

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 takes the reader through a young girl's ambitious journey into the entertainment industry, filled with both excitement and struggles. At just ten years old, she participated in the competitive world of *Star Search*, where she performed a spirited version of "I Don't Care," a song she'd heard Judy Garland sing. Though her performance scored 3.75 stars, she advanced to the next round, despite being upstaged by an operatic rival. In the subsequent round, she faced off with Marty Thomas, a friendly competitor who wore a bolo tie and had his hair styled with plenty of hairspray. Their friendly rivalry played out onstage, where she performed "Love Can Build a Bridge" by The Judds. After their performance, Ed McMahon, the host, tried to lighten the mood with a playful interview. When asked about having a boyfriend, the narrator answered honestly, admitting that boys were mean. Despite her best efforts, she was emotionally affected by the result, and after a disappointing performance, she was consoled by her mother with a hot fudge sundae.

As the experience continued, the narrator's career took an even more serious turn with an offer to perform in the off-Broadway production of *Ruthless!* In this show, she played Tina Denmark, a sociopathic child star in a musical inspired by classics like *The Bad Seed* and *Gypsy*. The role struck a chord with the narrator, as it mirrored her own life in some ways. The other understudy for the role was none other than Natalie Portman, adding an extra layer of prestige to the already challenging environment. While performing in the musical, the narrator balanced a demanding schedule with schooling at the Professional Performing Arts School. Her free time was spent between dance lessons and rehearsals, mostly at the Players Theatre downtown. Despite the validation of working on a professional production, the grueling nature of the schedule quickly became overwhelming. With performances nearly every day, including two shows on Saturdays, she was left with little time to be a normal child, let alone build

meaningful friendships.

The challenges of being an understudy weighed heavily on the young performer, who had to remain on standby until late at night in case she needed to step in for the lead. Eventually, after months of preparation, she took over the role, but the exhaustion was starting to take its toll. By Christmas, the narrator found herself questioning the demands of the job. When she learned that she was expected to perform on Christmas Day, she broke down in tears, wondering why she had to continue working during such a special time. She reflected on the holiday traditions she had left behind at home in Kentwood, Louisiana, and longed to be with her family. In a move that highlighted her childlike innocence, she made the decision to quit the show and return home, feeling that the pressures of the New York theater scene were too much for her at that age.

Despite leaving the production, the experience was not without its valuable lessons. One of the most important takeaways was how to sing in small venues with intimate acoustics. The audience was close enough to feel every note, and this unique experience of performing in front of just a couple of hundred people became an essential part of her understanding of stage presence. In addition to the emotional growth she experienced, she learned the significance of balancing career ambitions with personal well-being. While her time in New York was undeniably transformative, the desire to return to simpler, more familiar joys like spending time with family during the holidays was undeniable. This chapter highlights the complexities of being a young performer in a fast-paced industry, constantly learning, adapting, and sometimes sacrificing precious moments of childhood.