act between going out on the road where a comic could earn good money and being available in LA for auditions. She had a little nest egg to start out with, but after staying in town so much lately, it was nearly gone.

“What’s the story on this guy?” Keith peered at a photograph of a swarthy man dressed like an Arab. “He an impersonator or something?”

Cleo returned carrying an application. “Don’t you know Rudolph Valentino?”

“Oh yeah, he’s the dude that sang *Ahab the Arab*.”

Maddie shook her head.

But Cleo didn't seem to notice his mistake. Her raspy voice softened. "He was Hollywood's greatest star."

"Now I remember. He's one of my grandmother's favorites." Keith glanced at Maddie for guidance and saw her mouth the word 'mother.' "And my mom likes him too."

"Apartment 228 was his," said Cleo, still dreamy eyed. "It was early in his career, before my time." Suddenly the spell was over, and she thrust the application at him. "Bring this back with your resume, and I want to see a videotape of your performance."

"Sure," said Keith, thanking Cleo and promising to bring it back the next day.

Maddie watched him leave, wondering if she should give a thirty-day notice.

Chapter 4

Cleo asked sweetly, “How’s the family?”

“Good,” said Maddie, forgetting her dilemma and recalling the pleasure of seeing her daughter play basketball for the high school team. “Michele scored 15 points and hit two three-pointers. She played point guard nearly the entire game, and they won by 23 points.” All of Maddie’s friends knew about Michele’s sports career. The male comics were always caught up in Maddie’s enthusiasm as she regaled them with play-by-play highlights of the most recent game. They often offered coaching advice. “Has she ever passed the ball between an opponents legs?” said Gardell. “Girls would never suspect that.”

“How’d it go here?” asked Maddie.

Cleo gestured towards the second floor. “Jackson Boyd brought home some crazy woman—had her up in his apartment all weekend; then yesterday, came down here complaining to me that he couldn’t get rid of her. I told him straight out, ‘What do you expect? Bringing her in here, doing all kinds of nasty things up there.’” She shuddered. “And ugly! You shoulda seen her. She looked like death sucking on a pickle.”

Maddie shook her head and laughed.

“You talking about Boyd?” said a little girl voice descending the staircase.

Amelia Wise, a baby-faced blond with a slim figure, wore a pink blouse and white jeans.

“Did you see Miss Pickle?” asked Maddie.

“No, but I heard Mona moaning.”

“Was that her name?” asked Maddie, laughing along with Cleo.

The telephone rang and Cleo stepped through the double-doors to her office to answer it. They overheard her singsong announcement, “Belvedere Apartments.”

In her forties, Cleo had experienced a bitter divorce with a man she said, “ran around with chippies.” Consequently, every philandering male in the Belvedere suffered for her ex-husband’s indiscretions. Neither did Cleo suffer fools gladly, and she showed undisguised contempt for those she held in little regard. Despite her waspish personality, Cleo was always friendly with Maddie and Amelia.

“By the way, how’d your audition go at Quip’s?” asked Amelia.

Maddie stopped from opening her mailbox and frowned. She explained about the evening, concluding, “So the pressure’s on. My year is almost up, and I’m about to run out of money.”

“What about the aspirin commercial?”

“My callback’s on Wednesday. That’s my last hope.” She managed to shake off the gloom and picked up the cocktail dress. “I’m supposed to be a socialite throwing a party. What do you think?” Maddie raised her hand to her forehead. “Oh, this crashing headache and eight people coming to dinner. What am I going to do?”

Amelia nodded, “I could see you in that role.”

Cleo carried the telephone into the hallway and flagged the women over. “Yes, they’re sitting right here.”

Maddie and Amelia peeked inside the office where Cleo pointed to two brown suitcases.

Amelia said to Maddie, "Riley drove off this morning and left his luggage in the parking lot."

"With his tuxedos?"

Amelia nodded.

"You're lucky the neighbor found it before some vagrant came along," said Cleo. "Though I doubt even a Hollywood bum would stoop to wear a celery-green tuxedo.... No, I'm not sending your suitcases to Seattle. I've got better things to do with my time.... It's not my problem if you don't have clean underwear. Find a K-Mart." Cleo banged down the receiver. She smiled sweetly at Maddie. "Is that what you're wearing for the audition?"

Maddie hesitated, adjusting to Cleo's swift change of temperament. "Do you like it?" she asked, holding up the dress.

"It's gorgeous. They'll love you." Cleo took the hanger from Maddie and held the dress in front of her. "It's been ages since I got dressed up."

Stu Patterson strolled out of his apartment jangling his keys. He was neatly dressed and carried a stack of large tan envelopes. He gave a short wolf whistle. "Wow, Cleo! Do you have a date tonight?"

"Heavens, no." She slapped at the air. "This is Maddie's dress."

"I thought maybe you were going to the Academy Awards or something." Stu handed Cleo a check. "This is for you."

"I have my rent, too," said Amelia. "I'll bring it down this afternoon."

Maddie opened her purse. "Here's mine." She paused, feeling a flash of guilt. It would be just her luck to not give her notice and *not* get the commercial. Perhaps she could thwart Murphy's Law, giving her notice would practically guarantee getting the commercial. It was worth a try? "Maybe," she hesitated, "I should give you a thirty-day notice."

They all stared at her.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Stu. "I thought you're going to be a regular at Quip's?"

"No," said Maddie.

Amelia explained to the others about the previous Thursday, then turned to Maddie. "You still have a callback for the aspirin commercial. And it's a national, too, isn't it?"

Maddie nodded and tried to smile.

"Forget about Quip's," said Stu. "Write your own show. That's how Whoopie Goldberg did it."

"He has a point," said Amelia. "I'd never get spots from Spider if it wasn't for my agent."

"You hear that," Stu gestured toward Amelia, "and she's done two *Tonight Shows*."

"Why do they put a weasel like Spider in charge?" asked Cleo. "That's what I want to know!"

“This town is full of weasels. I think it’s part of the job description. ‘Only Weasels Need Apply,’” said Amelia.

“He’s sour because he never made it,” said Stu. “The town is full of people just like him. Somehow, they manipulate their way into these peripheral jobs with a bit of power and then make everyone else miserable.”

“Someone ought to confront him—tell him just what a loser he is,” said Cleo.

“It might not be prudent,” said Maddie. “Lana Turner said, ‘always forgive your enemies because you never know when you’ll have to work with them.’”

Footfalls on the stairs drew their attention. Dexter Cleveland, a comic who lived on the third floor, came bouncing down working a purple yo-yo. “Hi, everybody.”

“How’s the yo-yo guy?” asked Stu.

“Up and down,” said Dexter.

Everyone moaned.

A tall red-haired comic sauntered in the front door.

“Hey, Nick,” said Stu.

“Yo, whassup?” said Nicholas Stanco.

Dexter stopped yo-yoing and watched Nick stroll down the hall into the last apartment. He shook his head. “That white boy is not funny.”

“Hurumph,” said Cleo, “He can barely talk.”

“Mr. Dese, Dems, and Dose does okay,” grinned Stu.

Dexter grimaced, “Come on, Stanco stinks!”

Maddie pointed after him. “How does *he* get such great spots at Quip’s?”

“His uncle is one of the investors,” said Amelia.

There was a collective, “Ahhh.”

Boyd Jackson appeared at the top of the staircase, his arm around a chunky woman. She wore a loosely fitted seersucker dress and lace-trimmed socks in dark laced shoes. She had long, unruly, curly hair and squinted like she was myopic. The conversation stopped and even the dogs watched Boyd escort the infamous Mona down the steps past them to the front door.

“Ya’ll call me,” said Mona. “Ya hear?”

“I will, Sugar.”

“Promise now, Boydie Joydie.”

“I promise, Darlin’,” said Boyd, crossing his heart.

Mona kissed Boyd, and for an instant he forgot his audience, then broke off. The door finally shut behind Mona, and everyone watched until she was out of sight.

“Whew.” Boyd wiped imaginary sweat off his brow, then turned to the group. “Hi.” The dogs approached him, and he bent over to pet them. “Hi, Clark Gable. Hi, Tinkerbell.”

“Leave them alone,” said Cleo, “before you give them dog disease.”

“Ah, Cleo, she was nice. A good old country gal.”

“They have a fog machine in that club when you picked her up?” asked Dexter.

“I met her at Ralph’s.”

“In the liquor aisle?” said Stu.

“Meat department.”

“Do you have your rent, Boydie Woydie?” asked Cleo.

“I’ll have it for you, tomorrow.” He crossed his heart. “I promise. I have a gig tonight at Whiskey Creek.”

“If you can’t pay your rent on time, there’s a stack of applications on my desk, talented comics with TV credits, eager to move right in.”

“I can pay you first thing tomorrow,” said Boyd.

“No, you bring it by tonight. Knock on my door when you get home. I’ll be up watching Johnny.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Boyd, heading for the stairs.

Stu glanced round at the group gathered together, “You know, this building would make a great sitcom.”

“Everybody says that,” said Amelia.

Chapter 5

Maddie worked the key in her lock, musing over Stu's comment. The Belvedere *would* be a perfect setting for a sitcom. It was filled with quirky characters like Mrs. Parker, off to Sex for Seniors, Cleo with her pooches shadowing her every step, not to mention all of the comics. Every week there was a mini-crisis. Riley, always forgetful, now stuck in Seattle without his tuxedos or clean underwear. Mark always overdue with his rent, bringing in a parade of floozies; while Andy doted on his pet pigeons on the roof, but his own apartment was a pigsty.

She opened the door, perusing the spacious abode cast in blue by the drawn curtains, glad to see everything as she had left it: the bed neatly made with a floral spread, matching pillows on the white sofa, framed Shakespearean pictures decorating one wall, and over the couch a print of LeRoy Neiman's depiction of legendary celebrities mingling in the Polo Lounge. On her desk an old Macintosh Computer, books, magazines, notebooks filled with joke ideas, and an ashtray shaped like a movie clapboard overflowing with change. On a shelf, pictures of her family. She padded into the walk-in closet, hung up her dress and put away her basket of clothes. She came out, still pondering the sitcom idea. How would she pitch it? Write a script? Or maybe a proposal? With less than a month left, where would she find time? More importantly, to whom would she pitch it? If only the TV networks knew about this place.

She got a can of tonic water from the refrigerator, popped the tab, and sat down at her desk before taking a sip. She stared at *People Magazine*. On the cover Candace

Bergen, the star of the hit sitcom *Murphy Brown*, smiled back. Maddie straightened. She grabbed the magazine and rifled through the opening pages, past the cigarette ads, the liquor ads, the movie ads, until she located the editorial masthead.

Several phone calls later she reached the staff office. “Hi,” she said cheerfully, “did you know that there’s an apartment building in Hollywood where twelve comedians live? ... That’s right, 36 units and one third are occupied by standup comics. ... The Belvedere on Carlton.” Maddie rattled off every fascinating detail she could recall, “One comic writes jokes for the President. ... Yes, of the United States.” She recounted rumors, legends, anything she could think of to make the building sound intriguing. She gave thumbnail bios on each comic. “She keeps a menagerie of animals, he’s an expert with a yo-yo. Rudolph Valentino once lived here. Haunted? You know, just this weekend my friend heard moaning on the second floor. The Belvedere has an interesting past. It used to be set in the middle of the Hollywood Freeway. ... That’s right, before the freeway was built. Then they cut it in three and moved it to 333 Van Carlton. And there are three stories—and three sets of staircases on each floor,” said Maddie, improvising as she spoke, trying to latch onto anything that made the place sound interesting. “They say Tarzan—the *best* Tarzan, Johnny Weissmuller, had affairs with three different women who all lived here.... Married five times? No, I didn’t know that—and Bela Lugosi died of a drug overdose right around the corner. ... That’s right, twelve. Nine men and three women—and we’re integrated, too. There are three black comics, a Hispanic; the rest of us are all mixed up, from all over the country—Texas, Washington, Connecticut, Tennessee. We’re all different. Riley does song parodies.

Fisher juggles. Andy does impersonations and raises pigeons on the roof. Gardell performs and also writes jokes for Jay Leno and the President. ... Me? I'm married and have kids. *No*, I'm not like Roseanne—more like a cross between Erma Bombeck and Bill Cosby.”

Maddie hung up the telephone and dug out last week's newspaper. For the next two hours, she pitched the story to *Variety*, the *Hollywood Reporter*, the *LA Times* and several local TV stations.

She finished the last telephone call and leaned back, tapping a pencil, wondering. Was there another important media that she had forgotten? The telephone jangled. She started. Could someone be calling back already?

“Hello?”

“I'm going to go work out,” said Amelia. “You want to come with me? I can get you in as a guest.”

“Sure.” Maddie tried not to sound disappointed. “Give me ten minutes to change.”

She had just pulled on black Lycra shorts and was trying to decide on a top when she heard Amelia knocking the door. “Come in, it's open,” she called out. “I'm almost ready.”

Amelia came in slamming the door. “You won't believe it! I just got off the phone with him and he asked me to marry him—after all these years!” She paced back and forth, gesticulating like she was directing traffic. “Just as my career is taking off, he proposes. *Now* he wants to get married!”

“Izzy?”

“Who else?”

Maddie poked her head out of the closet. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m *not* marrying him now.” Amelia stopped pacing and plopped on the couch. She snatched up a *Vanity Fair* from the magazines strewn across the coffee table and began thumbing through it. “What about my career? Where was he five years ago when I was a nobody—dying to get married?” She tapped a picture of a sleek model in a gold beaded sheath, “That’s divine!” and resumed her rant, “Now I’m on the brink of success!”

Maddie walked out in her socks and a black sleeveless T-shirt and headed into the kitchen. “You want a bottle of water?”

“Thanks, I already have one.” Amelia slapped down the magazine and followed Maddie into the kitchen. “What’s this?” She picked up a short roll of paper.

“It’s wallpaper, a border for the kitchen. I bought it on sale a few months ago and just never got around to putting it up.”

Amelia glanced about the apartment. “You’ve fixed this place so cute, I hope you don’t have to leave.”

“Me too.”

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An hour later, Maddie and Amelia were in the Hollywood Spa striding side-by-side on treadmills. Amelia wiped the sheen from her brow. “He wants me to move back to Connecticut! What am *I* going to do in Connecticut? Even if I worked out of New York, it’s nearly two hours away by train. Where was Ishmael two years ago?”

“That’s Izzy’s real name?”

“I know. When I first met him, he said ‘Call me Ishmael.’”

“That’s funny. You could make a bit out of that.”

“He told me his Mother was reading *Moby Dick* while she was pregnant with him.”

“Do you still love him?” asked Maddie.

“I *hate* him. Besides, I just booked another *Tonight Show*. I’m on standby, but they could call anytime.”

“Congratulations.”

“My agent called, and I’ve got two lines on *Santa Barbara* on next week’s show.”

Maddie reached over and touched Amelia. “In case some of your luck is contagious.”

“Lucky, but broke,” said Amelia. “I don’t even want to think about my credit cards—and I need a new outfit for the *Tonight Show*. I’m thinking of saving money this time and renting something from one of those designer consignment shops.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Come with me after we finish here?” said Amelia.

“Sure, I wouldn’t mind checking out one of those places.” Maddie picked up her water bottle and took a long swallow.

A muscle-bound man in an orange T-shirt that read, “JUST DO IT—WITH ME” swaggered by them to the free weights. Amelia studied him, frowning. “Who needs men anyway?” She softened, “Except for kids. I would like to have at least one. You’re lucky, Maddie. You already have a family.”

“Except it’s not that easy trying to start a career in this town when you’re not dewy-eyed and nineteen.”

“You’re still young.”

Maddie shrugged. “Well, Spider did ask me to do the *Playboy* showcase.”

“Ratzoid. I didn’t get a chance to tell you, he called me too.” Amelia reached for her water bottle and poured some on her face.

“What did you tell him?” asked Maddie.

“I turned him down. None of the comedienues with any credibility are auditioning, only a bunch of wannabes you never heard of.”

“That’s probably why he asked me. They’re desperate.”

“You’re not a wannabe. You’re a working comic with an act.” Amelia looked over at Maddie. “Besides you’re in great shape. Notice they’re not calling Roseanne.”

“She’d do it.”

“That’s what they’re afraid of.” They both grinned.

Maddie suddenly looked serious. “I have twenty-seven days left to make it.”

Amelia turned to her. “I’ve been meaning to ask, how did you get your husband to agree to let you come down here?”

“It was his idea.” Maddie thought a minute. “Well, I kept saying, ‘you have to go to LA to make it.’ Finally he said, ‘Go to LA! Try it for a year.’ I lined up an agent and a manager before I came, but they were awful.”

“The senior citizen guy and the one that handled the midgets,” said Amelia.

Maddie nodded.

“Don’t you miss him?”

“The midgets?”

They both laughed.

“Usually I’m too busy here. I think it’s harder for him. But it’s great when I get back home.” Maddie flicked her brows like Groucho Marx.

“What about the kids?”

The twenty-minute timer on the treadmill sounded, and the two stepped off. Maddie took a long drink of water before answering. “My two oldest are away at college—only Michele’s still at home—in high school.”

“The basketball player?”

Maddie nodded. “I drive home for all of her games. But remember how it is when you’re in high school, you’ve got your own social life. And when she wants something, she calls. Last week we spent two hours on the telephone doing a history report.”

“What if you had to choose between your career and your family?”

“I shouldn’t have to choose. Men don’t.”

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Amelia directed Maddie to the consignment shop off La Cienega Boulevard in West Hollywood, and soon they were both thumbing through racks of designer dresses.

“Maybe you should do the *Playboy* showcase,” said Amelia.

Maddie stared at her friend. “Are you crazy!”

“Just the audition. You never know who might be in the audience. Didn’t Phyllis Diller work for *Playboy*—back when they had the clubs?”

“I think you’re right, but she wasn’t in the magazine.”

Amelia lifted out a dark green velvet suit trimmed with gold braid, scowled and put it back. “Then it all comes down to the commercial.”

“Yes.” Maddie felt a surge of anxiety and managed to contain it. “Though I’m pursuing something else, too. You know how we’re always saying that the Belvedere Apartments would make a great sitcom?”

She had Amelia’s attention now. “Yes.”

“I was thinking if we got the right publicity, maybe we could get one of the networks interested in us.”

“Sounds good.” Amelia pulled out a plum-colored dress and held it in front of her. “What do you think of this for the *Tonight Show*?”

“Not bad. I just happen to have shoes you could borrow that would go perfectly with it. Try it on.” Maddie followed Amelia to the dressing room. “So I called *People Magazine* and told them about us.”

Amelia stopped and whirled around. “They’re going to do a story?”

“I don’t know.” Maddie lifted her palms in uncertainty. “But I called a lot of others, too.”

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On the way back to the Belvedere, Maddie avoided the traffic on Sunset Boulevard and drove Franklin Avenue, but had to stop at the red light on Highland. A panhandler slouched against a light pole holding a cardboard sign with indecipherable scribbling on it.

“That poor man,” said Amelia “He looks ill.”

The man was bald with skin stretched like latex over his bony skull; he had a hooked nose and deep vertical lines on his face.

“He looks like Freddie Kruger,” said Maddie. “I wonder who does his makeup?”

Amelia took a bill from her purse, dashed from the car and handed it to him, then hurried back just as the signal changed.

Maddie drove on and glanced over at Amelia then back at the road. “You gave him \$10!”

“He looked so pathetic.”

“I thought you told me that your credit cards are overdrawn?”

Amelia snapped her purse shut. “What’s another ten bucks?”

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The two approached Maddie’s apartment from the back entrance of the Belvedere and both heard the telephone ringing. Maddie quickly unlocked her door and rushed to answer it.

“Hello... Yes... Yes...” Maddie picked up a pencil and jotted down some information.

“Is it *People Magazine*?” whispered Amelia.

Maddie shook her head. “Great. Thanks.” She hung up the phone.

“Who was it?”

“My agency. I’m no longer up for the socialite part—I’m auditioning for the pharmacist role.”

“Oh. What are you going to wear?”

Maddie shrugged, “A white blouse?”

“Go over to the recycled costumes shop in the Valley and get a doctor’s smock.”

“Good idea. Let’s check the shoes for you.” Amelia followed Maddie into the walk-in closet.

“I love Hollywood closets,” said Amelia, turning around and surveying the three walls lined with clothes. “They’re bigger than some New York apartments.”

"I heard Dexter put the bed in his," said Maddie, lifting down a shoebox from the upper shelf.

The two came out into the light of the front room, comparing the plum-colored heels and dress. A rap-a-tap-tap on the door opened it because it hadn't been completely shut.

"Hi," said Brenda Hoo, coming in. She was petite, with short brown hair, and cuddled a black and white rabbit. She lived on the third floor in an apartment so stacked with clutter there were narrow passages between areas. She also housed a menagerie of animals. "Did you hear what happened to Roxanne Cooper?"

"She got a line on 90210?" guessed Maddie.

"Nope. She was raped."

"What?" said Amelia.

"When?" said Maddie, "I just saw her last Thursday."

"That's when it happened," said Brenda, petting the rabbit. "Or maybe it was Friday? No. It was Thursday."

"Where did it happen?" asked Amelia.

"In the alley behind Quip's."

"I saw her there. We talked. It must have happened right after she left—right around midnight."

"How did it happen?" asked Amelia.

"Her car was parked in the alley, and when she left to go home, some man came out of nowhere, pulled a knife on her and raped her. Right there. In her own car."

“I’ve parked back there, sometimes—when there was no place on the street,” said Maddie.

“Not me,” said Amelia. “It’s too spooky.”

“How is she doing?” asked Maddie.

“I don’t know. I just heard about it last night.”

“I’d like to call her, see how she’s doing, but I don’t have her phone number,” said Maddie. “Do you think that the club would have her number?”

“I doubt it, since she’s not on the payroll,” said Amelia.

Brenda glanced in Maddie kitchen. “Gee, I’m thirsty.”

“You want a soda?”

“Do you have any apple juice?”

“I have orange and cranberry.”

Brenda pinched her lips together. “Forget it.”

Amelia set down the box of shoes. “I know four other comediennes who were raped.”

“Now you know five,” said Brenda.

“In LA?” asked Maddie.

“Three in LA and two on the road,” said Amelia. “You know Gerri Cohan?”

Maddie nodded.

“I know who she is,” said Brenda, “but we’re not friends.”

“She was working the road, driving between gigs, and pulled off the highway to take a nap. I think it was somewhere in Idaho. Anyway, two guys in a pickup truck stopped to see if she was broken down and . . . ” Amelia’s voice trailed off.

Maddie glanced at Amelia. “A few times when I felt like I was going to fall asleep, I’ve pulled over and taken a nap.”

“You’d better be careful where you stop,” warned Amelia.

“A lot of actresses are raped—or almost,” said Brenda, holding up the rabbit and looking into its pink eyes.

“Back in New York, I was chased around an office by this old lecher,” Amelia’s eyes narrowed, remembering. “But I became so hysterical, he ended up getting me a glass of water and an aspirin.”

“No one’s ever tried it with me,” said Maddie. “I mean they’ve come onto me, but they haven’t actually tried to rape me. Oh wait, there was one college guy I dated, and he got pretty forceful. The jerk! I never went out with him again.”

“Stacey Watkins told me she just had sex with this guy, a comedian—she wouldn’t say who—because she knew she had no choice.”

Maddie shook her head. “Protecting the guilty.”

Brenda let the rabbit down on the blue carpeting. The front of her blouse was covered with rabbit hair. The rabbit hopped off towards the floral bedspread.

“That’s why I like this building—no rapist will get past Cleo,” said Amelia.

Maddie eyed the animal. “Brenda, I’d prefer that you didn’t let your rabbit loose in my apartment. I don’t want to be stepping on any little surprises.”

“Rabbits are easy to clean up after—easier than cats or dogs.”

“Yes, well after raising three kids, I’ve cleaned up enough poop in my life.”

“I can take a hint.” She collected her rabbit and headed for the door.

“Come back anytime,” Maddie called after her, “without your friend.”

“That’s it,” said Amelia, gathering up the dress and shoes. “I’m going to buy some mace.”

Chapter 6

For the callback Maddie returned to the site of the first audition, an office building on Doheny Drive in West Hollywood. The afternoon before she'd hurried over to Wear It Again on Sepulveda Boulevard in the Valley and found a medical smock for four dollars. In case they were interested in a studious look, she brought along a pair of wire-rim glasses.

Maddie felt a quivering thrill ascending the stairs to the office space above. After being married for nearly twenty-three years, she couldn't believe she was in Hollywood about to land a national commercial. Her agent told her that they needed six people and had narrowed the list down to ten. Considering that the average commercial actor did seventy-five auditions before landing a job, the odds were too good to ponder.

Four women and four men were already there seated on fold-up chairs lined up against the wall. All the women were blond and about the same age as Maddie but neatly dressed in casual clothes. The men also looked similar, dark hair and comfortably dressed in a variety of slacks and polo shirts. Was she the only one auditioning for the pharmacist's role? Was it possible that they'd already made a decision from the videotape, and she had the part? Excitement rippled through her. What a relief that would be.

Since there was no one manning the sign-in table, Maddie assumed that the staff must be in the other room watching the auditions. She signed in and placed her picture and resume in the in-box. She picked up the sides, the short script written on strips of

paper, and sat down to study the lines. The scene was a conversation between a married couple shopping for a mattress. Maddie felt a sense of dread. Where were the sides for the aspirin commercial?

The casting assistant, a young woman with her hair pulled up in a ponytail, came from the other room carrying a clipboard and called two names.

Maddie rose. "Excuse me, I'm here for the aspirin commercial."

The assistant raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow. "I don't know anything about that. This is an audition for Marvel Mattresses. What agency are you with?"

"Total Talent."

"We had some people from there this morning. There's a payphone outside if you want to call them. But we're almost finished here."

"Thanks," said Maddie. She picked up her resume and photo and hurried out to telephone. She glanced down at her agent's phone number listed on top of the resume and dialed.

A man outfitted in tight Levi's, a western shirt, boots and a black Stetson strutted towards her. He must be here for a different commercial too, thought Maddie.

He tipped his hat to her, "Howdy."

Maddie nodded but couldn't smile and continued waiting for someone to answer the phone that kept ringing. Finally, someone picked up, and in a rush, the circumstances spilled out. She tapped her heel nervously, waiting while the schedule was checked and watched the first couple come out and high-five.

"That was great," said the woman.

“We nailed it,” boasted the man.

A young voice that Maddie didn’t recognize came back on the line. She hemmed and hawed, mumbling a scrambled explanation, until Maddie figured out what had occurred.

“Yesterday?” said Maddie. “I could have been here yesterday, but I was distinctly told the callback was today. . . . An intern got mixed up?” Maddie felt like she had been slammed to the ground, and it took her a moment to catch her breath. Her eyes filled with tears, and she blinked several times and swallowed hard, so she wouldn’t start sobbing. “What?” she whispered. “Now? They’re doing auditions for Marvel Mattresses. . . . Okay, I’ll ask them.”

Maddie clunked back upstairs past a second couple exiting the audition, this pair ignoring each other.

The casting assistant was sitting at the desk when she returned. “Did you get it worked out?”

“Yes,” said Maddie, trying to chase the gloom from her voice, “and my agent asked since I’m here already, could you fit me into this audition?”

Miss Ponytail glanced from her to the cowboy. “Sure, you can go in with the Marlboro Man.”

Maddie blew her nose into a tissue. “Excuse me,” she said to the cowboy.

“Cold?” he asked.

“Allergies,” she lied.

She picked up the sides and sat down next to him. "I guess we're auditioning together."

"It looks that way" he answered.

"Do you want to rehearse the lines?"

"Might as well."

The third couple came out of the auditioning room smiling, and the fourth couple were called in.

Maddie checked over her partner. He was handsome, and she thought if they had been dressed appropriately, they would have made an attractive couple.

As if reading her mind, he asked, "Why are you dressed like that?"

Maddie explained about the mix-up. "How about you?"

"My agent told me they wanted a cowboy."

"For a mattress commercial?"

"He said it was dog food."

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Maddie drove like a zombie. It was so unfair. She was so close to nailing the aspirin commercial, to having enough money to finance another year, maybe two, not to mention the exposure she'd gain from a national commercial. But no chance of that now, not when you missed the callback. Too unprofessional. No excuses. You had to return on time, preferably early, to the final callback. And the Marvel Mattress audition was a

disaster—nothing but comic relief for the casting agents. On the way out, she overheard, “Clint Eastwood and ‘Hot Lips’ Houlihan” and a burst of laughter. She thought about buying a pint of gushy chocolate ice cream for solace but felt too miserable to stop. Now she had no idea what to do—maybe hope that another commercial audition would come along? There was always a chance. She considered the *Playboy* showcase that was set for that evening; too late now. And that wasn’t the solution. She felt tears on her cheeks.

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When Maddie arrived back at the Belvedere, she stayed in her car and cried through that week’s Top Ten Songs in LA before getting angry with herself and shutting off the radio. She wasn’t defeated yet. She still had 25 days. Twenty-five days. Well, the entire world was made in six. She blew her nose and wiped at her eyes and went through the front door of the Belvedere.

Gardell came down the staircase chatting on one of those new cell phones. She liked Gardell. Maddie and Gardell bonded because they had a lot in common. They didn’t squander their time in LA partying. They were both happily married and here because they were serious about their careers—although Gardell wanted to eventually move from performing to the writing side of the business. Gardell’s wife was a flight attendant with Delta Airlines, and every other weekend she arranged for him to fly home to New Orleans free.

He waved and fell in step with her towards her apartment.

Maddie felt cheered by his company. "You want soda or some juice?"

"Juice," he said, then into the cell phone, "Let me know when you're ready to go. I'm visiting Maddie." They entered her apartment, and Gardell wagged his head. "Hmm, hmm, I can't believe those boys."

Maddie hung her purse on the desk chair. "Did they really go to Las Vegas?"

"Yep, they drove there after Mark's show Monday night. Went to a whorehouse, too."

"Loverboy paid for it?"

"They don't give free coupons."

Maddie poured them both a glass of cranberry juice. "Who went?"

"Mark, Stu and Andy."

"Did Mark lose his rent money?"

"Yep."

"He's going to get evicted."

"No, he paid his rent. Borrowed it from Andy."

Gardell's cell phone rang. He listened, "Uh ah. Yeah. Okay." He disconnected.

"That was Stu. He said, 'Don't tell Maddie about the whorehouse.'" Gardell grinned and shrugged. "Too late."

They both laughed.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door, and she opened it.

"You want to go to dinner with us?" asked Stu. "My treat."

“No, I’m not very hungry,” said Maddie. “You fellows go ahead and have fun.”

“Hate to see a lovely lady staying home all alone,” said Stu.

Maddie made herself smile. “I’ll take a rain check, guys.”

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Maddie borrowed Amelia’s VCR and spent all evening dubbing off her audition tape. Tomorrow she planned to hand deliver it to the top twenty casting agents in town. She sat on the floor in front of the TV labeling the last tape when someone tapped at her door. She noticed the clock on her VCR. Just midnight—still early for the comics to be coming home.

“It’s me,” she heard the gravelly voice say.

Maddie opened up. Cleo was dressed in a pink-satin bathrobe, patterned with little dogs chasing each other. Her hair was rolled in spongy pink curlers and she sported a pair of white gloves. Clark Gable and Tinkerbell were at her feet.

“I need your help,” said Cleo, holding out her hands. “I already creamed my hands for the night.”

“Okay,” said Maddie.

“There’s some drunk passed out on the porch.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I’m going to get rid of him, but I need you to hold the door open.”

Maddie followed Cleo, unsure of what she was up to until she spotted the pail of water sitting at the front door. Under the porch light she saw a bearded man, surprisingly well dressed, splayed out. She could hear his snores through the heavy glass.

“He looks like one of the Russians from up the street,” said Cleo, hoisting the pail of water. “Now, open it,” she commanded.

Maddie did as directed, and Cleo pitched the water on top of the inebriated man.

The drunk shivered awake. He stood up shaking like a wooly hound ridding itself of excess water. He glared at Cleo, then staggered off sputtering in Russian and English and shaking his fist. Maddie heard “capitalist”, “she-cat” and “Siberia.”

Cleo stood at the edge of the porch like an admiral on the bow of a ship, flanked by officers Clark Gable and Tinkerbell, calling after him. “And don’t come back. I manage a respectable building.”

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Maddie spent Day 23 maneuvering through LA traffic, dropping off packets with audition videos, photos and resumes inside. By three o’clock the traffic inched along Santa Monica Boulevard. In front of Maddie a red double-decker tour bus bellowed black fumes. She rolled up her window and watched for a break in traffic, then merged into the right lane behind a black Camaro. The traffic came to a complete halt. Maddie looked out the side window and realized she was on top of an overpass. Way below the never-ending traffic on the Hollywood Freeway roared by. Her heart began to race. She

gripped the steering wheel, forcing herself to stare at the Camaro. It had a taillight bashed in. The license plate was in the rear window. Even with the window rolled up, she could still hear the drone of engines below. *As long as I don't look down I'll be all right.* "Don't. Think," she ordered. The honk of a diesel truck wailed, and she felt the bridge quiver. "Oh, God... , " She clicked on her blinker and scanned the left lane for an opening. One car after another jammed together. Trapped. Nowhere to go. Overhead a heavy layer of slate-gray smog filled the sky; ahead a purplish building stood out like a bad bruise.

She was five again, playing with Peggy, the little girl that lived next to the freeway in a house overgrown with dark ivy. Peggy was an only child who lived with her mother and grandmother. With Peggy, Maddie always organized their activities: paper dolls, coloring, roller-skating.

That summer Peggy's grandmother suffered a stroke and was hospitalized. One hot drab day in the middle of summer, a carload of relatives from someplace back East arrived in an old Dodge, here to visit their ailing grandmother. There were five children in the group, including two younger girls about Maddie's age. There were also three teenage brothers, loud and brutish, who ran about shoving and wrestling with each other.

Maddie gathered the girls into a circle, all four kneeling on the sidewalk. She threw a handful of silver jacks in front of her.

"It's easy to play," she told them. "You begin with onesies." She bounced the red ball and grabbed up one jack and caught the ball all with her right hand.

"That looks hard," said the youngest, a girl with braided hair.

“You can use both hands,” said Maddie. She demonstrated, this time bouncing the red ball with her right hand and picking up a jack with her left. “First you do onesies, then twosies, threesies until whoever gets the highest amount wins. We’ll practice first, and then I’ll only use my left hand to make it fair.”

“We’re not playing that dumb game,” said the oldest brother, peering down at them. His face was acned, and there were nicks from a clumsy shave.

Maddie glared back at the stocky teenager. “No one invited you to play.”

“Oh yeah, these are my sisters and cousin,” he jabbed his chest with a thumb, “and you have to ask *my* permission to play with them.”

“It’s a free country,” said Maddie. “They can play with whoever they want.”

He kicked her jacks, scattering them onto the street. “You’d better do what I say.” The three other little girls cowered.

Maddie rose indignant, her arms akimbo. “You are not the boss of me.”

“You wanna bet?” The brute picked her up and strode towards the freeway overpass.

“Put me down, you big bully!” Maddie fought against him, but his arms clamped her against his chest.

He kept walking until they stood over the masses of speeding automobiles. Maddie heard the rush of traffic. He leaned over the gray metal railing and held her out over the freeway. Hot fumes gusted up from below. Maddie froze.

“You want to go to the hospital and visit my grandmother?” he asked.

She seized his shirt.

“Do as I tell you or I’ll drop you.”

She held her breath and began to pray. *Angel of God, my guardian dear to whom
God’s love commits me here—*”

“Who’s the boss?”

“Ever this day be at my side—”

“Who’s the boss!” he demanded. His teeth were yellow, his breath smelled rancid.

She whispered. “You are.”

He snickered. She saw clusters of blackheads across his nose. Suddenly he tossed her up. Maddie felt herself airborne. She held her breath and saw herself plummeting down, crashing on the roof of a speeding car, then thrown off, and hundreds of mean rubber tires mutilating her body beyond recognition.

“Hoonnk!” blared the yellow Hummer behind her. Maddie gripped the steering wheel and gasped for air. She opened her eyes and saw that the Camaro in front of her had moved on. She pressed the accelerator and tried to force the nightmare from her memory. But, she knew she never would.

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It was almost five o’clock by the time she returned to the Belvedere and ran into Amelia at the mailbox. Amelia was sniffing, the rim of her eyes reddened.

“Have you been crying?” asked Maddie, placing a hand on Amelia’s shoulder.

“Was it Ishmael?”

“No,” Amelia dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

“It’s mace.”

“Someone *maced* you!”

Amelia shook her head. “I maced myself.”

“Accidentally?”

“On purpose.”

“Why?” asked Maddie.

“I wanted to test it,” said Amelia. “I don’t want to hurt anyone seriously.”

Chapter 7

Late that evening Maddie was too apprehensive to go to sleep. She kept reviewing the past year, analyzing what she did and didn't do. It was two a.m. when she got out of bed and decided to wallpaper. She placed the four kitchen chairs at intervals around the room so she could easily access the top of the nine-foot wall. After reading the directions and making preparations, she dipped a portion of the paper in the bowl of hot water. She stepped from one chair to the next, smoothing the wet paper just below the ceiling. The blue border, a Pennsylvania Dutch design, went on easily until she came to the longest stretch of wall. Each time she reached the end, the first section would fall. Finally, she hopped off the chair and walked out into the hallway. It was almost three a.m. Everyone was probably in bed by now.

Then Andy trudged up from the laundry room in the basement. He wore a loose T-shirt over ripped denims.

"Andy," said Maddie, delighted to see him. "Can you help me?"

"How?"

"Wallpaper."

"What?" He followed her into the kitchen.

"I bought this on sale a while ago." She lifted the last soggy strip of wallpaper.

"I figured I might as well put it up. Only, with this last piece, I need another set of hands to keep it from slipping."

"I can do that," said Andy.

“Good, climb up and hold this end for me while I put up the rest.”

Andy stepped up on the chair next to her and held the border in place while she applied the rest of the lengthy strip across the long narrow kitchen. Once the border was in place, Maddie pulled a rag from her back pocket and wiped off the excess water.

She stepped down and inspected her handiwork. “All right, I think you can let go now.” Slowly he removed his hands and the border stayed in place. “Good, that ought to do it. Thanks, Andy.”

Suddenly she felt exhausted and knew she could sleep now, but Andy stood there, his shoulders slouched and expression forlorn. She should at least offer him something to drink after he helped her.

“Are you thirsty? You want a soda?”

“A root beer?”

Maddie opened her refrigerator. “Coming right up.”

“I should bring you a case; I’m always drinking up your supply. In fact, sometimes I come down here just when I’m thirsty.” He dropped his head.

“I’m happy to have the company.” She handed him the drink. “Sometimes I go next door to Cleo’s when I want real cream in my coffee.”

He took the root beer into the other room and sat on the couch. “Maddie, how come you never come up on the roof to look at my pigeons?”

“I’d like to see them.” She felt her heart beat faster. “I’m just not crazy about heights.”

“It’s completely safe. The pigeon coop is right in the middle of the roof.”

"I'll think about it."

"Maddie."

She looked at him, "Yes, Andy."

"I wanted you to know. When we were in Las Vegas, I went with those guys to the brothel, but I didn't ... you know, do it."

Maddie was careful not to smile. "I'll bet your girlfriend will be glad to hear that."

"Actually, we broke up a couple of weeks ago. That's part of why I'm bummed today."

Maddie studied his woeful expression. "Is there something else bothering you?"

He hung his head, rubbing his thumb along the top of the unopened can. "It's my birthday."

"You're kidding. Happy birthday."

"No one did anything." He glanced at the clock on her wall. "Well, technically, it's over now."

"Oh."

"Well, my mother called." He snapped open the can and stared at it. "I'm twenty-seven and I've been in Hollywood six years. Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing here. Lately, I've been considering going back home and finishing college."

"Andy," Maddie sat in a chair across from him. "You're the only one that can make that decision. If you're burnt out on Hollywood, you *should* go back home. But if you ever wanted to be in this business, now's the time to try. It's a lot harder at my age."

Sometimes when I'm at Quip's, and those managers and agents come in checking out who's there, they look right past me. I feel like I'm invisible."

"You're lucky, though—you already have a family." Andy gazed at the family pictures on the shelf. "I have no one except the pigeons. I've been up in my room alone all night."

"I wish you'd have told me." Maddie followed his gaze to the photographs of her children. How many birthday parties had she put on for them? They never invited a few friends, always the entire class. "I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings," explained her son.

Maddie slapped her knees and stood up. "I'm going to bake you a cake."

His eyes went wide. "You are?"

"We'll invite everyone in the building for a belated birthday party."

At the door there was a rhythmic tapping of *shave and a haircut—two bits*. Andy opened the door to Riley Morgan dressed in a purple tuxedo.

He grinned at them. "I knew you were still up, I could hear you talking."

"I thought you were in Seattle this week," said Andy.

"Not for the week, just a couple of college gigs. I took the red-eye back and landed at LAX and hung out at the Comedy Store for awhile, then went to Barney's Beanery."

"Then don't get too close to me," said Andy, wincing.

"Relax, I ate a hamburger."

"Nice tux," said Maddie.

Riley spread his arms and turned around modeling his grape-colored duds. “I bought it from a wedding rental outfit. I needed something since Cleo wouldn’t send my luggage up.” He ran his fingers along the lapel. “It’s barely been worn.”

“Don’t wear it with a green tie,” said Andy, “kids will think you’re Barney.”

Riley regarded Andy a minute before answering. “I think I can use that in a bit—and I already have a green tie.”

“Would you like a soda?” asked Maddie.

“Yeah,” he looked at Andy’s drink. “Got another root beer?”

“Hey, don’t drink all my root beers,” said Andy.

Maddie handed Riley the soda. “There’s plenty.”

He opened it and took a swallow. “So what are you two doing?”

“Wallpapering,” said Andy.

“You can’t wallpaper.”

“Oh, yeah?” Andy pointed to the kitchen, “Check it out.”

Riley surveyed the kitchen and nodded his approval. “Not bad. Oh, I ran into Boyd at the Comedy Store. He says that we have someone new in the building— another *comedienne*.”

“Who?” asked Maddie.

“Lola Hayward. I haven’t met her yet. She’s living in Fisher’s apartment while he’s out working the cruise ships.”

“Never heard of her,” said Maddie. “Where’s she from?”

“Florida.”

“Once I worked three weeks in Florida. Did a one-nighter in the Florida panhandle.” Maddie pumped some lotion onto her hands from a bottle on her desk. “A guy wanted to give me a snake.”

“Was he drunk?” asked Andy.

Maddie nodded. “The bouncer told him, ‘Now Earl, behave or we’re throwin’ y’all out.’”

Andy gazed off nostalgically. “I love working the road.”

Riley drifted around Maddie’s apartment, inspecting the pictures on the walls, the photos of her children, and the shelf filled with McDonalds’ Happy Meal characters she’d accumulated from her numerous drives home. He worked his way over to her desk.

“You have a message here.”

“Oh?” Maddie removed the newspaper partially obscuring her answering machine and saw the green light flashing. When had that message been left—when she went to empty her garbage? She pressed the playback button.

A refined voice spoke: “This is Thomas Hamilton from the *LA Times*. I’d like to know more about the building where the dozen comics live. Please give me a call at 1 800 LA Times.”

“It worked,” said Maddie, throwing up her arms. “It worked!”

Andy’s questioning look turned to a smile. “What worked?”

Chapter 8

At eleven a.m. six of the comedians, Stu, Riley, Amelia, Boyd, Gardell and Maddie gathered in Gardell's apartment on the third floor. The walls were a rich mocha color. Gardell had painted the trim and doors with glossy black enamel, which sent Cleo into a hissy fit. He spent the next few weeks buttering her up with little gifts of chocolates before she agreed that he didn't have to repaint. A framed picture of Martin Luther King Jr., his hands clasped in contemplation, hung over the black sofa, looking down on them. Alongside it were posters of various basketball players. The television set was always on, tuned to the sports channel, only now the sound was muted.

Maddie balanced a notepad on her lap and gripped a black pencil in readiness. Everyone leaned in when she began to speak. "I just got off the telephone with Thomas Hamilton, the comedy critic from the *LA Times*. He thinks we'd make an interesting story. He wants to come over and hang out with us."

She glanced at the others, gauging their reaction. Her confidence wavered. She hadn't consulted anyone before pitching a story idea that involved all of them. Now if someone objected—no matter what the reason—it might ruin this opportunity, and then where would she be? Ever since the disappointment at Quip's and the fiasco at the commercial audition, she felt that a neon calendar was flashing her final days left. She rallied her spirits and began. "This could be a real break—for *all* of us." She smiled, hoping she sounded convincing.

"Isn't Hamilton the dude who wrote that big story slamming Seinfeld?" asked Boyd.

"Yep," said Riley, hunkered on the edge of Gardell's bed. "He claimed Seinfeld's material has no substance. Shook the boy up pretty bad."

"But he's funny," said Amelia, who sat in the corner of the couch.

"Let's not feel too sorry for Seinfeld," said Gardell. "He's got a hit TV show."

"See there," Stu rose up from the desk chair, "any publicity is still *good* publicity." His shirt was neatly tucked into perfectly creased slacks. He sat back down, resting an elbow on the desk, which held a portable computer and a stack of *Sports Illustrated Magazines*.

"Right, so it doesn't matter what he writes, we won't be any worse off than we are right now." *Especially me, thought Maddie*. "And it could make a difference."

"We? Not all the comics are in town. Fisher and Joey are out on the road," said Riley. "And Dexter did a one-nighter in San Diego, probably spent the night there."

"That's the breaks," said Stu.

Riley gazed around the room. "And where's Andy?"

"Sleeping," said Boyd.

"There's still plenty of us here for variety," said Maddie.

There was a pounding on the door and Andy burst in. He wore a faded T-shirt over rumpled sweatpants, which he'd obviously slept in. "Am I late?"

"You were born late," said Boyd.

"Sit down, and shut up." Gardell gestured with his hand. "We'll fill you in later."

“Sorry.” Andy found a spot on the floor.

“What about Brenda?” asked Boyd. “She’s not funny.”

“No way are we including her,” said Stu, shaking his head. “She’s a waitress and a loose cannon!”

Gardell folded his arms, considering. “She could make us look bad—even blow it for us.”

“That’s all we need—her to start in ragging about her miserable childhood,” Stu rolled his eyes.

Maddie’s first instinct was to agree to exclude her, but she felt a prick of guilt.

“She does live in the building, and she *is* a comic . . . sort of.”

“She *tries* hard,” said Amelia, in her cheery voice.

There was a collective groan from the men.

Maddie crossed out her name on the notepad. “Maybe if she doesn’t know about it, we don’t have to invite her.”

There was a rap-a-tap-tap at the door. Everyone quieted. Gardell walked over and opened it.

Brenda bounced in carrying her cat, Custard. “Hi, Riley, am I late?”

Everyone glared at him.

“Big mouth,” muttered Stu.

Maddie was first to recover. “No, take a seat.”

“So, we’re going to be in the *LA Times*? I can’t wait.” Brenda wedged herself onto the couch next to Amelia. “I love being interviewed. Are they going to take our picture or use our headshots? Maybe my dad will see it, and he’ll find me.”

“This isn’t the Brenda story,” said Boyd. “It’s about all of us.”

Brenda stuck out her tongue at him.

“We don’t know yet,” said Maddie. “We hope they use pictures.”

“He needs to see us perform,” said Brenda.

Conversation halted; everyone stared at Brenda and then turned introspective. A light breeze through the open window billowed the dark drapes. A muted roar rose from the freeway.

Maddie sensed each of them realizing the possibilities and risks of being reviewed by *the* comedy critic of the *LA Times*. What if Hamilton hated them? What if he wrote a seething article that everyone in the industry read? How devastating would that be? They weren’t in the same position as *Seinfeld*. He was a headliner with powerful management behind him. On the other hand, what if Thomas Hamilton liked them?

“If you don’t take the shot, you don’t score the point, and you don’t win the game.” Gardell’s eyes were fixed on the poster of Michael Jordan about to slam-dunk, seemingly suspended in air like a hawk riding a wind current.

“Yeah,” Riley’s face brightened. “Let’s invite him to the Comedy Store. I always have spots there.”

Boyd gave him a sharp jab on the arm. “And what about the rest of us?”

Gardell scratched his chin. "Maybe we could arrange something at one of the clubs?"

"For Saturday night when it's packed with a hot crowd," said Brenda.

Stu shook his head. "It's too late. Every place is booked at least a week in advance."

"Well, let them bump somebody!" Anger roiled in Maddie, remembering the experience at Quip's. "Okay, maybe we can't get Saturday, but how about Sunday night? If this gets them publicity in the *LA Times*, they'll give us priority."

"You hope." Stu cocked a brow.

"Sure they will," Andy sat taller. "Call Quips, the owner loves publicity."

Gardell wagged his finger. "We don't want to deal with Spider."

"Call Chortles." Brenda stroked the cat's golden fur and Custard purred. "They have the nicest audiences, and a good crowd on Sundays; I should know, I waitress there."

Small discussions broke out between the comics, each one analyzing the major LA clubs and personal experiences there. The Improv drew a lot of celebrities that needed a laugh; the Comedy Store had a rowdy audience preferring edgy material or novelty acts; the Laugh Factory had a younger crowd, too uptight to laugh unless the material was risqué; Igby's got a polite crowd that appreciated smart humor; and Quip's had a enthusiastic crowd, but you had to deal with Spider; Chortles drew a well-rounded, spirited audience that arrived smiling. After quick consideration, they all agreed that Brenda was right. Chortles was the best choice.

Maddie was pleased. She favored the club for another reason; the stage was only a few feet high. "If we can't get booked there, we'll try the other clubs."

"All we need is five to seven minutes each," said Gardell.

"The same as a *Tonight Show* appearance," said Riley.

"Or Letterman," added Andy.

Boyd asked, "What about the new girl?" Everyone looked at him.

"What new girl?" said Stu.

"You haven't seen *Lo-la*," said Boyd, exaggerating the first syllable of her name.

"She's *hot*."

Andy's eyes widened. "Lola? That's her name? Really?"

"It's Hollywood, who goes by their real name?" Amelia now held the Custard on her lap. "My real name's Fern."

"I use my real name," said Brenda. "I have an important reason for not changing it."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know," said Riley, cutting her off. "I spoke to her. She's an actress, but she wants to be a comedienne."

"That means she's not funny," said Stu.

Maddie turned to Amelia. "Have you met her?"

Amelia nodded. "Just for a minute."

"I'll find out if she's funny," said Boyd, with a gleam in his eyes.

Gardell raised his palm like a traffic cop. "Wait a minute. She just moved in. It's *not even* her apartment, and wanting to be a comic doesn't make you one. I vote she's not invited."

"Gardell's right," said Brenda. "We don't want anyone that isn't funny."

"Talk about the kettle and the pot," muttered Stu.

"I heard that," said Brenda, starting to get up.

Maddie frowned at Stu. "Gardell and Brenda are right."

Brenda smirked at Stu and sat back down.

Boyd piped in, "She's going to be disappointed."

Riley patted him on the back and grinned. "You'll find a way to comfort her."

"Okay, who else is still in town?" asked Gardell.

"Nick Stanco," said Andy.

"I'll tell him," said Riley.

"Okay, to be eligible for the interview," Maddie raised a finger, "One: you have to be in town. Two," she raised a second finger, "you must be a working comic. And three," she raised a third finger, "you have to be renting an apartment in the building. Agreed?" There was a series of nods and yeses. "Opposed?"

Everyone turned to Boyd. He lips twisted into a disgruntled expression, but he made no comment.

"Next, I'll call Chortles and try to and get us spots," said Maddie.

Gardell snapped his finger. "Let's invite Hamilton to dinner—have a potluck."

"This isn't a church social," said Stu, producing deep frown lines.

Andy pointed at Gardell. "I think it's a good idea."

Boyd jumped in, "My granny used to say, feed a man and make a friend."

"Yes," Maddie nodded, "and this will give him a chance to get to know us in a casual setting."

"Where will we have it?" asked Amelia.

"My apartment?" offered Maddie.

"How about mine?" said Boyd, suddenly having a change of heart. "I just got new furniture."

"You don't have enough chairs." Andy repositioned himself on the floor.

"I'll borrow some."

Riley glanced down at Andy sitting Indian style on the rug. "*You* can sit on the floor."

"Sure, I don't mind."

"What about dinner?" said Maddie.

Gardell rubbed his hands together. "I'll make my famous ribs and cornbread."

"Famous for what?" asked Riley, giving him a sideward glance.

"I'll bring baked potatoes," said Andy. "That's my specialty."

A debate followed over the pros and cons of peas or baked beans, Caesar or tossed salad and paper plates or real plates. The men all groaned when Brenda volunteered to bring tofu.

"What if he's a vegetarian?" she retorted.

Amelia passed the cat back to Brenda. "No fear of that; critics are all carnivores." Everybody laughed, then seemed to withdraw into themselves, considering the connotation.

Maddie held up her notepad and read off each person's name along with the dish they would bring.

Stu listened intently until she had finished. "You forgot the dessert."

"No, I didn't," said Maddie, "I'm making a birthday cake."

Several asked at once, "Whose birthday?"

"Andy's," said Maddie.

All eyes turned to Andy. He blushed. "Actually, it was yesterday."

Maddie grinned. "Close enough."

Boyd stood up ready to leave then gave Amelia a quizzical look. "Your real name's *Fern*?"

Chapter 9

Andy sat at Maddie's kitchen table watching her frost his birthday cake. "Do you think Thomas Hamilton will like us?"

A flood of nerves threatened to overtake her, and Maddie forced it back. "I *hope* so." She steadied herself with a deep breath and began spooning whip cream into a pastry tube and scrolled a border around the edge of the cake.

"Hmmm, that looks good."

"You want to lick the beaters?" asked Maddie.

"Sure."

She popped the beaters from the mixer and handed them to him.

"Gee, I feel like I'm twelve." He carried them to the sink, bent over and licked at the sweetened cream.

Maddie sighed, then said, "I have exactly three weeks, 21 days, to make something happen."

"A year's not long enough to make it in LA. It takes that long to learn the freeway system. Can't you talk your husband into letting you stay?"

Maddie ripped open a packet of slivered almonds. "Part of the problem's money. I'm barely covering my monthly nut. She didn't mention that she'd borrowed money on her credit card to help cover this month's rent. "With two kids in college, we can't afford to keep two households going, and this fall my youngest goes off to college. Now we're

talking about three tuitions.” She sprinkled almonds over the whip cream. “I should probably get a real job—make some money and help out.”

“You can’t leave now. It’s not fair—you’re just getting started.”

“If only I’d gotten that commercial.” Maddie wrenched open a stubborn lid on a bottle of maraschino cherries and placed one on top of the cake.

“Wow!” Andy left the beaters in the sink and stared. “No one will believe you made it.”

Maddie grinned, “You’re my witness.” The telephone rang, and she wiped her hands on a dishtowel before answering. “Hello? ... Okay, I’ll be right up.” She cradled the receiver. “I have to run upstairs. Amelia’s having a fashion crisis.”

“I’ll see you at Boyd’s. And thanks a *lot* for the cake.” He tried to kiss her on the lips, but Maddie turned her head and caught it on the cheek.

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“Are you sure this looks all right?” Amelia held out her arms in a dramatic pose to show off the black rayon pants and a buff-colored blouse with full poet sleeves gathered at the cuffs. She turned around. “What about my butt? Does it look humongous?”

“You’re kidding, right? You look sensational.”

“I know it’s kind of a retro look—Kim Novak in *Bell, Book and Candle*.”

"I like it." Maddie peeled down the venetian blinds and checked out front. "You better get a move on—he should be arriving any time now."

"Almost ready." She tried on her twelfth pair of shoes and spun from side-to-side, examining her image in the full-length mirror. "Do you know what he looks like?"

"I haven't a clue." Maddie watched as a dark sedan crept by the building, as though the driver was looking for a parking spot.

"Okay, what do you think? I've narrowed it down to the patent leather pumps, the gold lamé heels or the red come-fuck-me shoes."

"The what?" Maddie turned back to the array of shoes scattered around the floor.

"The C-F-Ms? You know, the sling-backs—that's what Marilyn Monroe and Shelly Winters called them when they roomed together."

"Ohhh, well, with that outfit, I like the gold lamé—you don't happen to have a belt that matches?"

Amelia's eyes showed a glint of memory, and she disappeared back into the closet. Maddie could hear her thrashing about, and she turned back to the street scene below. A dented white truck hauling a stack of old mattresses raced down the avenue and skidded to a stop at the corner of the building. Two men leaped from the cab and opened the tailgate. One climbed into the truckbed and began uplifting the mattresses onto the sidewalk. Each one flopped onto the concrete, raising a cloud of dust.

"You've got to be kidding," said Maddie.

"What?"

"I wonder if those are the guys that dumped that water heater yesterday."

Maddie glanced at the man in the sedan and saw that he was also watching. “Amelia, I’ve got to go. I think he’s here.” Amelia stepped out of the closet in the gold lamé shoes, fastening a matching belt. Maddie eyed her friend and said. “You look fabulous,” and headed for the door.

* * *

A flash of blue dashed out the front door of the Belvedere trailed by her two yapping dogs, and hollered, “Get that out of here, now.”

The men exchanged looks, then the driver spoke. “We’re coming right back for them.”

Cleo stood on the corner; her arms akimbo and fists clenched. In a deep-blue polyester pantsuit, she looked like an aging Superwoman, except for the cigarette clenched in the corner of her mouth. “I said NOW.”

“Honest lady, we’ll be right back.”

She crossed to the back of the truck, locating their license plate and adjusted her rhinestone glasses. “J-U-N-K-3-8-8. Junk? Junk! I’m calling the cops.”

“Okay, okay,” said the driver. “But keep those mutts back.” Clack Gable and Tinkerbelle continued to growl, Clark looking particularly evil with a small fanged tooth that always poked out. The two men lumbered toward the mattresses, cursing, and maneuvered them back onto the truck. After a grinding of gears, they pulled away.

Chapter 10

The man in the parked sedan waited until the truck had rounded the corner before getting out, locking his car, and flip-flapping across the street in brown-tasseled loafers.

"Hello," he said to Cleo, "I'm from the *LA Times*. I'm looking for Maddie Jones."

He wore dark slacks, a tweed sports jacket, red socks and a red beret. He was in his late forties, with an abundance of wavy brown hair and about a head shorter than Cleo.

Cleo dipped her chin, suddenly coquettish, extended her hand and softened her gravelly voice. "I'm Cleo Burr, the manager of the Belvedere Apartments."

"How do you do." He shook hands and gazed at the salmon colored building decorated by elaborate ornamentation in the upper corners and over the front entrance.

"This looks like it was built back in the twenties."

The dogs approached him sniffing at his tasseled loafers and began growling. He glanced down at the Brussel griffons, stopped, and his face blanched.

Cleo snapped at the dogs. "Clark! Tinkerbelle!" She smiled at the journalist. "Yes, originally it was a hotel and used to stand right over there." She gestured towards the Hollywood Freeway; a steady drone of cars rose from below. "Before they built the freeway, of course." The dogs paced back and forth, snarling at the shoes, while Cleo continued chatting. "They cut the building in three and relocated it here. If you look at the sides, you can see the seams where they patched it together. They nearly lost some of that gingerbread up there."

“Churrigueresque,” he said.

“Pardon?”

“The decorative molding on the building.” He quick-stepped away from the dogs, the cuffs of his pants covering the tassels, and glanced at the structure that stretched along the corner lot to the alley that divided the block in half. “It’s quite extravagant actually. That architectural flourish may make it eligible as a historical landmark.”

“You don’t say.” Cleo swelled with pride. “What did you call it?”

“Churrigueresque, pronounced churri-guer-esque, like it’s spelt. It’s named after a Spanish architect. It was Spain’s response to Baroque. It’s prevalent in the Southwest, usually on the old movie palaces or Catholic Churches and some buildings. The Million Dollar Theatre downtown is a fine example, and closer by, the Baine Building on Hollywood Boulevard.”

Cleo repeated the word several times. Then boasted, “It’s the only apartment building with it in this area.”

The dogs crouched, ready to pounce, staring at the loafers, growling louder.

“*Stop* it!” commanded Cleo, then to the man. “The Belvedere is steeped in Hollywood history. Rudolph Valentino stayed here. In room 28. Tarzan, I’m talking about the *original* Tarzan, carried on several liaisons here. Of course, that was *way* before my time.” She primped at her stiffly sprayed, champagne-colored hair with painted-fuchsia fingernails.

“Interesting.” He studied the building, at the same time keeping a furtive eye on the dogs. He noticed Clark Gable’s projecting tooth. “You should get that dog’s fang removed.”

“Oh no, I think it’s kind of cute—gives him personality. Why, I’ve been told he should have an agent. You know, for commercial work and things.”

“Unlikely, no one makes it in this town without orthodontic work.”

Cleo ignored his comment and hooked his arm, escorting him along. “Let me show you around.” The tassels flopped with each step, and the dogs broke into furious barking. “Stop. That. NOW.” Cleo grinned at him, “I think they’re a little jealous. But I’ll protect you.” She glared at the dogs. “Now, *BEHAVE!*”

“I’m not used to dogs—actually, I prefer cats, Siamese to be precise. I have two: Chef Boyardee and Julia Child.” He clung to her arm, still watchful, dampness appearing across his forehead.

“You’re a cat man.” She crinkled her forehead. “We have two cats in the building.”

Once inside, they paused at the three rows of headshots that lined the lobby wall. The end of one tassel peeked from his pants cuff and both dogs sat glaring at it, keeping a low growl.

“*Here’s Rudy!*” She extended her free arm like she was presenting prizes on a game show. “And our comics, of course. They’re all funny. I *won’t* rent to hacks or mimes.”

“Excuse me, please.” He disengaged himself from Cleo to take out his pen and notepad, one pant leg shifting, exposing a tassel. The dogs began barking, darting at the embellishment. He jigged about, kicking out at the animals, trying to hold them at bay, tassels swinging. Clark Gable leaped up, teeth and fang bared, seized hold of a tassel on his right foot, ripping it off.

“Now THAT’S enough of THAT.” Cleo snatched up the dogs, one in each arm, and disengaged the tassel from Clark’s fang. She handed it to the reporter. “I’m sorry—are you all right?”

“Fine. Fine.” He handled it with fingertips, wrapped it in a tissue, and placed it in his coat pocket.

At that moment, Maddie came out into the hallway carrying the birthday cake now decorated with candles and approached the lobby.

“Here’s the man from the newspaper,” crowed Cleo.

The journalist tried to collect himself. He picked up his beret and smoothed his wavy brown hair, which had slipped to the side.

Maddie recognized it at once as a toupee and made a concerted effort to look him directly in eyes. “Welcome to the Belvedere. No problem finding us?”

“No, no problem.” He pointed outside. “Will my car be safe out there?”

“I’ll keep an eye on it,” offered Cleo.

Maddie smiled, “I hope you’re hungry.”

“A little, but I don’t care for cake. His lips bunched like he smelled sour milk. “I prefer pies.”

“Oh.” *Just like a critic. I knew I should have baked an apple pie, too.* Maddie maintained her smile, hoping she sounded upbeat. “They’ll be lots of other food. Follow me.” She gestured goodbye to Cleo and led the way upstairs.

Chapter 11

The door to Boyd's apartment was open, and they walked right in onto red carpeting. All of Boyd's new furniture was black and boxy—the chair, couch, and six black cubes used for coffee and end tables and nightstands. The bed was covered with a black satin comforter heaped with red pillows.

Several of the comics hovered in the kitchen near the food that Gardell guarded, and a few more were seated about the living room. As soon as they saw the reporter, everyone crowded around to meet him.

Gardell took the cake from Maddie and mouthed so only she could see, "He's short!"

Maddie barely nodded an "I know" and made the introductions, adding what part of the country each person was from:

Gardell from Louisiana.

Boyd from Tennessee.

Nick from New Jersey.

Amelia from Wisconsin.

Andy from Colorado.

Riley from Washington D.C.

Dexter from Texas.

Maddie was the only native Californian.

Then Stu came in and perused the new furniture. "This place looks like a checkerboard." He strode to the far side of the room and touched the wall. "King me."

Everyone chuckled, and Maddie introduced Stu from Illinois, and the comic who lived across the hall from her.

"Everyone, this is Thomas Hamilton from the *LA Times*."

He looked at her surprised. "No, I'm not."

The room stopped.

"I'm from the *LA Times*, but I'm not Thomas Hamilton," he said.

"Who are you?" asked Andy.

"I'm Graham Willoughby, the food reporter. You've probably read my articles in the Food Section: "The Gallant Eggplant," "Wheat, Squash and Lima Bean Pasta," "Liver, Kidneys and Tongue, The Neglected Meats."

The comics looked stunned.

Amelia recovered first. "Sounds fascinating."

"Yes, thank you," said Graham. "It is rather. Though, I've exhausted the subject, which is why, I'm switching to entertainment."

"What happened to Thomas Hamilton?" asked Maddie.

"He was in a car accident. Nothing too serious, a few stitches and a concussion, but they're keeping him in the hospital a few days to be certain, and he's going to take some time off."

A turmoil of emotions crashed through her. "Well," said Maddie, "so *you* were assigned the story?"

“Yes. I’ve never been to a comedy club before. Actually, this is my second entertainment story. The first one was on the food prepared for the premiere party for *RoboCop 3*.”

“There was a 3?” mumbled Boyd.

“Went straight to video,” said Andy, out the side of his mouth.

Maddie tried to console herself—at least they hadn’t canceled the story or delayed it. “You’re in for a treat,” she said, trying to muster some enthusiasm. “I mean, not just the food, which, may be a bit simpler than what you’re accustomed to; but I’m sure you’ll find it tasty—but you’ll get a chance to see live comedy.” She avoided stares from the others, which seemed to be saying, “What did you get us into?” “Well now, you’re the guest of honor, you go first.”

Gardell handed Graham a paper plate. “Try my barbecue ribs before these guys scarf them all up. I even make my own sauce.”

Everyone lined up behind Graham, who, with a curled lip, flipped the paper plate back and forth. Maddie saw his disgust and quickly fetched a real plate for him from Boyd’s cabinet.

“Thank you,” he said unsmiling. “Do you have dinner like this very often?”

“Every couple of weeks,” lied Riley.

Boyd embellished the lie. “Gardell started the tradition.”

Maddie got to the back of the line and Gardell followed her.

“The food critic?” said Gardell.

“At least they’re still doing the story.”

“As long as it doesn’t run next to the liver story.”

She swallowed. “That’s not the only complication. I could only get five spots at Chortles.”

“How many are going?”

“Nine, I think.”

Gardell eyebrows shot up. “What are you going to do?”

“I have no idea.”

Using both hands, Graham carried his plate of food into the living room and sat down on the couch. “This building’s nicely maintained, but I noticed it’s not in the best neighborhood. There’s a high rate of cars stolen in this area, not to mention the number of rapes. As a matter of fact, the police suspect there’s a serial rapist in the vicinity.”

Maddie experienced a shiver of fear and wondered, should she be worried? This feeling was usurped by a twinge of guilt. She still hadn’t spoken with Roxanne since her attack.

Amelia unfolded her napkin and placed it on her lap. “That’s why Cleo’s so great.”

“A regular pit bull,” said Boyd, “but I mean that in a ‘nice’ way.”

“I noticed.” Graham dabbed the corner of his mouth with his napkin and related the mattress incident, omitting the annoyance with the dogs.

Quietly, Gardell asked Maddie, “Is he gay?”

Between bites Nick Stanco said, “Dat’s nothin’, last week some idiot dumped a sofa.”

Riley gestured with his fork. "But it was gone the next day."

"Where do you think Boyd got his new furniture," chuckled Andy.

"Hey! I bought all of this new on Western Avenue. Got a good deal, too."

"I think you should get some circles and triangles." Stu glanced around the room.

"Then it would look like one big psychological test. Each day you could measure how crazy you've gotten."

"All comics are crazy—at least a little bit," said Maddie, smiling, trying to defuse the remark.

Andy sidled up to Maddie. "Is he gay?"

Maddie shrugged.

Soon everyone was served and gathered around Graham. "So what's it like living in a building with a lot of other comedians?" he asked.

"Like a frat house," said Riley.

"No," said Stu, "Maddie's right, more like a nut house."

"Isn't it competitive?" Using a knife and fork, Graham trimmed the meat off the ribs, while everyone else ate with their fingers.

"Sometimes," admitted Gardell. "But we're so different from each other. Outside of the comedy clubs, it's rare that we're ever competing for the same job."

"Yeah, we've got different hobbies, too," said Andy, "like I raise pigeons on the roof."

"Squab?" asked Graham, interested.

"They're not for eating," said Andy looking alarmed.

“It’s great for networking,” jumped in Amelia. “We always know what’s going on in town.”

“Like after I did a spot on the *Rick Dees’ Show*.” Boyd gestured with a fork in his hand. “I recommended my friends.”

“A couple of weeks ago, Boyd got a last minute gig opening for Dolly Parton in Anaheim.” Stu scooted his chair forward. “He was already booked at the Boiler Room in Ventura. But the Dolly Parton job was for five times the money, so he called me to fill in for him. I had a gig in the Valley that didn’t pay as well as Ventura, so I gave it to Maddie, who wasn’t working that night.”

Amelia added sweetener to her ice tea. “So much of the business is connections; as you move up and your friends move up, you have better contacts.

“Yes, I never worked the Ventura room before,” said Stu, “and they liked me, so I’ll get booked back.”

Graham drank his soda with his baby finger extended.

Stu caught Maddie’s eye and mouthed, “Is he gay?”

Exasperated, Maddie shrugged.

“When you live in the same building like this, you can try material out on each other, too,” said Andy.

Maddie held up a finger, “Although sometimes when we’re kidding around and someone says something funny, we’ll look at each other wondering, ‘Who gets that bit?’”

“So how are your careers going?” asked Graham. “Quite frankly, I’ve never heard of any of you.”

“Boyd is up for a role in *Matlock*,” Amelia pointed at him.

“Gardell found a literary agent to represent his scripts.” Stu pointed at Gardell.

“She’s sending out his work to some of the sitcoms.”

Gardell gestured towards Amelia. “Amelia got approved for another *Tonight Show* appearance.”

“Amelia’s raised the bar,” said Andy. “Since she moved in, anyone new will have to show an audition tape before they’ll get an apartment. You can check with Cleo.”

“Is that legal?” said Graham.

“He’s just joking,” said Amelia, then glanced at Maddie with a quizzical expression as if to say, doesn’t this guy have a sense of humor?

Maddie didn’t answer. Already too anxious to eat, she laid her fork on the plate.

“This has been a good week. Nick just signed with William Morris.”

“Yo, I lucked out,” Nick shifted his shoulders. “Dey like da way I talk.”

Graham pursed his lips and considered. “You’re obviously a character type—you’ve got that East Coast persona going for you.”

“Dat’s what my agent says. I told dem, I seen *Rocky* thurty-eight times. I knows Sly’s ev’ry line.” He tipped his head back like a coyote and yowled, *Adriiii! Yoooo, Aaaa-dri-enne!*”

Nick inhaled ready to cut loose again, and they all realized someone was banging on the door. But before Boyd could open it, Brenda let herself in. She carried the black and white rabbit and a package of red licorice. “Who’s Adrienne?” she asked.

“Rocky’s girlfriend,” answered Riley. “Don’t you know anything?” He smiled at Graham. “I’m just kidding her. Comics kid a lot.”

Boyd looked at the animal and rubbed his hands together. “Hmm, more dinner.”

Brenda gave him a dirty look. “Ha. Ha.” She jabbed him with the red licorice. He ripped open the bag, grabbed a piece and passed it around.

Maddie said. “This is Brenda Hoo.”

“Hi. And this is Grace,” She petted the rabbit. “I named her after Grace Slick.”

“She’s got a lizard, too, named Jim Morrison,” said Andy.

“And a hamster called Elvis,” Stu crumbled up his napkin.

“I love animals. Is there any lettuce for Grace?” asked Brenda

“I made a salad,” offered Amelia. “Does Grace like Roquefort dressing?”

“Anything but French.” Brenda held the rabbit aloft. “Dat means there’s wettuce for my Gracie.”

Amelia held Grace for Brenda while she served herself. She returned with a heaping plate of salad and sat down with Grace on Boyd’s bed.

“Hey, not on the satin,” said Boyd. “No rabbits allowed, only bunnies.”

Graham watched her curiously. “Hoo, that’s an unusual name.”

“People think it’s Chinese or that I made it up to be funny.” Brenda squeezed into a spot as close to Willoughby as she could get. She sat cross-legged and set the plate of salad before the rabbit. Using a fork, she began eating along with Grace.

“Like the Abbott and Costello bit?” asked Graham.

“Except that’s her real name,” said Amelia.

Gardell whispered to Maddie. "Quick, light the candles before she gets started."

Maddie collected a couple of dirty plates and moved into the kitchen.

"It's spelled H-O-O." Brenda watched Graham jot it down in his notebook. "I don't want to change it because once I'm famous, my father will be able to find me. His name is Simon Hoo. I haven't seen him since I was seven. That's when my mother divorced him, and we moved to Florida. He wrote, but she tore up his letters and wouldn't let him see me. We were always moving because my mother couldn't hold a job. I went to thirteen different elementary schools."

Maddie carried in the cake lit with candles, singing, "*Happy Birthday to you.*" Everyone joined in, drowning out Brenda.

"Make a wish before blowing out the candles," said Amelia, getting up to help with the cake cutting.

"Thanks everybody, especially you, Maddie." With one big puff, Alan extinguished all of the candles.

"Who wants a piece of cake?" Maddie asked.

Brenda moved to Amelia's spot on the couch and sat down beside Graham. "I haven't spoken to my mother in six years. She used to beat me—with hangers—like Joan Crawford."

"Does comedy help?" asked Graham.

"Oh, yes. I love to laugh."

Boyd stood up and looked at his watch. "Hey, we better get going if we're going to make it on time to Chortles."

“Who’s driving?”

“I can drive,” offered Gardell.

“Me too,” said Maddie.

Graham Willoughby stood up. “So who’s the funniest here?”

“I am,” said Riley.

“No, you’re not.” Gardell threw a red cushion at him. “You don’t even do material.”

“Yeah,” said Andy. “All you do is song parodies.”

“I’d like to see you try and write one.”

“How can you measure who’s the funniest,” said Amelia. “Comedy is so subjective.”

Maddie stepped forward. “They say that your A-material, that’s your best jokes, only makes ninety percent of the audience laugh.”

“Not everyone likes Bill Cosby or Robin Williams,” said Brenda feeding the last piece of lettuce to Grace.

“You’re avoiding the question.” Graham clicked his pen. “Come on, there’s a funniest person here and the least funny person.”

Several people glanced at Brenda, but before anyone replied, there was another knock at the door. Boyd, who was nearest, opened it to a voluptuous redhead wearing a green-leather skirt and a halter top that looked like they had been spray-painted on. She held a banana cream pie.

“Is this where the party is?” she cooed.

Chapter 12

Boyd gave her a toothy grin and puffed his chest like the cock of the walk. “Hi, Lola, glad ya’ could come.” He forgot about the others a moment, then came out of his cloud. “This is my new neighbor from down the hall, Lola Hayward.”

“That name’s phonier than fake fur,” said Dexter out of the corner of his mouth.

Lola moved in like a barracuda searching for prey. She sized up the group, spotted Willoughby and headed towards him like she’d found her mackerel. “I overheard that you like pie,” she said. “I hope banana cream is okay.”

Maddie muttered to Amelia, “Fasten your seat belts. It’s going to be a bumpy night.”

Graham looked back, beaming. “My favorite.”

“Perfect. I’ll cut you a piece.”

A few minutes later Lola slithered back from the kitchen and handed Graham a generous slice of pie on a paper plate, a plastic fork stuck in the middle of it. “I know *real* men prefer pie.”

He nearly fell off the couch accepting it. “Don’t tell me you’re a comedienne, too, Miss Hayward?”

“Please, call me Lola,” she said, coiling on the floor in front of him.

“Lola.”

Stu turned his head sideways and said quietly to Maddie, “I don’t think he’s gay.” Maddie gave him an impatient look that said ‘you just figured that out.’

Lola shook back her hair. “Yes, I’m new.”

“Hmm.” Graham managed the plastic cutlery and swallowed a mouthful of pie.

“Interesting angle—a *new* comedienne trying to make it.”

Gardell rolled his eyes.

“I think so, too.” She scooted closer to him. “I started out as an actress. I did lots of plays back in Dayton.”

“Dayton? Oh, right, that’s a *big* theater town,” said Stu, too serious to be sincere.

Lola gave Stu a cool glance and continued. “Then this comedy club, Side-Splitters, opened up downtown, and I went a few times. Right from the beginning, I just wanted to be on that stage, in front of all of those people. I *love* applause.”

Riley slapped his head in disgust.

“I started working on a routine, but I knew I needed to move to LA.” Lola blinked up at Graham. “This is where it’s all happening.”

Gardell stepped forward conspicuously, pushed up his sleeve, and looked at his watch. “Hey! We’d better get moving or we’ll be late.”

Boyd hurried towards his closet. “I’ve got to change.”

“Where are you going?” asked Lola.

“Disneyland,” said Dexter. Several of the comics snickered.

“Chortles, to do a spot,” answered Boyd coming out buttoning up a blue-silk shirt. Stu jabbed him in the ribs as he passed. “Ouff! What’s wrong?”

Lola bent forward getting off the floor, providing Graham with a panoramic view down her top. “Can I get on?”

“Sorry, there’s only seven spots.” Maddie gathered up several dirty plates and carried them into the kitchen.

“Seven!” Brenda counted the comics in the room. “There are ten of us here. How many people are going?”

“I’m not sure,” answered Maddie.

“There’s eleven counting me,” Lola said to Brenda.

Gardell cut in. “I can drive.”

“Me too,” said Amelia. “There’s plenty of room in the Leviathan.”

“That’s what she calls her car,” Andy explained to Graham. “It’s a ‘72 Mercury Marquis, about the same size as a steam liner.”

Boyd combed his hair in front of a circular mirror near the door. “Amelia’s the most successful comic in the building, but she drives a junk car.”

“It’s also the safest, thank you. It doesn’t hurt to have a steel barrier around you on the LA freeways.” Amelia stepped in front of Boyd, opened her purse and began touching up her makeup. “In New York I did this in taxis.”

“I’m not goin’,” said Nick. “I’ve got a spot at Ha Ha’s.”

“Maybe we’ll see you later?” said Andy. “We’re going to the Improv afterwards.”

“Right. Nice meetin’ ya’.” Nick gave a chin-nod to Graham before leaving.

“I’m off to the Valley.” Dexter announced and swaggered towards the door. He called back over his shoulder. “I’ve got a paying gig.”

“Good thing,” said Riley. “Your rent’s past due.”

“Hey! I pay my rent on time.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“That still leaves eight of us,” said Brenda, jabbing her fists into her waist.

“*Nine* with me.” Lola said. “Don’t you think I could get on?”

Brenda turned to Lola. “You don’t even live in this building. That’s Fisher’s apartment you’re crashed in.”

Stu tapped his chin. “Side Splitters has only been open for six months. Lola, I’m curious, how many times have you actually been on stage?”

“Well,” Lola gazed into space. “We did four performances of *Oklahoma*, and—”

“You played Ado Annie, right?” said Andy.

Lola raised her chin. “No, I was in the chorus. I did some dancing, too.”

“I meant on a comedy club stage,” interrupted Stu.

“I *said* I was new,” Lola snapped. “Tonight will be my *seventh* performance.”

She smiled sweetly at Graham. “I could drive you in my car.”

“You mean Fisher’s car,” said Brenda.

“Do you know your way around LA?” asked Maddie, trying not to sound catty.

“I’ll bet you don’t even know where the club is,” said Stu.

Graham stood up. “I’ll drive, Lola.” He moved towards the door and linked arms with her. She stood about four inches taller than him.

Lola turned back to the others and in a triumphant tone said, “We’ll see you at Chortles.”

Brenda hopped up. "Wait, I need a ride, too. Just give me a second to drop off Gracie."

"So do I," said Riley, "and I know a shortcut."

Behind Graham's back, Maddie gave Brenda and Riley the thumbs-up.

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Maddie, Boyd and Gardell rode with Amelia to Chortles Comedy Club in West LA, and Stu and Andy followed in a car behind them.

During the trip Boyd kept singing, "*Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets. And little man Lola wants you.*"

"Quit singing that song." Gardell got out of the Leviathan and slammed the door. "You can screw up your own career, laying around smoking dope all day or chasing after women, but don't mess with mine." He mimicked Lola; "I've been on stage seven times.' Shit, I stopped counting after two thousand."

Amelia locked the car door. "Leno says it takes seven years to figure out who you are on stage."

"You hear that, Boyd?" Gardell pointed to Amelia. "Seven years, not seven open mikes. I've got an idea. If you want to get laid so bad, why don't you give her your spot tonight."

"Enough already, you made your point," said Boyd. "Now shut up, I've got to think about my set."

“Ah ha! That’s just like you. Haven’t figured out what you’re going to do for The Little Man from the *LA Times*. Tomorrow you might as well get in your car and drive back to Tennessee.”

Andy and Gardell got out of their car and joined the others.

“What I can’t understand is how could he be taken in by a wannabe?” Andy said to the group.

“You’re forgetting, he’s not Thomas Hamilton; he’s a food critic,” said Stu.

“And he’s not gay,” said Maddie.

“But that red beret and phony hair—and did you see the way he held his drink, with his pinkie extended?” Andy demonstrated.

They approached the entrance to the comedy club and Maddie stopped. “Okay, let’s cool it. Nobody needs to know our business.”

The four of them plastered on smiles and greeted the girl behind the ticket window.

“Hey, how’s it going?” asked Maddie. “How’s the crowd tonight?”

“A good house.” The young girl peered at them. “I thought there were seven of you?”

“The others are coming,” said Maddie. “And actually, there are eight.”

The girl furrowed her forehead. “I don’t know about eight.”

“Is Mitch here?” asked Maddie.

“He’s in his office, but we already have a full line-up tonight.”

Gardell unhooked the red velvet rope so they could enter. "You're talking about adding Brenda, right?"

"Right," said Maddie, her expression adamant. "Better Brenda than Lola."

Amelia grinned. "I can't wait to hear what that car ride was like."

The four of them chuckled and Maddie said, "I was going to ask to ride with them, but when Brenda volunteered, I figured all the better."

They passed through a narrow hallway and a wave of laughter greeted them as they reached the showroom. On three walls painted faces of legendary comedians, Charlie Chaplin, Groucho Marx, Red Skelton, Abbot & Costello, and Lucille Ball overlooked the audience. Maddie frowned; it always bothered her that only one woman was up there. What about Phyllis Diller, Imogene Coca, Joan Rivers or Lily Tomlin? Maddie wondered if her face would ever grace the wall of a comedy club. She knew that at least her photograph hung in a number of comedy clubs around the country.

John Fink, the evening's emcee, introduced the next comic and came off the stage towards them. "Is your group here?"

"The rest will be here in a minute," said Gardell. "They're coming with the reporter."

"All right." John rubbed his hands together like he was warming them over a fire.

"He'll get to see me, too."

"We have an extra person that needs to get on," said Maddie.

"Don't ask me." John stepped back, raising his hands. "You better check with Mitch."

"I'll go with you," said Amelia.

The two made their way behind the audience to the office in the back and found Mitch, a mountain of a man, overflowing the chair in front of a desk sorting through bar tabs. Maddie explained the situation.

"Can't do it," said Mitch. "Besides, Brenda Hoo sucks."

"There's twelve of us in the building, and we only brought eight. She's the only other female comic living there," said Maddie. "Look, it's going to be a feature story in the *LA Times*. You can't buy publicity like this."

He frowned. "Are you sure the club's going to be mentioned in this story?"

"Of course," said Maddie. "He's said this is the best club in the city."

Amelia glanced at Maddie, then nodded. "That's what he said all right."

"His favorite, huh?" Mitch puckered his lips and leaned back. The chair squeaked, and Maddie studied its joints, praying it wouldn't collapse while they were in the office. He nodded. "The man's got good taste."

There was a knock on the door and a waitress in a skimpy black skirt and white blouse came in carrying a plate heaped with food.

"Set it right here, sweetheart," said Mitch, clearing a place in front of him.

"Where's my ketchup?"

Maddie saw the bottle of Del Monte's sitting on a shelf and reached for it.

"Allow me," she said, uncapping it and shaking out red globs onto a mountain of french fries.

Mitch smiled, "That's good." He dipped a thick french fry and sucked it down. "Okay. I'll let her go on. But if we don't get mentioned in this story, you can forget about getting booked here again."

"And if it's on the front page," said Maddie, "You'll book me back on the weekend."

He shoved some fries in his mouth and chewed before answering. "You've got a deal, girly. Now let me eat in peace, while my fries are hot. I *hate* 'em cold."

The two left the office, and Amelia said, "Good job, Maddie."

"At this point, I've got nothing to lose."

They returned to the showroom and saw that the others had arrived. Graham was seated at a small table with Lola cozied up next to him.

"I can't believe that chick," mumbled Maddie. She shook her head and tried to push the annoyance from her mind and think about her act.

Brenda came up to her. "Am I going on?"

"Yep," said Maddie.

Brenda whooped and several in the audience glanced at her.

"Thankyouthankyouthankyou." She gestured towards Lola. "What about her?"

"No way," said Maddie.

Brenda smirked at Lola.

Gardell saw the reaction and came up carrying a pencil and a slip of paper. "Get ready, you're going on last."

"I'm always ready," said Brenda.

Gardell penciled in Brenda's name and handed the list to John Fink.

A few minutes later the emcee was back on stage introducing them. "You think you have some wild neighbors? The next eight comedians to perform all live in the *same* apartment building. It's a regular house of comedy."

Maddie saw Lola stand up and glare at the group. She turned around and started walking towards the back of the club.

Maddie said to Amelia. "Bad timing, you don't want to get between Mitch and his french fries.

Gardell went first: "I am from New Orleans, or as we say, 'N'Oleams.' We try to make you feel at home when you visit. In the French Quarter, you can party! And never get arrested for being drunk in public—as long as you can stand up. In the Quarter you can stroll along streets drinking—as long as the booze is in a paper cup." Gardell became sterner.

"You carry a glass bottle, we'll arrest you. Throw your butt in the hoosegow. Yep, back home if a loved one dies of cirrhosis of the liver, it's considered natural causes."

One by one, each of the comics took the stage and performed material, demonstrating their individual uniqueness.

Amelia: "My cat's in a bad mood, the exterminator killed all of her toys. I slept with an eye doctor once. The entire time he kept saying 'Now? Or now?'"

Boyd: "I got a good job as soon as I moved out here. Jury duty. Six bucks a day. They say hard work never killed anybody, but why take that chance?"

Stu: "The French have a huge wine surplus this year, so they've decided to convert it to fuel. Now when someone asks you how your car's running you can say, 'Shy and understated, yet fruity and articulated.'"

Andy: "And being Jewish in Colorado, no one knew how to pronounce the holidays. Like Rosh Hashanah? The teacher would say, 'Andy, Happy Russian roulette.' ... My mother got chosen for jury duty once, but they sent her home. She kept insisting that she was guilty."

Maddie got on stage and saw her hands quivering as she took the microphone out of the stand. *Calm down.* She listened for a tremble in her voice, but she sounded fine. The years of performing overcame her nervousness, and with each laugh garnered, she became more relaxed. "My teenage son has paid for so many traffic tickets, he can use the Highway Patrol as a credit reference. ... My mother and teenage daughter are on the same wavelength. They both have blue hair. ... The nice thing about the punker look is it gives the ugly kids a chance to be popular."

Riley: "You've all seen me on TV." He began singing "Bad boys, bad boys, what you gonna do? What you gonna do when they come for you?"

Lola stomped back to the table and sat down and glared at Brenda. Brenda's bravado had disappeared, and she tentatively stepped on the stage. She began rambling about her pets. "And then I have a hamster named Jim Morrison, I mean Elvis." The audience sat attentively, listening and waiting. Brenda never reached a punch line and the silence seemed excruciating.

"She's bombing," said Stu.

“Like Hiroshima,” said Andy.

“We shouldn’t have put her on last—that’s what Graham’s going to remember,” said Gardell

Maddie folded her arms. “Nothing we can do about it now.

The silence was broken when Lola started to giggle.

“Bitch,” muttered Amelia.

Brenda’s expression of panic changed to anger. “Oh, just ignore her,” she gestured at Lola. “She’s my roommate. She can’t keep a boyfriend because she hates sex. I try to tell her guys just won’t go for a girl wears a peekaboo negligee and rubber gloves to bed.” There were a few chuckles. Encouraged, Brenda went on. “She’s so cold you could keep cheese in her bed.” No laughs.

Lola called out, “That’s not true! We’re not roommates.”

Andy was the only one to laugh, “But the cheese story’s true?”

Brenda squinted, “Oh, sorry, this is my *other* roommate, Lola. She’s a Lulu. She can’t get enough sex. She’s been around more times than a Merry-go-round. . . . She’s got more notches on her bedpost than Wilt Chamberlain.” The audience groaned. “She’s very unhappy with her current boyfriend.” Brenda lowered her voice confidentially. “He’s not very big down there. She says having sex with him is like playing Trivial Pursuit.”

Graham stiffened.

“Uh, oh,” said Gardell. “I think that one hit a nerve.”

“What’s that?” asked Dexter coming into the club.

“Dexter!”

“They’ve got to let you go on.” Maddie glanced towards the back of the club and saw Mitch standing at the bar. She pointed at Dexter, and at the stage, and clasped her hands in a plea.

Mitch shook his head no. There was another loud groan from the audience. Mitch reconsidered and nodded yes. Gardell informed John Fink. Brenda finished to pity applause, and the yo-yoing comic was introduced. Dexter walked on stage working a flashing yellow yo-yo.

Chapter 13

It was after midnight, but a line of cars still groaned along Hollywood Boulevard. Around the corner on Vine Street, pedestrians dallied at the all-night newsstand. A grizzled vendor, creases in his hands permanently stained with newspaper ink, hovered nearby. He snatched people's proffered bills, stuffed them into a gray apron, and clinked out their coins from a silver changemaker hooked to one side of his belt. Maddie paid little attention to the rows of glossy magazines in a rainbow of colors or the stacks of domestic and foreign newspapers from around the world. She paced back and forth like a sentry in front of the display racks, watching for the delivery of the morning's edition of the *LA Times*.

Graham Willoughby had telephoned on Friday with news that the story would be in this Sunday's entertainment section. Finally, she got a break. Another story by Thomas Hamilton, originally scheduled to run that Sunday, was postponed because of his accident and inability to complete the final draft, and Graham's feature, which he'd turned in on Tuesday, was substituted. Maddie was prepared to get up at the break of dawn to get the first newspaper, but learned that the Sunday edition was delivered on Saturday around midnight. She didn't mention this to any of the others, and she didn't drive home that weekend. She needed to be in town when the story broke, and she wanted to read it first. By herself. A week had passed since their dinner and performances at Chortles. Only fourteen more days and her year would be up. Maddie tensed: this was her last chance to make something happen.

She glanced at an older woman browsing the magazines. Her hair was dyed the color of cinnamon, and she wore heavy makeup. The skin on her face was taut. Maddie guessed that she was in her mid-fifties with a recent face-lift until she noticed her hands, veined and speckled with brown spots. Sixties? Seventies? Was she an actress still hoping to be discovered? Maddie turned away. She watched the sad parade of pedestrians go by and studied their expressions. All of them lean and forlorn. Was it unfulfilled dreams that left them downtrodden and disappointed? Where did they all come from? Most likely from all over the country—all over the world. Further down the block she could see homeless teens hanging out on the boulevard. Goths uniformly dressed in black looking like mourners gathered for a wake. Their eyes were heavily lined in black, lips painted black on a canvas of chalky-white skin; the only color was a psychedelic profusion of spiked hair. Their appearance seemed like a silent scream. *I'm here! Can't you see me? Doesn't anybody care?*

Maddie's musing ended when an orange paneled truck with the *LA Times* logo roared up Vine Street, its brakes squeaking to a stop. Without realizing it, Maddie held her breath, afraid to hope, fearful that she would jinx any possibility.

Four bundles of newspapers bound with plastic were deposited on the curb, and the truck lurched away. The grizzled vendor pulled out a pocketknife and snipped through the binding of one bundle and began filling the empty newspaper rack.

"Can I buy one of those now?" asked Maddie.

The man took her money, and it disappeared into the gray apron. Maddie's hands trembled as she sorted through the thick paper. A river of advertising slid onto the

sidewalk. She bent over collecting the papers and scrunched them under her arm.

Finally, she opened to the *Calendar* section and saw her own image smiling back at her.

There she was along with the others in a group picture tinted gold, all standing in front of the Belvedere, everyone grinning.

“The cover,” she whispered. Giddiness overwhelmed her. She bobbed up and down on her toes. “We’re on the cover.” She glanced around, extending her arms. The advertisements fell back on the sidewalk. She didn’t notice. “I’m standing on the corner of Hollywood and Vine, and I’m on the cover of *the LA Times*!”

“What’s that?” The vendor sidled over.

Maddie held out the newspaper. “That’s me—and my friends.”

He crinkled his eyes and read aloud. “House of Comedy, Hollywood Building Home to 12 Comics.” He peered at Maddie, “Actress, huh? Don’t recognize ya. What’s your name?”

“Maddie. Maddie Quinn. Wait. I can’t talk now.” She moved closer to the display light, her heart pounding, and thumbed through the first few pages to the beginning of the story. It was a two-page layout, with more photos and a “continued, page 35” at the bottom. “It’s on more than one page.” She closed her eyes a moment. *Please God, let him like us.*

Maddie’s eyes flew over the words. She nodded, murmuring, “Aha, aha, aha. *Funny. Okay. Talented and diverse group. Yes, yes. Living in a sitcom. Right! We’re a hit. We’re a hit. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, God.*”

The vendor was beside her again, holding an armful of newspapers. “How many do you want, lady?”

Chapter 14

The next morning the sun shimmered like a white diamond, and Maddie and Gardell walked four blocks to Denny's Restaurant on Sunset and Gower, better known as Gower Gulch. The corner, right across the street from Columbia Studio, picked up the moniker from the early days of Hollywood when Western movies were so popular. Men dressed in cowboy duds converged on the corner hoping to get a few days work from one of the many low-budget studios in the area. Denny's and the strip mall now located there have perpetuated the lore by flaunting a western façade resembling a film version of Dodge City in the Old West.

The restaurant was crowded with Sunday patrons. Maddie and Gardell assured the hostess they needed the roomier booth in the corner because more friends would be joining them shortly.

The hostess had burgundy eyebrows penciled into half circles, giving her a permanent look of surprise as if she'd seen too many horror films. "That table hasn't been cleaned yet."

Maddie saw a busboy clearing off the dirty dishes. "Doesn't matter, we'll take it."

The hostess managed to raise one of the half circles even higher, then relented and seated them, but neglected to give them any menus.

Maddie slid onto the green vinyl seat and pulled the rolled-up *Calendar* section from her purse. "Something's got to come out of this article, don't you think so?"

“Absolutely. The *LA Times* goes everywhere—all around the world.” He gestured out the window at Sunset Boulevard. “Right now a million people are reading about us.”

Maddie watched the traffic roll by, a golden Hummer clogging the lane, a dingy brown Chevy billowing smoke, and a silver Lincoln Town Car being towed. “Hopefully, it’s someone that can do our careers some good.”

Gardell’s tone became serious. “How much time do you have left?”

“Two weeks and counting.”

“There’s no way you can leave now.” He flicked at the crumbs on the table with his forefinger.

“I know, I know.” She felt her stomach clenching from the mixture of elation and nerves. She was so close. Why hadn’t she thought of contacting the newspaper months ago? What would become of her if she left now? Even if she went home and continued to do comedy, no one was discovered on the road. Everyone *had* to come to LA—even New Yorkers *had* to come to LA. And then there was the matter of money. If she finagled another month, her rent had to be paid, and she had already borrowed from her credit card—she shouldn’t even be eating out this morning. “My finances are tight. If only I’d gotten that aspirin commercial.”

“Can’t you get a couple of one-nighters nearby?”

“Don’t I wish. You know how it is—you’re competing with comics who have done HBO Specials. I was offered two weeks in Texas for \$1200, but I can’t leave town now. Besides, my husband thinks I’m coming home.”

The busboy returned and wiped the table, leaving wet streaks on the surface.

“Can we get menus?” asked Gardell.

“*No comprendo*,” shrugged the busboy.

Alan and Riley strutted in, each cradling a bundle of *LA Times*.

“We took them all,” said Riley, plopping newspapers onto the Formica. “Hey, this table’s still wet.” He grabbed up his newspapers.

“I paid for mine,” said Alan, setting his stack on the seat next to him. “I don’t need any bad karma.”

Maddie pulled a paper napkin from her purse and dried the table. Riley began sorting through the sections, pulling out the *Calendar* segment and discarding the rest on the floor.

The busboy returned and set the table with paper place mats and coffee cups. Amelia and Stu entered the restaurant, and Maddie waved them over.

“No wonder there weren’t any newspapers left,” said Stu, reaching for one of Riley’s.

“That’s for my Mother!”

“How many mothers do you have?” replied Stu.

“There’s my grandmother, my step-mother, my foster-mother—”

“Sorry I asked.” Stu tugged at a copy. “Just let me read it; I’ll give it back.”

Amelia picked up the *Local* section from the discarded papers and slipped into the booth next to Maddie. Covertly, she indicated a story to her: “Actress Raped.” They exchanged somber looks but said nothing.

Alan stopped a waitress carrying a steaming coffeepot, and she asked him, "Refills?"

"We don't even have menus yet," he said.

"I'll be right there," she snapped.

It was nearly ten minutes before she returned with menus and placed them on the edge of the table. She started to turn away, then zeroed in on the *Calendar* cover that Stu held in front of him. She studied the photo: nine of the comedians with big grins, one twirling a yo-yo, posed in front of the Belvedere Apartments. "I know that building." She scanned the group and then the newspaper. "That's you! Or some of you."

"Here's two more," said Gardell, scooting around so Boyd and Dexter could sit down.

"Oh," said the waitress, her eyes wide. "You're actors?"

"Comedians, Millie," said Alan, reading her name tag.

"All comedians?" She picked the menus up and began distributing them.

"Some of us are funnier than others."

Boyd jabbed Alan. "Shut up."

"And you all live in that building with the curly stuff on it?"

"There's twelve of us actually, but only nine are in the picture," said Boyd. "A few people couldn't make it."

"Who's the one with the yo-yo?"

"That's me," Dexter stood up and pulled out a blue fluorescent yo-yo. "This is what I call catching a carp." He worked the yo-yo up and down a couple of times, then

did a version of walking-the-dog, but suddenly jerked the yo-yo up in the air and back into his hand as though hauling in a fish. The trick didn't go unnoticed; people in the restaurant began staring at the group.

"Look, daddy," a little boy pointed, "that man's got a yo-yo."

"He's getting better," said Amelia.

"Here's a new one I'm working on." Once again Dexter propelled the yo-yo up and down. "I call this Elvis in Vegas." With one arm out stretched, he circled his other arm, reminiscent of Elvis' signature move. The yo-yo circled once, skimming the ceiling; on the second rotation, it hit the ceiling. A waitress, unaware of the performance, hurried out of the kitchen carrying an armful of breakfasts. The yo-yo, spiraling out of control, landed splat in a plate of *huevos rancheros* with salsa. Miraculously, she didn't drop it.

"I'm sorry," said Dexter, "I'll pay for that." He lifted off his yo-yo.

Stu pulled him into the booth. "Sit down before you bean somebody."

Millie calmed the other waitress, then turned back to the group. "You don't have any silverware! I'll be right back." She returned a moment later with a tray filled with glasses of water and utensils, smiling. "Can I get your drinks, coffee, orange juice, hot tea?"

"Please," said Maddie, "coffee with cream."

Millie jotted down all the drink orders and said, "Coming right up." Another table tried to get her attention, but she waved them off.

Maddie saw Millie talking to the other waitresses and gesturing at them. “Maybe we should have eaten breakfast at the Polo Lounge.”

Their waitress returned with beverages and two containers of cream. “Can I take your order now?”

“I know what I want,” said Gardell. “Give me the Grand Slam—and can I get all sausage, no bacon?”

“No problem,” said Millie. One by one she took the orders and was back a few minutes later with ketchup, syrup and a caddy of jams.

“I could get used to service like this,” said Stu.

The little boy approached their table holding out the newspaper. “Would you autograph mine?”

“Sure, kid,” said Andy.

The paper was passed around the table and each one of the comics signed it. Several other patrons approached, and soon they were autographing more newspapers, being congratulated and wished good luck with their careers.

Finally, when the last newspaper was signed, Riley put his pen in his pocket. “You’d think we were famous.”

“We are—for a day,” said Amelia.

“Let’s hope someone with some clout reads the story,” said Maddie.

“How can they miss it—it’s the cover of the *LA* fucking *Times*?” said Riley.

Stu examined the newspaper and shook his head. “You can tell this guy is the food critic. Look how he begins the story: ‘Maddie Quinn baked a lush birthday cake

dolloped with whipped cream and topped with a plump cherry and conveyed it up to Boyd Jackson's second floor apartment.'"

"I thought he didn't like cake?" said Riley.

Amelia stirred sugar into her coffee. "He's not stupid. If he says anything against birthday cake, he alienates thousands of readers."

Andy continued, "The kitchen was fragrant with Texas baked beans, corn bread and honey fried chicken seasoned with Gardell Jackson's own special concoction: garlic, oregano, paprika and corn chips."

"Corn chips?" repeated Boyd. "That's your secret ingredient?"

"That was *good* chicken, Bro."

"Thanks," replied Gardell, ignoring Boyd and high-fiving Dexter across the table.

"I like the way he described the building." Amelia took the newspaper from Stu and read: "The Belvedere, one of Hollywood's many vintage apartment buildings with a churriгуeresque façade, boasts a past clientele of legendary tenants including Rudolph Valentino and Johnny Weismuller."

"Churry-go-who?" asked Riley.

"Not who. What. It's churriгуeresque," said Amelia.

"Huh?" said Riley.

"It's that squiggly stuff on the building," explained Gardell.

"Don't you got no culture?" asked Dexter, still cleaning salsa off his yo-yo.

Millie was back, followed by another waitress, each with plates balanced on their arms. She passed out the breakfasts, then smiled. "Let me know if there's anything else." Everyone thanked her.

Andy took a couple of quick bites of his omelet, swallowed, then picked up one of his newspapers. "Listen to this: 'Each comedian brought a unique persona to the stage. Andy Cohen's animated performance and multiple character voices had the audience in stitches.'"

"Mine's better than that," cut in Dexter, reaching for the newspaper. "'Not only was Dexter Cleveland a talented comic, his skill with a yo-yo kept the audience mesmerized.' There's never been a comedian with a yo-yo." Dexter tapped his chest. "I'm the first."

"No, you're not," said Riley. "One of the Smothers Brothers does a yo-yo act."

"But he only does regular tricks. I have my own."

Gardell poured syrup on his pancakes. "We all got good reviews."

Stu frowned. "Not Brenda."

Boyd read the excerpt: "Brenda Hoo, a young woman filled with angst, wasn't as polished as the others. Finally, she managed to get a few laughs at the expense of a heckler in the audience."

"I knew we shouldn't have included her," said Riley. "She's the only negative part in the whole article."

"It adds drama." Amelia gestured with a piece of buttered toast. "Besides, it proves that old adage, dying is easy, comedy is hard."

“Yes, but she could have ruined it for us if Willoughby had felt more protective towards Lola,” said Stu.

“At least Brenda’s not in the photo. Boy, was she mad about that!” said Riley in a nasty chuckle.

“Not our fault if she wasn’t home,” said Gardell.

“I don’t think he’s gay,” said Boyd.

“Duh!” said Andy. “You just figure that out?”

“Did she spent the night with him?” asked Stu.

“I’d bet money on it,” said Boyd. “She zeroed in on him and practically rubbed her hands together.”

Maddie sipped her coffee and set the cup down. “Lola may have done us a favor and put him in a good mood.”

The others considered this for a moment then Gardell pointed out the window. “Look who’s coming.”

Outside, Cleo Burr, closely followed by Tinkerbell and Clark Gable, hurried along looking determined, as though she were collecting Boyd’s rent check. She came into the restaurant and perused the room until she located the comics, then came towards them. “Your phone’s been ringing off the hook,” Cleo said to Maddie. And I’ve been getting calls, too.”

A little girl in the booth across the aisle pointed. “Look at the puppies, daddy.”

“Who’s calling?” asked Maddie.

“Some Hollywood bigwigs—producers, people like that.”

“Why are they calling you?” asked Stu.

Cleo raised her chin. “I *am* the manager of the Belvedere Apartments.”

“Is the Belvedere listed in the phonebook?” asked Maddie.

“It certainly is,” replied Cleo.

The manager of Denny’s, a young man with a narrow mustache, approached Cleo.

“Ma’am, there’s no dogs allowed in the restaurant, unless they’re seeing-eye dogs.”

“Keep your smudgy tie on, Bucky,” said Cleo. “I’m just leaving.”

The manager peered down at his tie and wiped at a mustard smear, and Cleo raised her chin and walked out, followed by the dogs.

“Let me out,” said Maddie, grabbing her purse and her copy of the *Calendar*.

“Hang on, Cleo, I’m coming with you.”

Chapter 15

Before noon on Monday Maddie set a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a bowl of strawberries on the coffee table in front of Stuart, Gardell and Amelia. They met in Maddie's apartment to discuss the outcome of the news story.

"Where's the others?" asked Stuart.

"Everyone's gone except for Boyd and Andy," said Gardell. "Those lazy bums are probably just rolling out of bed."

Raised voices quarreled outside in the hallway. "That's them," said Stuart.

"You're so full of bullshit, your heart pumps piss," Boyd said to Andy.

Maddie opened the door and looked from one to the other. "What's going on?"

"Sorry," they mumbled and shuffled in and sat down.

"Ignore those two," said Stu. "They're always arguing."

Maddie picked up her yellow legal tablet, dragged over the chair from her desk and sat down. "As you know, yesterday I got a slew of phone calls."

"Me too," said Andy, "from comics who want to rent an apartment in the building. I told them there's no openings."

"I got calls, too," said Amelia. "Some people seemed happy for me, and others wanted to know how we got the story in the paper. Les Watkins lives in a house with five comics and says they've talked about the possibilities of doing an HBO special called *Five Funny Guys*."

“Forget it,” said Gardell. “We’ve got them outnumbered—or should I say, Watkins is ‘Less.’”

Stu smirked, “And they’re ‘Less’ funny.”

“That’s so punny,” said Andy.

Maddie grinned at Amelia like a tolerant mother and shook her head. “Anyway, I also followed up on the calls Cleo received.” She glanced down at the yellow tablet. “A wannabe TV writer from UCLA would like to collaborate with us on writing a sitcom.”

“Who needs him,” said Andy. “We could write our own sitcom.”

This was greeted with, “Yes!” “Yeah,” and “That’s right.”

“Okay,” said Maddie. “One woman wants to hire one of us to entertain at her father’s 92nd birthday party.”

“What are they paying?” asked Boyd.

“I don’t know,” said Maddie. “They just left the message.” She glanced back at her notes. “Two fellows, Abe and Murray Horowitz, cousins I think, want to meet with us.” She looked up. “In the 70s they produced a sci-fi film called *Space People*.”

“Never heard of it,” said Stu.

“I saw it,” said Andy, between crunches on a cookie. “It was campy.”

“And we got a call from Geoffrey Fieldname Productions.” Maddie looked from one to the other. “Has anyone ever heard of them?”

No one had.

Maddie retrieved a heavy, spiral bound book from her desk. “I checked the *Blue Book*, and Geoffrey Feldman Productions is listed in there. They produce TV movies.”

“So they’re legit?” Gardell took the book and opened it to a page marked with a paperclip.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I’ve even heard of some of their films—like that one about the woman with artificial legs that climbed Mount Kilimanjaro?”

“*One Step at a Time*,” said Amelia reaching for a strawberry.

“That’s it.”

“Do they want to make a movie about us?” asked Boyd.

“Yeah,” Andy’s eyes gleamed, “and then they could spin it off into a sitcom!”

Stu crossed his arms. “So if you set up a meeting, who goes?”

“All of us, don’t you think so?” Maddie regarded each one: Andy, in a rumpled flannel shirt and jeans, looking like a Jewish Jack Kerouac; Boyd, in sweatpants and a comedy club T-shirt that said, “LAUGH IT UP AT GUFFAWS, Kansas City, Kansas;” Stu, neat as ever in his preppy slacks and a polo shirt; Amelia, sweet and feminine in a loose-fitting flowered dress; and Gardell, in a Laker jersey and cargo pants with deep pockets down the legs. “We want them to see the variety and diversity of the group.”

“Strength in numbers,” said Gardell.

Stu frowned. “But not Brenda.”

“Don’t worry about her,” Boyd reached for a second cookie. “She’s doing extra work all week on *90210*.”

“And not Lola.” Gardell glared at Boyd.

“I don’t think we have to worry about her,” replied Boyd. “She’s auditioning for the *Playboy* feature—*Women in Comedy*.”

“Figures,” said Andy.

Amelia smoothed her fingernails. “How appropriate.”

Gardell crossed his arms. “What if they want the idea but don’t want us.”

“They can’t have the idea without taking us,” said Maddie.

“Yes, you have to stand tough like Rocky,” said Andy.

“You mean Sly Stallone,” corrected Maddie.

“Yeah,” Andy nodded. “They wanted to buy the picture and have Ryan O’Neal play Rocky. Stallone didn’t have a dime, and they offered him a truckload of money.” Andy stood up and began jabbing and weaving at an imaginary opponent then he threw one knockout blow. “But he stood his ground and said, ‘NO.’”

“Wish we had an agent representing us,” said Gardell, cracking his knuckles.

“Wait a minute.” Maddie fixed her eyes on him. “We should take an agent with us!”

“Great idea!” said Stu, imitating her enthusiasm, then looking somber. “Except none of us have theatrical agents— except for Amelia.”

Everyone turned to Amelia. “Want me to call him?”

Gardell cocked his head. “Has he ever negotiated a movie contract?”

“Unlikely,” said Amelia.

Maddie gazed at a poster on her wall, *The Chronology of World Theater* that started in Greece. “But maybe we could use this as leverage to get an uberagent.”

“A what?” asked Boyd.

“The point guard, the quarterback, the George Steinbrenner,” said Gardell. “The one that calls the shots.”

“Thanks, Dizzy Dean,” said Andy.

Stu wiped a few cookie crumbs from his pants. “He means a super agent.”

“I knew that,” said Boyd.

“Why don’t I call William Morris or ICM or ITA?” said Maddie. “I might as well start with the big boys.”

“Now you’re talking,” said Gardell.

“I’ll make some calls this afternoon—see what I can do,” said Maddie. “And everyone get me some of your photos and resumes and a video. I’ll dub our performances onto one tape and take it with me.

“I’ll get you mine now, then I have to get ready for an audition this afternoon.” Amelia stood up. “Hope something comes out of this.”

“Got that right,” said Andy.

Gardell snagged the last cookie. “How can they resist us?”

“Okay.” Maddie got up and scribbled on her yellow tablet. “Here’s the plan. I’ll wait to call Geoffrey Feldman Productions back until after I get us an uberagent—or at least someone from one of the better agencies—to go with us.”

“What about you, Maddie?” Stu carried his chair back to the kitchen. “I mean your situation—can you hang around town a little longer?”

Maddie turned away. “I haven’t talked to my husband yet.”

“Has he seen the story?”

“No.”

“You’ve got to tell him about it,” said Amelia.

“Yeah, he can’t make you go home now,” said Gardell.

“Yeah, stay here with us.” Andy put his arm around her and rested his head on Maddie’s shoulder. “We’ll be the Lost Boys, and you can be our mother and read us bedtime stories and bake us cookies.”

“And Amelia can be Tinkerbell, no we’ve got a Tinkerbell—you could be Wendy.” Boyd flicked his brows lasciviously and slipped his arm around Amelia.

“Wendy was the mother, idiot,” said Andy.

“Let go,” laughed Maddie.

“Get away from me, you pervert,” said Amelia. “I have an audition.”

“But you’re not going home?” Stu said to Maddie.

“No, I’m not going home.”

“What about your rent?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“We can help—chip in if you need it.”

“No, no, it’s covered,” lied Maddie.

The group got up to leave and Andy came over to Maddie. “I want you to come and see my pigeons.”

“Not today. I’ve got so much on my mind.”

“What if we talk about them in the interview? You’re the only one that’s never seen them.”

“Maybe that’s an angle?”

He gave her his lost puppy-dog look.

“Okay. I’ll come.”

He caught her by the hand. “Come now. I’m just about to feed them.”

Chapter 16

After reaching the third floor, the three climbed the last section of stairs to the rooftop.

“Are you okay?” Amelia looked over her shoulder at Maddie.

Maddie calmed herself with slow deep breaths. “As long as we’re not hanging off the edge.”

“Only the pigeons are allowed to do that,” said Andy, grinning. “Don’t worry, the coop’s in the middle of the roof.”

“Amelia, go get ready for your audition. I’m fine.”

“That’s all right,” she said looking concerned. “We’ve got time, and I haven’t seen the pigeons for awhile.”

Andy pushed open the door, and a shaft of sunlight hit them. The two women followed him outside, past a skylight. Around the perimeter of the roof there was a ridge about a foot high. A couple of feet from it, placed intermittently, were metal exhaust chimneys for the stoves and gas heaters from the apartments below.

At the front of the building Maddie saw the fronds of towering palm trees and beyond the HOLLYWOOD sign, the view as scenic as a postcard. On one side was another apartment building, a boxy-stucco structure only two-stories high, occupied by Spanish-speaking tenants. On the other side was a strip of parking along the building and across the street and below the freeway.

Maddie could hear the steady drone of cars but avoided looking in that direction. She kept her eyes on the pigeon coop. It was the size of a large antique chifferobe and painted red and white. It had a slanted roof with green shingles and two large doors that stood open over a screen. There were a dozen shelves juxtaposed at the top, most of them occupied by nesting pigeons. "How did you ever get permission for this?"

"Turns out the owner, Mr. Revello, raised pigeons when he was a kid in Brooklyn." Andy opened the coop and lifted out a bowl of water. "When he drops by, he always comes up on the roof to see the pigeons. He gave me the pure white ones."

"You keep this pigeon coop neater than your apartment," said Amelia.

"My mother always cleaned my room, but the deal was if I wanted to raise pigeons, I had to clean up after them." Andy rolled up the newspaper at the bottom of the cage and replaced it with clean paper. "Just got in the habit, I guess."

"What do you feed them?" asked Maddie

"Seeds, millet, cooked rice, grated carrots, mixed with a little gravel."

"Gravel?"

"It's good for their digestion." He refilled the water bowl from a plastic jug stored under the coop. "Funny, my grandmother used to say, 'You gotta eat a peck of dirt before you die.' Maybe pigeon's aren't that different from people."

"Who takes care of them when you're on the road? Brenda?"

"No way," grimaced Andy. "Stu does it. He's gotten pretty friendly with them, too."

"How many are there now?" asked Amelia.

“Sixteen, eight pairs.”

Maddie studied the pigeons. “They’re pretty colors, some are iridescent like mother of pearl.”

“Look at those two,” pointed Amelia. “They have white feathers on their feet.”

“They call those stockings,” said Andy. “I just got them a couple of months ago.”

Maddie whistled softly at the birds, and they glanced at her. “So how often do you let them out of the cage?”

“Nearly every day.”

“And they always come back?” asked Amelia.

“Yep.”

“So what keeps them from flying off?”

“Oh, take these new pigeons, Fred and Ginger. I kept them locked up the first two weeks after I brought them home, and I spoiled them with lots of treats like grated apples and nuts. The first time I released them it was just before sunset, and they were hungry because I hadn’t fed them yet. Pigeons don’t like to fly at night, so they don’t go far. About 40 minutes later when Fred and Ginger came back, I had food set out for them. I followed that routine for the next two weeks. Now it doesn’t matter what time of day I let them out, they always return.”

“Look, there’s eggs in that nest,” said Maddie.

“That’s George and Gracie.”

“Hi Georgie. Hi Gracie.” Amelia made cooing sounds. “Aren’t pigeons monogamous?”

“Yes, just like swans. They mate for life, unless one dies.”

Amelia glanced at Andy. “Men could learn from pigeons.”

“And some people eat pigeons? Squab,” said Maddie.

“Sshhhhh.” Andy put his finger to his lips.

“Sorry. Don’t worry, it doesn’t appeal to me.”

“What’s it taste like?” asked Amelia with a mischievous smile.

“Tastes like chicken,” said Maddie and Amelia together.

“Very funny,” said Andy.

Maddie examined the door at the lowest part of the coop. “Why did you put the opening down there? Seems inconvenient.”

“Pigeons instinctively make their nests up high, so it gives that illusion,” said Andy.

He stuck his hand in the opening. “Come on Alfalfa. Come on Darla.” The birds hesitated, then one flew to the opening followed by the other and they toddled out. Andy placed a sunflower seed on each of his shoulders and beckoned. “Come on!” The birds flew to his shoulders and enjoyed the treat. Several more birds vacated the cage and flew to Andy’s arms and shoulders, each rewarded with a sunflower seed. One hopped on his head. “What do you think?”

“You’ve got them well trained.”

“I wonder if I could work them into the act?”

“It would be different.” Amelia cocked her head.

“Yeah, but too much like a magician.”

“Probably.”

The door to the stairway opened. “What are you doing?” called Stu.

Two of the pigeons flew from Andy to Stu, and he fed them pumpkinseeds.

“Come back, you traitors,” called Andy.

Maddie noticed that fastidious Stu had changed into an old shirt and pants. One by one all of the pigeons left Andy and alighted on Stu. One hopped on his head.

“Not in the hair,” said Stu, placing his hand up so the bird would get on it.

“Boy, they’re friendly,” said Amelia. “Put one on my shoulder.”

“You’ve got to have a reward.” Andy handed her a handful of sunflower seeds.

“You want some?” Andy asked Maddie.

“No, I’ll just watch you three.”

Several more of the pigeons ventured out.

Stu came towards them, arms outstretched, a row of pigeons on each side.

“Too bad they couldn’t just pick you up and fly you around,” said Maddie.

Stu smiled at her comment and said, “I’ve got us both ten-minute spots at the Comedy Store tonight.”

“You’re kidding!” said Maddie. “How did you manage that?”

“They saw the article,” said Stu. “They only pay \$15, but it’s stage time in town.”

“Great, thanks, what time should I be ready?”

“I’ll pick you up at nine.”

Chapter 17

With three separate stages, the Comedy Store in West Hollywood was the largest comedy club in LA. The exterior was painted charcoal and decorated with hundreds of comedians' autographs scrolled in white. Maddie accompanied Stu through the side entrance, along the passages painted black. It had been a long time since she performed there, and she felt the lingering presence of Hollywood history. The place was built in the Thirties, and for over twenty-years, it was *Ciro's*, the swankiest nightclub on Sunset Strip. Celebrities like Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Ava Gardner and Frank Sinatra flocked there to see Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. She imagined its elegant baroque interior and plush banquettes. Then there were management problems and new owners. In the Sixties the street scene changed radically and *Ciro's* popularity faded. It was renovated into a rock 'n' roll club, and for a while bands like The Byrds and The Doors played there until the police set strict curfews for underage teens, and the club closed. It didn't become the Comedy Store until 1972.

Stu led the way upstairs past the Belly Room. "We're on in the Main Room, but let's go see who's up in the Original Room."

"Okay." Maddie followed him up through the inner stairways that connected one showroom to another until they arrived at the back entrance to the Original Room. Several comics stood in the doorway watching the performance.

Tani Augustine smiled in recognition, said hi and asked her, “How did you get that story in the paper?”

“Just lucky,” said Maddie.

“That’s going to really boost your career.”

“Maybe.” Maddie stepped back from the others and urged Tani closer. “Did you see that other story in the paper, the one about the actress who was raped?”

“I heard about it on *Entertainment Tonight*.”

“You haven’t seen Roxanne Cooper around since the...?” Maddie’s voice trailed off.

“I’m not sure she’s still in town.”

“Poor Roxanne.”

“I was nearly date raped,” said Tani.

Maddie eyes widened.

“I was with this comic. We were in his car kissing, and it was getting pretty heavy.” She looked at the black wall, as though seeing the experience unfold. “I wanted to stop and said so, but he got ugly. I was afraid, so....” She took a deep breath. “Maybe it was my fault.”

“It wasn’t *your* fault!” Stu had drifted up behind them and heard the last part of Tani’s story. “If you said ‘No,’ it’s ‘NO.’ A woman has the right to say ‘stop’ at any point.”

“Yes, but I got him really excited and ...”

“Are you listening, girl?”

“Yes, but ...”

“Men are always getting excited,” said Stu. “That doesn’t give them the right.”

Maddie touched Stu’s arm. “If only more men were like you.”

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Maddie had never performed in the Main Room of the Comedy Store. Even since Sam Kinison became entrenched in the club, the crowds were often unruly and eager for outlandish performances, so she avoided the club.

When it came time to perform, she received a glowing introduction with reference to the *LA Times* article and in spite of her apprehension, performed her G-rated material:

“There’s three signals you’ve been around small children too long. You have diaper bags that match your outfits. You start snapping your fingers and singing ‘Itsy Bitsy Spider.’ You have company for dinner and ask if they’d like a glass of wa-wa.... Still, you have to enjoy your children when they’re young because before you know it you have ‘teenagers.’ Teens go through what I call that dinosaur syndrome—where they look grown up, but the brain hasn’t caught up with the rest of the body. And I think God intentionally makes teenagers obnoxious, so when they leave home, you don’t feel so bad.”

Surprisingly, the young crowd howled at her jokes about teens, and Maddie finished with a big applause. Stu followed her on stage and performed equally well.

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It was after one o'clock by the time they strolled out of the Comedy Store.

"Remember the week we worked together in Sacramento?" asked Stu.

"At Giggles," said Maddie. She scanned the array of elegant boutiques and trendy nightspots that sparkled like silver. Sleek cars purred by, and enormous billboards overlooked the Sunset Strip. What a rush to have your picture on one of those.

"And the owner, what's his name?"

"Fletcher."

"That's right, Ned Fletcher—thought he was *so* funny. Always warned us not to go too long, especially on weekends when we had two shows."

Maddie nodded. "Then he'd go on stage and do a twenty-minute intro—"

"With jokes he'd stolen from the comics that had been there the week before."

"I remember," said Maddie laughing and wagging her head.

They turned south and began walking down Sunset towards Stu's car. The temperature was still in the 70s, but a coastal breeze refreshed and softened the heat of the day.

"Did you ever think we'd be here in Hollywood?" He spread out his arms.

"Actually performing?"

"Only in my dreams." She watched a red Porsche pull into the parking lot of the Hyatt Hotel. A valet in a gold vest rushed forward and opened the door. Maddie gazed up at the white structure. "The Rock and Roll Hotel. Bet this place has the stories."

"The Riot Hyatt," said Stu.

"Wonder if there's anyone famous staying here now." They both peered through the glass doors into the lobby.

"Probably." Stu pointed up to the top floor. "Did you know that Jim Morrison hung out of a window here?"

"He *was* crazy."

"I forgot you don't like heights." He fixed his eyes on her. "I was surprised to see you up on the roof looking at Andy's pigeons today."

"I can handle it," said Maddie, "as long as I don't wander over to the edge and look straight down."

Just beyond the hotel, a hitchhiker stood at the curb. He held up a cardboard sign: "Need a ride to Hollywood."

"Oh, brother," mumbled Maddie, edging away from the curb, but to her surprise Stu approached the man.

"Hey, pal," said Stu. "This is West Hollywood. If you want to go back to Hollywood, you should be on the other side of the street."

"Yes," replied the hitchhiker, stepping closer to Stu. "I want to go to Hollywood." His eyes were piercing and needy, like those of a wild animal that hadn't been fed. "I want to be a movie star. I'm hoping that a director picks me up and puts me in a movie."

His clothes were rumpled and he needed a shave. Maddie suspected that everything he owned was in the canvas tote bag at his feet.

Stu chuckled. "Right. But if you want to go to Hollywood you should cross the street." Stu pointed up the boulevard. "This direction takes you to Beverly Hills."

Maddie moved on and Stu caught up to her. "Those kind of people make me crazy," she said.

"Why?"

"Because they're tragedies waiting to happen. Here you and I have been busting our butts doing comedy for how many years? Seven."

"Nine for me," said Stu.

"Working the joints, doing the open mikes, until you've put together an act and can finally get booked, and these *nitwits* think they can show up in Hollywood and they'll magically be transformed into movie stars."

"They've seen too many films."

"I see these saps all over town." Maddie swept her arms in front of her. "Last week some sad, fat girl about 17 showed up at Jokers—came all the way from Michigan—got in a fight with her mother, withdrew all the money that she saved working two years at Kentucky Fried Chicken and paid an exorbitant amount for a one-way ticket to LA. She'd never been on a comedy stage in her life, but her friends think that she's funny. 'All I need is a chance,'" mimicked Maddie. "No high school diploma. Never had an acting lesson. Never even carried a spear in a high school play. She had been sitting in front of the club all day, waiting for it to open."

"Did she get a spot?"

"Hell, no."

Chapter 18

The following morning, Day 12, Maddie rose early and prepared for her attacks on the agencies. Armed with copies of the newspaper article, a pile of resumes, photos, and videotapes with everyone's performance, she entered the William Morris offices in Beverly Hills.

A blond, bone-thin receptionist in a cream-colored Chanel suit that revealed most of her thighs sat behind a glass table. Her well-manicured nails were like vulture's talons painted blood red. In a snippy tone, she said, "Can I help you?"

After Maddie's explanation, Miss Talons told her there was no possibility of an appointment without a referral, but she accepted a packet and said she'd pass it along.

At ICM the receptionist was a young man in a peach-colored shirt, white silk tie and gray slacks. His nose job was so high in the air he could have been trying to prevent a nosebleed. This time Maddie introduced herself and presented the situation with more enthusiasm. Raising one disdainful brow he glanced at the newspaper article then denied her an appointment but took the packet.

Maddie gripped the steering wheel and drove to the third location. The anticipation of carrying on a witty conversation in an agent's office was fading, and she tried to conjure up a new strategy—how to get past the receptionist. Somewhere she had read that Gene Roddenberry, an LA policeman at the time, dressed in full regalia including storm-trooper motorcycle boots, marched into Romanoff's Restaurant in Beverly Hills like he was the Gestapo and handed a frightened Irving Lazar his script.

“Read this,” ordered Roddenberry. The legendary literary agent, better known as “Swiftly”, sold Roddenberry’s work, opening the doors for the future creator of *Star Trek*.

But Maddie wasn’t a police officer.

On the sidewalk in front of International Talent Agency, a glowing sun beamed down, dazzling colors motored past, and stunning darlings in pastels glided by. Only Maddie was oblivious to her surroundings, agonizing over how to approach ITA, the third agency of the day. So far she’d struck out twice.

Abruptly she veered away from the front door, past ITA, not stopping until she reached the end of the block. Surprisingly, the place was not the slick office building that she had expected. The one-story redbrick structure had wide picture windows, resembling a quaint store. Maddie walked back and hesitated at the entrance. She studied her reflection in the glass door and tried to bolster her confidence: hair shiny and in place; makeup neat, but not overdone; clothes attractive, but not too sexy. She opened the door.

Inside, Maddie was greeted a trickling waterfall surrounded by ferns. The space was long and spacious like a loft. Instead of individual offices, each elegant walnut desk and attending chairs sat on an oriental carpet. The areas were separated by rows of ficus trees and potted plants, providing a forestal quality. Maddie forgot her nervousness and commented to the receptionist. “This is different.”

“It used to be a florist shop,” said the young woman. “The owner visited the building before the previous tenants moved out and liked the plants so much, he decided

to make it part of the decor. People still drop by occasionally hoping to buy a dozen roses.”

“Very nice.”

“I think so, too,” agreed the girl, “except for the snakes.”

“Snakes?”

“They’re in those two aquariums.” She gestured. “You can take a closer look if you like.”

“What kind are they?” Maddie took small steps towards the large aquariums near the waterfall.

“Pythons.”

“Interesting.” Her comic mind went to work. *Why don't snakes bite agents? Professional courtesy. Why did God make snakes just before agents? For practice.* But wisely she resisted the urge to voice them.

“They have to keep them separated, or the pythons will eat each other.”

“Goodness,” said Maddie. *Why do agents have their own offices? To keep them from devouring each other.*

“The other aquariums have tropical fish. I feed the fish, but I refuse to feed the pythons.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Maddie.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, not really, but maybe you can help me.”

“Sure.”

Maddie was surprised at her friendliness but didn't question it. She took out a copy of the story from the *LA Times*. "By any chance did you see this story?"

"Wow! Yes. Hey, that's you. I should have recognized you." She snapped her fingers, trying to come up with a name.

"Maddie Quinn," volunteered Maddie.

She held out her hand. "I'm Trudy. Yes, the apartment building with twelve comedians, right?"

"That's right. See, we've been getting a lot of calls from people in the industry interested in spinning this into a film or sitcom." Maddie knew she was exaggerating, but she realized more and more that this was a bullshit business. "In fact, we're supposed to meet with Geoffrey Feldman Productions."

"Really," said Trudy, looking impressed.

"You've heard of them?" asked Maddie.

"No, I'm new," admitted Trudy. "The regular receptionist is having surgery." She lowered her voice. "A face lift and a tummy tuck."

"Ahh." That explains her friendliness thought Maddie. Usually, these agencies had dragon ladies on duty, monitoring everyone that came in. "They make TV movies like *One Step at a Time*."

"I loved that movie!"

"We're going to meet with them, but we thought it would be smart to take our own representation. So I came here to see if I could find an agent interested in representing us."

“Oh, that’s a good idea.”

“What I need to know is which one of these agents would be best? I want someone ambitious, but with clout and experience, and someone open to accepting new talent.”

“Yes. Let me see.” Trudy perused the agents behind her. She said softly and confidentially. “I’ve only been here a couple of weeks, but let me warn you, you definitely do not want Harry. He’ll take you to lunch. Promise you the moon and try to take you to bed. *And* that’s all the action you’ll ever get from him.”

Maddie followed Trudy’s gaze. The infamous Harry sat on the edge of his desk, leering at a young woman, seated in a chair below him. All the while he peered down her blouse like a predator waiting to pounce.

Trudy covered her lips with three fingers as though someone there was capable of lip-reading. “He was accused of rape, but before it went to trial, the girl dropped the charges.”

“What a pervert,” Maddie said coldly.

“I just found out about it from one of our female agents. She handles children.” Trudy scanned the dozen desks. “Oh, Eric Demsky. He’s our newest agent. He came from William Morris—and did *not* leave on happy terms. I think he’s out to prove they made a big mistake letting him go.”

“He’s hungry,” said Maddie.

“Famished.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Trudy phoned Eric from her desk. Maddie watched the young man in a dark Armani suit, attire *de rigueur* for entertainment agents, pick up the receiver. A few minutes later she sat across from him, explaining the situation.

"I read the story," he nodded, opening up the copy of the newspaper story she gave him. "Incredible publicity. That's you in the middle—nice placement. So you're the Mom that bakes birthday cakes."

Maddie smiled. "I'm Mom at home, and sometimes I feel like Mom here, too."

"That works." He shuffled through the photos and resumes. "Okay, go ahead and set up the appointment at Feldman's, and I'll go with you." He picked up the videotape. "I'll look at this and also make a few calls and see what I can arrange."

"Thank you," said Maddie.

"Can I keep this?" He held up the newspaper.

"Of course."

Maddie knew it was a cliché, but still when she walked out, she felt a floating sensation like a buoy skimming on top of a tropical sea. One young darling strolling along in a yellow mini-skirt and halter-top noticed her exiting the ITC, and Maddie was certain she saw admiration and then her eyes narrow into envy. Maddie felt smug. All right, nothing was confirmed, but in the year, this was the closest she'd come to reaching the summit of success. She arrived at her car and remembered her Bret. A sinking sensation overtook her. Her time was running out, and he expected her to move back home. She unlocked the door and removed the aluminum sunscreen from across her windshield, folded it and tossed it in the backseat. She needed to talk to him—explain

how circumstances had changed. She would have to call him once she got back to the apartment. No. She had to speak to him in person.

Chapter 19

The street, lined with sycamore trees, was quiet when Maddie pulled into the driveway of her home. She retrieved the garage door opener buried in the glove compartment, aimed and pressed. As the door clattered open, she checked the dashboard clock, one a.m., five hours and sixteen minutes to get home. Fourteen minutes faster than usual. She had considered flying, but she would have had to pay premium fares since she hadn't bought tickets in advance. Moreover, she didn't mind the drive. Knowing she would be commuting weekly, she made friends with the long trek on Highway 5, the straight-flat thoroughfare with its monotonous scenery, bleak flatlands on one side and yellowish-brown mountain ranges on the other side. After a while, she found pleasure in her routine. First she'd buy a package of Pep-O-Mint Lifesavers and a large coffee, which was held in a cup holder hooked on the door. Then she set the cruise control and listened to a book on tape during the drive. Her favorites were mysteries: Agatha Christie, Riley Lee Burke, Carl Hiaasen. Sometimes she became so engaged in a story she regretted reaching her destination. Only, this trip she couldn't concentrate on Christie's *The Bertrand Hotel*. She kept rewinding the tape and listening to the same chapters over and over. Each time her thoughts wandered to the conversation she would have with her husband, anticipating what she would say to him and his response. Finally, she popped out the cassette tape and switched to music on the radio. Her coffee grew cold, and she didn't notice when stations faded in and out as she drove past one area to another.

Once inside the house, she climbed the stairs softly.

"Is that you, Honey?" called her husband.

"Yes." She entered the bedroom, and the light from the hallway sliced into the bedroom.

"I'm glad," he said, shading his eyes with the back of his hand. "I was just dreaming about you."

"I'm really an illusion." She smiled at his handsome face, his hair ruffled from sleep, and felt a warm rush, suddenly realizing how much she missed him. The bed creaked when she sat down on his side, and he pulled her into his arms.

"Are you home for good now?"

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In the kitchen early the next morning at the pedestal table, they sat across from each other. Bret picked up the *LA Times* article and began reading it. Maddie bounced her knee quietly and watched for a reaction. Too nervous to sit, she got up and cleared away their plates, sticky with syrup and crumbs from the French toast she had made.

He finished reading and fixed his eyes on her. "What does this mean?"

"I don't know. It's only been a few days, but we're getting a lot of attention. Producers are actually calling us." She poured them both more coffee.

"What kind of producers?"

“TV, movie and now an agent from an important agency is going to represent us at a meeting with one of the production companies.”

“And ...?”

Maddie raised her shoulders in uncertainty. “It could be the break I need—a movie or a sitcom even.”

“But there’s no guarantee?”

“Right, there’s no guarantee.”

“We had a deal—one year.”

“I know.”

“What if I said I want you to come home?”

“I still have eight days.”

“And you don’t want to leave, do you?”

“No. I don’t.”

“But what if I insist that you have to choose?”

Her shoulders slumped, and she studied his face, cognizant of how much more difficult it was for him to remain home while she was in LA, consumed with pursuing her career and luxuriating in the titillation of Hollywood: celebrities dropping by the clubs, VIP passes to TV shows when friends made appearances, and occasionally, invitations to parties in lavish homes. Only now, instead of being on the edge she had a chance to move to the inner circle and accomplish this crazy fantasy that she’d had ever since she first laughed at Lucille Ball in the Vita-meata-vege-min scene asking, “Do you poop out at parties?” How could she relinquish this opportunity? Lightning never strikes twice in

the same place. But success without him? She glanced at the decorative counter tiles that they had installed together, pictures of a variety of fruits: apples, grapes, bananas. She didn't even want to contemplate life without him. "I'd choose you, ...but I'd resent it."

He sighed. "I miss you when you're gone—and you didn't even come home last weekend."

"That's when the article came out."

He gazed down at the clipping, and Maddie could see there was a drop of syrup on the photo, obliterating Andy's face.

"I don't suppose they're paying you anything?"

"No, not yet."

"Are you making ends meet?" he asked.

"I'm getting by." She dare not tell him the truth—she'd have to get more money from her credit card.

He got up, left the kitchen and returned a moment later with an envelope and set it in front of her.

Maddie read the return address, 'VISA Card Services' and felt a sharp alarm, then anger. "That's my mail."

"I opened it by mistake."

She covered her face with her hands and rubbed her palms over her cheeks and forehead before answering. "I can explain about that." Maddie talked about the need to

stay in town the past few months, about avoiding roadwork and the difficulty of booking gigs nearby.

He tilted his head and looked into her eyes. “Do you need money?”

“No, that wasn’t the bargain—and I’ll pay this back later. It’s not that much.”

He gazed out the sliding glass door where a row of terracotta pots filled with pink geraniums lined the edge of the deck then looked back at her. “So how much longer do you need to be down there?”

“It’s hard to say—a few more months at least, and then if it works out—”

“You’ll be gone even more.”

“But I’ll be a success, and there will be money. We could buy a place in LA even. Michele will be off to college soon. Maybe you could get a transfer.”

He smiled half-heartedly. “Maybe I could take early retirement?”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?”

He shook his head. “My brother says I’m crazy to go along with this.”

“Who’s he to talk? He’s been married four times. Besides, did you tell him that you suggested I go and try?”

“I didn’t want you to feel trapped here.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’ve always loved my personal life, our relationship, raising the children. But some days I’m divided in two. Part of me has this drive, this burning desire to succeed. At times I feel it’s a blessing and a curse. It would be so much simpler to stay at home. Then I think about how bored and miserable I’d be.” She rested her elbows on the table and leaned into clenched hands. “I don’t mean to be selfish.”

“My sister admires you. She says most people don’t have the courage to follow their bliss. They’re too afraid of failing.”

“Well, if there’s one thing I’ve learned in show business, it’s ‘no does not mean never.’ There’s no such thing as failing, only quitting.”

He leaned back in the chair, folded his arms, shook his head and smiled in admiration. Suddenly his posture became rigid. “That’s not all. I worry about you—there are a lot of wackos down there. It’s dangerous.”

“I’m careful.” In her mind she flashed on the rapes in the area, but hoped that she didn’t convey her apprehension to him. “What’s more, I’ve made good friends in the Belvedere. We look out for each other. You know Stu, remember, we worked together in Sacramento—he’s right across the hall.” Bret had come to Sacramento and spent the weekend with her in the “comedy condo,” the comedians’ nickname for the condominium provided for them by the club. “And you’ve met Gardell and Riley. Besides, Cleo guards the building like the Marines.”

“Be sure those guys don’t get any funny ideas about you.”

“No chance. The more men I meet, the more I appreciate you.” She came over and settled on his lap, kissing his forehead. “You’re the only one for me.”

He locked his arms around her. “And don’t forget it.”

Chapter 20

Maddie arrived back in LA just as the afternoon traffic began clogging the freeways. When she reached the San Fernando Valley, it came to a complete standstill. Clicking on the radio, she heard there had been a five-car collision including a postal van and a bakery truck. The bakery truck was on its side and boxes of pastries, cakes, pies, cookies, and doughnuts were spread across the lanes. The DJ joked, "Better find an alternate route—the cops will be there for hours filling out reports if there's doughnuts." Maddie chuckled even though cops and doughnuts was a stock joke and considered, it had been a long time since she ate a doughnut. Hmm, a jelly doughnut filled with lemon meringue. Ugh, too greasy. Finally, she was able to pull off at Laurel Canyon Boulevard and to take city streets to Hollywood.

Inside her apartment she saw the green light on her answering machine flashing. On closer inspection, she saw there were fourteen messages. Excitement pulsed through her. She quickly unhitched her purse from her shoulder, dropped it on the floor and hit the playback button. The machine whirled, and she sat down, reaching for a pad and pen. The first five calls were from people in the building.

"Maddie, I just put on a fresh pot of coffee; if you have time, come over and have a cup."

"Good old Cleo," said Maddie.

Beep.

“Hey, girl.” She recognized Gardell’s Louisiana drawl. “Do you want to go to breakfast with us? My treat. We’re leaving in about 10 minutes.”

Beep.

“Maddie, this is Amelia. I need your opinion. It’s about Ishmael. And I’m having a hair crisis about tomorrow night—you’re going with me to the *Tonight Show*, right? Call me.”

Beep.

“This is Stu, where are you? Call when you get in.”

Beep.

“We want to take you to breakfast—let’s see, oh, okay, I guess it’s nearly lunch. Whichever you want. If you get this message after 11:45, we’ll be at Denny’s down on the corner.”

“Riley,” she said aloud.

Beep.

“Maddie! Maddie! Where’d you go? This is Andy,” he paused, then continued. “All right, I’ll call you later.”

Beep.

“¿Hola, esta Cecilia? Cecila? Cecilaaa! Aieeee. Creo que tengo el numero equivocado.”

“Si señor, you have the wrong number,” replied Maddie.

Beep.

“Hello Maddie, Eric Demsky here. I’ve got some good news. A meeting. Call me right away.”

He left a number and Maddie’s hand quivered as she scribbled it down.

Beep.

“Hello Maddie, this is Roxanne. I got your messages. Thanks. I know we haven’t talked, but I’m doing all right now. Considering. It’s strange, I think the rapist knew me.”

No. Maddie froze. Is it possible? If it is, I probably know him, too. But who?
Maddie shuddered and had to rewind the tape to listen to what she’d missed.

“Well, I’ll tell you about it later. Oh, congratulations on the story in the paper. That is so cool. But that’s not the reason I called. Anyway, last night was the first night I went to a club—not to Quip’s, to Jokers on Sunset. They were doing some more auditions for *Playboy*—not me though. Anyway, this Lola chick was doing some of your material! Like your Twinkie joke and your entire diet routine. I was so mad! I cornered her afterwards. She said that you told her she could use it. I know she was lying! Wasn’t she? Anyway, I told one of the judges. But I think they’re going to use her. So stupid, I can’t believe it. Just thought you should know. Call me.” She left her phone number.

“That bitch!” said Maddie.

Beep.

“Mom, where are you? Dad said you came home last night. I didn’t know you were coming—I spent the night at Jennifer’s. Anyhow, I need you to proof read a paper for me. I’ll fax it to you. Call me back tonight. This is your daughter.”

Maddie smiled.

Beep.

“Ahhh, ahhhh, ahhhh, ahhhh, ahhhh, ahhhh, touch it. Touch it. Ahhh, ahhh. Ahhhh. So good . . . ”

“Pervert!”

Beep.

“Hello, this is Regina Rawlings at Robert Feldman Productions. I’m calling to confirm an appointment tomorrow with Roger Fuller. Please let me know if that’s still convenient.”

Beep.

“Hey, what’s going on?” screeched the voice. “I heard they are making a movie about the comics in the building. If that’s true, I want to be in it. I’ve lived here longer than you—and all of these other jerks, too. So I’m not the funniest one here. But I’m still entitled to be part of the movie. You’d better not try and cut me out—or I’ll tell them. I’ll call the *Enquirer*. I’ll let everybody in Hollywood know.” Her voice softened. “Oh, and this is Brenda—and I got a new hamster. I named this one Harlow”

“Good grief,” muttered Maddie.

Beep.

"This is Murray Horowitz. Abe and I would like to get together with you and talk about turning your living situation into a reality show. I think I mentioned we've already produced two shows. Remember? I told you about *Magistrate*—the show like *Cops* and *Humane Society*—the true-life dramas of finding a home for abandoned pets. They're not on the network schedule, but they're in syndication across the country. You've probably seen them. Anyway, there are a lot of new stations looking for programming, and I'm sure we can sell it. So let's get together; you have my number, but here it is again." He left the number, and she jotted it down.

Beep beep beep.

She glanced at the clock, quarter to four. "*Please* still be there?" She dialed Eric Demsky and recognized the receptionist's voice.

"Hi Trudy, this is Maddie Quinn from the other day."

"Hi, I remember. Do you need to speak to Eric?"

"Yes, is he still there?" She crossed her fingers.

"He just walked out. But here's his car phone. Oh he's also got one of those new cell phones."

Maddie thanked her and wrote down both numbers and tried the car phone first.

"Eric here."

"Hi Eric, this is Maddie Quinn."

"Maddie! Good news! I've set up an appointment with Columbia TV and Development.

"That's incredible."

“They want to meet you and the others.”

“Oh. Okay.” She felt her heart palpitating and sat down. “But not everyone is in town.”

“Well, whoever’s available or whoever you think should be part of this. It’s unlikely they’ll use all twelve of you.” Then offhandedly, “You never know. Just make sure that you include the people that will help sell the show—like the comedienne that did the *Tonight Show*.”

“Amelia.”

“Yes.”

“When are we supposed to see them?”

“In two days.”

“What about Robert Feldman Productions? I got a message from them confirming an appointment tomorrow.”

“Put them off a few days—at least until after the Columbia meeting.” He gave her the details about the meeting and hung up.

Maddie sat contemplating what to say to Regina Rawlings at Geoffrey Feldman’s. Lie? She hated inventing a story. Why? Everyone in Hollywood did it. But what would she say? She felt a twinge of guilt and pushed it aside. Maybe she could pretend to be sick... like food poisoning. She shook her head. No, no, that wouldn’t do. So what then? It had to be believable. Too many comics were out of town? Better. She glanced at her calendar—tomorrow Amelia was doing the *Tonight Show*, and she couldn’t attend because she needed to focus on her appearance. Yes, that would work. And then she

needed to take care of that bitch, Lola. Maddie fumed. That's all she needed, that no-talent slut going around town butchering her material. And what about crazy Brenda? Whatever made her believe they had a movie deal? But first call Regina Rawlings. The sooner she let them know the better. She reached for the phone and made the call.

Chapter 21

Andy raced down the stairs like he was late for an appearance on the *Tonight Show*.

“What’s your hurry?” asked Maddie.

He stopped, glanced back at the empty staircase, and the tension in his face eased. “Ditching Brenda,” he said and strolled over to Maddie, Stu, and Boyd gathered at the mailboxes.

“She ambushed me this morning while I was feeding the pigeons. The dingbat came up there with her cat! Nearly gave my pigeons cardiac arrest. I ran her off. She was back five minutes later with the rabbit and yakked her head off.”

“That’s nothing.” Boyd waved a dismissive hand. “Once she trapped me in the laundry room and blabbed through two months of dirty laundry—I swear she never took a breath. Told me about every animal she’d ever owned. From Abe to Zeke.”

Gardell turned to Andy. “You didn’t slip about the meeting today?”

“No way! But she was asking if anything’s happening.”

Maddie had told them about the phone message, but didn’t mention Brenda’s threats. “What made her think we had a movie deal?”

“She must have been eavesdropping and got it all screwed up.”

Maddie stared at the opposite wall from where they stood. Next to their photographs hung a newly framed copy of the *LA Times* story. She felt a twinge of guilt.

“She is mentioned in the article.”

“Forget it,” said Stu. “She’d sabotage the whole meeting.”

“She’s worse than usual,” Andy lifted one arm and wiggled his hips, mimicking Brenda’s movements. “Walking around with a swelled head, bragging because after flashing the *LA Times* article on the set, she wrangled a couple more days of extra work.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Stu wagged his head. “Bet they were regretting that.”

“You *know* that’s true.” Andy double-checked the staircase. “She told me they were going to give her a couple of lines, but by the end of the second day, the part disappeared.”

“Sure,” said Stu, “they cut it after they found out she’s a nutcase.”

“So,” said Andy, “do we need her at a meeting motor-mouthing about her pets and her long-lost father? NOT!”

Boyd shook his head. “That girl’s a walking soap opera. She could be a one-woman *Days of Our Lives*.”

Maddie had to agree. This was her big chance to realize her dream, and she could not risk it by including Brenda. “If we get anything out of this, maybe we can help her out.” Maddie glimpsed the long hallway. “We’d better be careful. She might get suspicious if she sees us all leaving together.”

Gardell cracked his knuckles. “We’d better leave in shifts.”

A clip-clopping on the staircase caught their attention. It was Brenda. She wore a pair of cut-off jeans and an orange-sleeveless blouse tied at the midriff with a white cockatoo perched on her shoulder.

“Uh-oh, speak of the she-devil,” mumbled Andy. “I’m outta here.” He darted for the staircase at the backend of the hallway.

“Wait for me, brother,” said Gardell, striding after him.

Boyd shot out the front door, but Brenda called to Maddie.

Maddie answered over her shoulder while hurrying to her apartment. “What is it, Brenda?”

“Did you hear about my part on *90210*?”

“Congratulations,” said Maddie. “But I can’t really talk. I have an audition this afternoon.” It was like an audition, reasoned Maddie.

“Commercial or acting?”

“Ahmm, acting,” said Maddie, eager to change the subject. She studied the bird, pure white except for a crest of red and yellow that reminded her of an Indian headdress.

“I like your bird—haven’t seen him before.”

“This is Tonto. He’s a cockatoo.” Brenda extended her finger and the bird fluttered its wings and leaped on. “I just got him. He was a little expensive, but I figured I’d treat myself after working so much this week. And Andy’s so possessive with his pigeons. I thought I’d get my own bird.”

“What about your cat Custer? I mean Custard.”

“Oh, Custard won’t hurt him. She dug a sunflower seed from her pants pocket and placed it between her teeth. She brought the bird close to her mouth, and Tonto snatched the seed.

“Wow, you’ve already trained him to do that?”

"It's easy to train animals when you reward them with food." She stroked the bird. "I was wondering, has anyone called about us? I mean since the article came out? Because it seems like someone would think that we'd be a good idea for a movie or at least an HBO special. I mean that's what they were telling me when I was on the set."

"You were talking about us on the set of *90210*?"

"Yes, I just happened to have a copy of the article with me and showed it to some of the crew. Most of them had already read it. They were saying how standup comics are really hot now." She blinked dramatically. "I mean, I know that—look at the *Roseanne* show, and now Jerry Seinfeld and Tim Allen have shows."

From one of the other apartments, Maddie could hear a television playing—it sounded like a game show. "You can't predict this town; someone is just as likely to steal the idea and cast a bunch of actors in it."

"That would be a mistake. We could sue them." Brenda wrinkled her nose.

"What about Chortles? They haven't invited us back, have they?"

"Afraid not."

"Well, they should. They have the article posted in the entrance where everyone that walks in there can see it."

"They do?" said Maddie.

"Yes. I dropped by to pick up my check and there it was." Brenda crossed her arms. "I wish I'd have been here for the photo. You know, I look like my dad—he might have recognized me—but at least my name is in the article, so if he reads it, or someone

that knows him reads it, he might hear about me. I figured it wouldn't hurt to show it around while I was doing *90210*, and they gave me three extra days work."

"Did you get to meet the stars?"

"Yes, and they're all shrimpy. I'm nearly as tall as the guys are—except for the blond one. What's his name? Anyway, I told them about my father, and how I want to become famous, so we'll be reunited." Her eyes glowed. "I almost got a line." The glow turned to disappointment. "But I'm not union. It really makes me mad because I gave the writer a blow job."

Maddie was careful not to react.

"Now I'm not sure if I had a line or if he was just lying. I was hoping he'd call me. But I found out from the production assistant he's married." She slapped at the air with one hand, and the cockatoo ruffled his wings. "Sorry, Tonto—I figured as much—he had 'married' written all over him."

"Then why did you ... get involved?"

"You never know. I might have gotten the line. And I haven't slept with anyone in a long time."

Maddie couldn't resist asking, "But is that really satisfying for you?"

She considered before answering. "It's empowering, knowing I'm the one that got him excited."

"At least you made some extra money." Maddie shifted her weight, eager now to get away.

“Except I spent it,” she nodded at the bird. “I thought I was going to make more money—you know because of the line.” She exhaled audibly. “Regular extra work doesn’t pay much.” She grinned lopsidedly. “I made up for it partly by helping myself to the snacks off the goody table. I got a mess of Granola bars, if you want one.”

“I’ll pass.” Maddie turned the doorknob. “Well, gotta run.”

“Okay, but you *need* to call Chortles and see if you can get us on again.”

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Later, after exchanging a series of phone calls coordinating their departure, Maddie opened the door and glanced out. Amelia hurried down the stairway and slipped into the apartment.

“Did you see her?” asked Maddie.

“Earlier. She had Miss Parker cornered, telling her all about her experience on 90210.”

“I hope she didn’t tell her everything that happened.” Maddie dipped her chin and recalled Miss Parker’s latest class, *Sex for Seniors*. “Then again.” She peeped out the eyehole just in time to see Dexter pumping a red yo-yo with twinkling lights.

“Geez, you’d think Dexter would try to be a little less conspicuous—just this once.” Maddie turned to Amelia. “Who else are we waiting for?”

“Just Andy. The others are going with Gardell.”

“Have they left yet?”

"I don't think so. I saw Boyd sneaking up to Gardell's."

"Boyd should be sneaking *down*, not *up*."

"Yes, except Boyd lives next door to Brenda. They're planning to come down the fire escape."

"Are they crazy? That's smack in the front of the building. The ladder drops right onto the porch. Cleo will hear it clanking and be out like a flash."

Amelia lifted her shoulders in an I-don't-know-shrug. Maddie sighed and checked the peephole.

Directly across the hall, Stu opened his door. He poked his head out, looked, poked his head in and shut the door like a bird in a cuckoo clock.

"Uh oh, I think she's on this floor," said Maddie.

Amelia picked up Maddie's telephone and dialed Stu. From across the hall, Maddie heard the phone ring once.

"It's Amelia. Was that her?" Amelia nodded and said to Maddie, "She's talking to Cleo."

"Now what are we going to do?" Maddie moved next to Amelia and placed her ear near the receiver so she could hear.

"If you can slip over to my apartment, we can go out the window," said Stu.

Amelia's eyes widened as she looked down at the skirt of her frothy outfit. "I'm not dressed to climb out a window!"

"We've got no choice—we've got to get out of here, or we're going to be late," said Stu.

“What about the guys coming down on the fire escape,” said Amelia. “They’ll be even more conspicuous. Someone’s got to warn them.”

Maddie eased open the door and glanced down towards the lobby. Brenda and Cleo were engaged in conversation, while the dogs lounged nearby. Just beyond, through the wide glass door, she saw Gardell standing on the last rung of the fire escape. “I knew it!” She grimaced. “They’re going to get caught!”

Amelia grabbed Maddie’s shoulder, “What’s going on?”

“Don’t lower the ladder,” pleaded Maddie, then to Amelia, “Let go, you’re wrinkling my blouse.”

Gardell lowered himself until he was hanging from the bottom rung, hovering about three feet from the porch. He looked like a gymnast about to perform. Maddie saw the alarm on his face as he recognized Cleo and Brenda in the lobby.

“Sorry.” Amelia said, smoothing at Maddie’s blouse. “What’s happening now?”

“We need a diversion.” Maddie stepped out into the hallway and waved her arms like a flagman on a ship signaling distress. “Hi, Cleo, can you help me?”

Brenda and Cleo both turned towards her, but the dogs were drawn in the other direction. Clarke Gable, then Tinkerbell got up and gazed towards the porch.

“Can you come here a minute, I need to talk to you.”

Amelia whispered. “What-are-you-doing?”

Clark barked.

“Doggies!” Maddie clapped her hands. “Come here doggies!”

“I told you! I’ve got to distract them.” She looked at Amelia dressed in her finery and made up so attractively. Barely moving her lips like an amateur ventriloquist, she muttered. “Don’t let them see you—hide in the kitchen.”

Beyond the front door, Maddie could now see Gardell drop safely onto the porch and another pair of feet moved to the lower rung. Clark Gable barked, and Tinkerbell joined in.

“Clarkie! Tinkerbell!” Maddie called, clapping her hands. “Come here, now!”

The dogs hesitated, looking to and fro.

Maddie dropped to one knee and coaxed. “Come on babies!” Tinkerbell looked at Maddie and at the porch, then scrambled to her. Clark hesitated, then ran after Tinkerbell as though he was afraid he’d miss something else. Using both hands Maddie stroked the dog’s coppery-colored coats and in a mushy baby voice said, “How are you, Clark Gable? How are you, Tinkerbell? Have you been good little doggies?” The dogs wagged a happy response.

“What’s the problem?” asked Cleo. Brenda stood next to her, eyeing Maddie curiously. Tonto watched the dogs warily.

Maddie saw Gardell gesticulating for Boyd to follow. He shook his head, reluctantly. “Oh, Boyd!” Maddie squeaked.

“Boyd?” asked Cleo narrowing her eyes. “What about Boyd? Has he been pestering you?”

“Yes. NO. Yes.” said Maddie. Brenda and Cleo exchanged looks and stepped closer. “It’s about Boyd.” Gardell was cajoling Boyd to jump down. “He makes so much noise ... playing his stereo. I’ve asked him to turn it down, but ...”

“Playing that country-western, shit-kicker music I’ll bet,” said Cleo. “And he’s the first one to complain about the mariachi music next door.”

“I never noticed his stereo unless my window’s open,” said Brenda, “and he lives right next door to me.”

“Really?” said Maddie. “Well, I think the insulation is better between apartment walls than between the floors.”

She saw Boyd hanging from the last rung. He let go and dropped down awkwardly, hitting his knee. She flinched.

Cleo reached over to comfort her. “Don’t worry, I’ll straighten him out.”

Finally, Riley hung from the ladder, stretched out in a yellow tuxedo, looking like a psychedelic banana.

“Ohhhh no! Oh, yes!” said Maddie seeing Riley land safely on the porch. “I’d really appreciate it.” She made her excuses about having to hurry off and closed the door.

A few minutes later, Maddie and Amelia slipped across the hallway into Stu’s apartment and were extricating themselves out his window.

“Damn, I’ve ripped my nylons!” said Maddie. “I knew that was going to happen. We need to stop at the store.”

“There’s no time,” said Stu.

“I’ve got some lotion in my purse,” said Amelia. “Rub it on and go bare legged.”

Chapter 22

Maddie entered Columbia Studios with the other comedians, and a wave of excitement coursed through her. She had been on this studio lot before. Only today she was not here to see someone else do a guest appearance, or to play an extra or “atmosphere”, the latest and more dismissive term for the job. No, she *was* here to discuss the possibilities of being in her own project, a new TV show centered on her life—and, of course, the other comics in the building.

In the lobby, they announced themselves to the receptionist and were told to have a seat.

Maddie glanced at the others turned out in their best regalia: Riley, cool as a cucumber in a dark green tuxedo and black and white polka-dotted tie; Stu neat as always in preppy clothes; Gardell clad in black except for his custom-made vest in red, green and gold African print; Andy, out of flannel, into a crisply ironed shirt and khaki pants; Boyd in a silk shirt carefully tucked into gray slacks; Dexter with a purple fluorescent yo-yo bulging in his pants pocket.

“Is that a yo-yo in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?” asked Amelia.

Stu elbowed Dexter. “Are you trying to look like a pervert?”

“What yo-yo?” Dexter leered and pulled out the red yo-yo. He worked it up and down, tossing the twinkling-spinning disk out in front of him. He whipped it in the air around in a circle. On its second revolution the string slackened and the red toy began spiraling out of control. It flew back and hit him in the face.

“Ouch!” cried Dexter, grabbing his eye.

Maddie jumped up. “Are you okay?”

Dexter removed his hand, and Maddie and the other comedians moved closer to examine him. Even with his darker skin, a red welt was visible on his brow.

Gardell shook his head. “Mmmmm, Mmmmm, you’re gonna have a shiner, brother.”

“We should get some ice for it,” said Maddie.

“No, no, I’m okay.”

“Smooth move Ex-Lax,” said Stu, “right before our big meeting.”

“Sorry, it’s a new yo-yo,” said Dexter, glancing around at the others. “Can I stay?”

“Yes, of course you can stay.” Maddie picked up his yo-yo and handed it to him.

“But please put this away.”

“Dexter rolled up the string and shoved it in his back pocket and sat down.

“What else will go wrong?” said Amelia. “It always comes in threes.”

Maddie knew she was referring to the evening before. Amelia, feminine in a dress the color of crème de menthe, was still glum from last night’s disappointment at *The Tonight Show*.

Initially, Maddie loved accompanying her friend to TV show appearances, hanging out in the green room while Amelia was powdered and prepped by the make-up artist and waited to go on. There was so much food backstage, but Amelia was too excited to eat. Maddie wondered about the dichotomy. On every TV show or film set

there was always gobs to eat. Like the corner Quik Stop, an array of candy bars, cookies, and chips were available—on top of three meals a day, morning snacks and afternoon snacks. Who was suppose to eat it all? Not the actors—*definitely* not the actresses. And all of the woman behind the scenes, who would never appear on camera, from script girl to wardrobe assistant, were thin as eels. Did they have ambitions of becoming stars and wanted to be ready in case the director turned to them and said, “We need YOU.” Still the caterers seemed to be a critical element. Was it a status symbol like so many of the trappings in Hollywood? Or perhaps it was there to keep the crew happy and the extras mellow?

Of course, stranger things had happened, she knew. Unexpected successes and aching disappointments—like last night. Amelia looked poised for a magazine cover and was totally prepared to do seven killer minutes on *The Tonight Show* and then Bob Hope. “Bob FUCKING Hope” to quote Amelia, had blabbed so long that she got bumped. BUMPED! Sure the producer apologized and assured her that she’d be booked back soon—in a month or two probably. But what about all the time and expense of the 300 postcards that she’d mailed out to every important and semi-important person in Hollywood announcing her appearance on the show, not to mention her family and friends staying up late waiting for her appearance.

“So where’s this uberagent that’s suppose to represent us?” asked Stu, interrupting Maddie’s thoughts.

“He told me he’d meet us down here,” she replied. “Maybe he’s already talking to them.”

“He better be if he wants a commission,” mumbled Stu.

Riley fussed with the joker stickpin in his tie. “What do you think they’re going to ask us?”

A rush of nervousness rippled through Maddie. They could not blow this opportunity. But what would they think of her? What would they say? Would they take one look at her and declare, *You’re way too fat!* Or, *You’re too old.* *We have the perfect actress to play your part.* She tried to tap down her jittery feelings and replied. “They’ll want to know about all of us, and what it’s like living together in the Belvedere.”

Riley frowned, his expression hardening, “We need to make them laugh.”

“We will,” said Boyd.

Stu scanned the group. “No one hog the stage.”

“It’s not a stage,” said Gardell.

“You know what I mean.”

“Just be real,” said Maddie. “We crack each other up all the time.”

“We *are* funny,” said Andy. “If nothing else, we know we’re funny.”

“Does this look okay?” asked Riley, holding out his arms.

“You got a big spot on the butt,” said Boyd, gesturing with his chin.

“Where?” Riley’s face scrunched in panic, and he twisted around trying to view his backside. “I just got this out of the cleaners. Not the dollar cleaners either. It cost me eight bucks.”

“You got ripped off,” said Dexter. “The dollar cleaners is just as good. I did a comparison test.”

“He’s teasing.” Amelia gave Boyd the reprimanding gaze of a kindergarten teacher.

Riley glared at Boyd and moved towards him threateningly just as a young man came around the corner into the waiting room. He wore a pale blue shirt and navy tie and black pants. His blond hair was slicked straight back with styling mousse.

“I’m Mr. Jonathan Nash’s production assistant,” he said with a constipated smile. “I believe you’re here for an appointment?”

Production assistant, my Aunt Gertie, it’s the title for a glorified gofer mused Maddie. But if Mr. Mousse attached himself to the right executive, he’d earn a credit on a TV series or a film. The credit roll at the end of the movies ran longer than the movie trailers. Now film credits even listed the limo drivers and caterers. And many people, especially in Hollywood, stayed in the theater long after the movie ended to read them. It was only a matter of hooking up with the right executive, and as he ascended the mountain of Big Time Success, the PA advanced with him. Maddie personally knew of one girl who had moved from PA to assistant producer on an Oscar winning film. Maybe Mr. Mousse would end up with a credit on *their* TV show. She crossed her fingers and hoped.

“Follow me,” said Mr. Mousse.

The seven glanced quickly at one another, took a collective breath, readying themselves as if they were about to embark on a life or death mission and trailed down the corridor. Mr. Mousse led them into a conference room with a table the size of a small island. They sank into the plush carpeting as they entered the gray and mauve

room lit by recessed lighting concealed in the cornices. A credenza was against one wall lined with bottled water, china cups and a sleek stainless-steel coffee urn.

“Make yourself comfortable,” said Mr. Mousse with his hand on the doorknob.

“He’ll be here shortly.” The door clicked shut.

“Spiffy room,” said Andy glancing around.

Maddie lifted her arms like an orator. “Wait everyone.” The others stopped and turned to her. “You all know this is *my* last chance to make it.” She glanced from one to the other. “And it may be the only major opportunity some of you ever get in this town. So we’ve GOT to make this work. Don’t hold back—let’s tell them about the wacky things that go on in the building—and don’t hesitate to exaggerate. It makes for good drama. So be a good sport if the joke’s on you. Remember, never let the truth get in the way of a good joke.”

Amelia rubbed her hands together. “I’m ready.”

The door opened and everyone turned toward it.

Chapter 23

Five people came into the conference room. The ITA agent, Eric Demsky, was the second person to enter. Maddie felt her heart thumping, but managed to calm herself and to introduce Eric to the other comedians, and in turn Eric introduced Jonathan Nash as vice president of Columbia TV Development. Maddie was surprised at how young Jonathan looked. He was barely thirty. He dressed casually in a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves and wore brown rimmed glasses. He could have been a grad student at UCLA.

Jonathan Nash introduced Judith Kline, Head of the Talent Division, a young woman about his age. Judith's short dark hair was neatly fashioned, and she was clothed in a navy-blue dress and matching jacket with brass buttons. There were also two writers, Walter Stillwell and Charlotte Hines. They were both casually outfitted as if afterwards they were going to take a hike in the woods. Jonathan mentioned the writers credits. They had never worked on a sitcom, but had sold three film scripts—none of which had been made—and they were presently under contract to Columbia. Neither writer smiled.

Everyone sat down at the conference table. The comedians clustered together along both sides of the table, while Jonathan sat at the head of the table flanked by Judith Kline and Eric Demsky on his right and the writers on his left. Maddie noticed Jonathan set their resumes, photos, videotape and the newspaper article in front of him.

"I enjoyed your performances." Jonathan said, tapping the videotape. "Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourselves." He turned to Boyd sitting next to Judith.

Boyd introduced himself and said, "I'm from Memphis, Tennessee."

"Did you know Elvis?" asked Jonathan half-kidding.

"Sure did." Boyd glanced at the credenza behind him and picked up a crystal sugar dish. He laid his hand out flat on the table and placed the sugar dish on his fingers. "Elvis gave me this ring."

Everyone laughed.

Jonathan glanced down at Gardell's resume. "So what's it like to write for the president?"

"A challenge because he won't do jokes about certain subjects."

"Like what?" asked Jonathan.

"Taxes." Everyone laughed. "But he'll joke about the Republicans."

"How's the pay?"

"They don't pay. They promise not to audit you that year."

More laughter.

"What happened to your eye?" Jonathan asked Dexter. "Did you get in a fight?"

"No," said Dexter, rubbing his eye, which was turning black and blue.

"He beaned himself with his yo-yo!" answered Amelia. "Just now, while we were in the lobby."

Dexter shrugged, embarrassed. "The first time I ever hit myself."

"Usually he beans other people," said Stu.

Everyone laughed.

Jonathan shuffled through the photos and stopped at Andy's. "Andy," he said glancing at him, "tell me something ..." he looked at the next photo, a picture of Riley in a red tuxedo, "something quirky about Riley."

There was a moment's hesitation, then Andy said, "He's always getting locked out of his apartment. He has to creep in through the little doors."

"The little doors?" asked Jonathan.

"Don't tell him that," said Riley.

"Each apartment has these two little doors," explained Andy, "with a small space in-between, leading into the kitchen. They're about eighteen-inches high. The Belvedere used to be a hotel, so we think it was for meals or maybe it was to set your shoes out to be polished. Anyway Riley doesn't like asking Cleo for the key because she gets so mad at him, so he crawls in and out of the little doors."

"Who's Cleo?" asked Jonathan.

"She's the manager," added Stu. "She's got two Brussel griffons, Clark Gable and Tinkerbell, that follow her everywhere. Clark Gable looks sort of evil because he's got this one fang that sticks out even when his mouth's closed."

"Cleo's a busybody who sticks her nose in everybody's affairs," said Boyd.

"Affairs?" said Stu. "Good word choice there, Boyd."

"She sneaks into your apartment when you're not there and snoops around," said Gardell.

“That’s true,” said Amelia. “She took me into Andy’s apartment to show me the mess.”

“You didn’t tell me that!” said Andy.

Amelia shrugged a shoulder. “But she’s great because she watches the building like a tiger.”

“And she won’t put up with anything.” Maddie told them about the mattress incident and the drunk on the porch. “She’s a bit like the Louie character on *Taxi*.”

“Not that patient,” cracked Gardell.

Boyd stood up gesturing. “She’s got that white-blond hair and looks like an old Marilyn Monroe. She wears rhinestone glasses and is always smoking.”

“Sit down, Boyd,” said Stu.

“He can’t talk unless he’s standing,” said Andy.

The comedians went on describing each other and the Belvedere, making everyone laugh. Even the two writers couldn’t keep from laughing as the comedians shared stories about Andy’s pigeons, Boyd’s tryst with Mona, Maddie’s audition with the cowboy, Dexter’s yo-yo act, and Amelia spraying herself with mace.

“What do you think?” Jonathan asked Stillwell and Hines.

They exchanged looks and nodded. “We could write the pilot.”

“Okay,” said Jonathan. “We’ll draw up the papers, negotiate with your agent and get back to you.”

“Good,” said Eric, placing his palms on the table.

Andy clasped his hands in front of him. “You *like* us, you *really* like us.”

“Shut-up,” Stu nudged him. “You sound like Sally Fields.”

Jonathan stood up, chuckling. “I wish more meetings were this much fun.”

Everyone got up then, the comedians grinning and voicing a flurry of “Thanks
yous.”

Maddie took out her business cards and gave one to each writer. “If you want to talk to us about story ideas or character development or come by the building, please call me.”

Walter Stillwell and Charlotte Hines took her card and mumbled thanks.

“I need to speak with my clients a few minutes before they leave,” said Eric to Jonathan. “I’ll be right with you.”

Once again everyone shook hands, and Jonathan and his entourage left the conference room. Eric stayed behind with the comedians.

Maddie could feel her heart fluttering as she asked him, “What exactly does this mean?”

“We’ve got a development deal,” said Eric.

“All of us?” asked Stu.

“Those of you who are here,” said Eric. “They’ll pay you to stay in town and be available. They might use a couple of you in small roles, walk-on stuff, since you haven’t got a lot of TV experience, until the pilot is ready.”

“How much?” asked Gardell.

Eric grinned. "Let me see what I can negotiate. Meantime, I'll need all of you to come down to my office and sign contracts with me. My secretary will call you, and we'll meet in my office tomorrow afternoon."

* * *

The moment the group of comedians was on the sidewalk outside of the studio, there were whoops and hollers. They hugged each other and high-fived.

"We did it!" said Riley.

Boyd clasped his head in both hands. "I can't believe it! I can't believe it! I can't believe it." He turned to Maddie. "It's all thanks to you. If you hadn't gotten that story in the newspaper."

Maddie shook her head. "No it's everyone. You were all so funny in there."

"Best of all," Andy picked Maddie up and spun around. "You don't have to leave now."

Maddie laughed. "Put me down."

Andy set her on her feet, and the group headed to the cars.

"I've been saying all along we should be a sitcom," said Riley.

"You never said that! I'm the one that said that!" said Stu.

"That's funny." Amelia stretched out her arms, momentarily blocking everyone's way. "That could be an episode—or at least a running gag—Riley could always be taking credit for what someone else said."

Riley looked thoughtful. "I don't know ..."

"Shut-up," said Dexter, now holding his black eye. "If it makes people laugh, that's all that counts."

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Ten minutes later they all arrived back at the Belvedere and entered through the front door. They gathered in the lobby, reluctant to leave each other.

Gardell turned to Maddie. "What did you think of those writers?"

"I don't know." Maddie fiddled with her watchband. "They've never worked on a sitcom. Their credits were all for films."

"I'd like to know what those scripts were like that they sold," said Stu. "Were they comedies or dramas?"

Andy said, "I don't think they're funny. We were riffing the whole time, and they never added one funny thing."

Amelia piped in. "And they weren't very enthusiastic. They didn't even seem interested in visiting our building."

"Maybe they think they're too good for TV."

"Maybe they only want to write for someone already famous."

"I think we should try writing our own pilot," said Gardell. "Just in case they screw it up."

"It can't hurt," said Maddie. "We could all pitch in."

Cleo's door opened and she came into the lobby followed by the dogs. "How'd it go?" She fixed her eyes on Dexter's shiner. "What the hell happened to you?"

Suddenly the group was animated, telling Cleo about Dexter's mishap, Mr. Mousse, the meeting, acting out the jokes, laughing at one another as they relived the experience.

The joviality was cut off by a scream from the staircase. Everyone looked up.

"I HATE YOU!" screamed Brenda. She dropped Custard, and the cat scurried away. "ALL OF YOU! You think you can just cut me out! I lived here longer than most of you. You hear me?"

"Brenda," said Maddie.

"Shut up. Don't pretend to be my friend. You two-faced bitch."

Amelia leaned close to Maddie and muttered, "This is the third thing."

"Hey, calm down," said Boyd.

"Don't talk to me, asshole. I could tell them plenty about you! Like the time you were arrested for slapping that girl."

"Back off," said Stu.

She pointed her finger at him. "I know about you, too." She turned her head glowering from one to the other. "You'd better tell them I'm part of the group. Otherwise I'm calling them. I'll call the newspaper and tell them how you're trying to screw me out of this chance. I was in the article in the newspaper. Everyone read it! She stomped her foot. "I'm just as funny as the rest of you."

The comedians exchanged uneasy looks.

“No,” Maddie said in a calm voice, “the truth is you’re not funny. But I promise you if we’re successful, we’ll help you.”

“Liar! You’re just like my mother—a cheat and liar. You shouldn’t even be here. Why aren’t you home with your husband taking care of your family!”

Gardell touched Maddie’s arm. “Let’s go. We’ll talk later.”

“I’m going to get even with every one of you.” Brenda clenched the banister. “You’re not going to get away with this. I’ll call that faggot at the *LA Times*!”

“He’s not gay,” mumbled Andy. “He slept with Lola.”

“What’s that?” said Cleo.

“I’ll call the *National Enquirer*. They’ll be interested in my story. They’ll want to know what a bunch of rat finks you are!”

“All right,” Cleo stepped forward. “That’s enough of that, Missy.”

“Keep out of this, you nosy-mean-old BITCH!”

“How dare you speak to me like that.” Cleo looked like she’d been wounded, then her eyes narrowed and she glared at Brenda. “Ungrateful, self-centered hussy. I’ve never charged you a late fee when your rent was past due. I was nice enough to wave the rules and let you keep all those animals in that messy apartment. But this is the last of it. The next offense and you’re out. Evicted. I run a respectable building here. I’m not putting up with these histrionics.”

One by one the comics drifted away. Cleo went in her apartment. Brenda stomped back up to her apartment, and the echo of her door slamming reverberated throughout the building.

Chapter 24

Using two fingers Gardell hunted and pecked away on his portable computer while the seven other comedians, Andy, Amelia, Boyd, Dexter, Riley, Maddie, and Stu lounged, loitered, lazed and lunched in his apartment on the third floor. For most of two days and late into the nights, they sequestered themselves in the third floor apartment writing a TV script. Only earlier that morning, they'd traveled en masse to the International Talent Agency to sign individual contracts with Eric Demsky.

On Gardell's coffee table lay an assortment of sodas, snacks, chips, peanuts, jellybeans and a few leftover slices from two large pizzas.

Riley picked up Gardell's contract propped on a bookshelf. "I can't believe we're going to get \$50,000 each for six months for hanging around town! And we can still do local gigs."

"That's peanuts," said Andy, grabbing up a handful of salted peanuts. "If our pilot sells, we'll make ten, twenty grand a show. And if we become a hit—"

"*When* we become a hit," interrupted Gardell.

"When we become a hit," repeated Andy, "we could earn as much as Ted Danson on *Cheers*. I read in the *Hollywood Reporter* that next season he's going to get \$450,000 an episode."

"Holy shit," said Dexter. "We could afford to move out of this joint!"

"We could buy this joint," said Riley, high-fiving Dexter.

"Yes, but not yet," said Stu.

Boyd bragged. "When I get my check next week, I'm buying a brand new car. Haven't made up my mind what kind, a Firebird or Camaro or maybe a classic '68 Mustang GT like the one Steve McQueen drove in *Bullitt*."

"We don't have the money yet." Amelia selected three red jellybeans. "But when I get mine, I'm going to pay off all my credit card debt, put the rest in the bank and keep driving the classic I own free and clear."

"Maddie, you've been kind of quiet," Andy turned to her reclining in a soft chair in the corner. "Even at the contract meeting today, you didn't say much. Are you worried about something?"

"Well," Maddie sat up, "I was thinking the doors opened a crack, but we're not inside yet. In other words, first we need a good script." She gestured at Gardell hovered over the computer. "Okay, we're working on that."

"Good thing, too. Those two writers," Andy snapped his fingers twice before he came up with the names, "Stillwell and Hines were not funny."

Gardell stopped typing. "You know, this is a challenge because the pilot has got to introduce each person showing some distinctive, interesting, and funny characteristics."

"Hey," Andy jumped to his feet. "I could use my pigeons! I've got them nearly trained. Can you write that into the script?"

"Okay, Pigeon-man," said Gardell motioning for him to sit down. "But we need conflict, too."

"Let's give Amelia a cat," said Andy.

Amelia shook her head. “It would be funnier if it belonged to a guy.”

“Gardell!” Andy pointed at him.

Gardell frowned and thought about it. “I guess. I’d be the least likely one to own a cat. That could be funny.”

Maddie cleared her throat. “All right, secondly and just as important—our performances have to be good.”

“What do you mean?” Riley stood up indignant. “We’re funny. We’ve been performing for years.”

“Yes, on stage by ourselves,” said Maddie, “not in a scene with other actors. That’s a whole different ballgame. You have to listen to the other actors. You have to react to what they’re saying.”

“She’s right,” said Dexter. “I don’t want to be like Seinfeld. He’s stiff, the weakest one on his own show. Good thing they have those three other actors.”

“But we can’t depend on other actors to carry the show—there’s already seven of us.” Maddie glanced around at the group. “I mean, standup is good because we’ll be playing an extension of our stage personas, so those characters are well developed. But we need to connect with each other in the scenes on the show—just like right now when we’re talking.”

“You’ve been taking acting class, ha?” Boyd said to Maddie.

“And I did lots of Community Theater before I got into standup.”

Amelia searched for more red jellybeans. “She’s right. I’ve taken acting classes with other comics and most of them are terrible. They don’t react to what the other actors

are saying, or they take long pauses, you could drive a truck through, before replying. You need to understand when you're having a conversation with someone, often you formulate your response before the other person stops speaking, so there's almost an overlap of dialogue, not a pause—unless you're dumbfounded—or waiting for the audience's laughter to stop.

"If you're not in an acting class already, you need to sign up for one. I know I do." Stu took a handful of potato chips and crunched them into his mouth.

"Okay, we haven't talked about her, and I hate to bring up a bad subject, but what are we going to do about Brenda?" asked Andy.

"Ignore her," said Stu.

"We can't. She could ruin it for us," said Boyd.

Maddie shook her head. "I disagree. At this point, no one knows who we are. If Brenda calls the newspaper yelling like she did the other day, they'll think she's a fruitcake."

"What if they don't," said Riley.

"We'll tell them the truth," said Maddie. "She's a sad soul with some emotional problems."

"Yes," said Andy, "but they love stories like that."

Boyd picked up the last slice of pizza. "That's why people buy those sleazy rags like the *Enquirer*, the *Star*, the *Globe*. And she'll call them. I'd bet money on it."

"We won't be in the *Globe* unless the Belvedere is invaded with aliens," said Andy. "That's the only kind of stories they run."

Maddie pointed at Andy. “Now that would be a funny episode. Say we were trying to get publicity, kind of like we did already, but instead, in a sleazy tabloid like the *Globe*, so we fake an alien siting in the building.”

“That’s good,” said Gardell, “because half of us could be angry because we thought it was a stupid idea.”

“Bingo!” Boyd held out his hands. “There’s your conflict.”

“Wait a minute,” said Dexter, “didn’t Lucy and Ethel do something like that on top of the Empire State Building?”

Maddie considered a moment before replying. “Lucy doesn’t have the market on aliens. Besides, her show was in the Fifties, and we’d do it differently. Also the episodes have got to be layered—I mean, there’s got to be an A, B, C and maybe even a D plot going on.”

“Getting back to Brenda,” said Amelia. “Has anyone run into her? Since the other night I mean.”

“Not me.”

“Nope.”

“Me neither.”

The group looked from one to the other. But no one had seen Brenda.

“I’d like to run into her with my Toyota,” said Andy.

This got a few chuckles.

“She lives next door to me, and I haven’t seen hide nor hair,” said Boyd.

“That’s odd,” said Maddie.

Chapter 25

Just after four p.m. Maddie left Gardell's apartment. When she reached the second floor, she glanced down towards Brenda's apartment. She didn't want to bump into her and have another confrontation, yet she was curious. Where was she? Instead of continuing down the flight of stairs, Maddie tiptoed past Brenda's door and heard Custard's meowing. She slowed. There was a quality of distress in the animal's cry. What was going on? Maddie stopped, took a step back and listened. The cat continued to meow in a forlorn manner. She tapped on the door and waited. No reply. She knocked louder and called, "Brenda?"

Still no answer. Only the cat responded, sounding now like she was right on the other side of the door. Had Brenda gone out of town in a fit and left the animals unattended? Never. But no one had seen her since the fracas.

Maddie turned the knob. The door was unlocked. She opened it a few inches. "Brenda, are you home?"

The cat dashed out into the hallway. "Come here, Custard. Kitty, kitty, kitty."

Custard circled back and brushed by Maddie's leg. She scooped up the animal. Maddie pushed open the door and peeked inside. "Brenda? Are you here?"

She'd only been in the apartment once before, but recognized the same piles of clutter and narrow path leading in. She stepped inside and felt something sticky on her arms. "What have you been into?" she asked the cat. She saw crimson smudges on her arms and blouse. The cat's paws were bloody. She held the cat away from her,

examining it. "Are you hurt?" But the cat seemed unharmed. "Brenda!" she called louder and took another step inside. "I think there's something wrong with Custard."

She passed by the cages. The rabbit, Grace Slick, sat quietly. The lizard, Jim Morrison, gazed at her through the aquarium glass. The hamsters, Elvis and Harlow, huddled in a corner. Then she saw the overturned birdcage, and the cockatoo lying motionless.

"Did you kill Tonto?" asked Maddie. She moved to the cage but before she could stoop down, she saw Brenda in a narrow passage on the floor staring back at her.

"Brenda?"

Her eyes were open, but the color was flat and void like a shark's. A dark circle of blood puddled at her head and shoulders. Maddie knew she was dead. *She's killed herself. It's my fault.* Maddie took a step closer and saw the rest of the body sprawled on the floor, a knife protruding from her chest. *Murder? She's been murdered.* Maddie stared. Brenda's hands were curled like claws, the fingernails dark with blood. She was naked from the waist down. Her only clothing was a blouse that had been ripped open. *She's been raped.*

"No, no, no," Maddie moaned. She backed away from the body, bumping into the hamster's cage, causing the animals to scurry about. "No, no, no." She dropped Custard, turned and rushed out of the apartment and almost stumbling as she hurried down the stairs.

Cleo and the dogs were in the lobby. She looked up. "What's wrong?"

"It's Brenda. She's dead. Stabbed. Someone killed her."

Cleo started to go up the staircase.

Maddie shook her head. "You don't want to see her. It's awful." She hurried to her apartment and dialed 911.

After speaking with the police dispatcher, she saw the dark blood on the beige telephone, on her hands, on her blouse. She removed her blouse and bra and stood in the wash basin lathering her hands and arms and chest until sirens nearing the building roused her. She dried herself and changed, and she came out of her apartment.

A patrol car with its red and blue lights flashing screeched to a stop out front. Two policemen got out of the vehicle. One was broadly built like a football player; the other was darker, more compact and looked like he was Mexican. Cleo waited by the door to let them in.

"Where's the victim," asked the Mexican policeman, first through the door.

"Upstairs," said Cleo, pointing. "Apartment 204."

"Did you find the body?"

"No." Cleo looked down the hallway and waved Maddie forward. "Maddie found her."

The policeman looked at Maddie and said, "And you are?"

Maddie gave him her full name and explained about hearing the cat crying and finding the door unlocked and the blood on the cat's paws. She saw by his nametag, a brushed aluminum, that he was Officer Rodriguez.

"Is anyone else in the apartment?"

"Not that I noticed. Only the pets."

“What kind of pets?” asked the bigger cop.

Maddie described the animals and added, “They’re in cages. They’re okay, except for Tonto.” Then she started to cry. “Tonto’s dead, too.”

“Tonto?” asked Officer Rodriguez.

“The cockatoo,” said Cleo, tearing up. “It was a beautiful red and white cockatoo.”

A second police car pulled up in front of the building.

Officer Rodriguez looked out. “The sergeant’s here.”

The sergeant was by himself. He got out of the patrol car, and once again Cleo opened the door. Maddie wiped at her eyes and managed to stop crying.

The sirens had drawn some of the other tenants out of their apartments.

“Whassup?” asked Nick Stanco.

“Stay in your apartment,” ordered Officer Rodriguez.

Nick held up his arms like he was under arrest. “Dat’s no problem.” He looked at Maddie and mouthed, “Whassup?”

Maddie waved him away and mouthed, “Later.”

All three of the policemen unsnapped their gun holsters and started up the stairs.

Boyd and Dexter were on the landing. “What’s going on?”

“Do you live here?” asked the sergeant.

“Right there, sir,” said Boyd, pointing to apartment 203.

“I’m down the hall,” said Dexter.

“Get inside your apartments and stay there,” he ordered.

Cleo crept up the stairs, Maddie right behind her—just close enough so they could see the policemen at Brenda’s door.

“I don’t think the killer’s still in there,” whispered Maddie. “She’s been dead awhile. I’ve never seen anyone dead before, not like that. She looked like a collapsed rag doll—and then there was the knife.” Maddie shivered.

The three policemen took out their weapons, and two went into the apartment. The other one stood in the hallway with his gun drawn.

A few minutes later, one of the policemen came out and said. “It’s safe.”

Maddie whispered to Cleo “I think she was raped, too.”

Cleo stared big eyed.

Maddie nodded. “Most of her clothes were gone.”

“The serial rapist.”

“But he doesn’t usually kill his victims.”

More tenants and comedians came out of their apartments curious what the commotion was about. Riley and Andy came down the backstairs and joined Maddie and Cleo in the lobby. Andy looked ready to crack a joke until he saw the expression on Maddie’s face. Gardell and Amelia had circled around and came in together through the front door.

“What’s going on?” asked Gardell.

“Brenda’s been murdered,” said Cleo.

“No way,” said Gardell.

Maddie nodded, her eyes filling with tears. "It's true. I saw her." She explained to them what happened. Soon everyone in the building knew about it.

Officer Rodriguez came down the stairs. He clicked on his two-way radio and said. "Send the homicide team and animal control." He turned to Maddie. "Miss, we'd like you to come down to the police station."

Chapter 26

Another patrol car and a plain white car arrived in front of the building. Two more policemen and two men in suits came in and greeted Officer Rodriguez. The men in suits were introduced as Detective Owens and Detective Russell. The policemen talked among themselves, and for a moment, Maddie was forgotten as all five went upstairs to Brenda's apartment.

Maddie shivered. Poor Brenda. How humiliating to be viewed that way. Not that she would be aware of it now. But still. Maddie went to her apartment for her purse. Once she was inside and the door was closed, she sat down and let herself cry. Did Brenda ever get a break in life? She was so typical of the delusional wannabes in Hollywood. Completely out of touch with her capability. Still, at least Brenda had worked in the business. She'd enjoyed the intoxicating experience of being on a TV show, even though she was only an extra. Maddie dabbed at her eyes with a tissue and blew her nose. She went into the kitchen and drank some water. In the bathroom she washed her face and applied lipstick. She took a deep breath, picked up her purse and went out to wait to be driven to the police station.

A crowd of tenants and comedians had congregated in the lobby. Maddie went and stood by Amelia, Gardell and Cleo. Cleo put a comforting arm around her, and Maddie hugged her back. She took long slow breaths, so she wouldn't start crying again.

Boyd came down the back stairway and joined them. He sidled up to the four of them and said quietly. "They think it's the serial rapist."

“But he killed her!” said Cleo.

Boyd nodded. “They said sometimes it escalates.”

“You heard them?” said Gardell.

Boyd nodded. “Brenda’s window was open and so was mine. “I could hear everything. She put up a fight. She scratched the killer. They could tell by her nails. All they need to do is look for a guy with scratches on his face. They bagged her hands.”

“They’ll have the DNA,” said Amelia.

Officer Rodriguez and Detective Owens came downstairs and spotted Maddie. Detective Owens took out a small notebook from his coat pocket and said to her. “You were the person that discovered the body?”

Maddie nodded. “Are you taking me to the station?”

“Officer Rodriguez will take you, but first I have a few questions. Tell me what happened.” She repeated the story, and he scribbled notes as she spoke. He noticed the photos on the wall. “Is the victim’s picture here?”

Cleo showed him. “This is her.”

Officer Owens moved closer and studied the smiling photograph of Brenda. “A nice looking woman.” He moved from one photo to another. “All of these people live here now?”

“Yes,” said Cleo. “We’ve never had a problem like this before.”

He nodded and stopped when he came to the *LA Times* article. “This was just in the newspaper—a couple of weeks ago.”

“That’s right,” said Cleo.

He examined the picture. "The victim's not in the group picture."

"No," said Maddie. "She's mentioned in the article though." Maddie explained Brenda was working on *90210* on the day the photographer came over to take the picture.

"She was an actress?"

"No, an extra."

Officer Owens said to Cleo, "I need the names of everyone who lives in this building, beginning with the people that knew Brenda best. We may want to speak with them."

Dexter came from the hallway and joined them.

Detective Owens zeroed in on him. "What happened to your eye?" Dexter still had the traces of a black eye.

Amelia stepped forward. "He hit himself with a yo-yo. We were all there when it happened."

Sergeant Owens turned to the photograph on the wall of Dexter posed in the midst of a yo-yo trick. "You need to be more careful."

"Yes, sir," said Dexter.

Maddie turned away and gazed outside. A television news van pulled up. It had a satellite antenna on top of it and KABC on the side. A reporter carrying a narrow notebook got out, and the driver came around and slid open the door and picked up a video camera. The reporter gazed at the building and pointed to it. The photographer hoisted the camera on his shoulder, adjusted the focus and videotaped the outside of the Belvedere. A few minutes later he followed the reporter to the porch.

“How did they get here so quickly?” Amelia pointed to the camera crew outside.

“They’re always monitoring the police scanner or someone may have called them,” said Detective Owens. “Could have been one of your neighbors.”

Just then another news van came around the corner. Detective Owens walked outside and the reporter approached him. Maddie could see them talking. The detective went on to his unmarked vehicle, and the reporter came up on the porch and knocked on the door.

“This is a nightmare,” said Maddie.

“We just need to talk with someone a minute,” said the reporter through the glass door.

Detective Owens returned, and Cleo opened the door for him careful not to let the camera crew in. Detective Owens gestured to Maddie and said to Officer Rodriguez.

“Take her down to the station, now.”

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Officer Rodriguez drove Maddie to the Hollywood Police Station on Wilcox. He led her to an interview room, and she waited there for over an hour until Detective Russell came back to the station to speak to her. He wore a lightly checked shirt and brown tie. His hair was thinning, and he had a slight paunch around his middle. He brought a small black tape recorder in with him.

Maddie described what happened that day. She told the detective all she knew about Brenda—her pets, her mother, her long lost father, her work on *90210*, her performance at Chortles, her anger at being excluded from the sitcom deal and her threats of retaliation.

“Would someone in the building benefit from Brenda’s death?” asked Detective Russell.

Maddie was startled by the question. “Not that I’m aware of. She didn’t have anything except her pets. I think most of us felt sorry for her. I told her that if the sitcom was a success, we’d try and help her. I was thinking we could get her a walk-on role occasionally or a job on the set.” Maddie thought how condescending that sounded and tried to explain. “See everyone else in the group is a professional. You may not have heard of us, but we support ourselves working in comedy clubs around the country. We’ve all performed on television. You know on shows like *Evening at the Improv*, *Comic Strip Live*, *VH1*, and Amelia Reynolds has been on *The Tonight Show* twice—and they want her back for a third appearance.” She explained about Amelia being bumped by Bob Hope. “Besides, three of the others comics from the building aren’t part of the deal, either.”

“Why’s that?”

“Those two fellows are never in town. Fisher’s always working cruise ships. The other’s a road warrior. I mean he goes from gig to gig—you know, from one club to the another. That’s Joey Moss. He told me he put 120,000 miles on his car last year.”

And the third person?

“Nick Stanco.” Maddie made a sour face and shook her head. “He’s not very funny either, but he’s got connections, and he’s trying to become an actor.”

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It was dark outside and Maddie felt exhausted by the time Officer Rodriguez drove her back to the Belvedere. Detective Russell’s one question kept whirling through her mind. *Would someone in the building benefit from Brenda’s death?* She wondered would one of the comics actually believe Brenda was a threat to the sitcom deal? No. The serial rapist killed her.

When Officer Rodriguez pulled up to the building, Maddie was surprised to see the street crowded with news vans.

“I knew it,” said Officer Rodriguez. “Every television station in Los Angeles is here.”

Maddie could see that the reporter from KABC was still there. He recognized her and pointed, “That’s Maddie Quinn. She found the body.”

How does he know my name?

Since there were no door handles in the backseat of the patrol car, Maddie couldn’t jump out and escape into the Belvedere. She had to wait for Officer Rodriguez to come around and open the door for her. By that time, the reporters were gathered around the patrol car like sharks at a feeding frenzy.

Maddie stepped out and blinked at an onslaught of camera lights.

One reporter spoke in Spanish, "*Esta es la mujer descubrió a actriz muerta.*"

"Maddie, tell us what happened?" yelled one reporter.

"I don't want to talk about it," said Maddie negotiating her way through the media blitz and managing to reach the porch.

Cleo was at the door holding it open for her. But Maddie's entrance was blocked. Two men wearing blue jumpsuits wheeled a gurney with a black body bag on it out the front door. On the back of the men's uniforms was a patch that said CORONER in white letters on a field of black. The cameramen aimed their cameras, and everyone else watched silently until they passed by. Then the cameras turned back to Maddie.

"Look, we only want to get the word out," said the KABC reporter. "We want this fiend caught. You might be able to help catch him."

Maddie looked at the crowd. "But I didn't see him. I only found Brenda."

"Were you friends with the victim then?" asked a woman reporter shoving her microphone at Maddie.

Tears rolled down Maddie's face. Poor Brenda, did she have any friends? "We weren't close, but we got to know each other because I've been living here for a year." Maddie breathed deeply, trying to get control of her emotions. "She was always hoping to locate her father. Her parents split up with she was little, and she never changed her last name because she wanted to become famous and be reunited with him."

"Do you know his name?" asked the woman reporter.

Maddie thought a moment. "Yes, Simon Hoo, and he's not Chinese."

"*Simon Hoo era el nombre del padre de la victima,*" said the Spanish reporter.

“Brenda liked being around comedy. She waitressed at a comedy club and performed sometimes. She wasn’t very funny, but she said comedy helped her cope.”

“Did she have any other family?” asked another voice.

Maddie looked into the glare of lights but couldn’t identify who asked the question. “Not that I’m aware of. Only her pets. She loved animals. Her pet cockatoo was killed, too. It was a beautiful bird, red and white, and she was beginning to train it.” Maddie choked back a sob. “I can’t understand why anyone would do this.” Tears ran down her face. “I’m sorry. I can’t talk any more.”

Cleo had an arm around Maddie and guided her inside. Amelia put her arm around Maddie, and Cleo turned back to the crowd on the porch. “That’s enough now, you scavengers. Get out of here.”

Amelia was crying now, too, and together they walked to Maddie’s apartment. Gardell, Andy, Boyd and Dexter followed behind them.

“Don’t cry,” said Andy. “It will be all right.”

Before going in her apartment, Maddie glanced back at the four men. She couldn’t stop thinking. Could one of them be the killer? She recalled her conversation with Roxanne. *I think the rapist knew me.* Was it possible the same rapist—now also a murderer, lived in the Belvedere? Maddie shuddered.

Chapter 27

Maddie stayed in her apartment for the next two days, avoiding the others while they continued to work on the sitcom script. She refused to watch television or read the newspapers because the serial-rapist-now-murderer was continually featured everywhere. Every time she considered leaving to do an errand, she'd spot a reporter camped in front of the building. Even Bret had heard of the story and wanted her to come home.

Maddie decided he was right and decided to go home for a few days at least. She began packing and stopped when she heard the telephone ring. She had started screening her calls because somehow the media had gotten her phone number and kept pestering her. She listened to see if the caller would leave a message.

"Hi, this is Eric Demsky."

Maddie snatched up the telephone. "Hi Eric, I'm here."

"There's no easy way to say this except I'm afraid I've got some bad news."

Maddie sat down.

"Columbia's changed their mind. It's because of the rape and murder there. It's all over the television and newspapers, and they're afraid of the publicity."

"I thought all publicity was good publicity," said Maddie.

"Not in this case. Negative publicity and comedy don't mix. That's been true since Fatty Arbuckle."

Maddie nodded. She knew the story. In 1921 Fatty Arbuckle was bigger than Charlie Chaplin. He'd just signed a contract for a million dollars a year. Then he was

accused of rape and murder, and the scandal ended his career—even though later he was found innocent of the charges. “What about Geoffrey Feldman Productions?”

“I talked to them. They’re no longer interested either.”

Maddie sighed. “Did you call the other comics?”

“My secretary will.”

“Okay.” Maddie felt relieved he didn’t ask her to tell them.

“I saw your interview on the news,” said Eric. “It got a lot of play. All the stations carried it. And it ran on *Entertainment Tonight* and *Special Edition*. You were very compelling.” Maddie didn’t respond. “Look, I’m really sorry.”

“Me too,” Maddie hung up the phone and folded her arms. She gazed at the LeRoy Neiman’s picture, *Polo Lounge*. Marilyn Monroe’s sensual laughing smile. Now Marilyn’s gone and Brenda’s gone. Below the picture hung her calendar. She had one day left. Damn, she would have made it. She looked around her apartment. She might as well start packing.

In her closet she had the pharmacist smock and a couple other costumes that she kept ready for auditions. No sense taking them home. She’d give them to Amelia. She pulled them off the hanger, folded them and piled them in her laundry basket. Was Amelia home? Maddie didn’t bother to call. She needed to get out and talk to someone.

She tromped up the stairs with her basket of clothes and crossed to Amelia’s apartment. After several knocks, Maddie knew she wasn’t home. She pondered a minute, then walked up to the third floor to see if Gardell and the others were in. She

rounded the corner and walked down the hallway and recognized Stu coming towards her.

“What are you doing?” asked Maddie.

“I was looking for Gardell, but he’s gone out.” said Stu.

“Did you hear?” she asked.

“Yes. That stinks.”

Maddie switched the basket from one hip to the other and it slipped from her hands.

“Let me get that,” said Stu. He bent over to pick up the basket, his shirt falling forward just far enough for Maddie to see the scratches on his chest. Red angry lines clawed across into his skin.

He’s the killer.

Before she could hide her shock, he glanced up at her face and saw her expression. He looked down at his shirt. His eyes narrowed to slits.

“It was you. You killed her. You *raped* her.”

“I had no choice.” He smiled complacently. “She was going to ruin it for us.”

Maddie backed away.

“Now I’m sorry about you Maddie. But ...

She had to escape. Maddie turned and ran. The staircase to the roof was in front of her, and she sped to the top of the stairs and flung open the door. Out on the roof the wind hit her, and she panicked. *What am I doing up here? Where can I go?* She hurried

past the skylight, past the pigeon coop. It was empty. Where were all of the pigeons?

She looked around wildly. She hated heights. *I'm trapped.*

Stu was at the door, taking his time. Moving methodically. He turned around and locked it.

He had the master key. She glanced around behind her. The fire escape. *I'll have to climb down.*

He came after her blocking her way. "That's right!" he said gleefully. "You don't like heights, do you, Maddie?"

Don't think about it. But she could hear the whir of the freeway, and saw herself being tossed in the air over the speeding cars below. *No. No. No.*

She made a lunge towards the fire escape, but he countered and cut her off.

Distract him. Maybe Andy will come up to feed the pigeons. "You didn't have to kill her!"

"I did. I've been doing comedy nine years. I should have made it by now. I couldn't let her spoil my chance." He opened his arms like he was delivering benediction. "I did it for all of us." He moved toward her, backing her into the corner of the building. "You know, I've always been attracted to you."

"You're the serial rapist."

He smiled. "You found me out." He shrugged. "I usually control myself, wait until I'm on the road. But there are so many beautiful women here. Too many temptations."

Think! Think! What can I do? Keep him talking. Suddenly she remembered her audition at Quip's. He'd been at the club earlier that evening. "You raped Roxanne Cooper."

He touched his chest contritely and sang out, "Guilty."

What to do? What to do? She glanced over the side and felt dizzy. *Stop. Not now! Get control!* There was a maple tree directly below. Could she jump onto a branch? But it was so far down. What if she missed?

"She wanted it. She didn't even struggle."

"You had a knife at her throat, you pervert!"

"Ohhh, name calling." Stu's face hardened. "That's not like you, Maddie."

"What about that night at the Comedy Store? You said women have the right to say no at any point."

He grinned. "Convincing, wasn't I?"

She backed to the corner of the building and sat down on the ledge.

He smiled. "You're making this very easy for me. That's right! Jump! Your career's over. The papers will say you were too distraught."

She glanced down. A wave of nausea hit her. *Don't look down!* She swallowed. Maddie swung her leg over the side and felt the contour. *The churrigueresque.* The elaborate ornamentation on the side of the building was a mass of open curves and shapes. *Could I climb down it? But it doesn't reach the ground.*

She put her legs over the side, gripped the edge of the ledge and lowered herself. She felt for a niche where she could place her feet. *Oh God, I don't want to die.* She

found a toehold, and she reached down searching for a place to hold onto. She let go of the ledge, dropping out of sight.

Stu raced to the edge of the building and looked down. "Very clever," he said, angrily. "But it's not going to work." He leaned over and reached for her fingers to unhook them. "This is a waste of time. You're not going to survive." He reached down and grabbed her hand trying to dislodge it.

Maddie held tight with her other hand, and with the one he pried at, yanked it away, swung up and clawed his face.

"Bitch!" He pulled back, wiping his cheek, "Always with the nails."

"Explain that, bastard!" Maddie found another toehold and moved further down.

What will I do when I run out of churrigueresque? Maybe a neighbor will see me?

Where is everybody? Can't someone see me hanging off the side of the building?

"Help!" she cried. "Help!"

"Shut up!" Stu sat down and swung his legs over the side, trying to kick her.

Maddie hunched down just in time, but he lowered himself and found her hand with his foot and mashed it.

"No," she cried.

There was a creaking and she felt the churrigueresque beginning to loosen. Stu stopped and clutched the decorative molding, wrapping his arm around it.

Maddie heard a cooing. Andy's pigeons fluttered around Stu. One landed on his shoulder, then another and another.

"Get the fuck away from me."

Another swooped down on his head. “No!” He squirmed his shoulders to no avail, then swatted his arm. The plaster indentation he was standing on crumbled away. He slipped backward losing his balance, waving his arms. The pigeons flapped their wings. He screamed.

Maddie felt him brush by her as he fell. She gripped tightly and heard limbs snapping as he plunged through the maple tree to the brick walkway, landing with a sickening thud.

She waited, barely breathing, then reached up for the next niche. There was a frightening creak. She felt the molding shifting away from the building.

“Help,” she pleaded in a voice too soft to be heard. “Please, someone.” She inhaled and at the top of her lungs screamed.

A moment later, Cleo darted out the door and looked up. “Ohmygod!” cried Cleo. “Hang on! I’m coming! Gardell and Andy came around the corner and Cleo yelled, “Gardell! Andy! Help! Hurry!”

Epilogue

Amelia Reynolds moved to Connecticut to marry her boyfriend and start a family.

Gardell was hired as a joke writer for *The Tonight Show*.

The KABC news reporter tracked down Brenda's father. He was listed in the phonebook and lives with a second family in his hometown, Lawrence, Kansas. A collection was taken, and Brenda was buried in the same cemetery as Marilyn Monroe.

Stu survived his fall with a broken arm and a broken back. He was sentenced to serve two consecutive life sentences.

Dexter was hired as a co-host on a children's TV show for the new Warner Brothers Network.

Roxanne is now a regular at Quip's Comedy Club. She also volunteers at the Rape Crisis Center.

Nick Stanco is cast to play a supporting role in an action movie with his idol, Sylvester Stallone.

Andy Cohen returned to New Jersey to complete his college education, but vows he and the pigeons will return after he graduates.

In a new TV pilot, Boyd Jackson will play Gomer Pyle's Don Juan of a cousin.

Riley Morgan is a headliner in Las Vegas.

Maddie Quinn—as a result of Maddie's interview, airing numerous times on all the Los Angeles TV news stations, including *Entertainment Tonight*, *Inside Edition*, and KMEX, the number one Spanish TV station in Los Angeles, Maddie was cast as a nurse on a hit medical drama. Her character is described as “a sensitive caregiver who also brings comic relief to the series.” Her husband, Bret, took early retirement and plays golf every morning at the Wilshire Country Club. Her daughter, Michele, received a basketball scholarship to the University of San Francisco. She played on the “Cinderella Team” making it to “Sweet Sixteen” during March Madness.

Clark Gable and Tinkerbell were discovered outside Ralph's Market and are now starring in a series of dog food commercials. Thanks to the residual checks, Cleo and the dogs have moved to a home in the Hollywood Hills.