

Chapter 1

The Audition

"Hey, watch it, lady!" The yellow cab narrowly missed Mally Winthrop, as she hurried across the intersection of Broadway and 46th Street, the driver giving her the bird as he honked and sulked his way through morning rush hour.

A yellow haze hung over midtown, like a heavy comforter, unwanted at this time of year. The hot, thick air was annoying.

A line of women moved slowly toward the stage door on 46th Street. It was a relief to step out of the sun and into the shade of the theatre this September morning.

Entering the theatre backstage, Mally presented her Equity card and was promptly handed an audition form bearing the number 77. It was standard procedure to fill the card with the usual information, notably: age, height, weight, color of eyes and hair, and a brief listing of one's credits. Protocol demanded the impersonal but necessary form to be turned in to the management holding the audition. Mally smiled, believing any combination of '7' was lucky for her. 'We'll see,' she thought as she headed for the changing area in the basement.

Passing several women moving toward the stage area, she descended the stairs, finding a spot to squeeze into as she worked her way in the clump of animated chorines in the throes of undressing. Tension filled the air and murmurs from the hopeful gypsies punctuated the tight space, adding ambience: a mixture of anticipation, dread and necessity.

Auditions were a necessary evil in a craft which demanded every ounce of one's being. There was also a need to feed, clothe and shelter one's self in order to remain in New York to study, work and grow in the highly competitive world of the New York theatre.

Mally was just one of hundreds of female dancers who would be auditioning for the new Owen Matthews show, *Centipede*, bound for Broadway the first of the year. The production, an all-dance review, would feature cream-of-the-crop dancers hand-picked for type, ability and experience. Those who could emulate Owen's demanding and unique style had the best chance of working in one of his ensembles.

Recently returning from a national tour of *Bravo Business*, one of Owen Matthews' biggest hits, Mally felt confident, fresh and ready for a new challenge and a more substantial credit; one of an original Broadway show. She was excited at the prospect of using her skill and challenged by the fact that there would be others vying for a spot in Owen's universe.

As she removed her street clothes, first kicking off her loafers and sliding out of her jeans, she noted a few pounds missing in recent weeks, as evidenced by the baggy fit of her pants. She took off her jacket and blouse, revealing a lavender blue leotard, chosen that

morning because the color buoyed her confidence. It was by far the most flattering for her. Reaching in her dance bag, she pulled out her jazz shoes and finding a spot to sit, put them on.

"Hey lady, don't I know you?" Mally spotted Patricia Byrne coming toward her. Smiling, she stood and wrapped her arms around her pal. "God, I'm glad you're here."

"You know I wouldn't miss it." Pat and Mally had met at the Equity audition for the national tour of *Bravo Business*. Traveling together and being roommates for nine months, they had developed a deep friendship.

"How many women do you think are auditioning?"

"My guess is 200 at this call, and another 100 at the open call," recited Pat, who was no stranger to this nerve-wracking ritual.

"The numbers seemed to have doubled in a year. Oh well. You ready?"

"Ready, kiddo," said Pat, grabbing her dance bag and following Mally, as more women arrived. "Come easy, go hard, I always say," muttered Pat with a wry air.

The two hopefuls ascended the staircase, made their way to the wings and waited. The first groups were being taught some of Owen's most demanding steps. Looking through the throng, they spotted Jonas Martin, Owen's new assistant, demonstrating the combination they would have to perform to pass muster.

When their numbers were called, they took places in a group of twelve, nervously waiting before Jonas started shouting counts.

"I hate this part," whispered Pat, stretching in place, her heart thumping wildly in her chest. Mally leaned in, "Relax. You'll be absolutely sensational." From then on, it was a blur.

"Step cross touch front, step cross touch back. Kick ball-change, kick ball-change, step *relevé* turn and deep *plié* adding two outside *pirouettes*, then to the left and another kick ball-change, hold. Repeat to the other side, ladies," Jonas chanted, dancing the steps to perfection. Mally and Pat's group observed and followed, each finding her own niche, through her own body. There were four sets of eight as the combination became more complex, punctuated by an increase in the tempo. Then Jonas stopped the group.

"Pat, Mally, down here, please," shouted Jonas pointing to spots in the front line dividing center. "Other ladies, this is how the combination should look."

The pit pianist banged out the music following Jonas' "5, 6, 7, 8!" Again, counting out steps, Jonas led Pat and Mally as they ran the combination adding performance to the technical elements. At the conclusion, they moved back to their former positions and waited. Jonas ran the combination twice more and called a halt. Turning, he shouted out to the house "Anything to add, Owen?"

From the dark a commanding voice was heard. "Jonas, I'm coming up." Shifting from foot to foot, the women watched Owen Matthews, the best director and choreographer in New York, move down the aisle. Taking stairs two at a time, he crossed along the edge of the orchestra pit and strolled center. After consulting with Jonas, he

turned to the group.

Slim and fit, in a dark shirt, tight jeans, and desert boots, he was every bit the icon of a young dancer's dream. His short, cropped hair, dimpled cheeks and mustache only accented his sensual allure. As he spoke, a stub of cigarette clung precariously at the corner of his mouth and around his neck a whistle, known to stop dancers on a dime.

"Ladies, Jonas knows my style inside and out. Pay attention and watch. I don't want to see mechanics. I want subtext, performance. Pull out all the emotion and energy you have and dance as though this is the last time you ever will. You are all giving me about 75 percent, and I want to see double that. Watch the style nuances. For instance, on the step cross touch, your shoulders should dip with the movement, your head held high, the feet very staccato, crisp, clean, punctuated. I don't want to see overcooked spaghetti. I want pointed toes. Exaggerate and accent it." He turned to Pat and winked.

"Miss Byrne, give me more. Jonas, run them again, and let's get going. We have a lot of dancers to see today."

Jonas ran the combination again, eliminating everyone except Mally and Pat, who were told to come back the next day at 10:00 am. Another group of women, waiting anxiously were next to be put through the grueling pace of Owen's demands and Jonas' instruction.

The audition continued to the late afternoon. Dancers came and left. Hearts were broken, confidence, too. The selection process was never easy or fair. Who knew what was in the mind of the power folks making decisions that might change one's life drastically, or remain status quo? Only Owen Matthews knew and he wasn't telling, at least not now.

Deep sighs, pulled muscles, sweaty tights and lost smiles punctuated the run-off of dancers as more and more were eliminated. Being good enough to dance on Broadway was a feat not meant for the faint of heart. Grit was the main ingredient needed to walk on a stage filled with hundreds of others. Talent, tenacity and thick skin were pluses in the audition process. Sweat, fear, loathing and hope were the by-products. In time, some would emerge triumphant, working for a director the caliber of Owen Matthews. Heaven help them!

Chapter 2

Flashbacks

Mally was primed, rested and ready. The women she would meet today were those narrowed down from a larger field of hopefuls from the previous day's audition; she would be competing with the crème