

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: MOVIES

David was rather gleeful, “I know that you’ve been pissed at me about the novel. But I’ve got some great news. You’re a star! We’ve got you a movie deal.”

I hung up the phone after talking to him for a while. It wasn’t a big picture deal. And it wasn’t a lot of money. But it was enough to make me comfortable for a while.

“We need to celebrate. You need to drink some champagne.”

This was going to be the directors’s first feature. He had been making music videos. But they trusted his eye. They had got a couple of big names, has-beens, but recognizable stars, so that they could sell the picture. I was getting most of my money up front. David had driven a hard bargain for me. But they still wanted me to help write the script. I was going to act as more of a consultant with the actual work to be done by the writer-director Mark Deville.

“This is going to be a tough sell. You’ve got a two thousand page novel. And we’ve got to compact all the action into ninety minutes.”

I hardly thought of it as an action movie.

“People don’t want to watch two talking heads shooting the shit in a coffee bar.”

Had he even read the whole novel?. I wasn’t going to argue with him. I just wanted to do my job. I was going to let him take it from here.

“What do you need from me?”

“I want a story outline. Give me a treatment of the whole thing. I can put together scenes from there.”

I felt as if I was creating a comic book version of the novel. Instead of people talking, it would just read *Pow!* Or *Poof!*. I needed to accept the modern world if I wanted to survive.

“This is therapeutic, Steven. It will help you focus when you write your next book.”

I now felt as if I had written a sprawling tome. They were going to suck all the life out of it.

“Steven, I feel that we both have something in common. I’m on a search for meaning in life. And your book describes just such a journey.”

I listened to his explanation.

“I’ve drawn this map that describes the psychic path that the main character takes.”

“This sounds like a very personal quest.”

“It is!”

I didn’t want to distract him with the teeming mosaic of the characters’ experiences. My vision was more like a great ocean.

“I’m not trying to be too reductive, Steven. But we need a clear conflict. A good guy and a bad guy.”

“It’s not all guys!”

“I know that. It’s only a way of talking.”

I wondered if he really grasped any of the spiritual content of the book. Or did he just rush through that to get to the nasty parts.

“Mark, it’s easy to get distracted from the real meaning of this book.”

“I know that David. I’m seeing something epic like *All the King’s Men* with a little of the wrath of the Kitchen Sink Dramas.”

He was making every effort to make his work sound respectable. I needed to give him a chance even if he didn't have a clue about what he was doing. What was my choice? To go back to my room with book and mope about it. I had already signed the deal. I needed the money a lot more than I needed my principles. I'd get them all the next time out.

"Steven, I understand you. The Elmer Gantry thing. J.D. Salinger. All the great images from the history of American Literature."

He was giving me a gold star, and I only wanted a hall pass to go to the bathroom,

"Good stuff, Mark."

He wasn't a very imposing guy. But he talked with all this macho bravado. I just wanted to pull him from his seat and wrestle him to the ground.

"Do you like him?" David wanted to know about our meeting.

"He's a pompous asshole. He sounds like an illiterate."

"Steven, you can't keep being your arrogant self. It might work when you're fighting the demons in your bedroom. But you've got to get a public face."

I felt that I had told David enough. I wanted to get back to being my arrogant self. But he wouldn't let me hang up.

"We probably should meet. I can help you establish clearer guidelines for the project."

"What are you afraid of? I wrote the book."

"Steven, you're not very good playing with the other kids."

"Who are you now? The recess monitor."

"Nice title. I just need you to be clear about this deal. We've got the money. So we have to live up to our end of the agreement."

"I'm not a fucking prima donna. It's not as if I had a tantrum in his hotel suite."

David was afraid that I was storing up my anger.

"You have to cool it."

"I was an angel today."

"That's not what I'm talking about. You don't have the track record to go blowing this deal."

"I'll be like a little puppy."

"Just don't shit everywhere around his place."

"What does that mean?"

"You need to restrain your aggressive side."

Why was David coming on so strong? It was only natural to question this deal. I wasn't being unreasonable.

"I'll do my best to hold my tongue."

"That's why we need to meet. I need to make sure that we're on the same page."

"Thirty four. I'm always on page thirty four."

He became perturbed, "I'm not into your games."

"Lighten up, David. I haven't done anything wrong."

"Think of this as a whole new beginning. Your novel hasn't done so well. It's overwritten. You could have abridged it a long time ago. But you pushed for this immense volume. You got your wish. But no one in the world cares. It would take a lifetime to read the damn thing."

“You read it.”

“I had to sell the damn thing. Quit whimpering. Get cleaned up, and meet me for dinner.”

“I’ll bring my rattle with me.”

“Can’t you make things simple?”

“I’m a writer. I’m here to embellish.”

“Do that on your own time. Write a short story for therapy. Just put on your best face and show up for dinner.”

I couldn’t let the opportunity go, “David, you argue for our double life, but you want me to act like a choir boy.”

“Do what you want on your own time. If you want to hang out at a leather bar, that’s your prerogative. But show up clean!”

I felt as if the rest of my life was going to be about doing the penance for the wild life that I never even experienced. I wasn’t about to be apologize into eternity. I still needed a better strategy. I hadn’t become upended by Mark. But I was doing my best to restrain myself.

David felt that it was urgent enough for a breakfast meeting. I hated breakfast meetings. I felt as if I was seeing the principle. I was ready for him to pull down a file about my aptitude tests.

“David, I brought my game face.”

“I don’t want you making jokes about this.”

“Being serious is not going to get anything done.”

I saw him cradling his whip in his hand.

“What do you want me to do. Face the wall so that you can give me twenty lashes.”

“I don’t want you to ruin this project.”

“You could have told me that on the phone.”

“I know that Mark has a lot of ideas about the book. You’ve got to let him run with them.

All this stuff about a double life that gets out of control. Blackmail. Intrigue.”

“This isn’t going to be soft-core.”

“Chill out, Steven. Don’t screw this up.”

“I’ve been a good boy up to this point.”

I sat up in my chair.

“You need to be more than good. You have to help him get through all your shit. The faster he gets finished, the better we look.”

“I’m doing the work.”

“I’m here to help. You have to better define what the novel is about. People have secret lives. They want to change the world. They sneak around on their loved ones.”

“Where’s all the altruism that you’ve been pushing. I thought that we wanted to be different. Write a green novel. Save the planet.”

“That will come once we get a little more success.”

“What kind of success? Peeking in people’s bedrooms.”

“Steven, you opened Pandora’s box. Now you want to go philanthropist on me. You just want to get off like the next guy.”

“I want to leave some kind of permanent mark on the world.”

“Give to a charity.”

“You haven’t got me that much money.”

“You know what I mean. Find a cause on your spare time.”

“I’m doing what I can. But you want me to revise my book for Danielle Steele.”

“It’s not that bad.”

I sat there with my coffee and tried to imagine what David really wanted.

“The movie is going to be a detective story.”

“You need a hook. It’s in the novel. It’s just buried pretty deep. No one has that kind of patience.”

“I could give them a shovel.”

“You could screw with them if that’s what you’re about. But I need you for once to do some stock-taking. Rein yourself in. You didn’t do that for the book. This is your opportunity. Ask yourself in basic terms: what is your story? When you can boil it down to a sentence, that is all that you need.”

“We could make a short.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

I had a hard time listening. This was supposed to be my bread and butter. If I did a good job here, it could mean better things. I was open to other opportunities. But Mark had turned a lot of the main characters into minor ones. Unlike the novel, Chloe had stolen something from Cody Brainerd. This was part of the intrigue. He was never in a coma. She never read to him. Alida was only in one scene. Harriet wasn’t even part of the script version. There was nothing at all about politics in the movie. Where was the groundswell? What was I supposed to do?

“You’re going to be cooperative. It’s his book now.”

“It’s always been someone else’s book. First you. And now him.”

“This is different. You took the money. So do the damn work, and we might get more money.”

“Is it all about the money?”

“It’ about surviving. Not going back to a pizza job.”

I tried to take David’s advice. But Mark was getting more and more unbearable.

“She’s got the devil inside her. You know what that means.”

I shook my head.

“She’s dick crazy . She’s just got to have it in her. Any way, any time.”

“That’s sort of jerk thing to say about any woman.”

He got up close to my face and snarled, “I’m just telling it like it is.”

He spoke to me like a wild dog. He wanted me to see his animal nature.

“So you’re telling me that you feel it just like she does.”

“Let’s just say that I know it.”

He spoke like a man who had pushed a woman to betrayal, then swore revenge on her for following his lead.

“Know it how?”

“She doesn’t want to be alone. She just want some inside her. “

I could sense that this knowledge was at the heart of his pick up lines. I tried to imagine it like he saw it. Nothing would stand in the way of his raw appetite.

He explained, "You know how they say it. She's just aching for it. She's waiting for the first guy who can smell it. He's going to go wild in hot pursuit."

"And how are you going to show that on screen?"

"That's the only thing that you can show. It's all in her step. Her whole body explodes with that energy. That's how you cast the role."

He was getting me excited thinking about it. He nurtured the mental image. It made the guy feel way more powerful than he actually was.

"Your book lacks that sizzle. That's why I'm doing the script. I'm putting that pizzazz in the story."

"I wanted to believe that my female characters were more powerful than that."

"That's what gives them their power." He tried to embarrass me, "Haven't you ever been with a woman?"

"You only see one thing!"

"I follow through the end. I don't need thousands of pages to get my point across."

"But you're only preying on the girl's weakness."

"Come off it. Do you want her to do your math homework?"

"I don't want to see her as so needy."

"That's part of her nature."

"Female nature?"

He grinned, "You want me to say that."

"You're making no sense."

"You want these girls to be saints. They don't know how to say no."

"They can see your type coming a mile away."

He was trying to push all my buttons. I let him play the boss. I knew that I couldn't convince him for anything different.

"Girls are going to end up with the same kind of guy over and over again."

"Your charm isn't working."

"To the contrary. I'm a total geek. Why else do you think that I went in to movies? But my routine works every time. It makes the girl fight to be in control."

It was enough to be working with this worm. I didn't want to have to take advice about woman.

"We've been through this kind of thing before. You're way too much of an artist. You expect perfection. We just have to get this thing done."

"I don't know what's motivating you to say that."

"We're on a schedule. They've got a deadline. There's other people involved. They want to start shooting. You just can't say in a month. It has to be done in a week."

"I'm not standing in anyone's way."

"That's how Mark tell it."

"Mark is a twat."

David was becoming impatient with me. There wasn't much else that he was willing to put up with.

"You have way too much ego involved."

"I'm doing a job."

“At your own pace. I don’t even know how you did the novel.”

“I didn’t have a gorilla standing in my way.”

“Throw him a banana and be done with it. What’s the fuss?”

“He doesn’t care for literature.”

“He was hired to do a job. You need to be a professional.”

“He’s deforming the book into something ridiculous.”

“That ridiculousness could sell.”

“I’m over it.”

“You’ve spent the money. You have to work with him.”

“He can’t be worked with.”

With David’s help, Mark was painting me into a corner.

“You need to quit the name calling, and come up with a plan. Figure out what you want from the movie. And spell it out to Mark. If you’re clear about what you want, you are going to make it a lot easier for him.”

“I was clear. That was the book that was published.”

“I worked with you. And it was like pulling teeth. But I understood what you wanted. No one else is going to pamper you like that.”

“What about art?”

“What are you talking about? So he cuts out a couple of scenes with snotty intellectuals drooling in a coffee house. It’ll make pace of the movie a lot quicker.”

“You need to set the context. Not everyone is jacked up on energy drinks. The world’s clock turns a lot slower than people know. If they don’t feel it, they’ll miss it.”

He reminded me, “We’re not making a science fiction movie..”

“I think that’s how he wants it. Mysterious powers. Things blowing up.”

“And you have your monsters. Steven, what is the complaint.”

“My monsters are a lot closer to home.”

“Then live with your demons, and let him direct the movie.”

“I don’t want to sound like every other writer who’s complained about the movie version of his book. But Mark really has no subtlety.”

“It’s a movie. People have to see what’s going on. The picture has to be a picture before it’s moving. You can’t photograph an idea.”

“David, it’s more than that. Film is alive. That is where the ghosts hide. And a good director knows how to bring them to the screen. David just seems as if he has been taken over by the phantoms of the celluloid.”

“Nice analogy.”

“It’s true. That’s why he such a devil.”

I was sure that David identified with Mark because they both shared similar ideas about suffering. Mark had simply made those ideas more explicit. There was nothing left to the imagination. It wasn’t the film maker’s art. He only had an eye for commercials.

“Suffering sells!”

“David, that’s not the point. You don’t want a freak show. We’re not doing the Jerry Springer show. The characters can’t all become embroiled by their own emotions.”

“People like a scandal.”

“We’ve been through this before. That is the end of free thought. The public gets caught up in their own curiosity. It’s a feeding frenzy.”

“People can’t be high and mighty all the time.”

“What happens to your ideas of morality that you defend all the time. It’s a sham! You only roll out your true beliefs so that you can discipline those who won’t go along.”

He seemed more impatient, “I’ve catered to your every whim. Your actions have an affect on other people. You’re not just living on an island.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’ve heard so much about Steven’s troubles. Well, you’ve got a film deal. You have nothing to complain about.”

“Everybody’s doing it, so I’ll just jump off the cliff too.”

“We’re not asking you to drink the Kool Aid. You don’t have to suck someone’s blood.”

“I still have to listen to a damn vampire.”

“He’s writing the script. Let him write.”

“You have no idea what he’s like in there.”

He offered me some advice, “Chill. Get a doughnut and some coffee and relax as Mark spins his tale.”

“I am going to be an embarrassment.”

“At least, you’ll be well known.”

David had made me familiar with a terrible balance between out and out villainy and overactive imagination

“You start stretching the bounds of tolerance. You pretend not to notice how things have been getting out of hand. Maybe you start off staring at your neighbor through an open window. She smiles at you when you get the mail, so you act as if she’s given you permission to spy on her. But that’s not enough. You try to catch a glimpse when she is dressing. But the only way to really see what is going on is to make a real effort on your part. So you’re staring into her window. And each gesture is part of a conversation where she tells you that she wants you even more.”

“What’s your reason for telling me this?”:

“That it doesn’t stop at you accidentally seeing her through the window. This is now the highlight of your day. But you want to be sure that she is giving her permission. You can’t imagine her being rude to you. If she only knew, it would flatter her.”

He takes a drink then he continues, “You’re afraid that you’re going to get caught. You need to know if it’s OK with her. If only she were a little open to new things. Not if she had a lot of experience. A younger girl might be more forthcoming.”

“So you give in to your fantasy. You’ve got a telephoto lens at the pool. Snapping up pictures of college girls. You’re taking something from these girls, something essential. This is life. What makes people tick. And you want to know that she’s digging it too.”

“David, there is no way that anyone is going to go along with any of this.”

“Not if you’ve convinced her of your power.”

“What kind of power is that?”

“The power to see how she really is. That is her hidden desire. She is waiting for you to set her free.”

“No one can set someone else free.”

“Not what you think. What have you been writing about.”

“It’s more about belief. The belief of the watcher.”

“Steven, it gets a lot worse.”

Sure it did.

“He observes her body. And his leering glances memorize every inch of her body. What he cannot see, he fills in with his imagination. Her body is more supple than any other girl that he has seen. She yields to him.”

”That is his belief.”

I had to know, “How can a guy ever be certain..”

“It has to be more than knowledge. It has to be certainty.”

“This is what disturbs Mark the most. Brian. He’s way to extreme for Mark.”

“A real pervert.”

“You know it. But you need him for your story. How do you explain it?.”

“This guy is out there. He is doing something that would be hard for a truly merciless God to forgive. But this Brian is out way beyond that. What would you say, David?”

“He never wants to take no for an answer again.”

“This is pure aggression.”

David put it all in perspective, “The true double. He doesn’t want forgiveness. He just revels in what he does.”

“This is beyond monstrous.”

“It is all that matters to him. He thinks that he can’t be stopped.”

I felt that I was having a hard time being understood by Mark. In many ways, he had come to admire a certain kind of villainy. So it was going to be difficult for him to step back and see himself. He was part of a society that had lost the sense of the double because he had already given in to the dark side

I continued to pursue the topic with David. I thought that he might be more sympathetic to my point of view.

“What does it eventually mean to reveal one’s hidden secrets? The very words will make listener melt based on the very frankness of the confession.”

“You’ve been arguing for art. But you’re getting hung up on melodrama.”

“The shady character steals his best friend’s wife. He knows that the one thing that really turns her on is the very revelation that so humiliates his friend. And he takes advantage of this knowledge like driving a knife into him.”

David loved the exploration of the seamy side. It gave justification to his moral order.

I continued the tale, “What really gets the blood flowing is that raw mix of flesh and alcohol. When her perfume adds to that cocktail.

David seemed engrossed in my story, “He can imagine the trusting face of his friend. But he doesn’t care. He does it anyway. He can’t say no.”

“That is why people find appeal in Mark. When people feel truly helpless, they want more than personal strength. They want the whole universe to feel their suffering.”

“Exactly. The double is all about betrayal. Doing something that is going to reverse the heavens. Something to get’s God’s attention. That is all part of the twisted belief.”

“Is that where Brian comes in?”

“He sees his power in rearranging someone else’s soul.”

“But that belief is nonsense.”

I agreed, “Of course it is. But that doesn’t stop him. He believe that he is on to something cosmic. The physical body of poor Eva is meant to be possessed. It gives him the permission that he requires.”

“But that idea makes it seem as if you go along with Brian.”

“I think that is Mark’s biggest problem with what I’ve written. He can’t tell the difference.”

David warned me, “There’s not much that you can do about it now.”

“Mark doesn’t leave room for another point of view. He has his own problems.”

“You can’t play psychiatrist.”

“Even if I could, I don’t think that it would help the script.”

“So you just have to shut your mouth.”

“We’re back at the amusement park. People getting entertained on their own emotions.”

“That’s what the audience relates to.”

“I wanted a different story.”

“You got it. And it didn’t sell. Now, you have to give in to someone else.”

“David, it’s more than that. He gets off on humiliating me.”

“Don’t give him the ammunition. It’s fiction. Treat it like that.”

“I want to beat the shit out of him.”

“A lot of good that will do.”

“I’ll feel better.”

“For how long?”

There wasn’t much that I could do. I was seeing my own theories in action. It was like trying to stop a runaway freight train. If I stood in front of it, I’d only get crushed too.

I tried to put my problems out of my mind. I let Mark have his say. He would never understand that lovely give and take of the psyche. Everything for him was writ large in the sky. His victory made him think that he had one over on me. That his view of humanity had finally triumphed.

I chewed on the bloody doughnut as he went over the script changes. He was detailing the blackmail scheme.

“She’s set him up all along. Made him do all the work. And that’s how he incriminates himself. He really believes in love.”

What did Mark really believe in? The delights of the flesh. It was morning. I was tired from the night before. But he was jumpy. I wanted him to settle down. He thought that his nervousness gave him an advantage.

“Steven, let’s take a break. I need a cigarette.”

If all the characters were as driven as him, I wouldn’t have a story. No wonder he got off on blood and guts.

After the break, I told him about my theories on the ghosts in the celluloid.

“What does that mean? That we can awaken the spirits in Peoria.”

“That’s always been the hold of the movies. Why they take over the psyche. It’s as if we

have a sacred trust to protect that vision.”

He patronized. There was no magic in his script. David hadn't realized that I had been accommodating all along to this chump. But he thrived on conflict. He did everything that he could to push me.

I felt a giant relief when we were done. I had fought my battles out in private with David. I put on a happy face with Mark. He didn't know how to deal with it. I really got under his skin.

As the film started to go into production, I became excited.

“He's given you permission to be on the set. But whatever you do, I don't want you talking to the actors.”

“OK.”

“You can say hello. You can be gracious. But nothing beyond that. No requests for private meetings. No bull shit.”

“I'm cool with that.”

I had already accepted the massive changes in the script. The focus of the movie was going to be completely different. Mark was going to keep an experimental tone by using a stream of consciousness narration. But everything was changed. It was going to be more of a detective story. Rebecca was going to blend into the main action of the book. It was almost as if everything had literally been squished together.

I did my best to be polite on the set. It was crazy. They were using an old sound stage. And there were sets that they had from other movies. The lights were mesmerizing.

From the moment that they said action, everyone seemed larger than life. It was scary. I didn't feel as if any of it was real. It had this funky air of mystery to it that really freaked me out. I was in awe.

I wanted to tell everyone that they were doing a great job. I wanted the actors to talk to me. I felt as if they were the people who I knew, but with a new identity. If I just approached them, they could explain the secrets that had always eluded me. They were really acting according to the script.

I was on my way out from a day of shooting.

“I really liked your book.”

She was playing Rebecca.

“I didn't think that anyone actually read it.”

“Of course, I did. I always do if there's a book. It's part of my preparation. I really pushed my agent to get this role.”

“I'm surprised that you recognized me. I've been told not to talk to the actors.”

“I'm not a big star. My name's Linda.”

“Thanks for your interest. I really should go. I don't want the security guards reporting on me to the director.”

“Let's get a late dinner. I finish shooting at eight. I need a little insight for the role.”

I remembered Joy's struggle when we did the reading. But this was different. She seemed more professional. There wouldn't be the same games.

“Doesn't it bother you that I make such a fuss about these people who I don't even know? Don't you feel as if I'm just living in my head?”

“That's the charm of it. It gives us a chance to live another life inside someone else's

thoughts.”

“Isn’t there a name for that?”

“Some people call it infatuation. But I don’t want to be so condescending.”

She was eating light, a salad.

“What drew you to this particular role?”

“You don’t know her. That’s what the narrator says. But you give her all these possibilities. I like that. Like you’re the only one in the bar that cares.”

“Some people would call that controlling.”

“It’s because they don’t have any thoughts of their own.”

“Don’t you hate what Mark’s done with the script?”

“I have to admit that it’s different. It only makes my job more important. Even if he doesn’t understand with his words, I can bring the meaning back with my performance.”

I felt good to have an ally.

“All the great performances have always been about heart. I’m not saying that his script is bad.” She continued, “But I can make it come alive.”

“Like the ghost in the celluloid.”

“I love that book,” she smiled.

I wanted her to be more than a screen actress. I felt uplifted by her flattery.

I imagined that I was on the set. Around my life were all these technical people making sure that things were going right. And the actors seemed more vivid than real life. But when the crew shut down, everything went dark. And all the action stopped. I was alone. And my voice echoed on the empty sound stage.