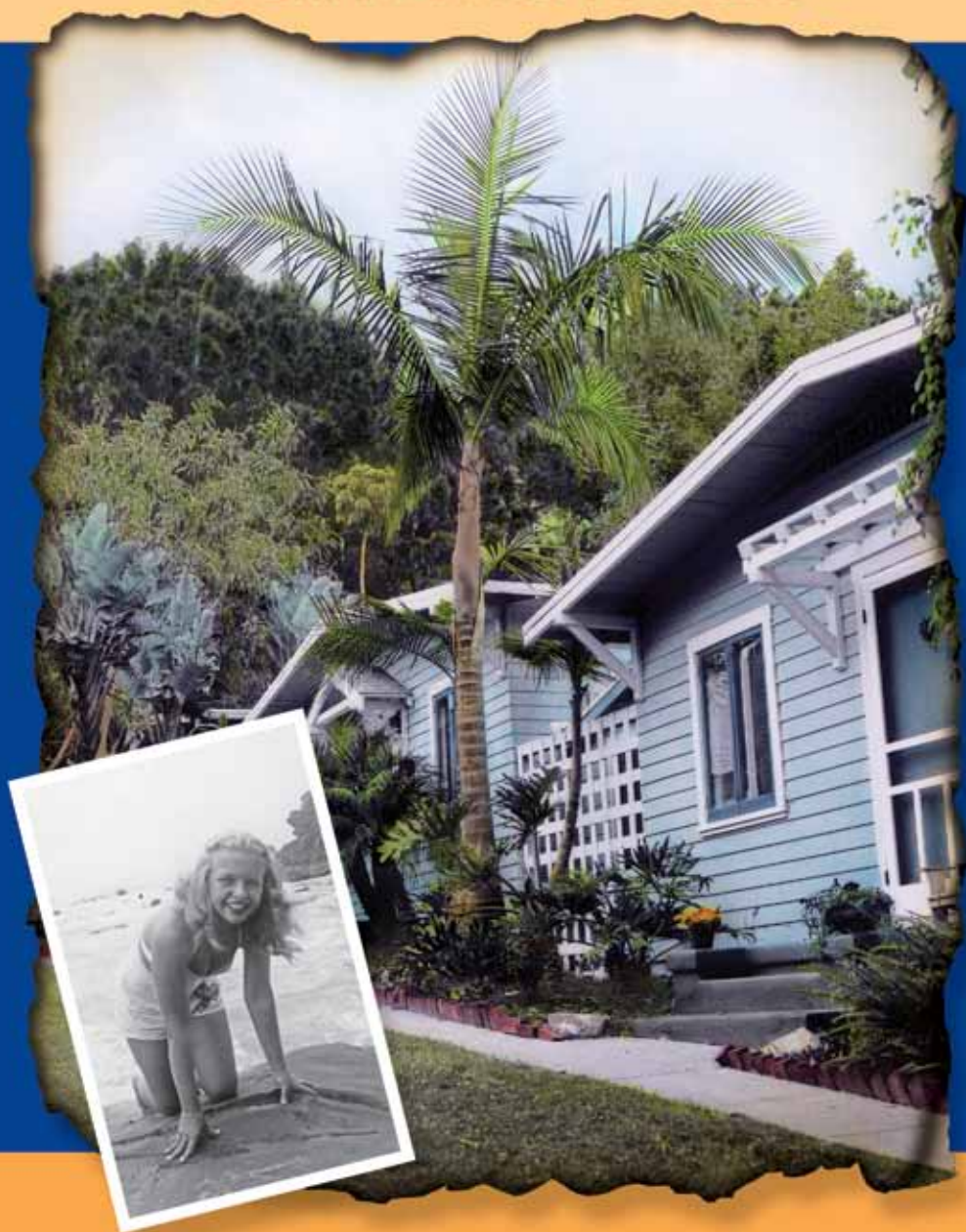


BIT PLAYER

—A JERI HOWARD MYSTERY—



JANET DAWSON

ALSO BY JANET DAWSON

Kindred Crimes

Till the Old Men Die

Take a Number

Don't Turn Your Back on the Ocean

Nobody's Child

A Credible Threat

Witness to Evil

Where the Bodies Are Buried

A Killing at the Track

Scam and Eggs (short stories)

Bit Player

A Jeri Howard Mystery



Janet Dawson

2011 · PALO ALTO / MCKINLEYVILLE, CALIFORNIA
PERSEVERANCE PRESS / JOHN DANIEL & COMPANY

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A Perseverance Press Book
Published by John Daniel & Company
A division of Daniel & Daniel, Publishers, Inc.
Post Office Box 2790
McKinleyville, California 95519
www.danielpublishing.com/perseverance

Distributed by SCB Distributors (800) 729-6423

Book design: Studio E Books, Santa Barbara, www.studio-e-books.com
Cover photo by Ross Parsons, hand tinted by Linda Lewis

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Dawson, Janet.

Bit player : a Jeri Howard mystery / by Janet Dawson.
p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-56474-494-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Howard, Jeri (Fictitious character)—Fiction.
 2. Women private investigators—Fiction.
 3. California—Fiction.
- I. Title.

PS3554.A949B58 2010
813'.54--dc22
2010040565

*For my mother, Thelma Metcalf Dawson,
who was selling tickets in her family's movie theater
in Purcell, Oklahoma when she met Don Dawson, a handsome
young sailor. They married in March 1944. When Dad shipped
out with the Navy, Mom worked at a defense plant.
They were married for 61 years. I have the greatest
love and appreciation for both of them.*

~

*I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of
Thelma Dawson and
former LAPD Detective Thomas G. Hays*

~ Bit Player



“GRANDMA SAID John Barrymore made a pass at her.” I nudged my friend Cassie and pointed at the framed poster from *Rasputin and the Empress*, displaying the famous profiles of John, Ethel, and Lionel in the 1932 film, the only movie the three Barrymores ever made together.

Cassie chuckled. “From what I’ve heard about John Barrymore, he made passes at anything in skirts.”

On this sunny Saturday afternoon, the last weekend in May, Cassie and I were in downtown Alameda, where we’d gone to a movie at the city’s newly restored Art Deco movie palace, glittering anew like the jewel it had been when it opened back in the 1930s. After the movie, we crossed Central Avenue to the produce market on the corner. After making a few purchases, I suggested a visit to the ice cream parlor around the corner, on Park Street. Cassie heartily concurred and we strolled back up Central. Just opposite the theater I stopped, lured by the display of old movie magazines and posters in the window of a shop that hadn’t been here the last time I’d been downtown, just a few weeks earlier. The sign above the door looked like a movie marquee, mirroring the real one across the street. The shop was called *Matinee—Classic Hollywood Memorabilia*. We decided to take a look. On the left, shelves held books about the movies and the stars, emphasizing the golden years of the thirties and forties. On the right, I saw movie memorabilia—the ephemera of Tinseltown, dating from the early part of the twentieth century up through the early 1960s. Post-

ers and inserts hung on the walls. In the shallow bins along the wall, protected by clear plastic sleeves, were lobby and title cards, programs, and photographs, as well as old movie magazines, and publicity files containing yellowed clippings from newspapers and magazines.

The *Rasputin and the Empress* poster, with big red letters on a cream background, had the patina of age, with faded colors. At one edge the paper was cracked and brittle. The poster was an original, the real deal, with a high price to match. Most movie memorabilia of the pre-World War II era had answered the call to duty and wound up in paper drives for the war effort. Much of what was available from that time period was reprints. The vintage stuff was harder to get, and priced accordingly.

I really like movie memorabilia, but I have to be picky and buy only what I can afford. I'm Jeri Howard, self-employed private investigator, with a slim profit margin, a mortgage payment to make, and not much room in my budget for frills.

"When did your grandmother encounter John Barrymore?" Cassie asked.

"On the set of *Marie Antoinette*. Barrymore was playing King Louis the Fifteenth."

Grandma was thrilled to be an extra in the lavish costume drama, in production at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in the spring of 1938, especially because she was in a scene with her favorite actress, Norma Shearer, who starred as the doomed queen. The movie also featured handsome young Tyrone Power and a panoply of Hollywood names, including Barrymore.

My grandmother, Jerusha Layne, went to Hollywood in the fall of 1937. She was eighteen, just out of high school. Ever since she was old enough to stand on a box behind the counter, she'd worked in her family's theater in Jackson, California, selling tickets and popcorn, enthralled by the movies spinning from the huge reels her father wrestled onto the projector upstairs in the booth. She wanted more from life than she could find in that small Gold Rush-era mining town. The new gold rush, for pretty young women like Jerusha, was to Hollywood. Visions of movie stardom

beckoned, as ethereal as El Dorado's glittering dust. Lightning could strike. She could climb the ladder to the top. After all, she sang, she danced, and she'd played the lead in several high school plays.

Except it didn't work out that way. Pretty and talented as she was, Jerusha discovered lots of young women just like her, scrambling at the bottom of that Hollywood ladder, trying to get their feet on the first rung. She worked in the movies, all right, first as an extra, a silent face in the crowd, walking down a sidewalk or sitting at a table at a restaurant, filling in the background while the cameras focused on the stars. Then she worked as a bit player, or day player, as they were sometimes called. Bit players were different from extras, because they had a few lines of dialogue, or they did *bits*, specific pieces of business. Jerusha played telephone operators, hat check girls, waitresses. She was the shop clerk, chatting while she waited on the star, or the neighbor who witnessed the gangland shooting and gave a statement to the cops. She got jobs through agents, but often bit players weren't under contract like actors who worked steadily in larger roles. As she sat in the background, Jerusha dreamed of the day when the parts would get bigger, when someone at a studio would notice her and offer her a contract.

It didn't happen. But Jerusha stuck it out for nearly five years, working primarily at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Then she left Hollywood, realizing her future wasn't written in lights on a movie palace marquee. Besides, she'd met a young man named Ted Howard. They married in the spring of 1942, like so many young couples in those war years, full of hopes and fears for the future. Later that year, Ted Howard, United States Navy, left to fight battles in the remote islands of the Pacific. But he came back, and my father, Timothy, was their firstborn. Grandma never had any regrets, but she certainly had some great Hollywood stories to tell her grandchildren. And I—the granddaughter named after her—relished every tale.

"I've always wanted something from one of Grandma's movies," I told Cassie. "A one-sheet, an insert, a title or lobby card—that would be great."

Cassie looked up from a bin of black-and-white photos, a still of Cary Grant in her hand. “What are all those things? I’m not familiar with the terms.”

“This is a lobby card.” I pulled one from a nearby bin. Encased in a clear plastic sleeve, the eleven-by-fourteen-inch card displayed a color photo of Marilyn Monroe, Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon in the Billy Wilder masterpiece, *Some Like It Hot*.

“Lobby cards showed colored photos of scenes from the movie,” I explained, “even if the film itself was shot in black-and-white, like this one. The cards usually came in sets of eight. They were displayed in theater lobbies. You don’t see lobby cards for movies made after the early sixties. I guess they stopped making them. Sometimes there was a ninth card in the set, a title card. Instead of photographs, title cards showed the title, names of the cast, and an image, usually the same as on the one-sheet.”

I gestured at the posters ranked along the walls—William Powell and Irene Dunne in *Life with Father*, Robert Mitchum and Deborah Kerr in *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. “These are one-sheets. A one-sheet is a full-size movie poster, twenty-seven inches wide and forty-one inches high. There’s a larger size poster called a three-sheet, which is forty-one inches wide by eighty-one inches. Got to have a lot of wall space for one of those. But an insert is a good size for display, thirty-six inches high, but narrower, about fourteen inches.”

“So the ones you have at home are inserts,” Cassie said.

“That’s right.” The inserts hanging on my bedroom wall were from two of my favorite movies from the fifties—*The Journey*, a 1959 movie with Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr, and *Picnic*, the 1956 classic, starring William Holden and Kim Novak.

A lobby or title card from one of Jerusha’s movies would be a great addition to my small collection. Did the shop have anything from one of Norma Shearer’s movies? Maybe the shop’s proprietor could steer me in the right direction. Come to think of it, where was the proprietor?

I hadn’t seen anyone behind the counter when Cassie and I had walked into the shop, though a tinkling bell above the door had an-

nounced our entry. But I'd been focused on the shop's wares. Now I tuned in my surroundings. We were the only customers in the place. The overhead lights were dim and the walls were a shade of bland somewhere between beige and brown. Music played softly. The tune was sweet and mellow, with that Big Band swing. Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade." As I looked toward the counter, I smiled. The poster on the wall behind it showed James Stewart and June Allyson in *The Glenn Miller Story*.

The music segued into "String of Pearls." Someone was there after all, a man perched on a stool, partly hidden by the cash register and the old issue of *Life* magazine he'd been reading. He cleared his throat. His voice sounded rusty and disused.

"I couldn't help overhearing," he said, setting aside the magazine. "Your grandmother worked in Hollywood?"

"She was a bit player, from nineteen thirty-seven to nineteen forty-two."

"Ah, I remember," he said. "Those were golden years."

"Were you there?" I asked.

"Physically? Or in spirit? I might have been."

I walked back for a closer look, intrigued by his response. My grandmother had been past eighty when she'd died, her Hollywood years a long time ago. Even if the man who ran the shop was younger than Grandma, he'd have to be well over eighty.

Indeed, he could have been that old. He was a colorless, wizened little elf, ancient and musty, as though he'd been stored in a film vault for half a century. He had papery white skin and opaque brown eyes. A frieze of cropped white hair formed a half circle at the back of his polished bald skull. From his half-open mouth came a sound that might have been a laugh or a cough, the rustle of old celluloid running through a projector.

"What was your grandmother's name?" he asked.

"Jerusha Layne."

His thin lips curved into the ghost of a smile. It didn't fit his face, making it look instead like one of those masks. Comedy or tragedy, I couldn't tell which. "Jerusha Layne," he repeated, tasting the vowels and consonants. "An unusual name, very pretty. I

imagine she was pretty. They all were. Where did she work? At what studios?"

"She worked mostly at Metro, though she did a few films at Warner, RKO, and Columbia. She was in the last six films Norma Shearer made before she retired. Well, before they both retired, Norma and Grandma."

The man behind the counter ticked off the titles of those last six Norma Shearer movies. "*Marie Antoinette, Idiot's Delight, The Women, Escape, We Were Dancing, and Her Cardboard Lover.* The divine Norma. What a wonderful actress she was. They don't make them like that anymore. These pictures today—" He cast a deprecating glance at the movie theater across the street. "A collection of car chases, explosions and sex scenes, starring people I never heard of—and don't want to."

I was inclined to agree with him. For me, movies today just don't have the same panache they did back in Hollywood's Golden Era. I'd grown up with my grandmother's tales of stars and studios. She and I had spent many afternoons watching the classics at the UC Theatre in Berkeley and the Castro in San Francisco. With the advent of videos and DVDs, we'd had our own film festivals at her Alameda home. Plenty of popcorn, of course.

"This shop is new. When did you open?"

"The first week of May," he said. "We do sell over the Internet, of course. Our website is listed on the business card."

"Do you own the shop? What's your name?" I asked. But he didn't answer either question. In fact, he acted as though he hadn't heard me, instead tapping a few keys on the computer at the counter. I wondered if he was hard of hearing. I plucked a card from the holder next to the cash register. But the card simply listed the shop's name, address, phone number and URL of the website.

He looked up from the computer. "Is there something special you have in mind?"

"Do you have lobby or title cards from any of those Shearer movies?" I asked, tucking the business card into my pocket.

"Let me check our inventory. I believe we do have some stock from *The Women*. I'm not sure what other Norma Shearer memorabilia we have."

The man consulted the computer on the counter. Then he hopped down from his stool and walked around the end of the counter, surprisingly spry in view of his evident age. I revised my assessment from frail to dapper. He was short, about five feet six, a little stoop-shouldered, wearing a pair of well-cut charcoal gray slacks. At his throat was a bow tie, with a busy pattern in gray and red. I hadn't seen a man wear a bow tie in years. His long-sleeved linen shirt was fastened at the wrists by a pair of square gold cufflinks that matched the ring he wore on his left hand. Both the ring and the cufflinks were decorated with the Celtic cross, the symbol that traditionally combined a cross with a circle surrounding the intersection. The arms of the cross were slightly wider at the ends, and inside were engravings of the Celtic knot, interlaced patterns commonly used for decoration.

He stopped at one of the bins. His age-mottled hands quickly flipped through the unframed, plastic-covered cards. He pulled out two title cards and handed them to me.

"Voilà," he said. "*The Women*, released September nineteen thirty-nine. And *We Were Dancing*, released in nineteen forty-two. Both of these cards are vintage."

They had prices to match. But I wanted them. I was already thinking how great they'd look in matching frames. Both title cards had yellow backgrounds and red lettering. The card from *The Women* had the names and photos of the three stars whose names appeared above the title—Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, and Rosalind Russell—and the legend IT'S ALL ABOUT MEN! The card from *We Were Dancing* showed Shearer in a slinky red satin gown, leaning back and gazing into the eyes of her debonair dancing partner, Melvyn Douglas.

"Lovely, aren't they?" The man looked at me as though he knew he had a live one on the hook. "And in great condition."

Not that I needed much convincing. "I'll take both of them."

The proprietor moved slowly now as he walked back behind the counter, as though he'd expended his day's ration of energy. He rang up the sale, ran my credit card through the machine, slipped the title cards into a bag and handed them to me. Then he placed his right index finger next to his mouth and tilted his head to one

side. It was a little too studied, a parody of a natural movement. The broad gesture, I thought, of an actor from the silent era, miming a man who was searching his memory.

“Jerusha Layne,” he said, with a dramatic wave of his hand. “I remember now. She was involved in that business with Ralph Tarrant, in ’forty-two.”

“Who was Ralph Tarrant?”

“A British actor who came to Hollywood in nineteen thirty-six. He was in *Lloyd’s of London*, with Tyrone Power. Had a marvelous voice. Quite handsome as well.” Something odd flickered in the man’s dark eyes. “Of course, I never met the man. I just saw the movies he was in.”

“What was this business with Ralph Tarrant that my grandmother was supposedly involved in?” I asked.

“I don’t know all the details,” he said. “Just what I read in the papers and heard on the grapevine. Probably nothing more than gossip. Hollywood simply thrives on gossip.” A malicious smile teased the corner of the old man’s mouth.

“The story was that Jerusha Layne and Ralph Tarrant were, shall we say, an item. Then they broke up. Not a friendly parting of the ways. So the police were rather interested in her whereabouts the night Tarrant was murdered. Rumors about who did it were flying all over town.” He fluttered his hands, miming the wings of a bird. “It was quite the Hollywood mystery, you see. Still is. The murder was never solved.”

“I THOUGHT you were going to come unglued,” Cassie told me when we left the shop. I’d lost my appetite for ice cream and so we walked back to Oak Street, where I’d parked my car.

“I don’t know about unglued, but I’m fuming,” I said. “None of it is true. It couldn’t be. Grandma and Grandpa met in ’forty-one and married in ’forty-two, before he shipped out to the Pacific. There’s no way she could have been involved with some actor named Tarrant. She never mentioned anything like that when she talked about her Hollywood years.”

“If she was involved with Tarrant...” Cassie began.

I shook my head and repeated, “No way.”

“Hey, I’m only playing devil’s advocate here. My point is that if she had dated Tarrant while she was engaged to your grandfather, it’s hardly something she’d have told her fiancé, let alone her grandchildren.”

“Dated? Hell, that old man implied they were lovers. He said they were ‘an item.’ I didn’t like the way he said it, either. What nonsense. I don’t believe it. And he claimed the cops questioned Grandma about Tarrant’s murder.”

“I’m sure he was just dramatizing,” Cassie said. “Did you see the look on his face, when he called it a Hollywood mystery?”

I recalled the avid expression in the man’s eyes as he’d told us about Tarrant’s murder and implied that my grandmother had had some involvement in the crime. “Yeah. He was really getting a buzz out of it.”