

## HOLLYWOO

This all started when my best friend Joanie said my fingernails looked like shit.

“You’re a psychic!” she wailed. “People notice! You’re turning over tarot cards, tracing palms. I’m surprised you haven’t *hurt* someone with those dry, nasty cuticles.”

She’s in acting school, Joanie. Forty-three years old, she takes classes at a studio somewhere off Sunset. She’s not good with directions, so I never ask. Her hair went a shocking shade of red that month. She’s had two boob jobs—the last one, through her belly button. She called, sobbing, the night before. Wanted my psychic reassurance that all would be well.

“All will be well,” I said, half asleep.

And it was. Her triple-Es got her noticed. She iced up her nipples and was hired for a cat food commercial. After that, a pornographic zombie movie. Joanie was in Heaven. Or Hollywood. All the same to most people. Me, I wasn’t sure *why* I’d bought my little house in Koreatown—I was only following Joanie. I walked out my front door each morning for the newspaper, and looked to the right:

H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D.

Those letters on the hill brought a chill to my neck every time. They worked past my butt, made the back of my knees just tingle. Saw a neurologist, once. He referred me to his brother—a high-priced Wilshire shrink.

“Are you listening?” Joanie snapped her well-manicured fingers in my face.

“This girl is the *best*,” she said. “Fast. Cheap. Hell—I’ll even treat you.”

That meant a lot. In spite of her recent stardom, Joanie was struggling like the rest of us. Los Angeles is hard on working people. Two years ago, a stray California orange tree sank its roots through the sewer pipe in my back yard. Four half-naked men dug a trench to the alley. Joanie came over. We had microwave popcorn and Natural Ice beer. Leered at the diggers. Joanie had this bright idea that if we turned the men on, the cost would go down. She stood by the window in a bustier. I stripped half-heartedly to my sports bra. We touched tongues, like we’d once practiced kissing in high school. I held her red hair high, and moved my lips to her neck. Circled behind her. The workers watched. They dug deeper, and maybe even faster. But the price was still four thousand.

Bottom line? Mr. Rooter forced me to be a working psychic, and I resent that. Sure, I’m fourth-generation strega. Mama had a crystal ball. Granny never lost in Vegas. Haven’t found my own specialty, yet. But it’s genetic. It brings in money, when needed. And it’s also a bit of a curse:

Know-it-alls are worse off than people who don’t know squat. (Trust me on this.) Dummies can get a date, at least. But psychics—by nature—are lonely.

“I love America!” gushed the Asian manicurist. “Land of opportunity.”

“Whatever,” I sighed.

“Get over yourself,” said Joanie. She knew that look in my eye—the pity party just getting started. She practiced her zombie groan, and pushed some Carnal Red nail polish toward me. “You don’t have to *tell* them you see all, you big ditz. It’s not like

you have a sign on your front door.”

Actually, I did. It was small and tasteful:

“ELLA LOFREDDO, ADVISOR.” Capital letters, like the HOLLYWOOD sign. There were soft spots in the door frame, so I’d hung it pretty high—right above the six-foot level. Joanie was five-foot three.

She sat next to me in the nail shop, shaking tiny bottles. Shaking up everything she touched.

“Oh, how you suffer,” she said.

The Asian woman pursed her lips and attacked my nails with an orange stick.

Oranges... Orange trees... I cringed at the thought. Tried to divert myself by looking around the shop.

The place was old, incensed, almost a shrine. Hollywood photos covered every square inch of wall space. Marilyn Monroe near a shampoo basin. James Dean and Victor Mature-- Victor greased up and Biblical.

“I learn English from all these movie stars,” said the nail lady. “Sexy, sexy! Even I am crazy for the *dead* ones!”

She doubled over, cackling, and jabbed my thumb. The cuticle split wide open. I looked down and heard ringing in my ears, the thump of my own arteries.

“Please hold still!” scolded the woman. But I couldn’t. I was slipping out of the chair—sliding toward the cool, white floor.

Voices.

Red blood on ceramic tile.

Fade out...

Don't know how long I hugged that floor. When I came to, Rhett Butler eyed me from just above the cash register. His photo had water damage, big time. The autograph was signed, "Love, Clark."

"Love, my ass," he muttered.

I must have frowned.

"You heard me, Missy! Don't pretend you didn't."

Someone whistled from the far left corner. I tilted my head to look. Charlie Chaplin made a silly face, then froze. Errol Flynn posed with his scabbard.

Joanie leaned over, tossed a Dixie cup of water in my face.

"Jeez, Jo! Why'd you do that?"

"What? It's not like you're wearing mascara, or anything! Most people would be grateful. Most people would say 'Hey, thanks Joan—glad you were here for me—'"

A whoop came from the west wall. Joanie ignored it, oblivious. Marlon Brando, in his white T-shirt days. His mouth hung open. His eyes were glued on Joanie's expensive breasts. Then the nail lady bent over me, and Marlon switched his attention.

*Men*, I thought.

He looked at me. Shrugged.

"What just happen?" whined the nail lady. "One minute, I'm pushing back cuticle. Then comes blood, and you rolling on the floor."

She fanned herself with an old magazine. I watched a bead of sweat form on

her upper lip and dangle.

“Don’t worry,” I answered. “I’m okay.”

Joanie glared at me. The woman exhaled slowly and relaxed. Scattered applause from different parts of the shop.

“I get you something?” asked the nail lady. “A Dr. Pepper? Some Dentyne gum?”

“A free manicure?” hissed Joanie.

“Well, okay...” said the woman, dropping her head.

“I could never accept,” I told her. “But a soda would be great.”

The woman smiled. She jumped up, hurried to the back room. Brando whooped again. Someone wolf-whistled. I groaned and covered my ears.

“What’s going on?” asked Joanie.

“Nothing,” I lied.

James Dean had peeled off his leather. He tap danced and sang arpeggios. Errol Flynn was trying hard to swallow his own sword. Chaplin was up against the glass, looking more and more like my last gynecologist. But Rudolph Valentino was the worst:

He masturbated into his own turban. The damned thing was almost full. He looked up and noticed me watching. His hands were busy. But he stuck out his tongue—touched the tip of his nose, the point of his handsome chin, and never missed a beat.

“Nothing,” I repeated. Maybe I’d hit my head. Maybe Granny’s blood sugar issues were finally kicking in...

The nail lady returned. She saw me watching Valentino, and laughed.

“He’s the *sexiest!* I give him to really nice lady with really bad cuticles—“

“Oh no, I couldn’t—“

“She’d be happy to accept!” snapped Joanie. She crossed to Valentino and plucked him from the wall. Cat calls from the others. A few stray howls. Joanie heard none of it.

“Don’t forget my 2:30 on Friday,” she said. Then she grabbed my arm and dragged me out the door.

“What about my manicure?” I asked.

“Your hands are hopeless, anyway.” Joanie held up the photo. “Did you *see* this thing? It might be an original signature! If so, then it’s worth big bucks. I have a friend downtown who appraises this stuff—“

“Who?”

“No one *you* know. But I say we give it a shot.”

We reached my Datsun 280Z. Joanie slid the photo under her seat to keep it safe. I heard the Sheik mumble, but ignored him. Started up the engine.

“Ella—what’s with your car?”

I wasn’t sure what she meant. It was old, yes—but it ran all right. Tires were good. I turned left on Vermont. The movie star had shut up half a mile back, and I was grateful.

“I don’t know,” said Joanie. “Feels weird—like it’s vibrating. Really strong! And there’s a spring loose in this seat...”

She squirmed a bit, then went strangely quiet. We got stuck behind a broken-down city bus. She giggled. She moaned. Her breath came fast, and that was scaring me. I took a quick right turn down an unfamiliar alley.

“Don’t worry!” she panted. “It’s not that bad! It’s almost—ALMOST—“

Her yells bounced off twelve L.A. dumpsters. A homeless man yanked off his jacket. Two pigeons hopped on the hood of my car—flapping their wings like crazy, dancing in time to Joanie’s supernatural orgasm.

“WHAT’S GOING ON?” I yelled, and buried my face in my hands.

“You are so dramatic,” she said. “I’d call it a ‘righteous automotive malfunction.’ With any luck, it’ll happen again.” Her eyes were closed, her grin damn-near goofy.

I actually blushed.

“Joanie, honey—listen. Pull your knees together, and open up the car door.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Do it, anyway. Please.”

She sighed and slid further down in the seat. Her left hand dangled next to her, fingers curved under. A milky liquid oozed toward them...

I threw open my own door, and stomped around the car. “You’re starting to piss me off!” I yelled. “It’s bad enough you ruined my first manicure. Then you assault my best friend—“ I grabbed Joanie by the elbow, and pulled hard—“in my own car. On top of that, you leave a two-quart wet spot!”

“Who are you talking to?” asked Joanie. “And why all the spit?”

“Dumb-assed Rudy Valentino!”

The pigeons chased each other in circles. The homeless man rubbed his neck.

“You mean, the movie star? The photo under this seat?”

“Yes, Joanie—the World’s Greatest Lover. And the sloppiest.”

The pigeons cocked their heads. I ran my fingers past upholstery. The liquid had receded. Dried up. I touched the picture frame by accident, and it vibrated. Flash of red light, power tools... I imagined him grinning under the seat and whipped out my hand.

“Are you insane?” asked Joanie.

I stood near the Datsun, wondering. A third pigeon joined the circles. A styro-foam cup blew our way, but made no sound. The alley was black and white. Silent.

“Maybe we should drive around,” said Joanie. “Maybe we should think about this.”

I agreed. But I also called shotgun.

I’ve never been a fan of Valentino. Italians are okay—my family tree is full of them. Silent movies, I can tolerate. But there’s something creepy about an actor who was prettier than ninety-five percent of his co-stars. My gut said he couldn’t be trusted.

He tried nothing with me. I was disappointed, almost. We skipped the appraiser, and pulled into my driveway. I reached beneath the seat—grabbed the picture frame, but Valentino wouldn’t budge. He was wedged in, completely. I got out and curled both hands around him. Strained hard. Looked toward the Hollywood sign, and that old, familiar tingle hit my neck. Burning hot. Queasy. The sweat pooled in my ears. Soon, I wouldn’t have the strength to get that dead wop from my 280Z, and I knew it.



“Joanie—*help*.”

She tottered over in her four-inch spikes. She bent slightly and it hit me how unbalanced my best friend really was. But she always came through in a pinch.

“Let go, Ella—I’ll do it.” She grabbed hold of one corner and pulled. Valentino slid out, easy.

“Give him to me!” I yelled. I was frustrated. More than a little jealous. This whole town was plastic. Even a dead European movie star went for manufactured tits and dyed hair. I snatched the picture from Joanie’s hand, and he fell to the concrete driveway. His frame split. Glass shattered. Rudy looked up, dark and accusing.

“Tough to sell him now,” sighed Joanie. She ran her fingers softly over webbed glass.

I picked up Valentino. Pieces dropped left and right.

“Be careful,” she said. “Maybe we can fix him.”

I looked at her. I looked at the oversexed Sheik in my hands. This was not the end, I knew. This whole situation was far from over.

I placed him near the front door, just under the mailbox. Turned his face toward the house. Didn’t want some innocent salesman falling prey, swooning on my own front porch. Not that *anyone* went door-to-door in Los Angeles...

“He’ll get wet out here,” said Joanie.

“Mr. Valentino will be fine.”

We went inside. I slammed the door. Locked it.

“They didn’t like him in Italy,” said Joanie. “I heard that when he went back

home, the whole town threw turds at his limo.”

“Who told you that?”

“The old folks at my acting studio. Les Ancien. Some of them were in vaudeville.”

I was duly impressed.

“I also read biographies,” she continued. “And poetry. Fiction. Newspapers. Jeez, Ella—you know I’m not an idiot.”

It was true. I’d met Joanie in the fourth grade. She was the girl everyone hated: pretty as hell, and she also threw off the bell curve. When I told her my mother was an Italian witch, Joanie held up an index finger. Said we should “investigate.” That was her Nancy Drew phase.

“What’s the last great book *you’ve* read, Ella?”

She was annoyed, I guess. Few people take her seriously. She left me to my black bean casserole and shriveled carrots. Went home. Slammed the front door, but not hard. I wasn’t worried. She never stayed mad for long.

Lunch was disgusting. I ate as much as I could, then scraped the rest into the trash. Vowed to take the bag to the alley later. A nap, first. A quickie. I put the ceiling fan on high, and stretched across the bed.

*I was a monk with red hair. Young. There were other monks around me, laughing. They pointed to a steep ramp that came to a “V” at the top. They told me to climb it—climb to the highest point, and ring a bell. Ring it good and loud. Slide*

*back down, and start over.....*

“Hey—anybody home?”

A woman’s voice. The doorbell. Someone knocking hard out front.

“Just a few more minutes,” I groaned.

The knocks continued. The bell came again and again. I stumbled to the door. It was Charlotte, the mail lady. She’s an albino black woman, and complains if she waits in the sun.

“Where you been?” she asked, checking her watch. “I’ve been knocking here almost a minute.” She held a package with my name in red. “Gonna need a signature.”

I rubbed my eyes and scribbled.

“So—what kind of advisor are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Man, you are really out of it! There’s a three-foot sign on your front lawn says you’re a “SPECIAL ADVISOR,” and you don’t know what I’m talking about? Whatever you got, I want some.” She handed over my package and marched away, a glob of sunscreen in the crook of her light left knee.

I stepped outside. The Hollywood sign did its same old number on my nervous system, but that was nothing. My *own* sign was big. Imposing. The background was black, with white letters. Silent movie style. Curlicues at the edges:

ELLA LOFREDDO, SPECIAL ADVISOR.  
(Seance minimum 3.)

Charlotte was across the street. I waved weakly. She looked at me like I was just another lunatic. I still clutched my package. Turned it over and ripped the plain brown wrapper open. Caught a sales slip, a customer name, a sudden flash of gold...

“*All sales final*, my ass!” I screamed. “Rudy! You know I can’t afford this! You rode in my car! You saw what I ate for lunch!”

No answer. But what did I expect from a pre-talkie movie star?

His new frame was 14 karat, and gleaming. Rich, red matting. Larger than life. He’d also ordered safety glass.

“Nice sign,” said Joanie from the sidewalk.

I was never so glad to hear her voice. I held up the frame. It glinted in the afternoon sun.

“That’s nice, too,” she said. “Where’d you get it?”

“Italy.”

I sat down hard on the dry grass. Joanie rushed over, pulled the crushed sales slip from my hard-clenched hand. She read it, then paused a second. I held my breath, hoping she was with me.

“The dead guy has very good taste,” said Joanie.

I closed my eyes, grateful.

“He knows what he wants,” I answered. “And he’s fast.”

“Absolutely,” she laughed. “This, I know. But where *is* the little devil?”

I whipped my head like a Santa Monica carnival ride. Joanie was right—Rudolph Valentino was nowhere near the front door, where I’d put him. He wasn’t on the porch,

either.

“Shit,” I moaned, and Joanie smirked a little. “Help me,” I pleaded. “We just can’t let him roam Koreatown!”

“Are you sure you want *me* to help?”

I tried to count to ten—a number Italians rarely, if ever, get to. I hit seven, tops. Then the rain came in big, wet splotches. There was one cloud in the sky, directly over my house. Joanie yelped as each drop hit. Her T-shirt stuck in seconds.

“Joanie?” I begged. “*Please?*”

She shrugged and stomped up the sidewalk. Turned left at the house. Kicked the broken picture frame I hadn’t noticed. Walked around back, to my bedroom. Then she slowly peeled Rudolph Valentino from the window screen.

“That peeping Tom!” I said.

“You’re the psychic, Ella. So how did little old me know where to find this guy? Well, I notice things. I catch on. A broken picture frame to the left of your house was one hell of a clue. I know that black beans put you to sleep. I also know that paranormal contact tends to wear you out. That means you took a nap—probably a long one. And having sat on Rudy, I had a pretty good clue to his character. I put two and two together, silly me.”

I stood there, mesmerized. Hadn’t heard my best friend talk like this in decades. Wasn’t sure what to make of it. The rain had stopped, but we were both dripping wet.

“Want to go inside?” I asked.

She looked at me, head cocked. “Got any more Diet Pepsi?”

“It’s flat.”

I remember the Fourth of July when I set Joanie’s hair on fire with a sparkler. Was so mortified, I avoided her for a week. She knocked on the front door one day and my mother opened it. Joanie had the first shag haircut in town. She looked fabulous.

She still does.

“He’s really kind of handsome,” she whispered. “Isn’t he?”

Re-framed Valentino. Joanie was right—the dead guy had very good taste. The red matting made his black-rimmed eyes burn hotter.

“Typical dago male,” I answered. “If he’d lived, he would have grown tufts of hair in bad places.”

“Well, *you* have a mustache—“

“We must never, ever speak of this.” I locked eyes with her, and set my jaw.

“You really don’t think he was good-looking?”

“He reminds me of cousin Gina.”

“The softball player? I always liked her,” said Joanie.

“She always liked you, too.”

I set Rudy upright at the head of the table. Joanie wiped off smudges with her damp shirt. The movie star smiled. Then the whole house started to shake.

A soda glass vibrated right off the edge of the table. It hit the tile and exploded. The lamp in the corner went next—then what sounded like every plate in the kitchen. A bookcase tumbled over. A small crack opened in the ceiling. Joanie and I ran for

the inside doorway of the bathroom and huddled there.

“Where’s Rudy?” she asked. “Didn’t you grab him?”

The medicine cabinet sagged. Toothpaste and old perfume bottles crashed to the floor. My best friend still believed the movie star meant money. Maybe she was right.

“Be careful!” yelled Joanie, but I’d already reached the dining room. Windows cracked. The light fixture swayed from one thin wire. But the table was fine—upright, barely shaking. And there he sat, grinning like some lost Italian uncle.

I grabbed Valentino, smashed him to my chest, and raced for the bathroom.

Joanie’s arms were wide open. I ran to them. She pulled me in, Rudy crushed between us. Our lips touched. Lingered. Uncertain, I opened mine a bit. Joanie did the same. Rudy shook between us, but the rest of the house went still.

We pulled apart. I set down the photo and backed away. I backed just across the hall.

“Ella?”

Couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t answer.

“Gotta go,” said Joanie. She was halfway through the living room.

“Is it safe?” I croaked.

“Don’t care.”

She threw open the front door and ran to her car. Spun the tires. Swerved hard around a fallen palm tree.

I looked to the hills. The Hollywood sign had lost its final “D.” HOLLYWOO.

Rudolph Valentino would appreciate that. Me, I had to vomit.

The days went by without Joanie. I tried to call more than once, but always got voice mail. Claimed she'd call right back.

That first week, I cleaned up the house. It wasn't as bad as it looked—just your average L.A. trembler. Was never sure if it could be blamed on a certain silent movie star. Could never prove it, anyway. So I took pains to be decent and hold my tongue. I placed him on the dining room table. Left him there. Alone.

The sign in my front yard was miraculously untouched by the quake. But one day my phone number appeared at the bottom. Big white numbers. I got nine calls in the first hour. Talked to four or five of them, then buried my phone in the closet.

Everyone wanted answers. Everyone wanted love and hope and reassurance. I did what I could, considering I was such a mess. They persisted. They called from different counties, left their credit card numbers on my answering machine. I was afraid to unplug it. Joanie might call. Night and day, the damned thing rang. I finally gave in and scheduled a seance for Friday.

Three people showed—two older women, and a man in his thirties. Said he was an accountant. He was nervous and almost bald. The women knew each other from a watercolor class. Both were Australian.

One woman sat to my right—Gert, or Gwen—I couldn't remember. She squeezed my hand in a martial arts grip, and my pinkie ached. The other lady sat directly



across the table. The accountant, to my left. I'd set up Rudy on an old Lazy Susan from the thrift store. Scrubbed it good. Slid my mother's crocheted doily underneath him. He was free to spin and spin, if he wanted.

"Nice touch," said the accountant.

I thanked him, nervous.

"Shall we begin?"

I had no clue how to conduct a seance, but thought that sounded professional enough. Turned out, I didn't have to say a thing. From the second we sat down, Rudy took over. Lights flared out. A cool breeze moved through the house. The flame of one white candle danced in front of his portrait.

Rudy spun slowly. He looked each of us in the eye—forced us to look back, and wait for the next revolution. The golden frame glistened. The Australian clutched my hand even tighter.

"Does he talk?" asked the accountant in a monotone.

"He's a silent film star," I answered. My own voice had flattened out and slowed.

"Oh..."

Valentino winked the next time he came around. At least, that's what I saw. The woman across the table giggled. Gert—or Gwen's—mouth dropped open.

"He's... thrusting," said the accountant.

"Is that what you Americans call it?" The lady across the table was breathing heavy. She undid the top three buttons on her blouse. This broke the chain of hands, but it didn't matter. Rudy went round and round with his come-hither stare and his

waves of personal pleasure...

A caress to the throat for the accountant. (I felt it, too.)

A sweet nibble just above an Aussie hip bone.

Full tongue to the small of my back, my T-shirt rising slowly.

Rudy was the *real* American Dream. Valentino was everything we'd fantasized from sixth grade, on—the skilled lips, the sure and slicked-up fingers. Male or female, didn't matter. Pure sex appealed.

The candle flickered like a tongue. We all moaned in unison. Rudy grinned, wicked, as our own hands took over. Our eyes were open, or half-shut, or closed. Our mouths followed. Our fingers, possessed, roamed where they wanted—touched where they were needed most—and moved on.

"I'm so sorry!" The accountant turned bright red, and yanked his left hand from under the table.

"It's okay," I said. "It's terrazzo."

He smiled, grateful, then started in again. Valentino spun. The ladies made little chirping noises in their throats. My house smelled like sweat, sex, and lemon bleach. My shirt was white and gleaming. Soft against brown skin. I wished for a second bedroom. Maybe a third. Or a fireman. A firewoman. A panting firehouse dog--

"Oh, my GOD!"

The Australians had found each other. The accountant was under the table. The smoke alarm sounded, but I knew it had no battery. Rudy spun faster—whirling dervish fast—then skidded to a stop in front of me.

I caught the gleam of a single red hair in the candlelight. Shocking red. It dangled from the outside corner of Valentino's frame—curled down toward his bare chest, his hidden Italian heart.

*"You're in love with Joanie?"* I asked.

He laughed, silent. Shook his head. Rolled his black-rimmed eyes.

"I have seen HEAVEN!"

The voice came from a nearby closet. It was female. Australian accent. The seance was officially over.

I called Joanie the next morning. Got her answering machine, and just started talking. Didn't think at all. The machine beeped and I called back. Told her about Rudy, the accountant, the crazy-assed smoke alarm. Was cut off again. Hit redial, and she finally picked up.

"We'll talk," she said. "Tonight. Chinese at your place."

"Who's buying?"

"You're the psychic."

The food was spread across the kitchen counter. I'd ordered eight different dishes; knew she'd like them all. The hot, the sweet, the crisp and bright and colorful—all in their little white boxes, begging to be opened.

I couldn't sit still more than two or three seconds at a time. Kept going to the bathroom. Moving candles. Picking lint off my dark, second-hand jacket.

Joanie came at sunset. I knew she would. I was there at the door before she ever rang the bell.

She looked dazzling, my best friend. The last of the sun echoed in her hair.

“You could use a boutonniere with that jacket,” she said.

“The food’s getting cold,” I answered, and knew we’d be okay.

Joanie walked straight to the table, her high heels smacking the floor. “Hey, Rudy,” she purred. “How’s it hanging?” She gave the Lazy Susan a spin. “Wow-- I remember that doily! You used to wear it on your head and pretend you were a nun.”

I ran to the table and grabbed her hand. Stopped Valentino mid-circle. “Please, Joanie-- don’t make him spin.”

“Maybe I *want* to.”

She was beautiful. Defiant. Our eyes locked a moment, or thirty-four years. Then she leaned in close and kissed me.

The Lazy Susan whirred to life. It hummed like the blood in my fingers—moving over Joanie, amazed. It spun crazy. Whined like a well-oiled engine. My mind was gone, and I really didn’t care. I was only following Joanie.

“What do you say we ditch the movie star?” Her lips were at my ear, my throat. The HOLLYWOOD sign rippled. Rudolph Valentino took a deep bow.

We left him going round and round, and headed for the bedroom. He’d find his way in, eventually. A psychic knows these things.

