



ONE

Nobody noticed the thin wisp of smoke uncurling from an eave. Hardly discernible, yet the acrid smell was as familiar as the odor of a lit match. As it became insistent, some readers in the library puzzled over its source.

Cindy at the checkout counter looked up and there it was—a blanket of white smoke rippling, unrolling across the ceiling toward the skylight, gulping for escape. She was horrified. Should she try to save the books? Or should she run? She was transfixed by the spread. Someone yelled, “Hey! It’s a fire! We’re on fire!” Others just gaped, collecting their papers and brief cases.

Suddenly a sucking noise swooped through, and white smoke billowed into a dark overhead swath. A chorus went up, “Fire! Call the Fire Department! Everybody out! Hurry!” And still Cindy stared, frozen. A stampede began. Books, tables, chairs were overturned, thrown aside. A wild melee ran through the reading rooms. The smoke spurted into raging flames, and the race was on.

Everyone charged for the doors. Somebody grabbed Cindy and pulled her outside. One spry young fellow ducked out a window. Screams arose above the ringing alarms—“Fire, fire! Help! Hurry!”

Shingles were crackling, timbers snapping as the blaze swept across the roof, flared and broadened into a pyre. The entire roof was ablaze with leaping flames as survivors gathered on the library’s front lawn joined by gawking pedestrians and neighbors.

Emergency horns and clanging bells signaled the approach of L.A. fire trucks. The crews sized up the fire, its speed, size and course, and hooked up hoses. Their axes rang through doors and walls. Plumes of water blasted into the blistered framework.

But there was no way to save the library's collection. Now its books were all tinder and fodder. Nonetheless they attacked with full force—assaulting the flames, searching for signs of life. Wetting down fixtures to staunch the spread of sparks. They did heroic work, but ultimately lost the battle. With a long creaking groan, the roof collapsed.

By late afternoon the library was a dripping shambles. A charred, blackened wet skeleton against an orange California sunset. Its foundation was littered with smoking debris and pools of sludge. In them lay masses of ruined literature, a mire of blistered books with blackened pages.

Across the sunken, swamped front lawn the hapless library staff huddled. Nobody was hurt. Nobody was missing. Nobody knew how the fire started. They sat on a low brick wall wondering how to piece their lives together. Their trade, their profession, their jobs were gone.

Where to begin again? Mrs. Bedell, the library manager, couldn't find words to cheer them. Cynthia Sulcer was in tears.

One of the surviving library patrons edged close to her, the tall young man who had pulled her to safety. "Sorry if I had to grab you," he said to her. "Can I be of help?" Cindy could hardly breathe; she was speechless. "Perhaps some coffee? A sandwich?" She squinted, looking up at him. He looked all right.

"Well..." she half-smiled. "Best offer I've had all day."

They sat in a luncheonette booth at the neighborhood drug store. They ate quietly, foregoing the usual introductions, questions and mutual lines. She appreciated that as she sipped her coffee. With a sigh he broke the ice. "Exciting, huh? The fire, the uproar, losing so much."

She nodded, "Terrible. The worst."

"I know. I almost got trapped in the Reference Room."

"Oh? You were there?" she asked. "I didn't realize. Doing research?"

He laughed, "Not enough, I'm afraid. Hardly any."

"Sorry," she added. "Did you—er, lose anything?"

"No, not at all. By the way, my name is Burt, Burt Hooper. I work around here, in Culver."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Cindy—well, really Cynthia—Sulcer. And as of today

I guess I'm unemployed, period."

"Well, you never can tell. Maybe you can help me out with a little unfinished research."

Huh? Was this a job offer coming on?

"Really? Doing what? What kind of research?"

"Mainly costume design. Roman togas and uniforms. Could you do it?"

Roman research? Piece of cake!

She gulped, "You're kidding. Tell me more. Who for?"

"I would not kid you, Cindy. They'd be for me. For a movie over at MGM. And it would be a legitimate staff job. I assume you've heard of MGM?"

MGM? Holy shit, who hasn't?

"Then you know it's on the up and up, right? Well, I work there, as a story editor. And no bull, I'm looking for a full-time researcher, and I've got a hunch that's you. So what do you think, Cindy? Interested?"

She looked him in the eye. *Like, are you serious? Do I look disinterested?*

"I don't know, Mr. Hooper. Guess I'd like to hear more about it."

"Well, check in at our front gate tomorrow morning. Know where we're at on Washington? Good. Show my card. And ask to see Harry Rapf, R-A-P-F. Tell him I sent you, and he'll go over all the details. You can be working tomorrow afternoon. A deal?"

"Well, so far, I guess. Sure." Cindy nodded.

"See you there," he said, and stood, left his card and a tip, and headed off to the cashier. Cindy gulped. Just like that?

Is that the way things happen around this town?

Gee, she had to pee. But first she craned her neck to see his car leave.

A Deusenberg. Not bad.



TWO

Finding the front gate was a game. After traipsing down Culver Boulevard and east across Madison, up Overland and back west on Washington Boulevard along the wrought iron fence, there it was. A huge new sign above a row of white columns said “Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios” topped by a painted lion.

Cindy blinked into the sun. Is their slogan really “Au Gratin Arses”?

Behind the cast iron fence were a dozen lush magnolia trees, and inside a massive grillwork gate stood a lone spreading fig tree.

The guard at the gatehouse noted her dog-eared business card and legs, made a call, and she was admitted.

“Please. Have a seat, young lady. I’m Harry Rapf. And let’s see—”

He glanced at the business card she gave him. “You’re Cindy ... Cindy. Um, Cindy Sulcer. Well, young lady, I can see you come well recommended, and you certainly came to the right department. Tell me about yourself.”

“Well, I live at home. Over in Van Nuys, you know, ... the Valley?”

“Deed, I do. The San Fernando Valley. Beautiful farms and roads. Butterflies, orange groves. A wonderful smell when I came out here, was it 1918? Six years ago? The air out here was so clean and fresh. I said I’d never go back to New York. To visit, okay, maybe once a year. I still have family there, and kids with their mother, a lot of vaudeville pals.”

Oh-oh, boring. This is definitely going to be boring.

“But to live there, after this? Not me, not on your marquee. My first job you wouldn’t believe. I must have been, I don’t know, seven – eight? I was running phone calls on the old East Side. And quick? Quick as a whippet. Had to be. Y’see, in those days practically nobody had a phone. Not in the