

Ballroom Barbie

by Deanna Rubin

I was seven when I decided I would one day be the best ballroom dancer in the world. I imagined myself in a long sleek dress with lots of sequins, wearing a tiara and bowing to huge applauding audiences. My parents were dancers, and I would tag along to the studio with them at least twice a week. The biggest problem was finding a partner, but that was soon solved when my nine-year-old cousin Jeremy was coerced into learning as well. Everyone at the lessons would ooh and ahh over us, and I do mean over us, as we were two feet shorter than the shortest adult couple. Sometimes they'd even trip over us. We'd scamper around the dance floor wildly, my long blonde pigtails flying out behind me as we foxtrotted.

By the time I was nine I was entering statewide competitions. My mother sewed me big flouncy dresses exactly like hers. My favorite was a long pink gown with ruffled sleeves and a deep collar. It looked like something Cinderella would wear. Jeremy was no Prince Charming, but waltzing around on the ballroom floor made me feel like a princess anyway.

I got my first pair of high heeled dancing shoes when I turned thirteen. Jeremy was suddenly five inches taller than me, and was beginning to stretch my elbows when spinning me around under his arm. Heels feel pretty funny at first, but at least they keep you on your toes. I was able to turn around more gracefully than I ever could before. My gliding sashays during the waltz stopped arguing with the floor. When we danced the swing, we really swung.

I lost my dance partner to college a few years later, but by that point I was old enough and tall enough to dance with other people. I tried to teach my first boyfriend to dance. He was pretty

good looking, but had absolutely no rhythm. He dumped me a few weeks later. I think he couldn't deal with my constant leading. After all, the man is supposed to be in control on the ballroom floor. Can I help it if he had three left feet and no musicality?

When I was eighteen I finally was able to enter the real competitions. My new partner Trey and I decided that our goal would be to win the National Championship that year. We entered in every category we could. After two days and many callbacks, we placed second overall. It was devastating. I added the trophy to the growing collection in my room and vowed revenge on the Dawson couple, the overall winners in our age group. They lived across the country, but I spent the money on long-distance calls to ring them in the middle of the night, hoping Cynthia Dawson would eventually die of fright. She looked like a small, scared creature on the dance floor. Her dazzling smile and strong frame didn't fool me for a minute. I knew she was terrified under that silky gown.

I even bought a pair of voodoo dolls and cut off their toes, one by one.

They didn't show up for the competition the next year. Others from their studio claimed that Cynthia had the flu, but I knew the truth. She was scared of me, scared of my victory over her. And sure enough, Trey and I won. Our picture was put in the American Ballroom Federation archives, and the trophy must have been at least as large as all of my other ones combined. I was described as "the woman who reigned over rumba" or "the charming cha-cha chica", and random other adulations, all of which I acknowledged gracefully.

I didn't go to college. I dedicated my life to my twinkling toes. Trey and I even talked of getting married and owning our own dance studio. As it was, we worked summers at a resort hotel in the Poconos teaching ballroom dance to the patrons and providing entertainment in the dinner theater with our Sexy Samba routine. People travelled all the way from New York City to watch us. A talent scout for the Rockettes came by and recommended I try out in the auditions that spring, but I knew I was better than those sluts. I was a ballroom dancer.

For our first anniversary, we went to England for the world-wide championship. We'd been practicing with a private teacher twice per week, a nice middle-aged lady named Maija who used to be the undefeated Danish champion or something like that. We learned all of the gold level moves for the international style dances that year, and were ready to take over the world. The competition was really intense. Trey had a muscle cramp during the Viennese Waltz and as a result

we only placed fourth overall. We came back to our studio, defeated, depressed. I blamed him; after all, my moves were perfect as always.

After the inevitable divorce, I finally changed my last name legally to Starlight, like I'd always wanted to. Stella Starlight. If that didn't sound like a graceful ballroom champion's name I didn't know what did. I called information to see if there was a Starlight Studio anywhere in the country. When I found one in Miami, I moved there and started teaching, even though I felt it was a waste of my talent. It paid the bills.

I went through a bunch of partners during the next few years. The problem was, when you got to the level I was at, there really weren't any equally competent guys wandering around looking for someone to dance with. After all, it takes two to tango. It killed me to attend the nationals and have people whisper, "There's Stella Starlight. She used to be a champion." So I did the only thing I could. I found out who the current champion in my age group was, and murdered his partner.

I'm not saying I did this in cold blood. I was too graceful for something like that. No, first I befriended her. Her name was Pamela Costello. She was pretty and about my height and weight. I approached her after the competition and congratulated her. She recognized me, of course, as everyone did. I told her that I thought her cross swivel in the quickstep was very well executed, and that I knew some excellent followup steps that she and her partner really should learn. When I invited them for complimentary lessons from the Starlight Studio, I knew I had her hooked. Then it became as simple as obtaining and administering the poison. She'd always admired my gowns, so I let her borrow one. The skin condition she contracted killed her a week later.

Out of the kindness of my heart, I offered to go with Patrick to the world championship that he and Pamela had been preparing for before her untimely death. He was hesitant, but I reminded him that Pamela had wanted to win, so he might as well honor her last wish by going. He was a strong partner, and I could see I'd chosen well. His hips swayed a bit much for my liking, but I knew judges really went for that dramatic body motion. We put together a set of unbeatable routines. His grief only gave him further determination to win.

Our moves were perfect. Our grace was sublime. The others didn't have a chance.

We won the next year as well, and spent our time travelling around giving lessons and

dancing in exhibitions. I was 27 years old at that point and respected world-wide for my dancing ability. They made a documentary about me, and a shoe company in London asked if I would appear in their advertisements.

After Patrick and I married, we won the world championships for three more years in a row. Then, during a dinner party at our mansion one evening, I stubbed my little toe on a chair. It hurt more than anything had ever hurt before. I fainted. Patrick and the other guests were quite worried about me, and I was rushed to the hospital. They said my foot was fine, that it was nothing, but I knew differently. The toe was swelling up. My left foot would no longer fit into my beautiful ballroom shoes. I tried everything. I went to the company that ran the ads with my picture to see if they could make me a special pair of shoes that all of my toes would fit into. They told me that was entirely unnecessary as my foot was just fine, and did I want a pair of their latest style of shoes? I told them I would no longer be endorsing their company and left in a huff.

I found an excellent plastic surgeon in Paris who entirely agreed with me. I told him my feet needed to be smaller. He ended up chopping off the little toe on my left foot. I did have to agree that it looked much shapelier without that useless appendage, and got him to take off the one on my right foot as well. I bought a pair of extremely pointy-toed golden dancing shoes to compliment my feet.

That year we were second in the world. I came home and looked very carefully at the videotapes of our dancing. I could not find a problem with our routine or our style, except that my hips weren't swaying quite enough to match Patrick's. Obviously my thighs were a little bit too large. I flew back to Paris and talked to Henri, and asked if he could slim down my thighs. Healing from the liposuction took a while, but upon resuming my training I could tell it had definitely made a difference. We became like charmed snakes slithering together across the dance floor.

Astoundingly, we placed third that year. I couldn't understand it. Patrick said it was okay, that maybe we should just retire and buy out the Starlight Studio and teach there. How could we retire before regaining our crown, though? I wanted to be remembered as the best, not the third or fourth. Maybe the worry lines had gotten in the way of my appearance. I got Henri to give me a face lift and surgically attach small rhinestones to my cheekbones, as was the style for young ladies in the ballroom those days. I had my long blonde hair chemically altered to sparkle, and got two

small stars tattooed on my lower left cheek, along the jawbone.

We placed fourth.

Patrick said that fourth in the world was good enough for him and retired. I don't know if he actually bought out the Starlight Studio, since I never saw him again. I had more surgery done. First there were the metal reinforcements to my knees, elbows and ankles to make them bend more gracefully. Then there was the tummy tuck to keep my figure firm and lithe. After that I had my breasts diminished because they were beginning to sag. I started going to a tanning salon to keep my skin tone constant and healthy. I began the search for a new partner.

My father sent me a letter one day congratulating me on all of my victories and told me they were holding a surprise birthday party for my mother's 60th birthday, and wouldn't I come home to attend it? Realizing that I hadn't seen my parents in fourteen years or so, I decided to go.

It was a rather nice party, held in a lovely banquet room complete with dance floor and stage. I sat there talking to my sister for the most part. She was a real estate agent and kept commenting how I should move back home and buy this lovely house on her street. I watched a lot of people dance. It's weird to watch old people dance since most of them are too drab-looking to be glamorous. I had nobody to dance with, at any rate. I guess everyone was too scared of me to ask.

Then Jeremy sat down at our table with his wife. I barely recognized him; it'd been almost twenty years. He told me he stopped dancing after college and went into landscaping instead, and was now a multimillionaire. I knew he was gloating at me sitting there alone. When the next song stopped playing and a cha-cha started, he began to get up to dance.

His wife stayed seated, though. "Why don't you dance with Stella?" she said. "I'm sure you two would love to have a reunion on the dance floor."

He looked doubtful, but asked anyway. "Would you like to dance, Estelle?" he said.

I cringed at the use of my formal name, but gritted my teeth into a smile. "Sure."

We soon fell into a comfortable rhythm, him leading me into some underarm turns, a few cross-overs and a spiral. It was actually nice to dance with him again, to be honest, and I began to enjoy myself. Then he led me out into a fan position -- right onto my eight-year-old niece, who was dancing with one of her cousins. I tripped and fell down, hitting my head on the floor.

The room spun. "Who's this lady?" I heard my niece ask.

"That's your aunt Stella," I heard Jeremy say.

"She looks like one of my Barbie dolls!" I heard another young voice.

"Ooh, she does, like Glittery Hair Barbie! Especially with all of those pretty jewels in her cheeks." squealed my niece. "Do you think she would let me touch them? They look so shiny."

"Ooh, I want to play with her hair!"

"When I grow up I want to look just like her!"

"Don't be silly, children," my sister said. "Now let's help Aunt Stella up."

I guess I hit my head harder than I thought. Next thing I knew I was in a big pink room with a large stage and a revolving floor. I tried to move my feet, but they were anchored into a stand. Strings were pulling my arms and legs to pose in different positions, and the stand on the floor kept revolving so I'd turn around. Everyone else on the floor was plastic. Maybe I was as well. There was applause as every other model went past the front of the stage. When I went by, there was booing.

"Make her dance! Make her dance more!" cried the crowd. "BOOOOOO!"

The strings pulled against my arms with more force. I spun around and around and around. My legs kicked. My hips swayed. The crowd booed.

"We hate Ballroom Barbie!" they yelled. "Make her go away!"

A trapdoor opened up in the floor and I fell and fell and fell. When I stopped falling, I was in the hospital. A nurse was standing there, making notes on a clipboard. "Oh, you're awake," she said. "Aren't you that champion ballroom dancer?" she asked.

I was grateful for the recognition. "That's me," I answered. "I don't give out autographs anymore, though, I'm sorry."

"That's all right, dearie," the nurse said. "I didn't want one."

Well, after I got out of that horrible hospital I went home to live with my parents for a while. They brought me to their studio to show me off, and the studio asked me if I'd be a teacher for their Style classes. I accepted to keep my parents happy, although there were many times that I regretted it. Everyone talked about me being a former champion. The nickname Barbie still stuck. It was terrible.

I started seeing a shrink a few weeks later. Dr. Chanin was undoubtedly the nicest person I'd ever met. He cared about my problems and understood why I wanted to be the best. He told

me it was good to have goals and be motivated. I told him about my nightmares. He said that in order for me to get better, I needed to conquer my nightmares and be in charge of them. I knew that I wasn't going to be able to beat Barbie, so I joined her.

Shockingly enough, there wasn't already a Ballroom Barbie doll in existence. So I went to Mattel and proposed that they produce one, in my image, of course. A bunch of men in business suits looked me over and said that I wasn't quite right, but that a few minor adjustments would work. I got blue contact lenses and had the arches of my feet reinforced so I could wear four-inch heels. The doll was beautiful, I must say. It looked just like me, down to the tattoo on its lower left cheek. It even had bendable knees so you could make it dance. I helped them design Barbie's Dream Ballroom, and Barbie's Ballroom Wardrobe, and numerous other things.

Ballroom Barbie actually became the best-selling Barbie ever. Some girls liked her glittery hair and face. Others liked her outrageous ballroom costumes. Some liked putting her on stage. When Ballroom Ken came out a year later, modelled after my first husband, sales flourished more than ever. Ballroom enthusiasts went out to buy the Dream Ballroom set and the dolls to put on their shelves as decoration, or in the hopes that their children would take the hint and become ballroom dancers themselves.

So it was no surprise when on my thirty-fifth birthday I was almost swamped with offers from men wanting to partner with me in the 35-and-over competitions. After all, who wouldn't want to dance with a beautiful, glamorous woman like me? The tryouts took about two days before I chose a handsome bachelor in his early forties named Merrick Fitzgerald. Merrick was tall, well-built, with a few gray strands among black. I'd known his first wife before she ran off to Mexico with a lovely latino man who promised her days of salsa, tequila and merengue.

Our honeymoon was spent celebrating our victory at the nationals. I wanted to return to the international battlefield on my new territory and armed with a new partner, but Merrick was deathly afraid of flying over water. I told him we could take a boat overseas, but he said that would take too long. He needed to stay on call with his accounting firm. I whined. I begged. I pleaded. He wouldn't yield.

Dr. Chanin said that he could help Merrick through the fear given a year or two to talk it out, but we didn't have that sort of time. I knew what I had to do. Two weeks before the world championship I convinced Merrick that we should at least take a vacation together. He suggested

Las Vegas, and I gushed over the idea, saying I'd take care of travel arrangements. An old friend of mine from the Starlight Studio flew his own charter plane, which was a preferred travel mode anyway, as most airlines tended to get really edgy when I set off all of their metal detectors. With a bit of coercing and a pretty steep price he agreed to fly us to London on the pretense of flying to Vegas.

By the time we were halfway across the ocean Merrick had slipped into unconsciousness. He didn't believe me when I told him that we were just flying over one of the Great Lakes and to calm down. He kept looking at the water and hyperventilating. It was really embarrassing. Eventually he just fainted and didn't wake up, which made the rest of the flight much more peaceful, at least. Unfortunately those terrible British doctors weren't able to bring him out of the coma for a week, and we missed the entire competition. Then, when they finally did, and I told him what had happened, he fainted right back into it. We flew him back to be put in the care of his family doctor. His parents blamed me, but I knew the entire situation was really their fault for neglecting him when he first developed such an irrational fear.

Luckily when he came out of the second coma he'd entirely blocked what had happened from his mind. The accounting firm welcomed him back, assuming he'd been on vacation. His parents kept trying to convince him that I'd caused his coma by taking him overseas, but he told them that was ridiculous. He'd certainly remember something like that; he'd just hit his head on the way to the airport to go to Las Vegas. So life went back to normal for a while, until the next national competition a few months later.

We were called to the floor with the rest of the celebrities at the beginning. The announcer's voice droned.. "...and couple 94, Claude and Maureen Larson, the four-time winners of the Silver Star, just back from a tour of Australia.. couple 103, Merrick Fitzgerald and Stella Starlight, last year's national champions, back on their toes after that unfortunate accident at the international grand prix.. couple 112.."

Merrick stared at me. "Unfortunate accident?" he said quietly.

"Ummm.. yeah. You know, that you hit your head and all."

"What did that have to do with the international grand prix?" he said, as the music for the tango started and we started dancing, him moving sharply into the lead.

"I have no idea. Maybe they thought we were planning to go before your accident."

“But he said an accident AT at the competition.” He turned us into promenade position, digging his hand into my back so hard I gasped. “What was that all about?”

“Don’t get angry, honey,” I said sweetly as he dipped me down and brought me back up back into a basic pattern. “So maybe I did try to get you there. But it worked out okay, right?”

He spun me around three times. “I can’t believe it!” he said through gritted teeth. “You really did cause the coma! After what I told everyone..”

We both stamped our feet coming out of the turn. “I only had your best interests in mind, sweetie. You know we could have won at World.” He dipped me again, almost throwing me on the floor in the process.

“But everyone must be laughing at me now! My stupidity for believing you.. the entire world must know.. how could I have been so blind?” We changed to a locked embrace, marching together across the floor angrily.

“Is it my fault your parents never took you to a decent psychiatrist?”

“Don’t bring my parents into this!” he said, grasping me around the neck and spinning us wildly into a bunch of reverse turns. “Do you care about anyone besides yourself, Stella?”

“Of course I do! I only wanted you to have the glory of winning, right?” His hold was getting tighter. I began to feel faint.

“Did it ever occur to you that I didn’t want it?” he said, going back into another dip, hands still around my neck. He kept my head down by the floor for a couple of seconds. “Stella, you may be beautiful, but you’re insane.” He pulled me back up and literally spun me out like a yo-yo, spinning me around him faster and faster. The room swam as I tried to reply.

He finally brought me back into dance position and I stared him in the eye. “No, I’m not,” I replied. “I’m just the best.” We stood there, glaring at each other.

The music ended. The crowd went wild. “Look, let’s just get this competition over with and argue later, okay?” he said, swiftly dragging me off the floor.

I caught my breath for a minute. “We’re going to win, Merrick. You know that. Now let’s go change.” He gave me a look, but followed me off to the backstage dressing rooms.

My new latin dress was really a masterpiece. It was actually an authentic Mexican call-girl outfit, complete with red feathery lining and the stiletto in the bodice. Black and silky, it fit me perfectly. I added a pair of fishnets, red pumps, and feathery barrettes in my hair. I smiled at the

mirror, applied my lipstick, and went outside. Merrick was already standing there in his black outfit, pacing back and forth.

I slithered up to him. “Like my outfit?” I asked, posing.

“I don’t like anything right now, Stella. They’re going to call us in a few minutes. Let’s just go out there and dance.”

His attitude carried onto the floor. Despite all of my attempts to be bright and happy, his smiles were still fake, his lack of enthusiasm apparent. He almost dropped me during one of the lifts. I glared at him after that, but he really didn’t seem to care. “Merrick,” I snarled through smiling teeth, “this is a *rumba*. At least *pretend* you’re in love with me and enjoy it here.” His face became even more rigid after that, and our routine began to break down. He began to lose the rhythm, but I forced him back into it.

During the second dance, the cha-cha, he began to lighten up a little, and at least got the routine right, but it was obvious there was no magic in his steps. I was becoming more and more frustrated. The next two dances were the same, and I realized we weren’t going to win.

Sure enough, we placed third. Standing at the side with all of the other competitors getting pictures taken with our trophies, I made a decision. I broke out of the line and ran up to the podium where the announcer was rambling off a list of winners. In one motion I drew the stiletto from my dress and grabbed the announcer around the neck, holding the blade to his throat. It was gleaming and wickedly pointed, and he stopped his speech. “What the--”

I stepped up to the microphone. “Hi. I’m Stella Starlight, as most of you know, and I should have won this competition. My partner decided to sabotage me. It’s really unfair that I’m denied this just because of him. Now I want my trophy. You all know I’m the best and deserve it, so give it to me!” I pressed the flat of the blade harder against the announcer’s neck. “Tell them. Tell them I’m the best,” I said, putting his head to the microphone.

“Stella.. Stella’s the best,” he said.

“Now I want everyone to say it, or I’m going to kill this man.”

“Stella’s the best,” I heard a few random people say.

“I can’t hear you,” I said.

“Stella’s the best!” a bunch of people cheered, staring at me in horror.

“Make *him* say it,” I said, pointing to the president of the American Ballroom Federation.

He stared at me dumbfoundedly, and the woman next to him poked him in the side and whispered something. He stood up and yelled, “Stella’s the best! A round of applause for her!”

People started clapping their hands. Everyone was watching me, applauding me. The crowd cheered as if hypnotized. The woman from the winning couple in my category slowly walked up to the podium and offered me her trophy. A little girl gave me a bouquet of flowers. A man came up and put a tiara on my head. I released the announcer from my grasp and tucked the stiletto back into my bodice. I stepped down and proudly walked through the cheering throng to Merrick, who was still just standing there.

“Let’s go home, honey,” I said sweetly.

We walked out of the arena.

The applause was deafening.