

# TOM SELLECK

YOU  
NEVER  
KNOW

*A Memoir*

WITH ELLIS HENICAN



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**DEYST.**

*An Imprint of* WILLIAM MORROW

## Dedication

*For Jillie and Hannah  
Kevin  
My mom and dad*

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## Prologue

### Mulholland Drive

On a sweeping turn, one of the wheels slipped off the pavement onto the soft dirt shoulder. The rear-engine car immediately lost traction, went into an uncontrolled skid and over the edge. Everything after that seemed to slow down. I was in the passenger seat as the car floated in the air, turning over on its axis. We had been bowling, and the two bowling balls flew around the cabin, seeking and all too often *finding* their target. It was a dark night, and I couldn't see where the descent was taking us. Then I felt a painful, overwhelming crunch as the car hit the ground upside down.

Thank God it was over.

But suddenly, we were airborne again. Turning over and over as we fell farther. Then another agonizing crunch, landing on the passenger side.

There was no window by now, and I felt the ground brush my right arm, somehow not crushing it as the car kept rolling. Back into the dark air, turning over once more and landing right side up.

I put my left hand up against the crumpled ceiling, bracing myself for what was sure to come next. But it never came. My mom's red Corvair Monza had landed on a flat spot on the steep slope and rested there. There was an eerie quiet of settling metal.

I *thought* I was thinking clearly. The Showmen were blaring on the radio: "Rock 'n' roll will stand." I turned off the radio. I turned off the headlights. The headlights were gone. I turned off the engine, which was no longer running. I guess I wasn't thinking very clearly.

*What about Vicki!?*

My girlfriend, Vicki Wheeler, was upside down in the backseat. There were no seatbelts in 1962. She was just starting to wake up. As I helped her onto the seat, I could see her blonde hair was soaked with blood.

"Are you okay, Vic?"

"Yeah. I think so."

It seemed to hit us both at the same time. "Where's Steve?" she said.

I had let my friend Steve Lowe drive my mom's car . . . but he was no longer inside. I jumped out and started to yell, "Steve! Steve!" Finally, up from the dark slope, I heard "I'm up here."

"Steve, are you okay?"

"I think so, but it hurts when I move."

I could see there was a house just below where we had landed. One more rollover and we would have landed on their roof . . . or through it.

Then everything started to speed up. The couple from the house came running. "Are you okay?"

Funny the things that come into your mind. *Does everybody say that?*

"I'm okay, but my friend is up the hill and needs help."

I looked below toward the San Fernando Valley and heard a distant siren. I could see an ambulance winding its way up Beverly Glen to get to Mulholland.

I can't remember much about the ride in the ambulance except thinking how much I had screwed up. My parents were not insured for another driver. Especially another teenager. All I remember after that was sitting in the emergency room with the left side of my face swollen up to, ironically, the size of a bowling ball. And my mom and dad running in.

In all my life, I had never seen an expression like the one on their faces. They had gotten the call in the night that all parents dread. In that moment, I realized how dire the outcome could have been.

"I'm okay," I said. I think I was crying. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I repeated over and over.

My mom took my hand, and my dad, interrupting me, said, "Don't worry. Just think about getting better."

Vicki and Steve also ended up at Valley Doctors Hospital in Studio City. Vicki was treated and released. But Steve had a broken pelvis, and we wound up sharing a room. The next morning, I read Steve an article from the *Valley News and Green Sheet*, the paper I used to deliver on my paper route. The headline read "Trio Hurt in Auto's Plunge."

My mom and dad and Steve's parents visited every day. Vicki came with some girlfriends from school. I remember Steve was embarrassed in front of the girls because he was in traction and had a catheter with a urine bag hanging off the side of his bed—you know, teenager stuff.

This being late spring, we both just wanted to get out of there for our graduation from Grant High School. I was out first, but only after they stuck a needle in my left cheek to draw out the swelling that would just not go down. Steve needed to be there for quite a while, but he hobbled through graduation.

There is a point to all this. I had screwed up big-time. And I knew that my parents would take a big financial hit. But even after I recovered, there were no recriminations, no "You're grounded for a year." Nothing like that. They knew they didn't have to push consequences because I would push them on myself. They knew by this time they had succeeded in passing on to me the gift of conscience.

It's kinda hard to explain. But all I know is that when I did screw up, which was a fairly frequent occurrence for a seventeen-year-old, the severest consequence was knowing that I had disappointed my mom and dad.

I don't know how my parents instilled that in me, but they did.

It's not that I was never punished. I got some spankings when I was little, all deserved. But as I got older, I think my parents' discipline started to evolve. My dad took me and my big brother, Bob, down to Van Nuys City Hall for a tour of the police station. I think I was about seven. Bob was nineteen months older. We met some very nice policemen, and we responded to their questions with "Yes, Officer . . . No, Officer." They took us downstairs and showed us some jail cells.

"Is it okay if they go in and see the cell?" my dad said.

The policeman gave my dad a little smile and said, "Sure, Mr. Selleck."

Bob and I anxiously went inside.

"All right, lock 'em up," my dad said.

Without a word, the officer slammed the door shut, locked it, and walked away with my dad, up the stairs and out.

There was a little false bravado between Bob and me, a smug "Yeah, very funny!"

After about ten minutes, it wasn't quite so funny. After twenty minutes, not funny at all.

Soon after that, we heard footsteps coming down the stairs. But no one was laughing. The officer unlocked the cell door, and my dad said, "I don't think I need to say anything."

In our little neighborhood on Peach Grove Street, we weren't supposed to play baseball in the street. Don't tell anybody, but all the kids in the neighborhood did anyway. Unfortunately, I got ahold of one and broke a window in our neighbor's house down the block. All of us scattered to our respective little houses.

I asked my mom, "Are you going to tell Dad?"

"No, I'm not going to tell your dad. *You* are going to tell your dad . . . And no TV till he gets home."

Well, when he got home, I told him straight out. He thought for a moment. I had no idea what was coming next. My dad said, "Thank you for telling me. We'll talk in the morning."

Early the next morning, he popped his head into Bob's and my bedroom with his familiar "Up and at 'em!" He walked me down to our neighbor's house and knocked on the door. When Mr. Rockwell answered, my dad said to me, "Tell him."

"Mr. Rockwell, I'm the one who broke your window."

My dad showed me how to measure a broken windowpane. Then he drove me to the hardware store, where we had a piece of glass cut and got all the supplies we needed for the job. And that's how I learned how to replace a window and not play baseball in the street.

These memories are still crystal clear in my mind. And I think that's the point in all this. The lessons you experience, not the ones you are simply told, are the ones you remember most clearly.

Another memory that's crystal clear in my mind is going off Mulholland Drive. It's kind of ironic that, a couple of years later, the Chevy Corvair was discontinued. Consumer advocate groups made sure of that. They said the Corvair had a tendency to roll over. To be honest, I'm actually not sure that's the case. I drove many safe miles in my mom's red Corvair Monza. But I can personally guarantee that it will roll over if you drive it off a 125-foot cliff.



## Chapter One

# Just Don't Let 'Em Change You

I knew exactly what the problem was.

I had a lot of distractions.

I was living in the Sigma Chi house my junior year at the University of Southern California. They had a pool table in the rec room and a big couch in front of the TV set. There was always a gin game I could jump into down the hall when I was supposed to be studying. Fraternity life was just too much fun. One last chance to be a kid. Occasionally, we would put towels over the drains in our communal shower, flood the second floor, and play slip-and-slide down the hall. Sometimes we'd go up on the roof with the fire hose and attack any open window in the Sigma Alpha Epsilon house across the street. And I had another distraction. Sleep. I had to take an early class schedule because basketball practice was in the afternoon. After late nights of not studying, I was always sleeping through my early classes. Then I'd walk to campus and go straight to the Trojan Grill and hang out with my friends before practice.

Late one morning, I shuffled down the stairs barefoot in my basketball shorts and T-shirt, rubbing sleep from my eyes after a rough night of playing gin. So I was headed to the kitchen to get some coffee. As I made my way past the common area, I heard it, the hum of active conversation. I stuck my head in and saw a large group of women. In the middle of the group was my mom.

"Oh, hi, Mom."

I had forgotten it was the day of the Sigma Chi Mothers' Club Luncheon.

Now, my mom was very protective of all her kids. "Oh, this is great," she said. "They've canceled your classes. Why don't you join us."

"Uh, okay."

"Go upstairs and change, and you can join us in the dining room."

I got out of there as fast as I could, all the time knowing that I knew that she knew.

My mom would never embarrass me in front of others. But I gotta tell you, and you can ask my brothers, Bob and Dan, and my sister, Marti, and they would all say the very same thing. It was next to impossible to slip anything past my mom.

You'd think I might have learned something from my student-body vice president "scandal" in junior high school when I had to give up my office because of a "U" in work habits. Not easy news to bring home to Mom and Dad. Clearly, work habits were a recurring theme for me. I sure had them in sports, but they were nowhere to be found in my approach to academics.

There was one other thing. Colleges sent your grades wherever you told them to. It wasn't like high school, where you had to get your parents to sign your report card. Skipping that step wasn't good for me. No one in the family knew about my declining course load and horrible GPA. My brother Bob might have had an inkling, but he never said anything. Bob was on track to graduate in June. I kinda wished he had stuck around. He was the one person who could give me a kick in the butt, sit me down, and maybe straighten me out. But Bob would soon be off on

his own adventure. A baseball scout named Tommy Lasorda had signed him to a contract with the L.A. Dodgers.

\* \* \*

I was a senior in name only.

Two and a half years at Los Angeles Valley College, two and a half years at USC, and I still wasn't going to graduate. That was growing clearer by the day.

I'd been on academic probation since the second semester of my junior year, which was what happened at USC when your grade point average slipped below 2.0. Now I was about to get bounced from the basketball team. To remain eligible, I needed to carry a course load of twelve units a semester. I'd been skating by—*barely*. But as the 1966–67 season approached, the thin ice beneath me was starting to crack.

As a business major, I had put off the hard courses as long as I possibly could, so the hard courses were all I had left.

My first semester of “senior year,” I had already dropped one class. So I was down to twelve units. Then I took an incomplete in my statistics class, Quantitative Analysis 1, hoping I could use the extra time to catch up. Plus, you had to do your homework for that course. There was a lot of math involved. I had barely cracked the textbook and almost never gone to class. The truth is, there was no way I could pass Quantitative Analysis. I was officially ineligible. Basketball was a real bright spot for me. I was desperate, and I didn't know what to do.

I went to see the professor to plead my case. I really didn't have a leg to stand on, but I had to try.

I didn't know the teacher well, since I'd hardly ever gone to class. He seemed very professorial and somewhat aloof. I explained my situation, what a jam I was in, how much the basketball team meant to me, and how proud I was that I'd earned an athletic scholarship for my last semester. As I told him that I would lose the scholarship, I got embarrassed. I started to cry. I hadn't planned that part. It just happened. I mean, it's not like I was an actor or anything.

Turned out he was a very kind man and gave me a gift D. I was eligible for basketball again.

I was clearly struggling, and the long view wasn't getting any better, despite my momentary reprieve. My spring-semester senior schedule would be even tougher than the fall. After my performance in QA-1, what hope did I have in QA-2? This was not going to end well. I could feel it. Even after five years of college, I wouldn't have enough units to earn my degree.

And with that struggle came a certain amount of guilt. My parents had borrowed the money to send me to college, just as they had for Bob. I certainly wasn't motivated by business school. I'd majored in business because my dad was in business. That's all the thought I ever gave it. I had taken a couple of history electives and really liked those, especially at Valley College. But what are you going to do with a history degree?

I made an appointment to see Dr. William Himstreet, the associate dean of the business school. I had met Dean Himstreet through my parents at football games. His daughter, Sue, was active in one of the campus sororities. He'd always seemed like a friendly guy with a wry sense of humor.

“I need some advice,” I said to the dean as I sat down in his office.

I was about to tell him about my academic struggles and my concern about my eligibility and my fear that I would never graduate. But he was way ahead of me.

“You know, Tom,” he said. “I pulled your transcript, and I have to say, I was very impressed.”

“Oh?”

“Your transcript is one of the most remarkable records of mediocrity I have ever seen. You’ve never gotten higher than a C in your major, and sometimes worse.”

He kinda said it with a glint in his eye. When I asked what I could do about my academic situation, he simply said, “Try harder.”

Of course, Dean Himstreet was right, but I must confess that it was not a new problem. Back when I was at Valley College, I had to take an extra semester because USC decided my grades had been “trending downward.” So I, of course, found a class that was supposed to be an easy A. The History of the American Theater did, in fact, turn out to be an easy A. At some point, the professor, Robert Rivera, told me I’d be a good type for commercials and that he could recommend an agent if I was interested. Well, I wasn’t exactly serious about it, but I’d heard you could make a lot of money doing a commercial. I mean, you never know . . . I went and met the guy. His name was Don Schwartz, and he became my accidental commercial agent.

During my first semester at USC, Don Schwartz called and said he had a job for me. He told me it was an air force training film for their psychiatrists. *Oh-kay*. It was called *The Mental Aspects of Human Reliability*. *Oh-kay*. I was to have three lines as Airman Pickens. *Oh-kay*. The truth is, I never really thought about it as a “job.” To me, it meant a paycheck. One day’s pay at union scale plus per diem.

In a nice way, it was a happy accident. The training film was shot at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson. When I got home from the location, my dad told me that he’d been stationed there as a B-29 mechanic, and at the end of the war, that’s the base he was released from. He returned home to Detroit and saw for the first time his second son, two-year-old Thomas William.

\* \* \*

Word went around the Sigma Chi house that it was easy to get on *The Dating Game*. Someone in the house knew a guy who was in charge of casting the contestants.

“We’re going down to be interviewed,” one of my buddies said. “You wanna come?”

“Okay,” I said, shrugging.

I got chosen. A couple of us did.

Every so often, *The Dating Game* had a segment with a reunion angle. The girl had previously dated one of the three bachelors and then broken up with him. Now she and the ex were on the show together, and the audience was left to wonder: Would she give him another shot?

Students being students, my fraternity brothers had figured out how to rig the game. They’d go on with their real girlfriends and let ABC pick up the tab for an all-expenses-paid date. They’d also have a friend in the studio audience who’d signal the girl in case she needed any help on which chair her boyfriend was in.

The show didn’t seem to have a clue, or maybe they did, and it didn’t matter to them.

I didn’t have a girlfriend. Also, somehow it didn’t seem entirely kosher to me.

I was Bachelor Number 2. As showtime neared, I sat on my stool, getting progressively more terrified. The assistant director took one look at my grim expression and suggested helpfully, “When the revolve turns around, be sure to smile.”

*Be sure to smile. Got it!*

I was in the dark with the other two contestants. My heart was pounding so hard I could almost hear it. Then Jim Lange’s deep baritone came booming through the studio: “It’s time to

meet our three eligible bachelors . . . and *heeeere they are!*”

The revolve began to turn. As we came around to where I could see the audience, the lights went up. I remembered what the assistant director had told me: *Smile!*

By then my heart was pounding so ferociously that when I smiled, my upper lip started twitching in perfect sync with my thumping heartbeat. If you look real closely at the old video, you can actually see the twitch. It’s not like I had a mustache to cover it up.

The girl asked the risqué questions *The Dating Game* was famous for. I had lame answers, and I lost. I wasn’t funny. I didn’t enjoy it. I was scared to death every second I was up there.

Over my time at USC, Don would occasionally send me out on interviews for commercials. Not that I was really in danger of getting one; I had no idea what I was doing. So I gotta say, I was somewhat stunned when Don said, “You got the Pepsi commercial.”

“I did?”

I kinda knew it couldn’t possibly have been my acting ability. Much more likely, it was my *basketball* ability.

In the commercial, my character—excuse me, I didn’t think in those terms back then—the guy in the basketball game fakes to the right, shifts the ball to his left hand, leaves his defender with his jockstrap on the floor, drives to the basket, and stuffs the ball with his left hand. That was easy. I was undeniably well qualified. Even after an insane number of takes, I proudly delivered. Our basketball season had just ended, and I was in basketball shape.

The company moved to the set in the locker room. I hadn’t considered that this was “the money shot” in the commercial, but it was. In the scene, I am sitting in front of my locker, getting slapped on the back (this was before the high-five cliché) and ecstatically chugalugging a delicious Pepsi. Honestly, I was unprepared for all the repetition. And the director didn’t bother to explain why I had to do the scene over and over. In hindsight, I’m sure he thought, *Why bother to explain to this obviously untrained refugee from USC basketball when he won’t have a clue anyway?* I did my best to act ecstatically each and every time, consuming a whole lot of Pepsi. Then the director came over to me, and of course I thought I had done something wrong.

He said to me that “the client” thought the color of the real Pepsi was photographing too dark, and we would have to start over. My stomach was more than full. But hey, it wasn’t my fault, and I was getting paid. So we began again. Once they’d watered down the Pepsi, it tasted like something that came out of the north end of a southbound cow. The truth is, I had always preferred Pepsi to Coke.

Never again.

For some bizarre reason, they asked me back for the nighttime edition of *The Dating Game*, where the winners got to go on fancier dates. And for some bizarre reason, I went back. I was still terrified, I still wasn’t funny, and I lost again.

At that time of life, some guys will do anything to impress a girl. Any girl. I know I would have. I guess going on *The Dating Game* was a tiny prestige kind of thing, something the girls might notice. Like my doing a commercial. I guess I liked it when someone said, “Oh, he’s an actor.” I wasn’t really an actor. It was just something that made me stand out a little, something girls might notice.

About a week after my second *Dating Game* appearance, I got a call from Don Schwartz, my kinda accidental commercial agent. He said a casting director at 20th Century–Fox named David Graham had seen me on *The Dating Game* and wanted to meet me. Don said the casting director had mentioned the Fox New Talent program and thought I might be a candidate.

“Will you see him?” Don asked.

“I don’t know. Why not?”

It wasn’t like I was burning to have an acting career. I’d never given that idea any thought at all. My “career” so far consisted of a Pepsi commercial and an air force training film.

Don explained that Fox and Universal both had talent-training programs designed to funnel young actors into the studios’ movies and TV shows. “Universal signs people and sticks ’em in a show without any training,” Don said. “They just see what happens. If you fail, you’re gone. But Fox will actually give you some training, like the old studios used to do. Acting classes, voice classes, dance classes. And the teachers are supposed to be terrific.”

A couple of weeks later, Don was back on the phone; I had gotten to know him pretty well by then, and I could hear the excitement in his voice. “Fox wants to see you first thing Monday morning,” he said. “I told them that Universal wants to sign you by Tuesday. Then I talked to Universal and told them Fox wants you, and now Universal wants to see you, too. So you have appointments with both of them, but you need to be at Fox.”

In Hollywood, there’s a technical term for the strategy that Don employed. *Total bullshit*, I believe it’s called. It’s also called good agenting.

I don’t remember much about my interview at Universal. It was just a go-see. I think the head of the talent program, Monique James, might have popped her head in, but that was about it.

When Don called, he didn’t reach me at home. I was at the Chapman Park Hotel, just around the corner from the old Ambassador Hotel and Coconut Grove nightclub, with the rest of the USC Trojans basketball team. We had Friday-night and Saturday-night home games that weekend, and we were locked in the hotel from Thursday night through Sunday morning. The coaches wanted to make sure the players ate right, not to mention behaved right.

“When you go to Fox on Monday,” Don said, “they want you to do a scene for them.”

“A scene?”

“A scene from a play.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll bring one of my actresses over. We’ll rehearse with you. You can do a scene from *Barefoot in the Park*.”

“Don, I can’t do that,” I said.

“Don’t worry. We’ll work with you.”

“No! I’m locked in the hotel all weekend. I couldn’t meet with her till Sunday afternoon.”

Sunday was much too late to get started, Don assured me. “Believe me, I have seen your Pepsi-Cola commercial, and you need more time.”

I knew I probably wasn’t going to play in either game that weekend. So I sneaked out of the hotel on Saturday afternoon. Not my finest hour.

Don’s client knew what she was doing. She had studied acting and had far more experience than I did. She was probably hoping to get discovered. She came back on Sunday and worked with me some more. After we got done rehearsing, I went home and practiced all my lines and all my expressions in the mirror. By the time I finished with all that, I swear I knew the scene better than Neil Simon himself.

When I arrived at the studio lot on Pico Boulevard in the heart of Century City, I met with the head of casting, a guy named Jack Baur. Owen McLean, the studio’s VP in charge of talent, was also there. I wasn’t nervous when I walked into the room. At least I didn’t think so, maybe because I really hadn’t made the stakes very high. I was cruising through my lines and my expressions when I reached a spot where my character gets a phone call. Now, most actors in

that situation would just make a fist and hold it up to their ear.

That wasn't enough for me. No. I was going to impress the hell out of them. I noticed a real phone on a table next to the couch.

I picked up the receiver.

The dial tone made me freeze.

I was absolutely stunned. "I don't know what I say next."

As head of casting, Jack Baur had probably heard *Barefoot in the Park* auditioned a hundred times. " 'For a lawyer, I'm some good kisser,' " he said.

I still had the phone to my ear. "Excuse me?"

"That's what you say next."

I fumbled through the rest of the scene, but sadly, my scene partner was dismissed. What a business!

Then Owen said to me, "Since we've gotta make a decision today, we need to talk to our boss."

"Okay."

"Let's go."

I didn't realize I was going with them, but apparently the "we" included me.

So, Jack, Owen, and I walked over to Building 1, the old Fox Executive Building, a grand and very impressive structure that was probably built in the 1930s. They led me down an equally impressive hallway, and we came to a very fancy door. The nameplate read "RICHARD D. ZANUCK."

I knew I was going to see *their* boss. I had no idea I was going to see *the* boss.

The outer office felt like the kind of room where the studio might have hosted elegant cocktail parties or celebrated Academy Award wins. "He's waiting for you," a secretary said with clipped efficiency as the three of us breezed in.

Richard Zanuck was the son of Darryl Zanuck, who cofounded 20th Century-Fox in the 1930s and guided the studio through a couple of its most successful decades. Now his son was in charge. After the formal pleasantries, Jack, Owen, and I sat down in front of the studio president's ornate desk.

"So?" Zanuck asked.

"He did a scene for us, Dick," Owen said, sliding my one-page résumé across the desk. "The kid is pretty green, but that's why we have a talent program. We think he might have potential."

I looked over at Zanuck, who seemed absolutely transfixed by my résumé. Frankly, there wasn't much on it. Certainly, the president of 20th Century-Fox wasn't interested in my Pepsi-Cola commercial and my air force training film.

"You play at USC."

"Yessir."

"I'm a huge UCLA fan."

And there it was: He had invoked what people in L.A. called "the rivalry."

"Well, that's too bad," I answered like a true Trojan.

He came right back at me. "That stall you guys did against us, that was a pretty cheap trick."

The last time USC had faced the undefeated UCLA Bruins, on February 10, our coach, Bob Boyd, had employed a novel strategy. *Stall ball*, it was called, and it was a highly newsworthy event. Passing the ball back and forth, back and forth. Refusing to shoot for two or three minutes at a stretch, just letting the clock run. We slowed the game to a low-scoring crawl. Our maddening strategy came this close to working. We led the national-champion Bruins 17 to 14 at

the half and forced the game into overtime before losing 40 to 35.

“Whatever it takes,” I said with a shrug. Then I added, “Actually, I ride the pine most of the time. But when we prepare for a game with you guys, the players who aren’t gonna see much action run the UCLA offense against the starters. We don’t have a tall bench. So, when we’re running the UCLA offense, I am Lew Alcindor,” the Bruins’ seven-feet-two-inch, high-scoring phenom, soon to become Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Zanuck looked like a kid staring into a giant bowl of ice cream. “No kidding?” he asked.

“No kidding.”

He turned to Owen and Jack and said, “Okay, let’s do it.”

\* \* \*

The whole thing is stunning when you think about it.

A kid goes on *The Dating Game* and, through the machinations of a clever agent, two of the biggest studios in Hollywood each think the other is interested in him. This kid, who has no real acting experience and no real desire to become an actor, ends up bullshitting with the president of 20th Century–Fox and is promptly invited into the studio’s New Talent program. And what seals the deal is college basketball. Go figure . . . You never know. And all of it happened so quickly, I never once stopped to ask myself, *Why? Why am I doing this?* I’m not sure I can answer that even now. I’d never had the slightest interest in acting. Ever. But in my own unplanned way, I had actually accomplished something. I’d been offered an opportunity that others would kill for. I was developing a healthy respect for serendipity.

Don explained the details. The pay would start at the Screen Actors Guild minimum, slightly over a hundred dollars a week, which sounded astronomical to me. I’d been making no more than expense money at my job as a campus representative for United Airlines. SAG minimum would be enough for me to get my own place after the semester and start to pull my weight financially. And did I mention my semester wasn’t going too well?

I went to see my dad at his office to tell him about the offer and get his advice. By then he was managing the Coldwell Banker office for the San Fernando Valley.

“I got this offer to sign a contract with 20th Century–Fox,” I told him.

I explained everything. I may have accidentally left out the part about not graduating. He listened intently, probably for anything he could pick up between the lines. When I finished, he sat for a moment. When he spoke, it was forthright, direct, and unwavering. “Well,” he said, “I think it’s like your brother Bob when he had the offer to sign with the Dodgers. It’s one of those opportunities that’s considered special. And if you don’t go after it, you might get to be thirty-five and have regrets. You might wonder what if . . . ?”

That was all I needed to hear. I wasn’t really asking for his advice about what I *could* do. I was asking so I’d know what I *would* do.

It was at that moment that I was reminded of a phrase he used: “Risk is the price you pay for opportunity.” You know what? I’m not really sure whether my father actually said that or I just think he did. But either way, he’d lived it, that’s for sure.

Then he said, “You’re gonna have to tell your boss at United right away.”

I knew that, though I was secretly hoping he might say, “Aw, that’s okay, son. I’ll call ’em for you.”

That wasn’t my dad.

I said something inadequate, like “Thanks, Dad,” and I got up to go.

As I did, my dad spoke, almost to himself but not really. I definitely heard his words.

“Just don’t let ’em change you.”

Out of the blue: “Just don’t let ’em change you.”

I didn’t say anything else, but I realized how difficult it must have been for my father to give me that advice. Thanks to the management-training program I’d had with United Airlines for my two years at USC, he’d felt I had a leg up in a company whose business he actually understood. Working in L.A. as long as he had, he had to be well aware of the many risks of show business. He’d heard the stories of all the wasted lives. He certainly didn’t want his son to get sucked into that swamp. So he knew the perils. But he still gave his advice freely and without hesitation.

\* \* \*

Many years later, my dad was seriously ill and in the hospital. My mom, my sister, my brothers, and I tried to be there for him. We made sure at least one of us was always by his side. One morning, I was in the hospital room with my brother Dan. My dad had been quiet for a while.

Then he said, “I never played a game of hardball. I never dribbled a basketball until I was well into high school. Don Lund and a lot of my friends always got to play sports.”

He was quiet again.

Then, to himself, he said, “It’s funny the things you think about.”

I looked at Dan. He looked at me. Our father was thinking about what had been and what could have been.

He had grown up in the Depression. His father was a building contractor who needed his youngest son to work with him. My dad’s friend Don had been a first-round draft pick by the Chicago Bears as a running back before deciding baseball was a better career choice. Don had played outfield for the Brooklyn Dodgers, St. Louis Browns, and Detroit Tigers. I’d heard a lot of Don stories over the years.

My dad loved sports. He had always taken a keen interest in supporting his children playing sports. If you ever saw my dad, you could see he had an athlete’s body.

My dad knew something about regret.

Even with all he had accomplished.

With all he had to be proud of.

*What if?*



## Chapter Two

### In the Program

I was really nervous. No, not the kind of nervous where I didn't think I was nervous. I was *really nervous* and I knew it. I was leaving from the valley, having moved back to my parents' house. It was my first day in the 20th Century–Fox New Talent program, and I didn't want to get stuck in freeway traffic. I decided to take one of the canyons.

I headed over the hill, as we called it, up Beverly Glen, and my mind was racing. *What the hell am I doing? I'm just not ready for this. Maybe I could get sick or have car trouble. I could take another day to get my mind right and get off to a better start.*

While I was obsessing, big chunks of road would go by without me noticing. But that was okay. I knew where I was going. I just didn't know where I was . . . *going*.

I reached the top of the hill, the intersection of Mulholland Drive.

About a half mile to my right was the spot on Mulholland where I went off the 125-foot cliff. *Wait, going over a cliff? What's that? Some kind of omen or something? Stop it, Tom! That's really stupid. This is gonna happen. Make the most of it.*

I took a couple of deep breaths and crossed Mulholland and headed down the hill. I remembered what Don had said to me, how lucky I was to be in the Fox talent program, the last of the old studio system.

*Really, what's the big deal? The only thing you know for sure is you'll do this for the next six months. And you'll get subsidized to be exposed to something you never knew you wanted to be exposed to. How bad could it be?*

Beverly Glen zigzagged across Sunset Boulevard and continued down to Olympic, where I turned left. I knew all these surface streets by heart. Growing up in the valley, I was always going to the movies in Westwood and Beverly Hills. I turned right on a side street. I wanted to be on time.

On my left I saw something I'd never known was there. It was the massive studio backlot. The tops of the movie sets were poking up from the greenery. A row of New York City tenements. A solitary church steeple. A western town.

I couldn't have known it then. But within a very short time, that studio backlot would be gone. Sadly, it would be sold off to developers to create what is now Century City. The 20th Century–Fox backlot had become a remnant of a bygone era.

Once I turned up Pico, the intimidating edifice that is the 20th Century–Fox studio came into view. I had driven by it many times, but somehow it loomed much larger now.

The thought occurred to me that I wasn't exactly driving up in a vintage Duesenberg. I was in my beat-up '64 Volkswagen. But the guard gave me a big smile. Courteously, he asked for my name.

"You have a drive-on, Mr. Selleck," he said. "We've been expecting you. Welcome to Fox."

He was really nice. Nothing like the gate guard at Universal on the go-see Don had arranged, who didn't appear to have ever smiled in his life. The Fox guard handed me a map with a

carefully drawn route to my destination. He'd marked Stage 3 with a big X and the number 163. I assumed the number was an address.

As I headed in, I passed the grand Fox admin building, where I'd had my moment of triumph with my new best friend, Richard Zanuck. I saw some modern soundstages on my left, big bare boxes built solely for function. I drove past some rows of charming cottages, the permanent private dressing rooms of the stars, where they could hang out in undisturbed comfort during their downtime.

When I got to the big X on the map, that's when I saw it. Painted on the pavement of an empty parking space. The number 163. How 'bout that? The rookie had his own personal parking place!

Buoyed by my new status, I climbed out of my tiny Volkswagen in a well-rehearsed feat of athleticism and just stood there, looking at the building that was Stage 3. It had an elegant facade in the old art deco style, same as the admin building and the cottages.

I took another deep breath and decided to move out. *Don't know where I'm goin', but there's no use bein' late.*

As I stepped into the lobby, there were two doors on the far wall marked "Stage 3" and "Stage 4." Next to the Stage 3 door was a sign: "PEYTON PLACE. CLOSED SET." All of a sudden, a red light above the door lit up and began to spin, like on a fire engine.

*Wow! Mia Farrow or Ryan O'Neal or Barbara Parkins might be in there, actually acting, at this very moment.*

I looked around. There was a stairway on the left. The sign above it said "TALENT PROGRAM." When I got to the top of the stairs, I put on my game face and went inside. Two or three nice-looking young people gave me nice smiles as they walked by.

At that point, a woman came out of an office. "Hello, I'm Pamela Danova," she said. "I'm the coordinator of the talent program." Her British accent made the whole enterprise seem even more important. "Please," she said, gesturing me into her office. She offered me a seat on her couch and said, "I know this is your first day, so you're probably nervous."

"No, I'm not nervous—just excited," I said, putting on my best *Dating Game* smile.

"I see," she said. "Let me tell you what we do here. Jon Gregory and his wife, Helene, run the dance classes. A very good teacher, Jack Woodford, is in charge of the voice classes. Of course, most of the time, we have acting classes."

"Of course."

That's when Curt Conway, the acting coach, walked in. Pamela introduced me.

"Welcome," he said warmly. "We're just about ready to start. Come on in."

I followed Curt into a large room with a mini-stage and a wide circle of chairs where eight or ten students were already waiting.

"Class," he said, "this is our newest member, Tom Selleck. And you've already met Linda Peck. Tom, this is Linda's first day too."

I took a chair.

"Linda, Tom," Curt continued, "in this class, we do some exercises and some improvisations, but primarily, we do scene study. I'll assign each of you a scene partner. You will rehearse together, and when you feel ready or I feel you should be ready, you'll put it up onstage."

Then Curt kinda got into the weeds. Weeds I had never walked through before. He talked about the Actors Studio in New York. He talked about Stanislavski and Boleslawski. Several times he mentioned "the Method." This went on for some time. But as he spoke, what came through was his passion for acting and teaching, what he kept referring to as "the work."

When class was over, everybody started trailing out. Linda Peck was right ahead of me.

“Excuse me,” I said to her. She turned around.

“I’m Tom.”

“Linda.”

“So, I guess you’ve been acting for a while.”

“No,” she said. “I have never done anything like this in my life.”

“Oh . . . okay. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Did you have any idea what he was talking about?”

“I’m a little rusty on my Stanislavski and Boleslawski,” she said. “I didn’t have a clue.”

“Thank you. I’m right there with you.”

Right then one of the regulars said to Linda and me, “We’re all about to go to lunch. Come on.”

The Fox Studio commissary was a large, bustling room with closely spaced tables, starched white tablecloths, and colorful murals on the walls featuring the abstract likenesses of Shirley Temple, Will Rogers, Janet Gaynor, and other early motion-picture stars. The commissary, I learned later, was built on the site of a French restaurant set.

“Hi, guys,” the hostess said brightly as we walked in. Linda and I followed her and the regulars to a great big round table in the middle of an alcove against the far wall. The hostess took the RESERVED sign off the table, and we all sat down. I didn’t want to rubberneck on the way in and look like a rookie, though naturally I was curious what famous people might be lunching that day. It could have been anyone. Maybe Charlton Heston, who was wrapping up *Planet of the Apes*. Maybe Barbra Streisand. Maybe even John Wayne.

We had a great lunch. Linda and I sat there and mostly listened while the other students talked about their scenes, rated what they’d seen at the movies, and griped about not getting enough auditions. It was nice for us to start to feel a part of the group, and it was quickly becoming clear that the talent-program schedule didn’t exactly operate with commando-like precision.

After lunch, I was sent over to see Sonia Wolfson, a wonderful old-timer in the Fox PR department. She was going to write up a bio on me.

“So, you went to USC on a basketball scholarship,” Sonia said as soon as I sat down in her office.

“I didn’t really have a scholarship,” I corrected her. “I wasn’t actually recruited. See, I was a walk-on—”

“And you were discovered on *The Dating Game*.”

“Well, it was more like—”

“That’s okay, dolly,” she said soothingly. “This is what we do.”

By the time Sonia was done turning my life into her breathless prose, I was a heavily recruited basketball star at the University of Southern California with a prestigious scholarship who was the new rising star at Fox. That guy—not me, that guy—definitely deserved a feature in *Photoplay* or *Modern Screen*. Which I guess was the point of the exercise.

\* \* \*

The next day, Pamela stuck her head into the greenroom and said, “Tom, you have a photography shoot this afternoon with Barbara Parkins.”

Wow! I hadn’t even been at Fox a week, and I already had a job with Barbara Parkins.

“Barbara’s running late,” a secretary told me when I got to the photography department.

While I waited, the photographer came over and explained to me that they were making a poster to promote the actress’s new movie, *Valley of the Dolls*. “Barbara’s face will be tilted back in ecstasy,” he said, “and she’ll have a bedsheet draped strategically over just enough of her breasts. Her costar, Paul Burke, will be embracing her. Except Paul can’t be here. That will be you. Of course, you will both have to be naked.”

“Can I wear my shorts?”

He rolled his eyes. “If you must.”

I’d been sitting for almost an hour when a phone rang and the secretary said to the photographer in a hushed, excited tone, “She’s here. She’s just pulling up.”

Barbara Parkins breezed in. She turned to the photographer and asked impatiently, “So where’s the body?”

I really don’t think she meant it insultingly. She had no idea I was even in the room. But if show business was shaped like a ladder, I suppose I was learning where to find my rung.

When we started the shoot, Barbara had nothing on except the sheet. I had my shorts. Right away, there was a problem. “Steven,” she snapped at the photographer, “I can’t hold up the sheet and embrace . . . Tom? Is that right?”

“Yes, Tom.”

“Tom will have to do it.”

Then to me: “Just hold on to the sheet, Tom. They won’t see it because it’s on your back. So lean in. It’s okay, Tom. Nuzzle me.”

That’s when the photographer weighed in. “Tom, could you give us another inch of right breast, please?”

That was my first job at Fox.

\* \* \*

The first scene Curt assigned to me was just a goofy exchange from the Charles Strouse musical *It’s a Bird . . . It’s a Plane . . . It’s Superman*, which opened on Broadway that year and totally flopped. No, I didn’t have to sing. My scene partner was a seventeen-year-old from Cleveland named Cindy Ferrare. She was very sweet and very pretty. Using her middle name, Cristina, she would become one of the world’s top models, costar with David Niven in *The Impossible Years*, be named “the Face of Max Factor,” and marry and divorce automaker John DeLorean before marrying Tony Thomopoulos, who would become president of the ABC Broadcast Group. She’d host a talk show, then go on to focus on writing lifestyle and cooking books. But to me, she will always be Cindy.

Each time we finished a run-through, she was very nice, very complimentary. I felt I was awful and that she was just trying to help me calm down. Cindy was definitely the grown-up in the room. For our dress rehearsal, the studio wardrobe department provided me with a Superman costume complete with tights. When she saw me in them, Cindy laughed out loud, caught herself, and said, “Tommy, you look just right.”

All my classmates seemed, well, promising. Some had experience. Some had studied drama in college. Some had connections. But anyone could see the potential in all of them. Lyle Waggoner was a big, good-looking, classic-leading-man type. He’d been a finalist for TV’s Batman, the role that went to Adam West. But Lyle wasn’t at all what he looked like. He had an impish sense of humor. Within a year, he’d be a regular on *The Carol Burnett Show*.

The group also had a real international flair. Corinna Tsopei was a Greek model and actress