

All That Money

A Novel by Steven Key Meyers

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1.

In Hollywood, when you wake up, who are you?

He tried to remember as his wind-up Big Ben trilled itself mute in the darkness. Outside, birdsong enshrouded the neighborhood.

It came to him. Both the reality and the pretense.

He yawned and leapt to his feet. Put coffee on and went back to the bedroom to wake up Julia.

"Hey, baby, time to get up!"

Julia moaned tragically, turned over on her back, covered her pout with arms and sheets, and from beneath them said in a little girl voice, "Jack, I'm *sleepy*."

"Early bird gets the worm." He pulled her toe, but she kicked.

"Cut it *out*. Staying home today."

"Julia, to play this game—"

That set her off. She sat up and tossed pillows.

"So I can't take *one day* off? Look, Jack, you've got twice the dimples of Clark Gable, but you're not getting anywhere either. It's rigged!"

He didn't want an argument. "Suit yourself, babe."

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“Kiss my ass, Jack!”

He bathed and shaved and dressed with care. After eating breakfast, and getting a last encouraging glance from his mirror, he flicked a jacaranda blossom off the hood of his Buick and drove down Manzanita, left on Sunset, right on Western. On the corner of Hollywood Boulevard he parked in front of Central Casting. The rising sun threw long, animated shadows from the actors—the movie extras—scrambling off a Red Car trolley and going inside.

As he went in, walking with a snap to his wrists, Jack glanced up at the cast cement nudes gracing the façade. One day he counted seventy-six breasts and thirty-one male members. Some law of irony decreed that the Central Casting building should also house the Hays Office—the movie censors, tense and celibate products of Jesuit schools. Jack presumed they pulled their hat brims low as they entered.

He submitted his name to Sophie at her barred window and grinned as she checked her clipboards. She usually found work for him. A young, dashing-looking guy was what the studios wanted most days, though even Jack admitted the town was crawling with handsome, well set-up youths with miraculously clear complexions. That was why he wasn't getting *lines*, too much competition.

“You're in luck, Jack,” Sophie told him. “Warner's got Cagney in a kidnapping flick, they need toughs.” She looked up with sudden misgiving.

Scowling, he growled, “Right up my alley, doll face.”

She giggled, handed across a card and said, “Warner's, stage 12,” and he was off.

Even without Julia—working together, they were often put in high-society nightclub scenes—he enjoyed his day, though he didn't get lines. The director sat him in a chair reading a newspaper on a dark set representing the back room of a bar, a spunky heiress—the kidnapping victim—tied up in a chair nearer the camera, and when Cagney looked in to ask, “How she doin'?” the other extra got the line: “Still kickin', boss!” Jack knew he could have handled

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it, but that was the picture business for you. He thought it too dark, also, for him to be reading the paper, but that's what they wanted. Irene Dunne played the heiress, and at a break when opportunity arose Jack gave her one of his frank looks, but was not unduly miffed that she ignored it.

After work he stopped off for a drink with colleagues at the Formosa Cafe, but it was still full daylight when he returned home. Sprinklers drizzled over the lawns, and blossoms splashed purple shadows over the stucco of the Spanish-style houses.

He was happy. Having a good time. Getting tired of his girl, of course, but that happens, and other possibilities abounded – even if Irene Dunne had crossed herself off the list. And if pictures weren't going to make him a star, he might switch to something that would let him sleep in a little himself: real estate.

The Depression was still on, but in Los Angeles you hardly knew it. Already in Jack's year and a half there, the bean fields on the way to Metro had begun to sprout cottages. No, he sensed money could be made in California real estate. Might be time to start turning his savings into land, especially over on the west side where the stars were moving now. Had his eye on some lots on Las Palmas.

So as he turned into the driveway and walked up the steps into his house, he was mulling the idea of moving from his take-it-as-it-comes kind of life to one more concerned with the future.

In the living room, whose arched window took in the Los Angeles basin from ocean mists at Santa Monica to the *Hollywoodland* sign strung across a scrubby hill, Julia sat on the couch.

"Hey, babe," Jack said with a smile.

His smile faded when she raised a gun from her lap.

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2.

After Jack left that morning, Julia had gone back to sleep for an hour, then arose in leisurely fashion. While warming up the coffee she smoked a Lucky Strike at the table in the garden. This California, with its year-round outdoor living—what was Kansas about, anyway? Why would anyone want to live where, when you drive to the far horizon, what you see is only a farther one?

Kansas was where she met John Simons. *If* that was his name. She had been looking out the window of the six-stool café at a little crossroads near Larned, across the tracks from the grain elevator where her father worked, when a Buick came purring through, turned in and stopped. John Simons stepped out to stretch his legs and have a cup of coffee.

She poured him the coffee.

He gave her a look, got one in return. He cast a sardonic glance at the surrounding wheat fields and said, “Guess you must like wheat, huh?” She blushed. He told her he was headed for Hollywood, asked if she wanted to come along. She said she might as well, dropped her apron, called into the kitchen that she’d be back in a minute, and got in his car. She was nineteen and drying up in Kansas. Nineteen was old enough to make up her own mind. Wasn’t like he kidnapped her or anything.

Two years with Jack had been fun, but now she was going on twenty-one, in a town where every second woman was gorgeous and trying to claw her way into pictures. Where it seemed vertical progress on the career ladder was best achieved horizontally. She had no problem with that, if that was the way it was. But it meant Jack was almost more of a hindrance than a help.

Almost. After all, he did have an income, a lifesaver since extra work could be hit or miss.

What she needed was a stake of her own, something to let her give five years, say—the first half of her twenties—to the unremitting pursuit of what they weren’t handing out on silver platters. Fine for *Jack* to play at it, but she couldn’t afford to. In five years she’d be twenty-six, poised at the tippy-top of the ski jump

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that was the downward slope of a woman's looks. She saw the girls working the diner counters, saw how it drained them and aged them even as they still made the rounds before or after their shifts, pestered agents, propositioned casting directors. And when in Bullock's Wilshire, you're stalked by a 30-year-old woman gripping the bulb of a perfume atomizer, and despite her wrinkles you recognize her as a comer in motion pictures not that long ago. It was creepy, no clouds of My Sin could disguise the stink of failure.

Julia wasn't going to waste a minute crying about anything, she'd do what she had to do, but she just couldn't go *that* route. *Couldn't*. She *had* to succeed. And *would*, if she could concentrate on the one thing only. But the only way to do that was to have a stake.

Jack (or whoever he was) said she could count on him, but catering to him alone was already a drag on her progress. Hadn't an assistant director just last week intimated he could help her, if only she had evenings free for the exchange of information?

It was possible Jack had served his purpose.

But there was one thing more he could do for her. He could give her that stake.

She smoked and looked down across the flats towards the Paramount water tower a mile off. The bus ran right past, so did the Red Cars, and to RKO and Columbia, too. But MGM required a change, it took an hour and a half just to get there. Warner's and Universal were in the Valley—forget about it without a car: two changes, two hours. And here she was, ripening day by day. She had to move the goods in front of the eyes that mattered before they spoiled.

Five years would cost a minimum of five thousand dollars—ten thousand to be safe, to have a car. Fifteen thousand and she could buy a little cottage, be that much more secure. And security's good for the complexion. Makes a woman radiant. And stars have to radiate their stardom.

If at the end of five years she was not by way of being a star, she'd take a job at Bullock's willingly enough. Oh, yes.

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So what about Jack? (Whoever.) From Atlanta, he claimed. She could hear traces—traces only. No Southern gentleman, not the way he came home late, stinking, if a girl let him. A few years older than she, but had the gall to go for women even older. Mother complex. But mother he never spoke of, or father either. Said he was an orphan. Except once said his dad was dead, his mother alive. Another time said the opposite.

Did he come from money? No, no, Dad was born to a Tennessee sharecropper, but went to college and pulled himself up.

It didn't add up.

And his money? She was secretive herself, but *still*. He wouldn't say a word. He owned the house outright and the Buick, and she'd come across two bank books, each showing an opening balance of ten thousand dollars and no withdrawals. She was sure there were more bank books. So he had plenty.

If they got married, it would be a cinch. While it lasted he'd be her security. If it ended, take him for what she could. But Jack swore he'd never marry. (But once he said marry *again*.) By the time she wore him down in that department, she'd be dishing up eggs at Barney's Beanery.

She puffed away and thought. There was something wrong about this John Simons character.

A fragment came back to her from a few months earlier. They had two days' work together at Metro, on a George Raft gangster picture. The scene was set in a New York nightclub, and they sat at a little round table, applauding the floor show, when G-Men raided the place. Melvin Sturgis, in what they called a cameo—the famous, real-life, gangster-buster Melvin Sturgis, recently retired from the F.B.I.—led the raid.

It was funny to watch Sturgis in front of the cameras. A star withstands the camera's scrutiny as though it's not there. *She* had that quality. (Had to admit Jack did, too.) Melvin Sturgis did not. Maybe he was cooler when it was guns and not cameras aimed at him, but for the camera he couldn't walk, couldn't talk, couldn't look anywhere except right into the lens, gaping. The script called

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for him to barrel down a staircase and interrupt George Raft's tango with, "Stick 'em up! Federal Bureau of Investigation!"

Sitting in the sun, she snarled, "Stick 'em up! Federal Bureau of Investigation!"

Easy – but not for poor Melvin.

"Stook 'em up! Oh, damn!" was the first take. The forty-fourth wasn't much better, but at least his legs didn't go spastic, and he didn't appeal wide-eyed to the camera while his tommy gun clattered to the floor. So they took it, overdubbed him for the final release.

She stubbed out her cigarette, drained her coffee cup, sliced a banana over a bowl of Post Toasties. What was it Jack said at some point during the farce? "Melvin Sturgis couldn't catch a flea – much less *me*. And he *tried!*"

Wasn't much to go on, but she had a hunch. She dressed, pulled on white gloves, put on a hat and dark glasses against the relentless glare that bathes L.A. from spring through fall, walked the block to Sunset and caught a Red Car downtown, to the mosaic-domed Los Angeles Public Library on Bunker Hill.

There she asked if they had newspapers from a year and a half, two years earlier.

They did. They sat her at a refectory table in a lofty room bright with fairy-tale murals, and soon a page rolled up a squeaky-wheeled cart piled with yellowing back issues of the *L.A. Times* and *Herald Examiner*.

She browsed through them. Nothing particularly caught her eye. Lynchings. Grave robberies. Fatal bites from rabid dogs on the loose. More bank robberies than she ever dreamed of, but Jack – *whoever* – wasn't the type.

In copies from September 1934 she read about Bruno Hauptmann being arrested and charged with kidnapping the Lindbergh baby two years earlier. Riveting new details emerged every day. But a month later, a fresh crime swept Hauptmann off the front pages:

HEIRESS KIDNAPPED! LUCIE SPODE WHITE TAKEN AT GUNPOINT!

She remembered the case—a national sensation, second only to the Lindbergh kidnapping—and at first turned pages impatiently. Three or four days into it, Jack’s picture! An out-of-focus snapshot of an engaging kid with younger, thinner features, a different part in his hair and no mustache—and a smile of pure joy—was identified as Harry Thrall, object of a nationwide manhunt. But it was *Jack*, no doubt about it!

The caption plastered beneath read: “*F.B.I. Reward: \$10,000.*”

“*Aha!*” she said. Couldn’t help it. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed. No one had, save possibly for the white-haired gent at the next table who, holding her gaze, flicked his lizard tongue across his lips. (An upward lift of her chin took care of *him!*)

She read on, straight through the front-page accounts of the delivery of a hundred grand in ransom, the subsequent release of the heiress unharmed and her kidnapper’s disappearance.

For days thereafter, the story lingered on the front page with reported sightings of Harry Thrall every place from Portland, Maine to El Paso, Texas to Graz, Austria.

Then the story moved to the inside pages, finally vanishing altogether, except for occasional Sunday supplement rotogravures of Lucie Spode White in an interesting condition, looking over the gunwales of ocean liners with her husband or coming out of fancy Continental hotels.

Julia thanked the librarians and, in response to their eager query whether she’d found what she was looking for, shrugged with a grateful little moué of disappointment.

Her path lay clear now. Much simplified. A hundred thousand dollars! Jack—no, *Harry*—had more than enough to stake her. And

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if he were disinclined, the Federal reward of \$10,000 would suffice. Kismet!

She celebrated with a late lunch in a shadowy corner of the Biltmore Hotel grille. In a sign of things to come (she hoped!) an RKO film editor pierced her woman-of-mystery persona and, though she rebuffed his first suggestion, gave her his card. She tucked it into her purse. After lunch she walked down to Broadway through the palms of Pershing Square. There she found a pawn shop, made her selection and returned home shortly after five o'clock.

When Jack—*Harry*—drove up an hour later and walked in the door, Julia was sitting on the Mission couch with her pawn-shop purchase—a little silver-plated .22 pistol—in her lap.

"Hey, babe."

"Hi, Harry," Julia greeted him, raising the gun.

"What did you call me?"

"Marry me, Harry. Gee, that rhymes."

"Not marrying you or anybody else, Julia."

"You'd better, or else give me fifty thousand, or I'll call the F.B.I."

He lowered himself into a chair, eyes on hers, and put his hands on his knees.

At least he was paying attention.

"Don't be silly, honeybunny. That's all I got out of it, was fifty thousand bucks."

"Gosh, that's disappointing, when the papers call it a hundred."

"They got it wrong."

"Harry, you're boring me."

"My money's *mine*. After what I went through to get it?"

He looked disgusted and angry—even, for the very first time, a trifle ugly. The shadow of a hawk's wings brushed the window.

"Just giving you a chance to beat the F.B.I. reward, Harry. Sure you won't reconsider?"

He sprang forward. She winged him mid-leap. *Bang!*

The noise was brutal and dogs started barking.

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He fell back into his seat, grabbing his left arm with that ineffable *You shot me!* expression.

"Shit, Harry, now it has to be the F.B.I., or the cops'll arrest me."

"Go to hell."

She picked up the phone at her elbow and asked the operator to connect her with the Los Angeles office of the F.B.I.

While she waited she said, "I'll admit, you got balls: Parading your face in front of the cameras with nothing but a haircut and mustache between you and a million newspaper photos?"

His good hand smoothing his hair back, he said, "Nobody ever sees what's right in front of their face."