

One



The beach is quiet today, which is completely different to the scenes inside my head. From the outside, I blend in with all the other tourists in the Land of Make Believe, who come to relax, and to let their imaginations run wild. No one recognises me here which hurts my ego terribly. I saw a couple of girls with frizzy blonde wigs and pink suits as I walked to the beach. Are they pretending to be me? That should be an ego boost, but it isn't. No one has approached me or smiled at me. They must think I am just another clone of ME.

‘No one can be as good as the original,’ I tell myself.

I'm sure my parents' broke the mould after I was born. I always wondered why I was the youngest child. My sister, Susie, is five years older than me, happily married with two kids. She has made my parents' proud. I've never heard them say that about me. Well, Mum can't say anything now since she died a couple of years ago. I should have been a better daughter to her.

‘Stop it!’ I chastise myself silently. “I am Sylvia Stark, the poster woman for all the independent thinking women in the Land where FairyTales Began. I am an ABC Celebrity reporter unafraid of asking the hard questions.”

I sigh as I roll over to cook the front of my bikini clad body, being careful to stay on the towel and off the hot sand.

FairyTale Revenge

All that changed about six months ago. The Media conglomerate running the company decided to use 'freelance' reporters only. Ha! Free Lance?! That is the same as unemployed in my dictionary. I wonder what Lance became free from? Free from regular income? Free from responsibility? Free from....

Eekkk!! Cough! Cough! Splutter!

A bucket of cold water splashes onto my hot skin, scaring the living daylights out of me. I spring to my feet, looking for who would have done such a horrible thing. A kid is running away as fast as his little legs can carry him, back to the safety of the tree line so I sprint after him.

"Stop!" I screech.

If he makes it to the carpark, he will disappear. I can't run on hot pavement without my shoes on but I can't let him get away! As I get nearer, I take a dive. I manage to grab a pants leg as I fall face first into the sand. His pants slip down, exposing red and white boxer shorts underneath, trapping him around the ankles. He tosses the bucket and grabs his waistband with both hands and tugs to keep them up. He also ends up face down in the sand.

"Let go of me!" he screams, rolling around, kicking his little legs violently. "Lunatic! What do you think you are doing? Maniac! Call the Police!"

To my horror, his voice sounds like that of a grown man! My overheated brain struggles to connect what I hear with what I am seeing.

He is a vertically challenged adult, otherwise known as a dwarf. Letting go of his pants leg, I pull myself out of the sand and brush it out of my face and front. It has gone down my bikini top, so I start fishing it out before I see him watching me, enjoying the show. Excuse me!

"I ask you the same question. What do you think you are doing throwing a bucket of water on me like that? That was mean. Sniff. ...Sniff....It smells funny. What was in it?"

FairyTale Revenge

What is this in my hair? Gently I ease a pointy thing tangled in my curls and then stare at it horrified. It is a tiny fish skeleton.

Someone has filleted a minnow and now I have its head and tail in my hair!

“Eeek! Fishy bits!”

I jump back flapping my hair wildly to get the stinky things off of me.

A crowd is starting to gather. They must think I attacked the poor little man. They have no idea what he just did to me. He is looking around nervously as if all the tall people are about to swallow him up. Is that what it feels like when everyone is so much taller than you? I am slightly vertically challenged myself, but I still feel like a giant next to him.

Suddenly my sense of humour raises its head. HeHeHe. I could be like a mean green giant and push my weight around here. The bullies at school used to do that towards those shorter than them, especially me. I could never understand why being taller made them any better. The image of me as an ugly faced giant vanishes. Poof! Nah, I’m not made that way.

He doesn’t seem in such a hurry to leave now, in fact, he is starting to move closer to me,. I’m obviously not very scary to him. Does he actually think I will protect him after what he did?

“I’m sorry, Miss. I was told to do that as a joke by a man over by the drinks cart. He said you would laugh,” he mumbles. “I guess you didn’t find it funny after all.”

His face is growing redder by the minute as he looks around nervously. I hope he doesn’t have a heart attack on me. That would be just what I need! I have a first aid certificate, but it is hard to know whether to treat him as a child or an adult. How many compressions per minute? Fast or medium? Feather light or firm? The CPR rhythm song starts up in my mind.

Stayin’ alive, stayin’ alive... uh, uh, uh, uh... staying aliiiiiiiiivvvee.

The Bee Gees really knew how to get the heart pumping.

FairyTale Revenge

I can't start grooving now, though. I need to get this sorted out and then the sand out of my bikini bottom.

"You guessed right. I don't think it is funny at all. Who was it? Where is he?" I demand, glaring down at him before looking around for my hidden attacker. "That really was mean. You scared me. Maybe you should ask your victim next time if they would like to be covered with fishy bits and cold water on their hot skins."

I pull another couple pieces of fish bones from my hair. He picks up his bucket and holds it out for me to drop them into it. How nice. I smile my thanks as his face starts to change from nervousness to joy. The crowd of nosy tourists are starting to wander away. Shows over. Nothing to see here, Folks.

"You are Sylvia Stark, aren't you!? You are the real one!" he says excitedly, doing a cute little hop for joy. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you on TV anymore?"

The mention of my name sends a murmur through the crowd. They turn around and come back towards us. 'Sylvia', 'Celebrity News', and 'So sad' are phrases my brain registers. A shudder runs through me.

I should be happy that one of my fans recognises me. However, being covered in sand and fishy water while dressed in a bikini is not the wholesome image I like to give. I want to be a serious reporter. I have left the fairy-floss celebrity news articles behind me. I am pursuing something of more substance.

Worse yet, he asks me about the one thing I don't want to discuss.

"Yes, well, it doesn't matter who I am or why I am here. I could have you charged with assault for what you just did."

An expression of supreme sadness swamps the little man's face, and his bottom lip pops out. How cute! He is like a child who has just been told he can't have an ice cream. Please don't start crying.

FairyTale Revenge

Oh, who am I kidding? It was sort of funny. In fact, it would have made a great skit on a funny home video show. I struggle to keep the smile from my face and replace it with a scowl.

“Ok, I won’t have you charged, but I want the name of the man who told you to do that to me. He should be punished for that.”

“I’m very sorry, Sylvia. He just gave me ten dollars, this bucket and pointed to you. No names. I needed the money.”

The initial shock is subsiding, and my brain is starting to take in my surroundings more. Several people in the crowd have cameras and are trying to take selfies with me in the background. I need to get covered up and cleaned up fast.

“I’ve got to go. What is your name?”

“Gavin,” he says, breaking into such a large smile, it nearly covers his face. “I truly am sorry. I’ll ask next time.”

Suddenly he is gone, weaving his way through the legs of those around us. I want to tell him that I hope there isn’t a ‘next time’, but he has already disappeared.

“What are you doing here, Miss Stark?”

“Can I get your autograph?”

“What happened in the Cinderella case?”

“Why aren’t you covering Celebrity News anymore?”

“Are you coming back?”

Questions start flying from those around me. Should I answer them? Should I run away?

“I’m here for a holiday. Hopefully, someday, I’ll be back to bring the news to you again. I need to go and get cleaned up now. Thank you for your support. It means a lot to me.”

FairyTale Revenge

I give them a smile, pose for a photo, then duck my head and push my way through. As soon as I am clear, I take a quick look around for someone who may have something against me. A certain 'someone' who wants revenge in a weird way. They've probably fled by now. They would be in another country by now if they only knew what I want to do to them!

First things first, though. I need to get covered up, especially now people recognise me. HeHeHe. It's amazing how my mood has improved. Maybe my life as a reporter isn't over yet. I can just imagine the headlines: "She's back by popular demand."

Harry Parker, you can start to eat your humble pie now! I am not as easy to throw away as yesterday's news. I may not produce as much as other reporters, but the people love me.

By the time I get back to my towel, seagulls are everywhere, fighting over the small pieces of fish left on the sand. The way they are squawking and jumping around reminds me of a certain celebrity interview I did once. Oh boy, the other reporters got so cross when the man kept taking my questions over theirs. HeHeHe. Serves them right for back-stabbing me.

"Shoo! Shoo!" I shout as I snatch up my towel, hat and beach bag.

The birds scream and dive bomb at me. They are not happy with being deprived of their feast. They can have the fish! I don't want them pooping on my towel.

As I turn around quickly to dodge one of the furious birds, I nearly fall over a little girl with blonde curly hair. What is it with these little people sneaking up on me like this? Immediately, my brain registers at least this one is a child.

"Excuse me, Miss Stark," she says shyly. "I just want to tell you when I grow up, I want to be just like you."

My heart melts as I kneel down to give her a hug.

FairyTale Revenge

“Thank you, sweetie. Just remember to be yourself and stand up for the Underdog. That is all I am trying to do.”

What a clever line! Stuart would be so proud of me for thinking on my feet like that. He used to feed cute lines to me over the microphone in my ear. It was quite distracting at times. My own thoughts kept trying to fight with his input while my mouth waited for them to sort out their differences. I ended up standing in front of the camera like a brainless robot. Duh!

However, generally, the whole performance flowed seamlessly and no one watching or listening would have had any idea of what was happening.

“I have a little puppy named Cleo. Does she count?”

“She is a good place to start.”

I wonder what she keeps her puppy under?

Wrapping myself in the large beach towel, I head back to the hotel room. Dark thoughts start flooding back. I am out of a job and all on my own. Now I've been recognised while covered with sand and stinky fish pieces. A little girl wants to be like me when she grows up. That makes me feel so old!

I'm not even sure what 'me' is anymore.

How could things get any worse?

Two



The hotel receptionist looks at me strangely as I walk past. What is wrong with her? I know I don't have my usual smile but what does she expect? I'm grumpy, sticky and tired now as well as covered in sand and stink of fish. Even former top rating reporters get in a bad mood when pushed like this. Maybe after a long hot shower, I'll be able to plaster the smile back on and focus on what I am doing here far from home. I'm sure there are more fishy bits stuck in my hair.

I see him sitting on the end of the bed, dressed in a white loose-fitting cotton shirt and blue jeans as soon as I open the door. His aftershave fills my senses like a powerful drug, chasing away the fish. It is HIM. Adonis, Male perfection, Superman, all wrapped in one. Oh, and I can't forget, Batman. A man of profound mystery. I stop with my mouth dropped open before shaking my head.

Things can't get worse so quickly, can it? It must be all in my mind. The bathroom is right next to the front door, so I turn on the light and strip off. No need to take a second look. He can't be here.

'He' is my ex-partner, the only love of my life. The last time I saw him was when I called the police on him for dealing drugs. There is no way he would ever want to see me again and I suppose I should feel the same way.

FairyTale Revenge

I knew him as Daniel Cook but after finding a pile of passports in several other names, as well as wads of foreign money and a couple of packets of white powder, I didn't know what to call him except 'OUT'. Out of my arms and out of my life. Unfortunately, I have never quite been able to get him out of my heart. Still working on that. It is a work in progress.... very slow progress.

The steam from the shower and the smell of the shampoo finally take over my over-wrought mind. It is impossible to hold onto stress when surrounded by such luxury. My hair has grown back to nearly its full glory since the fire, but I keep it more under control now. I can even tie it in a ponytail after using anti-frizz solution.

As I lean against the shower wall so the hot water can massage my tense back, my mind floats around, swirling like the steam. Why am I here? Why would I remember him now? Am I so insecure in myself that I need the one anchor I had in the past?

I have to focus, something I find hard without Stuart to prod me. Stuart used to be my cameraman until the 'restructure' then he went back to work with the Palace Guards. Our partnership is over even if I manage to get my job back.

It's funny how I never appreciated what I had until it was gone.

Stuart used to flick stones at my legs and pinch my arms as part of the charade we performed week after week. Done under the guise of keeping me focused, people loved it. It is strange how subtle domestic violence against a ditzy blonde was considered entertaining. What happened to all the politically correct viewers?

'Enough, Sylvia!' I chastise myself with the voice of my mother in my head. 'Beating yourself up like this is not achieving anything.'

Actually, it does. It makes me feel worse. Finally, I turn off the water and grab a towel. Enough of a pity party. My life has taken a change in direction, and it is time to grasp it with both hands.

FairyTale Revenge

There is a Stepmothers Unite magazine to start. That is my new project and my main goal in life now. After all the support for the Wicked Stepmother in the Cinderella fairy-tale, I felt compelled to follow it up. I'm still not sure just what to put in the first edition.

I have several interviews lined up for this week. These poor women depend on me to be their voice. Their experiences may give comfort to others in need of guidance. I hope to include favourite recipes and housekeeping tips. They can be helpful for me as well.

I sigh as I step out of the shower. Who am I trying to kid?

I'm not a homebody.

My pet pot plant is a cactus and even it looks sad most of the time. I can't even keep a plant that thrives on neglect! My fingers are definitely not green. Nope. I always wear bright red nail polish on my fingernails.

Nor am I a mother, or a wife, or a girlfriend.... What am I?

Wrapped with a towel around my head and another around my body, I open the bathroom door and peek around the corner. Nope, he isn't there. Whew! Relief along with a tinge of disappointment floods through me. It would have been good to see him again.

Suddenly, my eyes focus on someone else sitting there in the same spot. A petite woman of mystery has replaced my hunk of a man of mystery.

Hayley Dumpt. Also known as Humpty Dumpty, a code-breaking spy and the best friend of Princess Cinderella. Just over six months ago, she took over the Fairy Godmothers Inc. Spy Agency so I guess she is also the Fairy Godmother now as well. I'm not sure what other titles she can claim but 'my friend' isn't one of them. I turn to go back in the bathroom. I don't need this.

How can I be hallucinating? Did I get sunstroke on the beach today? Maybe I have a brain tumour.

"Sylvia, you can't hide from me," Hayley's voice says, penetrating my brain.

FairyTale Revenge

Nope, that voice wasn't from inside my head. I turn to face her, walking up slowly, ready to poke to make sure she is real. I am having an amazingly clear hallucination. I can see every aspect of her grey suit and black shoes. Her dark hair is hanging loosely down her back.

“How did you get in here? The door is locked. No one knows where I am. I'm even in another country.”

“Don't you dare poke me!” she laughs. “I am real. You should know by now you can't hide from us.”

“Us? Who is 'Us'? Why are you here? Why me?” I ask, sitting on the bed next to her.

“It's good to see you too. You could offer me a cup of coffee before you start with all the questions.” She gets up and turns on the kettle, then pulls a face as she smells the coffee packet. “This coffee is a bit old. Maybe I will decline my own offer.”

She looks at home here in my hotel room. My mind jumps to see Daniel standing in my unit many years ago. He loved good coffee. Stale hotel coffee would never make the cut. The vision of him sitting here is still clear. Maybe he left when he smelt the coffee on offer. I can still smell his aftershave. It is stronger here on the bed.

Get a grip, Syl!

I have to focus. Hayley is watching me again, trying to read my mind. I bet it is the hardest code she ever tried to break. HeHeHe.

“Are you here for a social chat or something in particular?”

We have never been exactly chummy since she explained the real meaning behind Cinderella and Humpty Dumpty. That piece won me several accolades within the Media centre but not enough to secure a permanent position during the 'restructure'.

This situation is starting to get awkward. I should have taken some clothes into the bathroom with me.

FairyTale Revenge

“I see you are still able to ask the right questions. I’m glad,” Hayley says, watching me carefully.

“That is not an answer, Hayley. Why are you here?”

She comes to stand in front of me with her hands on her hips. After thinking for a moment, she sits in the chair next to the bed.

“Alright, I’ll cut straight to the point. I need your help.”

“You or Fairy Godmothers Inc.?”

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. It’s not meant to be a trick question.

“Fairy Godmothers needs your help. Ella has asked me to see you personally. You owe her a favour.”

“Me? How? How do I owe her anything? I was prevented from publishing my whole article, and you know it. It would have been an amazing expose but instead, I got two paragraphs on the fourth page. One for Cinderella and one for Humpty Dumpty. I spent months on that project and had nothing to show for it. They used that against me when I got fired. I don’t see how I could owe her anything.”

I stop before I add a few more hurtful details. I am not the staunch royalist as I was before, but it was Hayley’s threat to have me arrested that swung against me as well. In a land where most of the Celebrity News focusses on the Royal family, there is no place for a reporter who they keep under restrictions. No Royal engagements equals no job.

“She arranged for your rescue from Officer Smith in the dungeon. She could have left you there.”

Oh yeah. There is that. How could I have forgotten?

Sighing deeply, I slump my shoulders in defeat as I grab my clothes and head for the bathroom to get dressed. So, that is the reason behind this visit. A call to repay a debt. I had

FairyTale Revenge

been kidnapped by a corrupt officer to trap the elusive Humpty Dumpty. Once I found out who it is, she is not that elusive after all. In fact, she seems to find me way too easily.

A tinge of disappointment leaps through me. I would have preferred it to be a social chat. I don't have many real friends. The hours I had to work with the Media centre prevented that. It would have been nice to have someone to eat dinner with and chat to about the day. Maybe I could even add 'friend' as a new label.

"I guess I can't say no then," I sigh with resignation as I return to sit on the bed.

No need to challenge this. After a week in a dungeon, I needed rescuing. The darkness was so intense when the lights went out that it was impossible to know whether it was day or night. She had to risk exposing who she was to get Stuart and me out of there.

"I would have preferred a bit more of an enthusiastic attitude, but we can work on that," Hayley laughs. "Aren't you going to ask the question that is burning in your brain yet?"

How did she know?

Quickly, I get up and rush to look in the large wardrobe and under the bed. Is he hiding here somewhere? Did she see him?

Surely I do not imagine his aftershave after all this time. It reminds me of a gentle, warm and yet seductive sea breeze. My beach towel still smells of fish so the sea breeze isn't coming from it.

"What on earth are you looking for?" she asks while watching me search the room. The confusion on her face is almost laughable. I guess she hadn't been able to read my mind after all.

"Where is he? Did you see him? Where did he go?"

"Who? When I came in, the door was locked, and you were in the shower. Was someone else supposed to be here?"

FairyTale Revenge

“Never mind. I thought I saw someone from my past. It is ridiculous really. He wouldn’t have....”

I stop mid-sentence and go back to sit on the bed facing her. I’m not sure what she expected. What am I supposed to ask?

“Don’t you want to know what you have to do?” she asks patiently. “You said you would do the job, but you should have asked what it is first.”

Oh, yeah, I guess I should have thought of that. It is all Daniel’s fault. His scent is driving me crazy. I can’t think of anything else.

“That was going to be my next question,” I reply, smiling innocently. “I didn’t think I had a choice and I’m pretty sure you will inform me of what is required.”

“It is all here in this folder,” she says as she stands up and hands me a brown folder. I hadn’t even noticed it sitting on the table. What else haven’t I noticed? Is there a hidden door that lets in random people?

Silently, she picks up the television remote control and presses a button.

“You’ve come a long way, Sylvia. You’ve changed a lot, but you need to watch your step. Doing things like this isn’t good for your image. You will never be back on Celebrity News if this gets out.”

My eyes are riveted to the screen as she leaves the room. There I am in all my sandy, sunburnt, bikini-clad glory, face planting in the sand while pulling down the pants of a dwarf. My heart plummets into my stomach. That is not a good look at all.

Did I really look so wild and desperate? Taken out of context, it appears I was attacking the dwarf instead of him attacking me!

She's right.

The Media world can be cruel.