

The Last Gasp (Excerpt)

One

Gary Prinz stepped out of the California sunshine and into the role of Garrison Prince, rising Hollywood royalty.

An unfashionably buxom receptionist bustled toward him in miserable-looking tweed. “Oh, Mr. Prince. Everyone’s waiting! So exciting. Come, come...” A second glance at him hinted she disapproved of his trousers, rolled-up shirtsleeves, and lightweight sweater vest. “You might have worn a sport coat at least.”

Everyone’s waiting? Sport coat? What for?

A few people waved as the woman trotted down the hallway, chattering about her excitement regarding the night’s premiere. “I won’t have tickets, of course, but I just know everyone will love *The Stolen Title*. It’s sure to be your best work yet!”

“I hope so, Miss Fischer. I hope so.”

The way she paused, as if for dramatic effect before flinging the door open, provided a hint of warning. Mr. Walker greeted him—Werner, if anyone did any digging, but German surnames were still out of fashion in America after the Kaiser and The Great War. “Come in, come in, Garrison. Our prince has arrived... We even have Eva here to celebrate with you. No champagne, of course. Must comply with Volstead, but...”

Only because this room is full of press reporters? Why?

A sick feeling shook his belly. *If the picture is already a flop...*

One cheeky man with a thick Brooklyn accent asked, “How do you feel about your new contract, Mr. Prince? Are you eager to begin work on this new project of Walker’s?”

The sick feeling turned cold. “I won’t be doing that, gentlemen. I—”

“Oh, don’t be modest, Gary.” He turned to the men clustered around the edge of the large office. “Can’t give away our studio’s secrets, but I can assure you that Garrison Prince is at the forefront of sweeping changes here at Imperial Studios.”

Uncertainty kept him silent. His gaze traveled about the office, taking in opulence he hadn’t noticed much after being invited into Walker’s inner sanctum in recent years. Like many men in Hollywood, he’d come from New Jersey, signed on as stunt and grunt man, and only out of sheer luck hit on a good contract when someone noticed that he had a handsome face that movie goers would like.

Eva, in long, languid movements, moved to his side and looped an arm through his. “Isn’t this a scream?”

It should have been said with emphasis and enthusiasm, perhaps with a giggle at the end, but the woman’s tone always sounded utterly bored. Gary shrugged. “I don’t know—?”

“Your contract, silly. I’ve seen it—or my equivalent. It’s the best my lawyer has seen.”

“I’m happy for you,” he began.

Walker preempted him. “Come, come. No time for chit-chat. We have a premiere to attend, but first...monumental business in the form of this six-year contract! The highest-paying one we’ve ever offered!”

Gasps and murmurs accompanied the fevered scribbling of pencils on notepads.

Lord, help me. Once I do this, I’ll never work in this town again—even as a soda jerk!

Walker held out a fountain pen. “Garrison?” There may have been an implied question in there somewhere, but Gary only heard the iron-clubbed threat beneath it. *Sign it.*

He stepped back and out of Eva’s grasp. “I apologize, sir.” *A little deference wouldn’t hurt.* “As generous as I’m certain it is...” He shot a look around him and prayed for the best. “And as flattered as I am, I distinctly recall telling you that I would not be continuing in film.”

The men bolted from the room, each one pushing the other in their frantic attempts to be the first to a telephone. Someone swore. Another yelped. Somewhere, a door banged. Eva shot Gary a contemptuous look before turning back to Walker. “You’d better get me a good replacement, or our contract is void. Remember that. My lawyer will be in touch.” At the door, she looked back at Gary once more. “You fool. You just signed your death warrant.”

As if to make good on her words, the moment the door slammed shut, Walker began a tirade that began with how he’d caved to unreasonable demands for more money, which Gary had never made, and ended with something being flung at the door as Gary pulled it shut behind him.

The words, “I’ll kill you for this!” rang in his ears as Garrison Prince stepped out of his role as Hollywood royalty and into the sunshine again as simply Gary Prinz.

A glance at his wristwatch assured him that there remained plenty of time to reach the park just a few blocks from Goldman’s Taj Mahal Theater. And enjoy... another glance at that wristwatch... a couple of hours alone with Miss Lucinda Ashton. *Prinz, soon, if she’ll have me.*