

**TERROR!**  
*like they're* **NEVER  
DREAMED!**

# THEY CREEP BY NIGHT

*written and directed by*  
**NATHAN  
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**THEY CREEP BY NIGHT - REVISED SHOOTING DRAFT 3 - 4/12/47**

24. EXT. CITY STREET - NIGHT

Anna, Julia, and Gracie lock up the tailor shop for the night. Fog shrouds the street.

JULIA

Woof, what a day! I'm dead on my feet.

GRACIE

I could go for a couple of Coneys with everything.

ANNA

One of these days, that stomach of yours is going to get you in trouble.

GRACIE

Hasn't steered me wrong yet!

JULIA

Don't look now, Anna, but I think you've been followed.

Anna, holding her purse, looks across the street, where Roger waits with a hopeful grin.

GRACIE

That man can lock me up anytime.

Anna blushes as Julia swats Gracie.

JULIA

You need us to stick around? Be your chaperones?

GRACIE

Cheering section, maybe?

ANNA

Don't be silly. I'll be all right. I'll see you tomorrow.

Julia and Gracie say good night, and Anna hurries across the street to where Roger's waiting, smiling.

ANNA

What's the trouble, officer?

ROGER

Just a routine foot patrol. On the lookout for dangerous characters.

ANNA

If I spot any, I'll be sure to let you know.

ROGER

I'm not so sure I believe you. Might have to give you the third degree. Say, over dinner at Riccardi's?

Anna presents her wrists as if to be handcuffed.

ANNA

I surrender to your custody.

They laugh, and Anna takes Roger's arm as they walk.

ROGER

Well, see, here's a dangerous situation.

He points to her purse, and the hole in the bottom.

ROGER

(Cont'd)

Seems like a menace to public safety. Someone ought to replace that for you.

ANNA

Someone wonderful got it for me in the first place. I'm in no hurry to get rid of it. But I promise I'll mend it first thing when I get home.

She puts her head on his shoulder.

ANNA

(Cont'd)

Oh, I love the fog, don't you? It makes everything look so magical.

ROGER

Does it remind you of the old country?

A cloud passes over Anna's face.

ANNA

I was only a child. I can't remember anything of those days. Joan used to tell me stories, but ...

ROGER

I'm sorry. You must miss her terribly.

ANNA

She went so suddenly, and so strangely. I only wish I knew why. [beat] But listen to me, being so morbid. Here I am out on a beautiful night with the city's most promising young detective.

ROGER

Agreed. A bad mood on a night like this? It's practically a crime.

She turns to him, flirtatious.

ANNA

And what's the sentence for that?

ROGER

Life.

He bends down to kiss her -- then they're both caught in the wash of headlights.

A POLICE CAR has pulled up. The OFFICER inside leans out the window.

OFFICER

You O'Bannion?

ROGER

That's the name on the badge.

OFFICER

There's been another one. Fifty-Third and Madison. Lieutenant wants you right away.

Roger turns to Anna, apologetic.

ROGER

I'm so sorry, darling. Rain check on dinner?

ANNA

Of course.

ROGER

Can I offer you a ride?

ANNA

Don't be silly. It's just a few blocks to my bus. I'll walk.

ROGER

Just ... get home safe, will you?  
Phone the station when you get there.

ANNA

Why, you great big worrywart.

She kisses him on the cheek. The officers in the front seat trade a look off Roger -- what a lucky guy! He climbs into the back of the car and it roars off, hitting the siren. Anna watches him go, sighing wistfully.

25. CUT

26. EXT. CITY STREET - NIGHT

Anna walks through the thickening fog, her heels clicking against the pavement. Another couple, lost in conversation, brushes past her. She stumbles, and her purse falls behind her, spilling its contents. They pass on without an apology, and Anna glowers at them.

She bends down to gather up her things, including the large, beautiful BRASS KEY to her apartment. As she's putting them back in the purse, she looks down the street in the direction she's come from.

THE SILHOUETTE OF A MAN in a hat and coat stands in the fog, outlined in a streetlight at the opposite end of the block. Perfectly still. He whistles an odd tune, erratic, shapeless.

Anna peers at him oddly. Shakes off the feeling. Stands up and starts walking again. Her heels click once more.

She walks casually, casts a glance over her shoulder.

THE MAN IS FOLLOWING HER.

Anna puts her hands in her pockets and quickens her pace. Looks back again.

The Man keeps walking, unhurried, but determined. Still whistling.

Anna stops by a lit shop window. Pretends to fix her hair in the reflection. Looks back once more.

The Man has stopped, still at the same distance.

A truck rumbles past on the damp streets. From Anna's POV, we see its lights wash over the Man. We don't see his face -- but the light GLEAMS off something long and pointed dangling in his hand. A LARGE KNIFE.

Anna's face tightens, goes white. She resumes walking, even faster than before, the only sound the metronome clicking of her heels and her increasingly rapid breathing.

Behind her, the Man follows. Accelerates. Closing the distance between them. Still whistling.

Joan breaks into a run. The Man keeps walking. She sees a lit storefront ahead -- a shoe repair shop. She tries the door -- locked. Bangs on it. Inside, we see a LITTLE OLD MAN closing up for the night.

ANNA

Let me in! Oh, please, let me in!

Behind her, the Man continues his steady approach. His odd tune grows louder.

The Little Old Man, on the other side of the glass, cocks his head, cups an ear. Can't hear her. She rattles the door desperately. Frowning and shaking his head at her, the Little Old Man closes the shade. The lights in the store shut off.

Anna looks back. The Man is now just half a block away.

She runs again, awkward in her heels, stumbling but never quite falling. The Man breaks into a run, too, no longer whistling, the knife flashing in his hand.

Anna runs, breathless, close to sobbing. The Man behind her draws closer and closer and --

WITH A SCREECH OF BRAKES, a BUS pulls into frame just at the end of the block in front of Anna.

27. INT. CITY BUS

She staggers onto the bus, fumbling for her fare, as the BUS DRIVER looks at her with alarm.

BUS DRIVER

You okay, miss?

ANNA

Oh, hurry, please hurry, close the doors!

BUS DRIVER

But what about the other fella?

He and Anna both look back onto the street. The Man stands still, in shadow.

BUS DRIVER

You want on, mister?

The Man says nothing. Doesn't move. Resumes whistling, in an odd, ominous way.

The Bus Driver shrugs and pulls the lever to shut the door, shaking his head. Anna sags with relief.

As the bus pulls away, Anna stumbles down the aisle past tired riders and falls into a seat on the back of the bus.

The Man walks to the edge of the block, watching the bus depart, and raises one hand as a TAXI pulls up to the curb...

28. CUT

29. EXT. ANNA'S APARTMENT BUILDING

The bus pulls up at the end of the block. Anna looks out -- sees no one. Deserted street.

She gets off the bus and hurries for the door of her building, stumbling and nearly falling as she opens the outer door into the foyer.

30. INT. ANNA'S APARTMENT BUILDING

The lights are dim, moonlight and streetlight from outside casting strange patterned shadows on the floor, the walls, the stairwell.

Anna runs up the stairs to her apartment, reaches into her purse for her key -- and her fingers poke out through the hole in the bottom. The key's gone.

She looks over the bannister at the foyer below. The key

glimmers on the carpet near the doorway.

Anna creeps down the stairs in silence. She reaches the key on the floor. Bends down to pick it up --

The front door opens, framing her in light from the street outside -- and then a LONG SHADOW falls over her as she looks up.

The Man stands silhouetted in the doorway.

THE MAN

It is you. I knew it.

ANNA

That voice -- I know that voice --

The Man steps forward. It's CHRISTOPHER LEE (Brent Halliday), hero of "The Panther Priestess"! But he looks haggard, unshaven, his eyes gleaming wildly.

ANNA

Christopher? Is that you? We -- we met at Joan's funeral.

CHRISTOPHER

Yes. Joan. Your big sister. My dearly departed wife. Did she tell you stories of the old country? She told me stories, Anna. Stories about the curse of the panther priestess.

ANNA

I -- I mean, they were bedtime stories. Folktales and legends.

CHRISTOPHER

I used to think so, too. For so long, I tried to believe that I must have imagined it all.

He runs one hand through his hair, exhausted.

CHRISTOPHER

(Cont'd)

I tried so hard to tell myself it was all some terrible dream. A delusion of the mind.

ANNA

Christopher, you don't look well. Please, let me help you. Let me call someone.



CHRISTOPHER

No. No, I don't need help. I'm better now. I know what I saw. I know what my wife became. I was confused, before, when I visited all the others. I thought they were -- I was wrong. I know that now. And I know how to end the curse -- forever.

He raises the KNIFE we saw earlier -- a gleaming, jeweled ceremonial dagger. Anna goes pale with terror, stumbles backward and falls. He looms over her.

ANNA

Christopher, what are you doing?  
Put that down, please!

CHRISTOPHER

I'm so sorry, Anna, but it's the only way. I thought the evil died with her. But no. It has to die with you. It has to die with you!

Anna SCREAMS as Christopher steps forward, raising the knife--

And stops. Feels something spatter on his face, his head, from above. Touches it, looks at his fingers. IT'S BLOOD.

He looks up.

From Christopher's POV, we see the PITCH-BLACK CEILING of the foyer high above.

Christopher squints again. Another drop of blood falls on his face.

Back to Christopher's POV -- out of the shadows a PALE WHITE FACE AND LONG TALONED HANDS comes BURSTING FROM THE GLOOM. It's BARON VON KARSTEN (Leslie Cadell, from "I, Bloodsucker"), his fangs wide and hungry!

Anna SCREAMS as Von Karsten grabs Christopher and hauls him SHRIEKING up into the darkness! From above, we hear CRACKING BONES and a horrible SLURPING sound.

From behind Anna, down the long dark passage beneath the stairs that leads to the rest of the house, we see a lantern light. It bobs through the darkness toward Anna, accompanied by the slow shuffle of large bare feet.

Anna turns, shaking, terrified. Out of the darkness emerges the wide, blank stare of TEE MISERY (Quincy Willis, from "By

Voodoo Cursed"), carrying a lantern.

Anna SCREAMS AGAIN -- and then a third figure steps into the light of Tee Misery's lantern. It's the PANTHER PRIESTESS herself (Eleanor Roberts).

PRIESTESS

Oh, there's no need for that, dear.  
I'll admit that Baron Von Karsten  
can get a trifle ... enthusiastic.  
But you're perfectly safe with us.

ANNA

I ... I don't understand.

PRIESTESS

Why, you're being called home,  
dear. The Conclave is convening.  
The Voodoo Riders and the Panther  
People, the Leopard League and the  
Vampire Bloodline, all of us. And  
we need you to complete the circle.  
After all, Anna ... you're family.

In the lantern light, the Priestess's eyes SHINE LIKE A CAT'S.

Anna clutches her head and shuts her eyes, screaming.

ANNA

No! No! I'm a normal girl! I'm not  
like you!

But when she opens her eyes, they, too, SHINE CATLIKE.

ANNA

(Cont'd)

I'm not like you!

LEN

(O.S., under his breath)  
God give me strength.

CUT TO:

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# **INT. STUDIO SCREENING ROOM**

Len says it quietly, under his breath, covered by the last rattle of film through the projector. Art can hear it, but he's hoping Sid and Max missed it. Not that it's hard to

tell what Len thinks about the picture, what he's thought about it ever since he took this devil's bargain. He's wearing his dog-puke tie.

Sid turns around in his seat, stonefaced, still, and way back in his eyes Art thinks he sees a strange sorrow.

But then Sid smiles, by far the better outcome of the coin-flip that is the Sidney Silence, and Art can breathe again.

"Good picture," he says, practically a soliloquy for Sid Myers. He lifts an eyebrow in Art's direction. "You got a swell eye, kid. I can hardly tell we kicked Jack up to the A's."

"It could move a little faster." Max Greene sits at the back of the screening room, always, with his little paper bag of jelly beans. Fishes one out, indifferent to its color, and pops it in his mouth, speaking around it. "And the lead girl. Pretty enough, but don't you think she's a little stiff?"

"Art's working with her," Len says, true insofar as Len hasn't said Art's succeeding at that. "If you feel like giving us a little extra in the budget, maybe getting someone on loan from MGM or Universal..."

Max emits one of his lugubrious screw-you chuckles.

"But you can sell it, Max." Sid's not asking. Max can sell anything. If he's trying. If he feels like trying. If you've coaxed him into feeling like trying.

"You gave us this ... wonderful title, Max." Len sounds as cozy as heartburn. "And you wanted your monster rally. Universal's cleaning up, and where are we, you said."

"All that money for costumes and makeup," Max sighs, and ha ha, all that money, whoever said Max was born without a sense of humor, "and we hardly even see the damn monsters. You tell people there's a vampire in the picture, they're going to want to see a vampire."

"You tell people there's a vampire in the picture," Len says, his voice a sharpened wooden stake, "and they're going

to want to be scared. Show them some middle-aged drunk in a tuxedo and slicked-back hair, and they'll laugh. There's nothing we can put up there that'll terrify them more than what's in here." He taps his temple. Good little speech. Not the first time he's made it. "Besides, my last three pictures all made money. Plenty of it."

"Not so much as the first one," Max shrugs, the syllables all getting mashed up alongside another jelly bean. He keeps a whole big jar of them on his desk. No one at the studio has ever seen him share them.

"Max, you know Len's deal," Sid says. Len was about to start quoting that one chapter and verse -- he keeps a bound copy in his desk -- and the look on Sid's face says he's not eager to hear it again.

Sid's, what, fifty-three? Not much older than Len. But lately Art thinks he's looked tired, the skin on his face taut and shiny, sculpted too closely to the bone.

"Len," Sid says, and his eyes add please don't fuck me on this, "maybe see what you can do. Max wants vampire standees in the theater lobbies. Get some zombie actors in to march down the aisles. He's got a point, is all."

Len's mouth pinches as tight as the studio's purse strings. "Sure, Sid," he says, "we'll take a look." He lets his dog-puke tie do the rest of his talking.

Art lets Len fume all the way out of the screening room, past the garish mockup of the poster Max stood up. That godawful title, the worst he's dictated yet: THEY CREEP BY NIGHT.

"Don't you think she's a little stiff?" Len mocks, in Max's nasal drone. "It's only her first goddamn picture. Heaven forbid we pay for actors."

"I'm -- like you said, I'm working with her," Art says. "I think we're getting somewhere." Again, somewhere, a carefully neutral phrase.

Len's face softens, and his dense little knish of a hand falls again on Art's shoulders. "You're doing great,

considering. I knew you could."

If not for Art, Len would be up in the A's with Jack, producing that Blackbeard pic he's had his heart set on. And maybe Art would be shut up in the sweatbox cutting it, as he'd done for all of Len's previous projects.

But Len had made Art a promise. The big chair, come hell or high water. And Len Valmont, perhaps alone in the whole of this forsaken burg, keeps his promises.

Art wishes, not for the first time, and not wholly for his own sake, that Len didn't.

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#### INT. LEN'S OFFICE - DAY

Art said the dailies went well. But Art looks like his dog just died, and also that dog was Rin-Tin-Tin. And Lenny's doing that thing where he gets really excited about The Next One.

In Eileen's limited experience -- having done one whole rewrite on They Creep by Night, a wet-behind-the-ears first pass on I, Bloodsucker, and some cleanup on By Voodoo Cursed -- that means he's trying not to think too hard about the current picture.

Maybe it's just her co-writer credit on the title cards, but Eileen thinks Creep's looking decent. Jack got kicked upstairs, but they've still got Nico lensing, with all his velvety shadows to hide the cheap sets. And Art, well. Art's trying. There's something there.

She leans sideways in her chair, around one stack of the Library of Alexandria that is Lenny's office, to catch Art's eye, and smiles. Chin up, kid. He gives her that bashful little grin, the one that first caught her eye across the commissary. Parlayed into exactly two damp-squib dates, and then, to their mutual relief, an honest-to-God friendship.

Lenny's rummaging through his desk under that favorite painting of his, the spooky island. He lifts the corner of

his rattletrap of a typewriter, stoops to peer underneath it, and pulls something out.

"Catch," he says, and wings the little leather-bound volume to Eileen, whose college softball years serve her well now. She doesn't even knock the pen off the legal pad on her lap.

"Carmilla," she says. "This is for, what, Baroness of Blood?" Max wants a Bloodsucker sequel, so Lenny, in the glorious eternal middle finger that is his career in pictures, is literally dusting off the 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature.

"I think there's something in there," Lenny grins. "You read it?"

Eileen nods. "Bit on the lavender side, as I recall. Big favorite of a few of the girls in the dorms." Here she is, using her English degree. Mother ought to be proud, but every time Eileen phones home, she gets an earful about going back into modeling. As if her face is worth more than what's behind it. "I mean, don't get me wrong. If we can get it past the Breen office, it's a juicy angle. So do we do this as a direct sequel, or just drop Von Karsten's name, or...?"

Lenny sits on the edge of his desk, conveniently the only part of its surface not covered with stacks of books or paper. He gets distracted for a second by the picture of Magda and the kids on the corner, and taps the glass fondly with two fingers. "So we've got the couple from the first picture, um, um, --"

"Charles and Peggy," Art chimes in.

Lenny's eyes, baggy, purple-rimmed, unfocus for a moment. Can a man look too heavy and too gaunt at the same time? He had that little "vacation" halfway through Bloodsucker, and all the rest of them pretended not to notice. He's worked a lot fewer weekends since then. And when the Valmonts have had her and Art and Jack over for dinner lately, Eileen has noticed Magda piling Lenny's plate up with more of the salad

and less of the roast.

"Charles and Peggy," Lenny shifts back into gear. "Let's say eight years have passed. Birds and bees, nature taking its course, now they have a daughter. Sensitive kid. Big imagination."

Art and Eileen share a look, a sly little smile. They've seen the pictures of Leonid Vladimirovich as a somber-eyed kid on his aunt's estate, heard Magda tell the birthday party story, the invitations in the hollow of the tree.

"The kid's lonely," Lenny unspools. "Wishes for a friend. And then into her room one night comes Carmilla..."

Eileen sees Art's eyes spark. "Her head and shoulders rising from the foot of the bed. Shadows, moonlight, maybe there's a little lamp."

"A candle!" Lenny snaps his fingers. "A flickering candle. And we play up the doubt. Is she real? Just the kid's imaginary friend?"

"What if," Eileen says, chewing on the end of her pen, "we get Von Karsten back toward the end of the picture? Leslie's still under contract, and he's not dead dead at the end of Creep. What if Dan and Peggy dig him up to try to defend their daughter? But he goes after the girl instead, and -- and, wait, what if Carmilla's been the goodie all along? Max does love a monster mash..."

Lenny nods. "I like it, I like it." God bless a producer who doesn't treat the pretty girl writer like a stenographer. "But look. We need a fresh angle on this. Really dig into the lore and find something new. You think you can get me a list by tomorrow?"

And ahh, shit, she just talked herself into a long night, didn't she? The things we do for mutual respect and camaraderie.

Eileen calculates how late the commissary stays open, and the odds that she can talk someone in the kitchen into wrapping her up a few sandwiches. "I'll see what I can do, boss."

#

**INT. WRITERS' OFFICES - NIGHT**

"Haven't seen him all day, Mrs. Douglas."

No, that's too sing-song. Too subservient. It's her one damn line, so it has to count. Can't be too defiant, of course, or it'll get her shitcanned. Vidalia dumps another reeking ashtray into her bin and tries again.

"Haven't seen him all day, Mrs. Douglas."

There, better. Sharpen the elocution, add that little note of exasperation. Now, what's she going to do with her eyes?

She ponders that while she empties the last of the wastebaskets -- half-eaten tuna sandwich in this heat, good Lord, these men. Her stomach's carping at her, but that smell's almost enough to shut it up.

Someone -- desk says Alf Nichols; she saw his last picture, not too bad, had some good lines for the supporting players in there -- has today's Times folded to the real estate ads, nice little bungalow in Los Feliz. Respectable choice. She's had her lawyer looking at a property a few blocks over from there. Roof needs work, but the foundation's solid and the walls are brick -- built to last. Close to where they're putting in the new school, too.

She'll call Randall in the morning, see if he can get them to knock another thousand off the ask. Fix the place up, it could get \$35, maybe \$40 a month in rent. In her mind she lines up her portfolio like Monopoly cards, and smiles. Tries to imagine the looks on the tenants' faces if they ever found out who the landlady was.

The Santa Ana blows in hot through the screened windows, rattles the door open and shut. She sweeps up some crumbs and stray ash, drops them into the bin. Good enough for tonight. She shuts off the light as she wheels the can out over the threshold.



On the terrace the wood creaks under her in the wind; beyond the lot she can see the tops of palm trees waving, outlined in the orange sky. Of course they make their own stars here; can't see a damn one up there with all the light from below.

"Haven't seen him all day, Mrs. Douglas." Yes, there we go. The smile a little bit tight, not quite reaching the eyes. Those who'll know, way up in the balcony section, will know.

Light on at the far end of the building, near the stairs. That seems odd to Vidalia, but then, she picked up this shift at the last minute, so who knows how things go at this end of the lot?

Only one person in the office -- a woman, at that -- so Vidalia dials down the deference a few notches when she knocks. "Cleaning lady. Coming in."

The night owl's pretty, even with her hair pulled back all straggly like that. She looks up as Vidalia wheels the bin in, looks at Vidalia rather than through her. "Shit, is it that late? Do I need to clear out? I can clear out."

Vidalia looks at her desk -- Eileen Robie, says the nameplate. Rings a bell, but far off, at the other end of a very big house. Miss Robie's got a stack of books piled high on one side, and a pile of vellum-bound scripts on the other, with a weary-looking legal pad and an overflowing ashtray hemmed in between, waiting for the cavalry.

"I can clean around you, Miss Robie," Vidalia says. Damn, is it Miss or Mrs.? She doesn't see a ring, but sometimes they take umbrage if you get the title wrong.

"Eileen, please." The woman narrows her eyes, chewing on a thought and the end of her pen at the same time. Vidalia finds her chest tightening, bracing for some remark. The well-intentioned ones actually bother her more.

But no: "You've been in Lenny's pictures, right?" Miss Robie gives her a for-real smile all the way up to the eyes, nothing tight or polite in it. "I know your face. You

were ...". She near to glows in recognition. "Shit, I'm sorry, you were Alma in By Voodoo Cursed! And the waitress in Panther Priestess! God, that was a great scene.

Vidalia ... I want to say Morse?"

"That's me." Vidalia feels that tightness in her chest uncoil. "You're working for Mr. Valmont?"

"Writing his latest," she says. She taps her pen against the legal pad. "And his next one, God willing. I wrote some on Voodoo, too. None of your scenes, though."

Scenes, plural. Same paycheck, of course, but she got to know things, to be a person, not an appliance, or background detail. She knew Valmont had to fight for that, him and Jack Moreau both.

"You, uh, doing research for a role?" It takes Vidalia a moment to realize that Eileen's not joking, and a laugh slips out of her before she can cage it.

Eileen winces. "Oh, shit, did I -- I'm sorry, I didn't mean to --"

"No, no, it's all right." Vidalia gestures to a chair, and Eileen nods gratefully. Vidalia sinks down, sweating, enjoying the sad little breeze from the desk fan as it rumbles past her. "You may have noticed that parts aren't exactly thick on the ground for someone of my ... qualifications." She thumps the side of the rolling can with her knuckles. "Gotta pay the bills somehow."

"Haven't seen you around before," Eileen says, frowning. "Usually it's Marjorie."

"Office told me Marjorie up and quit," Vidalia says, flexing her toes in her shoes. "Just this morning, by telegram, if you can beat that. Something about her health."

"Marjorie?" Eileen's brows knit. "The woman's a Sherman tank. I'd bet on the studio to fall apart before she does. Last I heard she was picking up extra shifts, even."

"She was," Vidalia nods. "Over at the executive suites. My usual stomping grounds. Saw her ... two nights ago? She seemed fine then. But I guess you never know." Her stomach

chooses this exact perfect moment to issue a gurgling growl, and she can't help wincing.

When she looks up, Eileen is fishing in her desk drawer. "Here. I got extra in case I got really hungry, but I think I filled up on coffee." She hands Vidalia a sandwich wrapped in wax paper. "Ham and cheese okay?"

"Ham and cheese is fantastic." To hell with ladylike delicacy; Vidalia went straight from extra work on Tormok and the Lost Emerald Mine to this, and lunch was a long time ago. Between bites, she eyes the stack of books. "I didn't know Monument had a library."

"It doesn't," Eileen says. "Slipped a sawbuck to a friend over at Paramount's."

"Eastern European folklore," Vidalia summarizes, from a glance at the spines. "Valmont making another scare show?"

"Sequel to Bloodsucker," Eileen nods. She fishes out a cigarette, offers one wordlessly to Vidalia, and when she's waved off, digs out a gold Zippo and wrestles with it.

"Ahhh, this damn thing. I just filled up the cartridge."

"Here." Vidalia slips her matchbox out of the apron of her uniform, strikes one, and leans across the desk to light the cigarette as it dangles from Eileen's lips. "Nothing beats the tried and true."

"Thank you." Proper manners; someone taught this one to be a lady, but it looks like only the good parts stuck. Eileen leans back, geysers smoke for the fan to bat at. "So, yeah, trying to come up with new particulars. Something everyone else --" she taps the sloppy heap of scripts "-- hasn't already done. Don't suppose you've got anything?"

Vidalia finishes the last of the sandwich, wipes her hand on her apron, and thinks while she chews. "I heard vampires can't cross running water."

Eileen flaps a script in the air. "Trail of the Vampire, Columbia."

"They ... hmm. Coffins need to be filled with their native soil?"

Eileen sighs and shakes her head. "They dug up that one back in Dracula."

Vidalia sits up, snaps her fingers. "They're, what do you call it, obsessed with counting. You scatter sticks, or rice, or grains of sand in front of them, and they have to stop and count them all."

"A monster with a complex," Eileen laughs. "That's good. Thank you. Mind if I use that?"

"Be my guest," Vidalia says, giving her hand a courtly flourish over the lip of the trash barrel. She pauses, rolls the dice on a sly sort of look. "So, this vampire picture. I don't suppose there's a housekeeper in it? A maid? Maybe a fast-talking waitress?"

"Well, hell," Eileen says. "There is now."

#

**INT. SOUNDSTAGE - THE NEXT DAY**

"Roger, I'm frightened." She burrows against his chest, circled by his arms. He strokes her hair. "I think -- I think there's something terrible inside me."

"Darling, darling," he murmurs. "That can't be true. I know because I love you."

"If you love me, then believe me, please --"

"Cut!" Art feels his heart settle somewhere around his lower intestine. He glances over at Len to make certain, gets the nod. They're not getting it. And they need this scene and three other setups in the can by the end of the day. "Dan, you're all right, stay on your mark. Lilah, a word?"

Lilah takes small, shuffling steps over to him, her evening gown a golden fountain of chiffon. She's casting sideways glances at the crew, as if their stares were lit cigarettes against her skin. He finds two empty chairs, sits down, motions for her to join him.

"I'm trying to hit my marks, I'm trying, and I made sure

to keep my face toward the camera --" she blurts, her stark blue eyes looking halfway to tears. Please don't, thinks Art, imagining the time lost for a touch-up in the makeup chair.

"Hey," he says, gently. "Hey, it's all right. You and me, right? We're in this together." He holds out his pinky finger, and she hooks hers into it -- their little mutual salute, like he used to do with his big sister.

He glances across the stage while Lilah composes herself. Len's there with Nico, fine-tuning something about the lighting; Art can already see the grips scurrying around in the catwalks overhead. He makes eye contact with a somewhat bleary Eileen, there with her notepad in case they need rewrites, not-so-fresh from her all-nighter finding new ways to ghoulish. She gives him the help me eyes as Max Greene hovers a little too close, trying to chat her up in his usual suffocating way. Art can see Max's mind tallying expenses like a taxi meter -- and hanging a price tag on Eileen like she's a cut at the butcher's. Art grimaces quickly at Eileen in sympathy, but he's got troubles of his own.

"Now, Lilah, pretend --" Art purses his lips, thinks, blows a tight ribbon of air out between them, then continues -- "I know you're used to the stage, but you're going too big. There's no back row to play to. Pretend it's just me. Just me out there in the dark. And I'm the only one you need to reach. That make sense?"

She nods.

"And for this scene," Art says. "You're playing it like you're scared for yourself, right?"

"Right," she says. "All these terrible things happening, all these creatures -- I get the shivers myself, to be honest, and I know it's just Leslie and that nice Mr. Willis in spirit gum and rubber."

"That's right," Art nods. He looks at Max, hovering close to Eileen, never quite laying a hand on her. "But also, they

want something from her, and she's afraid of what it'll cost. Of who she'll be if she says yes."

"But she doesn't, in the end!" Lilah protests.

"Yes, and you know that," Art says. "But Anna doesn't. What they're offering her -- power, a voice, a seat at the table -- I mean, we all want a little of that, right?" Lilah nods, and there's a sudden flintiness, a resolve, in her eyes that Art hopes to God he can capture on film. "But they're going to take from her in return. A piece of her soul. The part of her, of all of us, that knows when and how to say no. That's what Len wants people to be afraid of here. Not the monsters outside, but the monster in here, the one we all try to keep under control. Anna's not just scared for herself. She's scared of herself. Does that make sense?"

"I had a great aunt, back in Boston," Lilah says, in a fieldmouse voice, brow furrowed to conjure the memory. "When she was young, oh, I would hear stories. But she got old, and ... and confused, and she'd lash out. I was so frightened of her as a girl. But the worst times were when you could see in her eyes -- she knew, she knew something was wrong, but she didn't know what, or how to stop it. She looked so terribly sad."

"Do you think you could look like that? Like she did?" Art doesn't mean for this to come out sounding like a prayer, but if God wants to take it that way, well.

Lilah ponders, and then her bobbed hair bounces in affirmation.

"Attagirl," Art says. He lifts his head, turns back to the crew. "Okay, places!" Maybe they've got just enough time to get in one more take before--

The buzzer sounds. Someone on the crew calls, "Lunch!" Art's shoulders slump.

"It's all right, kid," Len sighs, as he and Art follow the tributary of crew out into the blaze of midday. Eileen's already beat feet to the commissary; after having Max hovering over her, who can blame her? "We can still get it

after lunch. Picture's probably got a little fat on it as is, so if we need to cut a scene or two to make the schedule, Eileen and I can knock heads and work it out."

Art sees Max Greene zeroing in on them both, with that look on his face. You'd think a man like that would never relish the prospect of losing money. Len sees it, too, and elbows Art in the ribs. "Go on, Art, leg it. Get some air, get some lunch. I'll jump on this grenade."

"Thanks, Len," Art sighs. Len looks about as tired as Art feels. Maybe more so. If they can get through these next few days, maybe Art can talk him into taking some time off. Magda's been asking, and Art can't disagree with her.

"Hell, kid," Len smiles, thin and worn like an old handkerchief. "What are producers for?"

At the door, just behind Lilah, Art looks back and sees Len and Max framed against the set, Max with that smile of his, meandering a jellybean from the paper bag in one hand to his lips. Len a tight little knot with his hands in fists down at his sides.

"Hey, Lilah?" Art asks. "Do me a favor, would you? Max is a sucker for a pretty face. You think you could go rescue Len, maybe talk him up a little to Max, take a little heat off him? Just for a minute or two?"

He sees Lilah do some kind of math in her head, and then she nods. Art's conscience blessedly leaves off from pricking him, at least as much as it had been.

"Thanks," he sighs. "After lunch, you and me, we're going to get this scene in the can. You're gonna be great."

She smiles at him, nervous, hopeful, and ripples away back into the cool dark.

#

**EXT. STUDIO LOT - DAY**

It's hot as blazes outside, even in the shade. Radio this morning warned of fire risk up in the hills. Commissary's

got central air, but with all these knots tied in his stomach, Art can't think about eating. He wanders instead, one eye on his watch, past the interiors for the oater on Stage 5 and the cannibal headhunters taking their smoke break outside the jungle picture shooting in 4. Marie Antoinette and her courtesans glide swaying out of 3, talking like sailors, and behind them a familiar face that gets notably less dour when it spots Art.

"Mon ami!" Jack Moreau, fleshy, broad-built, waves him over. California hasn't quite trampled all the French out of his accent, but it's making good progress.

"Jack," Art grins. "How's life on the golden ticket?"

"Filled with ruffles," Jack sighs. "That Jane Pickering, mon dieu, I don't know how she and her ego both squeeze into that corset. Will you hate me if I say I miss working with Lenny?"

"Only until I die," Art says. "Though if you want to trade problems..."

They find a slant of shade and a couple of crates and light up, sweating, talking shop. Jack mostly listens, nodding, here and there making a sympathetic noise in the back of his throat, or a Gallic shift of resignation in his shoulders.

"Of course they want to show the monsters." Jack rolls his eyes. "They want their money on the screen. But darkness, shadows -- they cost nothing. Why pay to build a monster when the audience can do it for you?" He takes a long drag, hisses the smoke out between his teeth. "The monsters are all around us," he murmurs. "We just don't see them. Not soon enough."

Jack fled Paris in 1940, a few inches ahead of the Panzers. Art figures he knows what he's --

"Hey! Jackasses!" A woman with a slouch cap and longshoreman shoulders stands, arms folded, giving them both the murder-eye. "You want to burn the place down?" She stabs an accusatory finger at the wall behind them, the fading



sign: FILM STORAGE. POSITIVELY NO SMOKING.

Caught out, Art and Jack flick their cigs to the paving and dutifully grind them away. "Sorry, Rosie." Jack ducks his head, lets his eyes go all beseeching. Rosie makes a noise as if she's gearing up to spit and wanders off, muttering.

Jack looks back at the sign and sighs again. Mischief glints in his eye. "Some days, you know, I think ... would it be so bad?"

"Let me finish this picture," Art laughs, checking his watch. Just enough time to get back to the set, if he jogs. "Could be it'll do the job for us."

#

#### **INT. DRESSING ROOMS**

"Lilah?" Art raps on the door with LILAH CAVANAUGH freshly stenciled on it, jiggles the knob. Unlocked. "Lilah, we're ready to roll."

The hallway at the back of the stage stretches down the row of doors into shadow, swallowing the steady tick of the wall clock. Dan and Lilah and especially Leslie have been on him to get the burned-out bulb changed, but Monument Pictures and Jack Moreau agree on at least one thing: darkness is free.

It's been a week since she last got the jitters this bad. Art figured their talk before lunch had straightened things out -- he'd actually, like a chump, been feeling good about maybe getting through these pages before the end of the day. When she didn't show, money burning by the second, Len offered to go find her. But it's Art's chair, Art's picture. He didn't ask for this shot just to let someone else do the hard parts.

"Come on, Lilah, you can talk to me." Art covers his eyes with one hand -- unlikely, but you never want to be wrong in these situations, or at least, you want to be the sort of

person who never wants to be wrong -- and edges the door open.

The dressing room's empty, lights off, save for a faint outline through the curtains on the boxy little window. Something crunches under Art's feet. He looks down, sees the glimmer of jagged glass. As his eyes adjust, the scene fades in: mirror shattered, cosmetics strewn, wardrobe ransacked, gowns draping the floor like crime-scene outlines.

He's heard horror stories about divas -- male and female -- but Lilah's not that famous, and definitely not that dumb. A king-hell prank, then? But by who? The crew, at worst, tolerates Lilah. She's a sweetheart to everyone. Too scared to do otherwise. No way she'd make anyone this much of an enemy. You need at least one completed picture, maybe two, to work up that kind of runway.

Glass breaks somewhere outside.

When he sticks his head out into the hall, the faintest chevron of gray-blue light slices out of the gap of the door at the farthest end. He hears rustling, motion, muttering.

That door wasn't open when he entered Lilah's room.

"Lilah?" He finds his heart pounding in time to the clock. One foot in front of the other, moving sideways like he's skirting a window ledge ten stories up, he sidles deeper down the hall.

Another crash inside the room. Oh, that's Eleanor's, some small part of him thinks, the snit she's going to throw.

He aligns an eye with the crack in the open door, like he's looking down a viewfinder. A shadow passes between him and the light within.

"Lilah?" he asks. The motion stops.

He pushes the door open and sees her standing there, facing the curtained window, her shoulders shaking. Sobs trickle out as if through the gaps between her fingers. Her hair looks different, disheveled, her gown fitting lopsided and wrong. Another crack spiders across the mirror here, and in the open closet, gowns dangle from hangers or slump

against the shoe rack on the floor.

"Lilah, what's wrong--" he starts to say. Then she turns around, and her hair slides off.

The wig falls to the floor, the thin strands beneath crazed and curlicued. The old woman's made a mockery of her makeup, lipstick trailing like a comet along the starchart lines of one liver-spotted cheek. The dress sags off her, a size too big, her slip showing underneath.

"I can't find her," the old woman says, her voice like the door from The Inner Sanctum. Her clouded eyes rove the room, squinting and widening and squinting again; he's not sure if she can actually see him. Her tongue slides an orbit around her open mouth, then retreats. "Where did she go?"

"Whhh--" The word comes out as a wheeze, and Art has to line up all the parts in his mouth before he can get it out right -- "where did who go?"

"The girl, the girl in the mirror!" The old woman locks on to his voice, lurches forward, painted nails on long bony fingers. Art steps on his own heel, nearly goes down on his ass, hits the door hard and slams it shut with his shoulderblades, the knob digging into his lower back. The old woman's on him, her breath sour, fingers clutching at his coat. "She was just here, I know it, I know I saw her! Where did you take her?"

Art throws up his hands, a flash of those nails coming for his face, his eyes. "I don't know! I didn't take anyone anywhere!"

The old woman quivers there, inches from him, and there's something in those cloudy eyes that feels so familiar, a thought lost in the file cabinet, just out of reach.

Her lips work, and she looks back at the mirror, points. "I looked and looked but she's not there."

She looks at him and her too-familiar eyes, tears like diamonds at their corners, say something is wrong with me, I know it. That terrible fear, that tremble at the very edge of the cliff. She begins to cry, carving tracks of mascara,

and collapses into a bag of air and jangling sticks against him. He feels her sob through his breastbone and all the way into his still-pounding heart.

"Ma'am," he says quietly. "Ma'am, I don't know how you got in here, but -- did you see a young woman? I'm looking for my friend. Her name is Lilah?"

She lifts her head, eyes shadowed with ruined makeup, a soul-shriveling sort of relief in her face. "The girl in the mirror," she says. "You saw her, too."

The old woman raises one gnarled fist, and extends the pinky toward him as far as arthritis allows.

"You and me," she says, looking through him down the corridors of memory. "You and me. In this together."

Underneath his sheen of sweat, Art feels cold all over.

#

**INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE - AFTERNOON**

"Anyway, they've got her on a hold at County overnight," Max drawls, sorrow bowing the corners of his mouth, "until a bed opens up out in San Bernardino. Tragic, absolutely tragic." He pops another jelly bean in his mouth and resumes chewing.

Sid lets out the kind of sigh that the Grim Reaper might take for a wolf-whistle. "Len," he says, a whole encyclopedia in that one syllable. "What the hell."

Right now, Art's just listening to the tiny reptile core of his brain that assures him no one can see him if he stays very, very still. By the looks of her, Eileen -- huddled at the far back of Sid's office, her legal pad upright on her lap like a blast shield -- has the same idea.

"Security's got no idea how she got on the lot. Or how Lilah got out," Len says. He didn't have time to put on the dog-puke tie today, so he's letting his voice, that look he's shooting Max, do all the work. "Last I saw, she was with you, Max."

"I complimented her on her fine, fine work on your ... lovely picture," Max mostly says -- this one's green, you can still see the flecks of color when he chews -- "and released her to the tender mercies of the studio commissary. Should I have personally escorted her? Besides." He reaches into a vest pocket and produces a Western Union slip. "Your leading lady's breaking contract. 'Too much pressure stop. Going east to mother stop. Tell Len and Art sorry stop.' Came in an hour ago."

Out of the corner of his eye, Art sees Eileen stiffen, like someone just goosed her. He just feels relieved. For a second there, he thought, he swore -- it was too nutty, even for the pictures.

"So we reshoot," Len angles. "Pick a contract player -- Judy Robinson's free, or, or Ava Dumont -- and we pick up her scenes. That's only about half of what we've got in the can so far, sets are still up. We work nights, we'll only need six more days, maybe five."

Another Sidney silence, and this time the coin lands wrong. "No reshoots," Sid says, like he's giving a eulogy to all those dearly departed dollars. "Len. You know what this means."

"But you pushed for this, Sid!" Art's heard Len angry, he's heard Len cajoling. But he's never heard Len this close to pleading. "This is your monster rally!"

"Now," Max intones, licking sugar off thumb and forefinger, "it's yours."

"Sid," Len says. "Give me till tomorrow to fix the script. I can use what we've got. Same schedule, same budget, no reshoots."

Sid lifts an eyebrow. "No reshoots?" Another Sidney silence. Art holds his breath.

After about a thousand years, give or take, Sid nods.

The office door hasn't even shut yet, and the engine in Len's head is already running. "We use the takes from today, it's just one scene," he's saying, low under his breath,

like Art and Eileen aren't even there. "Get a double in, put her in shadow, maybe a little of the panther makeup, for the big showdown. Center the rest of the picture on Dan --"

"I'll hit the commissary, bring back everything I can carry," Eileen volunteers. "Start a vat of coffee on the boil."

"I can type," Art says, raising his hand.

Len smiles at them both, but there's something off about it. The kind of smile you see receding, waving, from the deck of an ocean liner. "You're sweet. Both of you. Go home. I need you ready to shoot first thing in the morning, and you were up till God knows last night midwifing Carmilla. Too many writers on this lot already with mush for brains -- I don't need one on my unit."

"But we're talking twenty, twenty-five pages," Art protests.

"And I wrote triple that in my radio days," Len grins, defiant, and for a moment you can almost think his skin doesn't look quite so sallow. "Three times a week. Go home, kids. This is the job."

At the end of the corridor, Art looks back and sees Len at the door to his office, pacing, hands gesturing, bashing out the story in his mind. Art raises a hand to wave, stupid, like a child. But Len doesn't see it.

Eileen says not word one all the way out of the building. "Penny for them?" Art finally asks, as they cross sweltering asphalt to their cars.

"A telegram," Eileen says, and nothing else. Then she blinks, flashes him the smile she used to earn with. "Forget it."

#

#### **INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE / LEN'S OFFICE - NIGHT**

Typewriter keys chatter like wind-up teeth all the way down the hall.

Vidalia's dead on her feet, emptying the ashtrays and the wastebaskets on automatic, too tired even to daydream. She spent all day out of focus in the background of a Civil War drama, less important than the horses. A whole day of spackling on the smile the director demanded and retreating back into herself, picturing how she's going to renovate the property in Los Feliz once the paperwork goes through. Any part of her that's still worth a damn is several hours (sigh) in the future, already at home in bed next to Marvin, not minding if he snores.

But God forbid she sit down, even for a second. Typewriter keys mean someone's still here. And if that someone were to see her doing anything but her job, he wouldn't care about the throbbing in her feet or the ache in one shoulder. She'd be nothing more than evidence to bolster a long-held opinion.

As she wheels the bin one door at a time toward the sound of the typing, her eyes nudge her brain enough to recognize that it's coming from Mr. Valmont's office. The fraction of her that's awake relaxes -- not entirely, never entirely, you never know when even the nice ones can turn on you. But a little.

Mostly she spoke with Jack Moreau on set. Mr. Valmont, aptly enough, kept to the shadows, paging through a script, dropping words in Jack or Nico the cinematographer's ear like coins in a nickelodeon. But he'd smiled at her a few times, in a charming, almost shy way. Most producers didn't even see her at all. And he'd hired her back -- made a point of it, Jack had said, and expanded the role -- after Panther Priestess. That counted for something.

Damn, he's really hammering that thing. When she reaches his suite the outer door's shut, but the sound still carries. She gets out her keyring and finds the skeleton for this floor. As she tidies the outer office -- not much to do, really, his secretary runs a tight ship -- she can hear the typewriter rack-tack-tacking away with only the faintest

pause between pages.

She raps on the door before entering, calls out "Mr. Valmont?" Usually he's long gone by the time she makes it to his office.

Inside just one light's burning, a little one at the far end of the room on Mr. Valmont's desk. She has to lean to one side, around one of the many teetering columns of books and papers, to see his rounded little shape hunched at the typewriter. The sound of the keys bounces and flutters at the walls and ceiling like a flock of trapped birds.

"Mr. Valmont?" she asks again.

"Is someone there?" The voice comes so soft, so hoarse, she can barely make it out over the typing.

"It's Vidalia Morse, Mr. Valmont," she says. And when that provokes no response, she continues, feeling stupid, "I -- I was in a couple of your pictures?"

"Please," he rasps. "Paper. Can you find me more paper?"

She's drawn closer now, enough to see two piles of sheets on his desk -- one wobbling, unusually high, to his left, and another down to one or two last leaves on his right. Around his desk chair sprawl the torn-open packaging of several reams' worth of typing paper.

"Mr. Valmont?" she asks again, louder, to be heard over the drumbeat of fingers on keys.

"Paper!" Not an order. It sounds like a plea.

She leaves her rolling can, backs away, starts rifling through the nearest stack -- no, nothing here, all these pages have been filled. Vidalia flees to the outer office, tries the supply closet -- locked -- and the secretary's desk drawers -- locked. Too small to fit any of her keys.

She's not sure why she's moving with such urgency, why her heart's beating so. At last she tries looking under the secretary's blotter, and finds two stray sheets there, held in apparent reserve for correspondence emergencies.

She rushes back into the office, paper shaking in her hand. "Here, I -- I found some. Not much."



His hand reaches back without looking, and she puts the sheets in it. He slaps them down, and a little sound escapes him, like a sob. Of grief or relief, she can't tell. The typewriter sounds its chime, and he slams the carriage back into place, whips out the finished sheet, and rolls another one in, faster than Vidalia's ever seen it done. The typing resumes.

"Mr. Valmont, are you all right?" Vidalia asks quietly. "Should -- should I get someone?" Who, she doesn't know. Security guards are all the way at the edges of the lot, or prowling God knows where around the soundstages. She could call someone, but would they listen when they heard her voice?

"Stay," he croaks. "Company's good." Already he's finished the new page, and again, the flash of one sheet out, another one in. Just a few pages left. "I -- I'm glad you came by. I was -- afraid -- thought I'd -- be alone --"

He hasn't turned around. From here she can't see his face, just the back of his head, the sweat beading on his neck, the undulation of his shoulders as his fingers fly over the keys.

"Mr. Valmont," she says. "What's wrong?"

"I can't --" he says, as if each few words slip out of him amid some hand-over-hand mountain climb.

"I can't feel -- can't hear -- my heart beating -- anymore.

"And if -- I stop typing -- I don't know if -- it'll still be -- I'll still be --"

"Mr. Valmont?" She takes the risk, puts a hand on his shoulder, spins him around in the chair.

The office falls silent. His shoulders droop, his head lolls. His eyes stare up past her at nothing, at the distant stars beyond the stucco ceiling. His skin looks pale, blue, under its sheen of sweat.

And when she touches the side of his neck, on reflex, he's too cold for the room.

She stumbles backwards, feels something soft and sticky under her shoe, against the stiff cheap carpet. Lifts her foot, looks down.

A single smashed jelly bean.

She looks up again into his vacant eyes, his gaping mouth, and the sound wells up in her and she opens wide and

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**INT. WRITERS' OFFICES - MORNING**

Really, thinks Eileen, how else could he have gone?

The impromptu wake has mostly broken up. Nico's pinch-hitting on a second picture while its DP discreetly dries out, and Harris LeRoi had a rewrite to turn in, so it's just her and Art and Jack Moreau moping around. The paper cones from the water cooler pepper her wastebasket; her clandestine fifth of cheap bourbon has retreated to her desk drawer, on its last legs.

"Did they say who found him?" she asks, swiveling back and forth in her chair. She can't remember whether she's asked this already. Doesn't matter. It's just something to say.

"Cleaning lady, was all I heard from Albert," Jack sighs, in a plume of smoke.

"We shouldn't be here," Art says. "Magda, the kids, they've gotta be..." He falls silent for a moment. "I knew it. I knew he didn't look right. If it wasn't me on this picture --"

"Hey." Jack's using his Director Voice, the one that clobbers through your skull and gets a fist around your brain stem. "You didn't strong-arm that promise out of Len. And you didn't demand that he keep it. He wanted you in the chair."

Art spits out a bitter little laugh. "And for this picture." Then he blinks, realizes, cheeks flushing. "No offense."

Eileen shrugs, toying with her gold lighter, flicking the cap open and closed, watching it utterly fail to sprout into flame. "Silk purse, sow's ear. We were doing our best."

Art runs both hands through his hair. "The studio's asked me to dig up some photos of him. For the notice in the bulletin. Our Beloved Friend and all that."

Jack stubs out his cigarette in Eileen's ashtray. "Never speak ill of the dead. At least till the numbers come in on his last picture."

Outside the planks of the terrace groan. A silhouette hovers outside the screen door for a moment, before Max Green and his undertaker's face lumber inside. Shit. Eileen wishes she'd had more than just the one shot.

"Now, A pictures aren't my bailiwick," he intones, making a show of checking his wristwatch, "but I believe you're expected on set, Mr. Moreau. Marie Antoinette isn't going to behead herself."

"L'etat, c'est moi," Jack says. He nods in sympathy to Art, to Eileen, and then sidles past Max in the doorway.

"I know, I know," Art says, starting to rise from his chair. "We can't lose the day. I can get us shooting in an hour."

Max pats the air as if he's soothing it. "No need, no need. Grief takes time."

If the look on Art's face is any clue, he and Eileen have both smelled the same rat. "But Len's rewrites," she says. "Not to sound ghoulish, but he finished the pages, he literally died for the pages --"

"Which are, unfortunately, gibberish." Max shakes his head, professionally sorry. "The man was writing in some sort of delirium. Understandable, of course, poor Len."

Art sinks back into his chair. "You're shutting us down."

Max adopts an expression of bland saintliness. "I'm giving us all time to sit with this ... simply tremendous loss. Besides. It's clear the picture wasn't working -- due respect, due respect. I think it'd benefit from a fresh

approach. No sense throwing good money after bad."

"And what does Sid say about all this?" Eileen asks. "I can't see him throwing out half a picture and just starting over. He'd sooner eat his own liver with onions."

"Oh, you didn't hear?" Max's eyes widen slightly, a portrait of unobjectionable concern. "Sid's taking early retirement. Health concerns, just between you, me, and the wallpaper. Can't blame him for having a wake-up call. They'll get someone in to replace him soon -- all well above my pay grade, you understand -- but in the meantime, I've been asked to temporarily shoulder his duties on our little B unit." He sighs like a flock of mourning doves. "Tough call, of course, but I've got the studio to think about."

Max turns to leave, then looks back at them. "Don't worry," he says. "There's still a place for both of you in the Monument family. Take the day, clear your heads. I'll have new assignments for you by tomorrow." He produces his little paper sack of jelly beans from inside his coat and ingests one. His mouth quirks in a private smile. "Oh," he says around the chewing. "That's a lovely flavor."

Then he's gone, leaving Art and Eileen and their collective misery.

Art goes jellyfish-limp in his chair. "Back to the sweatbox for me," he groans. "It was a nice dream while it lasted, wasn't it?"

Eileen opens her desk drawer, envisioning a long future full of honeys and sweethearts and requests to fetch coffee. She pulls out the bourbon bottle, watches its dregs splash around in the sunshine through the windows. "Shit," she sighs.

#

#### **INT. STUDIO ARCHIVES - NIGHT**

At some point the light through the blinds dwindles to almost nothing, and Art has to get up and switch on a lamp.

His back's sore, his tuchus aches, and when his grumbling stomach compels him to check his wristwatch, he realizes to his dismay that the commissary's just closed. Hell. He's almost done. He'll hit the soda fountain across the street from the west gate after.

Truth be told, he's been hiding in here all day. Imagining a phone call from Magda, the pitying looks of everyone on the lot. The golden boy who lost his big chance before it even began --

He shakes that thought loose, ashamed. He's still alive. Doing better than some.

Art's found some great stuff, probably more than the bulletin will ever use. The glowing letter of recommendation from Selznick. The candid of Len and Sid shaking hands on his first day, Max's vague outline hovering blurry in the background. The publicity still of Len and Belle Devereaux with the honest-to-God panther that Max had forced Len and Jack to use in Panther Priestess. They'd turned the lights down so low on set that you could barely make it out onscreen, and had Art cut it back to a few handfuls of frames. The suggestion of a big cat.

Art remembers Jack and Len slapping the table at some Shabbat dinner, pink and breathless with hysterics, recounting how the panther kept breaking wind so loudly and noxiously that the mics could pick it up. He feels tears coming again and pre-empts them, mostly, with a grin.

He closes the last filing cabinet harder than he intends to, and the top volume of the studio yearbook tumbles off and lands on his toes. 1927 was a painfully heavy year, and when he bends down, smarting, to pick it up, he notices it's fallen open on the studio portrait.

He marvels at fresh-faced junior executive Sidney Myers of twenty years ago, his unlined face and thick head of dark hair. If that's a portent of things to come for him, perhaps it's time he joins his brother in the shoe-repair business.

And there, in the back row, half-hidden by the VP of

Foreign Marketing, is Max Greene. Has he been with the studio that long? Hard to make out, but he looks as bald, as fleshy, as ever. He looks --

Art frowns, hauls the book over to the desk he's been using, angles the light. He cleans his glasses and looks again.

Damned if Max Greene looks the same then as now.

Art flips a few pages onward to the individual portraits. There's Sid, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. But Max only merits a caption at the bottom of the page: Not pictured.

He pages through the book, studying the executive photographs. Here and there, the captions identify Max in the background -- always moving right when the flash goes off, always blurred and out of focus.

Curiosity gnaws at Art. He goes back to the cabinets, selects a random scattering of years, all the way back to 1919, when the studio was founded. Execs come and go from book to book, the usual turnover. But every year, in every studio picture, Art finds Max in the back row, always with his head turned, or in someone else's shadow, or his face a wobbling smear. Same goes for the few years someone manages to collar him for a portrait sitting.

Max's titles change, of course. But he never seems to rise too high, always hovering comfortably in the middle of the ranks. Which would make him the least ambitious man in this entire town who still registers a pulse.

And -- to the extent you can even resolve his face -- Max always, always looks the same. Exactly like he does now.

Everyone else ages. Fast, it seems to Art, young faces piling on thirty years of lines in fifteen or twenty. But that's the business, right?

Isn't it?

Art thinks of the old woman shuffling around in Lilah's gown.

The girl in the mirror. Where did she go?

The room's warm, but Art still shivers, an impossible

thought cracking through its eggshell within him. A prickle at the base of his neck makes him look over his shoulder.

But it's only him in the room.

By the time he's run across the lot through the hot night wind, panting, a sweat-stuck mess, he's very nearly talked himself out of it. He's hoping Eileen will get him the rest of the way there. The photos are grainy, the reproduction terrible, especially in those earlier editions. Monument Pictures doesn't save its cheapness only for the B unit. And some people just have those sorts of faces, never young or particularly old. He's mixed-up, he's grieving, he's being ridiculous. Surely that's what she'll say.

Her office light's on, but he can tell through the screen door that she's out. Makes sense -- it's pushing nine at night. He stoops over her desk, catching his breath, scavenging pencil and paper to leave her a note all about what an ignoramus he surely must be.

He almost writes it on the back of the half-crumpled memo sheet lying in the middle of her blotter, the sort the office boys use to run messages on the lot. But he turns it over first, in case she might need it, and reads the messenger's hasty pencil scrawl:

TO: E. ROBIE:  
YOUR ATTENDANCE REQ'D  
MEET EXEC BLDG, FL. 3, 8:15 P.M.  
FROM: M. GREENE

#

# **INT. PRODUCTION OFFICES - NIGHT**

Vidalia Morse is hauling her trash can out of some executive VP's office as Eileen emerges from the stairwell. For a moment Eileen puts on a smile, glad to see a face that isn't Max's. But Vidalia just looks exhausted, all the lights in her dimmed.

"Another long day?" Eileen asks.

Vidalia looks up from the floor, startled, but Eileen sees relief in her eyes. "Miss Robie," she says, with a quick sidelong glance, as if she's worried someone might be watching. "I'm sorry for your loss." She leans closer, drops her voice. "I was the one who found him."

Eileen feels gut-punched all over again. "God, I'm so sorry. That's horrible." She wants to stay, but the clock on the wall tells Eileen she's cutting things fine as it is. "Can I meet you after? Will you be around? Maybe an hour? I'm so sorry, but it's Max Greene, and I don't think I can keep him waiting."

Vidalia opens her mouth as if there's more to say, but stops, and looks away with a little nod. Her disappointment stings Eileen's conscience, lemon juice on a cut. "Thanks. I'm sorry, really I am. We'll talk later. Promise."

She half-turns, and then a stupid thought seizes her. "Hey, if tomorrow the studio gets a telegram from me--" Vidalia's looking at her like she's just sprouted antlers. "Forget it. Never mind. Find you in an hour or so? Hopefully less."

"Have a seat," Max says from behind his desk -- there, the famous jar of jelly beans, finally borne witness by her own eyes. The radio announcer's giving some kind of bulletin about a chance of rolling blackouts from high winds when Max switches it off. "Thank you so much for coming, Miss Robie."

He stands, stretches. Eileen holds her legal pad on her lap, her pen tight in her fist. Lots of things you can do with a pen, if you need to. She's heard stories from some of the other girls -- not about Max, but she's not taking any chances. But he doesn't move to close the door, at least.

He gives her a smile from under his heavy brow, surprisingly shy, even self-effacing. "I know what you must think of me. Max Greene, the big bad bean-counter." He pats the jar on his desk. "After a while, you just decide to embrace the legend. But I am sorry about Len, I really am."



He had so much to offer. So much vitality. And his pictures did make us a hell of a lot. I'm sure my titles helped, of course."

"Of course," Eileen says slowly.

"That's the part of the job I've always loved, you know," Max says. "The creativity. It's all right, you can laugh, I'm sure I sound ridiculous. But I asked you here because I've got an idea for a picture -- horror, yes, but the sort of thing Len would have liked." He lifts his hand in a sort of Boy Scout pledge. "And for all our ... disagreements, I think Len and I would agree that you've done fine work. I'd like your help to flesh it out. Art could direct, even. It could be your tribute to Len."

This whole pitch has strayed far enough from what Eileen was expecting that curiosity drives her to lean back, ready the pen over the pad. "All right," she says. "I'm listening, Mr. Greene."

He moves behind his desk to the cart on the corner, holds up a pair of clinking glasses in one large hand.

"Refreshment? I don't usually touch the stuff, but this business with Len has left me in a sentimental mood."

Eileen would say no, should say no, but if she's reading the year on the bottle's label correctly, Max gets his liquor from the loftiest of shelves. She hasn't seen its like since her teenage forays into her father's locked cabinet.

"One finger," she says, affecting a casual toss of her hair. "Rocks."

"The lady knows what she likes," he nods, seemingly impressed, and fishes ice from a sweating bucket with small silver tongs.

The ice makes a pleasant rattle in her glass. She waits to see him take a sip before doing likewise. A girl can't be too careful. The stuff is good, better than good, a peat bog trailing a slow smolder across her tongue.

"Where are my manners?" Len clucks his tongue at himself.

"Shall we toast? To Len, perhaps?"

"To business," she says, and he stretches out a long thick arm to chime his glass against hers. She takes another sip, small, polite, and sets her glass down on the little table next to her padded chair. "Speaking of which."

He sets down the drink on his desk and claps his hands together, rubs them, smacks his lips. "Yes. Of course. Now, I know I had your unit working on Baroness of Blood. But really, sequels, monster rallies, Universal's already wearing them out. I should have realized it sooner, but I can admit when I'm wrong. Len's best stuff was fresh. Original. And that's the angle I'd like to take with this picture. A vampire picture, yes -- but not like any other. Something no one's seen before."

Eileen settles back into the chair, cradled pleasantly soft by the upholstery. "Not a middle-aged drunk in a tuxedo, then?"

Max's eyes practically sparkle. "No. That's the brilliant thing -- no need for special makeup, fancy costumes. Our vampire looks like the average man on the street. Blends right into a crowd. Economical to make, you see."

"So he's biting necks in off-the-racks from Woolworth's." Eileen feels her jaw muscles clench away a yawn. Too many late nights recently. Bad form to fall asleep in front of the high muckety-mucks. Especially Max.

"Ah, there's another difference," Max says, sitting on the edge of his desk, leaning his elbows on his knees. "None of that neck-biting stuff. It's played out, and besides, it always gets the censors in a lather. Done to death. Heh. No, our vampire doesn't even want blood."

"Lymph fluid, then?" Eileen asks, drawing on the approximately fifty thousand scripts from the Doctor Mulvane series she's had to mark up. "Maybe a chaser from the spinal cord?" Weariness pulls her eyes out of focus, and she muscles them back in line.

Max smiles. "Time, Miss Robie. Our vampire drains time."

Youth. Life. Same idea as ever, I'll admit, but less visceral. More ... cerebral. Surely Len would approve."

Was her pen always his heavy? Was the chair always this soft? Eileen feels herself relaxing, more and more at ease. This isn't so bad. What was she ever worried about? Strange, this yellow pad in front of her, lines like good little soldiers. Should she be writing something down?

Max stands, moves out of her immediate view, into the hazy periphery of the room. Far away she hears a door shut, a latch turn.

"Our vampire hunts by scent," Max is saying. "What do the naturalists call it? An apex predator. One whiff fixed in his mind, and he can track his prey anywhere." Eileen hears footfalls on the carpet. A shadow falls over her, and she smells his cologne, and something else, strange, like the air before a storm. She hears him breathe deeply, feels heat rustle her scalp. Then the footfalls move away, around her, and Max looms back into view, sitting once again on the edge of the desk across from her. He picks up his glass -- oh, how lovely, how it sparkles in the light -- and takes another sip.

"And none of that phony mesmerism junk," Max scoffs. "No look into my eyes, no magic rings." He holds up a hand. "Our vampire, he emits this ... I don't know, maybe an oil through his skin. A touch, or maybe some residue in a drink, to relax the prey. Make them docile."

"Docile," Eileen repeats, and the sound of her own voice nearly makes her giggle. Docile. Such a soft, pleasant word. She could stroke it like a long-haired rabbit.

"And no fangs," Max tuts. "Fangs, you can see, and you know, Len was right. It's what you don't see, what you imagine --" He looks at his own hand again, holds the fingertips out to Eileen. "So imagine, if you will -- are you familiar with the creatures of the deep ocean? Remoras, little parasites, they have these, these astonishing little sucker mouths with rings of tiny teeth. Imagine one of those

on each fingertip, hidden beneath the prints. We won't even have to show it, of course. Just describe it, and let the audience do the rest."

Eileen squints, trying to get her eyes to focus. Is that -- does she see, there on his fingertips...? The light's not great. When did the light get so dim? Is that the light, or her eyes?

"Also, he doesn't live in a castle, oh no." Max shakes his head. "Too obvious. Asking for trouble, really. No, he blends in. Works in an office. Big corporation, let's say. Lots of people coming and going. Plenty of turnover. He burrows into the organization like a botfly and stays there, nested, content. Letting the decades pass, letting personnel come and go, no one sticking around long enough to mark him out. The perfect place to hide. To hunt."

He stands again, his mass blotting out the light. And somewhere deep in the padded cell that her body has become, Eileen, straitjacketed, thrashes against the walls, screaming Something is wrong! Something is wrong!

"Now tell me, Miss Robie," he says, soft, ever so soft. "What sort of picture do you think that would make?"

He reaches out with a plump thumb and forefinger and undoes the top button of her blouse.

The door latch clicks. Creak of the hinges as the door swings open. Max stands up, yanks back his hand as if it's been burned. "I don't wish to be disturbed," he snaps.

"Oh, I'm so terribly sorry, Mr. Greene, I didn't know you were in a meeting." Eileen knows that voice. But it's different, mocking itself, stretched out like a cartoon into a lazy drawl, as if it's trying to fill an outline someone else drew for it. "I won't be but a minute, sir, just let me bustle on in. You won't never know I'm even here."

"That's all right," Max protests, "you're not needed here," and Eileen in her straitjacket screams yes, yes you are, oh please, don't leave, and by the time the words fight their way up to her actual lips, they come out as the

gentlest of breaths.

"Oh, that's so very kind of you, Mr. Greene, honest it is," and she's there, Vidalia, pushing her can into the office, waving her broom handle around industriously. The very picture of obedient servitude. "But Mr. Marston, you know Mr. Marston in building services, he tells me, Vidalia, you make sure you get every last one of those offices, don't you miss a one. You all go on with your conversation, though. Don't pay me no nevermind." Dialogue could use a rewrite, to be honest. But Eileen's always taken issue with ad libbers.

"Really, now, there's no need, and if you'll just --" Max splutters, and then her broom handle swings wide and knocks the jar of jelly beans to the carpet, scattering them everywhere.

Max wails, his mouth trembling, and as if drawn by some magnetic force sinks to his knees over the windfall, this future bumper crop of candied beanstalks.

"Oh, gracious, clumsy me, Mr. Greene, I am ever so sorry," Vidalia says, pouring molasses on each syllable, straight from the jug. "Here, let me help you get those --"

"I can get them!" Max snaps, high, a theremin whine somewhere beneath the words. "I need to get them. Leave them alone."

"As you like, sir, only I'm so terribly sorry." Vidalia pauses. "Mr. Greene, your guest here don't look none too good. Come here, dear, let's get you some air, shall we? I don't suppose you'd mind, Mr. Greene, if I take her on to the infirmary to get her a looking-to?" Eileen feels Vidalia stoop, strap an arm under her shoulders, lift her from the chair. The change in altitude makes her head start to spin, and she sags against Vidalia until the patch of fog burns away from her vision.

Max looks up from the carpet, mouthing something as he fetches beans one by one from the rug, gathering them in an upturned palm. He gazes steadily at Vidalia and draws air in

through his nostrils, breathing deep. His face seems to flex and flutter for a moment there, as he inhales, some trick of the light.

"No," he says, mild, level. "You go on ahead. I'll catch up with you in a little while."

In the hall Vidalia shuts the door and locks it from the outside with her keyring, and Eileen half-falls into the wheeled bin and vomits everything in her stomach and several days retroactively, besides. When she surfaces, clinging to the rim of the can like the rail of a storm-tossed ocean liner, her head's cleared some, but her legs still wobble like a colt's.

"Max," she says, through an acid-soured mouth. "He's not -- he's not -- I don't know what he is. But I know what he isn't."

"I know," Vidalia says. "When I found Mr. Valmont, he was -- he was dead, but he wasn't, he was talking to me and -- I saw a jelly bean on the carpet --" She shakes her head, steels her features. "Can you walk?"

"Just about got my sea legs," Eileen says, then lets go of the can and nearly makes a liar of herself. Vidalia catches her and they both droop against one wall until she can right them.

"Easy," Vidalia says. "I've got you." They stumble toward the stairwell.

Three flights down and out into the sultry night, the wind whipping at Eileen's hair, stinging her eyes. "How long will that counting trick last?" Eileen asks.

"Depends on how fast he goes." Vidalia looks grim. "And how many beans in the jar."

"Eileen!" a voice screams over the wind, and she startles and nearly falls.

But it's Art, twenty percent sweat by volume, hair plastered to his head. "Oh, thank God, Eileen, it's Max, it's Max! He's some kind of a --"

He stops. Looks at their faces.

"Oh, shit, you already know," he says.

Eileen reaches out a hand and pats his cheek fondly. "We do," she says, world still a little soft at the corners, "but it's nice of you to show up anyway."

Art registers Vidalia, double-takes. "Weren't you in Panther Priestess?" he asks. "Wait, yeah, and By Voodoo Cursed! You were --"

"How do we get out of here?" Vidalia cuts in, but sweetly, politely. Art blinks, still catching his breath,

"Shit. Yeah. Right." He checks his watch. "It's after nine, and no night shoots scheduled, so they've already locked the front gates. But if we cut through the backlot, maybe we can make it to the west exit."

The wind roars again, hard enough that they have to brace against it, and in its wake the lights of the studio around them play out a death scene -- a flicker, a last-minute rally, and then out for the count. Doesn't look to have gotten the whole city; the sky still glowers orange above them. But this little corner of it, for certain.

The wind blows the stairwell door open, and from inside, echoing, they hear another door slam shut, higher in the building. Footsteps, slow and heavy, before the outer door closes again.

In the near-gloom Art, Eileen, and Vidalia trade looks. Art stoops under Eileen's other shoulder, and together the three of them limp off into the shadows.

#

#### **EXT. BACKLOT - NIGHT**

They can't go fast. Eileen's still dizzy, stumbling over her own feet, apologizing every few steps until Art hears Vidalia tell her to knock it off. "Not your fault."

They cut through the walled-city sets built for Hunchback, plywood creaking and canvas rippling in the fevered breath of the Santa Ana. Len always wanted to shoot

a picture with these.

"Just a little further," he tells Eileen -- he's lying, but they all know that, it's a morale thing -- "and we'll be out of here."

"And then?" Dread curdles in her voice. "He hunts by smell, Art. He's got our scent. We can go home and lock our doors and curl up in our nice cozy beds and he'll still --" Her eyes go briefly glassy, looking like she's fighting down another wave of nausea.

"Even if he doesn't," Vidalia says, huffing a little from holding Eileen up this long, "he'll be here. Every day. Biding his time. This is his home. He knows all the rules. Probably wrote them."

A left turn at the town square takes them into the city street set. The wind curls trash and papers across the asphalt, plasters them against the facades. Ahead the shadows of the soundstages loom over the truncated tops of the buildings. Art can't believe he was here a week ago, with Len, with Lilah, shooting the big stalking sequence. There's the shoe shop where Anna begs the proprietor to let her in. No one home now. No bus to catch.

The wind whistles -- no, wait, that's not the wind. Not just the wind.

Art looks over his shoulder. At the opposite end of the set, a silhouette strolls after them, leisurely. Spitting out some formless, lilting tune between pursed lips.

"Why isn't he trying to catch up?" Art pants, as they try and fail to quicken their pace.

"He doesn't need to," Eileen says. "We'll wear ourselves out for him. He's got time."

Art sees the soundstages again, looming closer. Realizes the sick, cold feeling in his gut doesn't owe to what might happen to him -- but to what he intends to do about it.

"Maybe not as much as he thinks," Art says.



**INT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT**

They grope their way through the pitch dark, so velvet-curtain viscous Vidalia can feel it pressing against her open eyes. Her shoulder aches where Eileen drapes over it. They see-saw along between the shelves, arms outstretched to guide them, barely enough room in the gap for each of them to reach all the way to one side. Vidalia's fingertips brush the wood, and occasionally a smooth shiver of dented steel.

"Any better?" she whispers.

"Some," Eileen breathes back. "Head's clear, I think. Legs are still weak."

"Just a little further," Vidalia urges. "Almost to the other side." Funny how she's thinking of Marvin now, of all times. Of those dimples in his cheeks when he smiles at her.

Ahead of them, a clack of steel, a door swung wide. When Vidalia's eyes adjust, she sees the long shadow stretching along the concrete toward them, the figure outlined in the doorway. Blocking their way out.

"I suppose you thought you were being clever." Greene's voice echoes off the high ceiling. "Doubling back. To cover the scent, perhaps?"

In the doorway his shadow seems to ripple at the edges. Perhaps it's the wind, or Vidalia's eyes. Perhaps not.

They could turn back, but to where? The shelves stretch straight to the opposite end of the building, to the door they came in through, and up nearly to the ceiling. No way to duck to the next aisle over, not with the shelves crammed full as they are.

He's been taking his time, up to now, toying with them. But Vidalia feels coldly certain that he can run just fine if and when he wants to.

"Was that your little boyfriend, Miss Robie, I saw with you earlier? I never bothered to fix on his scent. Art never seemed interesting enough, if we're being honest." Greene clucks his tongue, scolding, softening his voice around the

edges like a favorite uncle. "Did he cut and run on you, ladies? Did he promise he'd go get help?"

Vidalia feels a tremble run through Eileen's legs, leans toward her as Eileen wilts against one wall of shelving, catching her breath. "Something like that," Eileen says.

Greene sighs. "He won't save you, you know. If he's even trying, there's no way he'll be in time. And whether he does or not, I have ways to quiet him. Little ways, big ways. You wouldn't believe what people will choose to overlook if you can promise them just a little more than they've got." He chuckles. "Well. I suppose now you can, at that."

"Why Len?" Eileen says, blowing a fallen strand of hair away from her eyes. "What did he ever do to you? Besides make you money."

"Ah, yes." Greene's voice puckers with contempt. His shadow ambles toward them in a loose-limbed mockery of Chaplin's penguin waddle, a burlesque of leisure. "Little Leonid Vladimirovich, the sad-eyed boy dreamer, filled with ideas above his station. So sure of himself, but he never understood. This, all of this, this is a suction hose, an oil derrick. A siphon right into the pockets of the world, a steady flow of nickels and dimes, to pay for more siphons, to bring in more nickels and dimes, forever and ever, amen." He makes a curt, dismissive little noise deep in his throat. "And there's Len, thinking it's special. Magic. Beauty. The insufferable little prick. It's insulting, really, how delicious those last dregs of him were."

He's just a few feet from them now, his face in shadow, an outline painted with the light from the doorway.

"Now," he says. "Ladies. This doesn't have to be unpleasant. If you just hold still and try to face the thing with a little dignity, it'll all be over soon."

"Yes," Eileen says, through gritted teeth. "It will."

A noise from above, a tap-dance chorus on a tin roof, and the film cans from the highest shelf avalanche down. Eileen and Vidalia stumble back, go down together like a three-

legged race, just getting clear. Greene looks up, barely has time to raise his arms, before he's buried under the weight of all those dreams. Some of the cans crack open, ivy furls of film stock spilling out to shimmer in the wind through the doorway.

Art clambers down from his high perch one shelf at a time, until he's helping Vidalia and Eileen up off the floor. Eileen drapes against him, which is fine by Vidalia; hot water bottle or no, this shoulder's going to be cussing her all night at the least.

"On behalf of Len and his entire unit," Art pants, "I'd officially like to say: fuck you, Max." He lets out a slow breath, marveling at himself. "God, that felt amazing."

The mountain of film cans stirs, lurches, and they all jump back. Vidalia can make out Greene's head, a shoulder, one reaching arm coming out from beneath it. Under all that weight, under the oil-slick blood from the gash on his head that's dripping down over one eye, he's laughing.

"Ohhh, I can't wait to see what the papers will make of this," he chortles. "Disgruntled creatives, comma, colored charwoman in brutal attack on exec VP! They'll feast for days. I know just how to feed them."

"We're not scared of you, Max," Vidalia hears Art say, but he sounds about as convinced of that as she does.

"You stupid boy," Greene snaps. "You think I'm the only one in this town? You think we don't talk, don't coordinate? When I'm through with you, when every door in town is closed, even Poverty Row? You'll wish we'd done this my way. You'll come begging to me. To us."

Eileen pushes herself straight. Reaches into a pocket, pulls out something and holds it for Max to see. The gold lighter. They watch all the mirth on his face chill, crumble.

"Begging, huh?" Eileen says. "And what exactly would that sound like?"

"Now, now," Greene says, his speech spun into cotton

candy, "we don't have to be hasty. I can put in a word. I can put in lots of words. A pictures, A budgets. Director's chair for you, Art. Your own unit! And you, Miss Robie, how about, how about head of story! Time for a change in that department, I think. And, and you --" he snaps his fingers at Vidalia, willing his name onto her lips, "-- Miss Morse, yes, of course, you think I haven't noticed you. But I know you work in pictures. Room enough in this town for another Lena Horne, I'm sure. Do you sing? Dance?"

"I empty your wastebaskets," Vidalia says, and looks to Art and Eileen. They exchange a nod.

Eileen flips open the lighter.

The top hangs there dumbly, the flame unlit.

Eileen winces. Closes, opens it. Flicks the wheel, raising a few stubborn sparks and nothing else.

"This goddamned thing," she mutters, and on the floor Greene's already laughing again, low and delighted.

Vidalia digs in her apron, pulls out her box of matches. Shakes it. One left, rattling inside.

"Nothing beats the tried and true," she says, and strikes it.

She takes a moment to note its gleam reflected in his one unbloodied eye, and his lips are moving, he's saying no, no, and she wonders how many times he heard those same words before from someone else, and what he did when he heard them.

She lets the match fall from her fingers. The film stock curls, flares, and Max Greene is screaming even before he actually starts to burn.

They don't wait around. The fire certainly doesn't. Halfway out Vidalia turns back, a real Lot's wife situation, just for one more look. In the blur of heat and the bright blaze of flame, whatever's still thrashing around under all those molten canisters of film no longer seems human-shaped, its dwindling shrieks nothing any throat could ever utter.

By the time they stumble out of the warehouse the way

they came in, they're coughing out the same fumes that billow from the brilliant interior. The automatic alarm inside hammers at itself.

"What do you think, Art?" Eileen wheezes at last, propping herself on an elbow. "Would Len have gone for this ending?"

Art coughs and rolls onto his side. "You kidding?" he gasps. "No way we'd ever have the budget for this."

They lie on the hot paving, hearing the distant howl of sirens, watching millions of dollars turned to light, turned to sparks, drifting and scattering up into the sky. Like so much stardust.

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