

## CHAPTER ONE

I'd just finished having lunch with Mack Sennett, the creator of the Keystone Cops, at the Brown Derby in L.A. I was working on a documentary about the slapstick comedies of the 1910s and '20s. It was a wonderful day—*until it wasn't*. Not after that gunshot was fired.

Mack Sennett was seventy-four years old here in 1954 and had been out of the movie business for years, but he remained an engaging guy with a solid, retentive memory. Still a novice at TV, I was the West Coast correspondent for CBS.

We had chatted about the Army-McCarthy hearings in Washington, debunking his claims about Soviet agents burrowing into our government like termites. I had done a story on how dangerous to our democracy the chronic liar Senator Joseph McCarthy was, and had received death threats in return.

But we didn't dwell on that; mostly we talked about his Keystone Studios' rivalry with Hal Roach back in the day. As I took notes for my documentary, I sensed Mack had some lingering bitterness toward Roach, but actually very little.

We discussed some of the stars he'd had under contract, including a young Gloria Swanson, W.C. Fields, the tragic Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, and the lovely Mabel Normand, who starred with Charlie Chaplin in many of his films. Sennett had been especially pleased that he'd first teamed Normand and Chaplin in a film in 1914. It was all very open and cordial. We made plans to meet again about my documentary.

Bob Cobb, owner of the Brown Derby and the inventor of the Cobb Salad, or so he claimed, came by and held court with us for a while. Cobb was also part owner

of the Hollywood Stars baseball team. He told us they'd be pretty good this year.

Now leaving the restaurant, Sennett and I stepped out onto the Wilshire Boulevard sidewalk under an April sunshine that glittered on the concrete like silver coins. He was taller than me and had a good, firm stride for an older guy. Cars whirred by on Wilshire. We turned onto Alexandria Avenue, heading for the Derby's parking lot in the rear.

Three or four pedestrians were headed our way. Suddenly, one of them pulled out a handgun. And fired at us!

Sennett was hit. I was right next to him. Blood spattered on my jacket. Sennett went down like a felled tree.

"Stop that woman," I screamed. "Stop that woman!" I was pretty sure the shooter was a woman.