

CAPE SEDUCTION

by Anne Carter

A Paranormal Romantic Mystery

Chapter 1

Northern California, Near the Oregon Coast

May 2008

Pea soup.

Rebecca Burke squinted at the road ahead, hoping to make out the taillights of the car in front of her.

Fog is nothing like soup. Not green, not hot, not tasting like some disgusting pureed legume.

The eerie silence unnerved her. She snapped on the radio and twisted the knob in search of something other than talk or rap. Settled on Garth Brooks.

Coast Highway ran only two lanes in either direction, and Rebecca kept to the right, nervously alternating between gas pedal and brake. She wasn't used to this thick, cottony mist. Dense fog almost never occurred back in Phoenix. She focused her attention on the white abyss before her. Surely it would burn off soon.

Was anyone behind her? Quick glances into the rearview mirror revealed nothing but retreating gray. *Perhaps I've entered the Twilight Zone*, she thought, trying to conjure a chuckle.

As the roadway swept around the base of a steep cliff, Garth's warble turned to noisy static. Rebecca reached for the tuner, intending to search for a stronger signal. Out of nowhere, a car charged past her on the left, churning up a brief clearing before being swallowed by the whiteness ahead. Startled, Rebecca's heart quickened, and she took tighter control of the steering wheel. She considered pulling over, but since she couldn't see the roadway to the side, she hesitated, slowed her speed even more. But what if a faster motorist hit her from behind?

The radio static grew. Rebecca again attempted to tune in something more agreeable, pausing when she discerned traces of a female voice behind the noise. Just a word, here and there. "Time

has come...find me..." Rebecca frowned, concentrating as she listened.

Again she checked her mirror. Seeing nothing, she started to pull her eyes back to the road when something appeared. A face, a woman's face, stared at her from the backseat.

A shockwave bolted through Rebecca's body at the sight. Grasping the steering wheel, she hit the brake, pulled the Volkswagen off the highway, and came to a skidding stop. She quickly twisted around, stared hard at the empty seat, the floor, the back window, and the fog.

I must be losing it.

Fortunately, there was a wide, flat shoulder where she'd left the highway. She looked to her left where the occasional car rushed by, traveling south. To the right, the fog lay heavy over the Pacific Ocean. Garth had resumed his mournful tale of unrequited love.

Rebecca smacked the *off* button on the radio, leaned back in her seat, closed her eyes. Clearly, her anxiety had caused a hallucination. There was no one in the car with her. She could barely recall the details of the woman's face, so brief was the vision. For a moment, she wondered if she'd seen her late mother's face; she'd dreamed about Mom just the night before. Heart still pounding, she opened her eyes and peeked into the rearview mirror. Nothing obstructed her view of the back window and the menacing fog beyond.

At 9:00 a.m. the sun hung somewhere overhead, lamely trying to burn through the clouds. The VW died; she twisted the key in the ignition, without result. No starter, only the futile clicking that usually foretold a dead battery. Eyeing the instrument panel in disgust, she thumped the steering wheel with the heel of her hand. The check engine light glared back at her, so there had to be some juice left.

Rebecca tried again to re-start the car to no avail. With a sigh, she reached for her wallet and cell phone, dialed, and peered again into the rearview mirror while waiting for an answer. This time, only her hazel eyes stared back. She shoved her bangs back off her forehead just as the tow service came on the line.

"I'm not exactly sure where I am. Somewhere near Crescent City. I know I passed an RV campground a few miles back. No, I don't have PGS or GSP or whatever it is." *Like I really want some*

satellite keeping track of me.

The tow service dispatcher had more patience than she did, but Rebecca found it hard to be friendly, especially after hearing it might be an hour before someone would be by. "Well that's just grand," she muttered, slapping the cell phone closed before tossing it into her backpack on the passenger seat.

I can't just sit here. Reaching behind her to the rear floor, Rebecca grabbed her black camera bag and stepped out of the car, quickly walking around to the passenger side. Cars whizzed past, their drivers oblivious to her plight. She dug her digital SLR camera out of the bag, draped the woven strap around her neck and then popped open the trunk and dropped the empty camera bag in.

Carefully, she perused her surroundings, her photographer's eye searching for a subject. She hated the waste of time. There had to be something worth shooting. She didn't mind the grayness—she'd shot some of her best work in black and white—but there still had to be subject matter.

A lone gull sat atop a nearby trash can. Tentatively spreading its wings, the bird begged for attention.

"Forget it, pal. I've already got your mom, dad, and cousins on film."

Rebecca walked unhurriedly through the mist in the direction of the surf, still wishing she'd happen upon an interesting angle or unusual sight. There was nothing, and why should there be? Nothing else had gone right today, from the power outage in her hotel, which caused her to be late and almost cost her the job, to the breakdown of her car and the wait for the driver. Not to mention the ridiculous hallucination that had driven her off the road in the first place. Now here she stood, wasting valuable travel time walking on Nowhere Beach, California, USA.

She finally found a log big enough to sit on. Not comfortable but a tolerable perch while she waited. The fog lifted while the clouds thinned in response to the sun's persistence. Rebecca glanced back at the highway. Her car had recently been serviced and had received a clean bill of health, damn it! Yet it quit running when she pulled off the road. Died. No illness, no accidental cause of death. She huffed out a sarcastic chuckle. What next? A tsunami?

Shaking her head slowly, Rebecca could see the oncoming waves now. She imagined them to be like a string of small white

animals, all rushing toward her before losing their collective nerve and retreating quickly back to the safety of the ocean.

Forced relaxation. She closed her eyes, tried for that calm, centering peace her yoga instructor always raved about. *I need a vision. Something soothing. Something—*

Rebecca's eyes fluttered open, and she felt the sting of threatening tears. The vision rising before her mind's eye did not offer tranquility. The face of the woman in the rearview mirror returned, and while she still couldn't be sure the image was her mother, fresh grief inexplicably washed over her.

"I don't need this," she murmured. "I don't need this at all."

Rebecca unlaced and took off her sneakers and socks, neatly stacking them on the log. *This water will be freezing.* She edged toward the wet sand, camera swaying below her chest. "Freezing," she repeated aloud as the first small rush of foam-crested seawater lapped at her feet. Still, she stood grounded, mesmerized by the thinning fog. There were rocks, some boulder-sized, in the waters before her, becoming visible as the waves crashed against them. The odd beam of sunlight, here and there, painted the individual rocks with an ethereal glow, intriguing her as the water sprayed up with each pounding wave.

Transfixed upon one huge rock miles out, Rebecca slowly brought her camera to her face, peered through the viewer as she focused on the rock, which, through the telephoto lens, turned out to be a small island with some sort of structure on it. Shrouded by remnants of mist clinging to its sides stood a building, as gray as the fog surrounding it, built on an islet barely large enough to support it.

Snap. Snap. Snap. The shutter worked its magic, stealing moments of time, freezing the waves, the spray, the birds, the rocks and the odd little structure on her micro memory card. The haze rapidly dissolved as Rebecca snapped away, and she moved closer as she filmed. Suddenly, the sun broke cleanly through the sparse clouds, evaporating the remaining fog, giving Rebecca a clear view of the island and its lone structure. She smiled as she lowered the camera, squinted into the sunlight, making sure the image spied through the lens wasn't some new mirage. No; her eyes, unaided by lens and filters, looked directly upon a lighthouse.

Maybe her luck was changing.

* * *

"Just sign here."

"Even though you didn't do anything?"

The tow truck driver shrugged. "Hey. I drove down here from Crescent City. I did something. Not my problem there's nothing wrong with your car, lady. You should be glad."

Rebecca frowned and took the pen he offered. "Know where I could get a decent motel room?" she asked, scribbling "I.M. Stupid" illegibly on the form.

"Straight ahead about two miles there's a Best Western. Clean. Got a coffee shop."

"Thanks," Rebecca said, handing the clipboard back.

"You're not from around here," he said, noting the time on his watch and jotting it onto the form.

"Nope." *Duh*. Could the Arizona license plates have clued him in? Phoenix seemed like a million miles away. Digging into the hip pocket of her jeans, she pulled out some ones and handed them to the driver. "You know anything about that lighthouse out there?"

The driver pocketed the tip and looked up. "No," he said, staring straight into Rebecca's eyes. "Nothing." He turned to go.

"Is it still in use?" Rebecca asked, following the man to his truck.

"No. It's not occupied anymore. *Es vacante. Abandonado.*"

"Is there any way to get out there?"

"Not many guys are willing to take a boat out there. Killer rocks." He hesitated. "There is one guy. He's in town," he said, motioning over his shoulder toward Crescent City. "He might. Ask at the bait shop."

"Thanks," Rebecca murmured and stood back to watch as the tow truck merged into traffic. She paused, looking from the VW back to the lighthouse, then to the road and the southbound traffic. She had time to kill. Her rescheduled appointment wasn't until late afternoon, and she now felt compelled to stay on the beach for awhile.

In the trunk were her father's binoculars and her aluminum accessory case. She selected a telephoto lens from the case, swiftly exchanging it onto the camera body, then grabbed the binoculars before heading back to the driftwood log. Bracing her elbows on her knees, she leveled the camera before her eye and snapped a few frames before turning the camera sideways, framing the

lighthouse vertically.

Something was different now. The water line rose higher on the rocks, the tide rolling in.

"I wonder how far it is," she said, tilting her head and trying to figure the distance between the beach and the island.

Perhaps her client would know. He might even be able to see the lighthouse on a clear day, as his home perched on a bluff not too far north of where she sat.

Soon, she rested her camera in her lap and lifted the binoculars to her eyes. The lighthouse looked old, gray and beaten. Tall, a squarish tower rising from the center of an immense oval base. Rebecca's mind searched for a word. Forlorn. Cold. *Forgotten*.

The waves crashed, relentless in their attack on the small rock, almost as if the sea was trying to reclaim it, to destroy the man-made structure and return the islet to its natural state. Build-crash-retreat: the water glistened over the rocky island base as it trickled back into the sea. Rebecca wondered what the lighthouse looked like inside. *Who had lived there? Was it scary, being surrounded by water, all alone out there? Who owned it now, and why did they allow it to fall into such disrepair?*

There were answers, Rebecca was sure. Adjusting the focus, she made one more perusal of the island. Moving slowly in order to take in the smallest detail, Rebecca noticed something she'd not seen before. Something red, a small figure, perhaps, at the top of an external stairway on the base below the lighthouse. She strained to hold the binoculars steady, squinting her eyes.

A woman.

Taken aback, Rebecca started, her focus lost. She struggled to locate the same spot, and when she did, the stairway was empty.

"How strange," she murmured, re-examining every section of the stairway and its surrounding structures. No signs of life. Could the woman have gone inside?

At noon, she reluctantly packed her equipment, put her shoes and socks back on, and returned to her car, hoping to find the motel with the coffee shop close by. She sighed with relief when the VW started and she eased out onto Coast Highway.

* * *

The laptop grabbed the Wi-Fi signal right away. Rebecca took

a large bite out of the apple she'd brought back from the convenience store, then placed her fingers on the keyboard, carefully typing in the name her client gave her: *Dragon Rock Lighthouse*. She chose the most informative looking link and clicked. Her eyes raced over the words, unable to pause for even a moment. She had to know everything about the lighthouse, and fast.

"Abandoned in 1947...failed attempt by local preservation society to gain ownership in 1988...shown in backdrop for *The Keytooth Affair*, Sandstone Productions, 1996..." She read aloud to herself, nibbling on the apple as she reviewed site after site. "Ownership is private...identity veiled by corporate documents...no plans to restore the property at this time."

She found photos, of course, many of them from a time when the lighthouse was young and in good condition. Rebecca leaned close to her screen, poring over each picture. "Just over six miles offshore. Built in 1891...also seen in the film *Cape Seduction*, MGM, 1948."

Cape Seduction. Her father was an old movie buff. She picked up her cell.

"Dad? It's me. Yeah, still in Northern California. My shoot went off great when I finally got there. He has a '34 Packard, Eleventh Series Eight Convertible. Yeah, pristine. I shot it in a kind of *film noir* look. Hey, speaking of films, did you ever see a movie called *Cape Seduction*?"

He paused and with a mumble, her father reached into his memory. "Let me see. Seduction. Hmm."

Rebecca found herself drumming fingernails on the desk. "It might have had a lighthouse in it..."

"Lighthouse. Oh, yeah! Hell, that must've been...1938..."

"Forty-eight."

"Yep. Errol Flynn was the hero, I believe. Is he even still alive? Oh, what a Casanova, let me tell you. Friends with Doug Fairbanks, Olivier, you know, that whole gang. The woman was a new actress, back then, anyway. Can't remember her name right off. Young, real pretty, dark hair."

"Did she make any other films you can remember?"

"Nope. Now that I think on it, I don't think we ever saw her again. Your mother, God love her, she...she really liked that picture."

Her father went silent as they both thought about Rebecca's mother, dead for over fifteen years. Jebediah Burke still grieved. Rebecca flushed at the memory of her surreal experience in the car that morning, and her thoughts about her mother. *Shake it off, Bec.*

"Thanks, Daddy. I saw this lighthouse today, and for some reason, I just got crazed to know all about it. So. How's the weather there?"

"You know what they say. In Phoenix we have two temps, hot and hotter. It's only hot right now."

Rebecca chuckled. "Hey, I'll be home in a week. I have about ten more cars to shoot for the magazine. Love you."

* * *

She tossed in bed, her sleep broken into short, fitful naps. As she twisted restlessly beneath the sheets, visions of a nameless face appeared in settings, familiar and yet out of place. A woman sat behind the wheel of a 1944 Packard. *A Brown Bomber*, her father said, nodding in approval. The woman smiled from behind dark glasses. Smiled, yet Rebecca shuddered at the appearance of a single tear sliding down the fading cheek of the driver. *Wait*, she called out, wanting badly to remove the sunglasses from the woman's face. The car drove away. Her father bowed his head.

Rebecca awoke fatigued, but determined to get moving on her plan. At 8:00 a.m. she phoned Pat, her boss, hoping he'd had his first cup of coffee. Even two.

"Okay, I have this excellent idea for a photo story. You ready? Lighthouses."

"Lighthouses? And why would our readers care about lighthouses? Isn't that a bit too cozy-romantic-sappy for our jet-setting subscribers?"

"How about mystery, intrigue, weird history?"

"What sort of weird history?"

"Well, I don't know yet. But I will. There must be thousands of lighthouses around the U.S., and they all have stories, right? There's even one right here, not more than ten miles from where I'm staying." She decided not to share her sighting of the woman in red.

"Where you *were* staying. You have to be in Sacramento by 5:00 p.m., right?"

Rebecca groaned inwardly. What a stick-in-the-mud. She tried again.

"Our readers are wealthy travelers with a variety of interests. Lighthouses have an aura...they're different, out of the ordinary, unique places of history where people risked their lives every day to protect our coasts." Paraphrasing the website still on her screen, Rebecca rolled her eyes at the trite words.

"Let me think about it. You just get those cars digitized for September."

"But I'm here *now*. Why would you want to go to the expense of sending me back?" A risky question. She hoped Pat wouldn't use it against her.

"Rebecca. What are you asking for? More time? Money?"

"Can we set the car shoots back a few days...give me time to see if I can get on the island and film the inside of this lighthouse before I have to move on? It'll be worth it, Pat. I guarantee it. And I never guarantee anything."

She pictured her boss chewing on his fake cigar.

"Okay. Look. I'll bump Sacramento and San Jose to the end, so that'll give you three days before you have to hit that kid in Monterey with the 1930 Pierce-Arrow ragtop. Got it?"

Rebecca smiled, danced her fingers lightly across the top of her laptop. "You won't be sorry," she said honestly. "You're gonna like this."

"I hope so."

* * *

"If there are no tours, how do I get out there?" Rebecca asked. The clerk behind the counter of the Del Norte Visitor's Bureau smiled.

"You can get there by helicopter but not without the owner's permission."

"And the owner would be..."

"It's called the St. Paul Foundation. But honestly, no one around here really knows who they are."

"They must have an address somewhere. What if...what if something happened out there, an emergency or something?"

"Their address is in care of an attorney in Beverly Hills. That's about all I can tell you." The woman, a nice looking senior, wore

pearls the same color as her up-do hair.

Rebecca lifted her chin, took in a deep breath, considered the clerk. "I, uh, understand they filmed *Cape Seduction* out there."

"Oh, yes. Our local claim to fame in the '40s. Jordan Kent became all the rage, and that Darla Foster..."

"The leading actress?"

"Yes. When she went missing, it brought all sorts of notoriety to our little town. It was the only movie she ever made, you now."

"She went missing? Like, disappeared?"

"Mm-hmm. About a month after the picture came out. It debuted at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, you know. In Hollywood. Oh! What a fabulous night."

"You were there?"

"Well, no, only in spirit. They did a radio broadcast, and my girlfriends and I, we sat up all night chatting about it."

"What about Douglas Fairbanks. He played the hero, right?"

"No, no, definitely Jordan Kent. Douglas Fairbanks wasn't in the film."

"You wouldn't happen to know if your video store has a copy, would you?"

The older woman's eyes fairly twinkled, Rebecca thought, as she gazed back at Rebecca with a knowing smile.

"Yes, it does. It just came out on DVD, too. Part of MGM's anniversary celebration. You going to rent it?"

"I think I will. Say," Rebecca ventured on, sensing the clerk's enjoyment of their conversation. "Is Jordan Kent still around?"

"They say he's reclusive. He's in his late 80s, you know."

Rebecca nodded, filing the information away for later. She got directions to the video store and bid the clerk goodbye.

She smiled as she left the video store with a copy of *It Happened One Night* in her hand, along with a rain check for the already-checked-out *Cape Seduction*. Tonight it would be room service and a good, old-fashioned romance. She giggled aloud at her own foolish thoughts and at the realization that *Cape Seduction* was drawing her in.

Chapter 2
Hollywood, California
March 20, 1948

Before Cecelia Kent brought the cigarette to her lips, the two men sitting in her midst thrust their lighters forward. One of them, her husband, the charming and much lauded film star, Jordan Kent. With his crystal blue eyes and slicked back, rich sienna hair, his face had launched many a teenaged heartbreak. The other man, her powerful, movie mogul father, Harvey Bregman, flicked a flame first and lit the Chesterfield. Batting her eyelashes as the gray smoke swirled about her face, Cecelia wore a bored expression as she panned the restaurant around her. A waitress appeared, filled their water glasses.

"Well, it's a shame about Rosalind. Everyone in town swore she'd be taking home Best Actress," Cecelia lamented, tapping her cigarette on the ashtray before her. "They're saying *Variety* already had the headline typeset. 'Rosalind Russell wins the gold for her stunning portrayal of Lavinia in *Mourning Becomes Electra!*'"

"Did you see March's face when he opened the damned envelope? He was shocked as hell. You could tell," Jordan agreed, taking a quick puff off his own smoke before snuffing it out.

"*Frederic* was shocked? Poor Ros had already begun to rise out of her chair to accept. But what did she do? She went right into a standing ovation."

"Yeah, she's a class act all the way." Jordan glanced at Harvey Bregman, who'd kept quiet during the exchange with Cecelia. "So. Harv. What do you say?"

Bregman shrugged, reached for his scotch. "Loretta deserved the Oscar."

Before anyone could comment further on Loretta Young's surprising upset, another couple hurried up to the table. The woman, Jordan noticed, couldn't have been more than twenty-one years old. Her full-length, faux fur coat matched her dark brown hair, cut into a bob years out-of-date but which gave her dark eyes and fair skin a sort of pixie look.

"Sorry we're so late! The traffic on Sunset was just *awful*," she gushed, hanging onto the arm of her date a little too tightly. "Russell, honey, could you get this animal off my back?"

"Sure, doll." Russell Harrington made a great show of sliding the coat off the woman's shoulders, then flagged a waitress to remove it to the coat room.

"It's freezing out there! Can you believe the wind? Where shall I sit? Are we boy-girl?"

Cecelia looked up through lowered lashes at the woman, her expression one of distaste and arrogance. She said nothing, letting the smoke from her cigarette create a fog around her. Jordan, however, grinned.

"Damned cold, yes. Did you see Reagan's hair when he came into the Shrine? Ha!"

"Ronnie always looks perfect to me." Cecelia uttered her comment toward her husband but did not look him in the eye.

"He looked okay when he did Best Picture. Anybody surprised?" Russell asked, leaning down to help himself to a bit of caviar from the plate on the table.

"I thought *Possessed* should have won," the brunette said, finally settling into the open seat beside Jordan. Russell sat on her other side. "Joan Crawford—"

"Darla, sweetie, *Possessed* wasn't even nominated," Russell corrected. "I put my money on *Body and Soul*."

"Joan *was* a smash. Jordan Kent, by the way," Jordan said, holding his hand out to Darla. "And you are?"

"Darla Foster. Pleased to meet you." Darla smiled sweetly, shook Jordan's hand, then subtly jabbed Russell with her elbow.

"Sorry, Jordie boy. Forgot you hadn't met Darla. She's new in town. Darla, Cecelia. Jordie's little woman. And Harvey Bregman."

"Hi," Darla said, offering a little wave as Cecelia gave a curt nod while puffing away.

Harvey Bregman lifted halfway out of his chair, leaning across the table to take Darla's hand. "Welcome to Hollywood, Miss Foster. Gateway to mayhem and madness."

"How do you do?" Darla replied, taking Bregman's hand briefly.

"What's a guy gotta do to get a drink around here?" Russell waved down another cocktail waitress. "Martini. Dry. So Mr. Bregman, wha'ja think about *Gentleman's Agreement*? You think it deserved Best Film?"

Bregman swirled his drink, squinting his eyes in thought. "Peck actually did a remarkable job. I was one of the skeptics.

Didn't think he could pull off playing a Jew."

"Well, isn't that the gist of the film? A gentile pretending to be Jewish so's he can report firsthand on anti-Semitism?" Russell asked.

The filmmaker nodded, plumping out his lower lip in surprised respect. "Yeah. That's the idea. Film's already made back the two million it cost to make. Took Kazan twelve weeks to make his picture."

"I thought it was worth half a buck to see. Dorothy McGuire ain't too hard to look at, neither."

Darla turned to her date with a pout. "She's no Joan Crawford."

On her other side, Jordan laughed. "No, but she *is* sitting at the next table, Miss Foster."

"Oh!" Darla briefly clapped a small hand over her red-painted lips. "I didn't realize—"

"Yes, it will be all over the *Hollywood Reporter*. 'Starlet Slams Seasoned Scene Stealer at Brown Derby.'" All of the men at the table chuckled, and Jordan patted the back of Darla's hand. "They'll probably let you off this time. First offense."

The blush went from Darla's hairline down to the modest cleavage shown off by her lacy black cocktail dress.

"Indeed. So, Miss Foster, how is it you came to be here tonight?" Bregman asked, causing Cecelia to turn toward him with a sneer. "You an actress?"

"You bet she's an actress. Damned fine one, too," Russell answered.

"Russell, please. I'm quite capable of answering on my own. Yes, Mr. Bregman, I do act. I just finished a production of *Streetcar* in Pasadena."

"Stage. Done any film? You got pictures?"

"Yes, no, and yes. You have to have pictures in this town, right?" Darla asked, smiling broadly to reveal an enviable set of teeth and apple cheeks reminiscent of Shirley Temple. No one said another word as the waitress distributed drinks around the table. Finally, Jordan broke the silence.

"So what's in production?"

Bregman took a swig, put his glass down. "DeHavilland is doing *The Snake Pit* for Fox. Olivier's signed on for *Hamlet*. Warner's got Lew Ayres and Jane Wyman doing *Johnny Belinda*."

"But what about you, Harv? Aren't you working with MGM on something?"

"*Cape Seduction*. We're in pre-production. Lookin' at locations. Gotta find a lighthouse we can shoot inside and out."

"A lighthouse? Ooh, sounds romantic." Darla clasped her hands eagerly.

"Sounds melodramatic. You're better than that, Daddy," Cecelia stated, reaching for a glass of champagne. "I think you should do a picture with Bette Davis."

"She's with Warner, Cec."

"They'll loan her out. They loaned her to RKO, remember?"

"*The Little Foxes*. Yeah. But I don't work well with Bette. I'm looking for someone...fresh."

Jordan tilted his head. "You could shoot the interior on sound stages and maybe use some file film or fly-bys for the exterior."

"I want to get a real lighthouse. There's a feel in this story. It needs authenticity."

"How about Old Point Loma in San Diego?" Russell asked, scraping up the last of the caviar with a cracker.

"Nope. Too clean looking. I want something a little spookier."

"Is it a ghost story?" Darla asked, her eyes wide. "I love scary stuff."

"Not exactly." Bregman opened a menu. "It's a suspense. My illustrious son-in-law will play the lead."

"News to me," Jordan murmured, lifting his glass.

Ignoring the comment, Bregman continued. "Looking for a best actress contender."

Russell, too, opened up his menu. "I hear Lana Turner is looking."

"She's mad at MGM over that *Three Musketeers* disaster." Bregman closed his menu. "Don't know why I look. I always get the New York steak."

"Ingrid Bergman?" Darla asked, her eyes darting from the producer to the actor. "I just love her accent."

"Nope. She's doing *Joan of Arc* with Victor Fleming. They got their own company now. *Good luck*." Bregman finished his scotch.

"I'll take the prime rib. Darling?" Jordan turned to his wife, who merely shrugged.

"Petit filet," she finally muttered, leaning back in her chair.

Jordan sighed. He didn't know what bugged Cecelia, nor did

he care. She'd been sullen and antagonistic for weeks. Maybe months. He'd given up trying to please her. He turned to Darla, who frowned at her open menu.

"Maybe I'll have the chicken." She looked around then, obvious in her hope for approval. Cecelia rolled her eyes. Jordan took the menu from Darla's hands and snapped it closed on top of his own.

"Great choice. It's settled, then. How 'bout you, Russ? You still like swordfish?"

"Naw. I'll go for the New York. At least it's completely *American*. Don't know who might be listening, right?"

Russell's reference to proponents of the "red purge" gave Jordan pause. None of them needed a link to Communism.

"Don't look at *me*," Jordan said, running a nervous hand over his hair. "John Wayne is my favorite cowboy."

"And Mickey Mouse your favorite cartoon buddy. I gotcha," Russell agreed. "Hey what do you think about what they're saying about TV? You really think it means anything?"

"What? That television will kill the movies? Malarkey. The studios would never let *it* happen. They aren't letting the networks show their films or use their stages. They'll kill TV." Jordan wasn't as certain as his words would indicate, however. He took a gulp of champagne and looked around the room.

Russell shook his head. "I dunno. They got a lot of power, those TV guys."

"I think we need to be very, very careful," Bregman spoke up. "Yeah, there's only a million TV sets in America, but I heard it'll quadruple by next year. Why should 90 million people pay forty or fifty cents a pop to go see a film when they can get sports, Milton Berle and game shows for free? And don't forget some independent studios are making pictures for the tube."

"What? *Howdy Doody* beat out *It's a Wonderful Life*? I don't think so," Jordan argued.

"CBS is planning to put news on TV this year. What'll that do to the papers?" Russell challenged. Before Jordan could respond, Darla sat forward.

"My uncle works for CBS. He says people are getting away from newspapers. He says a human being reading the news to the public on TV will be the greatest thing *to* ever happen *to* people. He says—"

"The papers will always be around." Cecelia reached for her cigarette case. "This television thing is just a passing fancy. Movies are the mainstay of entertainment. I think you're all wrong."

Quiet ensued while each thought about Cecelia's comment.

"Well, I want to hear more about your lighthouse movie," Darla announced, directing her question to Bregman with a sunny smile. "I once got to go inside of the one at Point Fermin. It was so...exciting. I wanted to stay all day there, just absorbing all the history and stuff. Can you believe how those lighthouse keepers used to live? All alone, with all the storms and such? Does your picture have lighthouse keepers, Mr. Bregman?"

Bregman pondered a moment, fingering a book of matches on the tablecloth. He tilted his head, peered at Darla across the table. "Would you like a copy of the screenplay, Miss Foster?" he said at last, his gaze intent on her face.

The smile froze on Darla's lips, and her fingers went to her throat, as if to toy with a necklace not worn tonight. "I-I, gee whiz, I'd love that! Wow, is it okay? I mean, do you have an extra?"

The girl's exuberance and naiveté charmed the men at the table, especially Jordan, who threw an arm around her shoulder for a quick squeeze. Again blushing, Darla turned her face up to him.

"I'm pretty green, aren't I?" she murmured, and he chuckled.

"You are merely refreshing, my dear. Take the gentleman up on his offer and then thank him."

Bregman watched them closely. Taking a pen and a business card from the inside pocket of his dinner jacket, he began to write on the back of the card. "What's your number, doll face?"