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## PROLOGUE

# STORMING THE FORTRESS

HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA, JUNE 5, 1974.

A COASTAL MIST SHROUDED THE HULKING ART DECO BUILDING AT 7000 Romaine Street, making the corporate fortress appear even more sinister than it was. Security guard Mike Davis shivered in his aviator jacket as he systematically checked each outside door and window, though all of them had been sealed shut four decades earlier. As he reached the front entrance, he glanced at his watch. It was about 12:45 A.M.-right on schedule.

Just as Davis opened a side door he felt "something hard" jammed into his back. He didn't put up a fight. "I just assumed they were armed. I knew I wasn't," he later recounted.

"We're going in," said a voice behind Davis. Then the burglars—at least two, perhaps as many as four entered a structure previously thought to be impregnable. A Davis coworker had dubbed it "the Bastille."

"Be quiet and don't look around," Davis was told. At their orders he lowered himself to the floor on his belly. While one man bound his hands, another tied a loose blindfold over his eyes. A thick rectangle of duct tape was placed over his mouth.

Part one of this beautifully planned heist had proceeded without a glitch.

Without triggering an alarm, without encountering a single video monitor, without attracting a single glance from anyone wandering the streets of late-night Hollywood, a group of men had effortlessly invaded the legendary castle keep of the phantom billionaire, Howard Robard Hughes. Once considered the most impenetrable commercial building in Los Angeles, once guarded by an army of secret police, it proved as simple to breach as a skid row pawnshop.

Davis listened as the men wheeled in a handcart carrying a pair of acetylene torches. Peering down through a gap in the blindfold, he glimpsed the words UNITED STATES NAVY on the side of one of them.

The burglars appeared to know where they were going as they made their way through the building that so few had ever

been permitted to enter. They stormed through the offices, breaking into hundreds of file cabinets and torching their way into walk-in vaults, many of which hadn't been opened in decades. The Los Angeles Police would later reveal that several offices were opened with keys. They spent four hours rifling through the dark hiding places that had protected Howard Hughes's deepest secrets for forty-five years.

After burning their way into the most personal of Howard's safes- dating back to the era of silent films and silver-screen vamps-the men pillaged the faded mementos of dozens of fabulous love affairs, touching keepsakes of Hollywood's most prolific Don Juan.

Passionate love letters from Katharine Hepburn were carelessly tossed onto the floor along with fiery telegrams from Ava Gardner, postcards from Yvonne De Carlo, and notes from Lana Turner.

A sweet, annotated children's book from Terry Moore tumbled to the floor among hundreds of close-up photos of Jane Russell's cleavage and a scented envelope of dried violets, a wistful gift from heiress Gloria Vanderbilt. They tossed a bundle of faded receipts into a corner, reminders of romantic escapades with Ginger Rogers, Ava Gardner, Susan Hayward, Vanderbilt, and Howard's most elusive lover, dark, sultry actress Faith Domergue.

In one crumbling dossier, the burglars flipped through picturesque hotel bills from the fabled Mexican resort Agua Caliente, where Hughes had wooed and bedded Jean Harlow, the hot blonde he had made into a superstar in his epic Hell's Angels.

Unnoticed was a velvet casket of engagement rings-accepted and then rejected by silent queen Billie Dove, Ginger, Ava, Kate, Lana, Faith, Kathryn Grayson, and the most famous debutante ever, Brenda Frazier.

The marauders uncovered the bulging contents of a polished mahogany cabinet jammed into the back of the vault. Thousands of folders spilled out-surveillance reports on hundreds of unknown but startlingly beautiful starlets who had been part of a secret harem of lovers collected by Howard during the fifties. Also listed and catalogued were apartments, mansions, beach hideaways, and hotels where the errant billionaire had housed this stable of paramours. Scrapbooks-more than four hundred of them-bulged with yellowed clippings. Aviation trophies and keys to cities across the country, souvenirs of a hero's welcome decades past, lined the shelves.

The burglars, though, abandoned Hughes's private inner sanctum and burned their way into a more modern and efficient vault two doors down. As the smoke cleared, the men stirred with excitement. Here was their quarry. Within this vault the invaders spied a matching pair of blue leather file boxes, one of which bore the words FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, DUPLICATED FILES.

"Here it is," Davis heard one of the men bellow. "This has to be it."

Breaking the thick wax seal on the dossiers, the men dumped the papers onto the carpet and began examining the reports under the dim light of a Tiffany lamp, a relic from Hell's Angels. But this was not what they were after.

The hoard, passed to Hughes by J. Edgar Hoover "because of my high regard for you," were the actual transcripts of one of the most audacious bugging operations in the history of domestic espionage: the 1943-46 bugging of Hughes's love nests and Manhattan hotel suites. This record detailed the billionaire's nights of passion with Lana Turner, Ava Gardner, and Yvonne De Carlo, a potent anthology of "the lone wolf" in action.

"Worthless," one burglar muttered.

Finally, in a tiny safe, they found what they had come for-an insignificant-looking pile of yellow legal pads, CIA contracts, and a fistful of quickly scrawled personal notes, all of them condensations of telephone conversations between Hughes's Las Vegas headquarters and select members of President Richard M. Nixon's "palace guard."

The men grabbed the CIA documents first, stuffing them hurriedly into the duffel bag. In their haste they failed to notice some of the key papers, including an actual contract between Howard Hughes and the CIA to plant an enormous spy station at the bottom of the ocean. That memorandum, in which Hughes agreed to be the front man for the most

expensive CIA gambit in history, slid under the edge of a desk, where it remained hidden for days.

They pocketed the Nixon documents almost as an afterthought, failing to realize that these private white papers proved that Howard's tangled financial relationship with the president had actually resulted in the Watergate break-in and the tragedy that followed. Nor could they know that one note from Robert Bennett, a Hughes operative in Washington, proved conclusively that the eighteen-minute erasure of the Oval Office tapes included an explosive exchange between Nixon and his hard-nosed aide H. R. Haldeman over Howard's curious financial deals with Nixon- words that might have single-handedly destroyed the president. Yet another five-line message even suggested that Bennett was the infamous Deep Throat who had spilled his guts on Watergate to Bob Woodward and Carl Bemstein, the Washington Post reporters who authored the landmark expose All the President's Men.

Whether they were interested in Watergate or the CIA connection may never be known. But the thieves were satisfied. They stuffed the contents of the safe, plus one hundred yellow legal tablets bearing Hughes's own handwriting, into their bag and unobtrusively slipped from the building and into history. The raid on Romaine remains an unsolved burglary.

When Hughes was informed that his sanctum had been invaded, he wasn't particularly interested that the burglars had pocketed more than \$100,000 in cash or carted off a rare South American butterfly collection, or that his ties to Nixon and the CIA were in unsafe hands. Instead, he flew into a rage about the fate of his love letters, his surveillance logs, and the cache of telegrams that had flown back and forth between himself and his two wives, Houston socialite Ella Rice and actress Jean Peters. Informed that the personal mementos were intact, he had them carted off to a bank vault, where they rested safely for six years.

Through a grueling course of research lasting three years, we followed a trail of intimate passion. We obtained facsimiles of the CIA and Watergate documents, which gave us the framework for an exhaustive study of one man's far-reaching empire and his power. We delved through hundreds of thousands of documents, an avalanche assembled during the exhaustive battle over the Hughes estate. We spoke with more than six hundred people in fifteen states, Mexico, Canada, and Europe, in order to penetrate the heart and soul of the most secretive, reclusive man of the twentieth century.

This is an inside look at one man's rise to the heights of fame and his eventual fall from grace. It is a saga of Hollywood, from the gin mill speakeasies of the Roaring Twenties through the chic and stylish forties, when Hughes was considered to be one of the sexiest and most irresistible men in Hollywood.

This story involves unbelievable wealth: millions of dollars worth of jewels, thrown at the feet of Ava Gardner, Elizabeth Taylor, and Ginger Rogers; the world's most luxurious yacht; and seduction in the skies.

And it's the story of a modern-day harem exotic beauties, many of them just teenagers, who found themselves trapped in lavish prisons, waiting, often in vain, for the coveted summons from the distant and legendary billionaire.

It is the story of a man so powerful that Richard M. Nixon lost his presidency because he feared Hughes so irrationally, of an aeronautical swashbuckler who changed the face of aviation, and of a man in the public eye who was so consumed with shyness and fear that each step out of the house was an act of courage.

It is the story of a privileged and handsome heir who died like a derelict, of two ideal marriages shattered by infidelity, of teenage Lolitas and one man's relentless search for the ideal lover-a lover who could equal the beauty and sensuality of his own mother.

It is a story that has never been told.