

## FALLING STARS OVER BELGRADE

A novel by Jeffrey Kwitny

### PROLOGUE

The flight departed from Los Angeles on a Sunday in February of 1989, the year when revolutions were taking place in far-off lands. The Berlin Wall came down that year. Communism fell in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Romania. Solidarity won elections in Poland. Student-led demonstrations erupted in violence in Tiananmen Square. It was also the year Stephen Krawczyk was hired to direct his first movie. They would shoot the thing in Yugoslavia.

A producer at New Vistas Pictures in West L.A., impressed with Stephen's work, had sent his director's reel to the offices of Starlight Starbright Entertainment S.R.L., located in Rome's exclusive Parioli district outside the Aurelian walls. Max Trueblood, chairman and CEO of Starlight, made horror movies—lots of them. There was a rush to make these films, which were experiencing something of a renaissance at that time. Offerings such as *Nightmare on Elm Street*—budget: \$1.8 million, gross: \$25 million—spawned legions of spinoffs. In the previous year alone, more than seventy-five horror films had been produced. Trueblood, always on the lookout for American talent, liked *Sucker*, Stephen's 22-minute parody of the Bela Lugosi version of *Dracula*. The film short, which Stephen had written, directed, photographed and edited, and which he'd shot with an old Bolex 16-millimeter camera, demonstrated real talent—the Roman producer soon offered him a job. But it wasn't only talent that he was scouting for. Investors required American names on the contract—a director's and a star's—if Starlight hoped to get financing and U.S. distribution. The wily businessman knew that even if Stephen failed—

this *nessuno di conseguenza*, this American nobody—he could easily replace him. In fact, unbeknownst to Stephen, Trueblood had a nasty reputation in the industry for firing first-time directors and taking control early on.

In Belgrade, where principal photography would take place, Stephen would make a great movie—he was sure of it. He had a priest’s pious faith in his own talent. He’d nurtured a dream of becoming a great movie director since boyhood, and he was determined to fulfill it. He *would* succeed. Besides, wasn’t that what his mother had always told him? “You can achieve anything you set your mind to, Stephen,” she’d said, when he was very little. “Anything imaginable.” After he completed the movie, more projects would certainly come his way. And just possibly, he might someday receive a star on the Walk of Fame at the intersection of Hollywood and Vine.

A pipe dream? Many people, thousands, shared this aspiration. Should he have asked for time to reflect before accepting their offer? It was a job directing a real motion picture, the Holy Grail in Hollywood. Who would have thought for more than a second?

Not in this town.

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