



B Alan Bourgeois

The Seventh Reel

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Dedication

For everyone who came to California carrying a dream.

For those who stood under bright lights, waited in quiet rooms, gave their best, and still watched the door close.

For those who felt broken when the dream did not become what they hoped, only to discover years later that the journey had been shaping something deeper than success.

May you come to understand that almost is not failure, that being unseen is not the same as being without value, and that sometimes the life we thought had passed us by was quietly teaching us how to become whole.

This book is for the dreamers who stayed, the dreamers who left, and the dreamers still learning that growth often arrives disguised as loss.

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Prologue The First Call

Before the maps, before the ships, before men gave names to coastlines they did not understand, the island moved in the dark water.

It did not drift like a boat. It did not wander without mind. It traveled the way a sleeping animal travels inside its own dream, slowly, with purpose older than language. At night, when the moon pulled silver across the sea, the cliffs groaned and the black stone under them shifted. Trees with roots deep as memory leaned toward the stars. Gold dust loosened from the high ravines and slid down in thin shining streams, catching in the palms of women who no longer believed in gifts.

They called the island **Avarra** then.

Not California.

That name was still centuries away, waiting in the mouth of a man who would mistake memory for invention.

Avarra rose from the water with cliffs on every side but one. The eastern shore sloped into a cove where the sea came in warm and green, quiet enough for children to swim, deep enough for bodies to disappear. Beyond the cove were terraces cut by hand into the dark volcanic earth. The women grew bitter roots there, red maize, beans that curled around poles of bone-white wood, and flowers whose petals closed whenever men were spoken of.

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There had been men once.

The oldest women remembered them as shadows at the edge of firelight, as arms lifting nets from the surf, as voices arguing over weather, hunger, possession. Others remembered them more softly: fathers, brothers, lovers, sons wrapped in woven cloth. But memory changed shape depending on who carried it. A widow remembered differently than a daughter. A queen differently than a girl who had hidden beneath a canoe while blood ran through the sand.

Now there were no men left on Avarra.

No boys, either.

For three generations, daughters had been born from rituals no one fully understood and no one dared question. Then fewer daughters came. Then weaker ones. Then none for two full seasons.

That was when the singing stopped.

Amaranta of the First Shore stood above the eastern cove and watched the last child sleep beneath a net of pale fibers. The girl's name was Luma. She was six years old, narrow-shouldered, fever-warm, and beloved by every woman on the island because there were no others left young enough to carry their future.

Behind Amaranta, the council waited.

Seven women stood in a half circle, their hair bound with shells, their faces painted with ash and gold. They had led harvests, births, burnings, storms. They had buried mothers. They had judged thieves. They had decided when mercy was weakness and when cruelty was only fear wearing a harder face. None of them were young. Their bodies carried the map of the island: scar, salt, sun, labor.

Maruva, oldest of them, leaned on a staff made from the rib of something the sea had once thrown onto the shore. She had been beautiful before beauty became useless. Her eyes were clouded, but she saw more than the others liked.

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"You called us here to say what we already know,"
Maruva said.

Amaranta did not turn from the cove. "Then say it."
The women were silent.

Below them, waves slid over black sand. Each
retreating line of foam left flakes of gold behind, useless
and bright.

Maruva spat into the dust.

"We are ending."

The words did not echo. They sank.

Amaranta closed her hands until her nails cut her
palms. She had known the truth. Knowing did not make
hearing it easier.

"No," said Ydora, who kept the seed stores. "Not yet."

"Yet is the lie we tell when we are afraid of now,"

Maruva said.

Ydora's mouth tightened, but she did not answer.

Amaranta turned then. She was not the oldest, not the
strongest, not the most loved. She had been chosen
because the island answered her more often than the
others. As a child, she had known where springs would
open before rain came. As a young woman, she had
dreamed of a cliff collapse and moved the sleeping huts
before morning. Once, when raiders came in narrow
boats from the south, she had walked barefoot to the tide
line and sung until fog swallowed the cove. The raiders
had rowed in circles for two days. On the third, their
boats returned empty.

The women called that power.

Amaranta knew better.

Power was something one held.

This held her.

"We have tried roots," she said. "Smoke. Blood. Moon
water. The old birth songs. The cave fast. The sea burial.
Nothing answers."

"The island answers you," Ydora said.

"Not this."

"Then make it."

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The words came from Naeva, who had once led the shore guards and still wore a knife at her thigh though there was no one left to fight. Her right cheek was marked by a scar that pulled her mouth toward anger even when she slept.

Amaranta looked at her. "Make what?"

"A call."

Maruva's staff struck the ground once.

"No."

Naeva did not look away from Amaranta. "There are men beyond the water."

"There is death beyond the water," Maruva said.

"There is death here."

The council shifted. No one wanted to agree with Naeva. No one could deny her.

Amaranta felt the island under her feet, vast and listening. Heat moved through the stone, slow as breath. The cove below glimmered in the lowering sun. She thought of the old stories, the ones told only after fires burned low and children slept. Men arriving hungry. Men wanting land. Men wanting women. Men wanting to plant their names where names did not belong. Men laughing until arrows found their throats. Men weeping when they were sent away. Men staying. Men loved. Men killed.

"We swore never again," Amaranta said.

"We swore when we had daughters," Naeva answered.

Maruva's blind eyes turned toward the sea. "Need is the first knife. Remember that."

"I remember burying three infants in one winter," said Ydora.

"I remember my sister bleeding for two days and no child coming," said another.

"I remember milk drying in women who had no mouths to feed," said Naeva.

Their grief gathered between them, old and fresh at once.

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Amaranta wanted to tell them no. She wanted to be clean. She wanted history to leave them one choice that did not taste of ash.

Instead, she heard herself ask, "And when they come?"

No one answered quickly.

That was how she knew they had already imagined it.

Naeva looked down toward the cove. "We choose."

"Choose what?" Amaranta asked.

"Who stays. Who fathers. Who dies."

The youngest council woman, Soreth, made a small sound. "Dies?"

Naeva's scar pulled white. "Men do not leave islands like ours and keep silence. If they return to their people, more will come."

"Then we blindfold them," Soreth said. "We send them away after."

Maruva laughed once, dry and terrible. "Child."

Soreth's face flushed, but she was not a child. None of them were, not anymore.

Amaranta looked at each woman in turn. "You speak of calling lives to us as if they are fish."

Naeva's eyes did not soften. "I speak of keeping Luma from becoming the last name spoken here."

At the mention of the child, all anger thinned.

Below, Luma stirred in her sleep. Even from the cliff, Amaranta could see the small movement beneath the pale net. So little. So much.

The island pulsed underfoot.

Not command.

Not yet.

Expectation.

That night, they went to the old mouth of the island.

It was not a cave, though it opened like one. It was a wound in the western cliffs where the stone had split long before women came to Avarra. At low tide, a path appeared between the rocks, slick and black, leading into a chamber where seawater breathed in pools and gold shone in veins along the walls. The women entered one

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by one, carrying bowls of salt, milk, blood, crushed shell,
and powdered root.

No torches were needed. The walls gave off a dim
amber light, as if the island remembered the sun even
underground.

Amaranta stood at the center of the chamber. Around
her, the council formed a circle. Beyond them, women of
the island crowded the entrance: farmers, weavers,
healers, net-makers, singers who no longer sang. All had
come. Even the sick. Even the grieving. Even old women
carried on woven frames so they could witness what
would save them or condemn them.

Luma was brought last, asleep in Ydora's arms.

A murmur moved through the chamber.

Amaranta raised her hand.

Silence settled.

She had prepared words, but they left her. Words
belonged to people. What waited beneath them was
older.

She knelt and pressed both palms to the wet stone.

The island was warm.

Mother, some would have said.

Beast, others.

Amaranta had never called it either. To name a thing
was to pretend it could not surprise you.

"We are ending," she said.

The chamber held her voice and gave it back in a
whisper.

Ending.

Ending.

Ending.

"We have fed you," she said. "With our dead. With our
songs. With our children's names. With the gold we
buried and the blood we spilled. We have kept your cliffs.
We have cut your terraces. We have drunk your springs.
We have slept on your stone."

A low tremor moved through the chamber. The tide
pools shivered.

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Behind her, someone began to weep.

Amaranta pressed harder until sharp rock opened her skin. Blood slipped beneath her hands.

"We ask now what we have never asked."

Maruva inhaled sharply.

Naeva did not move.

"Bring us what we need."

The chamber darkened.

Not fully. Not at once. The amber light withdrew into the walls like an eye narrowing.

Amaranta felt the island listening through her bones.

She saw, not with sight, but with something deeper and less merciful: water stretching in every direction; distant shores; fires burning under strange constellations; men sleeping beside boats; men dreaming of yellow metal; men waking with thirst in their mouths and a woman's voice behind their eyes.

A wind passed through the cave though there was no opening for it.

The women began to sing.

Not the birth songs. Not the mourning songs.

Something rougher. Older. A sound that had no words because words would have made it smaller. The song rose from cracked throats and tired lungs, from women who had sworn never to want men again and now wanted survival more than purity.

Amaranta felt the song enter the stone.

The island answered.

Far away, beyond the reach of any canoe Avarra had ever carved, a man woke from sleep and saw gold shining under black cliffs. Another dreamed of women with hair like night and hands painted red. Another smelled salt though he lay inland beside a dying fire. Another heard laughter in a language he did not know and woke with his body aching toward the sea.

The call moved outward.

It did not move like sound.

It moved like desire.

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Amaranta gasped and tried to pull her hands from the stone.

She could not.

The island had taken the shape of her request and widened it.

Bring us what we need.

But need was a door.

Need was hunger with a holy name.

In the chamber, the women sang louder. Some smiled through tears. Some fell to their knees. Naeva lifted her knife and dragged it across her palm, adding her blood to the stone. Others followed. Gold dust trembled loose from the walls and fell into their hair.

Luma woke and began to cry.

The sound broke through Amaranta's vision. She tore her hands free at last, skin ripping against the rock. The chamber light returned in a sudden flare, bright enough to blind.

Then the first offering came.

Not a man.

A bird.

It fell from the cave mouth, wings beating wildly, though no bird flew at night over the western cliffs. It struck the stone floor, staggered, and lay still. Its feathers were white, its beak gold, its eyes black and wet.

No one spoke.

The bird opened its beak.

From inside it came a man's voice, distant and dreaming.

"I saw the island," it said.

Then it died.

The women stared.

Ydora clutched Luma to her breast. Naeva smiled slowly, fiercely, with terror underneath. Soreth covered her mouth. Maruva bowed her head as if something ancient had passed judgment.

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Amaranta looked at the bird, then at the blood shining on the stone, then at the women waiting for her to tell them whether this was miracle or warning.

She wanted to say stop.

She wanted to say they had asked wrongly.

She wanted to say no survival built on hunger would remain survival for long.

But Luma was crying. The women were dying. The island was listening.

And somewhere beyond the water, men were already turning in their sleep toward them.

Amaranta rose.

Her palms bled freely now. Gold dust clung to the wounds.

"It has heard us," she said.

A sound passed through the women. Relief. Fear. Worship.

Outside, the tide began to change.

The first boats came before the next moon.

They arrived at dawn, three of them, narrow and weather-beaten, carrying men with cracked lips and eyes bright from dreams. They did not know how they had found the island. They did not agree on what they had seen. One said gold birds had flown above the water. One said his dead mother had called from the waves. One said women had sung to him from inside his own chest.

When they stepped onto the black sand, they wept.

The women watched from the cliffs.

No arrows flew.

Not yet.

Amaranta stood hidden among the rocks and felt the island beneath her, pleased as a mouth tasting fruit.

The men looked small from above.

Human.

Necessary.

Doomed.

Naeva came to stand beside her. "We choose," she whispered.

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Amaranta could not answer.

Below, one of the men bent and lifted a handful of sand. Gold flashed between his fingers. His face changed. Wonder became wanting.

The island felt it.

So did Amaranta.

The call deepened. It passed through the cliffs, through the roots, through the bones of the women gathered there, through Luma asleep in Ydora's arms, through the bright veins of gold under the earth.

It would bring more.

Not only the kind.

Not only the strong.

Not only the willing.

It would bring whoever could be moved by hunger.

Gold. Flesh. Glory. Love. Escape. Immortality.

The island had learned the language of men.

Amaranta closed her bleeding hands.

Far below, the first man looked up toward the cliffs and smiled as if paradise had chosen him.

The sea withdrew from the shore, quiet and green.

Behind Amaranta, the women began to sing again.



Chapter 1

The Woman Who Was Almost Remembered

The dead women came to Selene Voss in pieces.

A hand first. Then half a mouth. A pearl button at the throat. The soft blur of a cheek overexposed by a cameraman who had loved light more than faces. They arrived at her worktable one frame at a time, silver ghosts suspended in chemical dark, asking for nothing but patience.

Patience, Selene had learned, was the only form of devotion Hollywood still allowed women after it was finished with them.

She sat alone in the preservation suite beneath the blue-white hum of calibrated lamps, her cotton-gloved fingers guiding a strip of nitrate through the inspection bench. The room was kept cold enough to make her bones ache. Archives were not designed for human comfort. They were designed to slow decay.

On the screen in front of her, a woman leaned toward a window that no longer existed, in a house demolished before Selene was born, in a film no one had watched in nearly ninety years. The actress's name, according to the canister, was Lillian Rusk. According to the trade notices Selene had found, she had once been "a fresh discovery of uncommon radiance." According to everything else, she had vanished after three supporting roles, one marriage to a producer, and a death certificate filled out by a county clerk with poor handwriting.

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Selene advanced the film by a single frame.

Lillian's eyes opened.

Another frame.

The eyes closed.

Another.

The mouth trembled into something that might have been fear or flirtation or simply damage in the emulsion.

Selene leaned closer.

"Hold still," she murmured, though the woman had been dead for half a century and stillness was no longer the problem.

The frame jittered. A scratch ran down Lillian's face like a white scar. Selene adjusted the magnification and marked the damage in the restoration log. Vertical abrasion, right side. Mild shrinkage. Warping near perforations. Possible decomposition at head of reel.

She wrote in a narrow, controlled hand. She always wrote by hand first. Younger archivists trusted databases too much, as if entering something into a system meant it could not be lost. Selene knew better. Systems forgot women faster than fire did.

The preservation suite smelled faintly of metal, dust, and old vinegar. The scent of decaying film had a sweetness to it, almost fruity, if one was being generous. If one was not, it smelled like history turning sour.

Selene had stopped being generous years ago.

Her phone buzzed once beside the keyboard. She ignored it. The archive had rules about phones near active workstations, and Selene respected rules when they served the dead. The living could wait.

Onscreen, Lillian Rusk lifted a gloved hand to the curtain. Selene slowed the movement, watching the actress's face change by fractions. There had been talent there. Not genius, perhaps. Genius was a word applied too freely to men and too late to women. But Lillian had known how to listen with her eyes. She had known how to make stillness feel like withheld speech.

The scene should have made her career.

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Instead, the film had been shelved, the studio absorbed, the cast scattered, and Lillian reduced to a box of brittle publicity stills misfiled under another actress's name.

Almost remembered.

That was the cruelest category. Not forgotten entirely. Not preserved fully. Just visible enough to prove how easily the world could have chosen otherwise.

Selene understood that category better than she liked.

She had been twenty-three when she drove into Los Angeles in a used Honda with a cracked windshield, two duffel bags, and a headshot she had paid for in three installments. In those days, she had believed the city was withholding something from her only temporarily. She believed every room she entered might become the room. Every audition might become the story she would tell later, laughing, to someone interviewing her under soft lights.

You know, I almost didn't go that day.

She had imagined saying that. Every young actor in Los Angeles imagined saying that. The sentence was part of the spell.

For a while, the city encouraged her. That was its talent. It never rejected people immediately. It gave just enough to keep them obedient.

A detergent commercial where only her shoulder appeared. A two-line role in a hospital drama, cut before airing. A callback for a police procedural in which the casting director said she had "a sadness the camera likes." One independent film that played three festivals and died before distribution. A producer who told her she had the wrong kind of beauty but the right kind of pain, then asked if she wanted to get dinner.

She did not become famous.

She did not become infamous.

She did not even become one of those cautionary names people spoke with lowered voices at parties in the hills.

She simply stayed.

That was the part no one made movies about: the staying after the dream had removed its hand from your shoulder.

Selene advanced another frame.

Lillian turned toward the camera.

The expression caught Selene unprepared.

It was not fear. Not flirtation.

It was recognition.

For half a second, across the ruined strip of film, the dead actress seemed to know exactly who was watching her.

Selene sat back.

The preservation suite hummed around her. Air vents breathed cold across the shelves. Somewhere beyond the door, a cart wheel squeaked in the corridor, then faded. She looked again at the frame. Enlarged, frozen, drained of movement, Lillian was only a woman at a window, her gaze angled slightly past the lens.

Selene rubbed the bridge of her nose beneath her glasses.

"Too many hours," she said.

Her voice sounded thin in the cold room.

She logged the frame, saved the scan, and threaded the film forward. The machine clicked softly, tooth by tooth. It was the closest thing to prayer Selene still practiced.

People thought archives were quiet, but they were not. They made a thousand small sounds. The tick of reels. The whisper of acetate sleeves. The dry sigh of folders opening. The low electrical purr of servers pretending to be permanent. Selene had come to understand the place as a kind of hospital for the nearly erased.

She had not planned to end up here.

That was not entirely true. No one planned to become the person they became after the original plan failed. But there had been steps, and Selene had taken them. A job

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at a repertory theater box office. A volunteer shift helping catalog posters. A temporary position in special collections. A grant-funded preservation course. A supervisor who noticed that Selene had the patience to handle fragile things and the anger to defend them.

Now, thirty years later, she knew how to repair torn sprocket holes, identify nitrate decomposition by smell, coax images out of warped stock, and tell interns with bright faces that no, not everything could be saved.

That last lesson was the hardest.

Her phone buzzed again.

Selene glanced at it this time.

lone.

She removed one glove with her teeth and picked up the phone.

"What?" Selene said.

There was a small silence on the other end. Younger people still expected greetings. Selene had never found them efficient.

"I found something," lone Calder said.

"Congratulations. We work in an archive."

"No, I mean something that isn't in the system."

"Half the building isn't in the system."

"This is different."

Selene closed her eyes. lone was thirty-one, brilliant, impatient, and inclined to use the word "different" whenever she meant interesting. She had the nervous energy of someone who still believed discovery could change the shape of a life.

Selene had once had that energy. She found it more painful than annoying.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Sublevel three. Cold vault overflow."

"Why?"

"Inventory reconciliation."

"You finished Row G?"

"I was finishing Row G. Then I found a canister behind the Pathé newsreels."

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Selene looked at the strip of Lillian Rusk waiting under the glass.

"Put it on the anomaly cart and tag it for Monday."

"It already has a tag."

"Then photograph it, bag it, and tag it again."

"Selene."

Something in lone's voice changed the room.

Selene sat still.

The hum of the lamps sharpened. The cold seemed to move closer to her skin.

"What does the tag say?" she asked.

Another pause.

"That's why I called."

Selene looked at Lillian's frozen face on the monitor.

"Well?"

"It says Calafia."

The word entered the room like a draft from a door Selene had not opened.

She did not recognize it at first, not fully. It touched some old corner of memory: a mural, maybe; a history lecture; a half-remembered reference to queens and California and some gold-leaf nonsense sold in museum gift shops. The kind of myth the state liked to use when it wanted to appear ancient instead of merely expensive.

"Spell it," Selene said.

lone did.

C-A-L-A-F-I-A.

Selene reached for her pen.

"What else?"

"There's more. Under that, in different handwriting, maybe older: El Ramo."

Selene wrote the words on the margin of Lillian Rusk's restoration log before realizing what she had done.

CALAFIA.

EL RAMO.

The ink looked too dark against the paper.

"Any catalog number?" she asked.

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"No."

"Accession label?"

"No."

"Donor mark?"

"No."

"Condition?"

"I haven't opened it."

"Good. Don't."

"I know that."

"Do you?"

"I'm impatient, not stupid."

Selene almost smiled. Almost.

Through the phone, she heard lone breathing. Behind her, faint and hollow, came the dense silence of the cold vault, where shelves of old film waited in the dark like sealed lungs.

"There's something else," lone said.

Selene's fingers tightened around the pen. "Of course there is."

"The outer tag says Do Not Project."

Selene stared at the words she had written.

Do Not Project was not unusual in itself. Damaged nitrate could burn. Shrunken film could tear. Vinegar syndrome could ruin adjacent materials. Archivists wrote warnings all the time. Handle with care. Do not freeze. Do not open outside hood. Possible mold. Suspected nitrate.

But Do Not Project had a melodrama to it that belonged less to preservation than to superstition. It sounded like a dare left by someone who wanted to be obeyed and remembered.

"What kind of canister?" Selene asked.

"Metal. Older. No studio embossing. There's residue on the lid. Maybe tape, maybe wax."

"Wax?"

"I said maybe."

Selene looked at the clock on the wall. 7:43 p.m. Most of the staff had gone home. The archive after hours

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always felt less like a workplace and more like a body keeping secrets after the mind fell asleep.

"I'm coming down," she said.

"I figured."

"Do not open it."

"I won't."

"Do not move it."

"I already moved it a little."

Selene stood. "Ione."

"It was wedged behind two newsreel stacks. I had to move it to see the label."

"Do not move it again."

"I won't."

"And put on a mask."

"I'm wearing one."

"A proper one."

"Selene."

"What?"

"I know what I'm doing."

Selene looked once more at Lillian Rusk. The actress still faced the window, eyes angled toward something beyond Selene's sight. Almost remembered. Almost saved.

"Everyone thinks that before something goes wrong," Selene said, and ended the call.

She powered down the inspection bench with more care than haste. The strip of film had to be returned to its temporary core, wrapped, labeled, and placed in the holding tray. The dead deserved procedure even when the living were inconvenient.

As she lifted Lillian's reel into its archival can, Selene noticed the actress's name on the tape label had begun to peel at one corner. She pressed it down with her thumb.

"There," she said softly.

The suite lights clicked off behind her.

The corridor outside was empty, washed in institutional beige and motion-sensor light. Selene walked

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past rooms filled with flatbed scanners, playback machines, worktables, steel cabinets, and sleeping histories. Posters lined one wall in acid-free frames: women laughing beside men whose names had lasted longer; women leaning from balconies; women running from painted monsters; women with mouths open in silent screams no one had bothered to transcribe.

Her reflection moved beside her in the glass.

At fifty-seven, Selene had become a woman younger people called elegant when they meant well-preserved. Her hair, once dark enough to read as black onscreen, was threaded heavily with silver and cut blunt at her jaw. The bones of her face had sharpened with age. She had the posture of someone who had spent years pretending not to wait.

The elevator took too long.

It always did after hours. It rose from the sublevels with mechanical reluctance, as if disturbed from sleep. Selene watched the numbers descend. Three. Two. One. B. SB1. SB2.

When the doors opened on sublevel three, the cold met her first.

The overflow vault corridor was narrower than the main archive halls and less forgiving. No posters here. No donor plaques. No curated nostalgia. Just concrete, locked doors, warning signs, and the sterile breath of climate control. This was where films came when no one knew what to do with them yet.

lone stood halfway down the hall under a flickering light, arms folded tightly across her chest. She wore a gray sweater under her lab coat, blue nitrile gloves, and the wrong mask. Selene decided to correct that later.

"You took your time," lone said.

"I secured an actress."

"That sounds illegal."

"It usually was."

lone's mouth twitched, but the humor did not reach her eyes.

She looked too pale.

The Seventh Reel

Selene noticed that before she noticed the canister.

It sat on a stainless-steel cart beside the open vault door. Smaller than she expected. Dark metal. Scuffed. Unmarked except for the paper tag tied to its handle with brittle string. A second strip of yellowed tape crossed the lid, its adhesive browned and cracking. Something like wax did cling to one edge, dark amber against the metal.

Selene stepped closer.

The air around the canister smelled different.

Not vinegar. Not mold. Not nitrate.

Salt.

That was impossible, so she ignored it.

"Show me where it was," she said.

Ione gestured toward the vault. "Back corner. Behind Row G overflow. It wasn't on the shelf list."

Selene entered the vault. The cold sharpened instantly. Rows of shelving vanished into blue-gray shadow. Labels marked decades, formats, partial collections, forgotten donors. The Pathé newsreels sat exactly where Ione had said, several canisters shifted forward by a few inches.

Behind them was a gap.

Selene crouched, shining her small flashlight along the back of the shelf. Dust had collected there in a thick, undisturbed line except where the canister had rested. The circle it left behind was clean.

Too clean.

"How long has Row G been in overflow?" Selene asked.

"Since before I started."

"Seven years."

"Right."

Selene ran the light across the empty space again.

"And no one saw this?"

"That's what 'behind the newsreels' generally implies."

Selene glanced back at her.

Ione lifted both hands. "Sorry. Nervous sarcasm."

"Don't use all of it now. You'll need some later."

B Alan Bourgeois

She stood and returned to the cart. The tag moved slightly in the draft from the open vault. Selene bent close without touching it.

The handwriting was faded but legible.

CALAFIA

EL RAMO

DO NOT PROJECT

Below that, smaller, nearly lost where the ink had bled into the paper:

REEL 1

Selene felt irritation rise in her, sharp and welcome. Irritation was useful. It kept wonder out.

"Probably a student film," she said.

lone stared at her. "A student film in an old metal canister sealed with wax?"

"Students are theatrical."

"On nitrate?"

"You don't know that it's nitrate."

"The canister type suggests—"

"The canister suggests someone put film in a canister."

"Why are you trying so hard to make this boring?"

"Because most things are boring, and the ones that aren't usually become expensive."

lone looked at the tag again. Her ambition, usually bright and restless, had gone quiet. That worried Selene more than excitement would have.

"What is Calafia?" lone asked.

"You found it. You tell me."

"I searched quick before calling. Queen Calafia. Mythical Black warrior queen. Island of California. Old Spanish romance. Gold. Women. Amazons. Maybe where the name California comes from."

Selene looked at her.

lone shrugged. "I said quick."

"El Ramo?"

"That part I don't know."

Selene leaned over the canister. The lid had been sealed not only with tape, but with a thin line of hardened

material pressed around the rim. Wax, perhaps. Or resin.
The seal was cracked in two places.

Someone had opened it before.

Or something inside had pushed against the lid.

Selene exhaled through her nose.

No.

That was exactly the kind of thought she despised in other people. California was full of people who turned mold into omen, coincidence into past-life, bad wiring into visitation. Half the state seemed to be in permanent negotiation with invisible forces. It exhausted her.

A canister was a canister.

A label was a label.

A film was a film until proven otherwise, and even then it was usually only a film in worse condition than one hoped.

"We document first," Selene said. "Photos, measurements, environmental reading, chain-of-custody note. Then we open under hood with proper ventilation and inspection protocol."

"Tonight?"

Selene looked at the cart.

Every sensible answer said no. Unknown material. No accession record. No supervisor present. Possible nitrate. Possible contamination. Possible legal complication.

She should secure it and wait until morning.

Instead, she heard herself ask, "Are the small inspection bays still powered?"

lone's face changed.

There it was: the hunger of discovery.

Selene hated how much she recognized it.

"I can check," lone said.

"No. We follow protocol."

"You just asked if—"

"I asked. I did not decide."

The overhead light flickered again. Once. Twice.

B Alan Bourgeois

In the brief dark between pulses, the paper tag seemed whiter than before.

Selene touched it at last, carefully, with two gloved fingers to steady it for photographing.

The cold vanished.

For one impossible instant, heat moved through her hand. Not burning. Living. A pulse beneath paper, string, metal. The sensation went up her wrist and into her chest before she could pull away.

She saw water.

Not an image exactly. Not memory. A flash of green-black sea sliding over dark sand. Gold dust caught in foam. A girl crying somewhere high above the shore. Women singing without words.

Then the corridor light steadied.

The cold returned.

lone was watching her.

Selene lowered her hand.

"What?" she asked.

"You went pale."

"No, I didn't."

"You did."

"It's cold."

"It's always cold."

Selene removed her glove and flexed her fingers. Her palm looked normal. Dry skin. A small scar near the base of her thumb from a film splice blade twenty years earlier. No gold. No heat.

She put the glove back on.

"We'll move it to Bay Two," she said.

lone blinked. "Now?"

"Now."

"I thought we were following protocol."

"We are."

"Is that what this is?"

Selene looked at her. "Get the camera."

lone did not argue.

Together, they wheeled the cart down the corridor. One wheel squeaked softly, rhythmically, like something

The Seventh Reel

trying to speak and failing. The canister did not shift. The tag trembled with each uneven seam in the floor.

Selene kept one hand near it, not touching.

At the end of the hall, the motion-sensor lights clicked on ahead of them, one after another, opening the way in pale rectangles.

For the first time in years, Selene felt the old, humiliating sensation she had spent half her life disciplining out of herself.

Expectation.

Not hope. She knew better than hope.

But something close enough to be dangerous.

They reached Bay Two. lone unlocked the door, switched on the hood, and began gathering documentation supplies. Selene stood beside the cart and looked down at the canister.

Calafia.

El Ramo.

Do Not Project.

The words should have looked theatrical. Amateur. Absurd.

Instead, they looked like instructions left by someone who had known she would disobey them.

Selene heard, from somewhere beyond the walls, a faint rush of sound.

Air through vents, she told herself.

Old pipes.

The building settling.

But beneath it, almost too low to hear, was something else.

A tide pulling away from shore.

She looked at lone.

"Did you hear that?"

lone turned from the cabinet, holding the camera in both hands.

"Hear what?"

Selene waited.

The sound was gone.

B Alan Bourgeois

On the cart, the canister sat dark and sealed and patient.

Selene looked at the label once more, and for reasons she could not have explained to anyone, not even herself, she thought of Lillian Rusk turning toward the camera after ninety years in the dark.

A woman almost remembered.

A woman asking to be seen.

Then, from inside the canister, something clicked.



Chapter 2

Canister Without a Record

The click came again.

Small. Precise. Mechanical.

Selene held up one hand before lone could speak.

The two women stood still in Bay Two, listening to the hood draw air through its vented mouth. The inspection room was barely large enough for the cart, two stools, a stainless-steel counter, and the specialized equipment the archive kept for uncertain materials: magnifier, light box, nitrile gloves, pH strips, archival sleeves, sealed disposal bags, a digital hygrometer, a camera on a jointed arm. Everything had a place. Everything had a procedure.

The canister did not.

It sat beneath the hood like a thing removed from a shipwreck.

lone lowered the camera. "Was that—"

"Don't."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

"I was about to ask if old metal contracts in cold environments."

"It does."

"Does it click from the inside?"

Selene looked at her.

lone's mouth closed.

B Alan Bourgeois

The hood light gave the canister a dull sheen. Its metal had darkened with age, but not evenly. Around the rim, old residue clung in a rough circle. Wax, Selene thought again, though she had no reason to trust the word. It was amber-brown, cracked in places, pressed too deliberately to be accidental. Someone had wanted the lid sealed.

Someone had also wanted the warning visible.

DO NOT PROJECT.

Selene picked up the camera.

"If we document this properly," she said, "then whatever it turns out to be, no one can accuse us of mishandling it."

"That sounds like something people say before being accused of mishandling something."

"Then hold the measuring scale."

Ione obeyed, though not without giving the canister one last look. She moved into work mode quickly once given a task. That was one of the reasons Selene tolerated her impatience. Curiosity without discipline was only appetite. Ione had appetite, certainly, but she also had hands steady enough for fragile things.

Selene photographed the canister from every angle. Lid. Base. Handle. Tag. Seal. Tape. Side dent. Scratch near hinge. Residue at rim. The knots in the brittle string. The handwriting.

The camera flash made the paper tag flare white.

CALAFIA

EL RAMO

DO NOT PROJECT

The words looked different in the captured image. Less handwritten. More declared.

"Do you know Spanish?" Ione asked.

"Enough to mistranslate confidently."

"El ramo means branch, right? Or bouquet?"

"Branch. Bough. Sometimes cluster. Context matters."

"Branch of Calafia?"

Selene adjusted the focus and took another photograph. "Don't build a theory from a tag."

The Seventh Reel

"I'm not building. I'm arranging loose materials."

"That is what people call building when they don't want to admit they've started."

Ione accepted that with a slight tilt of her head. She had a way of receiving correction as if filing it for future objection.

Selene measured the canister: diameter, depth, weight. The metal was colder than the room should have made it. Even through gloves, she felt a faint chill rise into her fingers, the kind that came from something kept underground. She logged the dimensions, then read the hygrometer.

Normal.

Temperature normal.

Humidity normal.

Her pulse less so.

She hated that.

"Label fibers look old," Ione said.

"Labels can be aged."

"Why would someone fake this?"

"For attention. For money. For tenure. For a grant. For a joke. For reasons I'm too tired to imagine."

"But hidden behind uncataloged newsreels?"

"People misfile their own children."

"You're in a mood."

"I was restoring Lillian Rusk."

"That explains it."

Selene paused over the log sheet. "Does it?"

"You get protective with the vanished ones."

Selene did not answer.

Ione had never learned when to stop noticing. It would make her either an excellent archivist or an unbearable adult.

The canister clicked again.

This time Ione stepped back.

Selene did not, but only because pride was sometimes useful.

B Alan Bourgeois

The sound had come from the lid. Or beneath it. A faint metallic settling, followed by something softer. A shift. A sigh. She waited for odor: vinegar, rot, combustion, mold, the warning language of unstable film.

Instead, salt again.

Sharper now.

Impossible in that sealed cold room.

Selene looked toward the sink, though it had not been used in weeks. The stainless basin was dry. The floor was dry. The hood interior was dry.

"Environmental reading?" she asked.

Ione checked the small device as if grateful for something rational to hold. "Still normal."

"Note audible contraction from metal housing."

"You want me to write contraction?"

"I want you to write what we can defend."

Ione entered the note.

Selene took a scalpel from the equipment tray and stopped.

The motion was so familiar that her hand had moved before judgment caught up. She set the scalpel down again.

Not yet.

"External inspection first," she said, more to herself than to Ione.

She leaned under the hood and examined the seal with the magnifier. The amber material had been applied by hand. A fingertip had dragged through it before it hardened, leaving ridges too irregular for machine work. In one place, near the tag string, a partial impression remained.

Not a fingerprint.

At least not any print she recognized.

It looked like the curve of a small shell pressed into wax.

"Photograph this," she said.

Ione moved beside her. "What is it?"

"An impression."

"From what?"

"Something curved."

"Helpful."

"Accurate."

Ione photographed the seal.

Selene turned the canister slightly. On the underside, where dust had collected thickest, a faint mark had been scratched into the metal. Not a catalog number. Not a studio code. Three uneven lines crossing a fourth, then a circle.

Ione saw it too.

"That isn't standard," she said.

"No."

"Do you recognize it?"

"No."

"Could be a production mark."

"Could be."

"Could be occult."

Selene looked at her.

"I'm just listing options," Ione said.

"List quieter ones."

But the word had already entered the room.

Occult.

Selene had always disliked that word, not because it frightened her but because people used it when they wanted ignorance to feel glamorous. Los Angeles had never recovered from its appetite for hidden meanings. Séance rooms, cult houses, desert prophets, sound baths, gurus with legal teams. Even the archive had its share of rumors: cursed prints, dead actresses appearing in nitrate, projectionists who refused certain films after midnight. People wanted the past to be haunted because haunting gave neglect a plot.

Most archives were not haunted.

They were underfunded.

Still, the mark on the bottom of the canister bothered her.

She photographed it herself.

B Alan Bourgeois

"Chain-of-custody note," she said. "Found by lone Calder during inventory reconciliation of cold vault overflow, sublevel three, Row G, behind Pathé newsreel stack. No accession record visible. No catalog number. External label present. Unknown contents. Unknown donor."

"Unknown everything," lone said.

Selene wrote.

Unknown was better than assumed.

When the external inspection was complete, they stood side by side, looking at the canister without touching it.

The room seemed smaller than before.

lone broke the silence first. "We should open it."

"We should secure it."

"We should at least confirm contents."

"Confirmation is opening."

"And securing unknown material without confirming contents is also a choice."

Selene almost laughed. "Do not use my language against me."

"I learned from the best."

"You learned selectively."

"Selene."

lone's voice softened, and that was worse than her impatience.

"If this is what the tag says it is, even vaguely, it matters. A lost Calafia film? A possible silent-era production? A woman director? An unknown actress? No record? This could be—"

"Do not say important."

"It could be important."

"Importance is a drug in this building."

"So is caution."

Selene removed her gloves slowly.

The nitrile snapped lightly at her wrist.

lone watched her, smart enough not to press further.

Selene went to the small counter and washed her hands though they were clean. Cold water ran over her

The Seventh Reel

fingers. The scar at the base of her thumb shone pale. She looked into the stainless-steel basin and saw, not her face, but the overhead light broken into trembling pieces.

Almost thirty years in preservation had taught her that every discovery arrived wearing a costume.

A mislabeled reel became a lost trailer.

A lost trailer became a donor event.

A donor event became a press release.

A press release became a fight over rights.

A fight over rights became an email chain full of people using the word legacy while meaning ownership.

If this canister contained anything valuable, it would stop belonging to the dead almost immediately.

That was how institutions worked. That was how collectors worked. That was how Hollywood had always worked.

It turned women into images, images into property, property into myth, and myth into revenue.

Selene dried her hands.

Behind her, lone said nothing.

That was how Selene knew the younger woman was winning.

"Fine," Selene said.

lone straightened. "Fine meaning—"

"Fine meaning we open it enough to confirm material type and condition. We do not project. We do not run it through any machine. We do not attempt playback. We do not call anyone. We do not get excited."

"I can agree to the first four."

"lone."

"I'll work on the fifth."

Selene put on a fresh pair of gloves, then handed lone a proper respirator mask from the cabinet.

"Put that on."

"I have a mask."

"Put that on."

This time lone did not argue.

B Alan Bourgeois

They positioned the canister beneath the hood, secured the camera for continuous recording, and placed a clean tray inside the work area. Selene chose the smallest scalpel, then hesitated over the wax. Cutting a seal always felt like a kind of violation. Not because the object cared. Objects did not care. But someone once had, and the evidence of care deserved acknowledgment.

“Recording?” she asked.

“Recording.”

“Time?”

“8:16 p.m.”

“Date?”

Ione stated it.

“External canister marked Calafia, El Ramo, Do Not Project, Reel One. No catalog number. Seal appears compromised in two locations prior to opening. Opening for inspection under ventilation.”

Her voice sounded too formal to her own ears, but formal was useful. Formal made fear embarrassed to show itself.

She touched the scalpel to the wax.

The blade slid through too easily.

The material parted with a soft resistance that reminded her, unpleasantly, of skin.

Ione inhaled through the respirator.

Selene cut around the rim, slow and careful. Flakes of old seal fell into the tray. Under the hood light, they shone amber at first, then darkened as if exposed to air. The tape came next. It cracked under the scalpel, brittle but stubborn. Selene loosened one edge with tweezers and lifted it millimeter by millimeter.

No fumes.

No visible powder.

No heat.

The canister remained silent.

When the seal and tape were documented and removed, Selene placed both hands on the lid.

“Ready?” Ione asked.

The Seventh Reel

"No."

She lifted.

At first, the lid resisted. Then it released with a low, dry sound.

Inside lay a single film reel wrapped in black paper.

Not archival black paper. Older. Thicker. Tied with faded red thread.

On top of the wrapping rested a strip of cloth no longer than Selene's palm. Gold fabric, or once gold, now dulled by time. A few metallic threads still caught the light.

Ione leaned closer. "Is that costume material?"

"Don't touch it."

"I wasn't."

"You were thinking loudly."

Selene removed the cloth with tweezers and placed it in a separate tray. Beneath it, the black paper had been marked in white pencil:

REEL ONE OF SEVEN

THE ISLAND BEFORE THE NAME

Neither woman spoke.

The hood hummed.

Somewhere in the building, a pipe knocked once and went still.

Selene stared at the words until they stopped being words and became weight.

The Island Before the Name.

She wanted, with sudden force, to close the canister and place it back behind the Pathé newsreels and leave it for someone younger or braver or more foolish. She wanted to return to Lillian Rusk and her damaged window scene, to ordinary erasure, to grief that stayed where history put it.

Instead, she heard herself say, "Photograph."

Ione did.

Selene untied the red thread.

It loosened at the first pull, though it looked as if it should crumble. The black paper unfolded without tearing. The reel inside was smaller than standard feature

B Alan Bourgeois

length, perhaps a single short reel, wound tightly around a metal core. The film stock looked old. Dangerous old.

Selene bent closer, inspecting the edge markings.

Nitrate.

Of course.

"Material is nitrate motion picture film," she said for the recording. "Appears intact. Some edge shrinkage. No obvious active decomposition visible from exterior wind."

Ione was quiet.

Too quiet.

Selene looked up.

Ione's eyes were fixed on the inner side of the wrapping paper.

"What?" Selene asked.

Ione pointed.

Selene turned the paper carefully.

There was writing inside.

Not the same hand as the tag. This script was finer, slanted, almost elegant. The ink had browned, but it remained legible.

For the woman who finds this after she has stopped waiting to be found.

Selene read the line once.

Then again.

The room seemed to pull away from her.

Ione did not make a joke. That was kind of her.

"It could mean anyone," Selene said.

Her voice was flat.

"I didn't say it didn't."

"It's theatrical."

"Yes."

"Probably marketing copy."

"Hidden inside a sealed canister?"

"People are strange."

"True."

Selene's throat felt tight. She looked at the writing and felt an anger she did not understand. It was one thing for an object to be mysterious. It was another for it to be intimate. Intimacy presumed a right it had not earned.

The Seventh Reel

She reached for the inspection loupe.

Work. Procedure. Magnification. Evidence.

She lifted the leader edge with tweezers. The first few frames were black, then scratched gray. On the film edge, faint lettering confirmed the stock manufacturer and approximate era. Late 1920s, likely. That much, at least, behaved like fact.

Then she saw the title card.

Only part of it was visible through the loupe, but enough remained.

CALAFIA

A Motion Picture in Seven Reels

Directed by Adelaide Kurr

Ione made a sound that was almost triumph and almost fear.

Selene held up a finger.

The next frames showed damage, then painted clouds, then what looked like a shoreline. She advanced the film manually by inches over the light box, careful not to stress the perforations.

Black water.

Cliffs.

Women standing in rows along a high shore.

Selene stilled.

Even in miniature, even scratched and flickering beneath the loupe, the image had force. The women were not posed like actresses in a historical spectacle. They stood with the gravity of people who had not been told they were being watched. Their hair was loose or braided. Their arms were bare. Some held spears. Some held bowls. One held a child.

The scene lasted only a few frames before cutting to a studio title card.

THE ISLAND HAD NOT YET BEEN NAMED BY
MEN.

Ione whispered, "Oh my God."

Selene did not correct her.

She could not look away from the tiny words.

B Alan Bourgeois

The island had not yet been named by men.

It should have sounded like silent-film melodrama. It should have carried the grand, awkward rhythm of intertitles written by men in offices for women in costumes to act beneath. Instead, it felt stark. Accusatory. Almost modern.

Selene advanced another inch.

A woman appeared alone on a cliff.

Not Beatriz, unless the makeup and lighting transformed her utterly. This woman was older, with a broad face and dark eyes fixed not on the sea, but toward the camera. Around her wrists were bands of hammered gold. Her palms were darkened with something that might have been paint.

Or blood.

The frame blurred.

Selene adjusted the light.

The woman's mouth was open.

A silent film, Selene reminded herself.

Silent.

Still, she heard singing.

Not through the room. Not through the hood or the vents or any machine. The sound was too distant to be sound at all, a pressure deep behind the ear, where memory sometimes pretended to be music.

She drew back so quickly the loupe swung against its chain.

Ione looked at her. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Selene."

"Nothing."

But Ione's face had changed too.

"You heard it," Selene said.

The question came out as accusation.

Ione swallowed. "I thought you didn't."

They stood over the open canister, both of them suddenly aware of the narrowness of the room, the coldness of the air, the film between them, the warning on the tag they had disobeyed.

The Seventh Reel

Do Not Project.

Selene looked down at the reel.

"We're done for tonight."

lone stared. "You can't be serious."

"I am."

"We just confirmed a lost Adelaide Kurr film."

"We confirmed an unidentified nitrate reel with a title card."

"Selene."

"We are done."

"Why?"

Because I heard singing from a silent film.

Because the wrapping knows too much.

Because something clicked from inside a sealed canister.

Because old objects do not write messages to the women who find them.

Because I am not twenty-three anymore and I know what wanting does.

She said none of that.

"Because procedure says we secure unstable nitrate and notify the department head."

"You said we weren't calling anyone."

"Tomorrow."

lone's eyes narrowed. "You're scared."

Selene looked at her then.

The younger woman had the decency to regret it immediately.

"Good," Selene said. "You should try it."

lone looked down.

Selene began rewrapping the reel with slow, controlled movements. She did not replace the black paper exactly as it had been; that was impossible once opened. Nothing returned fully to its prior state. Not film. Not memory. Not women who came to California believing hunger was the same as destiny.

When she lifted the gold fabric to place it back inside, something slipped from its folds.

B Alan Bourgeois

A small paper envelope fell into the tray.

It had been hidden beneath the cloth, flattened so perfectly against the weave that neither woman had seen it. Selene stared at it. The envelope was no larger than a matchbook, sealed with the same amber material as the canister rim.

No writing on the outside.

Ione said nothing.

Selene should have left it.

She should have cataloged it unopened. She should have secured it, photographed it, placed it in a separate evidence sleeve, waited for oversight and witnesses and sensible morning light.

Instead, she picked it up.

The seal broke under the slightest pressure.

Inside was a single strip of film, three frames long.

A fragment.

Selene placed it on the light box.

For a moment, the images were too small to understand.

Then she magnified them.

First frame: a woman in gold, crowned, standing before a painted sea.

Second frame: the same woman turning toward the camera, mouth open as if speaking.

Third frame: a title card.

NOT THE QUEEN.

Selene felt the cold move through her chest.

Ione leaned close enough that their shoulders nearly touched.

"What does that mean?" she whispered.

Selene stared at the words until the letters blurred.

NOT THE QUEEN.

From somewhere inside the open canister, beneath the wrapped reel, came another soft click.

This time, neither of them pretended it was metal contracting.