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Cheaf Diamond

CHEEBONES AND AIRPLANES

There just simply wasn't any such place as 830 Broadway. It went down to 860 and dead-ended at Union Square Park, and that was all she wrote. I checked my appointment book to see if I had misread it, but no—in the nine o'clock space it said, *Ron Bonetti, 830 Broadway*. I stared at the numbers on the building again, then looked around the corner to see if they might for some reason continue down that way. Nope—860 was all there was.

Great.

On top of running out of Broadway, I was practically crippled from walking twenty-two blocks in new patent-leather gillies that had rubbed blisters on both of my heels, my right eyelash was off-kilter, and I was sweating in my mulberry Bobbie Brooks crew-necked sweater and box-pleated miniskirt. I never thought New York would be this hot in September, as far up north as it was. All I remembered from the news was big snowstorms, but then in Sweet Valley there never was a whole lot about New York on the news unless somebody got shot in a restaurant or thrown onto the subway tracks and run over, which seemed to

happen a lot. Cabs cost a fortune and subways were faster than buses but I can tell you right now, I was leery of going down into them. I have a little problem with being underground anyhow, and most of the stations were not very well lit and had an odor like mothballs and dirty bathroom. Plus, I was shocked when I saw that homeless people *lived* down there, and I didn't like myself for the way I reacted to them. Part of me was disgusted that human beings could smell that bad and carry on their life right out in public the way they did, and another part felt sorry for them and un-Christian if I didn't give them money. Like what if they were the old angel-in-disguise beggar from the Bible story, testing my compassion? I would flunk big-time, because I really needed every quarter I had. The subway was thirty cents, and that added up if you had to go several places in a day. Which was another reason I had decided to walk it this morning, since the day was pretty and sunny, and I didn't know exactly how far it was. I was going to have to study a map of Manhattan, and soon.

I crossed the street to Union Square Park, found a bench near a statue of Abraham Lincoln, and sat down to reglue my eyelash and try to figure out what might be the best way to go to find more Broadway. My blistered feet didn't want to make too many detours. I made a mental note to carry Band-Aids in my purse from now on. Thank goodness I had gotten up early and left myself a lot of time, having already found out the hard way how long it took to get anywhere in this town, and another little phobia of mine is being late.

Sitting in the park under green shade trees with the cheeky pigeons pecking on the ground right by my feet, I still had a hard time believing I was really in New York City. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it wasn't what had gone on in the last crazy week. Everything had happened so fast that, like Alice, I felt I was running as hard as I could just to stay in place. Up until last Saturday, I had never been on an airplane in my life, or out of the state of Arkansas, for that matter, except for a couple of trips to Vian, Oklahoma, to visit my aunt Juanita's family.

"I just can't understand why you want to go to New York and try to be one of those models, Cherry," Mama said for the umpteenth time. "It's a big old dirty city, and there are young girls in the papers every day up there who get killed or worse. I won't get one good night's sleep worrying about you in that place. I thought you wanted to be an art teacher!

That's what we paid for you to go to college and do. Is all that money wasted? And what are we supposed to do with that big box of expensive oil paints and brushes you brought home? Your daddy and me sure can't use them. I couldn't paint a straight line with a ruler."

Daddy just said flatly that I wasn't going, and that was the end of that.

But that's what *he* thought. I talked to them until I was blue in the face. I had done a lot of research in *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue*, and they said the model agencies took good care of their girls—why would they want anything to happen to their moneymakers? And I wouldn't be all alone up there. I would make friends. I was good at that. If an agency didn't take me on, I'd come right back home, I promised. If one did, I would call every week and write a lot. I was twenty-two years old, for Pete's sake! A college graduate. Half my friends were married with kids, including my cousin Lucille, who was younger than me and already had a baby more than a year old. Her mother and daddy didn't treat her like she was a child. I had never in my life done anything drastic that they didn't want me to do, and I know I was their only child and they would miss me, but I really, *really* wanted to go to New York and I just couldn't go if I didn't have their blessing. Or at least their saying it was sort of all right.

It took a while, but I wore them down. Mama, I think, even got to be a little excited about it. She'd never had a chance to do anything but be a wife and mother, since she had married Daddy the summer before her senior year of high school and had me the next July. She even confessed that at one time she'd dreamed about going to Hollywood, but didn't have the money or the nerve. At forty, she was the mother all the boys my age voted the hottest-looking mom; blond and beautiful and slim, she always dressed like a movie star to the best of her ability. She wore filmy nylon negligees around the house, and high-heeled satin slippers with marabou feathers on the vamps. I think her feet were permanently arched, like Barbie's, from always wearing heels, and flats weren't comfortable. She didn't even own a pair.

"There's no reason to pad around the house in flip-flops and a ratty old robe, like some fat housewife who has given up. Just remember, Cherry, if you let yourself go, your husband won't be far behind."

She always said that, but she and I both knew she had Daddy wrapped around her little finger. And when she finally came around to my side, Daddy had to throw up his hands and quit.

"I can't fight the both of you," he said. "But I'm buying you a round-trip ticket, Cheryl Ann, and you get on that plane and come home the first time you even smell trouble, do you hear?" I heard. I heard he was buying my ticket!

Watching out the thick round window of a plane as the ground falls away and the cars on the highway become the size of Raisinets is not the most comforting of feelings, especially after the stewardess made a big point of showing us what to do in case of emergency, how to blow up the life vests and breathe in the little yellow cups and all, and I couldn't help but notice there was a booth that sold flight insurance right by the counter where I got my ticket. I thought about buying some, but figured my parents would be too grief-stricken to spend the money if the plane crashed, so I saved my seven dollars. They were plenty unhappy as it was, and waving good-bye to them from behind the rope at the airport gate was one of the hardest things I had ever had to do. We were all teary-eyed, and I thought for three full seconds about turning back and forgetting the whole thing, but there was that little siren voice in my head that kept calling out to me—*Cherrrry . . . come to New Yorrrrrk . . . yooooou can be a model . . . you knooooow you can*—so I took a deep breath, blew them a kiss, and got on the plane. In spite of how much I loved Mama and Daddy, Sweet Valley was not the place for a girl with stars in her eyes, and I had stars big enough to blind me.

Plus, I needed a change of scenery, big-time.

It's a long story, but a lot had happened to me since last year. The *Reader's Digest* version is, I had sort of fallen in love for the first time in my life (and finally lost my virginity!) with a guy named Tripp Barlow, and then it ended, which, as it turned out, was all for the best, since he had a wife he neglected to tell me about that he had married in Vietnam. Although he thought they were separated, *she* had other ideas, and now they had a baby girl named Mai.

I went, in the spring, up to St. Juniper's Catholic Boys Academy in the Ozarks to do my practice teaching, then came back and graduated from DuVall University, B.A. in art, class of 1970. I was out of school and the sixties were over. I'm optimistic by nature, but the last couple of years strained it, with several of my friends getting messed up in Vietnam, a couple of them killed. President Nixon promised he would end the war, but he sure was taking his good sweet time about it. It

looked like his plan was to bomb them until there was nothing left to fight over—burning down the village to save the village, as the government is fond of saying. Like the Vietnamese are deadlier when the Communists kill them than when we do. And the ones they put to doing the shooting and burning are boys like my friends. It was getting crazy, especially after the National Guard shot those kids at Kent State last May. A lot of students across the country kind of lost it, rioting and taking over the administration buildings of colleges, but we hadn't done near that much at DuVall. We had a rally and everyone lit candles, but that was about it. I felt like I had done all the protesting I could, though, and needed a break from it all.

It was bittersweet, watching Arkansas disappear beneath the clouds as the plane carried me away. I felt light, like I was leaving everything behind—the war, the ex-boyfriend, Du U, and the schoolwork, but I felt a little lost as well. I was also leaving everything I loved, my family and friends, especially my best friend, Baby, who I hadn't been apart from since we were four years old.

But, like the angels in heaven, Sweet Valley and all I loved was still there; I just couldn't see them for the clouds.

The plane landed without crashing, thank the Lord, and after I called Mama and Daddy collect, I took a taxi to the Barbizon Hotel up on Lexington and Sixty-third Street, which *Cosmo* had said was a good, safe place to stay until you got your break. It was for women only and Grace Kelly and Lauren Bacall had once stayed there. Hopefully, I would be taken by an agency and could get an apartment soon, which would be a lot cheaper. I figured I had enough savings to last two months, if I was careful, and that seemed like enough time to make a start.

The room at the Barbizon was tiny, with a closet that barely held five of my outfits, so I had to leave the rest in suitcases, stacked around the bed, which didn't leave much room to walk. I shouldn't have brought so many clothes, but you never know what you'll need and the season was changing, so I pretty much brought everything I had.

Sunday, I spent the better part of the day trying to pick out what to wear for my interview at the model agency on Monday. All my clothes seemed hicky and wrong to me here in New York, even the few good outfits from Millie's, the best store in Sweet Valley, which Millie copied from the latest magazines as close as she could. I had sewn most of the

rest myself, and although I used *Vogue* patterns, I had gotten a C in home ec, which, sorry to say, was deserved. As hard as I tried, I wasn't good at zippers, and the stitching on my hems could make you seasick looking at it. Plus, everything I had was a miniskirt, and all the fall magazines were showing midis. So be it. I would get some new clothes when I started making money, and maybe the midi was just a fad anyhow and wouldn't last. If they couldn't see past what I wore at the agency, it was their loss and they could just lump it.

Brave words, said into the mirror.

Given everybody back home warning me about muggers, I was a little nervous about walking around in the city by myself, but finally I got hungry and bored of the Barbizon café, so I ventured out and bought a slice of real pizza at the closest place to the hotel on Lexington Avenue and sat at a little table on the sidewalk watching the people pass by. Not every woman was beautiful and chic, as I thought they might be, which was somehow cheering, and there were lots of women pushing baby carriages. How dangerous could it be, finally, if the streets were full of babies? I relaxed. After dreaming about it for years, I was really here, on the street in New York City! Eating pizza!

I lay awake most of the night, too excited to sleep, thinking about tomorrow and listening to the noises of the traffic and police sirens and the muted voices that drifted up to the third floor of the Barbizon. It was strange and magical. Even the air was different in New York, like every breath was jammed full of electric currents that tingled my nerves.

I drifted off to sleep and dreamed I was climbing hundreds of stairs to get to the top of the Empire State Building. The higher I went, the more stairs kept on appearing, and I woke up at six o'clock, worn out and feeling alone. I wished somehow Baby had managed to come with me. Baby was nearly as upset as Mama and Daddy about me going, but she had already signed a teaching contract, and even though she was the most beautiful girl I knew, she wasn't the type to be a model, being four feet ten, and you had to at least be five-seven. I came in at five feet twelve, or even five-thirteen if I was honest. Although Baby and I got a lot of Mutt and Jeff jokes, we had been best friends ever since her family moved from the Philippines to Sweet Valley when we were four. We promised to write a lot and call when we could, but it wasn't the same.

I wished I could get her opinion on what to wear. Her zippers were always perfect.

Finally, I put on one of my Millie outfits and went out for my interview at the Suzan Hartman model agency, praying she would take me on, which obviously she did, or I wouldn't be out here now hunting for a photographer named Ron Bonetti who had a studio at nonexistent 830 Broadway.

Suzan Hartman was one of the biggest models in the 1950s and had started the agency several years ago when she turned thirty and the modeling jobs started drying up. She was originally from Arkansas, too, which is why I even thought about being a model in the first place. She grew up in Little Rock, but her grandmother lived in Sweet Valley, and Suzan's mother moved back there to live with her after Suzan left out for New York when she was barely seventeen and Mr. Hartman died of a heart attack. I'm not clear if Suzan's leaving caused the heart attack or not, but I'm inclined to believe it did, if my own father's reaction was any clue. Anyhow, Suzan's mother, Mrs. Hartman, was my sixth-grade teacher. She used to bring magazines with Suzan's pictures into class, and she pinned her covers on the bulletin board. There were a lot of them. We hardly had any room for our artwork. Suzan (pronounced *Suzan*) had started out life as Susan, but changed it when she became a model, although her mother still called her Susan. Mrs. Hartman seemed to have a soft spot for me and said once that I had the makings of a model, being tall and skinny with a little nose, which thrilled me no end, since usually the boys made fun of my long legs and called me Snipe. She even gave me the part of the Fairy in a Christmas play we did, and let me wear one of Suzan's old dresses. I was a good-size girl already by the sixth grade, and the dress was none too big. It was blue net with a gold top that itched like the dickens and flaked off, trailing glitter in the air like pixie dust. Suzan had worn it to her high school junior prom. I couldn't imagine how she danced all night in that dress. Her skin must have been scraped raw and bloody. In spite of all that, though, I did feel pretty glamorous, and from then on I was a little obsessed with Suzan, who didn't seem to come home to visit much. I only saw her in person one time, when I bumped into her and her mother at the county fair. I was in high school by that time, and she was not getting covers any-

more. In any case, I had switched my allegiance to Lauren Hutton, Jean Shrimpton, Veruschka, and, later, Twiggy, who were so mod and great-looking and all a little offbeat, especially Veruschka, who, unlike me, *admitted* to being six feet one! I wondered what she had been called as a kid.

At the fair, Suzan was classically beautiful, in the fifties Grace Kelly style, her blond hair up in a perfect French twist, not one single hair sticking out. Among a crowd of blue jeans and plaid shirts, she was like somebody from another planet, wearing a simple sleeveless orange shift, no jewelry, and leather thong sandals with little gold coins dangling from the straps. I wanted those sandals so bad I could taste them, but they looked expensive and it was doubtful any store in Arkansas would carry them. Even if one did, they more than likely wouldn't come in my size, which unfortunately was eleven.

I sinfully coveted her small feet as I leaned against the corner of the fried-dough booth and watched her across the cow lot. She looked really bored, gazing at the prize FFA calf, smoking a cigarette, and eating a candied apple. Or rather, let me say, she was *holding* a candied apple. I never actually saw her take a bite, but the deep alizarin-crimson color of the apple looked really good against the cadmium-orange dress (painters always think in paint colors; it's a habit of mine), and she stood with one toe pointed out like she was waiting for someone to take her picture.

Finally, I got up the nerve to go say hi to Mrs. Hartman, who was happy to see me, and proudly introduced me as one of her favorite former students.

"Susan, this is Cherry Marshall, the one who wore your dress in the play."

"Suzan, mother."

She looked me up and down and didn't smile or say a word to me, not "nice to meet you," or "kiss my foot," or anything. I felt like a moron and mumbled something about going for another ride on the Tilt-A-Whirl.

Still, as rude and cold as Suzan was, seeing that face I had only known in magazines right there in the flesh at the Sweet Valley fairgrounds made being a model seem like it really could happen. After all, Helen Gurley Brown, the editor in chief of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the bible for all us girls, was also from Arkansas! Arkansas girls didn't neces-

sarily have to stay down on the farm. That's why God invented cheekbones and airplanes.

Even so, I was sure there were hundreds of other girls thinking the same thing, and for years I didn't dare tell Mama and Daddy I even dreamed about it since we were staunch members of the First Apostolic Holiness Church of God, and I knew they, especially Daddy, would be horrified by the sinfulness of it all. They would have preferred me to be a nurse or something helpful to humanity with a steady paycheck, but the smell of hospitals makes me gag and I fainted once when I tried to give blood. The only thing I was really good at was painting and drawing, so they finally agreed to let me study art if I would become a teacher. Teaching art isn't healing the sick, but I think it is nearly as important. Think how *beige* life would be without it. Art is the icing on the cupcake of life. Well, that sounds stupid, but you know what I mean. While I was doing my practice teaching last semester at St. Juniper's, my supervising teacher, Father Leo, who was not at all like you'd think priests were, took a few pretty good pictures of me. I also met Cassie Culver, whose boyfriend—or unhappily, ex-boyfriend—a cute guy named Lale Hardcastle, had actually run off to New York and to everyone's astonishment became a big male model.

One of the pictures Father Leo took of me got printed in the *Log Cabin Democrat*, which gave a boost to my dream, and my entire outlook changed. Instead of applying for teaching jobs after I graduated in May, I worked all summer as a salesgirl at the Family Hand, a great head shop in Sweet Valley where Baby and I had once painted murals on the walls, and I saved my money for New York. I know it's shallow to want to live a glamorous life and have your picture in magazines, and it isn't even helping humanity as much as teaching art, but I just had to try. I would always wonder, like Mama, if I would have made it and regret it if I didn't go.

I had no illusions that Suzan would remember me from the fair, and frankly hoped she wouldn't, but I got her address from Mrs. Hartman and sent her copies of Father Leo's pictures. She sent me back what looked like a form letter saying that I could come in for an interview and gave the times they saw new girls and a phone number to call for an ap-

pointment, but she didn't send me an airplane ticket or give me any encouragement or indicate that she knew I had been the favorite student of her mother. In fact, I doubt she even read the letter or looked at the pictures herself. It was probably some secretary. Well, she wasn't the only agent in town. If she said no, I would try all of them.

I was so nervous I could hardly breathe when I went into the agency Monday morning at ten. The waiting room was painted a sophisticated dark gray with lighter-gray carpet and plastic (but good plastic) molded chairs lined around the wall. Track lighting focused a beam on each of Suzan's framed covers, and there were enough to stretch all around the room.

The receptionist barely looked up, checked my name off a list, and told me to take a seat. There were several other nervous girls sitting around, all of us with manila envelopes on our laps. While I waited, girls and guys came in and out, not even glancing our way, heading back somewhere down the hallway, all of them beautiful, all of them relaxed and laughing and joking around, like the in-crowd in high school. They were the anointed ones. They had been taken. They had their pictures in magazines. All of them carried expensive-looking leather portfolios, and I recognized quite a few faces, although most didn't have on much makeup and tried to give the impression they had just rolled out of bed. But they made even blue jeans and a sweatshirt look chic by adding an armload of bracelets or a concha belt slung low, a scarf tied around their heads like Ali MacGraw or threaded through their belt loops. I felt really out of place, like 1966, in my mint-green miniskirt with matching tights and too much makeup.

The secretary called my name and I went through the door.

I guessed Suzan was pushing forty by now, but still so gorgeous it made you ache to look at her: a thin, delicate blonde with big blue eyes. She hadn't changed much from my first impression of her, though. Underneath all that delicacy those eyes were chipped out of the heart of an iceberg. She was a chain-smoker, and wielded her cigarette as a weapon when she talked. Her office was hazy with smoke; she had one in her hand and one burning in the ashtray.

Some people are surprised when they see me for the first time, but most try to not be so obviously shocked. Suzan didn't even try. I guess she never saw the pictures I sent or remembered me from the county fair.

"My, you're a big one!" she said, as she looked up from her desk, her eyes practically bugging out. "How tall are you? Five-eleven?"

"Closer to five-twelve."

"That may be too tall for us."

"Yes, ma'am, but Veruschka is over six feet, I think." Her eyes narrowed as she pulled more smoke out of the cigarette.

"Hmm. Yes, she is. What do you have for me?" I handed her my manila envelope with my few little photos, which she flipped through in three seconds and tossed on the desk. That stung. I was proud of them. Father Leo had a reputation as a real artist and even had shows of his pictures. One of these had won an award. It was of me standing in a woodsy brook in the early-morning mist, wearing a white net bathing suit. I looked like Venus on the clamshell rising from the water, with my river-bottom green eyes glowing, as a beam from the ^{moon} ~~rising sun~~ cast a light on them.

"These are totally wrong. You need to get some real pictures made, not bad artworks. They're not even in focus." I felt like I'd swallowed a small rock.

Then she stood up and walked around her desk, checking me over like I was a horse or something. I waited for her to pry my mouth open and look at my teeth. She was on the smaller end of the model chart—maybe five-seven, maybe a hair under—and had to look up at me, which I don't think she liked.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"That's old. You should have started in your teens. You've lost several valuable years, and it might already be too late. We don't even take girls older than twenty-three."

It was too late to lie. I had skipped from feeling like a child with my parents to feeling like I was already over the hill.

"Well, I only turned twenty-two in July. I was in college and graduated this year."

"A college girl." She made a noise deep in her throat, which could have meant she wasn't impressed, or was impressed, or was trying to dislodge phlegm. "Where are you from? You have quite an accent." She had totally lost her own accent, but I could see a little flash of surprise and recognition when she first heard my voice.

"Same place you are. Sweet Valley, Arkansas. Your mother was my sixth-grade teacher. I met you once down there when y'all were at the county fair."

As I was trying to figure out a way to nicely say I didn't want to dye my hair, a man walked into the office. He was tall and thin and his skin was the color of ash. He looked like a peaked version of Jimmy Stewart, only his face was not as nice. He also had a cigarette in his hand. The air in the office was beginning to make me woozy.

"Freddy, don't you agree that . . . what is your name?"

"Cherry."

"Cherry . . . nice name . . . should dye that hair and straighten it out? No one has hair like that in the business."

Freddy looked me up and down.

"No one in the business looks like this girl. And that is not necessarily a bad thing, Susan."

"Suzan, Freddy." She bit the words with her sharp white teeth.

"Suzan." He bowed his head, heavily accenting the last syllable, mocking her. She ignored it.

"I don't know. I'm not so sure she will sell."

"Blondes always sell, and she is more than a blonde. She's an über-blonde. Look at those legs. They're a mile long."

"She's too exotic."

"So is Veruschka. So is Pat McGuire. My God, Diana Vreeland is mad for exotic. There isn't one editorial outfit in *Vogue* this month that a secretary could wear. They're not into reality. They're into fantasy."

"But the California look is going to be the next big thing. The new ones coming up are more wholesome. More girl-next-door. Like Cheryl Tiegs. This one is just . . . just . . ." She couldn't think of a word for me. "Strange." She'd thought of one.

"Put her on the testing board and let's see. You never know."

He was smiling at me, in sort of a creepy way. His gray eyes looked liquid, like there might have been a few drinks sloshing in there behind them. He had on an odd aftershave I couldn't identify, sharp and sweet-ish, and I knew them all. I had a feeling it might be gin. She examined the pictures again, this time with a little magnifying glass, took another drag on her cigarette, and exhaled.

"All right, Cherry," she said at last, putting the pictures back into the envelope. "We'll give it a try. We'll put you on the testing board. You need some pictures. Go back and meet with Gina. She'll do the paperwork and give you to a booker, who will make some appointments with photographers who test new girls. And tell her to get Lana to show you

how to put on makeup. You have a good blank canvas, but you don't know how to use paint." That was ironic, since I *was* a painter, but it was clear she wasn't into hearing my life story.

She handed the envelope of pictures to me, turned her back, put out the cigarette she was holding, and picked up the other one. Freddy leaned against the door frame, watching me, blowing more smoke into the air. My eyes were beginning to water.

"Thank you so much, Miss Hartman, Mr. . . ."

"Collins. But you can call me Freddy. I'm Mr. Hartman." He pointed to Suzan and winked.

"Um, thank you, too, Mr. Collins, uh, Freddy. I'm really excited you're giving me a chance."

"You can call me Suzan," she said briskly. "And you can thank me by succeeding and making me lots of money."

"Great. I will. I won't let you down, Suzan. By the way, your mother said to tell you hi—I called her before I left, and she was really happy I was seeing you."

"That's nice. Now do me a favor. Let's don't get all mushy about Arkansas. We're not two little girls from Little Rock. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am. Got it."

"And drop the 'ma'am.' Besides being insulting to anybody under eighty, that's a dead giveaway. Nearly as bad as *y'all*."

"Right. Okay." I clutched my envelope and went out to meet Gina, who had an office down that hallway where all the glorious anointed were going. I was going to be a model, just like they were! If I could have, I would have jumped in the air and clicked my heels.

Gina was plump and on the edge of middle age, at least in her late thirties. She had a pretty face and I wondered if she had been a model when she was younger. She gave me a smile, and after Freddy and Suzan, it was a relief to see someone who was friendly. And not smoking.

"Welcome to Suzan Hartman, Cherry," she said, shaking my hand. "Sit down and talk to me." I sat. "For starters, let's fill out a card with your sizes and measurements. Do you know your measurements?" I knew some of them, but not glove size or head size, so she took out her tape and measured me. I was really ashamed to write eleven down for shoe size, but that's what it was.

"Well, shoes are probably out. The standard is nine. Bras, you won't be doing—the customary size is thirty-four B—but that's all right. Don't think your hands will make it—your fingers are too long and bony and you'd have to get nails—but you have great long legs. Good shape. Probably do well with hosiery ads. You're a size six, which is perfect, and with that lanky height you'll make out like a bandit on the runway. We're just starting the runway division here, and we'll put you in class to teach you how to walk. Love your coloring. It's natural, isn't it? Pretty face. Good teeth. You could slice bread with those cheekbones. Did Suzan say anything about your makeup?"

I told her about Lana.

"I don't think she's here now. I'll let her know, and you can meet with her later this week. We'll put it on your schedule. Your booker will make up a list of photographers for you to go see tomorrow. I think we'll give you to Liz. She'll set up appointments, and you'll call her every day to get your schedule. Or call her if you have problems or questions. Call her a lot. She'll be your mother superior. If you have nothing else to do, hang around here. You never know when a job will come in, and if she can't reach you, someone else will go for it. You can learn a lot from talking with the other models. You are going to be testing until you get enough pictures to fill your book and get your card, but you might luck out and get a job. You have a special look that someone might latch on to. I think you'll do well. Any questions?"

I was so ignorant I didn't even know what questions to ask. Frankly, my head was kind of foggy. I had never been dissected like that, so matter-of-factly, like I was a prime cow at an auction. I didn't know what a card was or how I got one or anything, but I figured I would learn it all in time. Then a question occurred to me.

"Just one. Do you know if there is a male model by the name of Lale Hardcastle here? He's from Arkansas, too, and I was just wondering."

"Not that I know of. He might have changed his name, though. A lot of models do. You have a unique name already, no Cherrys working that I know of. Although you'll have to drop the Marshall professionally. There's a model-turned-agent in England named Cherry Marshall, and we wouldn't want there to be any confusion."

"Are you serious? Really? Another Cherry Marshall? That's amazing!" I couldn't imagine there would be two Cherry Marshalls in the world, but England was far away, and whatever she looked like, I bet it

wouldn't be like me. "All right," I said after considering it for two seconds. "In that case, I'll be just Cherry." I would probably have said yes if she wanted me to call myself Esmeralda McGonagall.

So I joined the ranks of one-name models. I hoped I could still use my last name on my driver's license and things. My real name was Cheryl Ann, but I had been called Cherry ever since I could remember, unless my parents wanted to emphasize something to get my attention, like, "Cheryl Ann, what's the matter with you, thinking you can go to New York and be a highfalutin fashion model? You're gettin' above your raisin', girl!"

I couldn't wait to call them!

Gina gave me a contract to sign, and I floated out of the office and back to the Barbizon, stopping off in Saks Fifth Avenue just to look around and breathe the fragrant air of expensive stuff. It was the most beautiful store I had ever seen in my life, and I spent a couple of hours riding up and down the escalators and touching everything, fluffy cashmeres, soft Italian leather shoes and bags, not daring to try any of it on.

2

GO-SEE

Dear Baby,

Sorry to call you collect—your landlady is probably still mad at me—but I had to let you know Suzan Hartman took me! When the phone bill comes in, tell me how much it is and I'll pay you back. I'll have to write letters until I get my own phone.

I know I've only been gone a week, but I miss you so much I can't stand it. I wish you were here to go with me on some of these crazy go-sees, as they call them (because you *go* to the photographers and they *see* if they like you), and do stuff, like movies or museums. There are so many! The Museum of Natural History has a whole dinosaur skeleton and a huge *whale* hanging from the ceiling! (I'm sure it's mostly plastic. Otherwise it would stink.) I am going to the Metropolitan Museum this weekend, but it won't be as much fun to see all the famous paintings we've studied in class without you.

How is the teaching job going? Are you getting any painting

done? Set up an easel in class and paint when the kids are busy. They'll get more out of watching you than painting themselves.

Is that sleazy Mr. Bachman still trying to get you to play hide-the-weenie? I hope you stay out of the supply closet when he's around, or take a student with you, after what he tried to pull last time. You should report him, but you're right—it would be your word against his, and he *is* the principal. I bet you're not the first teacher he made a pass at, though. And him with six kids! His poor wife. What about Coach McClellan? Has he asked you out yet? I don't know, though. He looks good now, but I bet in five years he will have a huge gut. Those athletic types always get fat when they stop working out. And he isn't smart enough for you. You need somebody who you can talk to. Like Father Leo, only not a priest! What a waste of manhood. Have you seen him since I left? Tell him I miss him and the guys. Suzan didn't think his pictures were really fashion shots, so I have to get a whole lot of new ones. Don't tell him. I still love them.

Just being in New York is pretty exciting but there is so much I have to learn, including finding my way around, and I haven't made any girlfriends yet, much less met any guys who are interesting. Most of the male models are too beautiful to even talk to. You know how I feel about pretty boys (remember Tripp?!). They're *trouble*, and these ones that model are the prettiest. I've noticed a lot of them have really plain girlfriends—isn't that interesting? Like they don't want to walk down the street with someone better-looking than they are. Their girlfriends just live to wait on their every need and look at them with cow eyes, poor things. I think some of the guys might be homosexual, or gay, as they call it up here, but I'm not sure. Anyhow, it seems like most of them are too much in love with themselves to love anybody else. Like Narcissus. Remember that story from humanities class? I'm not being fair, and I could say the same for some of the girls. I just don't feel like I fit in with all these perfect specimens. I am the farthest thing from perfect, but then some of the famous girls have their little quirks, too, so we'll see. One of the biggest ones has sort of a weird eye that sometimes looks east when the other one looks west! But if they photograph her from the right angle you can't really tell.

At first it felt awkward, but now I'm getting used to going out by myself to eat. Usually I take a book to the coffee shop near the

hotel. For breakfast, I can get scrambled eggs and bacon for a dollar, with a buttered bagel, which looks kind of like a doughnut, but is bread that they *boil* and then bake, if you can believe it, and they always give you hash browns to boot. Nobody up here can understand anything I say, though, which makes it hard to even order a meal. The other day when I ordered a salad with ranch dressing, the waitress asked me if I said "French," and I said, "No, *ranch*," and she said, "That's what I said, *French*," and we went back and forth for five minutes, her screaming, "FRENCH?" at me like I was deaf, and me saying, "NO, *RANCH*," until finally I just gave up and said, "Blue cheese." I don't have as much trouble understanding them, I guess because of TV, but I am going to go and get speech lessons to lose my accent when I get some money.

I am still at the Barbizon, but Lana, one of the models who showed me some makeup tricks, said that when she first started she lived in a house owned by an old lady in Greenwich Village who rents rooms to actors and models and people like that, and she knew of a girl who was leaving. That would be a lot cheaper than the hotel, so I'm going to try and get it this week. Lana did a great job with the makeup, and showed me how to put eyeliner on just the outside half of my lid, sweeping it up and blending it with a smoky shadow so my eyes look slanted and the green really pops. She deepened my colors, which makes me look a lot more dramatic. I am totally another girl when it is all done up—I didn't recognize myself when she got through. AND, I have stopped plucking and am growing my eyebrows out to their original white—don't faint. Suzan's orders. She hates the dark neat brows for some reason.

Lana is quite a character. You would recognize her face—she's been on the cover of *Cosmo*, and she is almost as gorgeous as you, black hair and amber-colored eyes like a big cat, and she moves like a cat, too, sort of lounging on furniture rather than sitting, but I never heard anybody use swears in everyday conversation like she does, and I am ashamed to even write them down, so you'll just have to imagine the worst words you can. She goes by the one name, and when I asked what her last name was, she said, "Just Lana. The last is too hard to pronounce." She is from Serbia (I had to look at a map to find it) but came to New York with her family and learned English when she was fourteen, so her accent is even weirder than mine. A lot of the girls use one name, like Twiggy and

Apollonia and Veruschka, and now I am added to the list. They're having me go by just "Cherry," but I'll use my real last name anytime I need to. I don't think Daddy would like me giving it up, and it is too confusing when you are introduced to people if you don't have a last name.

You wouldn't believe the week I have had. I've been going out every day seeing photographers to try to get them to use me for tests, which would give me pictures to put in my book, and give the photographers a free model to try out shots or lighting or whatever. Out of about twenty photographers I saw, only one wanted to test me at all, and that was a total disaster, which I'll get to in a minute.

I'm gradually learning the subway, and it's not really as bad as we thought it would be. The first time I rode it I stood way back from the edge of the platform, though, in case some crazy person tried to throw me onto the tracks, but then I was so far away from the train that everyone rushed on in front of me and I had to fight to get on before the doors closed. Forget about getting a seat! I went out early in the morning and there were so many people going to work that there was hardly room to stand. We were all mooshed together like a can of Vienna sausages, pretending to read the ads above the windows, as if some stranger didn't have his nose practically in our armpits (*Aren't you glad YOU use Dial? Don't you wish EVERYBODY did?*), and every time the train went around a curve we all grabbed at each other to keep from falling. It was amazing how many people thought my rear end was a hand-hold or something. I have had boyfriends I wasn't that close to! Finally I got a seat when the person sitting right in front of me got off, but I couldn't see out the window for all the people standing, so I went past my stop and had to walk back ten blocks. Even so, I was still a few minutes early for my appointment, because Lana told me you have to allow an hour to get anywhere in this !@#\$\$%&* town, (pick your own word) and you know how I am about being on time. I wish I could just get in the VW and go, like at home, but keeping a car in the city is a lot of trouble, with the parking and traffic and all.

The first place Suzan Hartman sent me was an ad agency on lower Fifth Avenue. I don't really even know what kind of ad they were doing, because nobody tells you anything. You just show up. It must not have been one of the big ones, though, because it wasn't exactly a ritzy place. Dirt-colored indoor-outdoor carpet.

riastic plant. It was so crowded with girls there was no place to sit. A woman at a desk pointed to a sign-in sheet when I came over to tell her I was there, and I signed my name. A girl came out of a door and the woman told whoever was on the list next to go in, and somebody did. Finally, after ages, it was my turn. I had to find my own way to the office; it was weird, like the place was totally deserted except for the girls and the woman in the waiting room. I went down a dark hallway, and the last door on the left was the only one open, so I went in. A chubby woman with hair dyed that purplish-red sat behind the desk. She didn't ask me to sit down.

"Hi," I said, big smile. "I'm Cherry from Suzan Hartman."

"A southern girl, huh? Let me see your book."

Everybody up here always says, "Oh, what part of the South are you from?" or something like that. I am already trying not to say "y'all" or "ma'am," and at least not give them that satisfaction. They really treat southerners like they think we are subpar mentally. Added to that, when you say you're a model, then they think you are a *real* dimwit. I just can't stand it.

"Well, I don't really have a book yet, but I have some pictures," and I gave her my envelope with the beautiful shots that Father Leo took, which was all I had.

"How long have you been modeling?" she asked, squinting at me as she lit up a cigarette and tossed the match into a blue glass ashtray. I swear, every single person I have met smokes. Not to nag you, Baby, but I hope you are trying to quit.

"Actually, this is my first day and you are the first person I've seen," I said brightly, like the moron she thought I was. I don't know what I was expecting her to do—congratulate me? I can't believe myself. Maybe we *are* subpar mentally.

"Really? Thank you for coming. Tell the next girl to come in."

The appointments all week were more or less the same. Call back when you have more pictures. Drop off your card when you get one. Come around when you get some experience. Don't call us. We'll call you.

Then, the disaster. I went to this photographer named something Greek—I have blocked it out, but it sounded like Stasso Vendikas, or something like that. He looked kind of like Yul Brynner, bald and everything, only not as good-looking, and his place was smaller than most of the photography studios, which are

usually in big open lofts. He had some framed pictures on the walls of Maud Adams and Evelyn Kuhn and Karen Graham, so I know he at least had photographed some big models—unless he just got the pictures from somewhere else and hung them up, which I didn't think of until later. Anyhow, I was a little impressed. He looked at my pictures and asked me if I had time to do a test right then and there. I tried to act cool, like I did this all the time, and called my booker, Liz, the girl who makes my appointments at the agency, and she said, sure, go ahead. I was done with go-sees for the day anyhow.

"You're in luck!" he said. "I'm doing a catalog. Go in the dressing room and put on the orange pantsuit hanging on the rack."

Wow! I was so excited. This might be a real job, not even a test! I was so naïve I didn't know you had to be booked through the agency for work. I really thought I would be in the catalog.

I had stripped off my dress and was about to put on the orange pants, when he came right into the dressing room without even knocking.

"Uh, Mr. Vendikas," I said, "I'm not ready yet. Could you please go out until I change?" He not only didn't go out, but he came over and took away the pants from me that I had been holding in front of myself, leaving me in my bikini panties, my pink jelly beans sticking out of my flat chest.

"Ah, you're lovely," he said. "So tall. Like a white long-stemmed rose. How tall are you, my dear?" He only came up to the bottom of my neck, and had really bad breath, like he had never brushed his teeth in his life. I tried to put my dress on, but he snatched it away. "Don't be embarrassed. You have a lovely body. You'll have to get used to showing that body off." I tried to push him away, but he grabbed at me and tried to kiss me, getting slobbers on my face, which was really disgusting. I pushed at his arms, but he was strong, and I couldn't get him off me.

"Stop it! Leave me alone!"

"Oh, you like it—you know you do. All of you like it." Sweat had popped out on his bald head, which made him even more disgusting, if that is possible.

"Are you trying to rape me or something?" I said. Baby, I was really scared. We were alone in the studio. I always thought if somebody was going to rape me I could scream or kick him in the balls

or something, but men are a lot stronger than girls, even big ones, and I couldn't do anything. If I screamed, there was nobody to hear me. I would just have to get raped, I guess.

I stopped struggling and waited for him to do it. I hoped it would be quick and he wouldn't hurt me too much.

"Rape you? I don't have to rape girls!" he said, backing off, a little huffy. "Do you know how many women are waiting in line to have me make love to them? Did you see the pictures on my walls? Those girls are more famous than you will ever be! I have made love to every single one of them, and they beg for more!"

Yeah, sure, I thought. I just bet they did.

By that time, I had managed to get my dress on, grabbed my purse and pictures, and shoved past him to the door. He followed me out to the elevator, yelling, "You are a silly little girl! Don't you know you have to cooperate if you want to get ahead in this business? You will never make it! You, you . . . *virgin!*" It was the ugliest word he could think to call me.

I got out of there and called Liz from the phone booth on the corner. She wasn't as upset as I thought she'd be, which kind of upset me.

"Calm down, Cherry," she said. "You're all right. He didn't actually rape you, did he? Or hurt you?" I had to say no. "Good. I'll keep an eye on him and if we get any more complaints, he'll be out of test girls. Take the rest of the day off."

And that was my week. So no tests. No new pictures. But at least I didn't get raped. Please don't say anything to anybody about this, not Cassie and especially not Mama and Daddy. I know you won't, but I don't want them to try to make me come home. Maybe the guy is right, that models have to sleep with photographers to get any work, but I am not going to sleep with anyone, especially an old bald guy with bad breath, to get a test picture taken! There must be somebody in this town who will want to work with me for just me. But I learned a lesson—don't take your clothes off in some strange studio if you are all by yourself.

Have you seen Cassie? How is she doing? Has she heard anything from Lale? I asked at Suzan Hartman, and they had never heard of Lale Hardcastle, but then he's probably with another agency, or he might have changed his name. In fact, I bet that is just what he did. He should have realized, though, that if he was

going to get his picture in magazines that somebody from home was going to recognize him. Even with his face half hidden behind the girl in that shampoo ad, Cassie jumped right on it. She would have recognized him, though, if it was just his little toe! Tell her if I run across him, I'll call her, although I have no idea what I'll say to him if I do meet him. I'd like to punch him in the nose. Wouldn't that be funny, to meet somebody who has never laid eyes on you, say, "How do you do?" and then punch them in the nose?!

I miss you so much. Please write soon.

I love you,
Cherry

3

830 BROADWAY

I felt like such an idiot. Of course there was an 830 Broadway. You just had to get around Union Square, walk on down a few blocks farther, and find where it started again, which I did with a little help from a nice woman walking one of those yappy little dust-mop dogs. I wasn't too hopeful that this Ron Bonetti meeting would turn out any better than the ones I'd had the last few days, though. After a whole week, not one person had offered to take my picture, except ol' Stasso. I had a feeling Suzan was just itching to get rid of me, especially since Freddy went out of his way to talk to me when I was at the agency, and if I couldn't even get a test, that would be a great excuse.

Liz was great, though, even if she had been a little casual about my almost-rape, and maybe I did overreact to that. She said not to worry, just keep plugging away, that lots of girls took a while to get going, and one day, bingo, they hit. Liz was from the Bronx with a real New York accent that I loved to listen to, had frosted hair, and chewed Juicy Fruit gum all the time. At least she and Gina seemed to like me, and while I couldn't say Lana was a friend, she smiled and talked to me.

830 Broadway was not any different from the other buildings I'd been in all week. Old. Creaky elevators with worn linoleum floors. Not the cleanest places. That was one thing about New York—everything was old. Some of the buildings, like up on the Upper East Side, where I was staying, had doormen and were clean and fancy with polished brass, but it seemed like the farther downtown you got, the less well-kept they were. The city had many neighborhoods, vastly different from one another, as I was finding out, and I was staying in one of the nicer ones. So far, most of the photographers I had met were downtown, trying to make it to the big time but not famous, and most of them probably never would be. I was beginning to understand that I wasn't going to be sent up to Avedon and Scavullo and Penn right away. In fact, I was beginning to get a little discouraged. Maybe I *should* dye my hair golden blond. I hated the thought that Suzan might be right. I tried to stay out of her way when I went in every day to get my schedule, because she always looked me up and down, like she didn't like what I was wearing, and said something, like "When are your eyebrows growing back to normal?" In fact, the white hairs were beginning to come in, salt and pepperish, but I brushed mascara over them to even them out. When all the dye came out I would see what they looked like then. I wouldn't promise not to dye them again, but she didn't know that.

I had fixed my eyelash while I was sitting on the bench beside Honest Abe in Union Square Park, but it still felt a little funny, so I took out my compact in the lobby of 830 to adjust it, touched up my new mulberry-colored lipstick that Lana thought looked better than my old pink one, then found Ron Bonetti's name on the list by the elevator and punched the number for the eighth floor. The elevator door opened directly into the studio instead of a hallway, and I stepped out into a little waiting room with an old leather couch and a couple of chairs. A great big spool that some kind of wire cable had been wound around was being used for a table, with magazines arranged on it. There didn't seem to be anybody around.

"Hello?" I called out. "Ron? Ron Bonetti?" There was some noise in the next room, so I went to the door and looked in.

Four guys were scattered around, lying on old couches or flat on the floor, sound asleep, as naked as picked birds.

"Uh, uh, uh, excuse me! I'm sorry!" I said, hypnotized like a mouse staring at a snake, so to speak. One of them opened an eye and sat up, rubbed his hand over his face, looked at me, and said, "Bonetti's not here, honey, but I can take a look at your book."

He started to get up, his hand outstretched, but I said, "Ohhhhh, that's all right. I'll come back later."

I ran to the elevator and punched the button, thinking more and more that my daddy might have been right about New York. It seemed like it took forever for it to come back up. When the door finally opened, I ran smack-dab into a short guy, probably just a couple of years older than me, with dark hair and a close-cropped beard, wearing yellow aviator glasses.

"Hold on—where's the fire?" he said, picking up my pictures, which had been knocked out of my hand. The elevator door rolled shut.

"Are you Ron Bonetti? What kind of a place is this? There are four naked guys in there!"

"What! Hey, Axel! What are you guys still doing here? You were supposed to be out of here last night!"

"Hey, man, give us a break. We shot all night and just needed to get a little shut-eye. Be cool." The guy who had talked to me earlier came out, zipping up his jeans. His hair was long and wild, and he had a black beard and mustache.

"Aw, man, look at you. Get those guys out of there! I'll take this lovely girl out for breakfast. We'll talk later."

Axel went back and I heard grumbling. We stood in silence while we waited again for the elevator. I clutched my pictures, which were beginning to get a little bent. Another one of the guys stuck his head around the door. His hair was sandy blond and he had the most amazing blue eyes. His shirt was still off, showing chest muscles carpeted in dark-blond hair, but at least he had put on his pants. He grinned at me with a perfect set of white teeth.

"Morning, ma'am," he said. "I apologize. My mama raised me better than that."

I did a double take. He looked familiar and had a thick accent, which had to be Arkansas. Maybe Tennessee or Texas. Before I could say anything, Axel came back out.

"Come on, Zack. We got to get out of here. Bonetti has business to do." He pointed at me and they disappeared.

The elevator door opened and Ron and I got inside.

"Those guys are making a student film, and I let them use the studio last night. I'm really sorry about that. Let me buy you some breakfast."

"You don't have to do that. It's okay. I just never saw that many naked men at one time before. They couldn't have been comfortable, on the floor like that without any blankets. I wonder why they weren't sleeping in their clothes?"

"I'll have to ask them that." We had walked out the door and stopped in front of a coffee shop on the corner. "Is this okay?"

"You don't have to buy me breakfast. Really. I can come back some other time. I'll just go on . . ."

He took me by the arm and ushered me in.

"Please. It's the least I can do."

I was kind of hungry, so I went along without too much arm-twisting. Like most coffee shops, the place was narrow, with six or seven red booths, a counter with stools, and air that sizzled with bacon frying. The cook was flipping eggs and pancakes as fast as he could, a big pile of hash browns mounded up over to the side of the griddle, and the waitresses rushed around, putting down plates and clearing dishes nonstop as a stream of people came in and out. We had to wait a couple of minutes for one of the girls to wipe our table, leaving us, unluckily, standing right in front of a case full of muffins and pastries. I eyed the cheese Danish, which I'd had for the first time in the coffee shop in the Barbizon and had gotten kind of addicted to. I'd never really thought about what I ate before, being naturally skinny, but Suzan had told me, in one of her brief, pointed comments, that I had to watch my diet because she didn't want to see me gain even one pound, so I decided not to have the Danish, especially in front of a photographer.

"Coffee?" the waitress said, putting down menus and two glasses of water after we got settled in a booth.

"Yes, please. Thank you," I said, trying not to sound too southern. She filled both our cups. Ron glanced at the menu.

"What'll you have?"

"I guess I'll have scrambled eggs. And a sesame-seed bagel. But I'll pay for it." He shot me a look, and I knew I shouldn't have said that.

"My friend will have the number one, sesame bagel instead of toast. I'll just have coffee. And the check." She flashed him a quick smile and rushed to give the order to the harried cook.

"Have you already had breakfast?"

"I never eat breakfast. Just black coffee and a little gasoline to kick-start the day." He pulled a small bottle of vodka out of his pocket and poured some into his cup.

After the last week, nothing surprised me.

"So what's with the accent?" he said, sipping his coffee like it was just coffee. "Where are you from?"

"Arkansas."

"Arkansas! I never met anybody from Arkansas."

"Well, now you have."

"Do they all look like you?"

"No, some of them are really tall." He laughed.

"Who was that blond guy in the studio?" I asked. "He sounded like he might be from Arkansas. The one Axel called Zack."

"Beats me. Axel is an old buddy from college who is going to film school. He drags in anybody who'll work for free to be in his movies. Why? Did you know that guy?"

"No. His voice just sounded kind of like home, and I was curious."

The waitress put down an oval plate piled up with scrambled eggs and hash browns, the bagel on a separate little dish. It had taken all of three minutes. They don't fool around in these coffee shops—you're in and out before your shirttail has time to hit your rear end.

"So. Arkansas, huh?" he said after a pause. "I see you're wearing shoes."

He grinned, like he had said something really witty. I wanted to like this guy, but he was making it hard.

"Yeah, well, they make us rent them at the border when we leave, and we have to check them in when we come back."

"You're pretty funny."

"So are you. Funny like an iron lung."

"Is that an old Arkansas expression?"

"Must be. We used to say stuff like that in the seventh grade. Funny like a three-legged dog . . ."

"Funny like a dead kitten?" he countered.

"Funny like a squashed baby duck."

"Funny like a putrid . . ."

"You want to see my pictures, or should we just try to think up some more funny Arkansas stuff? I know a joke about two possums crossing the road."

"I would love to see your pictures."

I handed them over with a little attitude. They had been tossed back at me a few too many times.

"I know these aren't real model pictures, but they're all I have. I've just been here . . ."

"Wow! These are incredible! Who took them?"

"Father Leo, a priest in a place called St. Juniper's, up in the Ozark Mountains. He was a friend of mine. I mean, *is* a friend of mine."

"A priest, huh? Well, he sure knows photography. These are really fine." He took his time, studying each of them. He finally put them down. "So, you a Cat'lic like me, then?"

"No, I belong to the First Apostolic Holiness Church of God. In Sweet Valley."

"Oh, yeah? Is that like Baptist?"

"Kind of."

"What's different about them?"

"Well, we're noisier. We speak in tongues and do healing services and shout when we're filled with the Holy Spirit and . . . and . . . stuff like that." I ran out of steam. It sounded bizarre in my own ears, and I was trying not to be embarrassed, because we're supposed to testify to sinners and be not ashamed—not that I knew for sure Ron was a sinner, even though he was drinking vodka at nine in the morning—but I had never been much good in the testifying department, and I was flustered.

He was staring at me like I'd grown another nose. Bad for my soul or not, I was embarrassed and I know my face got red.

"So. Okay. Let me get this straight," he said after a minute. "You belong to an Arkansas church that shouts and speaks in tongues, whatever that is, and then you had some hot pictures taken by a Catholic priest, and now you're in New York modeling for Suzan Hartman."

"Well . . . yeah. That's about it." It sounded weird when you put it that way, I had to admit. For a flash, I saw it all through my father's eyes. He'd seen the fashion magazines, the swimsuit ads, the models posing half naked in bra and girdle and stocking ads, and all. He was no dummy. He knew what men were like. But I couldn't be his little girl forever, and he knew that, too, and finally he had let me go. A little pang went through my heart, like I had lost something precious.

I had changed a lot in the past year, and frankly, going back to the summer a year ago, when I lost my virginity to Tripp Barlow and smoked pot without being struck by lightning, I'd kind of stopped be-

believing I was going to burn in hell for every little bad thing I did, like Brother Wilkins said. I hadn't once thought about finding a church in New York. I guess I was close to being what we call back-slid. Still, even though my mind said not to worry, I knew deep down that I could never really get away from feeling that whatever I was doing was the wrong thing.

"How long have you been at it?"

"At what?"

"Modeling."

"Oh. A whole week. And not one person has wanted to do a test with me. One guy started to, but he only wanted to see me naked when I was changing and grab my boobs, which is kind of impossible since I don't have enough to grab. Don't laugh. Please don't laugh."

He had been ready to laugh, but his face changed. All of a sudden my bravado had run out and I was on the verge of crying. He reached over and took my hand. That made it worse, and to my horror, tears started running down my cheeks.

"Hey, sweetheart, don't do that. Come on. Everybody has to start somewhere. I have a fine-arts degree from NYU. I wanted to be an art photographer, but I couldn't get a gallery or make any money at it, and now I take pictures of food."

"You do?" I sniffed. "Food? Like in *Good Housekeeping*, when they give the recipes?"

"Yes, exactly like *Good Housekeeping*, and I'm really good at it, but what I want to do is fashion. I want to be the next Avedon, work at *Vogue* and *Bazaar*. So here I am. Reaching for the same gold ring as you." He fumbled in his pocket, looking for a handkerchief while I wiped at my eyes with my fingers, trying not to dislodge my eyelashes again. "Tell you what," he said finally, pulling a napkin out of the chrome holder and handing it to me. I blew my nose. "Let me do some pictures of you. You have something unique, and so do I. We'll start this thing together, and we'll wind up big stars, you and me. You wait and see."

"You want to take pictures of me? Are you sure? You don't have to, just to pay me back for Axel and Zack and them, you know. I've seen a naked man before. It was no big deal," I lied.

"I'm sure I want to photograph you. I'm not paying you back for anything."

He smiled and took a swig of his coffee.

"You know, if we're going to wind up big stars together, you'll have to tell me your name."

"Cherry. Just Cherry. Well, it's really Cherry Marshall, but they don't want me to use Marshall because some other, older model in England has it."

"Cherry. That name is going to be in the pages of *Vogue*, Cherry Marshall. You wait and see."

4

FLYIN' JACK'S

I couldn't believe that guy named Zack in Ron Bonetti's studio. That had to be a made-up name. The chances were he wasn't Lale—that would have been too much of a coincidence—but that accent sure did sound down home, and he looked a lot like the pictures Cassie showed me, only his hair was shorter now. Coincidence or not, I had to find out. Maybe I'd get Axel's number from Ron or something, but that could wait a while until I did the test and got some pictures out of him, if he didn't back out on me.

To tell you the truth, I wasn't in all that much of a hurry to find Lale. What I would do if this Zack was Lale, I didn't know. He had done a real number on a sweet girl who had become a friend, and when Cassie found out I was coming to New York she made me promise I would look for him. I couldn't say no, and I figured if somehow by chance we ran into each other, I would just start a little conversation and try to find out why he had done what he did. I mean, I sort of already knew *why* he had done it—that wasn't hard to see—but maybe I could convince him to call or at least write her. As ugly of me as it was, though, I kind of wished

I had never promised. I hated to be in the middle of things that were not my business. On the other hand, I wanted to help Cassie. It was a real predicament.

As I thought about Cassie and all that, it hit me how one teensy little decision can change your whole life. If I hadn't taken a wrong turn and got lost in a snowstorm, thereby coming into Buchanan on the wrong road, I wouldn't have stopped in at Flyin' Jack's, where Cassie was a waitress, and I might be teaching art somewhere right now, like Baby was. More important, Cassie might be dead. In fact, two people might be dead.

Mama always says there are no coincidences in life.

It seems like so long ago, in another life even, but it was only back in late February, and I was on my way to do my practice teaching at St. Juniper's, which was a slow four-hour drive from Sweet Valley up through the Ozark Mountains. It had just started snowing when I left, but as I climbed higher, it got heavier, and those winding mountain roads are tricky, even in good weather. Off to the left was a sheer drop-off with a breath-sucking view of the valley below, all silent and misty with snow, like a Japanese painting. My trusty little Volkswagen was doing its best—thank goodness Daddy had put on chains—but the wiper blades were old, smearing the windshield, and it was hard to see.

As if the worsening weather wasn't enough to make me nervous, I rounded a curve and there up on the rocks, somebody had hung a big homemade sign that said in crooked letters PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD!!! The words screamed out underneath a black paint-dripped cross. Not the most reassuring thing to see right at that particular moment because while I was trying to figure out how they had gotten up there to hang it, a Mack truck whipped around the curve, half over in my lane, and came within two feet of smashing into me. The blast of air as it passed blew my little car sideways, and I had to swerve to keep from going into the rocks. It shook me up to the point that I crawled along at five miles an hour until my heart stopped hammering. I could see him in the rearview mirror barreling toward the next curve, spraying up snow, oblivious to what was around the bend. I had no doubt he would plunge off the mountain and kill himself or somebody else before he made it to the bottom. Truckers are crazy. The stress of all those long hours of driving, not to mention the gallons of coffee and stay-awake pills they all take, must do some permanent damage to their nerves.

Unhappily, this near-miss made me remember the time when we

were in the sixth grade and the state troopers came to our school in their uniforms with Smokey the Bear hats and real guns hanging on their hips and all, to show us a film about traffic safety. It was actual home movies of car wrecks, if you can believe it. One was of a big truck carrying a load of pipes. The guy had been going down a mountain (truth be told, it looked a lot like the one I was on) too fast to make a turn, and went flying off the road; the truck wound up perched half on the road and half in the top branches of a tree. The pipes had crashed through the back window of the cab and jammed the guy's head clean through the steering wheel. They showed a good tight close-up of it, all bloody and purple.

We all had nightmares for weeks. I don't know what they were thinking about, showing stuff like that to kids, or why I had to remember it now, driving up this steep, narrow road in a snowstorm. There was no way I was about to turn tail at this point, though, so I just kept going and tried to see through my bad wipers as the snow came down and the knot in my stomach grew bigger. I had only been to St. Juniper's the one time, when I went for my interview, and although I thought I knew the way, everything looked different from the way it had back in the fall, when I had come on a bright sunny day and the leaves were red and gold.

The road split into a fork, which surprised me. I didn't remember any fork at all when I came up here the last time. Well, I would just have to trust my instincts. After a few miles, there was another fork, and then a while after that, another one. Just when I was beginning to wonder if I might have made a couple of bad choices, the road began to sharply slope up, and finally I topped a hill. It was snowing so hard I couldn't see more than a few feet ahead of me.

I took a breath and started down the other side, my legs shaky from practically standing on the clutch and the brake, when the car fishtailed and the right tire went off the road. I spun my wheels and desperately tried to remember any *National Geographic* articles that told you how to survive in the cold woods without freezing to death if you only had a nail file and two Snickers bars in your purse. I made a mental note to read the articles in the future instead of just flipping through and looking at the pictures.

After a hairy slide, miraculously the car bumped back up on the pavement, and soon, thank you, Jesus, I saw a sign that pointed toward Buchanan.

As I got to the edge of town, I passed a neat little café painted cheery robin's-egg blue snugged up next to Flyin' Jack's Truck Stop and realized

I was starving. I was so grateful to be back near people that I decided to turn around and have a little bite to fortify myself. Lunch would have been long gone at St. Juniper's.

Christmas bells still hanging over the door jangled when I came in, and the smell of good food hit me in the face and made my eyes water. It was a small place—just three red Naugahyde booths and five chrome stools lining the counter. Perched on one of them was a woman in tight blue jeans and a T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up over a tattoo that said CHARLIE on her not-insignificant bicep. She was leaned back with her elbows on the counter, smoking and talking to a man hunkered over a coffee cup who was wearing a plaid shirt and an oil-stained green billed cap that said L&B TRUCKING. She waved her cigarette at me. Her hands were big and square, like a man's, the nails neatly clipped.

"Come on in, darlin'—take a load off. Sit down anywhere you want to. We got room for everybody today." Her voice was rough, like it had been left out in the rain and rusted.

"Thanks. It's good and warm in here." I smiled at her and slid into the booth farthest from the door.

"Cassie, darlin', get off the can! You got a customer!" she yelled, then turned to me. "She'll be right out. I'm Bernadette, the chef and proprietor of the joint, so when you figure out what you want, I'll go back and cook it for you."

"I'd take the burger, if I was you," the man said, flicking another ash onto a mound of butts in a big ashtray. "That's edible. Either that or the beans and corn bread. Bernadette's a fairly decent corn bread maker. Little on the heavy side, but good and solid, and it sticks to your ribs."

"I'll heavy side *you*, Snuffy Simmons!" she said, poking him in the ribs. "You would've done been dead if it wasn't for my grub, so I don't want to hear any complaints out of you."

A waitress probably not long out of high school came out from the back room. She was heavyset and big-busted, with silky fine honey-brown hair, long and parted in the middle, cornflower-blue eyes, and white, even teeth set across a wide smile. Her nose was a little on the large side with a bump in the middle, but it didn't really matter. She was the friendliest face I had seen since I left Sweet Valley.

"How're you doing this lovely day?" She put a glass of water and a menu down in front of me.

"Not too bad now. It's been a rough one, though, and I'm hungry. What's good?"

"Everything's good. Depends on what you feel like. Burgers. Fries we make ourselves—real potatoes. Chili's good and spicy. Beans and corn bread, ham hock cooked in the beans. Fried catfish. Sandwiches. You name it."

"I'll try a bowl of beans and corn bread, since it comes so highly recommended. Side order of slaw." What did it matter if I ate beans? I was going to be sleeping alone, anyhow.

Cassie picked up the menu and went back to the kitchen. The man in the trucker hat, Snuffy, I guess his name was, nodded his approval, stood up, stretched, and rolled a toothpick out of a holder on the counter.

"Well, I ain't getting any younger, so I might as well get going. I got some doing around to do before I take off tonight. You take care, Bernadette, and try not to poison nobody while I'm gone to the big bad city."

"You take care *yourself*—and try not to starve up there. You won't get good cooking like mine up in Yankee land."

"You got that right." He turned to me. "In New York, they don't even know what chicken-fried steak is, nor red-eye gravy, neither. I stay just as long as it takes to unload my truck, and then I hightail it back here to civilization."

"You're going all the way to *New York City*?"

Outside of my one meeting with Suzan Hartman at the fair, I'd never met anyone who had actually been to New York City.

"You wouldn't like it," he said, picking a piece of meat out of his teeth and spitting it onto the floor. "Lot of big tall buildings, so many people crowded together you have to stand in line just to walk down the sidewalk. You have to look straight up to even see any blue sky. Too much garbage. Too much traffic. Too much noise. Too much everything. The side streets are one-way and narrow, and it takes a genius of a driver to maneuver an eighteen-wheeler down them, which fortunately, I am."

"There's no conceit in *his* family—he got it all," Bernadette put in.

"New York cabdrivers are all nuts, too. You gotta look out for them. It's a miracle more people don't get run over, as crazy as they drive. I wouldn't get in one of those ol' yellow things if my life depended on it. In fact, *all* New Yorkers are crazy. You need to carry a gun just to protect yourself from getting mugged."

Snuffy laid some money on the counter, picked his jacket off the coat tree.

"Y'all take it easy. I'll see you when I do." He swatted Bernadette on her tight rear end and winked at me.

"That old Snuffy sure is a card," Bernadette said as the bells jangled and Snuffy slipped on his jacket as he walked toward his pickup. "Best durn truck driver L and B has, though, and not too bad at everything else, if you know what I mean." She stubbed out her cigarette. "I'll get you your dinner," she said as she went back to the kitchen. "Just kick back and relax."

It was so warm and comfy in the restaurant that I did finally begin to relax. My feet were half frozen since I hadn't had the sense to wear thick socks, so I took off the rubber boots I was wearing and rubbed my toes through my silky tights, which is kind of gross, but there wasn't anybody else in there to see me. I had just put the boots back on when Cassie came back with a big bowl of steaming brown pinto beans, rich with pieces of ham, pink and juicy, and a basket of hot corn muffins.

"Here you go, darlin'. Perfect meal for a day like this. Where'd you come in from?"

"Sweet Valley. Know where that is?"

"I think so. Down southwest from here in the River Valley?" I nodded. "That's a pretty far drive, especially in this weather. You must be worn out. If you don't mind me asking, what made you go through a snowstorm to get here?"

"I'm going up to St. Juniper's to practice teach. Classes start tomorrow."

"No kidding. My mother is the head housekeeper up there. She runs the place, if you want to know the truth. Her name is Annie Culver. We go to mass up at the abbey, too. My name is Cassie Culver, by the way." She stuck out her hand, and I shook it.

"Cherry Marshall. Good to meet you."

I dug into the beans, but Cassie obviously didn't have a whole lot to do. She sat on the stool and leaned back for a chat.

"So what teacher will you be working with?"

"Father Leo. The art teacher."

"Oh, you'll love him! He's the best teacher they have. He lets me come up and use the wheel and the kiln sometimes on the weekends. Art was the only thing I was good at in school. I graduated from Buchanan last year, but we live not far from St. Juniper's. Our family grows grapes for Freyaldenheimer's winery."

"That's great. I heard they made wine up here. Are you going to college?"

"No way. I've had enough of school. I'm going to get married." She held out her left hand to show me her ring. I squinted and just about picked out the glint of a tiny diamond in the middle of a fancy gold setting.

"That's really beautiful. Lot of fire in that diamond. Who's the lucky guy?"

"Lale Hardcastle. We been going together since tenth grade."

"That's a good long time. What's he like?"

"Good-looking. He was voted Most Handsome every year of high school. It'll be one wedding where the groom is prettier than the bride."

"I don't believe that for a minute."

"You've seen me, but you haven't seen him."

"Well, maybe I'll get a chance to. I'll be here for the rest of the semester."

"You have a boyfriend?"

"Not at the moment. I just broke up with somebody, right before Thanksgiving. Or he broke up with me. He was a good-looking guy, too, and I hate to tell you, but most of the time, those are trouble."

"Yeah, I hear you, but Lale's not like that. Maybe you'll get back together."

"Afraid not. He's married to somebody else."

"Oh. That's awful. Well, you'll find somebody better. You're too beautiful not to have a boyfriend for long."

She seemed a little embarrassed. I shouldn't have blurted it out about Tripp like that, but it was the truth, so why hide it? And frankly, I'm not sure Tripp and I would have been together anyhow. I thought I loved him, enough that he was the first guy I ever slept with, but a lot had happened since I met him last summer, and although it was a big shock at the time when I found out about Faye, his Vietnamese wife, it wasn't like I was all that devastated. If I'm honest, part of me felt relief that I didn't have to make a decision about marrying him myself, because I was in no way ready to tie myself down like that. One thing about Tripp, though—he always made me feel beautiful. Most of the time I felt like a tall, gawky freak who could never find a place to put my legs and arms, but Mama drilled into me that when somebody gives you a compliment, you don't need to spend a lot of time denying it and

shuffling your feet. All you have to say is "Thank you." Otherwise, you insult their taste.

"Thank you."

"You look like you could be a model, tall like you are and all. Did you ever do any modeling?"

"Well, I posed in a swimsuit for figure-drawing class at DuVall, but not really."

"You're prettier than most of the ones in the magazines. I used to work at the drugstore so I got to read them all when they came in. You ought to get Father Leo to take some pictures of you. He's a great photographer. He's had shows of his stuff down at the bank, and at the abbey, and even at the Art Center in Little Rock."

"Does he photograph women? I mean, that's kind of weird, a priest and all."

"Well, he mostly does landscapes and stuff, but he does women, yeah. You better realize that priests are men, Cherry, in spite of those collars. But Father Leo's okay. He's my buddy."

"Cassie!" Bernadette called out from the kitchen.

"Be right there!" She stood up and stretched. She had on a loose top, and I wondered if she was a little bit pregnant. Oh, well. So what? Same song, second verse. A lot of marriages started out that way. My own dear cousin Lucille was nearly three months gone when she and her husband, Jim Floyd Hawkins, got married, and they had a great baby named Tiffany LaDawn and were really happy. If Cassie was pregnant, it was no big deal, and maybe she wasn't. It was hard to tell, since she was a big hefty girl, almost as tall as me.

"Anyhow, don't worry about finding a boyfriend. I know a few guys up here," she said. "I'll work on it."

People in love are just obsessed with trying to spread the happiness around and fix up anybody who is single.

"Cassandra Marie Culver! These dishes ain't going to wash themselves!"

"I'm coming!" She made a face and stuck out her tongue in the direction of the kitchen. "I better get back and help Bernadette, the old slave driver. Holler if you need anything. You might try that pepper sauce on the beans. It's real good."

She shined her ring on her shirt and looked at it in the light. "It does have a little fire in it, doesn't it?" Then she sauntered on into the kitchen.

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MOST HANDSOME

It was dim in the barn, in spite of the coal-oil lantern that warmed a pocket of the dark, and when George Hardcastle pulled open the big wooden door, a swirl of white snow came in with him and made Lale squint until the door closed and shut out the light again.

"Son, what are you doing out here in the barn? Your mama's got supper about ready. You better get on in the house and get cleaned up."

Lale lay stretched out on a pile of hay with his hands behind his head. The noise of the cows chewing their cud blended with the whine of the wind, making a strange kind of music.

"I'm not real hungry, Daddy. Y'all go on and eat. I'll get something later over at the café. Cassie's girlfriends are giving her a shower tonight, and after it's over I got to go by and pick her and the presents up and take them to her house."

"You're taking your life in your hands, boy, going to a hen party. Those girls will peck you to death!" George laughed, but Lale didn't join him.

"I feel like I've already been pecked to death." His voice was gloomy

in the dark. "All Cassie talks about is curtains and mixers and which dishes and glasses to pick out. I couldn't care less what kind of plates we eat off of, or if we sleep on flowered sheets or plain."

"Well, son, you didn't have to get married. Y'all could have waited awhile."

There was silence. In the dim light, George could see Lale struggling with what he had to say. George was patient. He already knew what was coming.

"Couldn't you?"

"Oh, Daddy." The words came out like a sigh, ragged and broken. "I need to tell you something, but it's so hard."

"Try me. I might be more understanding than you think I will."

"I hate like everything to do this to you and Mama, and I know it's all my fault, but we got to get married. Cassie's going to have a baby."

"I done figured that one out, Lale."

"Does Mama know?"

"I think she figured, too, but she likes Cassie. How far gone is she?"

"Two months, I guess, more or less. We'll have all the hoo-rah of the wedding, and won't even get settled in until it will be more showers with baby stuff. It's just all happening too fast. The truth is, I don't even want to get married, much less be a daddy. In fact, I was thinking about breaking it off with Cassie when she dropped this load on me about the baby. I just don't know what to do, Daddy. It's eating me up. My insides feel dead. It seems like my life is already over before it even starts. I don't know if I can go through with it."

George sat down on the bale of hay next to Lale, put his hand on his son's ankle. The gentleness of the touch almost made Lale cry.

"You may not believe it right now, son, but you can. I know you can. Let me tell you something, Lale, that I never was going to tell you, and you don't have to let your mother know I did. The same thing happened to your mother and me. I was a year younger than you when we got married, and maybe I felt like you do. I wanted to go to the university and play ball, wanted to see what redheaded women were like—any other woman, for that matter. Your mother was the only one I'd ever been with, then or now. I had it in my mind to study to be a doctor or a lawyer or even a businessman—anything besides hardscrabble farming like my daddy. But even though I was only eighteen, I was acting like a man, and I had a man's responsibilities. If you play, you got to pay. Still and all, don't get me wrong. Not for one minute did I ever regret marry-

ing your mother and having you and your sister, and you'll feel the same way once you hold that baby in your arms. Cassie's a good, solid girl. Things will change once the wedding's over, and you'll get used to married life. It won't be so bad. You're just scared right now, and I don't blame you."

"You mean you didn't ever wonder what it would have been like if you'd gone to the university and played ball? You never looked at a bus and wondered what it would be like to just get on it and ride to the end of the road and see what was there?"

"It don't matter whether I ever wondered or not. I had a responsibility to you and your mother, and you have a responsibility to Cassie and that baby. You forget about the end of the road, son. Right here's the end of the road." George patted his leg, two short pats, as if he was dismissing him, then got up and opened the barn door. "Don't be sulking out here with the cows," he said lightly. "It'll sour their milk."

Lale tried to smile. "You go on in. I'll be there directly." As the barn door closed, the smile crumpled. He might have been acting like a man, but the boy he felt inside sobbed big greasy tears.

Unlike his father, Lale had already had other women besides Cassie. Quite a few others, including a friend of his mother's who had been his first, when he was fourteen. Sandra was a divorced blonde who had been a cheerleader with his mother, Janet, in high school. She dropped by for a visit one afternoon when Janet was out shopping with Lale's little sister, Brenda. He couldn't really say how it happened, but before she was there fifteen minutes they were up in his room with all their clothes off. He doubted many boys his age had an initiation like that one, and as much as he wanted to, he didn't dare tell his friends about it. She was the mother of one of them. They still saw each other once in a while, if the truth were told. Amazing what you could get away with if you just kept your mouth shut.

Cassie was different from most of the ones he went out with, though. She was a good Catholic girl and they had gone together over two years before he finally wore her down and she let him go all the way. It was a late-summer night, and surprisingly the aurora borealis lit up the sky. That was something rare that you almost never saw this far south. He told her it was a sign from God that it would be all right, but by that time she didn't really need much selling. Part of the problem of being a good Catholic girl, however, was that she wouldn't hear of him using a rubber, and he now saw what a fool he had been to keep on with

her under those circumstances. She tried to use the rhythm method, but got pregnant after only a few months.

He winced when he remembered the night she told him. They were parked out by the bluffs, and it still made him sick at his stomach to remember it.

"I got something to tell you, darlin', and I don't know how you're going to take it," she had said in a small voice.

They were lying comfortably in the backseat of his Thunderbird, their clothes draped across the seat back in front of them. Cassie played with the thick mat of hair on his chest, running her fingers through it, which gave him goose bumps. That hairy chest had sprung out by the time he was in the eleventh grade, and the boys on the football team all kidded him about it. "Too much juice makes you hairy, Hardcastle," they'd said. "Better unload some of it." Whether they were right or not, he'd done the best he could to do just that.

"Do I really want to know?" He knew he didn't.

"That depends. But one way or the other, you'll find out, so let me just make it short and sweet. I'm pregnant."

Cold shock went through his veins. It's not like he never thought it *could* happen—it just hadn't seemed like it would. Nobody else he had been with had ever gotten pregnant, not to his knowledge anyhow. He even thought he might be sterile, since he'd had a bad case of the mumps when he was seven.

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm sure. I went to the doctor in Fayetteville and there's no doubt."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I am telling you."

"Look, Cassie, let's think about this for a minute. Let's talk about it. You don't have to go through with it. There's ways to stop it. I know of a girl who . . ."

She interrupted him. "You're not talking about an abortion, are you, Lale Hardcastle? Because if you are, I pray that God would strike you dead right here in this car. Besides being illegal, it's murder and I am not killing this baby! If you don't want to marry me, that's fine—I'll have it by myself." She sat up and started putting on her brassiere.

"I didn't say I didn't want to marry you."

"You didn't say you did. In fact, the first thing you thought of was getting rid of it."

"Don't be like that, Cassie. It was just a shock. Of course I want to marry you."

He tried to put his arms around her, but she pushed him away. It took him ten whole minutes to get her to look at him.

"Cassie, look at me. I want to marry you. I really do. We'll go to Father Leo and start it up. It'll be all right."

He took her chin in his hand and forced her to look into his eyes. It was hard not to melt when Lale looked you in the eyes. Cassie threw her arms around him. With her face pressed into his neck, she didn't notice that he was staring out the back window, those baby-blue eyes a shade deader.

"Have you told your mother and daddy?"

"Not yet," she sniffed, pulling away from him and wiping her eyes. "I thought we'd tell them together. We don't have to tell them about the baby. Just that we're getting married. Lots of babies are born in seven or eight months."

"All right. Just give me a day or two to tell mine."

"Lale . . ."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

"You never have said 'I love you' to me. Not one time. Are you really sure you want to marry me? Because if you don't, baby or not, then I don't want to marry you."

"I love you, Cassie. I do. It's just hard for me to say. I'm not much of a talker—you know how I am." He put his arms around her. "It'll be all right."

His mouth said it, but his eyes didn't. Cassie saw it, but for now, the mouth part was enough. The eyes part would have to come later.

6

THE BEST ATTIC

Ron Bonetti wasn't kidding—he called Liz and booked me for a whole afternoon! Just having a real test booked gave me the lift I needed, so I called the woman Lana had said might have an apartment for rent, Mrs. Digby, and she said for me to come by.

The house was on West Twelfth Street, a pretty, tree-lined block in Greenwich Village. It was an old five-story red-brick walk-up with a little courtyard in the back. The first thing you saw as you entered was a flight of steep stairs centered with a strip of faded carpet that must have been a nice Oriental at one time. Mrs. Digby lived on the ground level, to the right of the stairs. The place was going toward shabby, furnished with an old green velvet couch, its down cushions a little punched out, a couple of faded chintz armchairs, and a reading lamp. Cream and rose-coral flowered wallpaper was marked with water stains, weathered over the years to a soft brown, which had become almost part of the design. It was homey.

Mrs. Digby met me at the door, shading her eyes as she looked up at me. She was about the size of Baby. Mrs. Digby had undoubtedly been

taller in her youth, but she hadn't been young for several decades, and now her back was beginning to bend into a widow's hump, which made me think unkindly of a turtle poking its head out of a shell. I made a mental note to drink more milk. She smiled with a full mouthful of teeth that must have been perfect once, but were now worn to a translucent pale yellow.

"My goodness, you are a big one!" Her voice was high and crackly like a parrot's. Her hair, so thin that streaks of white scalp showed through, was dyed coal black and pulled into a tight, small knot on the top of her head. Her nose had the narrow scooped-out bridge and skinny nostrils of one of the first nose jobs ever done, and the tip had traveled off a bit to the left of center with age. Still, it was obvious she had once been pretty, and she cared enough about herself to put on, rather expertly, bright peony-pink lipstick and a dab of pale powder.

I hate it when people say the obvious about me the first time I meet them, but I didn't want to start off on the wrong foot with her.

"Yes, I guess I am big. You must be Mrs. Digby?"

"I am Mrs. Digby. Beatrice Digby. Come in, my dear, and let's chat." She poured out two cups of tea from a porcelain teapot and passed me the sugar bowl.

"You are a model?"

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, yes, I am. Trying to be one."

"First time away from home?"

"Not really. I lived at a school for a few months last spring. But this is the first time in New York."

"Oh, you'll love it here. New York is the only place for young attractive people to live. I grew up in New Jersey, near the shore, but came here when I was just a teenager—fourteen, if you want to know the truth. I had to lie, of course. I used to be on Broadway, a dancer. I was a Ziegfeld girl—can you believe it?"

I could believe it and said so. Even with her bent little back, she walked with a graceful step, like a dancer.

"I danced with Evelyn Nesbit—do you know who that was?"

"No, ma'am, I'm sorry."

"Never mind. It was a long time ago. Old history. You seem like a good girl. I can always tell. I'm a little bit psychic, you know. It helps when you have to invite people to live in your home. I have a vacancy on the top floor. It's not big, and you only have a hot plate and a small refrigerator, but you have your own bathroom. No pets. There's nothing

worse than dogs and cats peeing on the carpet. You can never get the smell out, no matter what you use to clean it. I hate that. One girl sneaked a dog in here, and the nasty thing peed on the couch and I had to get it recovered. I could smell it all the way out in the hallway. I might be old, but my smeller is perfect. Of course I had to ask her to leave. It's seventy-five dollars a month, first month in advance."

It sounded high, since you could rent a three-bedroom house in Arkansas for that. I had to slow down on spending, as it looked like I wasn't going to start making money right away. If ever. I had even thought about maybe trying to find a job as a salesgirl or waitress somewhere, but would wait until I absolutely had to. I was determined not to have to ask Daddy for money. He would just say come home.

"I'd like to see it first, if that's all right."

We climbed the five flights of stairs, and I was huffing while Mrs. Digby, spry as could be, was not even breathing hard when we got to the last one. I'd always tried to stay away from exercise as much as I could, especially anything that had to do with running and balls, but I'd get into shape in spite of myself just walking around town and going up and down to my room.

We entered the apartment from the landing at the top of the stairs through a walk-in closet, which was weird but nice to have, and then we had to stoop through a door which was only five feet high, because of the slope of the roof, to go on into the room. Well, I had to stoop. Mrs. Digby had no such problem, but I cracked my head a good one on the top of the door. I actually saw stars, like in the cartoons.

"Watch out, dear," she said too late. "That is a low door."

The room had been walled off from the apartment on the other side, necessitating the odd entry through the closet, and was almost like a secret chamber in the peak of the house. It was not more than three or four hundred feet square, full of odd nooks and crannies, one of which held the small fridge with the hot plate on top. There was a bed, a Persian rug in muted colors of henna and moss green, old ivory and blue, a chest of drawers, and a small mirrored dressing table shaped like a kidney with a skirt and a stool covered in worn tapestry. A dark-red velvet easy chair and a lamp for reading were in another nook. The roof slanted on both sides, and the only place I could comfortably stand upright was the middle of the room. I would sleep with the ceiling jutting up right over my feet, and hunker down every time I went in or out

through the closet. I made a mental note to put foam padding on the top of the door. I knew there were more head-bangs in my future.

The bathroom, just big enough for a claw-foot tub, toilet, and tiny sink, was built into a round corner turret with a heavy tapestry curtain instead of a door, and the ceiling was like a high peaked hat. I could stand up straight! I had always preferred baths to showers, the hotter the better. You can't soak and read and relax out the kinks in a shower. As small and quirky as it was, the apartment was like a storybook house, Rapunzel's castle. A tall window showed off a view of treetops and roofs across Greenwich Village. And it was all mine!

"This is so great, Mrs. Digby! I love it. When can I move in?"

"As soon as you want, dear."

As we started down the stairs, the door of the other apartment that mine had been walled off from opened and a man came out carrying a leather shoulder bag. A black man. A tall black man. Well, technically, he was the color of rich chocolate milk. A headband of red and orange and green African print was wrapped around his short Afro, and he was dressed in a tight red knit shirt and fringed leather vest, worn shiny in spots; bell-bottoms were molded like faded blue skin tight across his rear end. He saw me and grinned. It was like a two-hundred-watt lightbulb came on in the hallway. He had the whitest teeth I'd ever seen, perfectly lined up under a little pencil mustache. I felt like my shoes had melted and stuck to the floor.

"Hello, Mrs. D.," he said, his voice deep and smooth like suede. "Who is this?"

"It's the new girl who's taking over Leslie's apartment," Mrs. Digby chirped. "Cherry Marshall, this is Aurelius Taylor. He is a fine actor and musician. Aurelius, Cherry is going to be a big model."

"I don't doubt your word for a minute," he said, looking me over, his eyes the color of brimstone. I got a weird tingle in my lower regions that I hadn't felt since I'd first met Tripp Barlow. "Mrs. D. is psychic, you know, Cherry. Welcome to the attic. This part of the house was the old servants' quarters, when one family owned it back in the early eighteenth-hundreds."

"Really? I think it has to be the best part of the house."

"Me, too. Anyhow, welcome. If you need anything, I'm right across the way. Just knock on the wall."

That was comforting. I was sure I'd think of something I needed.

He loped down the stairs, two at a time, humming a little tune. I felt like humming, too.

I packed up all my clothes and moved from the Barbizon that afternoon. It was autumn in New York, and I was in love with everything—Greenwich Village, its curving streets with names like Bleecker and Jane and Hudson, the small shops that sold antiques, pottery, jewelry, and Indian imports, the exotic smells of spices and sauces and sizzling meats that wafted out of foreign-food restaurants as you passed, the long-haired hippies and the Rastafarians who sold incense and small paintings and old clothes on tables on the streets—it was all so alive and exciting!

Most of all, I was in love with the attic on Twelfth Street, with its eccentric old ex-showgirl landlady and sexy neighbor. And I had a test booked! There was a possibility that I might become a model. A real one.

I couldn't wait for tomorrow to see what would happen next!

7

THE HEN PARTY

The parking lot of Flyin' Jack's Truck Stop was crowded with cars as Lale pulled up and parked off to the edge, under a stand of trees. He cut the engine, but left the key in to listen to the radio. He was earlier than he meant to be, but he hadn't felt like having supper with his family and facing his mother. There was no way his father wouldn't have told her the news. He ate a burger and fries at the Dairy Queen, then picked up a couple of six-packs at Chet's Quick Stop. Chet was good about letting kids get beer if he liked them. He said that if a fellow was man enough to fight in a war at eighteen, he was man enough to have a beer or two. He had fought in World War I, himself, and liked telling his war stories to the boys. There was always a new crop of boys who hadn't heard his stories and courted him to get beer.

"How're they hanging, Lale?" he said as Lale put the cans down on the counter.

"Hanging loose, Chet. What's up with you?"

"Same old, same old. Arthritis chewing on me, but that's nothing

new. My back's never been the same, you know, since I took the bullet in France." He punched the numbers into the cash register. The drawer opened with a hard *ka-ching*. His hand trembled slightly as he counted out the change. His long-sleeved flannel shirt was buttoned tightly around the knobby bone of his wrist. "Don't guess you've got your calling card from the draft yet, have you?"

"Naw. You know I got a high draft number. Three hundred and ten. If I'm lucky, they won't get up to me until the dang thing's over."

"You better hope so. If Vietnam's anything like it was over in France during WW One, you better *dang* hope so. Did I ever tell you about the time me and two of my buddies got cut off from the rest of the battalion, and I lost my gas mask?"

"You might have said something about it." In fact, Lale had heard it all a few too many times. Chet sat down on the stool behind the counter, the change in his hand, getting ready to settle in for a good long visit. Business had been slow that night, and the old man got lonesome with nothing to do but read *The National Enquirer* or *Grit*, but Lale wasn't in the mood for war stories tonight. He reached out and took the bills from the old man's hand.

"I wish I could stay for a spell and shoot the breeze, Chet, but I got to go pick up Cassie, and I'm running late."

"Aw, that's all right, Lale. I'll catch you another time. When is it y'all are getting married?"

"I guess in a couple of weeks. They're giving her a shower tonight out at the café."

"She's a good little girl. You're a lucky man."

"That I am, my friend. That I am. See you, Chet. Don't do nothing I wouldn't do."

He didn't feel like a lucky man. It was all he could do to smile as he stuffed the money into his pocket and picked up the beer. He thought about trying to find one of his buddies to kill time with before he had to pick up Cassie, or driving by Sandra's to see if she was alone, but couldn't get himself up for it. He needed to get away from people and think things through. Sitting by himself in his car and waiting for the bridal shower to be over wouldn't be so bad. He'd collect his thoughts, have a few beers, and get nicely oiled before he had to face the giggling girlfriends and lug the load of presents out.

The radio was picking up WLS in Chicago, as it did sometimes on clear nights, and his favorite song, "House of the Rising Sun," blasted into the night air. It had finally stopped snowing and the stars were out. He stretched his legs across the front seat and popped the top on another can of Bud, chugged half of it down. This shower thing was taking longer than he'd thought it would. Before too many more songs had played, he'd had a pretty good start on the first six-pack, and a couple of swigs drained another can. He tossed it onto the back floorboard of the cream-colored '59 Thunderbird, where it clanked against three others. He'd clean them out sooner or later. Or more likely, Cassie would. She didn't like beer cans in the car. It would be her car, too, he realized, after they were married, and he could see her making him scrub it and wash and wax it all the time. That was one thing she went way overboard on, cleaning stuff up. He could see her nagging him about putting his clothes away and throwing his wet towels on the floor. His mother just griped and picked up after him like she always had, but he bet Cassie wouldn't after they were married. He thought about the little apartment they had already put a deposit down on. It only had a small living room, one little bedroom, and a kitchenette, and there wouldn't even be a place for his gun rack. Cassie had already said she didn't want him bringing his ten-point buck head to hang on the wall. The glass eyes creeped her out. After the baby came, there wouldn't be room for anything but baby stuff. He felt as if he were already being smothered under piles of dirty diapers and baby puke. His gloom settled in deeper.

He was on the verge of becoming a little unstarched, but he didn't care; if worse came to worst, Cassie would drive. She hated it when he drank, but he needed a little something to take the edge off, and what else was there to do while he waited? He couldn't go in and ooh and ahh over toasters and pot-scrubbers.

A few more songs played, another couple of beers went down. It seemed like those girls were going to take forever. He got out and stretched, walked into the shadows and peed behind a tree, then decided to sneak a look in the window and see how close to being done they were. He walked, a little wobbly, toward the window, his cowboy boots squeaking in the snow, took a few deep breaths to clear his head, then looked into the restaurant. Cassie was sitting in the middle of a circle of girls, opening presents. A big pile of paper was mounded up beside her, and on her head was a crown of bright-colored ribbons, rescued from the wrappings and braided together by one of her friends. She

pulled a black lace nightgown out of a box, and everyone squealed as she stood up and held it in front of herself, wiggling her hips in a lewd vampy dance. They all roared with laughter. She was so happy. He had never seen the look she had on her face now as she pranced around with the black lace nightgown and the hat of ribbons. To his surprise, it made him feel sad. Maybe he just didn't know how to put that look on her face. She didn't laugh a lot around him. It was like she was always looking out of the corner of her eye to see how he would react before she said or did anything, waiting to see if he would approve of her or not. He guessed he did criticize her more than he ought to, but she should know it was for her own good; if she would just lose some weight she would be the beautiful girl she was when they first started going out in the tenth grade. In the last few years she had packed on a lot of pounds. Try as he did to get her to lay off the fries and milk shakes and go on a diet, she didn't seem to lose an ounce, and in fact she had gained quite a bit more in just the last month. She would be as big as a house before this baby was born. It seemed like she ate just to spite him. He didn't like to admit it, even to himself, but he had gotten a little ashamed of Cassie. When the two of them walked into places, people stared at them like they were wondering why someone as good-looking as him would be with a fat girl. When they were alone, though, she was sweet, and it was so good and easy to be with someone who adored you no matter what you did, who you could relax around and didn't have to put on any show for. And in the dark, Cassie was soft and warm and smelled like rich loamy earth, like bread fresh out of the oven; her skin felt like the smoothest creamy deerskin, buttery and lush. A man could fall into a woman like that and never make his way out, and it seemed like that was just what had happened to him.

Still, the one thing you can't make yourself do is fall in love, and Lale just didn't love Cassie. The old line "You deserve someone better than me" in this case was not just an old line. She did. She deserved somebody who would love her and take care of her and he knew he never would. He was cheating on her now, every chance he got, and he knew that wasn't likely to change after the wedding. Maybe he was one of those guys who just couldn't be true to one woman and would never fall in love at all. He hadn't up to now.

His stomach lurched and he felt a little sick. He thought of all his young years stretching before him, walking into places with Cassie, them getting older, her getting fatter and fatter. In his mind she was

blowing up to the size of a circus freak, and he was smothering in her flesh, getting sucked into the quicksand of her swamps. He imagined them in their tiny apartment, packed together like chickens in a crate, surrounded by a dozen kids, all screaming and calling him Daddy. Cassie would never use birth control. She was too Catholic. He rubbed his eyes to clear the image. He had to get out of there. He'd drive around for a while, sober up, and maybe they'd be done with the presents when he came back.

Just as he got back into his car, a pickup pulled into the yard of Flyin' Jack's garage next to the café. Lale turned to see Snuffy Simmons park, get out, and head toward his eighteen-wheeler. He opened the back to check on the cargo, which looked to be a load of boxes of something or other, and then Bernadette appeared out the back door of the café, carrying a sack and a thermos. Lale couldn't hear what they were saying, but they stood close together and then kissed. Snuffy cupped her butt in his hand, and she snuggled up to him. Then he pulled her by the hand and they went into the garage, dark now after everyone had gone home. Bernadette's laugh rang out silver in the cold night air.

The back of the big truck was still open, and Lale went over to take a look. The boxes marked with Freyaldenheimer's wine labels were stacked high, but there was quite a bit of room left. Enough for a man to lie down fairly comfortably. He stood staring for a minute, his heart pounding. An idea was catching hold of him. He went back to his car, rummaged around, and found an old gas receipt and a stub of a pencil in the glove compartment. He was nervous and excited—his fingers felt thick as he wrote and the beer had his brain working in slow motion—but he didn't have any reason to lie to her at this point.

Dear Cassie,

I am leaving out tonight. You deserve someone much better than me. You are a good girl and I would only cause you a lot of misery. That's a fact. I know that you will be mad at me, because I am mad at myself, but in the long run you will thank me for this. You can have my car. Tell my daddy to give you the title, and tell him I'll be in touch when I find out where I will be. Think about what I said about taking care of the "problem." Bernadette will know what to do. If you decide to do it, I'll try to send some money for it when I get a job, or you can sell the car if you need to. It's not too late for either one of us now, but it will be soon. Take care of

yourself, and have a good life. Try not to hate me too much. I would say I love you, but it doesn't much seem like I do, does it?

Lale

He laid the note on the seat, underneath the keys. The girls were still giggling and eating chocolate cake as he passed by the window. All he had on him was twenty-two dollars in his billfold, another six-pack, and the clothes on his back, but he couldn't go home. His daddy would know something was up if he came in and tried to pack, and by then Snuffy would be long gone. His mother would be crazy with worry, and he hated that, but he would think what to do about them later. He knew he should feel guilty, but the only thing he felt was exhilaration and a sense of relief, like a bird looking at an open cage door.

He hoisted himself into the back of the semi and settled down near the front of the cargo, where he'd be less likely to be seen, on an old piece of padding he found between the stacks of wine cases. It was cold, but not too bad in out of the wind. He didn't know where Snuffy was going, but he figured he would sneak out whenever he stopped, and hitch a ride with somebody else before Snuffy could see him and tell Bernadette and Cassie what had happened. Maybe he could make it to California. He always thought he might like to try his hand at being a surfer. Or a movie star.

It was a long way to the end of the road, but finally Lale was going to see what was there.

8

THE FIRST TEST

Ron had said for me to bring a lot of different outfits and accessories, so I just packed a big bag with whatever came to hand, not having the foggiest idea what he was going to do. I had scarves, hats, sunglasses, a long granny dress made out of white gauze that looked kind of like a nightgown, and several miniskirts and matching tights. The bag was so heavy I couldn't carry it on the subway, so I took the metaphorical rubber band off my shrinking wad and hailed a taxi. I was still a little amazed that I could stand on the street, hold out my hand, and, like magic, a taxi would pull over and stop. I remembered what Snuffy Simmons had said back at Flyin' Jack's, about all New York cabdrivers being crazy, and I always compared them to their pictures and took careful note of their names and cab numbers on the piece of paper in the window in case one of them did something weird. I had been warned about hitchhiking all my life, and to get in a car with a stranger went against my instincts, but if they had a picture of themselves right there on a license, it probably was all right. They did drive pretty fast, though,

most of them, and sometimes I had to hang on to the strap to keep from falling on the floor when they went around a corner.

The studio was different from the way it was that first day—well, obviously, there were no naked men, but also Ron had hung a big piece of seamless paper from the ceiling and set lights up all around it. Over to the side was a table with a bottle of wine and glasses, a bowl of fruit, and a platter of cheese and crackers. I wondered if it was for us to eat, or leftovers from some *Good Housekeeping* picture.

"This is going to be *tremendous*," Ron said, coming out of the back room. "Now let me tell you what we're doing. There's a new magazine called *Rouge* and the art director likes me. I think I can work for them. It's a sexy magazine for women, a little tuned toward the avant-garde artsy stuff, no nudity, well, not much; maybe they'll have a nude guy as a centerfold—just kidding, don't get nervous—but serious political articles while still being fashion-oriented. Somewhere between *Vogue* and *Cosmo*. I want to put together a presentation for them, and I want *you* to be it. Okay?"

"Okay. Wow. Sure. That's great!"

I was going to be a presentation for a magazine! I had never been photographed in a real studio in my life, and just seeing the blank seamless paper and all the lights made me a little nervous. In fact, I didn't know the backgrounds for all the pictures, like the ones Avedon did for *Vogue*, were even paper. I had practiced posing like the models in magazines in the mirror, of course, but never in front of anyone. I hoped I wouldn't embarrass myself.

"We're going to do this thing right," he enthused. "I have a terrific makeup and hair man here. He will make you gorgeous—not that you're not already gorgeous, but gorgeous-er. Sal, come on out! Cherry's here!"

A tall, slender man with short-cropped black hair came out from the dressing room. He was dressed all in black, his shirt buttoned right up to the neck, and wore big round glasses with black-and-white-checked frames and pale purple lenses, ones like Elton John, the guy from England who had just come out with a great record called "Your Song," would wear.

"Salvador de Vega, meet Cherry Marshall."

"Hi, Salvador. Nice to meet you."

"Oh, my God! Is *this* the Cherry you told me so much about! *Who*

walks on water? Look at you! You are *incredible*! Ron, you didn't tell me you had something like this fabulous creature coming in! My darling, you are just to *die!* To *die!* That hair! Those eyes! Those *legs!* They go on for *miles!*" I had a fleeting impression of a flock of flamingos as he spoke, hands fluttering like wings.

"Hold on, Sal. Let the girl catch her breath. Do you want some coffee or tea, Cherry? I have some stuff to eat, so if you get hungry, just let me know."

"I'm okay, thanks."

I had never seen anybody remotely like Sal, who was wearing red nail polish and the biggest rhinestone bracelet I had ever seen, and it looked like he had on eyeliner. I couldn't take my eyes off him. He had a small head and a long slender neck that was a little snakelike, and he moved in a graceful dancer-ish way when he walked. He had perfect big white teeth and a way of throwing his head back and opening his eyes wide that somehow reminded me of Little Richard. And I sure had never been gushed over like that. I couldn't take it seriously. He probably said that kind of thing to all the models.

"Well, if you get hungry, we can take a break anytime," Ron said. "I have a couple of great ideas for shots, but let's see what you brought."

I opened my bag, and he went through all the stuff, picking out a long red-and-white Indian-print scarf and my gauze dress. In addition, he had a pink baseball cap, another hat with a clear plastic green visor, and a whole box of glittery costume jewelry.

"This is going to be so great. We'll start with the red-and-white scarf, Sal. Our girl from Arkansas is going to be a smash."

"Arkansas? *Arkansas!* That is so *amazing!*" Sal exclaimed. Sal exclaimed nearly everything. "I have a *boyfriend* from Arkansas! But I'm sure you wouldn't know him."

"Probably not. Arkansas is kind of a big place." Nobody I knew would be Sal's boyfriend. Maybe somebody from Little Rock.

"Well, never mind. He's the kind you don't bring home to Mother, anyhow. I also had a boyfriend from Nashville, which is *cheek by jowl*, as they say, to Arkansas, a country singer, but that didn't work out. I'm sure I'm not telling you anything you don't already know, but, honey, those southern boys are *big trouble*—take it from me. Unfortunately, I have always rushed toward trouble, like a moth to the proverbial *flame*. I just can't seem to stay away from bad boys. Why, just last week at Max's Kansas City, you know Max's Kansas City, I'm sure . . ."

I shook my head.

"Oh, *well*, then you'll have to come out with us one night and *play*. Max's is the most groovy fun place in New York! Or maybe we could all go to Maxwell's Plum, with all those wonderful Tiffany lights—it's the most *beautiful* fun place in New York—or to Corso's up on Eighty-sixth Street and dance! You would love it. Tito Puente plays up there, and it is the most, *most* fun, all those Latin types, dark and sexy . . ."

"Okay, gang, let's get started," Ron said, cutting him off. I had a feeling I would hear all about what happened last week at Max's Kansas City anyhow.

We all went into the dressing room, Sal hardly taking time to draw breath, giving me the list of the best places to party in New York. There was a long table surrounded by lights that was laid out with Sal's makeup box, a lot like a huge fishing-tackle box with tiers of little compartmented drawers full of all kinds of makeup and creams, brushes and combs and curling irons and different-colored wigs and hairpieces stuck to Styrofoam heads lined in a row, and tons of other beauty stuff that I'd never even dreamed of. Sal turned on the radio, blasting out a Sly and the Family Stone song. He tied a ribbon around my head to hold the hair back, then he started dancing around to the music, at the same time getting out a huge jar of cold cream and rubbing it on my face.

"I want to thank you *fallettinme be mice elf agin*, uh, huh," he sang to the music. "Now let's see what's under all this goo, Miss Cherry. We have to start with a clean face, you know."

I had put on makeup before I left the apartment, because that's what I did every day when I got up, rain or shine, and nobody had told me I shouldn't. I probably wouldn't have gone on the subway without makeup even if they had told me not to wear any, though—my naked face looked like a bowl of oatmeal with two green grapes stuck in the middle, and I would never ever go out in public like that.

"Let's get those eyelashes off, sweetie, and . . . oh my goodness! Look at this! Are those *real*?" He had just wiped cream over my eyebrows, which had started to come back in white, but were splotchy, so I still brushed mascara on them.

"Yes, they're real. So is my hair."

"*It is?* That is so *amazing*. And these brows! You have such *great* eyebrows! So thick, like a white wolf! Why are they two colors? Have they been dyed?"

"Well, yes, but I'm letting the dark grow out."

"I'll take care of that, sweetie. We'll just take out what's left of that dark color, and then you'll have the best brows in New York City. Whatever were you thinking, dying these gorgeous things?"

He carefully brushed some bleach or whatever on my brows and in a few minutes they were pure snowy white.

"Fabulous! Oh my God! This is going to be *so great!* I'll just prune them a little, but we still want that wolf look . . ." Out came the tweezers and it hurt like the dickens, but they were pruned. I was a little shocked when I saw myself in the mirror, but it didn't look all that bad at all. I couldn't wait to show them to Suzan, who seemed to have an overly attentive interest in them.

It took him over an hour to get the makeup on, between dancing and posing and sips of wine, and telling me about all his boyfriends and a long list of the big stars I would meet at Max's Kansas City, like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, Mick Jagger and Dennis Hopper, which I didn't know whether to believe or not. I did my own makeup in five minutes in the morning, but he did a lot more than I ever did. He mixed liquid makeup in his palm with lotion and rubbed and wiped and mixed and put more, then powdered, blushed my cheeks, powdered some more, outlined my lips with a pencil and then took a small brush and stroked it over several different lipstick tubes, daubing one color here, another there, until he had painted my whole mouth. You'd have thought it was the size of a truck tire, the time it took. Then he brushed on layers of eye shadow, one tiny brushstroke at a time, stood back with pursed lips and did another little stroke, taking so long that my bottom got numb and I nearly went into a coma. At last he noticed I was tilting a little.

"Need a little boost, darling?" he said, taking me by the shoulders and straightening me in the chair. "Want a sip of coffee? You'll have to be careful if you drink anything. We don't want to ruin those luscious lips."

I shook my head, and tried to wake up. I didn't want to ruin my lipstick and have to have him do it all over again, either. Sal then finished off with false eyelashes, individually placed, a hair at a time, touched up the liner some more, then brushed my hair back into a little ponytail and wrapped the big red-and-white scarf around my head and neck, like a nun's habit. All you could see was my face. Ron came in.

"How're we doing in here? Wow! Look at you, Cherry!"

I turned and looked in the mirror and didn't recognize myself. My

skin and the white of the fabric were close to the same, and my lips were like the old Revlon Cherries in the Snow color my mother used to wear, but with rich deep shiny red layers of burgundy and rust and purple that glistened and made my mouth look bigger and perfect. My eyes were dramatic and black-lashed, iridescent peacock colors of green and blue on the lids, making my green eyes glow. But my eyebrows were the wildest part—stunning white, brushed up, blending so as to be almost invisible from a distance. I thought of Da Vinci and his *Mona Lisa* model who didn't have any eyebrows. I always wondered if the style back in those days was to pick them all out, or if Mona was just a girl who happened to be eyebrowless. Actually, hardly any of Da Vinci's women had eyebrows. Maybe Da Vinci just didn't like to paint them.

They led me out to the lights and put me on a stool.

"Okay, Cherry, look right into the lens of the camera. That's where you make eye contact with the viewer. When someone looks at this picture, they will be looking you right in the eye, right into your soul, and you into theirs. You will be connected, soul to soul, with the thousands of people who see this photograph. . . . That's it! Don't move!"

He did a Polaroid, which he wouldn't let me see, then adjusted the lights, did another Polaroid, adjusted again, then another one, until he liked what he saw, then he dragged over another big camera on a tripod and shot and shot and shot, taking the back off the camera each time he finished a roll, quickly putting on another back that was already loaded with film. That was handy. I had never seen a camera like that before. It must have cost a fortune. I think ol' Ron was doing a little better with his food pictures than he let on.

I was nearly paralyzed anyhow from sitting in the makeup chair so long, and now to have to sit some more without moving was torture. I was dying to get up and run around the room. I gazed into the camera's eye and tried to connect with the souls that would be seeing it, and look sexy or happy or sophisticated or whatever he told me to look like, which was hard because I felt like a mummy, all draped in the scarf like that.

Sal stood off to the side, wineglass in hand, giving me encouragement with oohs and aahs, and came over periodically to dust a little powder on my face or add a stroke of gloss to my lips.

"Okay. We got it," Ron said after ages and I don't know how many rolls of film. I was so relieved to be through. I was ready to go home and

get a cheeseburger. Then he said, "Let's try another one. This time, Sal, do the makeup less dramatic. Pale lips, not red. More girl-next-door."

Back I went to the dressing room, and as Simon and Garfunkel sang "Bridge over Troubled Water," Sal took off my makeup with cold cream and started all over again.

This time, I had pearly-pink-colored lips and a pink shadow on my lids. He let me keep the lashes; my eyebrows again were au naturel. He fluffed my hair out and put on a pink-and-white-striped baseball cap, and tied a pink bandanna around my neck. All of this took another hour and a half with more wine and dancing, then he brought me back to the stool in front of the camera. Ron handed me an ice cream cone. About time. I was starving.

"No! Don't eat that! You'll ruin your lips! It's for the shot."

"Can I eat it when the shot is over?"

"Yes, when the shot is over."

I looked into the camera's eye and held the ice cream cone, strawberry, it was, while it melted and ran down my arm. When I tried to move, Ron said, "Don't move! It's perfect! Let it drip! Yes!"

It dripped until there was no ice cream left, then he took the soggy cone and tossed it into the trash while I went to the bathroom to wash, then back to the dressing room for another makeup. At this point, I was ready for a cup of coffee, but only got a couple of swigs before Sal started in again.

The next shot was me in the green cap with the plastic visor, holding a green apple. I wanted a bite of that so much my mouth watered, but it would have messed up my new coral lips. Ron took a bite out of it and put it in my hand as I sat still as a statue on the chair. By this time I had exhausted all my sexy and happy looks but he kept on shooting. More rolls of film. More orders from Ron:

"Move the little finger a hair to the right. Open the lips just a little. Too much. Look over to the right. To the left. Move the head down a bit. Up a bit. Not so much. Perfect! Don't move!"

I hated the way he talked about me to me like I was a guy moving some dummy in a department store or something. *The finger. The lips.* Couldn't he at least say *your* finger or lips? I was beginning to get a cramp in my arm, holding the apple in one position.

"Oh, shi . . . er, rat doodies! The apple is turning brown. Sal! Come and eat off the brown part!"

Sal dutifully took it from my hand, ate off the brown part, and washed it down with a slug of wine.

After another hour of makeup with gold-colored lips and lids, we did some of me in the gauzy dress with my hair picked out and ratted into a huge white Afro. Finally, it was over and I could move. I was totally exhausted. Who would have thought getting your picture taken was so much work? I had no idea if Ron liked what I had done or not. I went back to the dressing room, and sat in the chair. Sal packed up, kissed me good-bye, and left, saying he would call me to plan some fun dance evening, but I couldn't move. For some reason I wanted to cry. I didn't know what modeling would be like. It was hard.

Then Ron came in with a glass of white wine and handed it to me. I had never drunk a glass of wine in my life, but I didn't want him to know that, after our conversation in the coffee shop about the church. I felt far away from home and the church that preached if you had one single glass of wine or a beer it was down the chute to the flames for you, and at the wedding in Cana, Jesus changed the water into grape juice. At this point, I had a real hard time believing that God would send me to burn in hell for having a beverage, so I took a big gulp. It was like drinking a swig of tart grapes, and I couldn't help but make a sour face, which I don't think Ron saw. Then I took a smaller sip and after a few more sips it wasn't so bad, and in fact I began to relax.

"You were terrific, Cherry. I didn't tell you, but I'm going to try for a cover. Wouldn't that be wild if you got a cover from your first test?"

It would be a miracle. I was excited, but I was sure there were a lot more girls trying for that cover. Frankly, I had never heard of *Rouge* magazine. It couldn't be much of a magazine, not like the big ones. But maybe because it was new they would take a chance on somebody new. I tried not to hope too much.

"It was great, Ron." Now that it was over, it had been great. "I hope we got some good ones. Do you think we did?" At least I would have some real pictures for my book.

"Oh, yeah. We got some good ones. Lots of good ones." He put down his glass and picked up a guitar. He started strumming "Yesterday" by the Beatles, and all of a sudden I felt light and happy. Maybe it was the wine. I was still wearing the gauze dress, which brushed my ankles. I got up, stretched, and started dancing in my bare feet around two white chairs that were in front of the window. For a little while I was so lost in stretching and moving my tired arms and legs that I hardly no-

ticed the music had stopped. Ron had picked up a smaller camera and was taking pictures of me as I danced, silhouetted against the soft afternoon light coming through the window. After a while, I realized what he was doing, but it felt so good that I didn't stop. We weren't a bossy photographer and a mannequin taking stiff posed pictures any longer. We were artists making art.

Art, I understood.

9

THE GOOD-TIME GIRL

Snuffy drove through the night, and just before sunrise, rolled into a truck stop on Interstate 70 near the Indiana border. Lale woke up, disoriented, in the pitch-black of the truck and realized the vibration of the wheels had stopped, but he had no idea when or how long he had been sleeping. He flipped on his lighter and looked at his watch. Five o'clock. He needed to pee like crazy; the beers he had drunk in the dark after the truck had started out had engorged his poor bladder until it felt as big as a watermelon. His head pounded with the alcohol, and he had a crick in his back from lying on the hard trailer floor all night. He got to his feet, stretched, and felt around until he found the lock on the inside of the back door. He opened it and stuck his head out. They were at some truck stop, with a dozen or so other trailer trucks parked around them. No sign of Snuffy. That was good luck. No telling what Snuffy would do if he caught him and realized he had run out on Cassie. Not that Snuffy was an angel himself. Lale knew he had been fooling around with Bernadette for years, even though he had a wife and four kids. Probably had had other women along the way, too. Still, it wouldn't do to have

him run back and tell Cassie where he was going. Not that he knew himself. He didn't even know where he was right now. All the highways and truck stops looked pretty much the same until you read the signs. It was cold, that was for sure, even colder than it had been when he left, so he didn't figure he was anywhere near California. And it was still dark, but the sky was beginning to lighten up in the east. He pulled his leather jacket together and zipped it up, turning up the collar. He would find the men's room, and then decide whether to try to get back into Snuffy's truck, or lie low and find another ride. His head felt foggy, and his eyes were starchy. He should have had something more to eat last night instead of the second six-pack.

Lale stood in front of the urinal in the men's room, and it seemed like the stream went on for five minutes. He thought to himself there was nothing in the world as satisfying as a good pee when you needed it. The door opened and someone else came in. Lale glanced over as a pair of gorgeous legs that ended in red-lizard high-heeled shoes came and stood right next to him. He jerked his head up, and a tall willowy woman was staring at him, or at least staring at the private part of him that was exposed.

"What the heck are you doing in here! This is the men's room!"

"Don't get nervous, sugar. I'm not going to hurt you."

The woman had a soft voice, a little hoarse. Her hair was blond, hanging down over perfect breasts, which stood out like toy balloons under a bright-red-print minidress. Her brown eyes were ringed with thick false eyelashes. She reached out a delicate finger, raking a long red nail lightly over his cheek.

"You're the cutest thing I've seen all day. Granted, it's early in the morning, but I'm still working on last night. Would you like to have some fun?"

"Hold on. No. Wait a minute. What is this? Are you . . . a . . . a . . . whore?"

"That's not a nice word, is it? I prefer to call myself a good-time girl. I do like good times, don't you?" She moved closer and batted her furry eyelashes.

"It's five in the morning, for Pete's sake! What's the matter with you?"

"Five, schmive. When opportunity presents itself—and you, sweet cheeks, are a delightful opportunity—Miss Sally answers the call."

"Well, thanks, Miss Sally, or whatever your name is, but no thanks. I'm not interested."

"Are you sure? You won't get this chance again. Strangers passing on the road of life and all. Who knows where I'll be tomorrow, or where you'll be. Why not give yourself a fun little memory that will last a lifetime?"

Lale zipped his pants up and started edging toward the door as Miss Sally came close, put both her hands on his arms, and leaned in to kiss him.

"Lale Hardcastle? Is that you?"

A stunned voice made Lale's head whip around. It was Snuffy.

"What in the heck are you doing here? And what are you doing with that?"

"Get lost, buddy. This is none of your business." Miss Sally's voice had changed, hardened and deepened, and Lale stared at her. Now that he took a closer look, he saw a big Adam's apple, and stubble was under the heavy makeup.

"Oh, my God. You're a man!"

"Nobody's perfect, *chérie*." She shrugged.

Lale shoved Miss Sally aside, shouldered past Snuffy, and headed out into the clean morning air.

"Lale! You get yourself back here!" Snuffy had followed him outside. Lale stopped in his tracks.

"I wasn't with her. Him. She . . . he just came in while I was taking a leak and tried to start something. I didn't know she was a man."

"Forget about her. I want to know what you're doing here and how you got here."

"I guess I hitched a ride in the back of your truck."

"I guess you did. Want to tell me why?"

"I don't know."

"I think I know. I think it's because you are a spineless little pissant who hasn't got the guts to stand up and tell his girlfriend he doesn't want to marry her. How could you do this? What do you think Cassie feels like right now?"

"What do you think your wife feels like when you pork Bernadette?"

Lale was on the ground before he saw the punch coming. It was a solid right and it snapped his teeth together hard and threw his vision out of focus.

"You want to run away, you run away, you little turd, but you're not

doing it with me." Snuffy stalked over to the truck and climbed in. Before Lale could collect himself, Snuffy threw it into gear and roared off.

"Are you all right, sugar?"

Miss Sally emerged from the bathroom and stood over him. The sun was beginning to rise and Lale squinted as it lit up the blond hair, making a halo around her head.

"I don't think my jaw is broke, but that's the good news," he said, rubbing his jaw and opening and closing his mouth.

"Funny. It's usually *me* who gets it. I've been beaten up tons of times, and I can tell by looking at you, your jaw isn't broken. You'll be sore for a couple of days, but no lasting damage. You'll live."

Lale got up on his knees, then took the hand she held out to him and pulled himself up. Miss Sally leaned against a '65 baby-blue Mustang, watching him.

"Wow. That old man can punch," Lale said, rubbing his jaw.

"You don't look so good. Some coffee might perk you right up. Are you hungry? Why don't I buy you some breakfast?"

"No offense, uh, Miss Sally, but I'd just as soon not go into the truck stop with you."

"I hear you, sugar. No offense taken. I'll tell you what—you wait for me right here. This is my car. You can sit and rest in it for a little minute and catch your breath. I'll be right back."

Lale stood, stupidly staring at the car. He tried to get his brain working to decide whether to run or fight or stay. He felt like a rabbit cornered by a yard dog. Make that cornered by a poodle.

"Oh, *really*. Puh-lease. I'm not going to bite you, although that's not the worst idea in the world. Just sit. You don't seem to have a lot of options, do you?"

She took a bag from the backseat of the car and went into the men's room. Lale opened the car door and nervously sat on the passenger side, wishing he had never laid eyes on Snuffy Simmons or his big truck.

Ten minutes later, a dark-haired man came out, freshly scrubbed, wearing jeans and a jacket. There was no sign of Miss Sally. He threw the bag into the car.

"What . . . ?" Lale blinked, confused.

The man stuck out his hand. "Salvador de Vega. But you can call me Sal. Everyone does. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat. But I'll buy my own. I got money."

"Independent. I like that in a man."

They started across the parking lot to the diner. Lale tried to look at him out of the corner of his eye without being too obvious about it. Sal had a different walk in the men's clothes, somehow graceful and a little swishy, but not as much. But then it couldn't be easy to maneuver in those high heels without a swishy walk. If he hadn't seen him dressed up like a woman before, he wouldn't necessarily know he was . . . like that. Except there *was* something a little weird about his face. His eyebrows were too neat or something, like they had been plucked. Lale had never been this close to a homo before. Not one that he knew for sure. There had been a guy in school, Geordie Simms, who was a little bit sissy. He was in the band, wore socks that matched his shirts, and once had tried to take home ec to learn how to sew. Everyone teased him and gave him a hard time, but he had a mousy little girlfriend who used to sing duets with him in church, so he probably wasn't really one. Being this close to a card-carrying homosexual made Lale a little uneasy. He tried to act natural, but his jaw kept tightening up.

Oh, well, he said to himself. What the heck. Snuffy was gone. Nobody knew him at this truck stop, and it wasn't like he was going to *do* anything with the . . . guy. Girl. Whatever. They were in public, and if it came down to it, Lale figured he could take him in a fight. What could it hurt? He was hungry, and it was only breakfast. Then he would find another ride and be on his way.

10

JOE JR.'S

On the corner of Twelfth Street and Sixth Avenue was a coffee shop called Joe Jr.'s. It had great greasy hamburgers and fries and home-made soup, and best of all, it was cheap. Most of the tenants in Mrs. Digby's apartment house ate their meals there, as did a lot of actors who lived above the Thirteenth Street Repertory Company, just around the block. I have no idea who Joe Jr. was, but Tony was the owner and he would run a tab for you if he liked you. I think most people paid it sooner or later. I soon became a regular. It was too much trouble to cook on the hot plate, and frankly, I never was much of a cook anyhow. Mama never taught me—she thought it was easier to do it all herself, and so did I.

Since I had met Aurelius that first day, we hadn't managed to run into each other again. He undoubtedly slept late and I was out early. I would have known he was a musician as well as an actor, though, even if Mrs. Digby hadn't told me, because late at night I could hear him, through the walls, playing a lonesome sweet saxophone. I got to where I listened for it, and had a hard time going to sleep until he played.

I was sitting in my usual booth at Joe Jr.'s, second one from the door, when he passed by on the street. I caught his eye; he stopped and stood there looking at me through the window. He had a funny look on his face, like he was angry. Then he came into the restaurant and stood by my table.

"Are you okay? Aurelius? What's the matter?"

"Hendrix is dead."

"What? Who?"

"Jimi Hendrix. He's dead."

"You're kidding. What happened?"

"OD'd. I don't know. They say he choked on his own vomit. Stupid fool. Stupid, stupid, stupid!" His hands clenched and a vein popped out in his neck. It was a little scary.

"Wow. That's awful." I didn't know much about Jimi Hendrix. I had heard his music, of course—who hadn't?—and pretended to like it more than I really did because it was considered cool. In reality, it was too loud and jarring for me, and too repetitious. I liked songs I could sing along and dance to, music that stroked all the hairs in the same direction, like stuff by Marvin Gaye or the Beatles or the Band. It was cool and wild and crazy that Jimi Hendrix set his guitar on fire and all, but I think it was a little out of my league.

"Do you want to sit down? What happened?"

"I don't know. He was in London, on some kind of dope, too out of it to know what he was doing. Something like that." He slid down in the seat until his head rested on the back. "Seems like we just can't keep from killing ourselves. It's not enough that we've been enslaved and whipped and lynched and shot, shut out of hotels and cafés and sent to the back of the bus, but every time somebody black makes it big, we find a way to do our own selves in. Look at Bird. Billie. Whole *string* of jazzmen. Booze. Drugs. Black man—woman, too—get a little famous and rich and first thing they do is buy a fur coat and a big car and then start shoving their bodies full of junk, like they can't deal with success with their own God-given brains, they got to jack them up on dope. We might as well all take a running jump off the Brooklyn Bridge." He sat up and leaned toward me, his eyes flaming. "What's the point of working and sweating for something, against all odds, *making it*, and then just killing yourself for no good reason? You tell me that."

"No point, I guess."

"You don't take drugs, do you?"

"No. Well . . . I smoked pot a few times."

"Pot. Hmph. That's nothing. It's the heavy drugs you have to stay away from. Uppers. Downers. Heroin. Speed. Cocaine. LSD. Like that. Those things mess up your *mind*, and your mind is all you got to get you anywhere in this life. That and your ambition. Not to mention looks. You got that, all right, and you'll have plenty of people trying to give you all those drugs, you, a big model and all. You stay away from that mess, you hear?" He leaned even closer, glaring at me. I leaned back a little farther.

"Sure. Of course I will." This was getting a little weird. I half expected him to reach across the table and grab my arm and shake it. Instead he sat back and took a long look at me.

"Cherry Marshall, right?"

"You're pretty good on the saxophone."

"You hear me?"

"Late at night."

"Didn't mean to bother you."

"You don't bother me. I like it. Do you play with a band?"

"I got a little group. We get gigs here and there, downtown in somebody's loft, mainly. I'm trying to be an actor, too, but there's a lot of us black men out there and few roles. Sidney Poitier gets to be all the doctors and lawyers and Nobel Prize winners or something, and everybody else gets to be a pimp or a mugger or somebody's black-ass Step'n Fetchit, and not many of those."

"There's parts other than those, surely."

"You try to find them."

"I'm just trying to get somebody to take my picture. That's hard enough."

"Don't give me that. Pretty white girl like you? You got it made."

"I don't think I have it made. I'm running out of money, and if I don't get a job soon, I'll have to waitress or something."

"Now, Lordy mercy, wouldn't that be awful? Why don't you just ask Daddy for more money until you make it?"

"What do you mean by that? You don't know my daddy."

"I mean you don't know what it's like to *really* be without money. Oh, I figure you're trying to make it on your own, but I'm betting you have a backup daddy who wouldn't want to see his baby starve. Isn't that true?"

"Well, of course my daddy wouldn't want me to starve, but you don't have to be so hateful about it. What's your problem?"

"My problem? You don't know nothing about problems. You sound like you're from the South. Arkansas or Tennessee. Maybe Texas?"

"Arkansas."

"Well, then you ought to know that to be black in the South is to be treated like something on the bottom of somebody's shoe."

"What do you know about the South?"

"All I need to know. I come from Alabama. I got out of there as soon as I was tall enough to turn in my cotton sack and hitchhike out. That would be something else you don't know nothing about, working in the fields."

"That just goes to show what *you* know. My grandparents were sharecroppers. My mama worked in the cotton patch when she was a girl, so I think I know a little bit about it."

"Your mama. Your grandmama. But *you* never had to do it *yourself*. I can tell. You had it easy. You never had that pearly-white skin burned by the sun until it blistered and peeled, those soft hands picked so rough you couldn't touch anything fine without tearing it to shreds."

"Okay, so I never *personally* picked cotton. I admit it." He was beginning to tick me off. "But I worked. I worked in a pickle plant and peeled onions all summer!"

"A pickle plant? A *pickle* plant? Huh. I spent a summer castrating pigs!" He looked at me, smug, like he was asking me to top that one. I think he had me.

"Well, I . . . I give up. You win the worst-job contest! And I'm really truly sorry Jimi Hendrix is dead, but you don't have to be black to do yourself in. White singers die all the time, too, in little planes crashing trying to fly in bad weather, like Patsy Cline and Buddy Holly and them. Hank Williams overdosed. Everybody's got to die, one way or the other, whether they're famous or not. I expect to do it myself one of these days. I bet you do, too."

He looked at me hard for a minute, then laughed.

"You're not the worst chick I ever met. Peeling onions in the pickle plant, huh? That makes me hungry. Tony! I need a cheeseburger bad, man. Extra pickles and onions."

Tony came over to the table, put down a glass of water and another place setting in front of Aurelius.

"These together?"

"Yeah, we're together. Put the girl's meal on my tab."

I looked up at him, my spoon stopped on the way to my mouth.

"I mean, since you're so bad off and might have to waitress and all, I'll buy your bowl of soup," he said. "Okay?"

"Okay. I'll let you pay. With all your savings from picking cotton."

Something was starting—you could feel it in the air between us. I was a little scared. It had never once crossed my mind to think of any of the few black guys back home as possible boyfriends. We didn't even integrate until 1962, when I was in the ninth grade, and then it was just fifteen kids in the whole school. When they first came, we were all kind of suspicious of each other, but after a while it was no big deal. They joined the football team, the choir, the honor society, and everything else; we discovered they were good athletes and singers and students, and they realized we weren't going to beat them up or make fun of them; for the most part it seemed to be okay. Our choir won a number one at the state competition for the first time ever, and the football team got into the district finals. The only thing is, I don't think we ever did totally relax around one another; we were always too aware that we might accidentally say something that might be taken the wrong way. We joked around and laughed a lot, sure, but seldom did we sit and have serious talks about anything important. I had a friend named Queen Esther McVay, who I sat with in art class, and we had fun doing art projects together, but we didn't double-date or spend the night at each other's house like I did with Baby. The black kids didn't hang out at the Freezer Fresh, where we all went. I don't remember any of them even driving up and ordering from the window. There was a barbecue place and juke joint out at Turkey Bend called Moe's that they all went to, and once in a while late at night some of us would drive by there, on our way out to the river to park, and it smelled so good that my mouth watered for barbecue, but it didn't occur to us to actually try to go in, or that it was weird that we felt like we couldn't. That's just the way it was and none of us ever thought about it.

Since I'd been in New York, I hadn't exactly had a nightlife, so I'd gotten a library card and spent most of my evenings reading. I guess partly because of meeting Aurelius, I checked out a biography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou, who was from Arkansas, down in the Delta, and that showed me a whole different side of the situation. As I got into the book, I found out that Maya and I had a lot

more in common than I would have thought. Maya's grandmother ran a store that sold to black sharecroppers, and I wasn't kidding about my grandma and grandpa being sharecroppers. At one time they'd had a nice farm and took out a mortgage to buy more land to raise cotton, but shortly after they did, the Depression came and the bottom fell out of the cotton market. They struggled for a few years, but got to the point where they couldn't make the mortgage payments and there was nobody left to borrow from, so the bank foreclosed on them, like it did on so many others. A man from town who had been a professional baseball player decided he wanted to retire back home and go into farming, so he bought their mortgage and got the whole farm for the amount of the mortgage—less than two thousand dollars—which even in the Depression was way less than it was worth. He obviously thought that price included not only the house and land, but also every single machine they had on the place, every stick of furniture, every horse and cow and dog and cat—and the sheriff did nothing to stop him. He signed the papers the day Grandma and Grandpa took their cotton crop to the gin, and as the bales came out of the baler, the new owner was waiting with a truck and took those, too. They had the clothes on their backs, and that was about all. The only thing they had left to do was pull up their socks and go to work on shares for a larger farm, leaving behind the neat white house where Grandpa had grown up and their girls had been born, to move into a four-room croppers' shack in the field they worked. They never got over it, especially Grandpa. If the man who bought their farm's name ever came into the conversation, Grandpa would spit, even though he was a Christian man and tried to see the best in everyone.

Nobody, black or white, ever got out from under picking cotton for somebody else—the landowners saw to that by always keeping the croppers in debt to them, charging them high prices for the seed and their supplies, which you could be sure always totaled out to more than their share of the profits.

Grandma and Grandpa raised two good-looking girls, though, my mother, Ivanell, and my aunt Rubynell, both of whom married young and, like Aurelius, got themselves out of the cotton patch. It's a fact that, fair or not, good looks are always a ticket to someplace better.

Aunt Rubynell's husband, Uncle Jake, owned the Esso station, and Daddy was the postmaster at the post office. Although nobody could call us wealthy, we lived in town in a two-story house and Mama had all the

pretty clothes she never had when she was growing up. Even when she lived in the cotton patch she loved clothes. She was tall with a slim figure and could sew and make a hand-me-down look like an expensive store-bought dress. No matter how much money you have, you can't buy style—it's something you're born with—and Mama had it. It could be that growing up with her is why I am a little fixated on clothes myself.

The patch my grandparents had moved to was down in the river bottom, near Turkey Bend, where most of the black pickers lived, and they shared it with several other families, both black and white. Like the folks in Maya's book, they called each other Miz or Mister this or that, or Brother or Sister if they went to the same church. My grandparents called *each other* Mr. Shelton and Miz Shelton, even when they were alone, or so Grandma told me once when I asked her. He was quite a bit older than she was, and it never occurred to her to use his given name. That wouldn't have been respectful.

I never heard my grandparents say anything hateful about any of their black neighbors, but they didn't visit or talk much, even if they were picking right next to one another in the same field. Or unless one of them was in trouble, like the time my grandma was throwing the dirty dishwater out the back door and slipped and fell, landing on the jagged edge of the rocks they had piled up to use for door steps. She gashed her leg open, ankle to knee, and when Grandpa couldn't get the gaping wound closed or stop the bleeding and she turned gray and began to shake, he ran and got Miz Berry, who lived down the road, to come and help him bind it up. They got her in the truck and both of them took her to the hospital, where Miz Berry sat outside and waited for hours until they came back out with Grandma's leg sewed up and bandaged. Then Miz Berry went back to her house and cooked them a big pot of chicken and dumplings, turnip greens, and biscuits enough to last for a few days until Grandma could get up and around.

Grandma would have done as much for her, and she did when Miz Berry had a baby who couldn't thrive because her milk dried up. Grandma carried milk to her from their cow every day for months until the baby got big enough to eat. But they didn't go to see each other and drink tea and exchange recipes or whatever. Life was too hard. That was just the way it was.

That baby was a girl my same age named Reenie, and every Sunday afternoon while Mama and Daddy visited with Grandma and Grandpa we'd dig in the sand down by the river or play out in the old barn,

climbing up to the loft and jumping into piles of hay. One time Reenie found a sack of pink pellets out in the barn and ate some, thinking it might be candy, but it turned out to be rat poison. She didn't swallow much, but it burned her mouth and we got scared. My mother picked Reenie up and ran down the road to her home, and then Mama and Miz Berry scrubbed out her mouth and made her throw up and then drink a big glass of fresh milk. She was all right, but it scared us so bad we stopped playing in the barn, afraid of rats, and neither of us ever again tasted anything if we didn't know what it was.

It was about this time that we were six and big enough to go to school, and when I said something to her about how much fun we would have, going to first grade together, she put her hands on her hips and told me in no uncertain terms that she had her own school to go to, that it was better than mine, and she would get to ride a big yellow bus to get to it. Her family quit the patch and moved away not too long after that, maybe to be nearer the school, which I later found out was more than an hour away on the bus. I never saw Reenie again.

I didn't know then why we couldn't go to the same school, but in the excitement of first grade I forgot about Reenie. When Little Rock High School integrated in 1957 with all the hateful mess that went with it, I was too young to really understand what was happening. It was just normal that there were no black kids at school. If I'd ever thought about it, and I didn't, I guess I would have thought, as Reenie had said, that they were happy being bused to their school and felt like it was better than ours.

A few years later, of course, I got older and the civil rights marches brought out all the ugliness of segregation onto the six o'clock news, but even then, aside from Little Rock, which seemed far away from Sweet Valley, most of the trouble was always somewhere else, in the Deep South, Alabama or Mississippi or Georgia, and didn't appear to affect us much. We didn't have protesters sitting in at the Freezer Fresh or fat sheriffs beating up people, whooshing them down with fire hoses, siccing German shepherds on them. Nobody had ever gotten lynched in Sweet Valley. We felt like we were somehow apart from it all. After I read Maya Angelou's book, I doubted the black kids felt the same way. That book made me think in ways I never had before, and made me ashamed of those white people, ashamed of being so ignorant. If you think about it, white people have done a real number on *everybody*, starting with Columbus and the explorers—first on the Indians, then on the black

people they forced over here from Africa as slaves, and even right up to now on the Vietnamese, whose country we have no business being in at all and which we are destroying as hard and fast as we can.

Well, frankly, let's face it, down through history we've done a pretty good job on each other, too. Nobody knows if Cain and Abel were white or not, but I'd bet money they were.

So, sitting across from Aurelius, I was a confusion of feelings, to put it mildly. I had only had that feeling, that attraction, whatever you want to call it, like this twice in my life, and it was something I couldn't ignore. I know he felt it, too.

But what would people say if we started going out? How would my mother and daddy act when I told them I was seeing a black man? I know it was jumping the gun a little since he hadn't really asked me out at all, but would I have the courage to tell them if he did? What if they came to visit me? Well, so what if they did? I was grown, wasn't I? It wasn't any of their business who I saw! Oh, my gosh. Here I was getting mad at them already, before anything had even happened. Maybe they wouldn't care at all. They had never been prejudiced like a lot of people I knew. Daddy worked with a black man at the post office. They might like Aurelius.

Finally, though, what did it really matter what anybody else said or thought? This was New York, not the South. Nobody in Joe Jr.'s blinked an eye at us eating our lunch together in the same booth. There was nobody at all watching to frown on anything I did, no preacher telling me I would go to hell for every little thing I did or thought or said that wasn't like what the Holiness church believed, no whispering old ladies to run and tell my parents what they had seen me do. There were no Turkey Bend and Negro-only juke joints, white-only Freezer Freshes. Aurelius and I lived in the same house, right across the hall from each other.

I was starting out a whole new life, where nobody knew me and the only ties to the past were in my own mind, however strong or fragile those ties might be.

I had no idea what was going to happen between us, or even if anything would, but for right now, this moment, it felt good—it felt right—to be with Aurelius, his brimstone eyes looking at me over a bowl of soup. Everything else I would shove to the back of my mind with the rest of the confusion already piled up there, and, like Miss Scarlett, think about it another day.

11

THE TAN THUNDERBIRD

It was the end of Baby's and my first week of practice teaching in our separate schools, and the weather was warming up some. The snow had begun to melt, leaving bare patches of grass outside the parking lot of Big Bob's Burger and Beer Joint on the Buchanan strip, and there was a whiff of spring in the air. Baby and I had met at Big Bob's to have supper and compare notes. I think I was ahead in the supervising-teacher department, since Father Leo turned out to be as great as Cassie Culver had said. He had long wavy hair and a beard, and smoked cigars. He didn't care if the boys said a swear in class, and they all thought he was the coolest teacher ever. So did I. He liked my painting, said I had a great color sense, which was why he had picked me to be his student teacher. How can you keep from liking somebody who loves you for your work and not your curly hair?

On the other hand, Baby's supervising teacher, Alice Sinclair, wasn't even going to be there to help her at all, since she was eight months pregnant and big as a cow. In fact, the first day, she introduced Baby to the

kids and then took off, never to be seen again. Baby was probably slightly ahead of me with the kids, though, since hers seemed to like her a lot and all of mine were boys and, for the most part, all they did was ask me to get things from the bottom shelves so they could see me bend over, the little brats. I had forgotten that high schoolers were not children. One or two who were on the basketball team were even taller than me. I would have to wear my bell-bottoms and leave all the miniskirts in the drawers or I'd never get anything across to them. But it was kind of fun, being the only woman in the whole school. I would be a liar if I said otherwise.

Baby and I got in my car, our bellies full of burgers and fries, and headed toward St. Juniper's, leaving the neon lights of Big Bob's behind us. I wanted to show her the cute guest cottage where I was staying out behind the abbey and fix her some coffee in my little kitchen. It was almost like a playhouse there, and I loved being all on my own. Baby had an apartment in Buchanan in a house owned by a cranky landlady who knocked on the door if she heard the bathwater running too long and complained if she thought Baby had eaten one of her prunes or whatever, so it was almost as bad for her as being at home.

The road was deserted this time of night, and the sky was full of stars. The only other car on the road was a few hundred yards in front of us, and we slowed down when it braked and put on its blinker to cross the train tracks that ran parallel to the highway. Only it didn't cross. It stopped right in the middle of the tracks, and the driver put out the headlights. As we came closer, we could see it was a light-colored Thunderbird.

"Good Lord, Baby! That car is sitting right in the middle of the tracks! If a train comes along, it's going to get hit!"

"Maybe the motor died."

"Then why did they turn off the lights?"

"I don't know. Do you think they might be in trouble? Maybe we should stop and see if they're sick or something."

I turned, pulled in behind the car, and honked the horn, but it didn't budge. I killed the motor, and Baby and I got out of the VW and walked up to the car.

"Hey! What are you doing? You can't sit here on the train tracks!" Baby called out as we went up to the window. I was surprised to see Cassie sitting in the driver's seat. She had the window rolled up, and I banged on it.

"Cassie! What do you think you're doing? Do you want to get run over by a train?"

She rolled down the window halfway and calmly looked down the tracks.

"Looks like it, don't it?" Her words were a little slurred. I smelled liquor on her breath. A whistle sounded, low and lonesome in the distance. I turned to look, and sure enough, way on down the track, there was a light.

She was just going to sit there and get run over.

"Cassie, this is stupid. Come on. There's a train coming."

"I know there is. I might be stupid, but I'm not ignorant. Lale run off and left me, and I'm killing myself."

She pushed down the lock on the door and started rolling up the window. I tried to get my hand in, but the window kept on coming and I had to jerk my hand back before it pinched off my fingers.

"Cassie! Roll down this window!"

"Let me alone! Just get out of the way!"

"Are you crazy? Don't do this! Baby! Help me!"

Baby ran around the Thunderbird to open the door from the other side, but Cassie was too quick and pushed down the lock before Baby could get in.

The train was coming on hard down the track, but she still had time if she would just get moving. We pounded on the doors, but Cassie put her hands over her ears and rested her head against the steering wheel.

"Let's try to push it, Cherry," Baby said, coming back around. We got behind the car and pushed with all our might, but the car didn't budge an inch. That old story about a person turning into Superman in a crisis didn't seem to be true in our case. The train was getting closer, and I was beginning to panic. I went to the window and banged on it one last time. Cassie had her head turned away, but she could hear me, I was pretty sure.

"Listen, Cassie. I know you're all upset about Lale and everything, but I can promise you that he won't even come home for your funeral if you do this. He's probably having a high old time right now with some other girl, and after you're dead and buried, he'll still be having one. Think about it. Even if you want to smash yourself into meat loaf on the front of a train, do you want to kill that baby, too? Cassie?" I had no idea

if she really was pregnant, but all the signs pointed to it. She half lifted her head. At least she heard me.

"Cassie, you know suicide's a sin," Baby chimed in. "You won't go to heaven, and neither will the baby." Baby's grandmother had been Catholic and she knew which buttons to push. "You don't want to go to hell, Cassie." Baby kept on at her. "Hell is like dousing yourself with lighter fluid and sizzling and frying forever and ever."

"Yeah, you might not care for yourself," I said, taking over, "but killing a baby is the worst sin you can commit. It's an innocent little thing and it doesn't have any say in it. Let the baby live, Cassie!" I felt bad about saying those things to her with the shape she was in, but at this point I had run out of options.

"We better get out of here, Cherry," Baby said in a panic. "There's nothing we can do for her now." The train was charging on down the track, blowing its whistle like there was no tomorrow, and I suddenly realized that if it hit the car, we'd be right in the line of fire. I banged on the door again.

"The train is coming, Cassie. We're out of here. Good luck!"

We didn't have time to move the VW, so we just ran down the incline and jumped into the ditch, praying the car wouldn't land on us when the train crashed into it. As we hit the ground, I heard the T-bird's engine cough and turn over as Cassie popped the clutch, and the car lurched off the tracks, rolling down the grade on the other side just as the train roared through, so close I could see the glare from the headlight through my squeezed-shut eyelids. Tons of iron whizzed by, only feet away from us, and the noise from the whistle nearly deafened me. I imagined I saw faces in the windows with a look of horror on them, and nearly peed my pants. On the other side of the train, the taillights of the T-bird shone red between the wheels of each car as they went by, exhaust smoking out of its tailpipe.

The caboose finally passed, and Baby and I went running across the tracks.

"Are you all right? Cassie! Open this door!"

The door opened and Cassie staggered out. I grabbed and hugged her, then she slid to the ground and sat with her back to the car, crying, which made us cry, too, in relief.

"Why did you have to do that?" she said, through her tears. "Why couldn't you have let me alone?"

"Because I hate the sight of blood," I said, wiping my nose on the back of my hand. "Now come on. What's going on?"

"I told you. Lale run off and left me," she sobbed. "I don't even know where he is. He doesn't want to marry me or even see the baby."

"So there really is a baby?"

"Not yet. But you were right—there's going to be. Everyone in town will know it soon, and they'll know he didn't want us."

She staggered to her feet and lurched over to the side of the road, where she threw up.

Baby went and got a box of Kleenex out of the car and handed her a couple. "Here, take some of these," she said. "Are you all right?" Cassie shuddered at the sour bad taste of regurgitated wine in her mouth, but seemed a little more clearheaded. She nodded.

"Yeah. I'm all right. Y'all can go on."

"Oh, no. I think not. We need to get you home. Baby, you drive my car, and I'll take Cassie in the T-bird."

"It's Lale's T-bird. He gave it to me. Payment for his conscience." She laughed a hard little laugh, blew her nose, and leaned against the hood of the car. "I'm okay. Let me just sit for a minute. I don't want to go home like this. I can't face Mama."

She sat on the ground and bent her knees, resting her forehead on them. We stood around, not knowing what to do. After a few minutes, she raised her head and looked at us. I'm not sure she'd really known who we were before.

"I remember you. From the restaurant. Cherry?"

"Yeah. Sure you do. It was only a few days ago."

"Who are you?" she asked Baby.

"I'm Baby, Cherry's friend. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too." She held out her hand and Baby shook it. "Thank y'all for saving me. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know what got into me. I really didn't mean to do it." She began sobbing all over again.

"No, I don't think you did," I said. "No man in the world is worth killing yourself over. He might feel bad for a minute, but then he would have his whole life ahead of him, and you'd still be dead."

"You're right about that." She sniffed. Baby took a couple more Kleenex and handed them to her. She blew her nose again. "I guess my guardian angel sent you. Or maybe it was the baby's guardian angel."

"Maybe she did. But she might not send us the next time, so no

fooling, I hope you won't try anything else like this. I don't think I could take it."

"I won't. Don't tell my mother. Please don't tell her."

I wasn't going to promise. I thought Annie probably needed to know about this.

"Look, Cassie, I don't think you ought to be by yourself right now. If you don't want to go home, why don't you come on with us to the cabin up at the abbey for a while? We can sit around and listen to music, I'll fix us some coffee, and you can tell us all about Lale."

"All right. That sounds good." She pushed herself up with some difficulty. "I'll follow y'all."

"I don't think so. Baby, you drive the Bug and I'll go with Cassie." I didn't want to let her out of my sight for a minute.

I got into the T-bird, turned it around, and bumped back over the railroad tracks. I shivered again at the thought of how close the train had come. Amazing. A few feet of space was the difference between life and death. Cassie got in, and we led off, Baby following. I only then noticed that the backseat was full of gifts.

"What are those presents in the backseat?"

"They're from the bridal shower. That's the night Lale run off, and I never did unload them. Need a new chip-and-dip set? I got three. Or a black lace nightgown? Take anything you want."

"Cassie, stop talking like that. Let's go over to my cabin and talk it out, all right?"

"Yeah, all right. Just please don't tell my mother."

"Wasn't Annie at the shower that night? Didn't she know Lale left?"

"Mama went home early. She saw Lale waiting out in the car and thought he would bring me on to the house, and I never told her different."

"When did you find out he had gone?"

"After the girls started to leave, I came out to see if he was waiting for me. His car was sitting there empty, and he'd left me a note. I don't even know where he went. Probably hitchhiked out. I didn't let anybody know what the note said, just said that he'd had to go do something at the last minute and I was going to take the stuff home myself. I've been going crazy for days and tonight I couldn't stand it any longer, so I took one of Bernadette's bottles of wine and just drove around to try and figure out what to do, thinking and drinking."

"Thinking and drinking don't go together too well, I guess."

"Maybe not."

"Are you feeling better now?"

"Yeah. I'm okay."

"Let's go and get you some coffee. We'll call Annie and tell her you're with us, and won't be home for a while. Okay?" She nodded her head.

I had a bad feeling it was going to be a long night.

12

ON THE ROAD

So, what did that awful truck driver mean when he said all that about you running away from some problem? Not that it's any of my business, but, honey, we all have problems and we'd all like to just get in the car and run away from them. That's partly why I was here in this dump of a truck stop at five in the morning. I ran hard and fast from one of mine this weekend. I can't imagine *why* I followed that loser to Nashville, but that's what love does to you. It takes away every shred of judgment you possess. All your brains drain right out of your head and down into your wickie. That's what makes it hard, you know. All those brains. I should have known any western singer I met at Max's Kansas City in New York was not a real cowboy. I found out the only horse he'd ever ridden was at the five and dime, and the only affection he had for *moi* was the dough I could shell out to support him until he got his record contract. Ha! Every single waiter and car jockey in Nashville is waiting for their big record contract. He did have a lovely voice, though, really and truly. Although *lovely* isn't quite the word. More like *sexy*. That's the word, honey, pure and simple. Sexy. One of those rough, gravelly kinds

of voices like Johnny Cash has. Like it was dragged out of his throat at four in the morning and beaten with a tire iron. Do you like Johnny Cash? I think he's sexy, wearing black, and all that romantic drugging and all, back before it was fashionable. I think I must be over my cowboy phase, though. Honey, it was just too, too much in the end. Literally. Not that *that* usually is a problem, but he wouldn't leave me alone for a minute! I had to make excuses to even get a few hours' rest! And a girl like me really needs her rest, don't you know? Why . . ."

"Excuse me, Sal, but would you mind not talking for a while? I got a lot on my mind right now, and I need to think."

"Oh, I'm sorry, cherub. I do tend to run on, don't I? You just sit and relax and leave the driving to Miss Sally. Yes, indeedy, you must have a lot on your mind—I can see."

They were heading north, in the baby-blue Mustang. Lale was beginning to realize, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, that his beery decision to run from his problems was probably the wrong one, but he had gone and done it and there was no way he was going to go slinking back with his tail between his legs to face the wrath of his parents and one very big angry girl. Not to mention that he would be the laughing-stock of the whole town. He could just hear his friends at the wedding—"Hey, Lale," they'd yell. "She dragged you to the altar kicking and screaming, didn't she?" Not to mention what that would do to Cassie. She was probably going to kill him if she ever saw him, but she'd get over it. Heck, she was probably glad he was gone, in a part of her. Or at least she would be. She'd be all right.

He had insisted on paying for his own breakfast and broken the twenty he had in his pocket, but the rest would have to last him until he made some kind of plan. He had hated like everything to go into the truck stop with Sal, but nobody much gave them a second look. If you didn't look too close you didn't realize that Sal had plucked his eyebrows into an arch and still had the remnants of mascara on his lashes. His hair was cropped short, to make the wigs fit better, and truth be told, the truckers probably disapproved more of Lale, his blond hair growing down over his collar. Long-haired hippies were not high on truckers' lists, as Lale found out when he approached a couple about a ride, and they shook their heads.

"You might as well give it up, Lale," Sal had called from the front seat of the Mustang as he watched Lale go to the third truck, then walk away. "I'm the only ride in town for you this morning. I'll be good, I

promise. I'm on my way to New York, back to civilization, and you can ride in the old blue horse as far as you want. For free."

It wasn't exactly free. Lale paid dearly by listening to the constant chatter, which nearly ran him up the wall after the first couple of hours. This last stretch of silence lasted exactly thirty seconds.

"Well, are you going to tell Aunt Sally your big secret or not? It was a girl, wasn't it? Your girlfriend? Did she catch you with another girl?"

"Nope."

"Nope what? Nope it isn't a girl, or nope she didn't catch you with another girl? Did she catch you with a boy, perhaps? Please, Lord, let him say yes!"

"Nope she didn't catch me with another girl and she especially didn't catch me with another guy. I told you I'm not like that."

"Ah, that's too bad, but we're getting warmer. So . . . there was this girlfriend you were totally true to, and you ran away from her because . . . she was stifling you?"

"Nope."

"Nope you weren't totally true to her, or nope you didn't run away from her because she was stifling you?"

"Look—I really don't want to talk about it, okay?"

"Fine. I am not one to pry. Never was one to pry. Never, never, never. I have six brothers and sisters, and they can vouch for me on that. Every one of them would come to me when they had secrets because they knew that their brother, Salvador de Vega, could keep a secret. Yes, I certainly can keep a secret. Was she pregnant? That must be it. That, of course, is the oldest reason in the world to run away. Tell me, Lale. Ooh, I bet she was pregnant. Am I right?"

Lale looked out the window at the passing trees along the highway.

"So she *was* pregnant. Hmm. Well, were you going to marry her? I would imagine she already has the cake and the dress, doesn't she? Was the wedding going to be today? My God, you didn't leave her standing at the altar, did you, you naughty boy? What does she look like? No, don't tell me! Let me guess. She is a cheerleader with a long blond flip. Big blue eyes, perfect teeth fresh out of their braces. Cute little buns. Wears those adorable white cotton panties called Lollipop. Am I close?"

"Nope."

"Nope. Nope to what? I've lost track here. You really have to give me something to work on. You're as bad as the lonesome cowboy I just left."

"Nope she ain't a cheerleader. She's out of school. She works at a

café. And nope she ain't blond, but her teeth are pretty good. I don't think she ever needed braces. She is a tad overweight, but she's got blue eyes. Nose is a little long, but not too bad. She's a good girl."

"I see. Well, that's better at any rate. Lale, darling, you are in a mess, yes indeed you are. You know you should be there at the wedding, but it seems that here you are instead. So. Do you have any idea of where you're going? I can let you out at the next bus stop if you want to catch a bus back home and do the right thing. I'll even float you a loan for the ticket. No one can ever say that Miss Sally doesn't rally to the cause of young love. It's your last chance. Going once . . . going twice . . ."

"That's great, thanks for the offer, but I've got to work it all through in my head first. I don't think she'd want to see me after what I done last night, running off like that in the middle of her shower and all. And my daddy would take a strap to me, and I'd have to let him. I better just keep on going for the moment, if you don't mind."

"Oh, I don't, mind, sweet cheeks. You can go all the way to New York with me if you want to. New York is absolutely *made* for boys like you. But you left in the middle of her shower, did you say? You mean you left her wet with soap in her eyes? My, what a time you picked to leave! I can't imagine."

"Let's not talk about it for a while, okay?"

"Okay. As far as I'm concerned, you never said a thing to me. My lips are sealed. And I'll never bring it up again unless you want to talk about it. I have absolutely no curiosity. You have *no* idea what kind of secrets I am holding in this brain of mine. You probably don't know it, as how could you, being buried your whole brief life in the Ozark Mountains and all, but I'm a famous makeup artist for fashion shoots and movies, and, honey, let me tell you, those stars have more dirt buried in their closets than you ever plowed back on the farm. And I guess there is something in me that just brings out the confessor in them. Or are they the confesseees? Whatever. I should have been a priest. My mother, God rest her soul, wanted me to become a priest, but can you imagine! Wearing the same outfit day after day? I'd go stark, raving mad! Not that I don't like black—actually I look quite good in it, but . . ."

Lale leaned his head against the window and slept as Sal's voice continued like rain on a tin roof, lulling him into dreamland.

13

CALLING THE HOGS

After I did the test at Ron's, something must have happened, because it seemed to take the cork out of the bottle and I began to get some more tests. Ron, bless his heart, came through and gave me several 11-by-14's of all the poses, some in black and white and some in color, some in a wonderful old-fashioned sepia tone. They didn't look stiff and posed at all, like I was afraid they would. I was so thrilled that I went out and splurged on a new burgundy-red leather portfolio that zipped and had carrying handles, and Liz helped me arrange the shots. We opened up the book with a black-and-white in the baseball cap and melted ice cream cone, and then built up to some of the more dramatic ones in color. Toward the end, there were a few of me dancing in front of the window, which were my favorites. I was never much of a dancer, as my friends who had been stepped on and bumped into at dances would tell you, although I begged like crazy when I was little to take ballet like some of the other girls did, but dancing was on the sin list so I never did get a pair of those pink satin toe shoes. Still, in the picture, I *almost* looked like a dancer, arms spread out and legs silhouetted through the

gauzy dress, the focus as soft and grainy as the ones Father Leo had done. Ron must not have been kidding about liking those. At the end, I put in Father Leo's. I didn't care if they weren't fashionable. They were beautiful. And I had a book! Even Suzan didn't have much negative to say about them, and grudgingly said, "These will do for a start."

Now on go-sees the photographers would at least stop and flip through my pictures, and I began to get booked for more tests. Most of the time I had to bring my own clothes and jewelry, which I was beginning to find at flea markets and the antique-clothing stores that were opening up on every corner in the Village. I got some great stuff, especially down on Canal Street, which was in a part of town called SoHo that was mostly factories and warehouses. Even though the area was a little creepy, full of big trucks and huge garbage bins, and it was sort of illegal, there were artists and people like that actually *living* there, because artists could get a whole unfinished loft in an empty factory for really cheap, as it seemed like a lot of the manufacturing was moving out of town and the owners didn't want the buildings to just sit empty for somebody to break into. While there weren't many restaurants or anything, just a few lunch places for the factory workers, like the Broome Street Bar, it was beginning to get a few stores, and there was even a small Italian grocery on West Broadway that had fourteen different kinds of olives and fresh balls of mozzarella cheese that came in little tubs of water. Because of all the artists, an art gallery had opened up on Spring Street, and you could tell more would be coming—it just had that feeling.

One of Lana's boyfriends was a painter who lived in a loft on Spring Street so she knew the neighborhood really well. She took me down there for the first time on a Saturday and we went shopping. Canal Street was the southern boundary of SoHo, and it was packed with people crowded on the sidewalks and cars all lined up, trying to get to or from the Holland Tunnel and the bridges to Brooklyn. Most of the stores along the street were supply places for the factories, but anybody could go in and buy. There was a store that just sold rubber stuff that smelled so good that I just stood and breathed until I got light-headed, and one that sold nothing but plastic, sheets and shapes of every kind of plastic in every color, some that were iridescent and some that were patterned. For some strange reason I've always loved hardware stores, too, and on Canal Street there were several, with long aisles full of any kind of tool or paint or nut or bolt you would ever need. My favorite one, though,

was a big store that sold art supplies called Pearl Paint. I bought a folding easel, which I set up in my little apartment, and made a mental note to write to Mama to send up my paints and brushes so I could paint when I had time. Still, I couldn't resist buying a few tubes of this great paint by a company I'd never heard of called Bloxx that was creamy smooth and had the most fantastic colors—periwinkle blue and deep Chinese red and a green the color of new willow leaves—colors so beautiful you wanted to spread them on bread and eat them. I loved living with the smell of fine oil paint and linseed oil, and I realized I really missed painting. Maybe I'd get Aurelius to sit for me. He'd make a great portrait, with his headband and all, his skin a mix of burnt sienna, raw umber, yellow ocher, and brown-pink.

Canal Street was just a few blocks from Little Italy and Chinatown, and Lana and I walked around all afternoon, looking through windows painted with red-and-gold Chinese letters, at whole ducks, braised crispy brown, hanging in rows by their necks, and small fragrant pigs roasting on spits. We ate spaghetti at an Italian place with red-and-white-checked tablecloths and candles stuck in Chianti bottles; we bought black velvet embroidered slippers for a dollar from an old Chinese woman on the street, and yellow egg-custard tarts in little fluted pastry cups from a Chinese bakery. We goggled at the live turtles and fish and squid swimming in big tubs at the outdoor Chinese market, and ducks and chickens in cages. People actually took them home live and killed them for dinner! I could imagine somebody walking a fat duck home on a leash and then whacking it with a cleaver to make Peking duck.

Just walking down the street with Lana was a trip. She was tall and dark and skinny, and if I do say so myself, we made an attention-grabbing pair. Everyone turned and looked at us, and I heard the word "models" whispered, which I can't deny gave me a thrill.

The best place to find clothes and jewelry and stuff was an outdoor flea market on Canal and Wooster where I spent every bit of a check Mama had sent to me on a brown velvet monk's cape with a hood, a black fringed Spanish shawl embroidered with red and green and yellow flowers, a turquoise Japanese kimono that was real silk, hats from the thirties and forties, old jewelry, and tons of scarves, all for really cheap. A step above flea markets were the antique clothing stores, and we found a great one called Harriet Love, where I got a black straw cartwheel hat trimmed in ostrich feathers that must have been from around 1915, and a black velvet coat lined in softest ivory satin from around the

same period that was trimmed in lush black fox. My room was beginning to fill up and I hung the stuff around the walls like art. I packed away most of my Arkansas clothes, all the ones I had made, for sure, and my look started to change from mod to more . . . chic hippie, I guess, for want of a better term. I began to wear hip-hugger bell-bottom jeans with skinny turtleneck sweaters and scarves tied around my head, little rose-colored granny glasses, and big hoop earrings. I had never been so happy in my life.

Sometimes the photographers I tested with would have makeup and hair people, who were also working for free to get experience, contacts, and photos for their books, but most of the time I had to do my own and I was getting pretty good at it. I hadn't run across Sal again. He was too famous, I found out, and hardly ever did test girls unless he was paid or was a great friend of the photographer, but I always hoped I'd see him. He was fun, and was also the best at makeup I'd had, even though he took so long. In fact, most of them tended to take a long time, even on a test. On a job, they were probably being paid by the hour, like models, and liked to stretch it out. I hated what some of the other makeup artists did, though, the ones who were practicing, and sometimes I would sneak into the bathroom to fix it the best I could before the photographer started. The makeup artists didn't like it, but it was *my* face in front of the camera, not their artwork. One of them obviously had no idea what color my skin was and put on makeup that made me look like I was wearing an orange mask, and one put dark blush in the hollows of my cheeks and made me look like a skeleton. It was awful. A few of them tried to color my eyebrows darker, but it never looked good and I always made them wash it out. I was getting used to the white eyebrows. It was becoming my trademark.

Liz began to send me out for jobs, too, as I got more pictures in the book, and one of them was for pantyhose. On the go-see, the photographer did Polaroids of my legs in different colors and designs of tights, and later in the day Liz called and told me I got the job! I couldn't believe it. I was going to be making sixty dollars an hour, and they booked me for two hours! That was as much as I'd made in two weeks at the Family Hand! Of course, I had to take out for the agency's commission and taxes, and then . . . well, it was still more than I'd made in a week at the Family Hand.

Even if it was just the lower half of me, I finally was making money as a model! Mama and Daddy would be thrilled, I can tell you. Or on second thought, maybe they wouldn't. In spite of Mama slipping me a little money from time to time, Daddy had been writing and asking when I was going to make some money and said I could come home when I finally realized this wasn't going to pan out. Now they'd know for sure I was going to stay. At least for a while.

I had just gotten my daily schedule from Liz and was coming out of the lounge at the agency when Freddy cornered me. I hated it when he did that, trapping me by putting his arm against the wall and leaning in to talk like we were alone and had some secret. I know he did it to all the girls, but somehow they knew how to handle him better than I did. I always got flustered and acted like I was scared, which I think he enjoyed.

"Well, Cherry, I heard you got your first booking. Congratulations."

"Thanks, Freddy. It's just stockings, but it's a start."

"I told you you'd do well. Those legs." He smiled his little off-center wet smile. "Say, we're having a little party this weekend in the country, and Suzan and I would like you to join us. It'll just be a few of the models, some friends. I'll cook."

"Well, I don't know. I don't have any way out there."

"Lana's coming. I think she's borrowing a car. You can go with her."

Freddy and Suzan's weekend parties were legendary among the models. To be invited was a sign they thought you were going places. Lana usually went, and of course all of the more famous models, but this was the first time I had been invited. It was a big step for me, but I was a little nervous. Suzan always managed to intimidate me, even when she was trying to be friendly, and I wasn't looking forward to being in her house for the weekend. But I couldn't say no.

"All right. Thanks, Freddy. That will be nice."

Suzan and Freddy had a country house at Sneden's Landing, up on the Hudson River, forty-five minutes from New York. It was made of native stone on a quiet street, set well back from the road, with a long driveway leading up to it and a sloping back lawn that went down to the river. They had an indoor swimming pool and eight bedrooms, and every weekend there were houseguests. Suzan was a vegetarian, if she ate at all, so everyone else had to be, too. Freddy liked to say he cooked, but

I later found out it was really a woman from Ireland who made the meatless meals, which were underseasoned (certainly no salt, which made you retain water), so bland you wouldn't *want* to eat much. There was plenty of liquor, though, and cocktail hour started at lunch, with Freddy handing out bloody Marys almost the minute we came in the door. I asked for something nonalcoholic and he gave me a virgin Mary with a stick of celery in it, which was tasty, and then we had lunch. Suzan didn't appear, but the guys and several other girls gradually drifted in. Most of them were well known, and it was weird to see them so casual, without much makeup, wearing jeans and sweaters. They all looked younger than they did in pictures.

Lunch was pretty casual and we didn't formally sit at the table, just got our food from the sideboard and sat around the table or out on the patio. It hadn't gotten too cold yet, although there was a nip in the air. I sat with Lana, a little shy of talking to the others. These people were all so beautiful and famous that I felt awkward. Back home, ever since I was a kid, I had always been seen as strange-looking, too tall, too skinny, too pale. In the high-fashion world, tall and skinny and pale were good, and all of a sudden I was in a whole world with people like me, or people who thought people like me were beautiful. But old insecurities die hard and I wished I was as confident as the rest of the girls.

After lunch, we went to our room to get settled. Lana and I shared a small bedroom with twin beds and white lace curtains. A chest and ladder-back chair were the only furniture, but it had a great view of the river. I put my clothes in one of the drawers and went outside across the back patio to look at it. I had always loved the Hudson River School of painters, and wished I could paint the river and all. I'd bring my camera next time if I was invited back and try to get some good pictures, which wouldn't be the same as painting *plein air*, but I might try it. Lana came out and joined me and we sat watching the sun light up the orange, red, and yellow leaves and turn the river to gold.

"Beautiful, no?" she said in her cute, funny accent.

"Beautiful, yes," I said.

"Did you bring your swimsuit? The guys are already in the pool."

"Are you kidding? I'm not going to go swimming in front of five male models and have all my makeup wash off. You know what I look like without it!"

"Don't be silly. You look fine without it. You don't sleep in it, do you?"

"Of course not. I scrub it off with soap and water."

"Soap and water? But that is horrible for your face! You have to use fine cream to take it off!"

"I have some Pond's I put on sometimes." I never really thought about my skin. It was just there and I'd never had much trouble with it, not even too many pimples, thank the Lord.

"Pond's! Oh, no, no, no, no, no, my dar-ling, I'll have to take you to Saks and get you something good or you'll look like an old lady by the time you're twenty-five! The best is Elizabeth Arden eight-hour cream. You can use that for everything—your face, your elbows, your heels, even on your lips. When we get back, we'll go."

There was so much I didn't know about this beauty business. It had never once occurred to me to put cream on my elbows or heels. Probably someone had been eyeing them with distaste, thinking, "What rough ugly elbows and heels that girl has." I'd have to check it out in the mirror. One more thing to worry about. At least I didn't have to worry about my weight. With all the walking and stair-climbing, I had lost five pounds already, and this weekend's food wasn't going to put any weight on me, I could tell. For lunch we'd had boiled lentils and salad with lemon juice. That was it. I couldn't wait for dinner. Next time I was bringing a jar of peanut butter along, that's for sure.

"Sure you don't want to go for a swim?" Lana said. "Don't be by yourself. Have some fun! I brought an extra swimsuit. You can wear it."

"Thanks, Lana, but I don't think so." The idea of wearing someone else's swimsuit was about as appealing as borrowing their underwear. I guess it's an only-child thing. "I'm not much of a swimmer. You go ahead and have fun. I'll catch you later."

There was a gazebo, just like in the movies, on the long lawn, and I strolled down and sat in a cushioned chair and just drank in the beautiful scene. Fall was definitely in the air and the sun hanging low in the sky threw a soft golden glow over it all. I was a little annoyed at myself that I didn't make more of an effort to be friendly to the others. I think part of me felt like a fraud, and they were going to find out I wasn't really one of them, but just a gawky girl that somehow got taken by Suzan Hartman by mistake. Part of it, too, was that I was hesitant about talking, because of the accent. Although I didn't have the money to call the speech teacher Suzan had recommended, I practiced talking with the TV, saying "I," instead of "Ah," and trying to make one syllable out of words that we used two for—like the name Ann, we pronounced "Ay-

un," Jim was "Je-um." Never use one syllable when two will do just as well—that is the secret to a good southern accent. I had to think about it, though, and usually forgot.

I decided to practice the "I's" while I watched the sun go down.

"I-ee, I-ee, I-ee . . ."

"You what?" I turned around to see one of the models standing there, a guy named Paul Serrero. He was Italian, had dark curly hair, and was in the pages of *GQ* and *Esquire* all the time.

"I-ee was just practicing my I's. So people will stop asking me what part of the South I'm from."

"What part of the South *are* you from?" He plopped comfortably in the other chair. He had friendly brown eyes and a cleft chin.

"Arkansas." I said it a little defiantly. People sometimes actually laughed when I told them, like Arkansas was a big joke or something.

"Really? I know a guy from there."

"A model?"

"Yeah. Blond guy. Zack, I think his name is."

"That's a weird coincidence. I think I ran into him at Ron Bonetti's. Is he a friend of yours?"

"No, but we just did a catalog shoot together."

"Do you know how to get in touch with him?"

"Hey, baby, I'm not your local dating service. Why so interested in that guy? I'm right here!"

"I'm not interested in him, like *interested* in him. I only saw him that one time. It was just a coincidence, that's all. Not many of us Arkies up here. We might be cousins or something." I smiled and Paul laughed, which was a relief.

"Right. Tell you what—if I see him again, I'll get his number for you."

"That's okay. I don't need it."

"Good. Because I wouldn't have given it to you anyhow." He tried to look roguish, and I let him think I thought it was funny. "So," he continued, "are you seeing somebody?"

"Not really. Kind of." I wasn't, but I thought of Aurelius. I hadn't seen him since the coffee shop, but the next morning there was a red rose outside my door. He was sure taking his sweet easy time about asking me out, if that was what he intended to do. I couldn't wait around forever, no matter how tingly I got when I saw him. The nights with the library books were beginning to get long.