

COMBUST THE SUN

A RICHFIELD & RIVERS MYSTERY

by

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PROLOGUE

It would be months before I would learn of Sterling Hackett's desperate late-night call to Robert Isaacs regarding the too-perfect Italian boy whose exquisitely carved body lay naked on the floor of Sterling's palatial Bel-Air estate, threatening to expire and take with him Sterling's hard-won motion picture career.

Sterling apparently thought the youth had merely passed out from erotic exhaustion and designer drugs, until he felt for a pulse in his neck. Panicked, he tried to haul the boy out of his living room but, for all of his lithe beauty, the lad was far too large for him to handle. Sterling dropped to his knees beside the boy and began CPR. I could envision Hollywood's action-adventure idol, infamous for never being able to remember the most elementary dialogue, shouting, "Four breaths, two pushes, or two breaths, three pushes? Shit!"

That's when I imagine Sterling rang for help. The booming voice that had enthralled women by the thousands, scaling up to high C in near hysteria, "He's not breathing! We were partying and I gave him a little Ecstasy. That's all. You gotta do something, Bobby!"

"I warned you about this!"

"You're wasting time!" Sterling shouted.

"Try to get him breathing. Do CPR or something. I'll get someone over to your house right away. Do whatever she says."

Moments later across town, another phone rang in Barrett Silvers's Los Feliz home. Naked to the waist, she propped herself up in bed on one elbow and tried to sound awake when she picked up the receiver.

The voice on the other end of the line was loud and firm. "Barrett, get over to Sterling Hackett's house right away. He's got a kid over there

who's not breathing. See if you can get him going. If you can't, I don't want any trace of that kid ever having been near him, you got that?"

"I'm not dressed—"

"I don't give a fuck what you're not! Be there in two goddamned minutes and get that kid breathing! Then call me." The phone went dead.

Shaking, Barrett dove into the pants hanging over the chair in her bedroom, slung on a shirt, slammed her bare feet into her loafers, and ran to her car, now fully aware that "she who rides on the tiger's back must go where the tiger goes."

CHAPTER ONE

My feet landed on the treadmill in time to the shriek of violins and a country singer proclaiming that the devil was down in Georgia trying to make a deal.

If he thinks Georgia's tough, he ought to try Hollywood, I thought and cranked the treadmill speed up a notch, out of frustration. The music was shattered by my own voice in the distance—"You've reached Teague Richfield. Leave your name and number and I'll call you back"—then a shrill beep signaling the caller to talk.

"Teague? Barrett. How about lunch at Orca's, one o'clock? I really need to talk to you. Unless you call, I'll assume we're on."

I shut off the treadmill and reached for the cordless phone just in time to hear the line go dead.

"Why didn't you get it?" I panted to Elmo, who lowered his long basset ears and let out a disapproving groan.

Staggering to the kitchen counter, I deposited myself on a bar stool in a palpitating heap and replayed Barrett's message. Whatever she wanted to tell me was obviously important. I'd known Barrett for years. The common denominator of our friendship was our studio ties, and the fact that she once fucked my brains out, but we rarely lunched.

I scanned the trades to be "au courant" for my lunch with Barrett, who knew more players in Hollywood than a gossip columnist. Half the women screenwriters in town owed their careers to her, and the other half were afraid of her. Barrett confided in me precisely because I wasn't afraid of her—occasionally attracted to her, but not afraid of her; and in Hollywood, that alone could constitute friendship.

I glanced at an article on Marathon Movie Studio's CEO, Lee

Talbot. Next to it was a smaller article about Marathon's star, Sterling Hackett, and the ongoing investigation into Hackett's alleged procuring of young boys for sex. I tossed the trade magazine aside as the phone rang again. It was Mom, in Tulsa, calling to tell me to turn on CNN immediately.

"Channel forty-one!" she shouted, persistent in her belief that the entire U.S. was on her cable system. I located the channel carrying CNN in L.A.

The crawl running along the bottom of the screen read "Dateline Oklahoma," over a scene of several homicide investigators and coroner's assistants loading a body into a morgue van while a reporter announced that in Tulsa, Oklahoma, prominent businessman Frank Anthony was found murdered and police were still looking for leads. I turned up the volume. Frank Anthony was a legend when I was growing up in the Midwest. I was ten years old when I saw him step out of a truck in the middle of an oilfield. He was wearing a pair of boots so highly polished that the cow who gave up the leather must have been able to see her reflection every time she scratched her ass. I asked my dad if Mr. Anthony was rich.

"Richer than three feet up a bull's butt," was my dad's colorful reply.

Frank Anthony owned everything from oilfields and car dealerships to shopping malls and movie theaters and was now apparently one of the richest dead men in Oklahoma.

"Do you see it?" Mom yelled through the phone line. "It would make a great movie! Maybe you could stay here and work on it. Diane Sawyer said the next earthquake could sink all of California into the ocean, so you should come home."

"If Diane Sawyer wants me home, I'm there," I said and told Mom I'd see her in a couple of days.



At noon, I donned my new tweed faux riding jacket, looking a bit like I'd taken a wrong turn at the fox hunt, and drove through Coldwater Canyon to Beverly Hills in high spirits over my lunch with Barrett Silvers. If Marathon had a project for me, I could leave for Tulsa secure in the knowledge that work and money awaited my return.

As a screenwriter, I vacillated between the certainty that I would never be able to write the stories I was given and the fear that I would never be given any stories to write. And of course, there was my history with Barrett, which made me doubt I could write at all.

Dozens of stately palms lined Beverly Drive, stretching their elegant trunks toward a blue and balmy heaven, their leafy tops blowing in the wind like great pom-poms cheering on the row of multimillion-dollar homes. Hollywood might be violent, rude, and expensive, but she was still the woman with whom we all wanted to be intimate. Even I had succumbed to her allure, receiving my Hollywood initiation at the Beverly Bungalows that infamous Friday night when I learned that no one's ever too old to be naïve.

I went east, then south, taking a right on Third, and pulled up in front of the Sante Fe–style restaurant. Only a few small European letter tiles embedded in the adobe designated the building as Orca's. It was an address one could easily miss, which seemed to be a criterion for Hollywood hot spots. I entered the building, looping around the adobe wall, down a short and narrow unmarked path.

Inside, studio executives, directors, writers, and agents were huddled in twos and threes eating overpriced pasta in a room with so much reverb only Marlee Matlin would be able to make out what anyone was saying. I could see Barrett seated on the coveted patio enjoying the beautiful summer day. The light sliced through the vine-covered trellis overhead onto her Greco-carved curls, which lay flat against her head like an olive wreath, crowning the beauty and power and grace I remembered from that day I'd first stepped foot into her office on the Marathon Studio lot. I'd gotten the appointment by virtue of the script I'd submitted entitled *Sveltiana*, based on the true story of New York's top fashion model caught up in the runway rituals of binge-and-purge perfectionism.

It was exactly four p.m. when Barrett's gracefully gay male assistant led me to her office for that memorable meeting. From the moment I saw her, I realized I was looking at the most captivatingly androgynous creature I would ever see in my lifetime, her DNA seemingly able to morph kaleidoscopically from X to Y chromosome and back again, daring me to settle on a gender. When I entered the room, she rose to her feet, tall and washboard smooth from her chest down to her pleated slacks. Lifting her French-cuffed arm, tan at the

wrist where the expensive gold watch dangled loosely, she shook my hand. “I’ve enjoyed reading your script,” she said with a genuine smile. Her phone rang before I could speak and she excused herself, picking up the receiver and showing the muscle definition of a young man who worked out at the gym. She pivoted, to profile her chiseled features framed by the Adonis curls, and stared out the window as she spoke. She could only be described as smashing handsome.

“What time is it now?” she asked the caller and gave me a “this will only take a moment longer” look. Her light brown eyes were smart and cunning, going slightly soft in the center, if anyone could ever get to her center. Just looking at her left me short of breath and, of course, she knew that. She traded on that.

“All right then, six,” she assured the caller and hung up. “I’m sorry, I’ve just learned that I have to get over the hill and be at the Beverly at six to meet Talbot.” Name-dropping in L.A. was always effective, especially if the name ran the studio. “I wanted to talk about your script today because I’m leaving town next week...” She paused in thought. “Tell you what, if you want, we could meet this evening around sevenish at the Bev, if you’re not tied up.”

“That would be great,” I said.

“Good.” She bounced to her feet and shook my hand again. “Then I’ll see you shortly. If I’m not in the bar, ask Amanda, the redhead behind the desk, where I am and she’ll get us hooked up.”

“Perfect,” I said and left, elated that Barrett Silvers, head of development at Marathon Studios, enjoyed reading my script and delighted that I was going to get to see her tonight, script or no script.



Promptly at seven, I entered the Beverly lobby and scanned the bar for Barrett. My quizzing the redhead behind the desk led me to bungalow 42, where a heavysset, matronly woman wearing a hotel uniform opened the door. She invited me in, saying she was Teresa, the massage therapist for the hotel, and this was Marta, who was in training. From across the room, Barrett, lying facedown and naked on a massage table, spoke nonchalantly, inviting me in. “My meeting was short. Talbot offered me his suite for the weekend, and of course, I never pass up pleasure.”

Her long, well-proportioned frame was tan from the nape of her neck to the soles of her feet. No white sock or panty lines for Barrett.

“Teague is a very good writer,” Barrett told the masseuses, who oohed appropriately and offered me a free massage because “Marta is in training.” Barrett laughed and asked who could turn down a free massage. I was ushered into the bathroom to hang up my clothes, shower off, and have a glass of wine, all the while believing this was the most So-Cal studio pitch I’d ever encountered.

After my second glass of wine, I decided that, in fact, this was the way all studio pitches should unfold; then, even if my story were turned down, I would be too relaxed to care. Marta gave me a forty-five minute going-over that made me question whether or not she was really in training. When I was as relaxed as a boneless chicken, she helped me up and placed me on the bed on clean towels and covered me with a sheet.

Assuming Barrett was still being massaged, I closed my eyes and was in a dream state when I heard the click of the latch as the door softly closed. Barrett and I were alone as, of course, I had suspected we would be, even hoped we would be. The massage therapists had been dismissed so quickly that they left behind their tables and the obligatory New Age waterfall music. Barrett slid onto the bed beside me, wasting no time on preliminaries, and rubbed her tan, fully lubricated, frictionless form against my own.

“On page thirty-six,” she began flatly, as if she were sitting behind her desk and I were fully clothed, “when he first kisses Colette, he says, ‘This is just a prelude.’” She leaned into me slowly and kissed me warmly on the lips. My mind registered disappointment that Barrett couldn’t kiss. Being able to kiss, followed closely by being able to dance, were two key criteria in lovers, and oddly, I’d never found anyone who could do either satisfactorily. I reached up to encircle her with my arms, but she pushed my arms back to my side. It was clear that this was Barrett’s motion picture, and she was directing it.

“The first thirty minutes work beautifully,” she said of my screenplay, her hand stroking my inner thigh. “Then there’s that moment when he suddenly sees her alone for the first time, and he wants her so badly”—her lubricated fingers, slick with coconut oil, slid gently into the pathway she’d created—“so badly that he literally slams himself into her,” and Barrett entered me with an unexpected force that was

both frightening and exciting. She retreated slowly. “It sets up a nice character arc for him later that pays off in the last scene. Very smart, very sexy.” I moaned, and she slid on top of me, but for Barrett, the person beneath her was no longer me, it was the screenplay. She was making love to the words I’d written. She knew the dialogue and the silent act breaks and the characters. I felt as if I were merely the stage on which she’d chosen to perform her soliloquy. I told myself that I didn’t care that she didn’t care. She was technical perfection and my heart pounded, almost out of my chest, in testament to her skill. I perspired and pulsated in her hands in streaming applause. I was so emotionally high from her artful combinations of touch and taste and sound that my body could no longer take the intensity. It had to end.

“What would you say the climax of the movie is, Teague?”

“Tell me,” I whispered, my mouth open, my head back, and my body screaming.

“It’s your movie, you tell me,” she said provocatively.

“It’s your movie,” I panted, giving up my screenplay, and in one explosive wave, giving up myself.

“The climax is when Colette lets go, really lets go.” It was Barrett climaxing now, with no further assistance from me, just flailing and screaming and sobbing and all the while in me, finally falling forward on me and whispering, “I want to make your movie.”

I had no idea that this show in bungalow 42 had been playing for so many years it could have gone on tour, that Friday night at the Beverly had been a rite of passage for women writers for a decade, a drama replayed time and again with Amanda and the masseuse, and that Barrett’s Friday-at-four, sex-at-seven appointments with unsuspecting screenwriters were legend. I thought I was the star, because that’s how naïveté works, when in fact, I was just an extra. New to Hollywood, I had not yet heard the cocktail party joke, “Barrett Silvers first makes you, and *then* she makes your movie.”

After *Sveltiana* was green-lighted, I was no longer a struggling writer. I could finally say I was making a living in the business. How much of that was due to Barrett, and not me, remained the gnawing question. Did Barrett only sleep with real talent, or was my real talent that I had slept with Barrett? I was determined now to write a script that would forever set me apart from that sea of writers who would happily sleep with Barrett if someone would just give them her address.



The maître d' at Orca's interrupted my reverie to ask if I was meeting someone. Barrett had sent him to retrieve me. He escorted me past the bar and through the double doors where Barrett's boyish figure rose to give me a Hollywood air kiss. She still epitomized the studio power broker: tall, fit, trim. Sort of a Jewish All-Star. With pants creased, shirt starched, shoes buffed, and jewelry gleaming, she made me feel like I'd gotten dressed in the dark.

"You look fabulous!" I surveyed her top to bottom. "You've lost weight."

"If you're ten pounds too heavy, the rumor is you've gone to seed. Ten pounds too thin, and the rumor is you're dying. There's this very narrow five-pound window you have to hit."

"Well, you're there." I flashed her an appreciative grin. There was still a small electrical current that pulsed between our lower extremities, vibrating now like a plucked guitar string. I had to remind myself that age and power are seductive, but in this day of STDs, I didn't need a relationship with a woman who slept with everyone in town.

"Got any more high-concept scripts?" she asked, looking deep into my eyes.

"Like Arnold Schwarzenegger is pregnant? Or *Pretty Woman*? Prince Charming marries his hooker."

"Made millions."

"I'm tired of movies conceived out of men's sexual fantasies."

"I prefer a good female fantasy myself." She shot me a smile. "Unfortunately, the studio likes women in jeopardy."

"I brought you *Haunted*, and it went nowhere. How much more in jeopardy can you get than a woman whose husband had her raped, beaten, poisoned, and then tried to shoot her?"

"Too much jeopardy."

The berries from an overhanging tree plopped into my salad nicoise, threatening to poison me, as Barrett recounted the latest list of ridiculous movies that had been green-lighted. She summarized the current buying trend with, "Find me a good true crime story, and I'll get it up for you," which bore an appropriate double entendre, albeit accidental I was sure.

“I’ve got a lead on a story. I’ll let you know,” I said, thinking of the Frank Anthony murder.

I told her I’d just seen the latest Marathon hype in the trade rags about Lee Talbot, Marathon’s tall, vibrant, silver-haired septuagenarian CEO who had done the impossible, turning around a studio that, only six months earlier, had Credit Lebane breathing down its back, threatening to close the studio’s doors. To complicate matters, there was that nasty rumor about someone skimming money off the top, studio books that didn’t reconcile, and nervous accounting types scurrying about trying to explain where the money was going.

“So what’s really going on over there?” I asked, wanting the insider scoop.

“People are nervous. I’m nervous. My job puts me in a lot of... odd places at odd hours.” Barrett shifted her weight as if getting more comfortable in her chair, but I noticed she was also checking out the room to see who was listening. She settled back down and ran her long, slender fingers around the rim of her coffee cup, in an unintentionally seductive moment of contemplation, before deciding to share what was bothering her.

“Talbot’s success with Marathon makes good PR—silverback-CEO-still-has-what-it-takes kind of rhetoric—but it’s Robert Isaacs, the motion picture division’s president, who’s the real brains behind Marathon’s resurrection. He’s working barter deals with Hollywood’s A-list, getting them everything from desert islands to permanent police protection in exchange for signing with Marathon.” Barrett swallowed her pronouns as she tried to talk and eat simultaneously.

“Not talking about stuff like ‘keep the wardrobe.’ Isaacs got Lola Landon’s kid—straight-F moron—into the best prep school in New England. Built the school a new gymnasium in exchange for one scholarship per year. Guess who gets the scholarship? The cost of the gym was less than the cash Premiere Studios offered Lola for a three-picture deal. She chose Marathon over the cash. Isaacs tapped into the fact that, while Lola’s a big star, she’s also a mother. Getting the best for her son is what she wanted and what Marathon gave her. It’s all about delivering that one thing a person wants more than anything in the world. Talbot was so happy he gave Isaacs a corner office the size of the Hollywood Bowl.”

“And you?”

“I’m his new executive vice president of talent acquisition worldwide.”

“Congratulations! And what do you do?”

“Whatever needs doing. I wrangle the big talent and keep them happy. I’ve delivered a birthday yacht to a mooring in Malibu for a big producer, kept drug charges off the record of a prominent director, smuggled prostitutes into the bungalow of a well-known actor every night of the shoot without his wife’s knowledge.”

“So you’ve taken a job as a studio pimp?” I asked.

My remark seemed to curb her appetite as she put her fork down, placed her hands against the edge of the table, and pushed herself back slightly in the chair, her gold-embossed cuff links winking at me from under her designer jacket. Barrett had always looked like an ad for a gentlemen’s quarterly, but the cuff links looked more expensive than I remembered.

“You know, if I disappeared tomorrow, no one would notice for days.” She spoke cautiously, as if she were working up to something. “I don’t have anyone...”

“Because you have everyone.” I realized it was an uncalled-for jab.

“You’re smart, Teague. That’s what I’ve always liked about you.” She paused to smile at me.

“Not smart enough to stay the hell away from you.”

She waved me off, indicating that what she had to say was more important than rehashing old hurts.

“Suppose you knew that a studio was sending a messenger around to its top producer with, let’s say, a kilo of coke and ...”

“Did that happen?” I asked, and she ignored my question.

“...no one at the studio reports it, because if the agents, directors, and stars are happy, better deals get made. But if you knew it was happening, would you...do anything, say anything?”

“Depends on if they’re going to knock me off,” I replied flippantly, trying to chalk this increasingly worrisome conversation up to Barrett’s predilection for good plot.

“Suppose your boss calls you in the middle of the night to—let’s just say for discussion’s sake—go help out a big superstar, and you get there, and there’s a body.”

“A dead body?” I put my fork down and gave Barrett my full

attention. It was evident from her tone that this wasn't just for discussion's sake.

"Almost dead, but you do CPR on the body and you get him breathing."

Barrett was leaning over the table now, whispering, "And you realize this was a fucking big near miss and that you could just as easily have been on a murder scene."

"You gotta tell the police right away. Listen to me"—I found myself leaning in—"No job is worth this shit. You've got to report it."

"I have reported it, to someone I trust on the Marathon board. But now I'm convinced the phone was tapped. These are big players, Teague. You don't think they can muzzle the police? They can muzzle anybody!"

"Who's involved in this?"

"You don't want to know that. I don't even know. To know is to be in some real fuckin' danger."

A dark, muscular Latin man leaning against the wall as if he were waiting for someone suddenly approached our table. His head was strangely shaped, wide and round at the cheeks, narrow and flat at the top with a dark blemish by his left eye.

"Barrett Silvers?" The thick Latin accent sliced through Barrett's sentence.

When Barrett nodded, the man locked eyes with her, laid his fist on the table next to her hand, and deposited a one-by-two-inch stone with petroglyphs on it. Barrett apparently recognized the object and began shaking uncontrollably. The man reached over to retrieve the stone, but Barrett quickly covered it with the palm of her hand, knocking over a coffee cup and sending a wave of cappuccino across the layers of pink and white tablecloths. The man grabbed Barrett forcefully by the shirtfront and pulled her up from her seat, giving her a rough kiss on the side of her face. I jumped up from my chair, realizing she was in danger.

When he let go, Barrett teetered back and forth on her heels for a moment, her face paralyzed in an expression of surprise. I grabbed her by both arms, trying to steady her. Her hand banged awkwardly against my jacket as her mouth opened grotesquely in an attempt to tell me something, but only moans came out. She sagged to the floor like a rag doll, excrement seeping down her pant leg, her eyes frozen

open like a carp's in a fish case. The dark man had disappeared, and I felt my insides turning to putty. My hands shaking, I reflexively rolled Barrett onto her side so vomit wouldn't get into her lungs and shouted for someone to call 911, thinking all the while that it was too late to save her. A young male waiter hurried over, knelt down beside her, and began CPR. Despite being grief stricken, I could still appreciate the irony of Barrett Silvers leaving this world with her lips on a man.