

## CHAPTER 1

*New York City, 1943*

# ADA

Performing was first essential to her art; now, to her survival. Years at Arnhem's Muziekschool had taught the young woman how to tell a story through movement, instilling her with a discipline that rivaled that of the German soldiers who had overtaken her homeland during these last three years. When a ballerina takes center stage, she dances with levity and elegance, defying the way her body burns and bleeds, enduring the pain. Masking everything that must remain hidden. Every step and turn influences what the audience perceives and what they conclude.

Tonight, a quiet Manhattan street is her stage, she the soloist. And she must perform.

A chilling wind sweeps over her; she does not slouch against it, does not flinch when a distant *crack* sounds too much like a gunshot, does not beg a nearby street vendor to spare a morsel for the woman who has been too thin for too long. She presses onward, shoulders back, chin lifted. She has walked for some time, banishing the unsteadiness in her

legs following her journey overseas, settling into her performance. Into the woman she has come here to be.

The Dutch girl she has been for the past twenty-one years has fallen. Another casualty of war. Now she is Ada Worthington-Fox: a proper British woman, according to both her new identification papers and the accent she developed from years in a boarding school in Kent. A woman who has come to New York City with nothing from her old life. Only its disciplines. Its pain.

And the documents tucked inside the novel hidden beneath her overcoat, pressed against a heart pounding in rapid contrast to her measured pace.

Across war-torn Europe, across the ocean, all the way to America. Ada is here at last, safe. Far from those who must not find her.

From an open apartment window, a newborn's wail breaks the quiet. She passes a well-dressed couple sharing drinks outside a bar, then a bedraggled man huddled on a stoop. At last, Ada glances over her shoulder. This street is abandoned, so she turns down a narrow alley.

Damp air, heavy with rot and filth, seeps into her skin. With shaking hands, she pulls a set of matches from her coat pocket and extracts one of the documents tucked inside the novel. Then she strikes a match, watching the golden flame dance with all the effortlessnes of a ballerina en pointe. An effortlessnes that, in fact, requires far more effort than one might expect. Ada should know.

This flame will take her past, protect her from its truths, its pain, its memory, and leave her with her new role. No, she must not think of it that way any longer. Not a role, not even a performance. Her new life.

Ada Worthington-Fox touches the eager flame to the paper. It succumbs, and she stands alone in the dark, quiet alley, watching it burn.

*Three Years Later*  
*Hollywood Hills, 24 August 1946*

When Ada planned this evening's celebration, Gordon had insisted a champagne tower was necessary. Now, as the sparkling liquid descends from the tower of coupes to fill each glass, Ada cannot deny that her agent was correct. Every celebration deserves a little extravagance. And Gordon Sharpe's home in Hollywood Hills is just the place for such a party.

After accepting a glass, Ada lifts it to the actors, filmmakers, and various members of the entertainment industry gathered around the backyard pool. "To the dear members of my Star Society: May our careers be long and our drinks be strong!"

Cheers rise while guests raise their coupes in response. Someone starts the gramophone as Ada sips her champagne, watching the moonlight glittering over the pool.

"Spectacular, as always." Gordon repositions his horn-rimmed spectacles and appraises the dress hugging her slim figure. "Gold lamé, fitted bodice, sweetheart neckline, shining like the Oscar that is certainly in your future. A perfect complement to your toast, if you hadn't left out the most important part: 'We're celebrating this evening because I, Ada Worthington-Fox, rising star represented by the esteemed Gordon Sharpe, signed a contract for my first lead role in a film.'"

"Esteemed?" She flashes a teasing grin. "Did you mean arrogant?"

"Always tout your own excellence, kid. By the time I'm finished this evening, everyone will expect this role to send you to the Academy Awards." As she chuckles, Gordon taps his glass against hers. "Congratulations. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got some bragging to do."

"Not too much. Casting is confidential until the official announcement, remember?"

He sighs. "Fine, although it's hardly fair that the papers get to break the news and I don't."

A rush of warmth courses through Ada as he joins a few men—members of the Screen Actors Guild Board, she recalls. Her parties are always lavish affairs, yet right now she is present only to the summer evening's warmth and the champagne tickling her throat. After three years working between New York City and Los Angeles, at last she has secured her first lead role in a major motion picture. And for Abe Sternberg, the director who selects promising actors and transforms them into stars. When Gordon mentioned Mr. Sternberg was seeking a lead for his upcoming film noir, that was all she needed to hear before she snatched the script. Then she left her audition with the same indescribable feeling she had found when, as a girl of six years old, she first stepped onto a stage for a ballet recital.

Performing feels the way champagne tastes—thrilling, a bit dangerous, yet too addictive to resist.

As for why she hasn't made the announcement as Gordon expected, well, it *is* confidential. And because being cast in a lead role does not make her worthy of praise yet, not until she lives up to the responsibilities, the expectations. There is still plenty of time to fail.

She swallows the last of her champagne, letting it wash away such doubts. Tonight is for indulging in her accomplishments, in this role that will secure her place in Hollywood. She is Ada Worthington-Fox, for God's sake—Hollywood's Vixen, as christened by the gossip rags, hostess of the ever-so-exclusive Star Society, and soon-to-be household name when this role propels her to stardom. A delighted little shiver runs down her spine.

When the gramophone strikes up a lively swing dance, Ada grabs the nearest fellow—who, if she's not mistaken, happens to be Fred Astaire. Ada's gatherings might be invitation only, but sometimes even she is impressed by her own guest list. Mr. Astaire, here at her party despite his recently announced retirement, which Ada hopes won't last; the industry needs talent like his.

She slips her arm through Mr. Astaire's. "Come along, darling; you look like a fellow who knows how to dance."

The teasing remark wins a laugh. He leads her beyond the pool and onto the dance floor set up on the lawn. There Ada loses herself in movement, in believing she is, at last, almost where she wants to be in this new life she's found for herself, with the old one firmly behind her.

\* \* \*

"Will you please go to bed?" Ada calls to Gordon long after the final guest has departed. He emerges from the pool, wraps a towel around his hips, and uncorks a chilled bottle of champagne. "You promised to run lines with me tomorrow, so stop drinking so ambitiously."

"Too late for that, my dear. And the Star Society was your idea."

It all started after signing with Gordon and moving to California. Beyond the all-female boardinghouse where she resided alongside other aspiring entertainers, Ada wanted to connect with industry professionals. Why not host a party? Gordon, being a wise agent and dear friend, readily agreed. One party developed into another until the frequent gatherings earned a nickname from the gossip rags. Now that she's exchanged the boardinghouse for one of Gordon's spare rooms, she intends to make them an even more regular occurrence.

While Gordon smooths a hand over his graying mustache, Ada offers him two glasses. "Thank you," she says as he pours. "For always letting me host parties here. And for believing in me."

"The star of the Star Society and of the great Abe Sternberg's upcoming picture—which I can say now that we're alone, so you can't chastise me for spoiling it before the papers do." With a cheeky grin, he waves the bottle in farewell. "Turn off the lights, will you?"

While he goes inside, the warm summer evening prompts beads of

moisture to form on Ada's cold glass. Without the party noise, the night is quiet. Almost too quiet.

Much like the last time she performed in a starring role. Except then she danced the lead in a ballet, *Giselle*. Then, she performed to no music, no applause, no celebrations, nothing that might attract the soldiers occupying her country. Then, any noise might have gotten her killed.

Ada stifles a trembling breath with a sip of champagne. She always imagined that the next time she played a lead, she would celebrate surrounded by everyone important to her. That was before she learned what war is. What it does. War takes and takes and so rarely returns.

*Darling, I need you to trust me.*

The refined lilt is so sudden in Ada's head, the champagne sours on her tongue. She had trusted Mother until she could trust no one anymore, not even herself. And now Ada is here. Where Mother is, she does not know anymore. As for whether it would be easier if she knew, Ada is not certain of that, either; perhaps it would have been more difficult to detach from something known rather than something unknown.

Before the growing pinch can fully form in her chest, one signaling the deeply buried pain, regret, and guilt, Ada silences Mother's voice, the memories, the war. She cannot dwell on the girl she no longer is. She is Ada, just Ada. A woman with no one and nothing, a woman whose past is hers and no one else's.

After finishing her drink, Ada turns off the lights, passing through the various rooms until she reaches the small office Gordon allows her to use. The place where she can most fully connect to who she is rather than who she was. Inside is a desk, a bookshelf, a small chaise longue, and a few film posters and newspaper clippings.

Soon she will have new posters to add to this wall, ones that will read: *Starring Ada Worthington-Fox*. A shiver travels across her skin. The first article she ever framed discussed her role in a picture that re-

leased two years ago, in 1944, and the piece was featured in *The Dish*, the gossip rag responsible for naming her parties.

FROM THE GREAT WHITE WAY TO TINSELTOWN

by Minnie Musgrave

Actors often make their way from Broadway to Hollywood, but none quite like Ada Worthington-Fox, as poised as a duchess yet as sultry as the vixen in her name. The twenty-two-year-old captured attention in *Read the Fine Print*, playing a businessman's daughter who seduces the leading man, part of an elaborate plot to dupe him into a foolish deal. A minor yet bewitching role. Acclaimed talent agent Gordon Sharpe recently discovered the British actress, who was a dancer and chorus girl on Broadway, and now represents her. When asked why he felt the part was fitting for his newcomer, he said: "America has her sweethearts. What she needs is her siren."

And thanks to Mr. Sharpe, Hollywood has her: Ada Worthington-Fox. Every woman wants to look like her and every man wants to take her to—well, dinner, of course. Why, what did you expect?

Ada rolls her eyes at the last paragraph. She had initially considered trimming it out, but enduring Minnie Musgrave's drivel is key to surviving this industry. Best to start practicing right away. Since this article, Ada's roles have steadily improved—bigger parts, more lines, better scenes. And now, at last, a lead.

As she closes the office door, a knock reaches her ears. She glances at the hall clock—well past midnight. Company at this hour? Perhaps someone from the party forgot something.

Stifling a yawn, Ada strolls down the hall, past the foyer's elegant curving staircase, and opens the front door.

No one is there.

She presses her lips together as she steps beneath the portico and stares past the four sturdy columns, across the redbrick motor court, and toward the dark street. One of the neighborhood children must be having a bit of fun, though it's far too late in the evening for pranks. Gordon needs to put up that gate he's been mentioning. She's about to close the door when something catches the moonlight.

An envelope rests on the doormat—no address, only a name. *Ada Worthington-Fox*.

Fan mail, perhaps? No fan has ever hand-delivered a message—or discovered her residence, for that matter. A prickle steals over her neck. Definitely time for a gate.

Once she pulls out the letter, she unfolds it—except it's not a letter. It's an otherwise blank page containing a name.

*Aleida de Vos*.

A gasp chokes in her throat while Ada presses a palm to her stomach. The hand clutching the letter trembles. Surely her eyes are playing tricks on her. Too much champagne and too little food.

No, the name remains. *Aleida de Vos*.

Only a few people could have written that name.

But one of those few must be dead. She had promised to write, to assure Ada she was safe, and she never did. They never broke their promises to each other, so this note cannot be from her, because she cannot have survived.

Ada grips the note tighter, fighting to steady her breaths. She swore to forget everything that happened in Arnhem, the severity of her failure. To forget the fury igniting with the memories. To forget the past.

She should have known that the past would always find her.