

Chapter 1

The Meeting

“Holy Crap!” Turning the corner of Broadway and 46th, Mally ran head long into a throng lined up under the marquee. “Damn that extra 5 minutes!” The huge clock in Times Square showed 9:30 am.

The stifling haze of the Manhattan morning engulfed her senses, invading every part of her body. Her hot, sticky hands plunged and fumbled anxiously through the cavernous dance bag. Perspiration clung, her forehead and neck taking the brunt of the unseasonable day.

Searching frantically, she found the small white card bearing her name, and the faint graphic of the masks, comedy and tragedy. This item was the necessary passport to audition admittance for a Broadway show. “Thank God, I joined Equity,” she mumbled, as she got in line.

The audition, a necessary evil to gain employment, lay ahead. She would endure still another gut-wrenching experience in hopes of being cast. *Bravo Business*, a smash hit directed and choreographed by Owen Matthews, was being remounted for a national tour. Matthews was famous for setting the bar at the highest level possible! More than any other, this audition would be a race to the finish line, crossed by very few. But working for a Broadway legend was a prize worth the pain.

Mally inched her way along, eyeing the usual mix of competitors: Female dancers of every shape, size, and type: Tall, short, lean, voluptuous, demure, aggressive, hopeful, fitful, ambitious, and terrified. They were all here. She was no stranger to this company of dancers and their endless search for acceptance and employment.

It had been a year since she had tried to pass muster for Owen Matthews and failed. New to New York she arrived from Minnesota, with a head full of dreams, determined to set the commercial theatre on fire. Broadway’s newest dance star! But in the year since the big fish from a small pond, reduced to a minnow in the ocean.

Owen had cut her from the first audition group, eliminating the future hope for Broadway. Imagine! A faint smile crossed her lips as she recalled that wake-up call, the supreme reality check. ‘I’ll be back, Mr. Matthews. You’ll see,’ she thought at the time, forcing herself to accept her dismissal. Indeed, she was back trying again. She’d take another crack at his demanding, unique choreography.

Moving closer to the front of the line, she felt butterflies fluttering in her gut with each step.

‘All right, boys, I know you’re there, but could you fly in formation?’ She giggled at the thought.

“Next!” A brusque, but polished voice, cut through the air. Handing her Equity card to the stage manager, she waited while he examined it, handed it back, and gave her an audition card to fill out.

“Here you are, number 138. Please enter this door and take the first left to the backstage area. The changing area is in the basement, down the circular stairs.” Mally started to go, but paused long enough to notice how attractive he was.

The sudden coolness of the theatre’s interior was a welcome relief from the blistering wait of the past hour. Finding a corner in the change area, she filled out the audition card and set it aside. Mally changed with great effort, the fabric sticking to her sweaty body. Reaching in her bag, she found her dance clothes and jazz shoes in a scramble of layers. Slipping on her tights, she inched them along her moist skin. With her tights on straight, she added high cut trunks and a tank top. With a final tug, the top was in place. “Almost ready,” she muttered, with a sigh. The last step, anklets and shoes, were added with relative ease. Stuffing street clothes into her bag, she put her wallet in an out-of-the-way pocket and zipped it shut. Card in hand she was now ready to meet the stage manager.

Taking a slow, deliberate in-take of air, she slowly let out her breath, rolling her shoulders as she ascended the winding stairs, the sounds of the audition beckoning her. Walking to the wings, she could barely see the top of Manny Johnson’s head as he demonstrated the routine, calling out counts. Clumps of hopefuls watched with dread as others tried to ape Manny, Owen’s right hand and the best assistant in the business.

Groups of six were called, in the order of their given numbers. As the combination was taught and tried, each dancer’s moment of truth rushed by, as the process unfolded. Mally moved in to get a closer look at the required steps, marking the choreography as she absorbed what was coming.

“Next!” Several dancers stepped forward, Mally included. Having collected cards, the attractive stage manager entered the house, and walked to the production table. Mally’s group took their places behind Manny. ‘Keep breathing,’ Mally thought.

The race began. A “5, 6, 7, 8” echoed in her ears as she took off. Copying Manny’s moves, she committed the choreography to memory as she moved through space, aping him with determination.

The line glistened and heaved like a giant serpent bending, twisting, sliding and coiling. All around there was heavy breathing, moisture flying, muscles tensing, and adrenaline in high gear. Mally glanced into the darkened house trying to distinguish the small production staff gathered in muffled unison, as her group sweated and steamed, kicked and turned. Mally’s energy on, her kicks high, her turns strong and balanced.

As the audition continued, Mally’s memory took her back to the sound of her Russian Ballet teacher’s voice, as he banged out a tempo with his cane. Music filled her as an ancient piano provided a perfect Chopin etude, a graceful counterpoint to the smell of rosin, reeking tights, and the ever-present aroma of fried onions from the diner across the parking lot. Her heart and breathing accelerated.

“I need 138. Please stay.” Mally was jolted back to the present. She joined the newly formed line of sweaty dancers, the old memory

of onions and rosin instantly fading away.

"Ladies, report back here at 1:00 p.m. for the singing call. Please wear dresses only, no slacks!" The single voice from the abyss was commanding and loud.

"God, isn't this great? We weren't cut!" A dancer standing near Mally embraced her with enthusiasm.

"Hi, I'm Pat."

"Mally." Smiling, she extended her hand. Pat returned the gesture, enthusiastically pumping her arm.

"God Mally, can you believe we're singing for Raymond Fletcher?"

Mally gasped, "You mean it? He'll be here?" Mally couldn't believe it. Fletcher was one of the giants of Broadway, a composer of brilliant shows. Suddenly she was back in the reality zone.

"Oh no, I came in jeans! I don't have a dress with me, or time to make it home to change before the call."

"Don't sweat the small stuff. I have an extra dress in my bag. I like choices." Mally took a good look at the beautiful young woman, deciding she must be one of the friendliest persons in the five boroughs.

"Come on, I know a place we can change and jazz ourselves up. Your face could use some fresh paint."

Mally followed Pat off the stage, down the circular back stairs and into the changing area. Once back in street clothes they exited through the stage door, walking into the daylight and crossing the congested street. Traffic was backed up from Eighth Avenue to Broadway. The sound of horns blasting intermittently announced disgruntled drivers, as they hung out of vehicle windows, yelling, desperate to get somewhere in the noon clog.

Pat and Mally walked to Howard Johnson's on the corner. They passed behind a row of occupied stools and headed toward the back. The Times Square eatery was jammed with hungry customers all demanding orders at once. The smells of burgers frying in greasy onions and fresh coffee brewing reminded Mally she'd skipped breakfast. Through the crowd and clatter the girls found the ladies' room.

Pat immediately piled the contents of her large canvas dance bag on the vanity. Mally was amazed. Pat's dance bag held dresses, shoes, dance clothes, jewelry, make-up, and sheet music.

"I think you'll look good in this," said Pat, holding up a blue knit dress. "It picks up your amazing eyes. Go try it on!" Mally disappeared into the nearest stall and emerged moments later with bare feet.

"Oh well, we'll have to do something about that," Pat laughed, pointing. "I have sheer tights for you to wear. You don't happen to have a pair of heels in your bag?"

"Nope, I'm not very prepared."

"Now, for your eyes, they need definition," remarked Pat, as she began her meticulous task.

"Careful, I don't want to look like a hooker!"

"Relax, will you?" A minute passed as Mally faced the mirror. She

couldn't believe the stunning, wide eyes that blinked back at her.

The two young women were definitely the antithesis of one another as they stood together. Pat, clearly had strong Irish looks: long, voluminous red hair, startling green eyes, and a statuesque carriage. Mally by contrast was pure Midwest, with bouncy brown locks, fresh peach complexion peppered with freckles, and big blue eyes, like puddles after a generous rain.

"Now a little blusher and you'll be as good as it gets," said Pat, proudly.

"Maybe I'll hit a solid B flat for Fletcher, who knows?"

"Yeah, who knows?"

A small group of tidy hopefuls remained. The sweating waifs had dolled up hoping to attract the attention of the power folks. The small spill of light mid house and constant murmur indicated where final decisions would be made. The group waited anxiously for further instructions.

Pat recognized her number, 85, and moved forward to begin her best 16 bars. When she finished, she heard "Thank you." Her heart sank.

"Let's hear 138, please." Mally walked toward the orchestra pit and handed her sheet music to the accompanist. In spite of her trepidation, her best 16 bars burst forth from somewhere deep.

"Wait!" An attractive middle-aged man had stopped on the other side of the orchestra pit. It was Raymond Fletcher! "Please sing full power, and give me a nice solid B flat." Mally repeated her 16 bars and ended by belting the requested note with every ounce of power she owned.

"Thank you!" Mally retreated upstage and joined Pat as they listened to the competition. The air was thick with anticipation and dread.

An authoritative voice began calling several numbers, adding numbers 85 and 138. Mally was suddenly lifted off the ground as a pair of arms wrapped around her in python fashion.

"We made it, oh God, we both made it," cried Pat. Mally suddenly snapped out of her fog and began to squeeze back as her eyes welled up. The voice continued.

"Ladies, be prepared to sign a standard, chorus contract for a national tour beginning October 1963 and ending August 1964. We will contact you when the contracts are ready. Thank you."

"Mally, come to dinner at my folk's place! I'll call you," suggested Pat. They exchanged phone numbers and hugs.

Mally changed and exited the theatre. At the corner she spotted several buses, but not hers. The press of rush hour in Times Square surrounded her. Suddenly she felt a wet drop splotch her nose as rain began to fall, spilling over midtown and her. Mally quickly found an ample awning under which to wait. As she stood exhausted and eyes closed, she began to drift back to the beginning.