Woman Enters Left

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Chapter One

1952

Movies always begin with a panorama.

A skyline. A beach. A cactus-dotted desert. Paris, Rome, Honolulu, New York City.

This one opens in Los Angeles.

It's 1952, and the city doesn't have much of a skyline. Low buildings squat in front of the Santa Monica Mountains. A few are recognizable. The uninspired bulk of the United Artists Theater. The turquoise-stuccoed Eastern Columbia Building. The highest, the gold-spired City Hall, silhouetted almost alone against the dark mountains.

We zoom in. If not for that opening panorama, it could be any city in mid-December. The cafés, the hotels, the cinemas, the self-important office buildings. The shopwindows decorated with tinsel and artificial snow. It could be New York or Chicago. It could be a studio's back-lot set. Beautiful and busy people hurry down the

streets. They hail taxis, they step from streetcars, they push in and out of buildings. They balance shopping bags and gift boxes. They drop pocket change in red Salvation Army kettles. Everyone has a purpose, guided by an inner stage direction. Businessmen with trilby hats and folded newspapers. Young women with lipstick and slim dresses. Older women with handbags dangling from the crooks of their arms. It could almost be stock footage of Christmas in the city.

But then we see palm trees and sunshine between the garlands and strings of lights. We see lighted signs outside the theaters – the Pantages, the Paramount, the distinctive Egyptian and Chinese. We see the Knickerbocker Hotel and the Garden of Allah, the towered Crossroads of the World, the nine giant white letters so stark against the distant hillside and we know: This isn't stock footage. This is Hollywood.

A woman enters left.

Already we know she must be our leading lady. She stands out among the generic businessmen and lipsticked women. She doesn't swing her hips or smile at the passing men. She doesn't check her reflection in shopwindows. She's not pretty, if we're being honest. Striking, maybe. She doesn't have the lushness of a Lana Turner or Rita Hayworth or the fresh-faced prettiness of a Doris Day. But, eyes forward, shoulders back, she walks with a certainty that is infinitely more attractive.

She's dressed neatly, in a crisp white blouse and navy suit. The skirt isn't too short or too long. The jacket is feminine without being fussy. Beneath the turned-up collar of the jacket, she wears a thin scarf the color of daffodils,

smoothed down and tied in a square knot. It suggests a man's necktie. She might have intended that.

Perhaps she's a businesswoman, straight from a meeting. Perhaps a saleswoman, fresh from landing a big contract. She carries a soft brown briefcase, creased in the corners with use. Even without knowing what she does, we know she's a woman used to navigating her way through a man's world.

Her stride is deliberate, forceful, confident – that is, until she approaches an intersection. Here she pauses and looks in each of the four directions. She closes her eyes beneath a streetlamp topped with a decorative metal Christmas tree briefly, as if comparing these two crossed streets against a mental map. With a nod of satisfaction, she continues on her journey.

Eventually she turns off the main street. The sidewalks are less crowded here. All white stucco and red tile, it's a residential area. This isn't a neighborhood of mansions, of movie stars and cigar-wielding producers. It's not marked on any "Homes of the Stars" maps. Its streets are lined with quiet apartments and modest hotels.

After a few blocks, she stops in front of a building painted a brilliant blue and tucked away behind a shady green courtyard. It's an apartment building, unofficially called the "Blaue Engel," though Dietrich never lived there. Construction finished the day the movie came out. It's not as fashionable an address as the El Greco or Hollywood Tower, but its apartments never sit empty for long.

Setting her briefcase on the sidewalk in front of the Blaue Engel, she opens her wide leather handbag and conducts a search. A man with a shopping bag edges around her, as

does a woman with a small, furiously yipping dog. The man stares back over his shoulder but, engrossed with the contents of her purse, she doesn't notice. She finally extracts a lace-bordered handkerchief and dabs at her forehead. It's not especially warm out. Perhaps she's dabbing away a headache or a bad day. She refolds the damp handkerchief and glances at a little gold wristwatch. It's a Longines, slim and coppery. The way she turns her wrist and shakes away her sleeve in a practiced movement, it's clear she's a woman with a schedule. Right now she frowns down at the watch. Dropping the handkerchief back into her bag and retrieving the worn briefcase, she heads for the arched courtyard doorway.

The courtyard is leafy and dripping with bougainvillea. It's a bright, wild backdrop for this woman, in her serious suit and neck scarf. A man in a rumpled black jacket looks up from a potted geranium.

"Louise Wilde," she says, before he can ask.

The jacketed man dusts off his hands. He eyes her, but there's no recognition.

She's been in films since '39. Two dozen of them, to be exact, nearly two a year. But surely they aren't his kind of films. This old man, with potting soil under his fingernails, doesn't go in for frothy pictures about showgirls and romance. The Betsey Barnes series, *Tap-Dance to Heaven, Red-Blooded Rita,* that new high society picture. All featuring "a small-town girl with big-city dreams," as the studio is fond of saying, all with a grand makeover scene, all with a husband won successfully by the end. He hasn't seen them, she's sure.

The man in the black jacket still waits by his geranium.

"I'm meeting Mr French," she adds.

He taps his head. "The lawyer fellow? He didn't say he was expecting a gal."

She tightens the grip on her black handbag.

"Well, he's upstairs." He pushes open a gate and indicates a set of metal stairs. "Number twelve."

Louise walks up the stairs by herself. The man has already gone back to his geranium. She finds the door marked "12," hung with a scrawny wreath. Of course, the door is blue.

For just a moment, she pauses in front of that blue-painted door. It's been a day and she'd rather be back at home in her bathrobe than here. All morning she'd been at the studio, arguing the new script. Fruitlessly. They'd nodded, smiled, and told her to be on set Monday or else. And then she finds a stack of messages in her dressing room from a lawyer with instructions to meet him at the Blaue Engel. Her fingers twitch for a Manhattan.

Before she can decide whether or not to knock, the door swings open.

Mr French looks exactly like a lawyer, with a three-piece wool suit and unnaturally white teeth. His hair is dyed and Brylcreemed to within an inch of its life. He's probably fifty, sixty years old, despite what the pancake makeup under his eyes wants you to think. He's more Hollywood than she is.

"Mrs Wilde?"

Her back straightens. "Miss." Every ounce of that earlier confidence is back. "Miss Wilde."

"You're a hard girl to get a hold of." He peers over her shoulder. "Did your husband come with you?"

"Was he named in the will as well?"

"Ha!" Mr French flashes another toothy smile. "Of course not. But I just thought—"

"I had many reasons for marrying him. His legal expertise was not one of them." She draws her heels together. "Shall we get to our business?"

He stares a moment, as though trying to decide whether he's been insulted or not. "Of course. Yes. Will you come in, please?"

The apartment is small and tidy, with pale yellow walls and a scrubbed tile floor. A tiny Christmas tree, dripping with tinsel, perches on a bookcase in the corner, the only concession to the season. Stepping in, she slips off her gloves. "This is all very surprising. I'm still not quite sure how I merited a mention in Miss Daniels' will. As I said on the phone, I scarcely knew her."

"Are you sure?" Mr French shuts the door behind Louise and goes to the tiny dining table, where he's left a sheaf of papers and a pair of horn-rimmed reading glasses. "I assumed she was a family friend."

Louise had grown up in Newark, New Jersey, with a widowed father and far too many games of checkers. The most she could hope for were visits from Uncle Hank, a balding man with a perpetually spotted tie who owned the butcher shop with her father. He came for dinner most Sundays, always with a meringue-topped pie. No other visitors. No family friends, and certainly none as exciting as a Hollywood screenwriter.

"I didn't know her before I moved out here." Louise sets her white gloves and handbag on the table. Her briefcase she tucks under the dining chair. "But, really, I didn't know

her much even after. I met her a handful of times at parties. Once at the Brown Derby. And half a dozen nods passing in the hallway at MGM. I didn't even know that she lived here at the Blaue Engel until today."

He's brought three paper cups of coffee. Obviously he really had expected Arnie to come. And why wouldn't he? *Movieland* once described her as the "effervescent muse to Arnold Bates's genius" and *Modern Screen* said she brought the "pop and sparkle" into his screenplays. As though she were the pretty and the fun to Arnie's wisdom. As though their careers were intertwined from the moment they exchanged vows. She's never effervesced outside of the klieg lights' glare, but Mr French doesn't know that. After all, if you can't believe the Hollywood rags, what can you believe?

One cup is half-empty, the other two covered with cardboard lids. She wonders how he carried them all from the diner down the street. He opens both until he finds one pale with milk. Clearly that one is for her. He untwists a paper napkin holding two sugar cubes, but she saves him a step and reaches for the other cup.

He raises thick eyebrows. "You drink it black?"

The coffee is tepid and bitter, but she doesn't relent. "Who doesn't?"

She sits and crosses her feet at the ankles. It's the blocking this scene calls for. The leading man, with his important papers and his important news, is the center of this scene. The leading lady – she minimizes, crossing her legs, lowering her shoulders, looking down at her fingers laced around the paper cup. The coffee is awful, but it's something to hold on to.

Mr French plays the part of the scene's hero well. Of course he does, with his artfully arranged hair. "As I mentioned on the phone, I'm Florence Daniels' executor. You've been named in the will."

Louise hadn't seen the obituary at first, but she'd looked it up after Mr French's phone call. It was brief and effective.

> DANIELS, Florence, passed away December 13, 1952, at Mount Sinai Hospital. She was born June 12, 1898, in Orange, New Jersey. In lieu of flowers, contributions may be sent to the Screen Writers Guild. Services will be held at Blessed Sacrament.

"May I ask, how did Miss Daniels pass away?"

"Cancer, I think it was." He unfolds his reading glasses. "When she made the appointment to draw up the will, she said it was the second time she had imminent death on the schedule and maybe this time she'd just go ahead and do it."

Louise can't help it – half of a laugh sneaks out. Mr French looks suitably shocked. So much for not effervescing.

"She wrote the will herself. Near the end, she wasn't able to do much, but it's in her own hand." He slips on his glasses. " 'I, Florence Jane Daniels, being of sound mind and reasonably intact body (minus a wholly unnecessary appendix and twelve teeth), do write my last will and testament, the final act to the screenplay of my life.' "

This will is better than most of the scripts Louise is given. "I may not have known her personally, but her sense of humor was famous," she says.

Mr French sets down the paper. "The reason I called

you here to Miss Daniels' apartment instead of to my office . . . Well, you aren't just named in the will, Mrs Wilde." He leans back and rests his hands on his knees. "With the exception of a few small bequests, you are Florence Daniels' sole beneficiary."

With a slosh, Louise spills lukewarm coffee down the back of her hand.

He has the good sense to jump up and move the will out of the way, but a trail of coffee runs across the table to her white gloves. He goes in search of a paper towel, continuing to talk to her from the kitchen. "I've started probate proceedings. But there should be no contest. That means—"

"I know what that means."

"Right." He emerges with a handful of paper napkins, which he passes across the table. "Like I said, there should be no contest. She has no living parents or siblings. And, as you can see, no husband or children. Spent too much time at the studio for either, I imagine."

She mops at her hand and the table and her sodden gloves. She's still trying to process his announcement. A woman she'd admired but barely exchanged two dozen words with had just left everything to her.

"Just a few things to distribute, and then the remainder of the property is yours. The apartment here and its contents, her savings, a Schwinn kept down in the gardener's shed." He takes a gulp of coffee, scratches his chin, and picks up the will again. "She left a grand to the Hollywood Studio Club. One hundred dollars each to Blessed Sacrament Church, the Entertainment Industry Foundation, the Los Angeles Public Library, and the proprietor of Chen's Dragon Café. Twenty-six years' worth of *Variety* back

issues to one Howard Frink. She also left three dollars and . . .” He squints and straightens his glasses. “Three dollars and an orange sombrero to Miss Anita Loos, ‘to thank her for that rhumba.’ ”

“I was introduced to Miss Loos once. I think it was when she was working on *When Ladies Meet.*” She takes another sip of whatever coffee is left in her cup and makes a face.

“Coffee that bad?” he asks.

It is, but she doesn’t want to be rude. “It’s not that. This is just all so strange.”

Mr French takes off the glasses with one hand and rubs the bridge of his nose. “You might not have known her, but she knew you, and must have thought well of you. Howard Frink was her neighbor for seventeen years, and all he got was a stack of old magazines.”

As she picks up her coffee again, she sees it has left a ring on the table. Though technically the table now belongs to her, she feels guilty. When Mr French turns back to his stacks of paper, she rubs out the ring with her thumb.

“I think I read something about your husband recently.”

She hopes he isn’t talking about the *American Legion Magazine* piece. Something about Hollywood screenwriters and their “red” pens. Mr French looks just like the American Legion type. “It must have been something about Korea.” She remembers to smile. “He just came home, you see.”

“That must have been it.” He talks without glancing up from his reading and initialing. “Well, I bet he’s glad to be back. Home cooking sure beats anything army mess serves up. Or was he navy?”

"Neither. He went over as a journalist."

"Is that so? Well, sounds better than trudging through a jungle, that's for sure. The whole time I was in the Philippines, I thought about coming home to my wife's custard pie. Do you make pie?"

"Not often."

He looks up then and gives a wink. "Maybe now would be a good time to start."

She can't think of a response, so just keeps the smile pasted on.

"I have to sort through the things that won't be staying." He glances around the room. "Also, I have to find an orange sombrero."

"I could help you look for it."

Really, she wants an excuse to peek around, to see the life she's inherited.

He nods. He seems relieved.

She takes the coffee cup to the narrow kitchen and empties it into the sink. A lone saucepan sits upside down on a dish towel. Judging by the pantry, Miss Daniels had subsisted on saltine crackers and peanut butter, raisins, and can after can of tomato soup. A whole shelf of the pantry holds nothing but red and white Campbell's cans. The fridge doesn't offer much more: club soda, half a jar of pickled onions, and a paper-wrapped slice of chocolate cake with all of the icing scraped off.

Maybe that's all Miss Daniels really ate. A Hollywood diet, straight from the pages of *Pageant* or *Photoplay.* Louise understands. She's been on one for the past decade and a half. Shaken egg yolks for breakfast. Single scoops of tuna salad for lunch, poised on a curve of a lettuce leaf. Veal for dinner.

Or maybe Miss Daniels was simply an indifferent cook. Louise can't see more than salt and pepper in the cabinets. Nothing to suggest culinary brilliance. All she sees in the way of cookbooks is a single typewritten recipe for chicken croquettes tacked inside the cupboard door.

The main room looks more lived-in than the kitchen. Near to the door is the little dining table with two chairs. The lawyer's papers cover nearly the whole thing. A low sofa strewn with velveteen pillows faces a row of bookshelves and a framed lobby poster for *The Temptress*. Louise wonders if it was a favorite film or if Miss Daniels had worked on it. She'd made her name in the twenties, after all, working her way up from scenario girl to screenwriter.

Above the sofa is a small, framed painting, done in oranges and aquas and moss greens. In front of a pueblo, two women sit, one combing the other's hair. It's a quiet little watercolor, nothing particularly noteworthy. It's done right on paper with faint hints of pencil lines behind the paint. Somehow, though, it suits this unpretentious apartment.

A small and meaningfully cluttered desk is tucked in the corner, by the window. It's dominated by an Underwood Champion and scattered stacks of white paper. A few framed photos are propped here and there on the papers. There's no television or radio in the apartment, but there's an old crank record player and a modest stack of albums. Mostly old jazz, like Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters.

Louise runs an index finger along the bookshelves. There are few novels, though Miss Daniels seems to have had everything by Elinor Glyn and Radclyffe Hall.

Face-out on a shelf is a crisp new copy of *The Price of Salt,* with a bookmark tucked in halfway through.

Most of the shelves are taken up, unsurprisingly, with black-bound screenplays. One by one, Louise pulls the manuscripts from the shelves and flips through them. She recognizes a few. There, Miss Daniels' adaptation of *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself*. That was the first film that brought her acclaim. And her screenplays for *Wild Winds* and *Such Is Love*. Louise remembers seeing *Wild Winds* one rainy afternoon as a girl and passionately vowing to set off on an adventure of her own one day. Her adventure wasn't to Africa, but Hollywood felt far enough away to an eighteen-year-old girl with thirty dollars and a whole lot more determination.

Others on the shelves are unfamiliar. Florence Daniels was known for her adaptations of women's stories, the sorts of films that Cukor or Goulding directed and women flocked to see. But not all of the manuscripts are her well-known adaptations.

Louise takes down original screenplays, unfamiliar, unpublished, unproduced screenplays. She scans the titles, opens the pages, so white they were likely never read. No rings from coffee mugs or smudged fingerprints. These manuscripts hadn't made the rounds.

They're stories about women. Women strong and successful, leaving their marks on a world determined to forget them. Women not all too different from Louise and Florence Daniels herself. One is about an actress carrying her performance throughout a tentative marriage. Another about a young mother struggling to hold tight to an almost forgotten girlhood passion. One about two friends dying of, yet living despite, radium poisoning. They're the kinds of stories Louise

longs to see on the screen. Already, she's casting the screenplays in her head, picturing the blocking, the gestures, the inflections, the sweep of the camera. This one she could see Gene Tierney in. Maybe Constance Bennett. That one, Pier Angeli, with her delicacy and strength. And this one, she decides, could only be Lauren Bacall.

The papers on the desk are scraps of more screenplays, ideas waiting for the rest of their stories. She rifles through the pages, but it's the framed photographs that catch her eye. Miss Daniels at a premiere with Anderson Lawler. At a costume party with Sonya Levien, both dressed imperiously as biblical queens. Sitting poolside in a group at George Cukor's in wide flowered pants and a sun hat. Miss Daniels had been an attractive woman.

But one photo doesn't have other Hollywood notables in it. It doesn't even include Florence Daniels herself. It's a little older than the rest, somewhat fuzzy, as though it had been taken with an old cardboard Brownie. The snapshot is of a young woman posed by a desert rock, squinting at the sun. Dark bobbed hair whips out from beneath the scarf tied around her head. She's pale, either from the sun's shining straight on her face, the film processing, or the weariness of travel, but she's smiling. Whatever rock in whatever desert she leans against, she's happy to be there.

Louise recognizes the woman, though she's not famous. She recognizes her from another photo, a stiff studio portrait that she knows well. And she should. The portrait, of a couple in modest wedding finery, has sat for the past thirty-two years on her father's piano.

A thousand thoughts flood her mind, but the first is a

wash of relief. There's the connection. Florence Daniels knew her mother.

Maybe it isn't too surprising. Dad always said that Mom went to California. Drove all the way across the country, only to die somewhere between here and there. Maybe she reached Los Angeles. Maybe, in her last days, she met a young screenwriter.

She knows she's wrong the moment she opens the desk drawer. Inside the desk is a large, heavy envelope, and inside that there are more photos.

She spreads them out, straight over the typewriter and the stacked manuscripts. Her mother, forever young in her memory, is in them, but so is a young Florence Daniels. The two women, with arms around one another, are posed against trees, mountains, lakes, and a battered Model T in snapshots of a long-ago adventure. Even without reading the smudged captions on the backs of the photos, Louise knows they are a record of her mother's final trip.

The last two items to slip out of the envelope confirm this.

One is a lined notebook, like the ones schoolgirls use for compositions. It's filled with penciled script, sometimes neat and flowing, sometimes cramped with emotion. A makeshift travel journal, dated 1926. She flips pages to see how far it goes. Journal entries fill about a third of it and a sketched-out screenplay fills another third. It's titled *When She Was King,* the same as one of the screenplays on the shelf. At the very back of the notebook, past dozens of blank pages, is the single, lonely line, *"Holding your hand, I suddenly wasn't as scared."*

The other volume is a small cardboard-bound book, the kind given out for free as a promotion or advertisement. A

little family accounts ledger. This one says "Feldman's Pharmacy – Sellers of Vit-A-Milk" and has preprinted pages to keep track of weekly budgets and expenses for the year. In the columns are indeed household items, printed in rows of tiny letters: groceries, expenses, planned meals. Sometimes, in the corners of the pages, little sketches in ink, of trees and cars, of a little girl's face, of windmills and cacti.

But, as she flips through it, she sees more than lists and plans. There are personal notes, notes that stretch and push beyond the succinctness of a household record. Sometimes only a sentence, sometimes a crisp paragraph, they're little glimpses of the woman behind the housewife.

The lists of groceries, the mundane details about cans of tomatoes and fryer chickens, are written in the same hand as Louise's birth date in the front of the family Bible. Unexpected tears spring to her eyes.

"Is everything fine?" Mr French comes out from the bedroom with an orange-dyed sombrero in his hands.

Louise blinks and starts catching up the scattered photographs. She'd forgotten she wasn't alone in the apartment. An actress is always on camera. "Yes." She shakes her head to clear it. "Are you almost finished?"

"I've found all of those *Variety* issues. I'm going to see if the caretaker has a box or two."

"Fine." She turns the envelope over to slide the photos back inside. She hadn't noticed before, but it's addressed to her, in those same small inked letters. Addressed, but never mailed. *"For AL, who has many journeys ahead of her"* is written across the unsealed flap.

Apart from the wedding photograph and the early death, Louise never knew much about her mother. This

envelope, with its photographs and makeshift diary, hidden in a stranger's apartment, holds more of her mother's story than she's ever had before.

While she waits for Mr French to return, she pours a glass of club soda; she doesn't find any gin. With glass in hand, she sits at the table and opens her briefcase. The script inside she extracts with two fingers. *The Princess of Las Vegas Boulevard*. She'd only flipped through it earlier at the meeting. It's so gaudy and girly she's surprised the front cover isn't sequin-studded. She opens to the first page and wishes she hadn't. Stilted dialogue, right from the start.

She abandons both script and drink and wanders back to the bookcase.

What she wouldn't give to star in a script like one of these. Stories about smart, daring, resourceful women, doing more than blushing and sighing up at their leading men. She wants one of these roles so bad she can taste it like sugar at the back of her tongue. Drawn by the title *When She Was King,* Louise takes the screenplay from the shelf. She loves the contradiction and the complete absence of the word "princess" in the title.

Right away, she's impressed.

The writing is crisp, the dialogue playful. The characters are so real she can almost shake their hands. From the snippets she reads, it's about two women rekindling a friendship on a drive across the country. There are campgrounds and card games and a very resilient Model T. There are tears and regrets, and also yearnings held tight to the chest. She wonders if her mother's last trip was like this. She wonders if that's why Florence Daniels started writing it in the back of her travel journal.

She hears Mr French's voice outside and slips the script into her empty briefcase. On impulse she takes another from the bookcase, and then another. She stuffs them in the briefcase until it's full.

Those few pages of *When She Was King* had brought up a surge of defiance so sharp she can almost taste it. Two women driving across the country with the same stubbornness that had brought Louise out to Hollywood all those years ago. Back then she'd had a determination that she'd almost forgotten until this moment. "Just like your mother," Dad had always said. It had taken guts to set off on a journey with nothing but a Model T between you and the unpaved United States.

Mr French comes in with a cardboard box and Louise latches shut the briefcase. Though it's all hers, she's sure she's not allowed to take anything yet; lawyers thrive on red tape and paperwork. She doesn't even know why she's trying to sneak the briefcase full of screenplays out. Maybe because, reading this one, she's been reminded of Mom and her courage. Maybe it's because she wants the same courage, through the dialogue of the script and in real life.

She retrieves her coffee-spotted gloves and handbag and says all the right things to Mr French, hoping he won't notice that her briefcase has grown in size, hoping he won't notice the gaping holes in the bookcase. He doesn't.

It's not until she's back out on the sidewalk that she remembers she left the two diaries sitting in the envelope on the desk.