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One from the Hart

Stefanie Powers

Chapter One

A Hollywood Childhood

I was not long into this life when I realized that while I had not been born into its upper echelons, I was indeed and most gratefully a product of the lucky sperm club. It was a matter of luck that my forefathers broke from Poland and joined the hopeful masses emigrating to the United states during the early part of the twentieth century. and it was by even greater luck that Julianna Dimitria Golan, third daughter of Zofja and Frederick Golan, broke from the family farm in New York state to venture, as an eighteen year-old, with her big sister Helena, to the bright lights of New York City to pursue a life in the theater. she eventually found her way to Hollywood, where she married and produced two children, one of whom was me. My mother was born on July 21, 1912, near Middletown, New York, at home on the family farm with the help of a midwife. eventually, more of the family came to Middletown from Poland to seek their fortunes, including one person who was a great influence on her. Uncle Leo taught himself English by reading National Geographic magazines, which he passed on to young Julie. adapting quickly to the New World, Uncle Leo brought with him a sense of adventure and style, resplendent in a photo of him wearing wingtip shoes, posing in front of his newly acquired Model a roadster.

Uncle Leo had panache.

The countryside provided an idyllic childhood, but as Julie was growing

up, the world around her was changing dramatically rural America was being introduced to the telephone, to the moving picture show, and to barnstorming aviators, who toured the country, putting on shows and taking young ladies for rides in their open-cockpit planes. Very exciting for the young Miss Golan. But it was the musical films that caught her attention, and the musical theater's travelling shows that caught her fancy and lured her to the big city.

When the time came for Julie and Helena to spread their wings, they found respectable housing at the home of an Italian lady by the name of Carmella on West 69th street, one block from Central Park. While studying dance and going to all the auditions she could find, Julie and her sister both worked part-time as hostesses at the exclusive foreign film cinema on 57th street called The Little Carnegie Theatre. It was an extremely glamorous art house cinema, serving cocktails, tea, and coffee in the foyer lounge, where speakers from the foreign film companies would address their audiences. The Little Carnegie was the only venue in New York City at the time where foreign films were shown, making it avant-garde and an attraction for interesting people, many of whom became lifelong friends, including some of the filmmakers themselves from England, France, and Germany. Much later in life, while I was filming in England, Mom would introduce me to one of those gentlemen who had been a principal at British Gaumont Films.

In 1934, Mom made the giant step to move to Hollywood, following through on her dream to perform in films. Finding the most glamorous way to travel west, she went to Hollywood by boat, via the Panama Canal. she was quite an attractive package, with lots of shipboard admirers. The captain of the vessel even invited her to travel on to the Far east with him, but she gracefully declined. Instead she stepped off the boat and made her way to Hollywood, installing herself at the lido Hotel just north of Hollywood Boulevard and very close to another landmark glamour spot called the Monticito.

Hollywood Boulevard in the 1930s was still synonymous with the allure of the industry that inspired its development, stretching from sunset Boulevard in the east to just west of laurel Canyon, it switched its name from Prospect avenue in 1910 when the town of Hollywood was annexed to the city of Los Angeles, and a couple of decades later it was very much the place to see and be seen. Deco-era moviegoers patronized such ornate and palatial establishments as the el Capitan Theatre, the Pantages Theatre, the Warner Brothers Theatre, and Grauman's Egyptian and Chinese Theatres. Visitors, celebrities, and wannabes rubbed shoulders at the Spanish-style Roosevelt Hotel and the landmark Hollywood Hotel. The town's elite actors, directors, producers, and writers dined, imbibed, did deals, and held court at the already legendary Musso & Frank Grill. Not yet threatened by muggers, pimps, and drug dealers, Hollywood Boulevard was a street where couples could take a leisurely stroll, film stars could venture out in public, and aspiring actors might just get noticed.

Gravitating toward the daily parade of hopefuls was an eclectic assortment of eccentrics, including the “dress extras” – whose exaggerated demeanour and immaculate wardrobe ensured them a desirable place in the hierarchy of the background “performers,” giving them a natural sense of superiority – and the self-styled “character extras,” each with an attitude commensurate with their adopted persona.

“Nature Boy” wore sandals and white gossamer flowing linen robes, giving the impression of an aesthetic mountain-dwelling mystic who walked the boulevard with staff in hand. There was a lady “Robin Hood” in hunter green shoes, tights, dress, and cape, topped by a chapeau worthy of Sherwood Forest, complete with pheasant plume. she strode the boulevard with defiant purpose, going nowhere. “Goldilocks” was the personification of sweetness, sporting platinum ringlet curls in her hair that were completely inappropriate for her age and size, as well as a youthful costume with gold Mary Jane pumps and anklet socks with lace trim to match her lace gloves, gold bag, belt, and cream-colored dress. They were still in place, though somewhat older, when Mom began to take my brother and me to the movie palaces on Hollywood Boulevard and introduced us to these benign but colourful free spirits.

In the lobby of the lido Hotel, a piano player accompanied tea service that folded into the cocktail hour. Accordingly it was a gathering place for most of the residents, including a young, aspiring photographer. Their relationship began in the romantic atmosphere of those intimate evenings, and slowly my mother became seduced by the lensman whose portraits of her reflected the affection he felt. He became her first husband, and their union resulted in what she considered her greatest joy, my brother, Jeff, and me.

In spite of the fact that marriage and motherhood inexorably altered the direction of her life and aborted the realization of her artistic dreams, I never, ever heard Mom express any feelings of frustration or incompleteness. While there are always people who have more, there are a hell of a lot of people who have less, was the thought with which she raised me. To her mind, the inevitable price for a happy state of affairs was to earn each privilege through work. The work ethic imbued in the children of immigrants and survivors of the Great Depression was the criteria for all praise or reward; and at the end of the day, no matter how much we complained at the time, I can now say that it did, in fact, make me a better person and undoubtedly more able to bear the weight of responsibilities to come. My mother was the source of all stability and fun. one of my favourite childhood memories was when she would be going out of an evening wearing a particular black silk taffeta dress that rustled when she walked. as she would lean down to kiss me goodnight, I’d feel the softness of her silver fox stole on my cheek and smell the intoxicating, fragrances of shalimar perfume on her neck and a gardenia on her purse, thus establishing my sensual criteria for glamour and excitement. I really don’t remember many unpleasant times, with the exception of the tension and unhappiness created by my

father's presence. Nevertheless, there are two things I can thank my father for: the role he played in my conception and the sister I gained as a result of his marriage to his second – but not his last – wife.

Mom always lifted our spirits and made a game of adversity. That's how she got herself through the rough patches, and as best she could, she did the same for my brother and me. Perhaps that is why I always felt I wanted to do things for her: extravagant, adventurous, glamorous things to make her feel better about herself and about her life.

Both of my parents' relatives were in the east, so aside from occasional visits for weddings I did not grow up in the bosom of aunts, uncles, cousins, or grandparents. Our closest relative was Mom's sister Cioci (the Polish word for "aunt," pronounced "cho-chi") Helena, who followed my mother to California in the late thirties. After the war, Cioci Helena married Uncle Howard, whom I adored. A former vaudevillian song-and-dance man, tall and lithe, who did a mean soft-shoe and played straight man for various comedians, my uncle Howard was handsome and joyful. Following vaudeville, he made a successful career transition, first becoming a casting director at Ziv TV studios and eventually an executive at Technicolor. However, my favorite memory of my uncle was when he taught me a soft-shoe dance to the song "on the sunny side of the street." I loved him dearly, and I still remember every step.

Throughout those early years, Mom created an environment for us that reflected her active and rich fantasy life, keeping my brother and me constantly amused with stories about the nightly escapades of our teddy bears, kitty and Tiger. . . . "Did you hear all that racket last night?" Mom would ask at the breakfast table. Wide-eyed, we would respond, "No," and she would embark on the most elaborate tale of how kitty and Tiger had opened all the cupboards in the kitchen, taken out all the pots and pans, and somehow raced up and down the kitchen floor in vehicles fashioned out of cooking utensils. No matter how preposterous the stories were, we loved them, even when kitty and Tiger, beaten and battered beyond repair, disappeared overnight and miraculously reappeared the following day in completely new fur, apparently having gone away to some exotic Teddy Bear spa.

Then there were the nightly dinner table discussions, some of which included visits to other parts of the world. Out would come dictionaries in the appropriate languages while dinner would represent the country of choice. We never went as far as hats and costumes, but we would make up conversations, brutalizing each language and laughing ourselves silly at words like *platz* and *ausfahrt*.

In the neighbourhood where we lived, not far from the house my parents built before getting divorced, there were three outstanding residents, plus our iconic television family – the Nelsons, Ozzie, Harriet, Ricky, and David. Dr. Famularo a respected physician and a pillar of the community;

Miss Woods, a patrician woman of a certain age who had travelled extensively as a foreign correspondent in the Far and Middle east; and the reverend Norman, who was always referred to in those terms: the reverend Norman. The reverend Norman's credentials were greatly enhanced by his long and celebrated missionary service in China, during which time it was assumed – from the impression he gave to all – that he had gathered considerable knowledge of the Chinese people, their customs, and language. In fact, Miss Woods and the reverend Norman had China in common, although they had engaged in completely disparate pursuits. These three people, to varying degrees, impacted my young life.

It was not uncommon in neighbourhoods like ours to have all sorts of door-to-door salesmen ringing the bell. There was the Encyclopaedia Britannica salesman, the Fuller Brush salesman, and my all-time favourite, the Electrolux vacuum cleaner salesman, who would carry in his kit all sorts of bags containing sand, dirt, and small, undesirable particles. To my mother's horror, he would deposit these contents on her carpet and then, magically, his new and greatly improved model with extra suction power would vacuum away the offending soil.

The neighbourhood children ranged from the very tiny and therefore irrelevant to the nearly-teens. I was one of those who fell within the category of the minimum age to hang out with the "cognoscenti." Naturally, like all red-blooded American youths of the era, we indulged in that time immemorial game of you-show-me-yours-and-I'll-show-you-mine. Our sexual curiosity was tempered by the morays of society in the 1950s and the relentless lectures given to us at Sunday school on the subject of mortal sin. Therefore, imagine the combination of shock, fascination, embarrassment, and guilt on the day when I first encountered the forbidden phallus on an adult. The reverend Norman was indirectly responsible for my first encounter with a flasher.

The reverend Norman and his family, including his extended family of the faithful, lived in a large house that, in hindsight, must have belonged to his parish. The daughter of the family was in my class at grammar school, and we frequently walked home from school together, so it was not unusual for me to see her at her house. There were lots of visitors coming and going at the reverend Norman's home, and one day there appeared a Chinese boy in his early twenties. My recollection is rather vague concerning the details leading up to the unveiling, but I do recall that he, who is nameless in my memory, was sitting at the breakfast table. This was situated in a sort of nook, in what seemed to be a large kitchen, where He of Great expectation was reading a newspaper, with more newspapers on his lap, when he motioned to me to approach the table.

There was no reason for suspicion because, after all, we were in the reverend Norman's house. As I arrived at the table, the young man pointed to his lap, whereupon he lifted the newspaper and, lying there in what I would come to know as a semierect state, was . . . his penis. I must have looked

at it long enough for it to have made an indelible impression, because the memory of it is vivid even to this day, obviously indicating, at an early age, my predilection for heterosexuality.

I departed the kitchen and then the house, never to re-enter those premises, and ran non-stop down the block, through our back gate, across the garden, to the back door and the safety of our home. It was long after the reverend Norman and his family left the neighbourhood that I told my mother about the incident. I think Mom was hurt that I hadn't trusted her enough to tell her, but trust had nothing to do with it, and neither did harbouring some sort of Catholic guilt (which I did, of course). On the contrary, it had everything to do with how my mother might have reacted. She could be a tiger when it came to defending her son and daughter. The only other time I encountered a flasher was many years later while riding in the hills of Griffith Park. I kept horses at the L.A. Equestrian Center, and I was exercising them on a weekday by charging up the empty trails of the wonderful park that overlooks the entire San Fernando Valley. I was riding one horse and holding two others by lead ropes, one on either side of me. Suddenly a man in a raincoat, wearing nothing else but black shoes and socks, jumped out of the bushes and opened his coat. My horses reared, and I was so mad that I ran at him with all three horses. I gave him such a piece of my mind that he crawled back into the bushes like the insect he was. I realize flashing is some sort of sickness, but the man looked so silly that it was like seeing a scene out of *Laugh-In*, and I couldn't help but have a good laugh once safely back at the barn.

Our upbringing had a definite European flair to it, with Polish being spoken at home just long enough for both my brother and me to have a good understanding of the language. However, as a preteen who was afraid of appearing different, Jeff soon refused to be spoken to in anything other than English, especially in front of his friends, a rejection he would later regret. As in most quasi-European homes, a small glass of wine might be permitted young people from time to time, so drinking held no mystique for us. Neither did dining rituals. Given this sensibility, it was not surprising that we should become friendly with a family a few blocks away that consisted of a French father, an Italian mother, and a Puerto Rican nanny. Monsieur Bagier was the U.S. representative for Louis Jadot Wines; Madame Bagier was the daughter of Countess Mara, famous in the world of fashion for her men's shirts, ties, and accessories. The Bagiers had lived in Puerto Rico, where their son Robin and daughter Mara were born. So, when they came to live in California, they brought their Puerto Rican nanny with them. In short, there were, at all times, four languages spoken simultaneously in their home.

Because Jeff was the oldest, followed by Robin, me, and then Mara, we formed a perfect gang. And when Monsieur Bagier introduced my mother to the idea of expanding our palates – and, accordingly, our level of sophistication – through the appreciation of the art of fine wine, her fair assessment of our safety under his supervision opened the door to the creation

of our kiddies' wine-tasting ceremonies.

Monsieur Bagier did everything according to ritual, in miniature: we were seated along one side of a long oak dining table, and in front of each of us there were three or four small cordial glasses; a small, empty bowl; baskets of bite-sized pieces of French bread; a tray of crudités; and the bottles of wine for tasting. It is difficult to recall all but the broad strokes of the ceremony, but I do fondly remember Monsieur Bagier's valiant attempt to give us both geography and science in one go. Not until many years later, when I was married to a Frenchman whose property in Burgundy was one valley removed from the domain of Louis Jadot, did some of the lessons of Monsieur Bagier resonate.

When we were older, we were sometimes invited to the Bagiers' parties, and there were always the most beautiful and sophisticated people in attendance. The Hollywood agent Paul Kohner was a family friend and frequent guest, occasionally bringing his daughter Susan with him. Susan Kohner was one of young Hollywood's up-and-coming stars, making her mark in a movie co-starring Lana Turner and teen idol Sandra Dee. The movie was called *Imitation of Life*. The world of films was never more than a whisper away, but I certainly never imagined that one day I too would co-star with Lana Turner and Sandra Dee.

Then again, I also could never have imagined a character like Jack Robinson sweeping into our lives and sweeping my mother off her feet. Tall as a mountain, with a John Wayne swagger, he was her second great love and would become the most indelible father figure in my life. "Uncle Jack" raised Thoroughbred racehorses and drove a Cadillac Eldorado and a Mercedes Benz 300 Gull Wing, each with a solid gold horse head on its hood, a shiny Circle Jr brand clamped to the front and rear bumpers, and, to add to his larger-than-life persona, no less than two distinctly different cow horns with which he could elect to announce his arrival or embarrass me in front of my peers when he dropped me at school. Quite spontaneously, he might present us with birthday cake for breakfast. Uncle Jack was an overgrown kid and an unlikely stepfather, but I loved him.

Among the animals on the Circle Jr ranch in Corona, California (later purchased by Desi Arnaz), were, of course, the blue-blooded Thoroughbred racehorses, who were either sold at auction to equally blue-blooded buyers or raced under the silver and maroon colours of the Circle Jr and trained by Buddy Hersh. In addition, there was also an assortment of other critters, most of whom were rejects from the infield garden at Hollywood Park, which once boasted a "Goose Girl," fully turned out in her Dutch ensemble, parading with a flock of geese in a bucolic setting with exotic fowl, monkeys, baby goats, and baby lambs. The whole improbable yet compatible assortment wound up at the Circle Jr when Hollywood Park redesigned the infield.

In the 1950s, what passed for security on a Thoroughbred breeding farm with highly valuable horses was a device called an electric eye. This system, antiquated by today's standards, consisted of an electric box clamped to a post on one side of an entry/exit; a beam would shoot across to a mirror that reflected the beam back to the box, and only if that beam was interrupted by someone crossing it and breaking the connection would the bells and buzzers go off.

The Hollywood Park peacocks found a great home at the Circle Jr, and they looked majestic as they paraded gracefully around the circular drive, with its centrepiece flagpole and grassy surround encircled by the prized rose garden planted by Jack's mother. Dr. and Mrs. Robinson had come to live with their son and only child, building themselves a house on the entry circle and presiding in an aristocratic fashion over certain details at the ranch. They were an imposing and rather intimidating couple. The doctor had been one of the most successful physicians in Kansas City and one of the first to experiment with the healing properties of the X-ray. Unfortunately, the price he paid for his innovation was the loss of quite a few fingers, because he couldn't be bothered to slow down long enough to shield himself with lead-covered gloves. extremely vain, Dr. Robinson always had on hand no less than two hundred pairs of new and beautifully made broadcloth gloves, which he would discard after only a few wearings. His principle occupation was to board his electric-powered golf cart, upon which he would survey the property and all the activities both in the morning and in the afternoon.

For her part, Mrs. Robinson was like the dowager queen mother, serving tea in the afternoon on beautiful china wearing any number of jewellery ensembles in which she took great pride. she lovingly walked among her roses in the afternoon wearing a large picture hat and carrying a cane, and the peacocks only added to the idyllic ambience of the setting. However, the peacocks quickly fell out of favor after they discovered the mirrored side of the security system, in which they could glory in their reflected beauty, inevitably at the morning's first light, setting off all the alarms and generally causing chaos, much to my amusement.

The ranch, for me, was a bit like Eloise at the Plaza, and I created lots of secret places where I would go with the goat, who followed me everywhere, along with the outside dogs. These were my friends who were at the kitchen door every morning, waiting patiently for me to emerge with a loaf of white bread, which they would immediately consume before following me on my rounds to visit all the horses. The goat was never allowed in the entry circle, near the roses, for obvious reasons. That was until one particular day. For some reason all the adults had gone somewhere, as had my brother, who was nearly three years older than me and did not take to either this life or the horses. Normally Jeff would go off with his father while Mom and I spent weekends at the ranch. I must have been somewhere in the area of seven or eight years old, and there were a lot of staff at the ranch to look after me, but being a bit of a tomboy and having all my animal friends to

keep me company, I went off on my own. and what did I come across? The doctor's golf cart.

The dogs would have no part of it, but the goat quite liked it and climbed up into the seat next to me. somehow I got the damned thing started after lots of false stops and starts, and I managed to move forward at quite a nice pace with the goat beside me. I think we ran out of steam halfway around the entry circle, which meant we had to dismount and I had to try to push the golf cart back to where I found it. This was, of course, impossible for me. Running to find help, I completely forgot that I had left the goat behind. I must have been gone for quite awhile, because when I returned with the help they took one look at the roses and gasped in horror. The goat had done its best to consume most of the flowers, and there was going to be hell to pay.

Henceforth, I was only allowed to visit the goat at the far end of the property, where it was tethered on a long line for most of the rest of its life. Meanwhile, since it appeared that I had so much time to get into trouble, I was given a full schedule of chores, some of which allowed me to put my hands on the horses and begin to learn about how to care for them and, most important, how to commit to the life of the animals in your care. as for the goat, I am consoled by the knowledge that the head gardener promised me that, whenever possible, he would deliver roses to my delinquent friend.

Thus began my great allegiance to the animal kingdom, and a love affair that would last a lifetime.