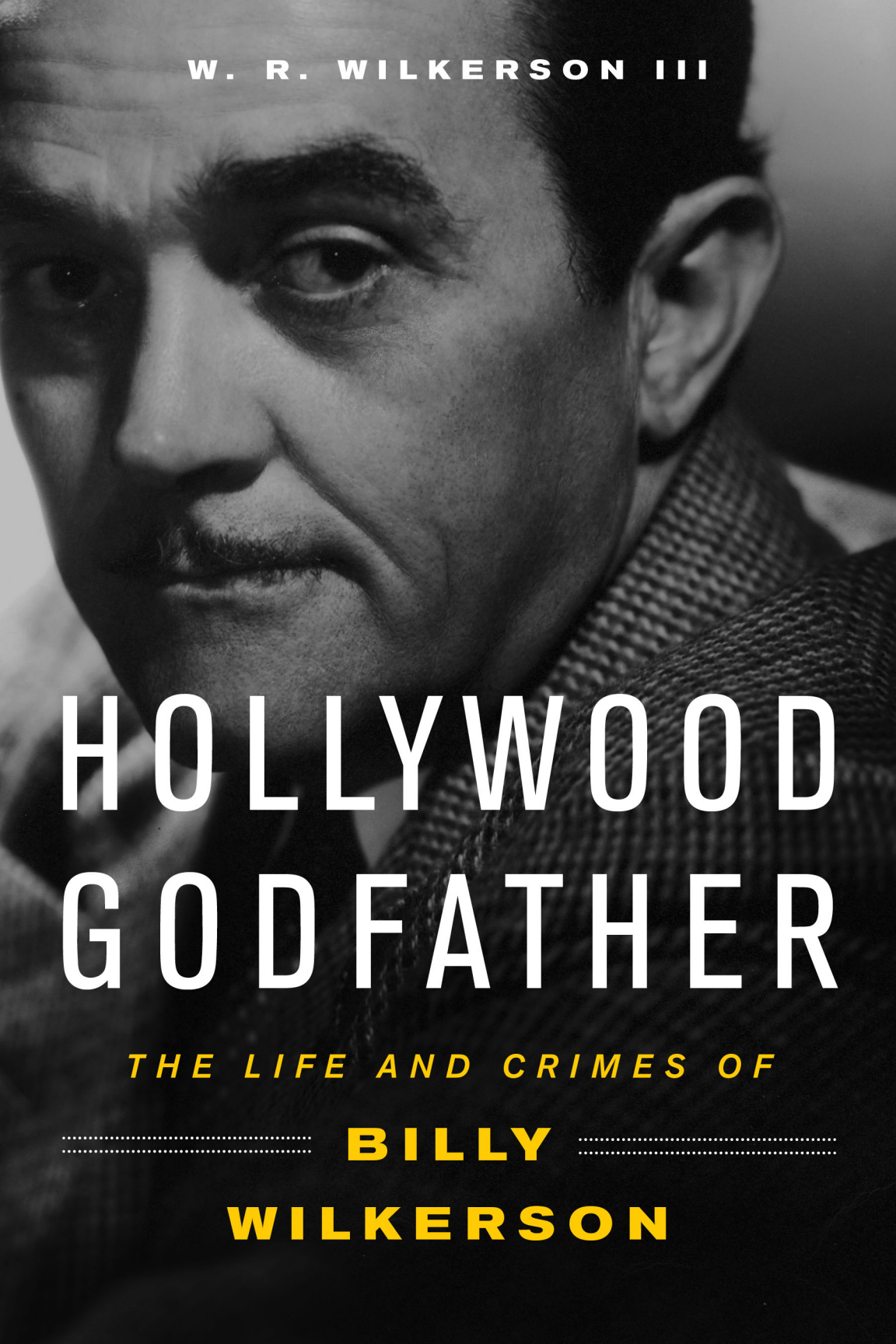
W. R. WILKERSON III
HOLLYWOOD GODFATHER
THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF
BILLY WILKERSON

BILLY WILKERSON WAS THE MOST POWERFUL MAN IN HOLLYWOOD during the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. He was owner and publisher of the *Hollywood Reporter*, the film industry newspaper that became known as "Hollywood's bible," and he built the Café Trocadero and other legendary nightspots of the Sunset Strip. In thirty years as Tinseltown's premier behind-the-scenes power broker, Wilkerson introduced Clark Gable and Lana Turner to the world, brought the Mafia to Hollywood, engineered the shakedown of the Hollywood studios by Willie Bioff and his mob-run unions, helped invent Las Vegas, tangled with Bugsy Siegel (and possibly was involved with his murder), touched off the Hollywood blacklist, and conspired to cripple the studio system.

Perhaps nobody in Hollywood history has ever ruined so many careers or done so much to reshape the movie industry as Billy Wilkerson, yet there has never been a solid biography of the man. Billy's son, William R. Wilkerson III, has done tremendous research on his father, interviewing over decades everyone who knew him best, and portrays him beautifully—and damningly—in this book.

HOLLYWOOD GODFATHER

THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF

BILLY WILKERSON

W. R. WILKERSON III

An A Cappella Book

HOLLYWOOD GODFATHER

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This one's for you, Pop . . .

Never forget a friend. Never forgive an enemy.

—Billy Wilkerson

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PREFACE

DISCOVERING MY FATHER

I NEVER KNEW MY father the way most sons know their dads—the way I wish I had. I was robbed of that opportunity one September morning in 1962, when I was ten years old and my father slipped out of my life forever. He didn't live long enough for the dust from his wings to fall on me, and his death left a void that was never filled and cast a pall over our house that never lifted.

At first, like most kids, I wasn't curious about what his life had been like. I was already carrying so many painful memories of the years with him; for almost my whole life I'd watched him suffer from emphysema and dementia. His health battles had seemed titanic and endless. And my preteen mind was preoccupied with other things—not the least of which was the appearance less than two years after my father died of the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The moment I saw that broadcast, I knew what my calling was.

But in 1972, after the dust of rock 'n' roll settled, I began to think more about my dad. I was a freshman at the University of Southern California, and I began to write to the man who many had told me knew Billy Wilkerson better than anyone: George Kennedy, his secretary of thirty years. George had been at my father's side (or just steps outside his open office door) since 1933, from his early years at the helm of the *Hollywood Reporter*, as he opened many of Hollywood's most renowned cafés, restaurants, and clubs, and through the whole rest of his life. George had a front row seat to both my father's business dealings and his chaotic personal life.

It was George himself who had opened the door to our correspondence, sending me a first-edition James Joyce volume signed by his Paris publisher,

Sylvia Beach, for my eighteenth birthday. And our relationship was made easier by the fact that George was also my baptismal godfather. When the time came for that Catholic sacrament—and my father was always a devout Catholic—Billy Wilkerson could have chosen from any number of his famous and powerful friends. He chose his faithful secretary.

George had been living in happy retirement in Ramona, California, following my father's death. I had not seen him in all those years, but we began to exchange letters, and as we did, my curiosity about my father deepened. When my film history professor at USC gave us an assignment to write a twelve-page typewritten paper on a well-known figure in the entertainment industry, it was a no-brainer. My father had been among the most well-known men in the entertainment industry in his day, and the more I learned about him, the more I wanted to learn. I wrote to George to ask for his help with my research into Billy Wilkerson's life. I had no idea, of course, that that paper would ultimately take me on a forty-year odyssey.

From that point on, every Friday after class I climbed into my orange MG roadster and made the two-hour drive from the house just above the Hollywood Bowl that I shared with my girlfriend at the time to George's home in Ramona, near San Diego. George lived in a modest house filled with an eclectic mix of antiques and signed paintings and photographs, many by the famous photographer Carl Van Vechten. He also lived in what felt to me like a library: every room in his house was filled floor to ceiling with books. At the time of his death decades later, he had more than seventy-five hundred volumes.

For the next several months I spent my weekends drinking in every story George told about my father. We spent early evenings on his veranda, gin and tonics in hand, watching the sunset as George told tales. He was usually uninhibited in his storytelling, despite the fact that he had kept my father's secrets for thirty years. He was sixty-four that year, and he asked me to please not use a tape recorder; he had a terrible stammer that was exacerbated when he was nervous, and some of the memories were unnerving. I understood, and I got good at listening closely, followed by hours spent writing notes.

Some days when I prodded for information, George was struck mute by the power of his own memories. He would sink into his armchair and dissolve in tears, and for a while he stopped telling stories. There could be no disputing the raw truth he offered me; if for a moment I'd imagined he was inventing, when I heard him at night screaming in his sleep, reliving some of the darkness

he had witnessed and overheard, I knew he was telling me the unvarnished truth about my father.

One stifling summer night George's screaming woke both of us. I wandered out to the kitchen in my underwear and T-shirt and found him there. We opened all the windows in the house to let in what little breeze there was, and we made hot chocolate and continued the conversation we had left earlier. Neither of us seemed capable of sleep, so we parked ourselves in the living room. Mindful of the air force of moths and mosquitoes just outside the windows screens, we lit just one light to keep them from invading. We sipped our chocolates and shared a whole pack of Winston filter cigarettes.

That night George was talking about my father's many wives, the sixth and last of whom was my mother, Tichi. For the first time, he dug out the breakup letter Dad had received from Edith Gwynn, his second wife. She was the partner who had been with him when he first catapulted to success, and she was the one who had stayed on at the *Reporter* for the next several decades, becoming one of the trade paper's best-known writers. George handed me her twelve-page typewritten missive. He wanted me to read it to myself, but I insisted he read it aloud. And so, by the light of that single lamp, he slowly read Edith's letter, which sounded like a cry from the soul.

I've always believed writing to be a great emotional exorcist. Why there is magic made when we siphon painful memories from our hearts and minds and commit them to the page remains a mystery, but magic I know it to be. And because I knew George carried many demons from those years—as did so many of those who crossed my father's path—I encouraged him on many of our late afternoon walks to take up the pen of exorcism. He shied away from the task, but to this day I believe if he had, it would have saved his life. What I know for certain is this: if anyone was qualified to write a book about my father, it was George Kennedy. He was a remarkably gifted writer—he loved words—and he knew my father inside and out.

After I had written my USC film paper, I began to hector George to write a biography about my dad. I was even prepared to pay him a king's ransom of a salary: a dollar a page, which was an enormous sum for a college student at that time. I had inherited a little money from my father, which made this proposal possible—and I couldn't imagine a better way to spend it. But the closest I got were George's replies to my questions via mail. Over time I realized that in these short snippets, answers to questions I posed, George had

created a comfort zone that allowed him to write about my father in the only way he could.

George had also pointed me in the direction of the other individuals who knew my father best. I got in touch with Tom Seward, my father's former business partner; his longtime attorney, Greg Bautzer; and his barber, Harry Drucker, who had been a kind of consigliere. I prodded all three just as I prodded George. But as I listened to the stories they told, I came to believe they were feeding me a whitewashed version of the man. Their tales only echoed the glowing obituaries and articles I had collected. Each one seemed to parrot the others, offering a résumé of a man who sounded far too good to be true, and a man whose image didn't square with Edith Gwynn's characterization.

I realize all these years later that the principals were hesitant to share the dark side of the story. After all, I was the man's son, and I suppose they were trying to protect me from hard-to-swallow truths. Others who had known my father intimately—people like Lana Turner and my father's faithful lieutenant Joe Rivkin—would not talk about his dark side, either; they seemed too devoted to him to do so. And my mother, who'd had a difficult relationship with my father, would speak only about incidents that did not involve their painful marriage. But I kept probing and digging, because the man who people told me had had the Midas touch, the man who had created so many palaces of splendor—from Hollywood's Café Trocadero and Ciro's to the infamous Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas—this man of extraordinary vision who also had a shadowy past, now seemed to have enormous holes in his life story, and pieces were not adding up.

After a while, stories about Dad's politics, his feud with the Hollywood studio chiefs, and the card games he hosted with stunning dexterity began to contrast with earlier stories I'd heard. I'd envisioned him as a kind of Catholic saint, but as I learned more and more about his closest allies and fiercest enemies—men like the mobster Johnny Rosselli, who adored him, and Bugsy Siegel and Willie Bioff, who wanted him either dead or financially fleeced—I was certain some of their dirt had worn off on him.

It took a long time, but finally a breakthrough in understanding my father's life came in a conversation with Tommy Seward, my father's business partner and once-upon-a-time brother-in-law. When I contacted him initially, he was not happy about being asked about my father. The two men had been locked in bitter litigation in the early 1950s, and that had led to an irrevocable split.

But why? For more than fifteen years, these two men had been inseparable. Indeed, my father considered Tommy the brother he never had. The lawsuit cited corporate malfeasance on my dad's part—absconding with corporate money for personal use. This also seemed unbelievable. My father was very comfortable financially. So why would he need to siphon off corporate profits? None of it made sense.

After the sixth phone interview, Tommy finally cracked. I pushed Tom to explain discrepancies in the stories I was hearing, and finally he confessed with restrained emotion that my father had suffered from a chronic gambling addiction.

When Tom offered this revelation, I was sitting in my home office in Hollywood on a sweltering summer day. I had no air-conditioning and I was mopping my brow. His words became my Rosetta stone. Until I learned about the gambling addiction, my father's involvement with organized crime and his never-ending vendetta against the movie studio owners never made sense. And although the news made me unhappy, it also provided the outline of an explanation—for his Mafia friends, for the regular card games. But it also raised more questions. For instance, if my father had been as inveterate a gambler as Tom described, how had he acquired the funds to build his palaces of splendor? So, armed with this new information, I returned to the principals to confront them with further inquiries.

When I called Greg Bautzer and told him what I had learned from Tom Seward, he didn't deny it. He did, however, discourage me from writing about it; neither Greg nor Tom nor Harry Drucker wanted my father's glittering image tarnished. I struggled with the meaning of the stories the three men began to confess. My father's criminal activities were becoming clearer to me, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't verify events.

I consoled myself with the fact that at least I had George Kennedy's letters, the notes I had made after our many conversations, and those tape-recorded interviews I had done with the others George told me to speak to. But in December 1976 disaster struck: my mother informed me that our family home in Bel-Air had been burglarized. It was the home my father had built in 1935, and it was where the family kept all our treasures. It's where I had stored my notes and recordings neatly in a briefcase, as I was moving into new digs in a month's time. I'd placed the briefcase in the garage with some of my other belongings, and when it went missing, my mother told me it had been stolen

in a burglary. I couldn't help but believe that, in truth, she did not want me to write about my father; I'm sure she didn't want me stirring up unwanted skeletons that had been so deeply buried in the family closet.

When I learned the material was gone, I was devastated. I abandoned the idea I'd had about writing about my father and decided to wait for George's book. I convinced myself that one day he would write it. But it turned out George was enjoying retirement too much to be bothered with what he thought of as simply more clerical work. He lived for gardening, donning his straw hat and gloves and spending his days trawling in the earth under a blistering sun. The thought of punching typewriter keys reminded him too much of those thirty years he'd toiled as a secretary. I once asked him why he never worked for anyone else after my father's death, and he looked at me, smiled, and said simply, "Your father was my job for thirty years." That said it all.

Having given up on the book project, I devoted myself to finding work in the entertainment industry as a songwriter. But my father's hidden dark side followed me wherever I went. Whenever I tried to gain a foothold in the music industry, I found gates closed to me. Some people took meetings with me out of courtesy to my family's business, but in the end they always disappeared quietly into the night. By the time I was twenty-five, I wondered whether my failure to crack the music world was the result of a lack of talent or if it was simply bad luck.

I began to see a pattern. Time and again, as I neared the finish line—a song I'd written under serious consideration, a contract being dangled—the offer either never came to fruition or was suddenly dropped with no explanation. My disappointments usually coincided with a negative review in the *Hollywood Reporter* or a *Reporter* gossip column's unfavorable swipe at the company or person with whom I was hoping to do business. Results were most often predictable and catastrophic. When your family has long been in the business of critiquing, maligning, and even destroying others' careers, you're likely to be on the top-ten enemies list. Sometimes when I was trying to place a song with someone, I'd suddenly recognize the signs—I'd see my interviewer barely able to contain himself, and often in the middle of our interview he'd blurt out, "Your father was a sonofabitch . . ." It didn't matter that this was the 1970s and my father's misdeeds had occurred decades earlier; there seemed to be no recovering from the sins of the father.

In early 1978 I married and moved to England to try to reinvent myself. Two weeks after my arrival in London, Steve Rowland, a transplant from Los Angeles who was running Hansa Records, a successful independent record label, asked to meet with me through my manager at the time, Sue Francis. His request had a sense of urgency. I knew Steve's uncle was Louis B. Mayer, the studio tyrant who had run MGM studios during the era when my father was running his empire. Steve knew a thing or two about being the victim of a Hollywood witch hunt. And when I sat down in his plush London office, he confessed that he too had had a difficult time making it in L.A. He wasted no time imparting his message: "They resent you there [in Hollywood]," he said. "You did good coming here." I never placed any songs with Steve, but his advice and insight were pure gold.

But even in the UK, I could not escape my family's history. I changed my name to Kurt Langdon, and despite that, at almost every turn I came across someone who had tangled with my family's newspaper and knew who I was. In one instance, an A&R man told me how the *Reporter* had given the band he was managing a negative review, and because of that the label that had been about to sign the band dropped them. The band broke up, the manager lost his income, and his wife divorced him because he had no money. With no one else to blame, I became the convenient whipping boy.

I returned to Los Angeles in 1983 and continued to try to make it in the music industry. After years of dog-paddling, I called it quits in 1989 and became a writer. But Billy Wilkerson's story was not among the projects I pursued.

Then, twenty years after George Kennedy and I began our conversations about my father, when George was eighty-four, the memories that had so plagued him caught up with him. On November 14, 1991, he removed the signed studio portrait of Billy Wilkerson that had hung on his wall for decades. He placed it on his bed, lay down beside it, pressed a revolver to his skull, and pulled the trigger.

When my mother's secretary called to tell me the news, I was crushed, but I understood that in the end George had been unable to let go of the ghost of my father, unable to shake the anguished love he'd felt for so long.

The next day I drove to his house and watched the relatives he had despised dismantling that home—moving photographs and paintings, furniture and clothing, all the treasures of my beloved friend's life. When I could not take the sight any longer, I walked out into his garden, the sight of so

many memorable afternoons, and let the hot breeze dry my tears. It was there I said farewell to the first man I had ever loved. That was the last time I set foot in George's house. It was also the beginning of my journey as my father's biographer.

For years I blamed myself for George's death. I saw myself as a pushy, arrogant young man and was certain that my unchecked aggression and endless probing all those years earlier had opened a door George was never able to close. I believed that ever since then he'd been flooded with memories and haunted by the darkness so many of them evoked. If I hadn't pushed, I might still have had him to talk to and walk with, to listen to and commiserate with over the legacy my father had left. Perhaps, I thought, those memories were better left forgotten. After all, I had collected memories at the expense of the life of someone I loved.

As time passed, though, I began to realize that if I did not tell my father's story, George's tragic suicide would be in vain. So I spent the next two years picking up the pieces of those stories I had begun to gather, pulling together the threads of stories I hadn't yet heard. I returned to a cardboard box of things I had culled from George, things that had not been stolen back in 1976. I had a trickle of articles about my father, a handful of yellowed newspaper pieces, and several obituaries extolling Billy Wilkerson as a visionary and a genius—the man who had created Hollywood glamour. I read and reread everything, but I learned nothing new. So many of the threads were broken that the story would not come together.

I began to slowly read through the daily editorials my father had penned for more than thirty years. Billy Wilkerson had not just run a publishing and nightclub empire in Hollywood from 1930 to 1962; he had also written a front-page editorial for the *Hollywood Reporter* five days a week for all those years. There were approximately 8,320 editorials to read, and as I did so, I came to understand that in those thirty-two years all the threads of Hollywood's history, golden and sordid and everything in between, had intersected at my father's desk.

I tracked down and read all the editorials I could find, and in them I learned that the story of Billy Wilkerson is the story of Hollywood, and that the story of Hollywood is not about movies or glamour but about power. Movies and glamour were mere by-products of Hollywood's unending power struggles, and throughout those decades Billy Wilkerson was at the epicenter of those

struggles. I kept reading, and soon realized I couldn't accommodate the rich and vast history of my father's life in a single volume. I had to make some tough choices about what would stay and what must go.

Much of what remained would have to include conversations reconstructed from memory, from the notes and recordings that had been stolen decades earlier. I found few other records, though over time, as I learned more, I was certain that my father had colluded with his friend Joe Schenck at 20th Century Fox and mobster Johnny Rosselli in a misguided scheme to extort millions from the studios. Everything Seward, Bautzer, and Drucker had told me showed that this was true, but nothing in the public record corroborated their stories. That made sense, of course: George had told me that in 1952 he and my father incinerated all the paperwork housed at the *Reporter* from its founding in 1930 to that date.

I decided to stick to the evidence. But that smacked me hard against a barrier concerning my father's biography, so I put the project on hold. I hadn't had a father when I was growing up, so I decided to devote my time to raising my own son. I wanted to give him what I had never had, a father's presence, since while my father was alive his was so often interrupted.

Then one night, eighteen months after I gave up, I was having dinner with my good friend David Neely, a Tennessean just like my dad. For the first time I confided some of the unsavory stories. I told him about my father's underworld associates, about the fact that he had been involved with J. Edgar Hoover. I confessed that I didn't know what to do with these stories. David smiled, leaned across the table, and reminded me of something that changed my life: "The very nature of organized crime is secrecy."

I couldn't shake that statement, and, as strange as it seems, that was the night I finally understood that the stories surrounding my father's life—the man I so often thought of not as Dad but by any of his many monikers, "Billy Wilkerson" or "the Hollywood Godfather" or "the Man with the Midas Touch"—were shrouded in mystery precisely because they were illegal. Of course no one had recorded those stories; of course those who knew them, including many of the people I interviewed, had taken the details to their graves. They were incriminating, and not only of my father. I decided that these were exactly the stories that needed to be included in any biography of my father if it wasn't going to be just one more whitewash. Even if these stories' secret nature made them impossible to verify, even if they challenged

the well-known accounts already on the public record, they needed to be told before they disappeared forever.

I thanked David and dived back into the project with renewed vigor, though my father's associates continued to discourage me from going near one particular aspect of my father's life. That was his involvement in the late 1940s with the anti-Communist movement in Hollywood. He had written scathing editorials, often harping for months at a time on the same subject. In them, he condemned "card-carrying Communists" in the movie industry—men and women, he claimed, who had openly pledged their allegiance to the Communist Party and thus were supporters of Joseph Stalin, the brutal Soviet dictator whose regime would ultimately claim the lives of tens of millions of innocent people. In some cases this was indeed true. But others were targeted for old and fleeting political connections or even the connections of their friends and family. Ultimately, my father's editorials became the seeds of the now-infamous blacklist, which ushered in one of the darkest eras of American history. Senator Joseph McCarthy coopted what had begun as my father's campaign and turned it into a nationwide witch hunt. Maybe it was not my father's intention to destroy lives, but it's clear that by naming names, some of them innocent, Billy Wilkerson and the *Hollywood Reporter* had helped to do just that.

My father's primary goal with these editorials was something different but still ugly: he wanted revenge on the Hollywood studio chiefs who he believed had blocked his dreams years before, as part of their illegal monopoly over the film industry. If anything about Billy Wilkerson's life is clear it is that he lived by a code of fairness; he loathed monopolies because he believed they were patently unfair. Still, I understood that if I wrote about what he had done in those dark years in the late 1940s, I was likely to stir up the same sort of resentments that had impeded my career in the music industry.

Finally, in 1999, I took my first steps toward bringing my father's true legacy into the light of day. Taking back my name and once again becoming a Wilkerson, I published *The Man Who Invented Las Vegas*, the story of my father's involvement with the Flamingo Hotel. With only the blessing of a handful of good friends, I published the book against my family's wishes. I was stunned by the universal praise the book received, and buoyed by that support. At last I had accomplished something without running into a roadblock.

Another decade passed. I authored several books not related to my father or my family. And then, in 2010, I woke up one morning and realized I'd

had a change of heart. It might have been wishful thinking, I knew, but I believed I was finally free of the tractor beam of my father's legacy; I felt that the blacklisting that had plagued me for decades had ended. I was certain that, after eighty years, the rumblings of events surrounding my father's life and the volcanic eruptions he had caused had subsided. I partnered with a distant cousin and respected TV writer, Ron Wilkerson, on a TV project about my dad. Together with the talented Canadian showrunner Robert Cooper, we decided to dramatize Billy Wilkerson's life. We created a series concept for American TV titled *Dreamland*, working on the project for six years. Often our project would be moving along just fine when suddenly, at the last minute and always without explanation, it would be dropped. I hadn't warned my two partners about the difficulties I'd endured because of my dad's misdeeds; I had stayed quiet because I thought that curse had passed. Still, with each rejection, I became more and more aware of the fact that the story of Billy Wilkerson, even all these years later, was too controversial for Hollywood. After a litany of legal wranglings and numerous options that went nowhere, we had to throw in the towel.

It was discouraging, of course, but I was convinced then and am convinced still that we cannot know the greatness of a person's life if we do not know his flaws. Omitting those flaws from the story of Billy Wilkerson's life might have landed us a TV deal, but it would have been at a great cost to the truth, to history, and to all those whose lives were so strongly affected by my father's deeds and misdeeds.

I do not believe my father's accomplishments are diminished by his many wrongdoings both great and small, and because I know his story is worth telling, I decided I must do so without pulling punches. When Billy Wilkerson died in 1962, everyone in the film world knew who he was. A mere decade after his death, the New York nobody who rose to become the most powerful man in the entertainment industry had faded into obscurity. That amazed me, frustrated me, haunted me, dogged me, and pushed me to resurrect the man, in all his glory and infamy.

1 | THE CORPSE

GEORGE KENNEDY, dressed in his best blue pinstriped suit, stepped over the body of the man who had been his employer for the last thirty years. Billy Wilkerson, my father, lay facedown on the linoleum floor of the master bathroom, naked and emaciated, a plastic tube with a metal clamp protruding from his abdomen. A few feet away, a cigarette had burned itself out, charring the white floor in a brown, wormlike trail. It was a little after 6:30 AM on Sunday, September 2, 1962.

It was the first time Kennedy had seen his employer naked. He was shocked at how undignified he looked. "Death swept away all his greatness," he would later recall. He bent down and placed two fingers on Wilkerson's neck to check for a pulse. Tichi, my mother, was waiting, standing there. He told her that her husband was gone. Then he broke down, sobbing uncontrollably, dropping to his knees. When he had sufficiently recovered, he nervously began reciting the Lord's Prayer over the dead body. "It was a futile gesture," he admitted decades later, "but I was at a loss for what to do at that moment."

Wilkerson's small beige poodle Pierre came in. It licked its owner's cold face and immediately launched into a fit of howling so haunting it raised the hair on the back of Kennedy's neck. Tichi, unnerved, interrupted Kennedy's prayer abruptly and asked him to remove the dog. Kennedy muffled his sobs with his handkerchief, picked up the dog, took it downstairs, and locked it in the kitchen.

Billy Wilkerson had apparently risen from his bed at approximately 3:30 AM and, in the dark, made his way unsteadily, limping, to the bathroom.

His widow remembered the sounds of her husband feeling his way along the walls in the darkness. In the pitch blackness of the bathroom, he sat down on the toilet and, out of sheer habit, lit a cigarette. Judging by what was left of it, he had inhaled only a few times before a heart attack overcame him. The cigarette fell onto the floor. Wilkerson's own fall was precipitously halted when his open mouth caught the small reading table in front of him. The coroner later determined that he was dead before his face made contact with the table.

Tichi told Kennedy that her husband had risen twice during the night to go to the bathroom. At approximately 4:30, when he did not return to bed the second time, she went to investigate. She switched on the bathroom light and found him on the toilet, his upper jaw clinging precariously to the reading table. With great effort, she unhooked his head from the table and shifted his body to the floor. Not knowing what to do after that, she immediately summoned Kennedy, who made the long drive from his Pasadena home to his employer's Bel-Air residence to find my mother still dressed in a white silk bathrobe and utterly bewildered.

A few evenings before, Wilkerson had slipped and fallen on that same linoleum floor in his bathroom. His dog had tipped over its water bowl. My father's screams, which echoed throughout the house, were so agonizing that I had plugged my ears with my fingers. I was only ten years old.

But on that Sunday morning, my sister, Cindy, and I were still asleep. After my mother called the coroner's office, she locked the master bedroom door to prevent us from inadvertently entering.

The coroner arrived just before 7:00 AM and officially pronounced Billy Wilkerson, age seventy-one, dead. The death certificate later listed the cause of death as heart failure. At 7:30 AM, Cunningham & O'Connor Mortuary collected the body.

It was close to eight o'clock when I came downstairs and found my mother and George Kennedy seated in silence in the dark, wood-paneled den where my father had spent so much of his leisure time.

When my mother spotted me in the doorway, she quickly escorted me upstairs and sat Cindy, who had just risen, with me on my bed. She put her arms around us and told us that our father had passed away during the night. Cindy cried. I didn't.

"It's a relief," said our mother. "It's over." We knew what she meant. For years our father had been struggling with poor health. His suffering had come to seem unendurable.

At that moment we heard howling coming from the kitchen. It was the same beige poodle. We couldn't stand it. My mother told Kennedy to take the animal away.

Billy Wilkerson perished one day before the thirty-second anniversary of the *Hollywood Reporter*. The trade paper he created had come to dominate the entertainment industry, and by the end of the following day, all three of Los Angeles's major newspapers carried a prominent notice of Wilkerson's passing.

To moviegoers, Billy Wilkerson was not a household name like Frank Sinatra or Lana Turner. He never made studio policy, nor did he run a motion picture company. His name appeared on the movie screen only a few dozen times, and that was in the 1920s. Yet the publisher was universally eulogized in print. Newspapers and magazines hailed Wilkerson as one of Hollywood's pioneers, one of its founding fathers and architects, the "Mentor of the Sunset Strip."

Hundreds of cables and phone calls poured into our residence and to the *Reporter* offices by the hour. Tributes mounted. Film producer and director Joe Pasternak, who made his first movie, *Help Yourself*, with Billy Wilkerson, wrote, "There comes a time in our lives when we cannot find adequate words to express our great sorrow." (Pasternak would later recall that the day my father died "it seemed like the whole world stopped.")

Those same sentiments were echoed in a cable from radio columnist Walter Winchell: "There are no words."

"As a matter of fact," wrote Thomas M. Pryor, the editor of *Daily Variety*, "a memory I cherish, Billy was the first to call and congratulate me and wish me good luck when I became editor of this paper. Our friendly relations remained unchanged when we became, in a sense, competitors in the same field."

"It is always a matter of deep sorrow to see fine, vibrant leaders taken away from our industry, and particularly so in the case of your late husband,"

wrote Barney Balaban, president of Paramount Pictures. "For his was a voice of great significance to the entire film business, and his powerful vision was dedicated in every way to the furtherance of the motion picture both as an art and a worldwide entertainment."

Spyros P. Skouras, chairman of 20th Century Fox, who knew Wilkerson during his salad days when he worked in Kansas City under Carl Laemmle, head of Universal Pictures, wrote, "He was a wonderful human being and will be greatly missed by all who knew him."

"He was a part of Hollywood and his departure leaves a void no one else can fill," wrote Harry Brand, Fox's head of publicity.

"I am one among thousands," wrote actress Joan Crawford, "who considered Billy a dear and wonderful friend." Actor Kirk Douglas wrote, "He was a marvelous man and a dynamic leader in our industry. He will be sorely missed."

Billy Wilkerson should have lived longer than seventy-one years. But his self-destructive lifestyle made that impossible. Amid the tributes, newspapers were quick to note his five failed marriages and his long battle with ill health.

What they neglected to mention were his ties with organized crime; or how he had been instrumental in the rise of Las Vegas; or how he had helped orchestrate the Hollywood blacklist; or his role in the assassination of Bugsy Siegel; or his involvement in *United States v. Paramount Pictures*, the case that broke Hollywood's distribution monopoly. Nobody mentioned that Billy Wilkerson had once been the most powerful man in the entertainment industry. Nobody mentioned it because almost nobody knew.

But condolences arrived, too, from those who knew some of his secrets, including his gangster friend Johnny Rosselli. "I did not see Bill too often in late years," he wrote. "I always considered him my very good friend." Considering the criminal favors they had done for each other, that tribute might have been the most understated we received.

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, a large beige building in the style of the Italian Renaissance, dominates a block not far from the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Highland Avenue in Hollywood and can accommodate approximately fourteen hundred people. But on Wednesday, September 5, 1962, at 10:00 AM

its capacity was tested. The numbers swelled to more than double that as relatives, friends, acquaintances, coworkers, and industry figures crowded the large church to pay their final respects to Billy Wilkerson. Rows of nuns lined the back pews, their faces pressed in handkerchiefs, quietly whimpering. The overflow of mourners from the standing-room-only crowd spilled out of the church onto the pavement.

"We come into this world with nothing," said Rev. Harold Ring, SJ, in his eulogy, "and it is for certain we take nothing out. But Billy Wilkerson has left us a very rich legacy which will stand for all time."

A simple spray of white roses adorned the bronze casket. The pallbearers were all men who had worked under Wilkerson for decades, like his secretary, George Kennedy, who visibly struggled with his grief.

The day before, a fight had broken out between Kennedy and my mother. She had insisted on a closed casket, but Kennedy protested. "The closed casket infuriated mourners wishing to pay their final respects," Kennedy later recalled. But Tichi Wilkerson was adamant. "I wanted them"—meaning us, the children—"to remember him as he was when he was alive."

There were detractors, opponents, and enemies by the score who avoided Wilkerson's funeral. Tom Seward, my father's right-hand man for close to a decade and a half, was noticeably absent. "A lot of people hated Billy's guts," Seward remembered, "myself included. It made no sense to attend."

Still, a three-hundred-car cortege wound its way to the interment. On that balmy, overcast afternoon near a large poplar tree that still shadows his grave, void of fanfares or salutes, Billy Wilkerson was laid to rest at Holy Cross Cemetery in Culver City, California, where his mother, Mary, had been buried two years earlier.

The man people in Hollywood considered their godfather, whom they came to rely upon as their guiding spirit, had finally expired. The question on everyone's lips now was how the industry would survive without Billy Wilkerson.

2 | ROSEBUD

WHEN BILLY WILKERSON DIED, his longtime secretary, George Kennedy, at the instruction of his widow, cleaned out the desk at his Hollywood office. In the top left drawer he found a small cardboard box containing a wooden printing block, a copperplate of Billy Wilkerson's first infant picture. For a moment Kennedy mused over it before adding it to the box containing everything else. He knew that some of his employer's happiest memories were of his childhood and speculated that he had kept the printing block as a reminder.

"We all have our Rosebuds," said Kennedy, referring to the Orson Welles epic *Citizen Kane*.

The story goes that on the night Wilkerson was born, his father sat at a poker game in a Nashville saloon, inebriated. After losing a considerable sum, he passed out in a corner booth. The next morning when he came to, it was pouring rain. Hungover, he walked the short distance to the hospital, where he learned that his wife had given birth to a boy. Cleaned out at the card table, he couldn't afford the hospital bill. But Wilkerson Sr. was one of the most recognized figures in Nashville, and the hospital knew he was good for the money.

All his life, William Richard Wilkerson Sr. had been a professional gambler whose fate and fortunes were dictated by the turn of a card. Indeed, in the 1900 US Census, "Big Dick," as he was affectionately known, would list his occupation as "gambler." The game of choice for the portly man with the flamboyant waxed handlebar mustache was poker, and people speculated that his nickname derived from the size of his sexual organ. No one who was in a

position to know ever verified this, and it seems more likely the name derived from his girth.

What we do know is that Big Dick loved to drink, so much so that his imbibing often deteriorated into barroom brawling. For certain, it interfered with his gambling. "He always lost when he was drunk," said Wilkerson Jr.'s business partner Tom Seward.

When Big Dick was sober and coherent, he managed to amass fortunes at the card tables. By all accounts, he was erudite and eloquent, an engaging storyteller, an orator par excellence who left audiences spellbound. Drunk or sober, Big Dick was something of a gambling legend in the Old South. He would make gambling history one night in 1902 when he won the Coca-Cola concession and bottling rights for thirteen southern states in a poker game. Such a boon could have made him a legendary financial titan, the Warren Buffet or Bill Gates of his day, but Big Dick was a professional gambler, not an investor. Thinking the franchise was worthless, he traded the rights for a movie theater, which he sold two weeks later for $4,000. After another night of heavy drinking and card playing, the cash evaporated too.

Just the opposite of the alcoholic gambler was Big Dick's wife, Mary, whom everyone affectionately called "Mamie." The petite, frail Mary Maher from County Cork, Ireland, gave the outward appearance of being almost saintly. Governed by common sense, patience, and steely determination, traits sadly lacking in her husband, Mary became the pillar Dick leaned on. Although they were an unlikely pair, everyone noted she was devoted to her husband.

"She quickly learned how to roll with the punches," said Kennedy.

Indeed, Big Dick's gambling led to a turbulent domestic life. At times, the couple knew untold riches; then, just as easily, Dick's losses tumbled the family into debt. They could go from owning plantations with cotton fields as far as the eye could see and employing hundreds of African American workers, to picking cotton in the very fields they'd once owned.

Mary, especially, had ugly memories of the bailiffs arriving at their door, coming to confiscate all their possessions. Dick ordered his wife into the next room while he fought off the bailiffs, but they returned hours later with police reinforcements, who restrained Big Dick while they removed the family's belongings.

It was into this domestic turmoil that Billy Jr. was born in Nashville on September 29, 1890. He was to be Big Dick and Mary's only child and would

inherit all his father's obsessive and dangerous passions—despite his mother's best efforts. By the time of Billy Jr.'s birth, Mary had had enough of her husband's drinking and gambling and decided the remedy was relocation to a new life in the country, where they could offer a safe and decent upbringing for their son. They would take up farming. It would be hard work but a welcome distraction from the Nashville saloons and gambling parlors.

Mary always had the final word, so the Wilkersons purchased a hundred-acre farm in Springfield, Tennessee, thirty miles south of the Kentucky line. The seat of Robertson County, Springfield boasted rolling hills and woods traversed by rivers and creeks. Cash crops during the 1890s included tobacco, corn, and soybeans. The Wilkersons grew tobacco.

But Big Dick could always find action; as Kennedy put it, "He had an uncanny gift for smelling out a poker game." The next decade would regularly find him straying from the farm in search of his next big score, occupying pieds-à-terre in Knoxville, Birmingham, even back in Nashville. Though records sometimes indicated that his wife and son were with him, according to Kennedy they rarely visited him at these "gambling addresses." Instead, Billy Jr. spent his formative years in Springfield, just as his mother had planned. In a life saturated with intrigue, controversy, and tragedy, the Hollywood Godfather would count those years on the farm among the happiest of his life.

At the close of the nineteenth century, styles were changing: the ragged look that had defined the Tennessee frontiersman was being replaced by the Parisian look, favoring a cleanly cropped head of hair. At age five, Billy Jr. sported golden curls that cascaded down his shoulders, so Big Dick transported his son to a local barber, where Billy Jr. sat patiently while the barber did his work. When he was done, he handed young Wilkerson a mirror.

"I turned the mirror from side to side," said Wilkerson, "and felt my head to see if it matched the image in the mirror."

Wilkerson Jr. burst into tears, threw himself onto the floor, and vainly tried to reattach his curls. Back home, he locked himself in his room and did not reappear until the following morning.

This was my father's earliest childhood memory, and a story he recounted at dinner tables for the rest of his life. There is no obvious reason why this event would tug at him perpetually, but it apparently did. Perhaps he saw it as the moment that inaugurated a long train of abuse at his father's hands.

My father also recalled reaching school age and tying his belt around his books, slinging them over his shoulder, and following the sun to school. He described the single-room red schoolhouse, remembering its dilapidation in detail, down to the ceilings that leaked during thunderstorms. "It was just a single room crammed with twenty students and there was a stove in the middle for heat."

My father's failing grades were evidence of his attitude toward school. As he put it, "Books were boring. And anything that was boring was just a plain waste of time." This attitude earned him a regular place in the corner of the schoolhouse, sitting on a stool and wearing a dunce cap. He donned it so many times that eventually his name came to be inscribed on it. As he put it, "I spent more time wearing that stupid cap than learning anything useful." It comes as no surprise, then, that he was often in trouble for truancy as well. "Billy got lickings from his dad for missing school," said Tom Seward. His lack of scholastic enthusiasm endured for the rest of his life; no one ever saw Billy Wilkerson reading a book.

So it's perhaps ironic that a big part of my father's boyhood came straight out of Mark Twain. He clocked hours lazing by the creek. He would park himself on the bank, his back leaning against the bend of a tree trunk. From a pocket he pulled a fishing kit—string wrapped around a sturdy twig. He had a makeshift metal hook created from something out of his mother's sewing kit, with freshly killed bugs in a tin box for bait. Barefoot, a straw hat pulled sleepily over his face, he daydreamed until he felt the tug of the twig between his fingers.

Later in life at the family dinner table, he often waxed lyrical about his ramblings through the woods surrounding the family farm. He told of catching live snakes, pinning them at the base of the neck with a pronged twig, but his mother's mortal fear of snakes prevented him from bringing them home. In the Tennessee wilderness Billy Wilkerson found his rapture, and throughout his life, during moments of turmoil and grief, whenever he reflected on this period, he immediately was restored to tranquility, able to carry on.

But catching snakes and fishing were not just idle fun; they ultimately became necessary for self-preservation from a deadly foe. His relationship with his father was seismic. Big Dick was abusive, frequently stumbling home in a drunken stupor from a poker game and exorcizing his demons on his son. Mary did not intervene, but during one early beating, according to George Kennedy, one of the farm's canines came to my father's rescue. From this indelible experience sprang his lifelong love of dogs.

After a decade, Mary's dreams of a decent country life for her son also fell apart. The restless Wilkerson Sr. had little luck with his tobacco crop, and in 1900 the family sold the farm and followed Big Dick to his latest gambling address: Hot Springs, Arkansas. His physical abuse of his son worsened, and by the time Billy was twelve, Mary feared for his safety. She spirited him away to Cullman, Alabama, to a school run by Benedictine monks. Billy Wilkerson would always be grateful to his mother for finally intervening, and despite the austere conditions at the school, there, at last protected, he flourished.

His attraction to the religion of his new protectors was immediate and adhesive. In Catholicism he found sanctuary, the kind he knew in few other realms. It became his safe haven from the troubled waters of the world. For the rest of his life, Billy Wilkerson's loyalty to the Church would never falter. He attended Mass every Sunday, irrespective of where he was or the state of his health. He carried pictures of the Savior and the Blessed Virgin Mary in his wallet and later would insist that my sister and I attend parochial schools.

While young Billy Jr. was grateful and happy to be safe from his father, his hatred of education traveled with him, and again his grades reflected his disposition. His academic underachievement raised a thorny issue for the boy after he transferred to Mount St. Mary's Prep School in Maryland, a boarding school run by Jesuits, in 1904. During his second year at the new school, a priest propositioned him, promising to improve his grades in return. Wilkerson wasn't the least bit surprised by the sexual solicitation. According to my mother, although this was the only proposition he ever received from a priest, he understood that such advances were, unfortunately, a pervasive part of Church culture. Nonetheless, he declined the priest's offer.

"The boy's grades next to me dramatically improved," he noted.

Without illicit aid, Wilkerson was forced to repeat his second and third years at St. Mary's. Nevertheless, he was a hard worker—according to his

second wife, Edith Gwynn, he labored like a demon to erase his broad southern drawl—and he possessed a boyish charm that never abandoned him. The 1906 Mount St. Mary's portrait of Billy Wilkerson shows a confident teenage boy with rugged features and a dark complexion. At sixteen, he looked set to become a snappy dresser, another of his lifelong trademarks.

Billy Wilkerson Sr., meanwhile, cognizant of his own charisma, launched a bid to represent Arkansas in the US Senate in 1904. He went to the trouble of having a campaign photo taken and made into a button—one of the mementos my father held on to that somehow survived the passage of time. There's no evidence that Big Dick ever filed papers, however, and his political aspirations remain largely unknown. Some theorize that his reputation as a gambler became enough of a liability that he was drummed out of the race.

His ambitions having been shattered, Big Dick was unsympathetic a few years later when his son announced his career aspirations. In his final year at Mount St. Mary's, Billy Jr. went home for Christmas and declared that he was studying for the priesthood. It's difficult to know where Big Dick's religious sympathies lay, but unlike his wife, he was likely an atheist who conveniently prayed for divine intervention at the card tables. In any event, when Billy shared his intentions, Big Dick raged. Mary calmed her husband and encouraged him to make amends, but when he went to the boy's room to apologize and talk some sense into him, he found Billy on his knees praying by candlelight.

That was it. According to Billy, Big Dick demolished the room, breaking every candle in half and throwing them and every ecclesiastical book out the window into the pouring rain. In fury, he delivered his dictate: Billy Jr. would be going to medical school. Two months later, he was on a train to Philadelphia to attend Jefferson Medical College, where his father expected him to learn to be a good doctor.

Wilkerson later admitted that his heart was never in medicine. The time spent in and out of labs, in classrooms and lecture halls, yielded few positive results. Instead of focusing on his studies, he tried his hand at amateur theatrics and took up the mandolin. He serenaded the nursing students from under their balconied windows. And as his academic failures mounted and

his interest failed to spark, he retreated into playing the track and betting on the World Series, with catastrophic consequences.

He also added drinking and frequent visits to the local bordellos to his list of pastimes. "He spent more time in the cathouses than he did in any school classroom or lab," Kennedy noted. Even when Billy was passed out drunk, his private horse and carriage conducted themselves through the streets to his college digs or to a bordello. They knew the way from memory.

During his second year, in addition to contracting bad grades, Billy contracted gonorrhea. When he realized his condition, he took matters into his own hands, sneaking late into the lab while everyone else was sleeping. He looked up the antidote and learned that one of the treatments was a dose of arsenic. "He reasoned," said Kennedy, "that if he gave himself double the dose, he could really knock it for a loop."

After that night, Billy was sick for at least two weeks, but he had achieved his purpose: the double dose eradicated his venereal disease. It had another apparent consequence: the treatment, he believed for much of his life, had left him sterile.

Billy's second-year report card, dated May 23, 1912, revealed that out of seven courses, he'd passed only four: organic chemistry, urinalysis, hygiene, and physical diagnosis and symptomatology. If Billy decided to return for a third year of medical school, he would have to repeat the courses he had flunked—but fate had already made that decision for him.

The previous year, Billy's parents had moved from Hot Springs to Birmingham, Alabama, as Big Dick continued to chase new opportunities for enrichment. The earth in Alabama is mostly red clay, ideal for farming cotton, which at the time was the state's cash crop. And those who found farming too challenging could find work in Birmingham's burgeoning steel mills. The Wilkersons had no need to resort to working in the mills; when they planted cotton, their fortunes changed.

But their good luck didn't last. Big Dick Wilkerson died on February 5, 1912, while Billy was in his second year of medical school. He passed away at a local Birmingham infirmary after an operation for appendicitis.

Billy did not attend his father's funeral. Some say his absence was out of spite for the man he grew up hating. But others say the young medical student was on a bender for an entire week, and it was only when he surfaced that he learned his mother had just buried his father.

What is unquestionably true is that Big Dick died penniless. Soon after his death, creditors took possession of everything the family owned and were soon demanding payment for the balance. As my father put it, "The only thing I knew I would inherit from my father were his debts."

With his father gone, Wilkerson Jr. opted not to stay on the path Big Dick had laid out for him; he dropped out of medical school after his second year. He also made two lifetime vows. The first was that he would never let poverty touch him. The second was that he would always take care of his mother. "They struck a bargain," Kennedy remembered. "They would always look out after each other."

After Big Dick's death, Mary surrounded herself with dogs and was passionate about gardening. From picking cotton in fields to pruning her own flowers and trees, Mary had an almost supernatural gift when it came to horticulture. With touching fidelity, she never remarried, living the rest of her life entirely for her son, cooking his meals and doing his laundry. Wherever she lived, she always had a room ready for him. And everywhere he lived, he made sure that his mother resided no more than thirty minutes away.

When a friend once asked Wilkerson who the most important person in his life had been, he said without hesitation, "My mother." Mary would be, forever, the one constant in his life. "I believe she was the only woman he truly loved," my own mother told me.

3 | LUBINVILLE

AFTER DROPPING OUT OF MEDICAL SCHOOL, my father had to figure out how to make a living. His job search took him to the Lubin Manufacturing Company, a film company that produced low-budget one-reelers out of its Philadelphia studio. Known locally as "Lubinville," the studio boasted a soundstage, editing rooms, and a film lab. Lubin produced many comedic shorts, introducing such stars as Pearl White and Oliver Hardy.

Billy Wilkerson knew nothing about the motion picture business, but even in those days he had an aversion to starting at the bottom of any ladder. According to his lifelong friend producer Joe Pasternak, Billy talked his way into Lubin. "Billy wasn't a gofer. That wasn't his style. He was too much of a wheeler-dealer. . . . He was a great con artist when he wanted to be. He probably said he had all this experience and they believed him."

Before the days of online background checks or electronic résumés, a little fibbing could mean the difference between food on the table and starving. So it's likely Billy Wilkerson fibbed, since in 1912 Lubin signed him on as a film producer and distributor. At first the film novice merely viewed this as an employment opportunity, but it was at Lubin that his love affair with the silver screen began.

Another love affair began that same year. In mid-1912 Wilkerson began courting Helen Durkin, a twenty-year-old redhead. One story has it that the two