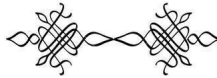


One



Sylvia Stark

Are you ready, Sylvia?" my cameraman, Stuart, asks, pulling me back from my daydream.

"Yes, of course," I reply, plastering a smile on my face.

I am not really ready to do this, but then it is the whole purpose for us standing here in the cool breeze, in front of the large house, in the trendy leafy suburb of Daydreams.

Daydreams. What a strange name for a suburb! Maybe that is why it is so hard to keep my mind on the job.

No, there is more than that to my problems. Deep inside, I am tired of acting like a ditzy blonde with nothing more exciting in life than reporting on royal events and celebrity

scandals. When I left school, I had wanted a more meaningful career, one that gets to the bottom of a story and not all this fairy floss, sweet and fluffy stuff.

That is not what is happening here, though.

I look at Stuart and nod. His short brown hair is just showing from behind the camera, making it appear like an alien mask. For a second, the long lens becomes his nose, but I force the image out of my mind. I can't get distracted again.

He is concentrating like the true professional he is. Boring. He has been married to the same girl, working for the same company, going through the same routine day after day, year after year. Doesn't he ever get bored? Feel restless? I have to remember to ask him that after we finish here.

Here we go!

"Hello, Viewers and Listeners, ABC Celebrity News Reporter Sylvia Stark here. It has often been said that there are two basic stories to define the imaginary perfection of men and women."

"For men, it is Superman, the ultra-powerful male figure who saves the world against evil. He is rich yet humble, powerful yet caring, extremely handsome and yet not conceited."

"For women, it's Cinderella, the lowly downtrodden young maiden who suffers the injustice of others with grace, never getting angry, always beautiful and yet also dignified. She embodies the ideal values of good, piety, and ultimate virtue. It is a story that lives in almost every culture around the world to this day."

Slowly I walk up the driveway towards the house a few steps then turn around again, giving enough time for Stuart to adjust his equipment to keep up and then to scan the countryside.

It is pretty here. My soft pink suit with its tight short skirt fits in perfectly this formal setting. Too bad my blonde curly hair has a mind of its own. One small puff of wind and

POOF! It leaps for joy in all different directions. I run my hand over it to bring a semblance of order before I continue.

Blah, blah, blah.

“Many listeners to this report will know how the story goes from childhood fairy tales, but for those who missed out, I will give a brief overview.”

“The story starts with Cinderella living with her widowed father, Henry Baker. Soon after the death of his wife, Susan, Henry remarries a woman named Charlotte Johansson. After a brief period of marital bliss, he suddenly dies, leaving Cinderella to be raised by her wicked and unjust step-mother, who dotes on her own two daughters. I have to remember to ask if she poisoned him or not! Oh sorry, the story continues.”

“Cinderella is forced to do all the chores, the cleaning, sweeping and the cooking. Poor girl, no wonder she was so skinny! She had to wait on the rest of the household, all the while maintaining her sweet composure. I just want to give her a hug! She is so cute!”

“Anyway one day the Crown Prince invites all the women of the countryside to a grand ball at the palace to choose his wife. For those of us lucky enough to be given a chance to report on the event, it was truly grand! Sigh! It was so romantic! I could have danced all night. I wasn’t really old enough to be there, of course. I’m not that old, really.....Sorry, back to the story.”

“However, the stepmother does not allow Cinderella to attend. The mean old cow. While home alone and almost giving up all hope, Cinderella is visited by a Fairy Godmother who temporarily transforms her into a vision of loveliness and transports her to the ball where she captivates the handsome prince. This is another thing I have to ask. Was this true? Stuart, make a note of that please.”

Stuart tells me to get back to the report.

“What? Get back? Get back to the report? Oh sorry, listeners, I seem to be easily distracted today. I do love a romance story.”

I brush my hair out of my face and smile at the camera again. I’m sure the viewers will think I don’t have two brain cells left inside my head by the time I am through this performance. That was fine when I started out, but I am over this charade. If the ratings were not so good, I would shelve it in an instant.

“As the clock approaches midnight, she must rush home before the spell is broken, and she returns to her shabby clothes. She only makes it to outside the palace walls before, poof! It all vanishes. The beautiful gown, the horses and carriage, everything is gone!”

“I always feel like crying at this point! However, as she runs out of the palace, she loses one of her glass slippers. Miraculously it is the only thing that doesn’t vanish. The prince finds it, and he makes a lengthy search for her. Finally, he comes to her house, and when her foot fits the slipper and she pulls out the matching one from her pocket, the wicked stepsisters and stepmother are furious, but it is too late. Serves them right.”

“Cinderella and the Prince marry and live happily ever after. It is a theme about Good versus Evil where Good is always rewarded after many tribulations. It triumphs over injustice! It rises above adversities! Beauty conquers the Beast!”

"What did you say, Stuart? Get on with it? Oh, sorry, doing it again. Everyone should read and listen to the story of Cinderella, if for no other reason than to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying values and perceptions that shape our modern world.”

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I am outside the house of the Stepmother. Cinderella has been married for many years now, and the wicked old lady is home alone, abandoned by her two daughters she has doted on to the detriment of our princess. It appears all her doting hasn’t bought her daughters’ affections. Serves her right. However, in the pursuit of fair reporting, I have an appointment to discuss the story of her

treatment of her stepdaughter with her. So, I am here to do the right thing. It is time to hear her side of the story.”

I pause for a moment and watch Stuart.

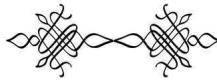
“What’s up, Syl?” he asks, lowering the camera from his shoulder.

I shrug my shoulders.

“Nothing. I just feel I am about to make the biggest mistake of my life. I’m going to need you to help keep me on track.”

“Gladly,” he says, smiling mischievously.

Two



Mercilessly I plough on with my charade, flipping my hair, batting my eyelashes, swooning over images. My God, this is tough. What I wouldn't give for a real investigative story!

“As I walk up the pathway to the house, there is no indication a wicked stepmother lives here. The path is paved with a lovely warm shade of cream coloured pavers and lined with strawberry coloured roses. Hehehe. It reminds me of poor Hansel and Gretel. I bet the old witch had a fancy path like this.”

“The house is large, and elegant, made of beautiful creamy sandstone, two stories with high pillars, quite grand actually. Much better than the old house she lived in when

Cinderella was growing up. I wonder how she afforded something like this? I bet she scrimped on the poor girl more than the story says.”

A stone flicks me on the leg.

“OUCH! What are you doing, Stuart? Don’t what? Oh, don’t judge! Ah, of course. Sorry again. A reporter is supposed to be unbiased when conducting an interview even on a case as prominent and well publicised as this one. Charlotte only agreed to talk with me on the condition I ask reasonable questions and don’t keep challenging her answers. I hope her answers are not too unbelievable then.”

Finally, we have reached the front door. The moment I have been dreading is about to happen. Why am I so apprehensive? Of course, we all know the answers I am going to get. That is what makes this so hard. It has all been told before in so many ways and in so many formats. Movies, books...ummm... movies, books.....

“Now is the moment of truth. I am knocking on the door. Can you hear that, listeners? I am using the solid door piece. Ohhh, it is shaped like a horse’s head. How cute. I am knocking loudly. Knock, knock, knock. I like to do it three times for emphasis. For those who can’t hear this because you are deaf or..... whatever.... It sounds solid like I mean business. Not timid, like a tap, tap, tap.”

“Just look at this view from the front door. How beautiful and peaceful. There is a lake at the bottom of the rolling green hill with a graceful white swan floating in it. She is obviously trying to copy the palace. The driveway we drove up weaved through a row of roses. It must be gorgeous when they are all in bloom.”

I hear a mumble over my earpiece. Quickly I put my hand to my ear so I can hear it clearer.

“Shhh! Don’t interrupt me, Stuart. I’m trying to describe my surroundings for the radio listeners. What did you say? The what is staring at me? Oh, the Butler! Hehehehe.”

Quickly I turn around to face the tall, slim stern-faced man dressed in a formal black and white butler uniform.

“Greetings, sir, I... We have come for our interview with the Wicked Stepmother.... Oh sorry..... with Charlotte Johansson Baker.”

Silently he turns and steps to one side to allow us to enter the short entrance hallway. The closing door causes an echo, and I nervously continue my report, keeping my voice as low as possible. I feel like an intruder even though we have an appointment.

“As we enter, my first impression is the house is amazing with high ceilings, ornate architrave and even a cute white statue of a naked man. He really should have some clothes on. He must be cold. His strategically placed fig leaf is pretty small. Sorry kids, no porn for you.”

“A sweeping staircase leads from the front foyer to the upstairs. The floor is white and grey marble. A grand chandelier hangs overhead. I sure hope that thing is secure. It looks heavy!”

“The Butler motions us along to our right. I’d love to explore this place, but he has a stern look on his face. Clearly, no wandering allowed. On the walls are beautiful prints of landscapes... wait.. they are not prints. They are real paintings! She must have a lot of money she hid from poor Cinderella!”

As I pause to admire the paintings, the butler motions us to continue walking. Why such a hurry?

“Now we are following the Butler, and we are being shown to the drawing room. It is filled with dark leather furniture, soft, creamy carpet and a lovely fireplace. The slight chill outside is nowhere to be seen or felt here. This is not what I expected at all! The rich earthy tones make the room feel warm and inviting instead of cold and scary like I thought it would

be. The old Scrooge was really holding out on our Princess. I am getting quite cross while I sit here waiting for her to arrive.”

Stuart puts his hand on my arm as he scans the room with the camera and squeezes tightly. It is all part of the play acting of our partnership that the public seems to love. What would it be like to do a serious interview? One of substance? Who really cares about the old Cinderella story, anymore? I, for one, am over it. I pull my arm from his grip and pretend to rub it.

“Ouch! Stop that, Stuart! No pinching! Okay, I will try to stay positive and focused.”

“The Butler returns, bringing us a plate of cucumber sandwiches and little cupcakes while a maid carries in a pot of tea and coffee. My, doesn’t she live well?! I bet she is trying to butter us up. I will not be bought, even though they do look nice. Oh, maybe I should have just one.... Oooh, these do taste delicious. Maybe she is not as bad as the story makes out but where is she?”

I turn to look towards the door.

“I hear the sound of footsteps coming up the hall, and the door opens to let a tall, slim lady dressed in a comfortable cotton frock enter the room. Her fashionably styled grey hair is hanging loose to her shoulders. If I didn’t know better, I would think I was sent to interview a cooking expert. Hehehe. Imagine that! Cinderella’s stepmother actually knows how to cook!”

Another mumble comes over the earpiece. Stuart is keeping me focused.

“Don’t you threaten to turn off the recorder, Stuart. I have to give my opinion so the listeners can visualise what we are seeing. Humph! Too bad if you don’t agree,” I say softly, standing up. I plaster a smile on my face to welcome our host. “Thank you for giving us your time, Wicked Ste.... Sorry.”

Quickly I close my eyes, put my head down then lift it up as if to start again and give my sweetest smile. “Charlotte.”

“No problem at all. I apologise for keeping you waiting. I must admit I was surprised at your request for this interview. It has been many years since the story first broke, nearly twenty, I believe, and I have not been asked for my viewpoint for a long time. I have learned to live with the way my stepdaughter has told the story even though I saw it very differently. I suppose it will be nice to get my side of the story out in the public arena although I do not expect anything to change.”

“At first I always declined anyone’s request for information as I feared they would try to turn it against me. The questions were structured to bring out the worst possible answers. Things were pretty bad for a while. The Cinderella story has been very hurtful to me personally as you can imagine but the public seems to love it.”

Her voice is soft and happy, not strict and sharp as I had been led to believe. Instead of any bitterness, the only emotional tone in her voice I can pick up is resignation. How bazaar!

Already I am feeling a little off balance, and I haven’t asked the first question yet. I glance over at Stuart to see his grinning “I told you so” face. How could he know? He is only a cameraman, not a reporter.

“How would you like to do this interview?” Charlotte asks after a moment of my staring at her in disbelief. She holds her composure well.

“I thought I would recount the story as we all know it and you can tell us your side,” I reply nervously. “I prefer if you could give examples instead of just ‘yes’ or no’.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea, my dear. I remember the only time I tried to speak up for myself the reporter asked ‘Have you stopped beating your step daughter?’ If I answered Yes, then it appeared like I had beaten her but stopped. If I answered No, it would seem like I hadn’t stopped when what I meant was I hadn’t beaten her at all!” she laughs

softly as she remembers. “Please have a cup of tea before it gets cold. I may talk for hours, so you will need to keep your strength up.”

Wow! Caring, happy, relaxed? None of the descriptions I would have ever put down to describe the ultimate in Wicked Stepmothers. Just goes to show the importance of not being prejudiced. Yes, Stuart, I know.

