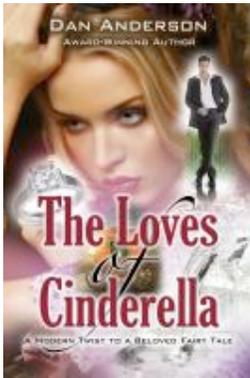


**DAN ANDERSON**

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

# The Loves *of* Cinderella

A MODERN TWIST TO A BELOVED FAIRY TALE



*What would happen if Cinderella lived in the geopolitical situation of the 21st century? This Cinderella is a teenager from Eastern Europe forced by terrorists to flee her homeland. She finds her way to Beverly Hills as an au pair only to encounter new threats from an evil family. How Cinderella overcomes all odds to become a Hollywood actress and find true love with Prince Charming is the stuff of which dreams are made.*

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# **The Loves of Cinderella**

Dan Anderson

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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## Acknowledgments

A word is in order about how this book came to be. A Hollywood Entertainment Company in the process of assembling the resources to film one of my mysteries contacted me with a proposal. I was approached regarding a project concerning the iconic story of Cinderella which they wanted to turn into a film. However, it had been languishing on the back burner awaiting developmental attention. Having loved my previous books, they asked if I would create a unique and contemporary version of Cinderella that would resonate with today's viewing public.

Cinderella is a European folk tale which has been around for centuries. This beloved masterpiece is known around the world and has been translated into hundreds of languages in hundreds of countries. It has also been interpreted in scores of operas, ballets, books, theatrical productions, films, television, and songs. There is something timeless about a virtuous and innocent heroine whose talents and skills are unrecognized but who achieves success after a period of obscurity and neglect by overcoming obstacles through determination and dedication to her ideals.

Coming up with a new treatment of this revered fairy tale was a daunting challenge, but I prepared a proposal and submitted it to the project's producers for their consideration. Their approval was quickly forthcoming and I was instructed to proceed with writing the novel which would serve as the basis for the movie's screenplay. This novel, *The Loves of Cinderella*, is the result of that effort.

I extend my sincere appreciation to my Hollywood producer, Stephanie Vellinova, for serving as a sounding board for my new approach to this classic tale. She was fully supportive of my contemporary and creative adaptation of this beloved fable and worked closely with me to bring this project to fruition.

I also extend my gratitude to The Society of Authors, on behalf of the Bernard Shaw Estate, London, England for their gracious written permission to use a quote from Mr. Shaw's play *St. Joan*.



## Dedication

This book is reverently dedicated to the memory of our wonderful dog, Misha, a Siberian Husky who passed away last year at the age of thirteen. Those with pets know the heartache and grief that comes from dealing with the loss of a beloved family member. Misha never met a stranger and was particularly well-liked by children and other dogs. He had a personality and grin that endeared him to all. He wasn't much of a watchdog since he licked the hand of anyone who would stop to pet him. He never barked but would emit a "woo-woo" on those occasions he had something to say. Regardless of what was going on around him, he maintained his steady, composed, lovable nature and genuine affection for all life forms. He was more than a remarkable canine—he was a therapist and emotional healer. It was impossible to remain upset around Misha. He sensed when you were sad and would approach you with his perpetual smile and sloppy, wagging tongue. If you were on the sofa, he would hop up and cuddle before rubbing his cold, wet nose against your cheek. He loved to lie next to you with his head in your lap and watch TV. He had high visual standards. He loved comedies and *Animal Planet* but disdained reality shows, talk shows, and game shows. Until he approached the end of his life, he loved to play catch and go for long walks. His special delight was riding in the back seat of our SUV with the window down to feel the cool air against his face and his dense coat of fur. Although he was bred for an Arctic environment, he never complained about the warm climates we dragged him to. If it's true all dogs go to heaven, we know Misha is there now sharing his treats, cheering the depressed, and befriending the lonely. We were a better family because of Misha and are forever grateful that he blessed us with his presence as long as he was able. We love you, Misha, and not a day goes by that you don't enrich our lives with a warm memory of your time with us.



**Also by Dan Anderson**

The Chauncey McFadden Mysteries

*Bad Vibrations*

*Death Cruise*

*Vietnam Vindication\*

*Death by Downsizing*



## Chapter 1

It was nearing noon and Maria Skolnick was almost finished with her morning chores. She had fed the chickens and collected the hens' eggs, drawn water from the well for their kitchen, slopped the hogs, picked a bushel of peas, led the cows to pasture, and carried split wood from the pile by the barn to the wood rack by the fireplace. School was out and she was expected to do more around the farm. She didn't mind because her parents had worked so hard to pay the expenses of putting her through parochial school. She would be entering her last year at St. Boyka of the Holy Spirit Academy in the fall. She glanced at the north field and saw her father trying to break up the hardscrabble soil to plant seeds. She looked toward the wash house and saw her mother pouring water heated by a fire into a cauldron filled with dirty clothes.

Maria is an eighteen-year-old girl from Slovotsky, an Eastern European country. She and her parents, small farmers following the agrarian calling of their families for the past two centuries, lived in the small village of Donetsky in the southern territory. They were financially poor, sustained by barter and the output from their crops and animals but wealthy in more important ways—they enjoyed a warm and close-knit family life. Maria appreciated her upbringing which instilled in her courage, persistence and self-reliance. However, from the family's small, black-and-white TV set they viewed foreign programming—advertisements, movies, and television shows. From the class curriculum at her school, she was exposed to a much broader world beyond the borders of her country. She was intrigued and envious of the rich and varied cultures, the wealth and lifestyles, and the abundant freedoms and privileges of the US and Western European countries.

While she loved her hometown people and the way they generously looked out for each other, she was restless for opportunities not available to her parents. She was easily the most beautiful girl in the village and the target of amorous pursuit by the young men in the region. Her long, blonde tresses, azure blue eyes, flawless complexion, and hourglass figure attracted appreciative stares whenever she sauntered down the town's main street looking into shop windows.

While she was flattered by the number of date requests, Maria rarely responded to their invitations. She was frequently teased by her girlfriends for her outmoded attitudes and beliefs. They were more modest in their expectations from life and didn't share her perceived unrealistic ambitions.

"Maria, if you do not loosen up you will die an old maid. Live a little and have some fun while you are young," advised Katya, one of her closest confidants.

"I am afraid that having fun may be an obstacle to achieving my dreams. I know that saving my virginity for my future husband and conducting myself accordingly sounds silly to you and everyone else. I do not want to spend the rest of my life trapped in the common pattern of our village—marrying a local boy, immediately spawning a succession of children with runny noses and dirty diapers, and being forever harnessed to small-town life."

"I appreciate what you are saying, Maria, but the boys at school and in the village think that you are either frigid or gay. Your friends know better, but we are upset at the things some people are saying behind your back."

"I realize boys are more cynical and cruel, especially after having their advances politely declined. But I worry about their opinions much less than I worry about being confined here for the rest of my life."

Maria was enamored with foreign movies she saw on TV and occasionally at the local fifty-seat theater with its noisy projector and stale popcorn. The great variety of stories, locations, and historical periods she watched caused her imagination to soar and fueled her desire to live in another country. She adored foreign actors and actresses and studied the biographies of each of her favorite stars.

"Why do you yearn so to become a movie star, Maria? There is no film industry in Slovotsky except for an occasional documentary or cartoon."

"That is why I want to head westward to a country that excels in making movies. I want to appear on a big screen and make people happy—give them memories to enrich their lives. I want people to like me and not criticize me because I do not meet their expectations or

conform to prevailing norms. I want to soar like an eagle, not be caged like a parakeet. I want to do something exciting with my life.”

Katya grinned. “I know why you want to become famous. You want to return to Slovotsky for a world premier so when village boys ask you for an autograph you can poke them in their eyes with your finger.”

Maria laughed. “I would never do such a mean thing although I may charge them for my signature.”

“Have you always wanted to be a movie star?”

“I have thought about it for some time. My interest was inflamed when I won a raffle at school a few months ago. The prize was a movie poster of an American film shot in France—*Lover’s Lament* starring Prince Charmaine. He is so handsome and such a good actor.”

“You cannot fool me. You would not care whether he could act or not as long as he slipped under the covers with you at night.”

Maria blushed and said “I think he is gorgeous and I confess he appears in my dreams from time to time. However, it is his career that is of most interest to me, not his extraordinary physique, which I find breathtaking.”

“Let us examine that statement for a moment. If Prince was a local farm boy who stayed in Donetsk, worked in the fields, and asked you to marry him, would you agree?”

Maria blushed again. “That is an unfair question. No woman could resist him, but the situation you describe is never going to happen so your question is irrelevant. Stop trying to trick me, Katya.”

“Okay, I will be good from now on. Do your parents know you do not wish to remain on the farm and continue its operation? Do they know of your dreams to do something different with your life in another place?”

She shook her head. “I have not discussed my dream with them. Since it is unlikely to happen, I see no reason to needlessly upset them. I know that separation would be very difficult.”

Maria yearned for the opportunity to discover her untapped talents and be all that she could be but was unsure how to take the first step on her journey to achieve them. Little did she know that step would shortly be made for her.

The Skolnicks were busy completing their respective tasks when a Preslav automobile pulled up in front of their farmhouse and parked under an oak tree by the porch. A tall man in a gray suit got out and walked toward the edge of the field. Maria's father saw him, put down his hoe, and shuffled to greet their visitor. They met by the fence and shook hands followed by an animated conversation punctuated by the shaking of heads and waving of arms. The man put his arm around the shoulders of Maria's father and they slowly approached the farmhouse. Maria and her mother stopped what they were doing and joined them.

Maria's mother wiped her hands on her apron and asked "Who is this man, Pieter?"

Her father looked at the suited visitor and said "Gretna, this is an old friend, Dr. Ludansk Stanoff. He is a professor at the university. I am afraid he has brought some bad news. We have not had any electricity for four days and are unable to watch the news on our television."

"What bad news? What did he tell you, Pieter?" Gretna asked, her voice reflecting anxiety if not panic.

Dr. Stanoff answered. "Our country's militia has been routed by the militants in the Northern Province and they are on their way south trampling everything in their path. You have not had electricity because they have seized the rural electric cooperative. They are in the process of replacing our programming with propagandist claptrap of their own. I suspected you were unaware of recent events, which is why I am here."

"Why are these militants fighting our forces?" Maria asked.

Her father sighed and motioned for the professor to respond. Dr. Stanoff scanned the family's faces with a sad look and said "An internal civil war caused by religious differences has created a militant and vicious insurgency that has brought our decaying government under direct attack."

"Who are these militants and what do they want?" Maria asked.

"They are the Militant Martyrs of the Mujadoom and they regard all Christians as infidels to be enslaved or killed. People in Donetsk and the neighboring villages are fleeing for their lives. Because the

militants are only a few days away, I strongly advise you to do the same.”

“I do not understand why any group would want to do us harm,” Gretna said. We are neither soldiers nor politicians. We bear no malice towards anyone. We are poor farmers trying to make a living from the soil and the beasts of our fields. We are no threat to anyone.”

“I will run from no danger,” Pieter declared. “This farm has been in my family for six generations and I will not abandon it and let these terrorists kill my animals for food and devour my crops.”

“It is, of course, your decision to make. I am here only to warn you of the possible consequences of not leaving and seeking safer ground.”

“I have spoken,” Pieter says.

“There is another factor you should consider.” The professor looked pained and hesitant to proceed before continuing. “They regard all young women as slaves whom they subjugate and force into sexual submission. They have rape squads that scour the countryside looking for girls to stock their harems and satisfy their carnal desires. Their women have no marital rights and can be executed for actions we would consider trivial. They cannot be seen in public except with their husbands or male relatives. They can be stoned if they reveal any parts of their bodies other than their upper faces. They must wear a burqa at all times. They cannot vote or drive. Their marriages are pre-arranged by their families. And the worst part is . . . they subject their daughters to genital mutilation to stem their sexual cravings.”

The look of panic on her parents’ faces alarmed Maria. Gretna dropped her hand over her mouth and grabbed her daughter by the wrist. “We cannot expose our daughter . . . our only child . . . to the sick actions of such degenerates. We will make plans to evacuate Maria immediately.”

Maria looked at her parents with a pale face. “Does this mean I will be leaving Slovostry by myself and fleeing to another country?”

Pieter embraced Gretna and wiped a tear from her eyes. “Yes, light of my life. We must find a safe place for you until this threat has passed. For thousands of years, Slovostry has been overrun by hordes of conquerors. This is nothing new. Without exception, all of these groups vanished with the passage of time. Sometimes they left for

greener pastures and other times they were driven out by an oppressed people or allied nations. However it was accomplished, they did not remain nor leave their mark upon our culture and civilization. Your departure will hopefully be temporary. As soon as the threat has been removed, we will send for you.”

“Why are we facing this danger alone? Why are we not getting military assistance from our allies in Europe and the United States?”

The Professor shook his head. “They may respond to our situation eventually, but this insurgency was so sudden they have not had time to plan an appropriate response. There are other reasons for their inaction as well. Their forces are already spread thin by the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. They have redeployed their military resources to Asia because of the growing threats and hostility in North Korea and territorial aggression from China. The growth and spread of radical Islam has become their prime concern. Their people have grown tired of constant wars, the loss of lives, and the financial depletion of their treasuries. Consequently, their leaders and politicians have become increasingly reluctant to engage in new military undertakings.”

“How will you know where I have gone? How will you be able to get a message to me? We have no phone and the terrorists will no doubt control all the media. I am frightened. All this is so sudden and the future is filled with so many unknowns.”

Professor Stanoff spoke. “The militants have seized the airport, train depots, and bus stations so these forms of transportation are no longer available. If Maria can get across the border to Vladistan, I hear they have refugee resettlement camps run by the United Nations that will take her in. She can remain there in safety until our political situation has changed. Maria, here is my cell phone number. When you get across the border and in a secure area, call me and tell me where you are and how I can get in touch with you. I will try to be a link between you and your parents.”

“Thank you, Ludansk,” Pieter said. You have been a good friend. I thank you for driving such a distance to bring us this news however sorrowful. Godspeed and return safely to your family.”

“We have been friends for a long time, Pieter. I know what a recluse you are and that you receive little in the way of outside information except for your television. Perhaps that is for the better. You may be such small potatoes these men ignore you.” The two men shook hands and the professor climbed in his Preslav and left. The dust created by his speedy departure on the dirt road hung in the air like a pall.

“We have no time to lose, Maria. The border is fifty-eight kilometers away. You can get there on foot in three days. I realize this is a hardship, but we have neither car nor public transportation from our small remote village. We will fill your school backpack with food and bottles of water. We have a small light suitcase you can take with a few of your clothes. I have a map and will mark the route you must take. Travel only at night to avoid marauding militants and sleep during the day in the woods. Avoid contact with all people. You can trust no one these days. When the UN people at the refugee camp assure you the situation has been resolved and the country is once again in the hands of our people you may return.”

The family ate their final meal as a unit that evening before Maria’s journey. Normally, dinner was the highlight of the day when they discussed what had been accomplished since sunrise and what needed to be done the next day. This night was not a bonding and pleasant experience. A sadness permeated the room and replaced family joy and conviviality. No one had an appetite and the trio pecked at their food as they struggled to come to grips with their current situation.

Pieter’s voice broke the silence. “We should be talking and saying things that matter. We should not retreat into silence. To do so means they have won. Maria, you know how much we love you. That goes without saying. But this I do say unto you—do not despair. We will meet again in this life. This is as certain to me as darkness follows sunset. As you make your journey, my child, you will be guided by God’s grace and mercy and the love and memories each of us has shared.”

“Your father has read my heart and my thoughts passed through his lips. I can say it no better. I will add only this. My heart will ache

every morning when I set the breakfast table with only two plates. My heart will ache whenever I put logs on the fire and do not see you asleep in your favorite chair with an open textbook on your lap. My heart will ache whenever your father and I sit in a church pew and you are not there between us lifting your voice in praise of our Lord. But most of all I will miss the sparkle in your eyes and your laughter when you are happy. I thank God every day that you are our child. Regardless of what happens, He has blessed us beyond belief.”

Maria cried uncontrollably. The three of them stood and had a final family hug. The emotions in the room were as thick and swirling as piled autumn leaves in a wind gust. That night after darkness replaced the last faint shards of sunlight Maria dressed warmly and slipped on her backpack. Twenty paces down the dirt road she looked back and waved to her parents who were clinched on the front porch wiping away tears. When she could bear it no more, she turned and set one foot in front of another. Her journey and flight to safety had begun.

## Chapter 2

Mid-summer had arrived in Donetsk which made Maria's journey bearable. Slovotsky was subject to unpredictable and harsh meteorological conditions and she hoped the present weather would hold for three days. She stayed on the back roads highlighted on the map and spent the days encamped in wooded forests and the nights guided by the light of a full moon and flashlight. The temperature dropped after sunset and Maria wrapped herself in a light sweater to ward off the evening chill before continuing her trek. When her path did permit views of the highways, she witnessed heavy traffic created by the exodus of her countrymen. With the militia being routed, the unarmed and ill-equipped citizenry were no match for the well-armed militants. She thought about joining the caravan but feared the possibility it could stumble into a horseshoe ambush and be decimated by the militants.

Days before falling asleep were the loneliest time because she had nothing to keep her company but her thoughts, memories, and dreams. Before falling asleep, she filled her mind with recollections acquired while growing up. Foremost was her love and respect for her parents who had brought her into the world, nourished her mind and body, and taught her the golden rule and ethical and moral standards. She also reflected on the good times she had at school, in the classroom, and the gymnasium.

The nights were stressful since the map didn't always clearly reflect unanticipated geographical features. When faced with the need to make a difficult terrain decision, Maria used her best judgment and with a hope and a prayer continued her journey. On several occasions, she encountered rivers and had to walk along the banks until she came to a safe place to ford. At other times, she entered forests so dense that little in the way of moonlight seeped between their branches. In almost pitch-black darkness, she saw the bright eyes of critters and hoped none were carnivorous. The animals she encountered—raccoons, squirrels, silver foxes, and rabbits—presented no physical threat. They looked at her with little more than detached curiosity since she was too large to be a viable food source. She did stumble across a large snake

on a wet rock, but his image was captured by the moon. He was swallowing a large rat or small rabbit and showed no interest in her as he tried to push a large abdominal lump through his digestive system. Her journey was quiet for the most part except for the occasional artillery blasts in the distance which indicated the advance of the militants.

Maria encountered very few people because of her nocturnal travel. She faced only a couple of situations, which were fortunately benign. Before ending one night's journey, she wandered upon a clearing that could be seen through the hardwood forest. Scanning the land before her revealed she had stumbled upon a farm. She began to partially reverse her course when she heard a voice ask "You can have all the carrots you want. We're getting ready to pull up stakes and head out."

Maria was startled and turned in the direction of the voice. A woman wearing a kerchief, heavy boots, and a knee-length apron stood with a rake in her hand. "Thank you, I do not wish any carrots. Like you, I am also heading out."

"Going south toward Cherkasy? If so, you can hop on the back of our truck. It's a longer haul from here, but we have relatives there."

"Thank you for your offer. I am on foot and heading to Vladistan since it is closer."

"God bless you, honey," she said, taking some carrots out of a bag. "Please reconsider and accept these in case your provisions run low before you get to your destination." Maria thanked the woman, gladdened there were people in the world who embraced humanity.

The second incident also occurred as the morning light was breaking and she was looking around for a good spot to curl up. She stopped in her tracks when she heard the sounds of a branch snap and the weight of footsteps upon dry leaves. She ducked behind a tree and waited, scarcely daring to breathe.

"It's okay, miss, I've been following you for a hundred yards or so to see what you were up to. Are you on a hike?"

Maria peeked around the tree and saw an older man in faded fatigues with white hair, a deerstalker cap, and a double-barreled shotgun resting on his shoulder.

“Please don’t shoot me. I am trying to get to the Vladistan border. The militants are approaching our village and my parents insisted that I seek sanctuary.”

“I’m not going to harm you, young lady. I’m rabbit hunting and was hoping to surprise some of these rascals when they sneak out their warrens for their morning food scamper. Are you looking for the border crossing where they have the checkpoint set up?”

“Yes, can you help me?”

“Yep. Continue in the same direction you’re going in and when you get to an abandoned coal mine, bear left. When you get to the railroad track, follow it to the border. That should bring you to the crossing. Want some carrots?”

“I have some in my backpack but thank you.”

After a third night of rigorous marching, Maria was at the point of exhaustion and stopped to look around for a good place to bivouac. She removed her backpack and dropped her suitcase and was beginning to make a bed with pine needles raked into a pile by her foot when she was startled. She listened intently and detected noises that sounded like car horns, muffler backfires, and the roar of untuned engines. She reclaimed her backpack and ducked from tree to tree as she zigzagged toward the sounds. As she reached the crest of a hill, she shouted with joy and jumped up and down in excitement. She had reached a checkpoint along the Slovotsky-Vladistan border. Almost in tears, she rushed down the hill and collapsed into the arms of guards still loyal to her country.

## Chapter 3

After hearing Maria's story, the Slovotskian border guards instructed her to proceed to a large tent on their side of the border. She was told to remain there with the dozens of other potential émigrés until a United Nations vehicle arrived from Vladistan to transport them across the border. In an hour, three large deuce-and-half trucks with canvas sides bearing the blue UN logo on a white background crossed the border. Several men in blue UN baseball caps and berets jumped out. They moved inside the tent and sat behind folding tables to begin interviewing people assembled in the tent. Maria was one of the last to arrive, but she was so happy to be there she refused the luxury of being impatient. When her number was called, she advanced smartly to an empty chair and sat down in front of a stocky man in uniform wearing camouflaged attire.

“Good morning, do you speak English?” the interviewer asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you have anything that proves your identity?”

She handed the guard some documents. “I have my birth certificate and my parochial school registration and attendance papers on their letterhead.”

The UN representative scanned her documents. “Do you have anything else to prove your identity?”

“I wouldn't have anything else. I do not drive, I have never married or divorced, I have never been in prison, I am not old enough to vote, I have no credit, and I did not die. I have no passport because I have never left Slovakia.”

The man laughed and smiled at her. “You're cute. I like you. Get on the truck.”

As soon as Maria squeezed between others to gain space on the bench seat in the back of the truck, she felt the weight of the world lifted from her shoulders. While happy and relieved her escape had been successful, she nonetheless felt guilty her entire family had not made the journey together. Her thoughts and prayers returned to her parents whose status was unknown. She turned her attention to others. There were a few individuals but mostly families on the truck. The

children were the luckiest since this ordeal probably appeared to be an adventure and not a frantic response to the desperate nature of their situation.

The truck crossed the border into Vladistan and drove for an hour through winding forests and white-capped mountains. The road was paved but plagued with potholes which caused the passengers in the back of the truck to be launched upward every time the pavement burped.

When the trucks pulled into the resettlement camp, the human cargo disembarked rubbing their backs as they walked. Maria and the two dozen other passengers from the three trucks were warmly welcomed by United Nations relief workers and shown their bunks and lockers in which they could secure their personal belongings. Following that, they were escorted to a dining hall where many of them enjoyed their first hot meal in days. Those requiring medical attention were taken to the infirmary.

After they settled in, the new arrivals were informed they would each be interviewed by another UN representative. Maria sat on her bunk waiting to be called. She found herself grappling with conflicting emotions. While the camp offered safety and creature comforts, she felt in limbo—trapped in a temporary and transitory situation.

When her turn arrived, she was taken to a building that served as the administrative headquarters of the UN contingency. When “Skolnick” rang out, her attention was captured by the waving hand of a woman sitting behind a desk who was scrambling to keep a stack of files from tumbling to the floor.

Maria jumped to her feet and stood politely before her. The woman appeared to be in her mid-forties and had brown hair frazzled after a hectic day. She smiled warmly and asked the teenager to be seated.

“Welcome to our little hostel. I am Katherine Stephens. And you are . . .” she paused to check her file . . . “Maria Skolnick. I see you arrived at our Dungev border station this morning. How did you get there?” The woman had a soft, thoughtful voice and seemed genuinely interested in her.

“I walked through the Mordik Forest for three days traveling only at night to avoid possible danger, ma’am.”

“You walked almost forty miles by yourself through dangerous territory?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“You are a brave resourceful young lady. Where are your parents or next of kin?”

“They remained on our farmstead. My father’s family has passed the land down from generation to generation and he and my mother refused to leave it regardless of the peril.”

“You speak very good English, Maria.”

“English was a required course at the Catholic parochial school that I attended. Do you know how long I will be here?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t have that information. The situation in your country is being continually monitored and we’ll let you know when and if it’s safe to return. Your presence here is voluntary and you can leave anytime you want, but most people have nothing to return to. We ask nothing of our guests but their help with housekeeping to help us keep the camp habitable. If you can help with chores like cooking, doing laundry, sweeping floors, and clerical assistance, it would be appreciated.”

“I will be glad to help any way I can. I prefer to stay busy. I have a question. My parents live in Donetsk. Have you received any news from that area?”

Katherine’s face clouded over and she laid her pen down and reached across the desk and placed her hand on Maria’s. “I’m afraid the news is all bad. We received a report last night that the militants have overrun Donetsk and have inflicted casualties.”

Maria’s face paled. “Did you hear anything else? Please, I must know the truth.”

Katherine squirmed, clearly uncomfortable with this aspect of her job. She took a deep breath and resumed. “I regret being the one to tell you, but the reports went on to say the militants rounded up many residents in the area and . . .” She stopped and looked away.

“Please go on,” Maria urged as she leaned forward, her eyes pleading for the rest of the sentence.

“Many of the people were rounded up and executed at gunpoint. I’m so very, very, sorry.” Then as an afterthought, she added “But not

everyone was a casualty. It's entirely possible that your parents escaped persecution, especially if they were not prominent opinion-shapers."

"I have a phone number of someone who said I could call him for information about my parents' situation. May I use your phone?"

Mrs. Stephens frowned. "I understand most landlines are down in Slovotsky and very few areas there have cell phone reception."

"The man I'm calling, Dr. Ludansk Stanoff, has a cell phone. Perhaps I will be lucky."

Mrs. Stephens relented and turned her landline phone around on her desk. Maria removed a piece of paper containing the phone number from her pocket and made the call. She received no response on the first try so she dialed it again. "I am not getting an answer. I hope the professor is not in danger."

The events of the day had caught up with Maria and her head slumped in her folded arms and she began to sob. Mrs. Stephens walked around the desk and put her palms on the girl's shoulders as a gesture of comfort. After Maria regained her composure, she was handed a tissue.

"Let's do the interview tomorrow. You need some time to digest this terrible news. If you'd like a grief counselor, please let me know. Needless to say, if we hear anything definitive we'll let you know." She stood up and summoned a guard who took the distraught girl back to her quarters. Lying on her bunk, Maria heard a conversation between two women exiting the ladies room. "I heard after the militants seize control, they round up everyone in the area and parade them to the local church where they're forced to kneel and are executed by a shot in the back of the head."

It was the longest night of Maria's young life. She tried to put emotions aside and rationally assess her situation. She had no family, no home, and no prospects. She got up and went for a walk around the perimeter of the UN compound to clear her mind and collect her thoughts. When she reached a remote area on the back side of the resettlement camp, she sat down in despair and covered her face with her hands. She couldn't recall a more miserable time in her life. Suddenly, she felt a cool breeze on the back of her neck and heard a

voice. She lowered her hands and looked around for its source. It was her mother's voice which said *"Do not despair, Maria. You have not been forsaken. Forces are at work that will take you away from here to a place where you will realize your ultimate destiny."*

"Mother, is that you? Are you alive?"

*"Yes, Maria, this is mother. Be strong and remain positive. You will receive blessings beyond your wildest expectations, but you must remain positive and strong to be deemed worthy of this assistance. That is all I can tell you now."*

"Wait mother. I have more questions. Please come back." Despite her entreaties, the voice did not return. After the shock wore off, Maria wondered what to make of this message from the supernatural. However, that night she went to bed filled with a serenity and peace she hadn't recently known.

The next day, Maria was summoned to return to Katherine Stephens to finish her interview. After she was seated, she was given forms to complete providing the UN with a résumé of her life and immediate family. After she finished, the congenial UN counselor scanned the information she had provided.

"Thank you, Maria. Everything appears to be in order. Are you feeling up to reporting to Mrs. Gunderson, head of housekeeping, to see how you could assist us with the new refugees who flood in here every day?"

"I would be happy to help in any way I can. The busier I stay the better off I am."

And busy she was. Maria was assigned to the kitchen to cook since she had frequently prepared her family's meals because of the long days on the farm put in by her parents. She received satisfaction being in a position to help others but was saddened by the influx of immigrants who were emotionally reeling from personal and family tragedies brought on by the invasion and occupation by the militants. She frequently held babies in her arms while their mothers ate. She helped out in the nursery and kindergarten keeping the children amused and occupied. Commercial toys were few and far between, but Maria would improvise by making checkerboards out of heavy cardboard and checkers using Vladistianian one donich and five donich

coins begged from soldiers. She helped out in the field hospital assisting nurses as they administered meds, changed bandages and dressings, and administered sponge baths to invalids. Devastated at the human toll the war had inflicted, she resolved to do everything possible to improve the lives and spirits of those suffering and marginalized. In the evenings she would walk in adjacent fields and pick flowers for the dining tables and herbs she recognized for the kitchen. She had always been able to mend household garments but now learned to make clothes using new sewing machines, patterns, and fabrics. She welcomed the opportunities to learn and develop new skills because they helped in her transition from rural small-town teenager to more modern womanhood. After two months in the settlement, she was summoned to Katherine Stephens' office.

"Maria, I have an opportunity I'd like to discuss with you. As I understand it, you have no home to return to and no relatives in other countries." The girl nodded affirmatively.

"Do you love children?"

She thought that an odd question but replied, "I think children are gifts from God. I worked at the nursery at our church and loved every minute of it." Katherine recorded her answer and made some notes.

"Would you consider relocating to the United States even if it's only on a temporary basis at the beginning?" Maria's heart skipped a beat and she almost fell out of her chair. She had always been enamored of the possibility of living in the US. From American television shows and movies, she'd been exposed to a lifestyle and abundance of freedoms rarely available in her country.

"I would love to live in the United States. How can such a thing be arranged?" Maria was intrigued and fascinated by this possibility. She realized she was at a crossroads in her life and must give serious consideration to any opportunities available to her.

"The news gets better. There may also be an employment opportunity available to you once you get there."

"You mean I would be able to live in America *and* have a job? How is such a thing possible?"

"There's a new initiative that's been launched by the UN in cooperation with Au Pair International. There's an au pair program,

authorized by the US Department of State, which provides an easy and popular way for an American family to bring a nanny from a foreign land into their household. Interested applicants have to be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six, be a secondary school graduate or equivalent, be proficient in conversational English, pass a physical and detailed background investigation, and be interviewed by an organizational representative in English. Your English is very good, Maria. If you meet the other requirements you would have only to undergo au pair training. What's your reaction?"

"More positive than you could possibly believe. I love children and am very patient with them. I would work very hard to see they are cared for physically and mentally and meet their parents' developmental expectations. How would I go about getting au pair training and who do I thank?"

"You can thank The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees— better known as the UN Refugee Agency—that's headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland." Kathleen paused to thumb through some papers before pulling one from the sheath. "I'll read you the rest since I don't know it by heart. It's a UN agency 'mandated to protect and support refugees at the request of a government or the UN itself and assists in their voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement to a third country.' "

Mrs. Stephens put the paper down. "In any event, they formed a special arrangement with Au Pair International to help resettle young women displaced by war in Eastern European countries. Au Pair is conducting nanny training in Udansk, Vladistan. You would go there for two hundred hours of childcare training followed by admittance into one of the fifteen au pair program sponsors in the US. The sponsor will help you complete form DS-2019 Certificate of Eligibility and form D-160, a nonimmigrant visa application requesting the issuance of a J-1 Visitor Exchange Visa. They will also help you get a passport valid for travel to the USA. Still interested?"

Maria squealed in delight. "When do I start?"

In three days, Maria and ten other women boarded a bus to Udansk to begin nanny training. They were met at the bus station by a UN hostess who took them to their campus and got them settled in dorms.

The first day was a general welcome to the attendees and an orientation to the curricula. There were sixty students from different countries in Eastern Europe. Those with good English skills were placed in a fast-track group and given their study materials. The first nine days were spent in such areas as health and safety in the home, food and nutrition, common childhood diseases, safety and emergency CPR and first aid, effective communication, au pairs as role models, ages and stages—birth to teenage years, age-appropriate materials and activities, and building self-esteem in children. In addition, they were required to complete two workshops—personal safety taught by a police officer and communication with host families and children. With this strong foundation behind them, each au pair spent several weeks in live care situations. The time passed quickly and Maria proudly graduated at the top of her class and was placed in the au pair availability pool. Three weeks later she was selected by the Rockinghams, a wealthy family from Beverly Hills, who paid the \$300 application fee and the \$6,990 program fee. Maria had her first job outside the home at a weekly salary of \$324 for up to 45 hours' work. The second phase of Maria's life had begun.

Before she departed, Maria approached Katherine Stephens who had come to Udansk to address the au pair graduating class. "I can never thank you enough for making all this possible. I feel you took a personal interest in me and I will be forever grateful for your kindness and generosity."

Katherine smiled and clutched Maria's hand. "I knew there was something special about you from the moment we met. You were slammed with unimaginable grief but refrained from withdrawing from the world and feeling sorry for yourself. Instead, you volunteered for every conceivable job at the resettlement camp and dedicated yourself to helping others, staff, and refugees. You gained everyone's affection and most importantly their respect. You are a remarkable young lady and stand out in every way. Not everyone could have navigated that heroic escape from tragic and dangerous circumstances to find our camp. Not everyone could have exchanged the only life they'd ever known for a new occupational beginning. And not everyone could leave the only world they've ever known to begin a

new life in a radically different culture. When I look at your remarkable journey and the fantastic attitude you've maintained throughout it all, I think you should have a new name—'Cinderella.' ”

Maria was very flattered and appreciative of the gesture from someone to whom she felt so indebted. She vowed to adopt this moniker as her call name going forward.

## Chapter 4

Because the flight was Cinderella's first, a local UN representative named Flory accompanied her to the airport in Sofia, Bulgaria. She helped Cinderella with the check-in and luggage process and escorted her to the gate where she waited until boarding. The first leg of the three-hour flight was aboard a KLM Airbus operated by Bulgarian Airlines which went from SOF to Amsterdam. After a one-hour layover, the second leg was an eleven hour non-stop aboard a Delta Boeing 747 from AMS to Los Angeles LAX. Cinderella was confused by the seat selection protocols but watched other passengers to learn the process. The flight attendants also recognized a maiden voyager by her behavior and went out of their way to help her fasten her seat belt, recline her chair, and use the earphones to listen to music. The initial anxiety and fear of the teenager slowly subsided and was gradually replaced by the excitement and promise of her new job.

After the plane landed at LAX, Cinderella collected her things and disembarked from the flight. The uncertainty of her next step caused her anxiety to re-emerge, but she followed the crowd to help her navigate the process. Her fellow passengers walked a short distance through the terminal and joined the end of lines at manned stations. Looking around, she saw people scrambling for paperwork so she rummaged through her backpack to extract all documentation in her possession.

After a ten-minute wait, her turn arrived and she stepped up smartly. The bored-looking customs agent with heavy eyelids gave Cinderella an approving once-over—probably hoping for a reason to do a slow pat down—but ultimately decided to focus on the business at hand.

“What's the purpose of your trip, business or vacation?”

“It is business. I am a nanny with the Au Pairs International program. Here is my birth certificate and passport that reflects my J-1 visa status.”

The guard glanced at the pages. “How long do you intend to stay?”

“My contract says one year, but I believe that can be extended if my services continue to be required.”

“Where will you be staying in this country?”

“At the residence of my employer, Mr. and Mrs. Winchester Rockingham, who live in Beverly Hills.”

“Lucky you. Do you plan on travelling to other areas?”

“Not that I know of. My employers will be responsible for any travel arrangements I need in the performance of my duties.”

“Do you have anything to declare?”

Cinderella was puzzled for a second but remembered if in doubt answer no. “I have nothing to declare. Here is my bag if you care to inspect it.”

“Okay. Pass through. Next.”

Cinderella watched other passengers remove their claim checks and walk around the luggage area looking for a number match. She mimicked their examples and found her suitcase. She followed the throng to the luggage inspection queue and placed her suitcase on a long table for contents examination. The uniformed man behind the table laughed and yelled over to his supervisor “Hey, check this out. I think we got a hit over here. It looks like somebody’s trying to smuggle duct tape into the country.” They waved Cinderella through without inspection but with a hearty laugh at the young girl’s expense which embarrassed her.

She retrieved her suitcase and scanned the crowd searching for clues when she saw her name on a piece of paper held by an attractive young man of medium build wearing a gray cap and uniform. He beamed when he saw her and approached in a friendly manner.

“Based upon the picture they showed me you must be Miss Skolnick.”

“Yes, I am. Thank you so much for meeting me. I was not sure what to do once I cleared customs,” she said with relief.

“No problem. I’ll take over from here,” he said helpfully as he discretely scanned the pretty arrival’s face and figure from the corner of his eye. “My name’s Sebastian and I’m the Rockingham’s chauffeur. I’m here to pick you up and get you home.” Looking at her suitcase he commented “This is it? I’ve heard of travelling light, but you must be a great packer.”

Sebastian took her elbow and guided her to the curb. He instructed her to wait while he retrieved their transportation from the short-term parking lot. In a few minutes, he pulled up in a long black stretch limo. After depositing her luggage in the trunk, Sebastian opened the rear door and invited her to enter with a motion of his hand. Cinderella slipped into the back seat and was enveloped by its lushness. She marveled at the car's leather and faux wood interior. She folded her hands demurely in her lap to avoid leaving any fingerprints.

"Do you know why the luggage inspectors were laughing at my suitcase?"

Sebastian said with a straight face "They've probably never seen that much duct tape on one suitcase before. Yeah, it was a little worn from decades of hand-me-down use—and may have looked like something from a homeless man's grocery cart—but they should be used to that from all the south-of-the-border traffic we get. Don't mind those jerks. None of them are graduates from charm school."

"This car is so beautiful," Cinderella whispered as she looked around in awe. "I never imagined anything like this could be made. It is like the inside of an expensive casket."

"Funny you should mention that," Sebastian said as he adjusted the rear view mirror to see if Cinderella's legs had lapsed into a casual separation. "We bought these wheels from Count Dracula. He used to close the curtains and sleep back there during the day."

Cinderella looked puzzled for a moment and then put her right palm over her mouth and giggled. "I see. You are making a joke, no?"

"I was making a joke, yes." Sebastian chuckled. "I should apologize. You speak English so well I forgot you were from Eastern Europe and not privy to our silly American patter. Thanks for putting up with me."

"You seem very nice, Sebastian. I am glad we are going to be working together."

Sebastian removed his cap and, after licking the palm of his hand, ran it over his thick brown hair to ensure all errant strands were in place. Cinderella noted this furtive little action and was grateful she wouldn't be grasping the steering wheel anytime soon. The chauffeur's own engine had started to rev and he cautiously suggested. "Maybe

you can put on some shorts and a tight T-shirt and help me wash the car some day.” He leered in the mirror again to assess her reaction.

“I have no shorts or T-shirt. I think I will be too busy doing my own work, but thank you for the invitation.” Cinderella made a mental note to sit in the corner of the back seat and hold an oversized pocket book in her lap on future trips. Wishing to change the subject, she asked, “What kind of car did you say this was?”

Sebastian’s chest puffed up and he replied with obvious pride, “This is a Bentley Continental Flying Spur luxury stretch limo. It’s been pimped up a bit but we skipped the bulletproof glass and machine gun turrets.”

Cinderella giggled and said, “You make another joke. You are very funny, Sebastian.”

Sebastian was feeling much more than humorous. The new nanny was quite a looker and he began to fantasize about tripping the light fantastic with her at a sleepover in his apartment over the sprawling garage. Sebastian was fond of bragging that his apartment was like the roach motel—virgins come in but never leave. After Sebastian paid the parking tab, the limo slowly left the LAX circus behind only to encounter a more maddening situation—the bumper-to-bumper traffic on the notorious San Diego Freeway 405. They inched north at a glacial pace before taking a right exit on Sunset Boulevard. Very shortly, Cinderella saw a “Welcome to Beverly Hills” sign and almost fainted.

“Is this where Jed Clampett and his family lived? Or the high school in 90210? We used to get American TV programs in our school.”

Sebastian laughed. “The *Beverly Hillbillies* was filmed at the Kirkeby Mansion in Bel-Air. It was a popular film location back in the day. *Cinderfella* with Jerry Lewis was shot there, too. *Beverly Hills, 90210* was primarily filmed in a warehouse complex in Van Nuys although it used locations all over Southern Cal as its ten seasons progressed. The high school in that show—West Beverly High—is fictitious. It doesn’t really exist.”

“Where will I be living, Sebastian?”

“The Rockingham palace in North Beverly Park. It’s an upscale community of sixty-four homes known for its huge mansions, famous residents, and more billionaires than any other place in L.A. When you take the kid out for a walk, you’ll bump into movie stars up the wazoo doing their morning jogging or speed walking.”

“You confuse me again, Sebastian. What is this ‘wazoo’ of which you speak?”

Sebastian laughed. “Oops, I did it again. It means you’ll be seeing a lot of silver screen royalty breaking in their new sneakers and sports bras.”

Cinderella continued to stare out the window of her extravagant motor coach in awe of the L.A. commercial landscape passing before her eyes. Her exposure to American movies and books hardly prepared her for this. “I never envisioned such a place in my wildest dreams. There is so much activity . . . like a beehive after it has been knocked off a branch. There is a lot to see and absorb.”

Sebastian tilted the rearview mirror down to catch the inadvertent charms of the accidental tourist. “Yeah, Southern Cal and L.A. in particular are totally self-contained worlds of their own. We got everything you could wish for. There are beaches, mountains, deserts—all within a few hours of each other. Activities? We got camping, hiking, surfing, parasailing, cycling, jogging, bicycle trails, and water skiing and snow skiing. We got all the major attractions—Disneyland, Universal Studios, Knott’s Berry Farm, Magic Mountain, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Santa Monica Pier, LEGOLAND, and SeaWorld. You like cruises? We got three ports—L.A., Long Beach, and San Diego. Like to fly? We got eight airports. Shopping? Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa, and Fashion Island in Newport Beach have got the goods. Like to gamble? We got casinos and horse racing. No dog tracks or cock fights though. I won’t even go into all the college and pro sports teams. If you’re one of those cultured types, we got tons of museums and art galleries. If you have any questions about anything, let me know. I drive so many of Mr. Rockingham’s out-of-town clients around that I had to bone up on the local scene.”

Sebastian continued on Mulholland until he turned left and paused at a guarded gatehouse, clicking his transponder before entering the exclusive enclave. They glided around Beverly Park Drive for half a mile and turned into a brick-paver driveway. Their passage was interrupted again by an iron gate blocking further access. Sebastian clicked his transponder and the gate slowly opened. Cinderella's jaw dropped as a magnificent Mediterranean structure atop a hill came into view as they rounded a curve.

"Is this a house or a museum? The government buildings in our capital are not as big."

"It's quite a spread for sure. It sits in the hills overlooking L.A. and from the windows on the second floor you get great views of the city and canyons below . . . after the Santa Ana winds blow the smog out of the valley."

"Not only is the mansion's size beyond belief, but the park-like grounds are gorgeous are they not?" The back-seat beauty was immersed in a state of wonder.

"Ditto that, nanny girl. The house squats on five acres and the huge gardens and rolling lawns give the gardener, Felipe, fits. In addition to normal maintenance which is a load, we've had a rough drought for a few years and he's been under the gun to keep things alive and green."

The limo pulled up in front of the elaborate entry to the manse and Sebastian turned off the powerful but quiet engine. He jumped out of the limo and ran around to the other side to open Cinderella's door hoping to catch a glimpse of thigh as she got out of the vehicle. The teenager, starting to catch on to Sebastian's carnal pursuits, kept her knees together as she swiveled around to exit thereby disappointing the randy voyeur. Thwarted in his visual quest to view that which lies beneath a women's skirt, he inwardly cursed and removed the suitcase from the trunk.

Cinderella followed him through a large courtyard fronted by arcade—a series of arches supported by columns. The wide walkway leading to the house was flanked by wide planters filled with cascading flowers that overflowed their perimeters. The couple was met by curved steps that led to a graceful archway framing massive double-doors that could have been stolen from the Alhambra in

Grenada, Spain. The exterior was composed of textured white stucco—a hand-applied mix of cement, water, and sand—that gave the house an aged Old World look. The bright white walls contrasted with the warm, earthy, rustic look of red clay terracotta roof tiles. There were several turrets that harkened to medieval times and a number of tower-like functional chimneys that were given special treatment with moldings and small windows. Ornamental iron work was much in evidence from the exterior balconies, scrolled railings, window grilles and lanterns. Brightly painted tiles enlivened the space around doors, windows, and arches.

Sebastian rang the chimes and a door was promptly opened by a diminutive Latina in light blue maid's garb and a white apron who stepped aside to permit their entry into a grand foyer. Cinderella looked with amazement at the twenty-foot-high rotunda from which a huge wrought iron chandelier was suspended. Its scroll design was similar to the many sconces that adorned the walls.

They stepped down into the living room. Cinderella spun around to look in all four directions and there was house as far as the eye could see. She looked up at the vaulted ceiling that was segmented by exposed wide, dark beams that added a sense of gravity to the room. The high walls had a rough stucco texture and colors—yellows, oranges, and deep reds—that were vibrant and earthy. The contrast of the dark wood beams against warmer walls provided a rich depth to the interior. Lavender, deep purple, and cornflower yellow colors on couches, pillows, and other fabric accessories inspired images of fields of flowers. The polished terra cotta tiles on the floor were bare except for occasional wool Dhurrie area rugs that picked up the colors of the room. Door and furniture hardware were made of rough-hewn iron, and the wood work, trim, and moldings reflected a dark, natural wood finish.

All elements in the interior design followed the rustic and colorful theme. Splashes of color were added by mosaic tiles on tabletops, countertops, and even stuck in plaster as wall adornments. There were two spiral staircases leading to the upper floor, each featuring scrolled iron banisters and hand-painted tiles on the risers. Accents were abundant and included terracotta pottery, hand-glazed tiles around the

fireplace, heavy carved furniture pieces like consoles and dining room tables, stained glass windows, and cut-steel lampshades. Through a large opening at the rear of the room an outdoor loggia could be seen. Beyond it were a swimming pool, pool house, tennis courts, and two guest houses.

Cinderella exchanged introductions with Marta, the maid who opened the door, and asked “How big is this house? I think I will need a map.”

Marta smiled as if she’d heard that question many times before. “The *Estancia la Paz*, it is fifteen thousand square feet on two *pisos*. . . floors. There are ten bedrooms and sixteen bathrooms, all of which poor Luz has to clean. There is library which holds thousands of *libros* . . . books and home *teatro* . . . theater. There is cellar for the wine and big room with equipment where the people do the exercise.”

“Gym” Sebastian added. “Let me help, Marta. There’s a beauty parlor or coiffure salon as they like to call it, quarters for all the staff, a conference room, three offices, a bowling alley, English pub, game room with two pool tables, and an observation deck reached by an elevator. The ten-car garage, my little piece of paradise, holds Mr. Rockingham’s car collection which I am privileged to keep in tip-top shape.”

Cinderella hung on every word. She wondered why five people needed so many rooms. She lived with her parents in a five-room house that could have fit inside the foyer. Hearing a cough, Cinderella looked up a majestic spiral staircase and saw three arresting figures in slow descent. The oldest figure was wearing a slinky little black number that revealed a lot of admirable cleavage and hugged her curves like skin on a grape. She was fashionably tall and thin with long dark hair tossed casually over one shoulder. Even at a distance, her smoldering black eyes and lips that were puffed up to fifteen PSI could be seen. The two younger figures were cut from a different bolt of cloth. Shorter and heavier, their black hair was tightened into buns and their faces rendered garish by the overuse of bright makeup. If they were her daughters, the mother must have suffered a satanic seduction from something too ugly for this world.

*The Loves of Cinderella*

Cinderella curtsied out of respect and said “I am Maria Skolnick, the new nanny, but people call me Cinderella.”

“Of course you are, my dear. I am Marguerite Rockingham and these are my daughters, Isabella and Gabriella.”

## Chapter 5

The two sisters looked at Cinderella and then at each other before Gabriella spoke. “My, she’s a pretty one. Too pretty in fact. I hope she learns her place and subservient position in the household.” Isabella added “We’ll have to train her to do our bidding and wait breathlessly for our next command.” The sisters laughed and commanded Cinderella to slowly turn around. “Judging by her looks, I’ll bet she was passed from boy to boy in her homeland. Where is she from again? Slohotsky? Is that the Eastern European Ozarks? Do they practice inbreeding there? We’ll have to have our OBGYN check her out. Where did she get those threads? A thrift store? I haven’t seen anything that hokey since *The Grapes of Wrath* had a garage sale.” They laughed again until silenced by a look from their mother. Their comments confirmed Cinderella’s first impression—the pair would have been more at home cackling around a bubbling cauldron tossing tongues of toad and brains of bats into the kettle.

“You’ll have to forgive their manners,” Marguerite said drily. “They regard you as a new toy, but their fascination should eventually wear off as does a kitten’s with a ball of yarn. If you do your job as instructed and conduct yourself accordingly, your employment should not be especially onerous.”

Cinderella was disappointed with the less than cordial welcome received from the Rockingham women. There was a decided lack of warmth exhibited during her reception. She sensed a resentment but wasn’t sure if it was a manifestation of their natural personalities or a reaction to her presence. Any initial misgivings were overcome, however, by the excitement of securing her new position.

Signaling Cinderella to follow her up the stairs, Marguerite and her brood led the nanny to the bedroom of the child entrusted to her care. Peering into the crib revealed the presence of a cute baby girl with a tuft of platinum hair. Swaddled in a diaper, she was simultaneously smiling, drooling, and kicking.

“This must be Chloe,” Cinderella cooed.

“Who else would it be?” Gabriella said with rancorous disdain. “It must be true what they say about blondes.”

Marguerite thankfully interrupted. “Roam around the house to get your bearings. Your quarters are in the east wing with the rest of the menials. Sebastian has already taken your luggage, such as it is, to your room. Any questions you have can be directed to Marta. She has experience with nanny relations.”

“Gained from your predecessor who was here one month before she went bonkers and left screaming into the night,” Isabella said before the sisters guffawed.

Cinderella changed Chloe’s diaper and held the baby in her arms while singing her to sleep. After replacing the slumbering baby in the crib, Cinderella adjourned to her room to unpack her meager belongings.

Things began to look up for Cinderella that evening when Mr. Rockingham got home. His reaction to her was markedly different from the one the teenager had experienced earlier. He set his briefcase on the floor and greeted her with a broad smile and brief hug. He asked Marta to make him a vodka martini before leading Cinderella to the parlor and inviting her to sit down and make herself comfortable. He was a tall man over six feet with blond hair and a Hollywood tan. Dressed in a dark blue pinstriped suit with a gray silk tie and matching pocket handkerchief, he was the epitome of sartorial splendor. Cinderella could not help but notice the diamond-studded links securing his French cuffs and a large gold watch on his wrist the size of a demitasse saucer.

“I’m Winchester Rockingham and I assume you’re Maria Skolnick, but I understand you have acquired the nickname of Cinderella. Your picture on the paperwork we received doesn’t do you justice.”

“Thank you sir,” Cinderella replied, flattered that he found her to be physically presentable.

“I trust your flight was satisfactory. I suspect it must have been a long one.”

“Yes sir. It was fifteen hours including the stop in Amsterdam. Thank you for giving me this opportunity and for having someone meet me at the airport.”

“I’m happy to oblige, Cinderella. The hustle and bustle of LAX can be quite unnerving to the first-time visitor.”

“This is a beautiful home, sir. You are obviously a very successful man.”

“I’m an entertainment attorney for a large law firm in Beverly Hills. We represent clients throughout the film industry. We try to keep their stars out of jail and the newspapers as well as defend them against a never-ending flood of lawsuits.”

“That sounds most interesting, sir. I have always admired American movies. They helped me learn your language and gain an appreciation for your wonderful country.”

“I’ll pass your comments on to the producers. They must be doing a great job because your English is better than half the people in Los Angeles County.”

“Do you have any special instructions for me, sir, in regard to my au pair responsibilities? I want so badly to get off to a good start.”

“I want you to feel like a member of the family,” Rockingham said, accepting his cocktail from Marta. “Please join us for dinner each evening. I’d prefer to have your company at that meal since it would give me a chance to know you better and be kept informed of the things going on in Chloe’s life.”

“Thank you, sir. I have met Marta and Sebastian. How many other household employees are there besides Felipe, the gardener, and Luz, the chambermaid?”

“Only Sophia, the cook.”

“You mean there is no butler like in those English PBS series?” Cinderella asked with a twinkle in her eye.

Rockingham laughed. “The butler left when I wouldn’t stand at attention when *God Save the Queen* was played.”

“That is a joke, yes?”

“Not a funny one but a lame attempt. By the way, my wife mentioned you arrived with only one suitcase and it was rather small. Tomorrow I will have Sebastian bring you to my office. I have asked my secretary, Sasha, to take you shopping to find some suitable casual clothing and put it on my American Express card.”

Cinderella was taken aback by his generosity. “Thank you, sir but I couldn’t possibly accept such a generous gift.”

“In the course of carrying out your responsibilities, you will frequently be called upon to run errands and perform other duties outside the home. You’re representing our family and must dress the part. I also want you to feel comfortable and the clothing styles in Los Angeles are probably somewhat different from those in your country. You’ll be doing me a favor by accepting my offer.”

Cinderella realized the kind man had concocted a pretext for his gift. She could not in good conscience refuse his generosity. “I am humbled by your offer and accept it with deep gratitude, sir.”

“You’re more than welcome. I understand you’ve received excellent au pair training so Chloe should be in good hands.”

“You have my assurance, sir.” After a noticeable pause, Cinderella asked with some reticence “Sir, I am puzzled by scattered pictures on the mantelpiece and tables around the room. In some of them I see you with the three women here. However, in others you are alone with another woman. I also see pictures of Mrs. Rockingham and her daughters with another man. I know it is none of my business, but it would be helpful for me to know family members and their relationships.”

Rockingham smiled and then looked sad as if recalling some unpleasant event from a previous life. “I can hardly keep track of them myself. The blonde woman in the pictures with me is my deceased wife, Monique. She died six months ago giving birth to Chloe. I met Marguerite a short time later and it was love at first sight. After a brief whirlwind courtship, we were married. The man in the picture with her is her former husband, Asdrubal Pontenegro, who was the Venezuelan ambassador to the United States during the Hugo Chavez regime. They were married for twenty years before his death. Gabriella and Isabella are their daughters.”

Rockingham quaffed his drink and rose to his feet. “I have to run to an appointment with a client, Cinderella, but I wanted to sneak in a quick visit to make sure you’d arrived safely and were adjusting to your new job and quarters.”

Cinderella jumped to her feet and curtsied.

“By the way, you don’t need to do that anymore. A handshake will do fine,” Rockingham said with a smile. “We stopped curtseying after Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown. And please stop calling me ‘sir’. It makes me feel older than I am.” He smiled and patted her shoulder.

After he picked up his briefcase and left the room, Cinderella felt much better than she had that morning. Rockingham seemed like a kind man who was genuinely interested in her welfare. He treated her like a fourth child rather than an employee and she could envision him as a surrogate for the deceased father she had been forced to abandon.

Unbeknownst to Rockingham and Cinderella, the sisters had been eavesdropping on their conversation from their positions outside the door.

“Did you hear the way that little tramp was playing up to him?”

“Yeah, and he was reeled in like a fish. He’s never given us anything but the bum’s rush. Miss Sweetness and Light bears watching for sure.”

For the next six months, Cinderella threw herself into her job and became totally infatuated with Chloe. The child responded in kind and it was apparent she preferred Cinderella’s company to anyone else’s. Cinderella was the first person she saw in the morning and the last person at night. Recognizing that Winchester had formed a special attachment to Cinderella because of her devotion to his only child, Marguerite and her offspring remained civil for the most part, at least when he was home. They clearly didn’t welcome Cinderella’s presence at dinner but recognized the folly of confrontation.

Cinderella strengthened her bonds with the support staff in the mansion during this period as well. She got to know Sophia when she ate breakfast and lunch in a nook off the kitchen. However, the affable cook was quite busy planning the meals, going grocery shopping, and doing the cooking which didn’t leave much time for relationship-building. The Rockinghams were fond of entertaining with small dinner parties which kept her occupied as well.

Marta was a different story. She was a riot once Cinderella managed to overcome her suspicion of a newcomer on the estate. The Latina was a veritable treasure trove of observations about people in

the household. One day, Cinderella decided the time was ripe to pump her newfound friend for information about things that had intrigued her for months.

“Marta, you’ve been with Mr. Rockingham for a while haven’t you?”

“Sí, *pero si claro*. His dead wife . . . I work for her first and then both of them when they marry. Señora Monique, she was *muy hermosa* . . . very beautiful and so nice. I happy when she marry Señor Rockingham. He a fine man and so good to Marta.”

“Tell me, how did Mr. Rockingham come to meet his current wife and what caused them to marry in such a hurry? They seem like opposites in many respects.” Then lowering her voice, she added “Anything you tell me will be our secret, I promise.”

Marta looked around to ensure their conversation wasn’t being overheard. “Señor Rockingham, he has much grief when Señora Monique dies. Señora’s death mean he have baby to raise on his own. *This* Señora Rockingham, he meet her at party. At one time, she famous actress in Venezuela. She appear in many movies there. She married to very rich man from South America.”

“I understand he was an ambassador to this country from Venezuela.”

“Sí but that not where he get his *dinero*. He own mucho mines and oil wells. Then he die . . . big heart attack they say. I have friend in Caracas who claim he poisoned. I don’t know. Anyway, she get mucho money from his will, but it run through her fingers like beach sand. She meet Señor Rockingham . . . think he very handsome. He has looks and money . . . she has body . . . so they marry.”

“I could look at Gabriella and Isabella and tell Mr. Rockingham was not their biological father.”

“Their father, Señor Pontenegro, he was ugly man. That why daughters look like those women who ride a broom. What you call them?”

“Witches,” Cinderella replied, suppressing a smile.

“When you are man, even if ugly you can marry pretty woman as long as you rich. Ugly woman . . . she sell fish tacos on street or wash windows. She no can be a *puta* . . . a whore if she is *fea* . . . ugly.”

“That double standard exists in every country I’m afraid,” Cinderella said empathetically. “How did you learn all this information?”

“Marta, she keep eyes and ears open. She hear a lot of things.” Marta smiled as if she had just bested Sherlock Holmes in solving a mystery.

“Now you,” Marta continued pointing at Cinderella. “You one beautiful señorita. You marry rich man one day. But be careful not to give away milk before man buy cow.”

Cinderella laughed. “That has been my plan all along. I am saving myself for marriage with the right man.”

Cinderella also tried to build a bond with Luz but she spoke no English which left her totally dependent upon Marta for communication. Luz kept herself busy sprinting from room to room to keep up with her housecleaning chores.

Cinderella’s relationship with Mr. Rockingham continued to grow. Her respect and admiration for him ramped up and he, in turn, enjoyed watching her blossom and transition from a teenager to the threshold of womanhood. He was her mentor and a shoulder to cry on. He loved arriving home and bouncing Chloe in his lap. She giggled and laughed and hung on his every word. He was so friendly and outgoing that he improved other people’s karma just by association. That’s why Cinderella was totally unprepared for news that would rock her world.

One day the doorbell rang and since Marta was unavailable Cinderella answered the door. A man in a dark blue uniform holding his cap in his hands was standing there.

“Good morning, I’m Deputy Marco with the Beverly Hills Police Department. Is Mrs. Rockingham at home?”

“I believe so,” Cinderella said, turning to see Marta coming down the stairs. “Marta, could you tell Mrs. Rockingham a deputy is here to see her?”

Marta did an about face and scuttled up the steps. In a moment, Mrs. Rockingham appeared still wearing her silk housecoat from that morning’s breakfast.

“I understand you wish to see me,” she said, mustering up a negligible amount of disinterest and boredom. “Did you make an appointment with my secretary?”

Cinderella could tell from his facial expression that Marguerite’s opening remarks didn’t sit well. The officer wasn’t there voluntarily and probably had his fill of haughty, dismissive, wealthy residents over the years.

“I didn’t think I needed one to tell you your husband is dead.”

Cinderella almost collapsed but held herself upright by seizing the edge of a door. Marguerite was shocked but wasn’t about to be trumped by the officer. She recovered remarkably quickly for a widow and said “That is most distressing news. How did my dear husband shed his mortal coils?”

The officer didn’t know what kind of reaction to expect, but this wasn’t it. “Your husband shed his mortal coils when he and his pilot crashed in his private plane landing at the Palm Springs International Airport. I don’t believe investigators from the National Safety Transportation Board found any coils in the wreckage.”

If the newly minted widow was feeling any grief, she was masking it exceedingly well. Marguerite looked like she was struggling trying to sustain interest in the news. “I can’t say I care much for your attitude. I hope the crash wasn’t due to pilot error but a result of some mechanical defect with the plane. That should make it much easier to slap the manufacturer with a wrongful death lawsuit. I also believe my late husband’s life insurance policies had accidental death benefit riders attached which should double the face amount.”

The officer looked disgusted and remarked before turning away “I’m sorry I couldn’t bring the checks with me, but we just got the call from Palm Springs.” He was still shaking his head as he walked back to his car.

Marguerite’s mouth pursed as if she had just swallowed something sour and she walked back upstairs leaving Cinderella in tears and Marta in emotional distress.

## Chapter 6

Cinderella didn't have an appropriate black dress for the funeral but was able to borrow one from Sasha, Winchester Rockingham's private secretary. The nanny wasn't allowed to sit in the limo for the ride to the funeral but tagged along behind in a second car containing household staff driven by Felipe. This was just as well as she preferred not to share her grief with the Rockingham family members who were probably busy calculating how they were going to spend the insurance money.

The memorial service was held at the Cathedral of Majestic Redemption, the church of choice for the A-list illuminati in L. A. County. The church filled up so quickly a sound system was installed to broadcast the service outdoors to an audience unable to be accommodated in the sanctuary. The presiding minister, Reverend Thaddeus Pompous Van Skeffington, was jazzed by the strong turnout and had the collection plate passed twice to catch the late arrivals. Rockingham had conducted business with so many people over the years that the legions of people genuinely distraught by his death were joined by those many casual associates in the entertainment industry who felt obligated to make an appearance. After an energetic eulogy that allowed the good Reverend to showcase his theatrical oratory, the attendees filed out of the service and got in their cars to join the caravan to the burial site, Evergreen Cemetery and Memorial Gardens. The immediate family sat in the front row in wooden folding chairs underneath an open-sided green-and-white tent. The rest of the *Estancia La Paz* staff had to maintain a respectable distance from the family in the back of the tent. Cinderella held Chloe in her arms and rocked her gently to keep her quiet. While the nanny frequently broke into tears during the ceremony, she noted that while Marguerite theatrically dabbed a dry eye on occasion, the siblings appeared less than devastated. Gabriella was chewing gum and filing her nails and Isabella was sending text messages from her smart phone.

The minister arrived with slow and carefully paced steps followed by two small acolytes lifting the hem of his robe to keep it beyond the reach of fresh grass clippings from the morning's mow. His full head

of once-gray hair, now dyed blond, was piled high and swept along the sides of his head like duck wings. Cinderella had never seen a man with hair extenders before. She wasn't sure if he was preparing to deliver casket comments or wait for a curtain call. He tapped the massive ring on his pinky against the metal crucifix dangling from his neck to call the ceremony to order. He cleared his throat and began waving his finger toward the sky.

“I have buried many of Hollywood's best and brightest over the years in this hallowed ground. Most of them, adored by the public and held in a reverence previously accorded only to European royalty, were called home in the midst of dynamic careers that blazed across the heavens like meteorites.”

An expensively dressed dowager in the row ahead of Cinderella whispered to her neighbor “The Hollywood has-beens who bombed at the box office and reviled movie critics are planted in the rear of the cemetery among the scrub oak and thistles.”

“Winchester Rockingham was such a man. Equally at ease with movie moguls or extras on the set, he moved among multitudes of people making things happen without calling attention to himself. He regarded the entertainment community as his second family and held them with reverence close to his bosom. He couldn't be bought and he couldn't be bribed—a unique and refreshing change from the celluloid hustlers who slink about in the zone of twilight ethics. His handshake was his word and his word was his bond. He was as respected as anyone in the history of the industry. We aren't likely to see many of his kind come this way again. The following quote, questionably attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, could justifiably be carved into the headstone of Winchester Rockingham:

*What is success?  
To laugh often and love much;  
To win the respect of intelligent people  
and the affection of children;  
To earn the approbation of honest critics  
and endure the betrayal of false friends;  
To appreciate beauty;*

Dan Anderson

*To find the best in others;  
To give of one's self;  
To leave the world a little better,  
whether by a healthy child,  
a garden patch,  
or a redeemed social condition;  
To have played and laughed with enthusiasm  
and sung with exultation;  
to know even one life has breathed easier  
because you have lived.  
This is to have succeeded.*

“This is why Rockingham Winchester was successful. It wasn’t his material possessions—his big house, his bank account, his prestigious law practice. He was successful because he lived and breathed the attributes described by Emerson. I’ll grant you there are many definitions of success. One anonymous wag defined it this way:

*God gave us two ends:  
one to sit on and one to think with.  
Success depends on which one you use.  
Heads you win; tails, you lose.*

“Winchester would have been comfortable with this definition as well. While he took time to stop and smell the roses, he didn’t nap in the rose garden. He was always looking to make things better and people’s lives easier. Most of you know he was killed in a plane crash landing at Palm Springs International. What you may not know is that he was delivering school supplies to the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. *Requiescat in pace*, Winchester. The world is a better place for your having been here. The heavenly hosts are rejoicing as we speak. They are honored to count you among their number.”

After the celebration of life ceremony, the crowd dutifully formed a line and paid their respects to Marguerite, Gabriella, and Isabella. The siblings didn’t even pretend to display any signs of sorrow although Isabella did remove her chewing gum and stick it underneath

her wooden chair. Cinderella was surprised Marguerite didn't whip out the will and a pocket calculator and begin tallying up her share of the loot.

One of the Hollywood bedroom bandoleros didn't wait for a decent mourning period to expire. He sidled up to Marguerite and placed his roving hand on her lower back and began to massage her lumbar region. Her response was not widow-like—she reached behind her, grabbed his hand, and slid it lower. Cinderella prayed she wouldn't begin shedding her widow's weeds until she got home where the ambitious suitor could tie her hands to the bedposts using her weeping veil.

After the service, attendees formed in small groups and began transacting business and arranging deals as if they'd never left the office. Some were signing contracts using the backs of others as writing-surface support. The motto of the Hollywood business crowd was never let a good opportunity go to waste. The women formed in cliques as well and exchanged gossip and flashed their expensive jewelry fresh from their home safes or the safety deposit boxes in their banks. Their patter was largely hollow compliments on the appearance of their friends and withering invective on the appearance of their enemies. One woman dropped her Lowchen to the ground because he was getting antsy in her arms. Upon gaining his freedom, the little dog slowly waddled to the grave, lifted his leg and peed in the rectangular hole in the ground. Cinderella thought that a little disrespectful, but perhaps he was paying his last respects in the only way he knew how. His gesture wasn't any worse than the Rockingham family who made a beeline for their limo as if they'd left something on the burner at home. Sebastian was leaning against the Bentley enjoying a toke. He was punching his way through his iPhone apps, probably trying to find a phone sex line.

When the family returned home, it didn't take the trio long to make sure Cinderella understood that major rules changes were now in force. They plopped down in the living room and ordered Cinderella to get them three beers and stand by the door. This was usually Marta's

domaine, but Cinderella sensed her duties were about to change substantively.

Marguerite looked at Cinderella and now, buoyed by her recently acquired power, said, “In case you haven’t realized it, sweetie, there’s a new sheriff in town . . . actually, three new sheriffs. Winchester may have been taken in by your pretty face and svelte figure, but that’s all changed. You’ll now take orders from the three of us. Any resistance or hesitation on your part will be met with severe repercussions which I assure you will not be pleasant. According to the terms of our au pair agreement, if we become dissatisfied with your services for any reason we can terminate your residency and ship you back to that third-world armpit you came from. Do you understand, dearie?”

“I understand,” Cinderella replied meekly. She had sensed that household dynamics would change and had resolved in advance to make the best of her situation and maintain a positive, pleasant outlook.

“Good, you can begin your obedience training by picking this up,” Gabriella said as she dropped her empty beer bottle and rolled it across the floor until it bounced off the tip of Cinderella’s shoe.

“There’ll be other changes as well. You’ll perform any personal services asked of you. That will include such things as doing our nails, running our baths, shining our shoes, sewing our garments, and bringing us beverages upon demand—day or night. Your pager is on the table by the fireplace. You’ll keep it with you at all times and respond promptly when summoned regardless of what you’re doing at the time.

“You’ll be assuming other duties as well. Cooking has become too taxing upon Sophia. She’s asked for assistance and you’ll be assigned to help in the kitchen as well. She’ll do the cooking and you’ll take care of the dishes and clean up the kitchen after each meal. This includes scrubbing the floors and keeping all appliances in spotless condition.”

“How can I do this and care for Chloe, too?” a perplexed Cinderella asked.

“She has a stroller and mobile playpen on rollers. When she’s awake, you’ll keep her with you at all times. Use the elevator that connects the upper and lower floors.”

“Make sure you scrub your hands after you change her diapers,” Isabella said, “I don’t want that brat’s taint on my dinner plate.” This provoked a moment of hilarity not understood by Cinderella.

“Be glad we don’t have you lick Felipe’s shovel after he scoops up dog poop.” Gabriella added maliciously.

“You may leave now, Cinderella. You’ve been dismissed,” Marguerite said. “Oh, and one more thing; you’ll no longer eat with us at dinner. You can carve out a place at the trough in the kitchen with the rest of the domestics.”

Cinderella had a heavy heart as she climbed the stairs to Chloe’s room. The happiness she felt a week ago had vanished and been replaced by despondency and anguish. She was dismayed her good fortune had taken such a sudden and dramatic turn for the worse. However, she took a deep breath and resolved to remain confident that the injustices inflicted upon her would be reversed and her journey on the path to her true destiny would resume.

## Chapter 7

The next day Cinderella took Chloe to her pediatrician's appointment on Wilshire Boulevard down the street from the La Brea tar pits. Sebastian dropped her off and the nanny was thankful she could hold the infant in her lap as a shield against the chauffer's lecherous gaze. As she bounced the baby in her lap, she could have sworn Chloe was spitting at Sebastian.

The waiting room was moderately crowded and Cinderella took a seat after checking in with the medical receptionist. She sat next to a young brunette about her age with flashing blue eyes and wearing green capris and a pullover with "Casting Couch Graduate" on the front.

"What a darling baby!" the brunette exclaimed. "She looks just like you."

Cinderella blushed. "She is not my baby. I am her nanny."

"The resemblance is remarkable," the girl continued. "If you ever drop a kid, I hope she looks like this cutie."

Cinderella frowned and said, "I would not drop a child. I am very careful and watch her closely."

The girl grinned. "You're not from around here are you?"

"No, I came to America earlier this year. I am from Eastern Europe."

The girl extended her hand. "I'm Erin O'Malley."

Cinderella shifted Chloe to her left arm and extended her right one. "I am Cinderella Skolnick. Do you have a baby?"

"No, I'm only the designated driver. I brought my sister who's in with the doctor now."

"I see from your sweatshirt that you graduated from Casting Couch. Is that a university?"

"Not in the sense you mean it, but I *have* spent some time there getting an education. It hasn't led to a degree, but the homework's been a blast."

"Are you a student?"

"Nope, I'm doing some part-time waitressing at two jobs while I take acting lessons."

“You are an actress? How exciting.”

“I’m not an actress yet, but I hope to be once I complete the classes and go on auditions for roles. Are you interested in acting?”

“I would love to act, but I don’t know how to get started.”

Erin rummaged through her wallet. “Here, take this card. It’s the name and address of the acting school I attend. They’re in Beverly Hills.” Cinderella accepted it eagerly.

“There’s my sister at the checkout desk. Gotta run,” Erin said, jumping to her feet. “Here’s a tinseltown mag I was looking at when you walked in. Want it?”

“I would love to see it. Thank you.” Cinderella said as she returned Chloe to her carrier.

The magazine, *Hollywood Exclusive*, was the standard glossy pictorial extravaganza featuring the hottest stars in the Hollywood film galaxy. Cinderella turned each page, eagerly reading the entertainment gossip until she reached page fifty. There, staring at her in all his physical majesty was her heartthrob—Prince Charmaine, the marquee star of Magnum Screen Gems Studio. He was taller than she’d expected and set the bar for “photogenic” with his mane of golden blond hair and cerulean eyes. He was uncommonly muscular and his broad shoulders, small waist and glossy, white smile explained why he was such a heart-breaker and soul-taker and given the nickname “Prince Charming.”

The article contained a brief biography of Prince, and Cinderella was astounded by the obstacles he faced growing up. His parents were killed by a drunk driver when he was a baby. Having no relatives, he was placed in the foster care system and raised by a couple who were in it for the money rather than child growth and development. Weak and puny as a child in school, he was frequently beat up by older bullies when he refused to sell drugs to schoolchildren and participate in purse snatchings. Upset at this continued abuse, he got a job shining shoes and saved money to join a gym. There he began an aggressive weight-training program and took boxing lessons from an old, retired, former welterweight champion. When there was nothing left to be learned, he ventured forth into his neighborhood, ran the thugs and drug lords out of town, and restored law and order. While in high

school, he established charitable foundations to help at-risk students with the necessities of life and tutoring assistance. Because of his excellent grades, he got a scholarship to Stanford and graduated in three years. He studied acting in college and his career advanced rapidly as his film appearances multiplied. He had not only a charismatic screen presence that pulled viewers inside theater chains, but his frequent nominations for acting excellence established him as a serious and talented actor.

Cinderella was further impressed by the interview in which he raptured on the joy of acting and the rewards that came from playing a role and doing it well. She would love to have a job that made her feel so fulfilled and self-actualized as a human being. She found herself being emotionally and intellectually drawn to an acting career and began to imagine herself in movies. She blushed at her fantasy of swooning in Prince Charmaine's arms in a torrid love scene and quickly turned the page hoping that her passionate excitations had gone unnoticed.

She was further entranced by a following article that chronicled aspiring actors across the US who flocked to Hollywood with hopes of making it big in the movies. They discussed the low-paying service jobs they took while pursuing actors' training in an attempt to turn their lifelong dreams into reality. Cinderella's thoughts raced helter skelter and she found herself bitten by the acting bug. She was allotted only one afternoon per week by Marguerite for personal matters, but she resolved to pursue acting lessons at a coaching workshop mentioned in the article—Madam Lafarge's Young Actors Studio. She glanced at the business card given her by Erin—it was the same studio. Cinderella felt a deep sigh of relief. She realized that sometimes you can't wait for destiny to take you by the hand—you have to grab it by the throat and drag it along with you. She was heartened by the knowledge that she' reached a decision and there was no turning back.

The following Tuesday, Cinderella hopped on the Metro Bus outside Beverly Park and commuted to a bus stop two blocks from the Young Actors Studio. She summoned her nerve, took a deep breath, and entered.

## Chapter 8

Several miles away at Magnum Screen Gems, studio executives, key production personnel, and Prince Charmaine were gathered around a conference room table discussing their upcoming cinematic tour-de-force—*The Servant of God*, a new treatment of the life and times of Joan of Arc. The studio's last few pictures had not fared well at the box office and they were looking for something to boost the probability of market success for their new venture.

J. P. Morgenstern, the studio CEO, tapped his pencil anxiously on the table while looking out the window at the “Hollywood” sign in the distance. “Well, folks, that’s the story, pure and unvarnished. You’ve seen the numbers and now I’m looking for a reaction. If we suck wind with one more flick, we’ll all be down at Nabisco punching assholes in animal crackers. I’m looking for some ideas to save our butts. Let’s go around the table and get some input. Don’t be bashful—nothing is too ridiculous as long as you can make a case. As they say in advertising, let’s run it up the flagpole and see who salutes. We’ll start on my right with Larry.”

Larry, the bean-counter, looked around the room nervously and opened with “The trades say that science fiction movies made from comic books and video games generate the greatest return because robotics and animation are relatively cheap. Use of sleek, cutting-edge technology can create screen sizzlers. Maybe we should take an animated approach to Joan where she’s a cybernetic warrior encased in iron armor that’s thrown into the middle of a war between France and England in the post-apocalyptic, dystopian, twenty-second century. She creates an army of android humanoids that can time-travel and use sophisticated LASER weaponry and supreme intelligence that attempt to destroy the English machine-soldiers in a futuristic Armageddon. Following the original story, we can have Joan lose the encounter between intergalactic forces, captured, and sold out to her enemies where she is zapped by an atomic disintegrator.”

J. P.’s head snapped back and he groaned. “What did they get in exchange for her—a case of motor oil? Larry, I don’t want to stifle input by being negative right out of the box, but that idea borders on

incredulity for a couple of reasons. First, the world already had an Iron Maiden—Margaret Thatcher. Second, what does your machine woman do for pleasure—get nailed by the Tin Man from Oz? Gordon, what do you have in the way of an idea?”

Gordon, who still had some cocaine powder stuck to the side of his nose, said “Here’s a novel approach that’s never been done, at least in a quality version—a porno version of Joan of Arc.” Half the people around the table lower their heads in their arms and quietly giggle.

“Hey, I’m serious!” Gordon exclaimed. “A good porn flick is a guaranteed cash cow. We could have Joan, a farmer’s daughter, working in the garden pulling weeds when a column of English soldiers passes by. They are enamored with the scantily clad beauty and force her into the barn and ravish her repeatedly over a bale of hay. This is why Joan hates the English so much and continues to curse them while burning at the stake. Then comes an espionage part. Joan assumes a disguise and infiltrates the English military officers’ quarters where, in exchange for strategic information that will enable her to plan a defense for the Siege of Orleans, she hikes her hem, bends over a table, and writes down the intel she’s acquired while the officers pull a train.”

There was a prolonged silence during which people struggled with whether to offer a rebuttal or let the idea suffocate under the weight of its own fatuousness.

“Here’s the best part. The raunchy apex comes when Joan’s been captured and confined in an English prison. The English jailers try to get Joan to renounce her faith so they subject her to sexual debasement using torture equipment in vogue at that time. She refuses to surrender to their perverse activities so they finally say ‘to hell with it’ and bang her eyes out.”

Finally, J. P. spoke up. “Gordon, I have two questions regarding your proposal. The first is, what is the title of this flesh fest of yours—Joanie Does Jacksonville? The second is—have you ever tried getting some back-door coochie wearing a suit of armor? I think you need to switch to designer drugs and quit buying your California cornflakes in the Walmart parking lot. I’m reluctant to ask, but are there any other suggestions?”

Angie, an intern who received a degree in Digital Filmmaking from The Los Angeles Film School, raised her hand. J.P. looked at her with some hesitation but against his better judgment acknowledged her desire to speak.

“Why not feature Joan in a horror movie? They bring in big audiences in our target demographic and they can be filmed on the cheap. We’ve seen an unprecedented burst of horror movies in recent years. Zombies, vampires, and werewolves run rampant on the screen and tube. Serial killers and supernatural depictions have their own syndicated shows. Look at all the horror movies on the SyFy channel that have a high viewer rating. Scary and creepy are the new buzzwords to people trying to decide where to spend their entertainment dollar. We need to cash in and give the public blood and guts and plenty of it.”

J. P. frowned. “This sounds like a different project to me. How could the plot in Joan of Arc possibly be enriched by introducing monsters and malevolent spirits?”

Angie thought for a second. “We could have Joan and some French soldiers get lost in the fog after a battle and stumble across a deserted haunted castle. The soldiers begin getting picked off one by one. Frankenstein could be hiding on the roof and grab a soldier walking along the parapet, crush his head like a grape, and toss him over the wall into the moat. In another scene Dracula rises from his crypt after dark and, along with his female minions, descend upon a couple of soldiers wandering around looking for a place to pee. The vamps drain the soldiers of their blood and dump the bodies. They spy Joan but are scared off by the cross around her neck and the cloves of garlic hanging from her training bra. Then zombies show up and launch into a cannibalistic orgy on the corpses. After the clock strikes midnight, it’s Friday the thirteenth and Jason appears. He catches a soldier, impales him with a pitchfork and hoists the body on a chandelier. A werewolf jumps another soldier and dismembers him with his claws and teeth. In another scene, paranormal apparitions. . . .”

“Thank you, Angie. Further exposition is unnecessary. That’s an interesting concept. I don’t think it meets our needs at this time, but feel free to shop your idea around to the other studios.” J. P. is

temporarily frozen in a state of suspended disbelief but gradually recovers and weakly asks “Does anyone else have a recommendation?”

A woman with spiked hair, a pencil behind her ear, and reading glasses perched on the end of her nose offered “How about a musical?”

J. P. rolled his eyes and asked condescendingly “Another novel concept. And how did you envision a happy musical being made of such an intensely dramatic tragedy?”

“You can make a musical out of anything. Look at *Springtime for Hitler*. I think it could work. Everyone loves singing and dancing. Some of the biggest grossing films in history have been musicals. After the movie’s run its course, it could be re-released as a Broadway play.”

“I’ll probably regret this, but give me a little more insight into your proposal.”

“A great scene has Joan in the dungeon with her fellow prisoners who are all men chained together. They’ve been starved and beaten and wallow in abject misery as they sit on the cold stone floor. But Joan jumps up and breaks out into a little ditty like *I Don’t Wanna Be Jail Tail* followed by a rousing *This Maid Can’t Be Made*. The other prisoners are inspired by her vocals and jump to their feet and form a conga line around Joan. This is a high-impact scene. These songs acknowledge her sexual identity but establish that she is chaste because of her higher calling and resistance to temptations of the flesh.”

J.P. is quiet but says softly “I suspect Cole Porter is turning over in his grave about now. Do you have other songs in mind for this merry musical romp through the torture chamber?”

Spiked Hair isn’t too quick on the uptake and continued her spiel as others in the room began to slide under the table. “The really big scene is at the end when Joan is being burned alive for heresy. She tugs our hearts with a sad ballad like *Gimme a Break, I Don’t Want the Stake*. The English soldiers in contrast are in a circle dancing around the bonfire waving their torches and doing fist bumps as they celebrate

her betrayal by her French countrymen with *Kiss the Snitch and Burn the Bitch.*”

J. P. is almost apoplectic but managed to exit with “That’s indeed creative, but I don’t believe they had rap and hip hop in the fifteen century.” His head snapped back over the chair as he asked weakly “Does anyone else have a proposal for group think?”

There was sustained quiet until the silence was finally broken by a quiet voice. “I have one I’d like to offer.”

Everyone looked around the table for the source of the comment. Prince Charmaine leaned forward, propped his elbows on the table, and interlaced his fingers. “All these proposals illustrate the creative minds we have at Screens Gems. Grant you, they may have pushed the envelope a tad beyond where prudent men fear to tread, but they *were* outside the box. However, I don’t believe we need extreme changes in direction. We have a great script that everybody loves so why jump ship to start from scratch with a new concept? Movies with a religious theme can appeal to large audiences, and you can’t get any more religious than St. Joan, a heroine of epic proportions to Catholics, the French, and people of all faiths. Some seventy-seven per cent of Americans identify themselves as Christians—that’s a sizeable target group who are dedicated and loyal and will fanatically flock to these kinds of films if we engage them in ways that resonate with them. *The Passion of the Christ* made six hundred and twelve million on a thirty million budget. I acknowledge we aren’t talking about the Bible or Jesus, but St. Joan has an innocence and piety that will appeal to a large swathe of the public.

“My second point is we should till the soil for awhile before we plant our seeds.”

J. P. sat up and furrowed his eyebrows. “For those of us not descended from agrarian aristocracy, can you expound on your statement?”

“It’s simply this. Do something that will generate a continuous stream of publicity months before we start shooting.”

“I’m listening.”

“I suggest we don’t follow our normal practice of picking an established actress for the part of Joan however appealing that may be.

Instead, we hold a casting call for this role. Anyone will be able to apply for an audition either in person or by submitting a DVD or an equivalent. Allowing DVDs will help us screen applicants more quickly since the response is expected to be huge. The pre-production publicity generated by an extended search for an unknown actress to debut in *The Servant of God* will bring boffo box office results to the studio because everyone will be dying to find out who won the talent lottery.”

There was a pause while everyone weighed the merits of this suggestion. Being politically savvy, they waited for J. P. to speak before they articulated their own positions. Finally, J. P. looked at Heloise, the PR maven, and said “You heard the man. By our next meeting, present the group with a plan that will capture the attention of the public and the media.” The Talking Heads of the Round Table jumped up and congratulated Prince Says-a-Lot, the idea’s originator, on the way out.

When the news circulated around Screen Gems’ stable of actresses, not everyone was happy with the decision to hold an open audition for the female lead. Prince found that out when he was approached by Chantelle Delacroix, a mid-range actress tabbed as an up-and-comer at Screen Gems, who spotted him in the commissary and joined him at his table.

“Hi, hon. I see you’re almost finished. Can you stick around a minute?”

Prince smiled and kissed her cheek. That was easy duty since Chantelle was his main squeeze at the moment. They had dated intermittently for over a year, each breakup followed by a makeup session composed of intense, prolonged, and rigorous sex. They knew their relationship had settled into this pattern of highs and lows, but the highs were so enjoyable neither party was anxious to provoke an interruption. Fantastic sex was not, however, her only redeeming factor. Chantelle was a tall, ravishing redhead in her late twenties who sported a figure frequently described by media moochers and Hollywood hounds as “statuesque.” Her auburn hair was in a chignon this day and complimented by mint green slacks and a matching blouse she filled out admirably.

“Hi, beautiful. You look especially gorgeous today. Are you shooting?”

Her eyes rolled to the top of her head. “I’m in this police drama with Lance LeTool on soundstage C. I wish he’d learn his lines before he comes to set. Every scene with him has to be re-shot which is trying everyone’s patience. He also has an eye contact problem since his are always looking down the front of my blouse. You think I should just flash him and satisfy his curiosity once and for all?”

“I’m not sure that’s a viable strategy,” Prince said with a grin. “I believe Lance is a member of the gay persuasion.”

“You’re kidding. In that case, maybe he’s been looking down my blouse searching for a lost contact lens. If not, the only way he’s kissing me is if my hand is between our mouths. Thanks for the warning. Hey, how do you know that anyway, lover? Have you been two-timing me? Is that why we only shagged five times last weekend?”

Prince laughed. “Don’t you read Selena Richter’s weekly column ‘Hollywood After Dark?’ I’m afraid our boy Lance is known as ‘The Burgomeister of the Bathhouse.’ ”

Chantelle bit her lip and did a faux moan. “At least he’ll keep his hand in his own pants which will be a change from some of the other actors I’ve dated—present company excluded of course.”

“I knew you couldn’t be referring to me,” Prince said with a grin. “When you’re around me, you’re never wearing any pants . . . not for long anyway.”

Chantelle rapped his knuckles with her spoon. “I have a question Burgomeister of the Boudoir. I heard the announcement that the studio is doing a cattle call for an unknown to star in *The Servant of God*. Why wasn’t I or any number of other actresses who’ve paid their dues considered?”

“It’s a PR ploy. J. P. is worried our box office magic is starting to wane. We’ve lost a hundred million on our last three releases and the board of directors has threatened him with slow castration if he doesn’t stem the flow of red ink. I’ll be honest with you—Casting an unknown as St. Joan was my idea. It’ll give us months of free media publicity to build up box office anticipation before the film’s released. If we don’t

get a spectacular candidate, we can revert to our previous approach and look inhouse. This decision isn't a reflection on our current talent pool, it's an opportunity to put ticket sales on steroids and quite possibly discover a previously unknown actress who is perfect for the role."

"I understand what you're saying, lover. My rebuttal is that this is such a plum role that people who've been pulling the freight around here for years should have been given first crack. If auditioning existing studio actresses turns up nothing, *then* dangle the acting carrot in front of all those aspiring Hooters waitresses who think a 40D rack equates to screen competence."

"Chantelle, the problem with your suggestion is that we lose many valuable months of free publicity. Holding open audition tryouts right out of the gate grabs the public's attention and inflames it as the high-profile search continues."

Chantelle frowned and flipped a Brussels sprout at Prince with her fork. "I have a role in mind to see who can make me orgasm the most in twenty-four hours. I was thinking of giving you the part, but I now think I'll hold an open audition for the position. You can't apply since I'm looking for an unknown Chippendale dancer with no acting experience."

"Maybe you should be looking for a stuntman. Word on the street is Chippendale guys can't string two sentences together."

"Didn't I tell you? This is a silent movie. The guy I pick won't have to talk. He just has to be packing."

"It sounds like your requirements are somewhat less exacting than Screen Gems. Outside of porn, I don't know of anybody who's ever gotten a role just by wielding a throbbing tallywhacker."

"Easy for you to say, lover. I think you're being a little naïve. You're so hot-looking you could thrive in Hollywood even if you had a puny pocket-rocket."

"Getting back on topic, my advice would be to give this strategy a chance. You want to be careful not to be perceived as a disquieting influence."

*The Loves of Cinderella*

“I’m just speaking my mind. What happened to the squeaky hinge gets the oil?”

“The door got removed and burned as firewood.”

## Chapter 9

Cinderella didn't know what to expect once inside the Young Actors Studio. It appeared to have been a large warehouse at one time. There was a long stage in the back with a dozen or so arranged settings such as a family room, kitchen, and bedroom. Several rows of chairs faced it for audience observation and critique. Scattered around the floor were several smaller circles of chairs for small group instruction and participant interaction. She looked around nervously when an attractive woman in her forties with blonde-streaked hair wearing brocaded trousers and a rose jacquard top approached her with a smile.

"Hi, I'm Penny LaFarge. How can I help you achieve your dream?"

"I am Cinderella Skolnick and I would like to become an actress. I will work very hard if you give me a chance to learn what I need to know." Cinderella said this with a lot more confidence than she felt.

Penny smiled. Her first impression was this was another hayseed from the cornfields of Iowa seeking to escape a bad harvest. But there was something different about this one. Her voice had an interesting patois, her carriage was erect, she was exceedingly pretty, and she had a sincere and determined bearing about her.

"Then step into my office and let's learn something about you. If I think you have what it takes, I'll give you an overview of our program and see if you still want to proceed. Tell me about yourself."

Cinderella took a deep breath and started with her childhood, schooling, and family life in Donetsky and continued through her flight to safety, time in the UN resettlement camp, au pair training, and experience to date in the US. When she was through, she felt tears forming in her eyes prompted by memories of her parents.

Penny was too dumbstruck to speak but finally put some words together. "That is one of the most remarkable tales of survival and courage I've ever heard. You're a remarkable young woman with unimaginable courage. Now tell me—why are you here? Why do you want to become an actress?"

Cinderella took a deep breath and began. "I want to be an actress because I welcome the challenge and excitement of stepping out of my

shoes and into somebody else's and doing it so well the audience forgets I am acting. I want them to feel I have become that person. It is a profession that allows you to continually grow and become more insightful and proficient with experience. Studying a character in a situation so thoroughly that you understand why they did what they did, or become what they became, strikes me as being one of the greatest challenges one can take on. It seems to me that acting is continually motivating and stimulating. It is not a job—It is a calling. It generates personal and direct feedback which is nourishing. I suspect I am insecure and receiving positive reinforcement would help me overcome those self-doubts.”

Penny was momentarily stunned by the depth of thinking in Cinderella's response. “That's one of the best responses I've received in my twenty years in the business. Most applicants say they want to be an actor to become rich and famous and live the high life. Your thinking goes well beyond that and reflects an understanding of what an acting career can be. We'd be honored to have you in our Young Actors Studio or YAS as it's known. Let me give you an overview of our objectives and what our students are expected to accomplish.

“Our mission is very simple—to help actors break into the television, commercial, and film industry. Our classes and workshop sessions enable new students to cover the entire cycle from scene study, improv techniques, and character development to the audition process—cold reads, call backs, and screen tests. We want students to become sufficiently skilled to productively market themselves for acting roles consideration. Our students will progress through group study, individual study, and workshops on specific topics. All of our instructors are professional actors and will work with you one-on-one as needed.”

“I would love this, Ms. LaFarge. How much does YAS cost? Being a nanny, I don't earn a large salary. Fortunately I have little in the way of living expenses since room, board, and utilities are provided by my employer. I could apply most of my income to acting lessons as long as I have enough for bus fare.”

“I'm impressed with your candidacy. I'll have you meet with our bookkeeper and I'm sure we'll be able to work something out. Since

you have no previous acting experience, you'll begin in our Basics Course where you'll learn specific, actionable skills, and acting tools that will help you develop confidence, enhanced self-awareness, artistic creativity, and a rigorous, professional work ethic. Only after mastering the requisite skills will you be expected to apply them to performance in a scene or role. You'll be taught how to absorb words on a page and bring them to life. You'll do this by creating characters that are emotionally rich, complex, and believable in their relations with others."

"I am so excited by this challenge that I cannot wait to begin. I feel like someone has waved a magic wand over my head and told me this is what I was meant to be."

"Very good. After you're through with tuition arrangements, you may go. We'll see you next Thursday afternoon."

Upon returning home, Cinderella was pounced upon by the nosy sisters who wanted to know where she'd been. "Sightseeing around Los Angeles" was her response and she vanished upstairs to avoid further interrogation and check on Chloe who was enjoying her afternoon nap. The Rockinghams continued to make her life as miserable as possible and were upset that their hostility and venom were met with a pleasant demeanor rather than cowardly withdrawal. Cinderella resolved to withstand their abusiveness, her determination strengthened by the prospect of succeeding in a career that enthralled every fiber of her being.

At YAS, Cinderella rapidly adapted to the techniques being demonstrated and was excited about learning a new creative craft. It was rewarding to meet kids in her own age group who shared her objective of pursuing their dreams and a comfortable life. She studied her homework every moment including nights after everyone else had turned in. Throwing herself into roles not only presented a stimulatory challenge but offered respite from the misery of her circumstances at *Estancia La Paz*. With each class, she strengthened her professional status earning accolades and admiration from students and instructors alike. Her turbulent and challenging childhood proved to be a boon by providing an enriched, complicated, emotional fabric from which she was able to draw.

One day after class, Ms. LaFarge asked Cinderella to remain behind and join her in her office. “I have some great news for you. Your progress has been nothing short of phenomenal. None of the instructors can recall a student who mastered the basic skill set as rapidly as you have. Let’s review where you’ve been and how far you’ve come. You were introduced to the fundamentals of acting through improvisational exercises that became more difficult. You learned how to tap into your emotional reservoir to perform instinctively and spontaneously, critical for acting success. Up until now, you’ve been reading the cookbook. Now we’re going to let you in the kitchen. You will begin acting classes on your next visit.”

Cinderella clapped her hands. “Thank you so much, Ms. LaFarge. I have worked hard for this moment and will not disappoint you.”

“This phase will be very challenging. You’ll learn to improvise with a memorized text on camera. You’ll have the opportunity to relate to the circumstances of the script and make the character your own. We’ll give you some scenes and roles and see what you can do with them.”

Cinderella was elated and even more motivated by the recognition of her improved skills. The talent separation between her and her peers became increasingly pronounced. Better than others, she excelled at responding to the challenge “What would motivate me, the actor, to behave in the way the character does?” She advanced to the “emotional memory” techniques of the Stanislavski system which allowed her to incorporate her own feelings and life experiences into the characters she portrayed. She was able to identify common emotions and draw upon her own experiences with those emotions to fill out the character.

After several months of auditioning and on-camera performance, it became apparent to Penny Lafarge and her staff that in Cinderella they had a gem. The youthful blonde’s alluring physical presence resonated with the audience and the breadth and depth of her emotional range delivered a magnetic, sensual impact. In short, her acting skills and maturity were well beyond her years.

Cinderella began to focus on her socialization skills as well. Fellow students in the class naturally gravitated to her positive

radiance and helped her adapt and adjust to contemporary American lifestyle and customs. She retained a slight trace of an accent which added a measure of intrigue and interest to her spoken dialog.

One afternoon after class, Ms. Lafarge surprised her students with an exciting disclosure. “May I have your attention please? I have some important information to share which may be of interest to some of you. A major Hollywood studio, Magnum Screen Gems in Burbank, announced plans for a big-budget blockbuster release. There’s nothing unusual about that, but here’s the fascinating part—they’re deviating from their usual casting process. While the male lead will be an established A-list actor you’ve seen in numerous productions, Prince Charmaine, Magnum will issue a casting call soliciting unknown faces for the female lead. This approach is frequently employed by smaller independent films but is rare for big studio releases.”

The reactions in the room were surprise and excitement. A number of students waved their hands to ask a question.

“Let me finish before I open the floor to queries. As a first round, the studio heads will accept personal appearance or DVD auditions for consideration. These will be screened and candidates who make a positive impression and survive this cut may receive a call-back for a screen test. Now I’ll take questions.”

“What are our chances of getting an audition?”

“To be honest, the odds for any particular individual are low. There are many acting schools in the L.A. area that have turned out hundreds of graduates over the years. The advantage you have, however, is that they’re looking for an unknown actress—a new face. That means actors who’ve acquired movie or TV credits will presumably not be considered.”

“Should we even bother to apply?”

“If you’re in the early stages of your training, the answer is ‘probably not.’ If you’ve taken the advanced workshops and are nearing graduation, then the audition and screen test experience can be helpful. Going on job interviews has value even if you don’t get the job. They give you a better idea of what the employer is looking for. Anyone who’s interested in making a DVD should see me after class. There is a charge for this since it isn’t covered by your tuition.”

Cinderella got in the rear of the line outside Penny's office. Most of the students came out wearing a disappointed look. The door was closed, but through the glass panel Penny could be seen patiently reviewing each student's progress and why or why not auditions and screen tests were a viable undertaking at this point in their careers.

Cinderella was the last applicant and she entered the office and quietly shut the door. She eased into her chair and placed her folded hands in her lap. After a moment of reflection, Penny smiled and opened the interview.

"You have requested a DVD audition. An audition in person is normally preferable. Is there some reason you would rather record your audition?"

Cinderella paused to choose her words carefully before responding. "I work for a family that is very strict and places a lot of demands and constraints upon me. They give me so little time off that a personal audition would be a hardship. I prefer they not know what I am up to at this time."

"Very well. We'll of course comply with your wishes. The reason I'm hesitating is that I look upon your desire for an audition at Screen Gems with some ambivalence. You've been with us only a relatively short time which would normally suggest that I advise you to wait until you have had more performance experience under your belt. I would hate for you to apply now, get discouraged, and give up acting if the results weren't what you'd hoped for."

Cinderella opened her mouth to speak, but Penny held up her forefinger to cut her off. "On the other hand, you have a genuine talent for acting. No, I would go further—you have a decided genius for the performing arts. The instructors caucus at the end of every class and, without exception, everyone's marveled at how quickly you mastered the techniques and how believable you are in role plays. They concur that your remarkable progress makes you a viable candidate for studio consideration. And while you would have benefitted from some additional onstage role play, they feel an audition in front of studio reps would be more instructive and valuable than premature. Therefore, I'll consent to recording your audition and endorse your candidacy if so requested."

“Can you suggest material for me to use? I do not have any experience in these matters.”

“You’ll be facing a lot of competition and want your performance to stand out from other auditions. With that in mind, I would advise you to select something dramatic rather than comedic. Comedy is entertaining and good for the funny bone, but it doesn’t have the same power and gravitas to stir evaluative intellect as does drama. That’s why relatively few comedies win Academy Awards. I would also suggest something classical rather than contemporary. By classical, I don’t necessarily mean Greek or Roman. It could be Shakespearian or its equivalent. The advantage of classical dialog is that it’s difficult for most people to master and those that do have an artistic leg up. I would like to recommend something that can knock their socks off and which I think you can handle.”

“I am excited already. What is it?”

“*Salomé*, a tragedy by Oscar Wilde. Let me give you some background. This is a one-act play based on the Gospel of Mark that tells the story of Salomé whose scorned attempt to seduce John the Baptist leads her to strike a bargain with her sleazy stepfather, King Herod Antipas. Obsessed with his stepdaughter, the king agrees to give her anything she wants if she will perform the dance of the seven veils, something akin to a striptease. After her bump and grind is finished, she demands the head of Jokanaan—that’s John the Baptist to us—a request he eventually grants. In the scene I’m recommending to you, Salomé has just been brought Jokanaan’s head on a silver platter and verbally unloads on him. This is a powerful monologue that can bring people out of their seats if presented properly. Are you game?”

“If you think I can do it, I am willing to try.”

Penny got up and led Cinderella to the script cabinet. She thumbed through some stapled pages until she found it. “I know this is a stretch, but let’s give you an opportunity to make a maximum impact. Take it home and memorize it. We’ll burn your DVD next week.”

Cinderella could barely feel the ground beneath her feet as she walked out of YAS. She half-expected to hear her mother’s voice again, but it did not manifest itself. She did, however, feel its presence and that was good enough. Although she had learned English at her

school in Donetsky, and improved upon it further during her residency in California, she struggled with Salomé's monologue. The language was a bit archaic, literary rather than conversational, and she rehearsed its lines repeatedly until they became more natural. She tried to imagine herself responsible for requesting a decapitation at her mother's behest. Could she muster the anger and vindictiveness necessary to engage a severed head? After hours of line study, she understood why Penny had selected this particular piece. It would require a stretch of her acting skills and give her greater insight into the exacting requirements of the profession.

The following week, YAS's staff set up the equipment to create Cinderella's DVD. Only several other members of the class had opted to respond to the casting call, but they had chosen a face-to-face audition. Two instructors got everything prepped while Cinderella took a final look at the script, inhaled deeply, and went to her designated spot on the stage.

"Okay, Cinderella, we're going to do this in one take because that's all you'll get in a live audition. Remember to speak naturally and forget you're in L.A. You're in some Biblical New Testament country."

"Do you think my monologue is long enough? I would hate to stop talking and see people still looking at me."

"It's more than long enough. Most of the people at your audition will make up their minds in the first thirty seconds."

The camera began to roll and another phase of Cinderella's life had begun.

## Chapter 10

At Magnum Screen Gems, Prince Charmaine threw himself into the talent search. He had been informed his input into the female lead-selection process was critical. The studio had not accelerated the search due to a couple of unforeseen developments. The first was a couple of key money men had been slammed by a recent stock market crash and been forced to modify their letters of intent to delay their funding until better market conditions returned. The second development was several other major studios had scheduled major releases concurrent with *The Servant of God's* time frame and it would be foolhardy to release their product to theater chains in the face of stiff competition. Nevertheless, Screen Gems began wading through the deluge of applicants and inviting women in for their promised auditions. While a few of the applicants had actor training and experience and were scheduled for return screen tests, the vast majority left a lot to be desired.

At the end of the first week of cattle call tryouts, Prince Charmaine and members of the audition staff huddled in a conference room discussing their observations. Comments started making the rounds in no particular order.

"It's too bad we weren't casting for a vampire horror flick," one rep stated. "I saw enough Elvira look-alikes to hold a Halloween party at the Staples Center."

"Based on what I saw, perhaps we should have given Gordon's suggestion more consideration. Maybe he was on to something with the porn angle. Some of the skanks who rolled in here look like they'd pulled triple-duty shifts at a Bakersfield trailer park. Most of the other truck stop queens couldn't coax a boner from a San Quentin inmate pulling twenty years in solitary. Where'd they get the idea that tube tops and spandex tights were appropriate audition attire? What did they think we were casting for—*Hooker Heroine from Heaven*?"

"Some of these darlings were packing some serious weight. If Joan of Arc had been that big, the French wouldn't have needed a canon—they could have thrown her against the doors of the English castles."

“I’ve never seen so many tramp stamps in my life. Some of these ink designs looked like a windshield after a high-speed chase through bug country. Also, whoever’s doing the inking needs a dictionary.”

“I saw the one you’re referring to, but I believe ‘fook’ is the Irish spelling.”

“That rendition of ‘Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star’ was delivered flawlessly, but it lacked emotional depth and artistic titillation in my opinion,” was said to a chorus of snickers.

“Did you see the babe sporting an orange Mohawk? I didn’t know whether she was going trick-or-treating or getting ready for round two of the French and Indian Wars.”

“What did you think, Prince? You have a couple of love scenes with Joan. See anything that puffed your penis?”

“I wasn’t evaluating them from that perspective, but I didn’t see many candidates for Victoria’s Secret,” Prince said.

“That was my reaction as well,” chipped in another observer. “Trucks would brake for roadkill before they stopped for most of these heffers.”

“Okay, enough sport for today,” Prince concluded. “It’s true we didn’t get the results we were hoping for, but all of the applicants were sincere and gave it their best shot. I feel badly about their rejections and hope we didn’t inflict too much psychological damage on them.”

“You’re a nice guy, Prince. I sincerely hope we find someone worthy of you.” He nodded at the compliment. *I just hope we find someone period.*

“How are the ground pounders coming along? Get any hot leads? Cold leads? Any leads?”

A cute girl in a sleeveless cashmere blouse spoke up. “We’re drawing a blank so far. There *is* a lot of interest though. A lot of guys we questioned asked for her name and phone number when we do find her.”

“They’ll have to join the end of a long and growing line. This doll is catwalk material,” contributed her male neighbor at the table.

Prince reflected a moment and said “Be of good cheer. Your activities aren’t a total waste of effort. Let’s keep the process going.

The more sources we eliminate the fewer possibilities remain. The more chaff we throw out the closer we get to the wheat.”

That night Prince lay quietly in his plush bed with Chantelle cradled comfortably in his left arm. They had just completed a marathon make-up session of acrobatic sex and both were sweating profusely despite a lowered thermostat.

“Prince,” Chantelle purred, reaching underneath the sheet and inching her fingers down his rock-hard abs. “How’s the starlet recruiting going? Found anyone with an IQ higher than her bust size?”

“Not yet but that’s our conscious strategy. Did you read the articles in the *L. A. Times*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, and the *Los Angeles Daily News* this week? Have you been watching *Access Hollywood*, *TMZ*, *Hollywood.TV*, *Hollywood Life*, *Hollywood News TV*, *Movie and TV News*, *Hollywood Today*, and the Spanish version’s *The Hollywood Channel*? Screen Gems is getting publicity money can’t buy.”

“Are you open to bribes?” Chantelle asked mischievously.

“What can you bribe me with that I haven’t had for the past three hours?”

“Let me think,” she said, tapping her lower lip with her finger. “You could tie me up and do a bondage and domination thing . . . we could run through the 101 Tantric positions . . . try a little sado-masochism . . . I could go down on you from Friday night until Monday morning. The possibilities are endless and you know how creative I can be.”

“You make a persuasive case, I’ll grant you that. But unless you’re willing to do all these things for Morgenstern, a tectonic shift in strategy isn’t in the cards.”

“I’ll pass. I stopped doing fat, bald old men once I got a few acting gigs under my belt.”

“There will be other roles. Don’t take this as a personal rejection because it’s not.”

“I’m trying to be objective but it’s difficult. If this role wasn’t such a career booster, I could probably be at peace with the decision. I’m filling in the time lapses between roles with commercials and guest appearances.

“I thought you were great prancing around that bedroom telling guys to buy a testosterone booster to increase their blood flow. And you did get ten episodes on that soap opera. What was the name?”

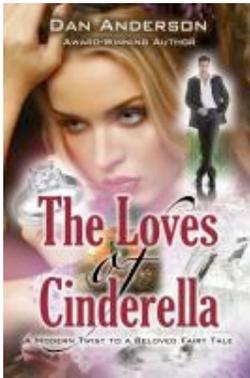
“I think it was *The Young and Restless* and *the Bold and the Beautiful* *Live Days of Our Lives* at the *General Hospital* or something to that effect. That series required less acting ability than faking an orgasm. The fact you couldn’t remember the name isn’t a surprise. In the last episode, I killed myself which was welcomed relief. If it hadn’t been in the script, I probably would have done it anyway.”

“I might have some good news for you. I talked to Travis Warner the other day. He’s directing *The Sheik of Malibu*. He has a meaty part for a gorgeous gal with a great body. Naturally, I thought of you. He’ll be calling your agent with an offer. You and I get to oil up and roll around the deck of an oceanfront mansion in Malibu. Interested?”

“Do I get any meaningful dialog or do I just moan and flail my arms screaming ‘yes, yes, yes’ when we fake the big ‘O?’ I don’t mean to sound skeptical, but I haven’t fared well recently when it comes to Screen Gems roles.”

“This role is tailor-made for you. It presents a great opportunity for you to display your oral and physical assets.”

“Yeah, that’s what they told Linda Lovelace before they shot *Deep Throat*.”



*What would happen if Cinderella lived in the geopolitical situation of the 21st century? This Cinderella is a teenager from Eastern Europe forced by terrorists to flee her homeland. She finds her way to Beverly Hills as an au pair only to encounter new threats from an evil family. How Cinderella overcomes all odds to become a Hollywood actress and find true love with Prince Charming is the stuff of which dreams are made.*

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