

Three Girls and their Brother



Theresa Rebeck

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Аннотация

A stunning novel about celebrity and the price of fame from a Pulitzer-shortlisted playwright and the creator of hit series SMASH. It was the photograph in the New Yorker which started it all. They were three young, beautiful, red-haired girls, the granddaughters of a literary lion. They were News. But it was the row over the youngest's reaction to the attentions from one of Hollywood's biggest stars that made them Celebrities. The family – the three sisters, their brother, their mother, their normally absent father – are sucked into a whirlwind of agents, producers, managers, photo shoots, paparazzi, journalists, stylists, parties, shows, a maelstrom they have no idea how to control. The three girls – and their brother, an uneasy observer – experiment with life and change, and learn to survive, each of them differently. Each of them pays a different price in their relationship with each other, with their parents and in their beliefs in themselves and the civilisation around them. Three Girls and their Brother is a novel to devour. The story is compelling, sometimes cutting, sometimes touching. The characters leap widely off the page. The setting and portrait of the celebrity scene is completely convincing, busy and yet intimate. Theresa Rebeck's first novel is a triumph.

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TERESA REBECK

Three Girls and Their Brother



HarperCollins e-books

For Cooper and Cleo, my own little beauties

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PHILIP

CHAPTER ONE

Now that it's all over, everybody is saying it was the picture, that stupid picture was the primal cause of every disaster that would eventually befall my redheaded sisters. Not that it's anybody's fault; not that anybody *blames* anybody. It's more like fate; the picture had to happen, and then everything else had to happen because the picture happened. Everybody sitting around, shaking their heads and saying, How could they know? Like total doom is just the mystery du jour.

But you know, I'm like—the *New Yorker* calls you up and says we want to do this thing, take a picture of those girls, it's all set up, Herb Lang doing color for once because of all that red hair—to me, the question isn't, How could they know? The question is, Why go for it? Why would you go for it? Why not hurl yourself

in the opposite direction, run for cover to Ohio or Iowa or Idaho, any one of those places where the most famous anybody ever gets is for like raising an especially gorgeous cow or something. I'm not saying it would have solved everything. But overall I don't know anyone who could now argue that moving to Ohio would not have been a better choice than announcing in the *New Yorker* that my sisters were the It Girls of the Twenty-First Century.

"Herb Lang is going to do us," Polly smirked. This is in the kitchen, all three of them are sort of lounging around, Daria's got her head in the refrigerator, and Polly is posing, like some glamour girl from the forties, her hip up against the counter and her cheekbones up against the light. On the one hand it's ridiculous when she tries that stuff, but on the other hand she seriously knows how to pull it off. She wears fishnet stockings half the time. So she's doing this thing with her hips and her cheekbones, and what she just said sounds just crazy enough to be possibly true, so I don't immediately call her a liar. I look over at Daria, who has closed the refrigerator door and is now leaning against the counter, opening an Evian. She's actually too cool to even glance my way, to see how I'm taking this earth-shattering piece of information, but you can tell from the way she's holding her head that she too is also smirking. Seriously, you should have seen those two. They looked like they'd already been *in* the goddamned *New Yorker*, and that thing that the Indians talk about, how pictures steal part of your soul, like that had happened already.

And yet, they also looked insanely beautiful. They always looked insanely beautiful. This is a sad truth of my life: Since the moment of my birth, I have always been surrounded by female beauty. It's a bit of a distraction. I mean, it is not something you ever get used to, even when you're related to it. Sometimes all three of them, it gets hard to concentrate. All that creamy skin and hair, shoulders and legs, lips—they're my sisters, don't get me wrong—but it's definitely overwhelming.

"Herb Lang? How'd you pull that off?" I say. I'm playing this very cool, which makes them doubly sure that I am impressed.

"It's for the *New Yorker*," Daria repeats.

Okay, our grandfather, just for the record, was Leo Heller. I never knew the guy, he was dead before I was even born, but, the point is, he was a really famous literary critic in the fifties, who wrote a lot of books about the history of American literature. Even though hardly anybody understands them, they are considered a big deal and, in addition, old Granddad at some point wrote an essay called "The Terror of the New," which apparently blew a lot of people's minds, if your mind actually gets blown by that stuff. So now "The Terror of the New" is one of those lines about literature and thought and America that people actually quote. People ask questions, like in graduate seminars, at universities, about how this or that idea fits into Heller's notion of "The Terror of the New." Literary critics write whole chapters of books about how Heller's theory of "The Terror of the New" explains the collapse of the Harlem Renaissance. Your average

person of course doesn't know about any of this, unless they do. So if I say "I'm Leo Heller's grandson" to a specific subset of human beings, they'll act like that's the coolest thing possible. Everyone else will stare at me like I'm a moron.

But everyone at the *New Yorker*, trust me, knows all about "The Terror of the New." Which is why Daria actually didn't need to say anything else in explanation as to why Herb Lang might be taking their picture. Red hair, plus Leo Heller? Definitely *New Yorker* material.

"It Girls," I shrug, deliberately unimpressed. "Wow."

"All *three* of us," Amelia hisses, from the corner.

Okay now, the thing about Amelia is, she is nowhere near as big an idiot as Polly and Daria. She has that thing that happens to youngest children, sometimes, where she just sits and *watches* the disasters all the rest of us are cooking up, which makes it much easier for her not to participate in them. She's, like, a genius at this. Seriously, she basically figures out how everything's going to go hours or years ahead of everyone else, and then she tries to explain it to the rest of us morons, in an attempt to give us half a clue. None of us ever listens and then it all happens, just the way she said. It's quite spooky, to tell the truth, almost like she's a character out of a comic book, with super powers, that's how accurate it sometimes is. I'm not kidding.

"It's not going to go anywhere good," she notified us.

Nevertheless, three days later we found ourselves in the middle of a decrepit loft on the Lower East Side, surrounded

by lights and photographers and droolers galore. It really just happened, like that fast: One day they call and say we're going to do this stupid thing that's going to change your lives forever, and then, like, suddenly there you are in some sort of deserted garment district kind of place where a lot of young women were chained to sewing machines in the nineteenth century, and now there are stylists everywhere. I got to see the whole thing because I faked a cold to get out of school, and then faked getting better when the car showed up. Mom was too out of her mind to notice, or care. The *New Yorker*! It Girls! It was enough to drive everyone bonkers.

Polly was in heaven, it was exactly the sort of thing she's been looking for her whole life, being the center of attention in a roomful of people who think being the center of attention is the only reason to live. Mom likewise was practically purring with delight. This is the thing you need to know about my mother: She was Miss Tennessee in 1977 and then the first runner up in the Miss America contest that same year. This is a dead fact, it's no joke. It's not the kind of information Mom ever actually spread around New York because the circles my dad traveled in would frown on that sort of thing, so she couldn't tell anybody and neither could we. When things were falling apart between them it would come up in fights, like the biggest skeleton we had in the old family closet, as if he didn't marry her in the first place because she's hot. At the same time, allow me to add that he did have a point. You look at the pictures of her in her swimsuits and

evening gowns, they're fairly nerve-wracking. The big-hair thing was still going on in the seventies and so you truly have to flinch. Nevertheless, that is obviously not the way she looks at it, and in fact it's fairly clear that she has not actually ever recovered from the experience of being a beauty queen, and this played no small part in the collapse of her marriage to my dad, who is mostly sort of brainy and above it all, when he's not falling for stupid but gorgeous women.

So Polly's delirious, Mom is purring, Queen Daria is too cool to react, which is her way of pursuing her bliss, and Amelia just keeps looking at the floor, wishing it were over. All the hair and makeup people have to ask her about twelve zillion times to hold her head up. Then they start telling her how gorgeous she is—well, everyone's telling each other that, and it's hardly news, it's more like white noise in this place—and then they start telling her to smile. It was really kind of frightening, to tell the truth, and in addition you could see it was more or less making her head split. I finally slid over sort of to one side of her, she's drowning in gay men who are picking at everything, her hair of course, face, toenails; she was really just surrounded. So I sort of stood there like a fool and yelled, “Hey, Amelia, you look gooorrrrrgeouuuuus!” She looked around, just like suddenly mad as hell, and I thought, oh shit, she doesn't get it, and then she did, and she grinned and rolled her eyes at me. She really does hate all that stuff.

I of course am totally not supposed to be there. I'm just the

idiot brother, only nobody of course knows even that much, because nobody introduces anybody around here. I swear, I don't know why anybody bothers teaching their kids manners; you go out into the world and expect people to say things like, "Hello, my name is Stu, what's yours?" Or even, "Hi, I'm the makeup guy, who are you?" But not one of these people does anything remotely like this; they are all too hip to introduce themselves to anyone, or take notice of some pathetic teenager hanging out in the corner because his sister has been abducted by the *New Yorker*. So everyone just keeps flicking their eyes over me like I'm just some total loser who snuck in without a hall pass and as soon as security shows up I'll get tossed. I'm standing around doing nothing, so obviously the only reason I would be there is because I'm desperate to be a part of this devastating scene, which means that my loserdom can provide everyone with an opportunity to be even more hip, because then they can strut around and prove to themselves that they're above saying hello to losers like me.

For all the frenzy, nothing really happens for the longest time. I swear, hours they're working on the girls and running around and yelling at each other about lip gloss. The head stylist, who is bossing everybody around and making all the decisions, is some guy named Stu. Stu apparently has been hired by Herb, who doesn't want to have to be bothered with all the decisions about what the models are going to wear and how to do their hair up, so he brings in Stu, who arranges everything and then Herb can

just show up and take the pictures. Actually, it might be the *New Yorker* that hires Stu to do all this. I can't remember. The point is, Stu is flying around like the queen bee he is, surrounded by flocks of minions who wait breathlessly while he decides who's going to wear what, what color toenail polish goes on which girl, and what to do with all that red hair. And then everybody tells him why that won't work, he screams, then changes his mind anyway, and it goes on like that for hours.

Which obviously takes a lot of concentration. There are maybe six thousand decisions to change your mind about. Do they all wear the same basic outfit, maybe three micro-minis in different colors, playing up the sister act? Micro-minis are so five minutes ago, maybe we should accentuate the classical allure of their beauty and just put them in evening gowns. Or do you put all three of them in get-ups which are all stylistically different, accentuating their separate personalities? Stu ends up going with a version of this last plan. There is great general relief at this point, and no one bothers to point out that Stu actually doesn't know what the differences in my sisters' personalities are, as he has just met them that morning. This is clearly going to be considered entirely irrelevant to the concept.

But Stu has moved on from evening gowns, and he's living in a fantasy of three gorgeous girls with gorgeous red hair, all of them different, completely "about" different things, awakening male desires in three completely different ways. Daria is going to be the picture of elegance, the princess every boy yearns to marry,

Audrey Hepburn at the ball; I swear the words “Audrey Hepburn” actually came out of Stu’s mouth and Daria got a real glint in her eye. I thought Polly was going to strangle her. But then Stu starts in on Polly and her raw sexuality, compares her to Christina Aguilera, which, let’s face it, isn’t as good as Audrey Hepburn, but Polly knows enough to play it cool and sure enough it gets better. Stu starts going on about Naomi Campbell and how she supposedly has the best body in the business but Polly’s is better, plus she exudes sex like all the supermodel greats—I swear, the words “supermodel greats” also came out of his mouth—and then he runs off a whole string of names which I had never heard of but she sure had. And then old Stu starts in on Amelia, and how she’s this androgynous girl-boy figure, a wood nymph, the mysteries of nature and earth and mind, Shakespearean heroines, I kid you not, Stu was an impressive bullshit artist. Anyway, it all amounts to the fact that Amelia gets to wear blue jeans. Which is such a relief for her that she actually gives herself permission to enjoy the whole mess for five or ten minutes, and for that brief period of time no one has to tell her to smile.

The announcement that Amelia will be wearing blue jeans turns the tension down a point in general, as Polly and Daria seemed to dig the fact as well. Polly even had a sort of vague, sisterly moment where she told Amelia that that would look cool, blue jeans are so sexy. It was so warm and gooey it was not hard to figure out what was going on. The fact is, you put three sisters in a room and say, well, now everyone is going to see

how pretty we can make you all look? And then keep at it for hours, with everyone screaming about how beautiful one thing or another is, eyes lips hair, hair hair hair; well, sooner or later the question of who is the *most* beautiful is going to rear its ugly head. As you may know, there's a whole Greek myth about this kind of situation; it supposedly started the Trojan War. Anyway, the point is, all three of my sisters are very beautiful; my mother's genes were ruthlessly efficient in this area. But Amelia got one thing from my dad the Jew that nobody else got: Her hair curls. In big, red-gold ringlets.

Which, as you can imagine, got their share of attention from the attention hounds. You should have heard them, in the middle of all that bullshit, there was this endless sort of dumb repetition, over and over, "And god, look at this one, it *curls*. Not only did she get the color, it *curls*. Fucking amazing ... Did you see the curls? Christ. And there's a fucking lot of it. What a head of hair. And it *curls* ..." So you can't blame Daria and Polly for getting a little worried; *I* was worried and what do I know? I'll tell you what I know: Amelia's only fourteen, Polly and Daria are seventeen and eighteen; it would be horrible beyond words for her to walk away with the shot. She's fourteen—put her in blue jeans, don't tempt fate.

So that's why we were all so relieved, for the moment. And once the blue-jeans decision was made, we moved onto the shades-of-green discussion. Different girls, different styles, red hair: The unifying element would naturally be shades of green. In

which, as you might expect, my sisters all tend to look rather devastating. Any shade of green pretty much works. In spite of which Stu whips himself into a frenzy; none of the greens go together and some of them are olive and dowdy and these are beautiful girls: What idiot would put girls who look like this in olive? Which got the clothes stylist kind of defensive and she started to argue about what's in this season and Donna Karan's fall line and Stu sneers about camouflage chic, and drops several pieces on the floor, which makes her even madder, and that goes on for another couple of hours.

There was one person in the middle of all this nonsense who resembled a human being. This is the hair stylist, who actually is so concentrated on what she's doing that she doesn't yell at anyone, ever, which made me think for the longest time that she was just somebody's assistant. Then at one point I slid over to see what she was cooking up for Amelia and all those damn curls and she looked at me and said, "Hey, who are you?" Which just about knocked me over; it was the most interest anyone expressed in me all day.

I was so surprised that anyone had spoken to me that it took me a minute to respond, so Amelia said, "This is my brother, Philip," and the hair stylist grinned and said, "This exciting for you, to see your sisters doing a big photo shoot like this?" And again I was so stunned by anyone expressing interest in what I thought that I sort of mumbled and said, "I don't know." But this hair stylist didn't even seem to notice, or, if she did, she didn't particularly care or

—here’s a stunning possibility—she was too well mannered to act like I was a jerk. This person was almost like the opposite of everyone else in the room: Nothing rattled her, and she actually seemed to be enjoying herself, while everybody else was running around screaming and miserable. She kept telling Amelia her hair was gorgeous, so in that regard she was part of the general trend, but somehow, when she said it, it didn’t sound like such a bad thing.

“God, look at that, that’s something,” she’d say, holding up a wad of curls. She had a funny accent, sort of British but with kind of a turn in it, it’s hard to describe, you have to hear it. “You hit the jackpot, didn’t you? Course what am I supposed to do with all this here? Can I cut some of this, around the face, you think, you mind? Just shape it a little, not much, get it too short you got a bit of a wedge going on, that’s no good. What do you think, just a little round the face, yea? Wow, this color really is something. That’s why they’re doing this, right? *The New Yorker*? Cause of the color? Funny if you think about it, getting into a big magazine like that ’cause you got red hair. I mean it’s pretty, but still. Kind of thing that makes you wonder.”

“Our grandfather ...” I offered, not even bothering to finish the thought. The hair stylist didn’t care, she picked up the thread for me, and kept on rocking.

“Right, he was some famous writer, like a critic or something, somebody told me that and I said, *please!* Like everybody’s really interested in the granddaughters of some big-deal intellectual

shithead! That's just a riot! If those girls didn't have hair like that, there's no way the *New Yorker* would be interested, that's what I say. The fucking *New Yorker*. Supposed to be some big culture magazine, and you get your picture in it cause you got red hair! How cultural is that?" She just kept talking, not expecting anyone really to answer. It was soothing, frankly, because her voice was nice and she wasn't mean or stupid, and she was also kind of saying stuff that you were thinking anyway so you felt less crazy when you listened to her.

She was a very unusual person. While she was just rattling on like that, it came out that after they blew up the World Trade Center she got so upset she decided to walk her dogs down there and hug people. This is a true story. I mean, obviously everybody got wiggled out when that happened, that was a very strange time, but we were out in Brooklyn where, other than the smell in the air, and what happened to the firemen, things seemed pretty normal. Aside from the loss of telephones and not being able to go into the city and people crying on the street. But anyway, this La Aura—that was her name, La Aura, not just plain Laura, I thought that was so sweet, La Aura—she took her dogs, the second day after it happened, and just walked all the way down there, and no one stopped her.

"I think they thought the dogs were rescue dogs or something, which I didn't say anything, I just kept walking and then they had those little stations, yea? Where people are handing out soup and donuts, you wouldn't believe the tray of donuts that was down

there, it was huge.” She held her hands out to show us, they must have had eight-dozen donuts in this box, that’s how wide her arms went, to show us. “Anyway there’s these two firemen there, in those black coats with the yellow bands, you know, that you just saw the whole time that happened, and they looked so tired, just really wiped, and I just said, ‘How’s it going?’ And this one guy started to cry, so I put my arm around him and he just cried like that, it was wild. And I talked to a lot of people, I asked them how they do it and one of them said, you know, he put it all in a place where he just couldn’t deal with it right then, and he knew he’d deal with it later. And then someone else said, you know, the first two days, there were a lot of women, not a lot, but some, with the rescue teams, and it just got to be too much for them. That women take it in too much, what happens at a big disaster, they feel it too much, and that after two days there were only men down there, taking the bodies out. And god you know, hey! I’m a lesbian! I don’t usually want to go along with all that gender shit, who does? But these guys were amazing. And I could see it was true, they were doing things no one else could even face, I couldn’t of done it.”

She’s snipping away at Amelia’s hair while she’s telling us all this. And we’re just listening, I swear, this woman was riveting. It turns out she hugged people for five hours, hugging and listening and telling them they were fine was like her thing she did to help; she went down and hugged people who needed hugs. She was really lively and very interesting and I did think, if I was in a

catastrophe, I would want a hug from this person, I really would.

Anyway, she's telling us this stuff and clipping away a little bit at a time, really, it didn't look like anything, what La Aura was doing to Amelia's hair, it just looked like she was picking up a strand here or there and then cutting a tiny piece of it off then tossing the whole thing around again. But all of a sudden I look at Amelia, and she's just listening, and I just felt my chest do something—it squeezed and hurt for a second, because that's how beautiful she looked. And then a second later I wanted to cry, I swear, because part of what made her so pretty was her good heart and how much she cared about this haircutting person being nice to sad firemen. A lot of fourteen-year-old girls, really what they care about is who's going to some idiot's party this weekend, or what movie star they saw in front of Lincoln Center last week. I guess in that way fourteen-year-old girls are not that different from most people out there. But Amelia still had that thing that really little kids have, where they want to throw their arms around total strangers on the street. You don't always see it because she's also kind of annoying a lot of the time, but when it does show up it's quite staggering, and there it was, in the middle of what turned out to be a really great haircut. No huge surprise there, that La Aura could really cut hair. Amelia looked unbelievable.

This is when another minion in black showed up and announced, "We need her, Laura." None of the minions seemed to understand that the woman's name wasn't Laura, it was La

Aura. But La Aura didn't seem to mind, "Yea, okay, I'm about done, just let me see ..." And then she scrunched all those curls around a little, just scrunching in her hand here and there, and Amelia's hair looked even better, and so La Aura signed off and they took Amelia across the room so she could try on different kinds of blue jeans and snaky little green tops. Daria and Polly were already over there, being transformed, respectively, into Audrey Hepburn and the supermodel of the century.

So then La Aura looks at me, and shrugs. "Those are great-looking girls," she informs me, as if it's news.

"Yea," I say.

"This is exciting, huh?" She doesn't seem to really think so.

It's not that she thinks it's unexciting, it's just that she's seen it all before and everyone else thinks it's exciting.

"I guess," I say. Sometimes I really do sound like an idiot teenager. I can't seem to help it; my brain freezes up.

"You could use a haircut. How 'bout I do you, while we're waiting for Herb?" She says this so friendly there's no sense of boy, this kid with the glamorous sisters could really use some help. I mean, she's just kind of studying me, looking over the top of those glasses, businesslike, but, as I said, friendly too. I have to confess it took me by surprise. You live with a lot of beautiful women, you get used to the fact that no one is actually looking at you very much. So it's startling when it happens.

So La Aura starts in on my hair, and at first it was pretty nice. As I said, when she's cutting hair, La Aura sort of chatters

on, about all sorts of things. Once she got off the World Trade Center she started yakking about movie stars and did I know any?, and then she kind of segued into numerology and astrology, and her dogs—she had somebody do a couple of charts on her dogs, which was surprisingly interesting to hear about—so I was more or less losing track of time when, all of a sudden, Herb arrives. Such a surprise, he's dressed completely in black, but he's old, he's considerably older than I would have thought. Even so, everyone immediately acts like he's god. They're all too cool to get excited, so no one flutters or gushes or anything like that, but they all start to circle in a very unimpressed but attentive way.

Herb basically seems all right, but honestly, it's hard to tell. He's real distant and doesn't seem to care about much. Stu waves Polly and Daria and Amelia into the front of the crowd, and introduces them, or actually it's more like he displays them, waving his arms around like a bad magician, showing off today's most impressive trick. Everyone fans out behind them, waiting, like frightened and expectant little kids. I don't know what they thought Herb was going to do, but he didn't really do much. He sort of nodded and seemed to mumble something to Stu, I'm not even sure he said hello to Polly or Daria, not to mention Amelia, who had been elbowed to the back fairly quickly in this crucial moment. Mostly it seemed like what Herb wanted to do was talk to some guy who had been running around screwing enormous klieg lights into place with umbrellas bouncing the light back into the room and then out the windows again. So Herb found

the lighting fanatic and they settled into a corner and mumbled to each other. And then they started laughing their heads off at some private joke; they couldn't give a shit about anybody else in the room. Stu put on a brave front, but you could see that he was all for killing Herb. Herb is an ungrateful asshole. This picture isn't about the light; it's about three pretty girls with pretty hair. What the hell is Herb's problem? Stu carries his disappointment and his rage around the room like a big fur coat. So everybody sees it, but they're all still too cool to comment on it. So Stu stews, Herb mutters, Daria and Polly are subtly posing around, La Aura's cutting my hair, and the next thing I know, Herb is looking at me and saying, "Who is this?"

Obviously, no one knows how to answer this question, as not one of them has bothered to ask me who I am, other than La Aura. So everyone sort of stares, stupefied for a moment, and then Mom takes the opportunity to insert herself into the spotlight.

"This is my son, Philip," she coos. She steps forward and poses and coos, I kid you not. The slightest bit of stress, and all the beauty queen training pops out of her subconscious like a bad dream. "The girls' brother. I'm their mother, Julia. We're so pleased to be here, really, this is such a thrill for all of us." And she holds out her hand gracefully and smiles that beauty queen smile.

Anyway, Herb glances at Mom, and to my wild relief he actually does shake her hand; Herb seems to have had some sort

of marginal training in niceties at some point in his life. And then he glances at the girls—really, he’s barely interested in any of this—and then he looks back at me, and says, “So, all of them? I’m doing all of them?”

Stu just about has a heart attack. “No no no no no, no no,” he says, casually desperate at the thought. “Just the girls. Philip’s just here for moral support, aren’t you, Philip?” I was staggered that he actually knew my name. Which just goes to show you, you should never underestimate a screaming queen who is completely self-absorbed: They pay attention more than you think.

La Aura shoves me a little bit, reminding me that I’m supposed to actually say something when someone asks me a question. “Sure,” I mumble. Really, I’m useless in a crunch, I completely even forget how to talk. So I’m sort of nodding like a fool, and mumbling, and Herb is just descending on me and La Aura, looking at the two of us.

“No, this is good,” he announces, studying me. “Three sisters and their brother, you see them, the unit, the inherent contradictions, yes? Yes, Philip?” He’s staring at me, with his photographer’s eyes, I have no idea what he’s seeing, but it does not seem to be me. La Aura shoves me again. “Sure,” I say.

Okay. I’m just doing the best I can here. I didn’t ask this guy to look at me, and if you want my opinion, the only reason he noticed me at all was because La Aura had done a pretty good job cutting my hair and suddenly there was something to look at—mainly, a decent haircut. I didn’t go asking to be in that picture.

But the next thing I know, Herb has his arm around me—really, in a kindly way, Herb is one of those people who gets you to do things because he makes you feel important and charming, so you're lost in this haze of warm fuzzy feelings and not really paying attention to what you're doing, you're just going along. His arm is around me, he's chatting to me in this low voice and I'm just walking with him, across the room and toward the drapes and the windows and the klieg lights. I can't really hear much. He turns me, stands me by a window. There's a kind of rustling and hum going on now, but I can't see anything, as all those lights are on me, and everything behind them disappears. You really can see the dust motes in these moments, that's one thing I remember. And then the next thing I remember is Amelia, and Polly and Daria, moving around me like angels. Really, they all looked so pretty and I'm just a mess—the only thing any of those style dudes did to me was ignore me and let La Aura cut my hair, so I'm kind of standing there in blue jeans and a T-shirt and this big old sloppy other shirt on top of that. Daria meanwhile is glowing, practically, she's in this shimmery sea-green snakeskin-like evening gown, and her hair is piled on her head—really she didn't look like Audrey Hepburn, she looked more like Lady Macbeth, but a very glamorous version of Lady Macbeth, there was no question about that. And then Polly is in this incredible little number, the smallest dress I think I have ever seen in my life, pale green, strapless, with black beads all over the joint, Stu apparently having decided that green was the theme but there

was no point being ruthless about it. Her hair is spiky, a look I don't tend to respond to, but now that I know that the nice hairdresser La Aura is behind all this I decide it's sheer genius. I mean, Polly looked great, no doubt about it. Sort of like a very tasteful punk rocker. Then there's Amelia, hopping around like a little bird. Blue jeans, no shoes or socks, green toenails, which looked strangely beguiling, and some sort of tie-dyed green T-shirt. She really looked so simple, and so great, and so herself. So as it turns out, Stu isn't so stupid after all.

Except there *I* am, in the middle of this meticulously designed land of green dresses and red hair and great-looking girls. There I am, a big boring teenage boy, nothing matches, poor Stu hasn't had half a second to figure out how to fit me into his picture, when Herb starts snapping away, I mean that Herb got right to the point. Stu is dodging around behind him, trying to get a word in edgewise, you can hear him saying, "Herb, maybe if I had just a minute ... Herb, listen, we had no idea you'd be interested in the brother ... Herb, really ... Herb ..." But Herb is just clicking wildly, one camera then another, he had like six draped around his neck, he looked like some mythical beast with too many eyes growing out of his chest. I swear, after all that picking and changing minds, and nothing seeming to happen for hours, all of a sudden everything was happening at lightning speed and no one was thinking about anything at all. I don't remember much of this part, to be frank, maybe that's why it seems that way in retrospect. I was so surprised to be suddenly tossed into the

middle of the action, I think I may have been in a bit of a daze. So that's really what I remember. Stu, Herb, me feeling like a dweeb, Amelia laughing; she thought it was funny that I was suddenly part of the whole mess. Somebody put some music on, I guess, I don't remember if it was on before and they just turned it up, but all of a sudden Elvis Presley was blasting, loud. Mom kept yelling something from the sidelines, who knows what. Daria and Polly sort of kept turning around, following Herb, I think, like flowers turning toward the sun anytime he moved. That's really all I remember.

And then it was over. Not completely over, just over for me. Herb ran out of memory in half his cameras at the exact same moment he ran out of film in the other half, so he had to take a break and have some underling reload them. The music snaps off, people start to suck on water bottles, hair and makeup rush in to do a dust-up on the girls. So while this is going on, Stu takes Herb aside and whispers to him, respectful, but urgent and firm, and while Herb doesn't really seem to say anything in response, he does turn and look at me, with those photographer eyes again, and then he turns back to listen, while Stu keeps talking. Stu is talking and talking and talking. And then, after a minute, Herb shrugs, nods, he doesn't care, he sort of looks over, casual, and says, "Okay, the brother, we don't need you, let's do some with just the girls." Just like that, like I was just a stupid prop all along anyway. Which in fact I was.

I didn't care. Mostly I was relieved that it was over. The

whole time it was going on—which was longer than I thought; afterwards I found out my part of the shoot went on for half an hour—I felt so self-conscious I just wanted to crawl into a hole and I couldn't, obviously, as everybody was staring at me. Well, they weren't looking at me, really; they were looking at Polly and Daria and Amelia, when they weren't looking at Stu and wondering if he was going to have heart failure. So I mostly spent the whole time looking at the ground and stuff. It was just, near the end, I more or less got in the swing of things. Amelia had decided it was just a big joke anyway, and so she's kind of doing this little dance with me, and I decide what the hell, and I start to dance back, so we're starting to have some fun finally. We were doing these old corny dances from the fifties, not that we know what they even look like. But we're just pretending to be big old hipsters. And then Polly I think was getting bored, or at least she got tired of competing with Daria for the front and center spot, so she started to dance with us, too. So the three of us were doing these ridiculous dances, and Daria was staring at us like we were just a bunch of juvenile delinquents, but also like some part of her actually finds us secretly amusing. So for maybe two minutes or something all of a sudden we were just ourselves again, not the selves we are when we're torturing each other, but the ones who know how to have fun.

So of course that would be when old Herb has to stop and reload. That's just the way of the universe, it seems like, sometimes. You take so long to figure things out and, just when

you get there, when you really figure something out that's maybe kind of good, they tell you you're out of time. I don't know why that is, but it does seem that way. Like most of your life, you sit around all tense, going, I know life is supposed to feel better than this, how do I figure out how to feel better? And everybody's got opinions about how to feel better—get drunk, go to the movies, read a comic book or a porno magazine, watch TV, whatever. And so you do all that, and it doesn't work, but you're trying, you know, everybody gets points for trying. And then something happens and it just clicks; one day you're lying under a tree or something and it suddenly feels like you almost know it, how to be yourself, and then you do know it, for a second, and then something else happens, a catastrophe, they blow up the World Trade Center or something. Someone dies. You lose everything. And then you think, why didn't I know how to feel happy and content and at home in my life when I had everything I ever needed? How come as soon as I knew it, it all went away?

Look, I'm not trying to say that getting kicked out of the picture was the equivalent of a big catastrophe for me. I just mean, I wish I had figured out how to enjoy the whole thing a little sooner. Because when me and Amelia and Polly started dancing, at the end? That was fun, it really was.

CHAPTER TWO

In between the picture-taking event and the picture coming out in seven zillion magazines and ruining everyone's lives event, there was a shred of time when our lives almost went back to

normal. For the next six weeks we actually went back to school and took up familiar activities, such as homework and piano lessons and breakfast. But none of it was the same anymore, already. Somehow the word was out, that fast, that Polly and Daria and Amelia were the new It Girls. I wondered, a lot, at the time, how can you be the new It Girls, if nobody's heard of you and you live in Brooklyn, and you're not in magazines? I mean, none of it had happened, yet; the picture wasn't out. But the news was already out, that this thing that hadn't happened yet was happening.

It was like, Polly was still going to school all the time, but she didn't even pretend to do the work anymore. Daria's modeling career, which she had been vaguely pursuing, started to heat up, in a preparatory way. The big-shot agent who kept almost signing her actually sent contracts over to the house and called, for once, instead of just returning. Which was a total turnaround; for complete ages this agent, Collette Something, had been sitting on the fence because, while it is undeniable that Daria is a knockout, the fact is that she "started late," because eighteen is like sixty, in modeling years. But now that the *New Yorker* was going to put Daria on the map, the concern about how ancient she was evaporated, and Collette called to say the FedEx guy was bringing the contracts by and oh, yes—would Polly and Amelia like to come in as well and take a meeting?

So then that made Daria completely insane and not want to sign with Collette, and then Collette kept calling, and faxing

over information about bookings she might be able to get for Daria, if Daria were actually one of her clients. Which made Daria mad, as she suddenly decided she wanted to be an actress, and not just a model, and Collette's bookings were beneath her. Mom meanwhile was fielding other offers from other agents who heard through the grapevine that the shoot was terrific, and could all three girls come in for a meeting, would that be possible? Polly and Mom and Daria got into huge arguments about the whole situation, as Polly, at the ripe old age of seventeen, didn't want to find herself in Daria's boat, being told she's too old to start a modeling-slash-acting career because she waited until she was eighteen. So she was ready to move. Daria now wanted to wait, although this might have been because she resented the fact that Polly was suddenly part of her career picture. Mom was endlessly moaning to people on the phone about how she wanted to "protect" her girls, and although I think she believed it, it was also clearly an excuse to buy enough time to get Polly and Daria on the same page because they needed to be behaving as if they were best friends when they finally did take all these spectacular meetings. I watched a lot of *Star Trek* reruns during these endless debates. Amelia took up a sudden interest in the piano.

Now, this piano thing was not completely out of the blue. She's taken lessons since she was five and had to stand up so she could reach the keyboard, and she's always been one of those kids who have talent but so what? You're impressed because they're pretty good, considering how little they are and all, but other than that

it's sort of like a dog doing tricks on late-night television. Besides which, Amelia has a pretty reckless relationship with the whole idea of discipline so she doesn't exactly practice with anything resembling regularity. But now that everyone in the house had become obsessed with the idea of agents, and I was drowning myself in *Star Trek*, Amelia couldn't get enough of the piano. Which was vaguely annoying; you try watching *Star Trek* with someone pounding Beethoven in the room next door. But no one said anything, least of all me. We were all just generally unnerved as hell anyway, and Beethoven sort of articulates that in a very grand way, if you think about it. So she's practicing like a demon, and then she has this piano recital, and nobody goes except me.

Nobody went, except me. Which is, I think, another sign of how odd things were already. When your fifteen-year-old brother is the only one in your family who goes to your stupid piano recital? Something is definitely off, in spite of the fact that I probably was the only one who ever enjoyed those things anyway. I couldn't ever admit it, of course, but I always thought those recitals were sort of corny and great: All these little kids playing Bach or the Beatles just terribly—there's only one or two of them who are ever any good, but the whole audience always cheers like lunatics, no matter how bad the kid is. And then afterwards everyone goes down into the basement of the school and the kids pig out on chocolate-chip cookies and cans of soda pop, then run around like maniacs and then after a while six or seven of the littlest kids crash and melt down and have to be taken home. It's

strangely pleasant. But I have to say, even though Mom and Polly and Daria never appreciated the whole thing the way I did, they always showed up. Now, in preparation for everything changing, apparently, I was the only one there. And Amelia was good; she had practiced that Beethoven within an inch of its life, and it was loud and fast, so she had to really attack the keyboard to get it out, and she walloped it. Everybody cheered like lunatics when she finished, and she was all flushed and laughing when she took her bow. She didn't seem to care that nobody else in the family came; she mostly was just pleased that she had played so well. Her piano teacher, this skinny guy named Ben who had a huge crush on her, kept congratulating her and telling everybody how proud he was. And then I went up and gave her a big hug, even though I am her older brother, and she laughed some more.

So we walk home, and she's sort of humming the middle part of the Beethoven thing, and it's nice out, a little drizzly, but not cold at all, just springlike, so that the rain feels good instead of annoying.

"I never played that good in my life," she told me.

"No, come on," I said. "You play like that at home all the time. I'm about to blow my brains out, I hear Beethoven in my sleep."

Amelia laughed at this, even though it was rather lame. She was really jazzed. "I was good, I was really good," she said, mostly to herself. Then she kind of looked at me. "Dad says if I'm really good he'll get me into LaGuardia."

Okay. This piece of information just about knocked me out;

I almost collapsed right there on the sidewalk. “Oh?” I say, completely casual. “When did you talk to Dad?”

She is oh-so-casual herself. “I don’t know. On the phone a couple times. He said he was going to try and make the recital but he might be in Brazil, so it’s no big deal he’s not here. I mean, cause he’s in Brazil.”

“Oh yeah, I think I remember hearing about that.” Ha ha, as if anyone ever knows where my father is.

“So he couldn’t make it, but you were there. Not that, you don’t have to tell him how good I’m getting or anything, I can have Ben do that.” She is still being oh-so-casual, but I’m starting to get the drift of her plan here. As if I don’t know when I’m being played by my own sister. “But will you, though? You will, right?”

“What, tell Dad you were good at the Garfield Lincoln piano recital? Sure. I’ll tell him whatever you want. If I can find him, when he comes back from Brazil.”

She pretends not to hear the utter disbelief and rampant sarcasm which has entered my tone here, and continues to blather on. “Thanks, Philip, cause you know it’s really important to me. Thanks.”

I’m still playing it cool with her, waiting to see how far she’s going to try and push this. “Well, because, like, I mean—since when did you decide you wanted to go to LaGuardia?”

“Well, Ben says I’m pretty good, and he said that LaGuardia, you know it’s not Julliard but it is the best high school for the performing arts and he thinks that my range is not just classical

anyway, and I could keep up my other studies and still focus on the piano and I just started thinking about it and then I just wanted to play the piano all the time.”

This is starting to strike me as obvious and pathetic. For all her talents, Amelia is absolutely the worst liar on the planet. I mean, she simply stinks at it. You have to stop yourself from laughing, that’s how bad it is.

“So, since you’ve been talking to Dad so much, did you tell him about all this shit that’s been going on with Polly and Daria and the *New Yorker*? Did you tell him about that?”

“He knows about it.”

“So you told him.”

“Everybody knows about it, Philip.” She’s starting to sound annoyed with me, which is a relief, because at least she’s not putting on this weird I-Want-To-Be-A-Pianist Act anymore. “Where have you been?”

“Well, I guess I’ve been over here on the Planet of Total Morons; someplace you apparently own property,” I tell her.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Gee, I wonder.”

We walk on, in silence, getting rained on. The cool drippy rain is starting to get annoying, such a surprise.

“I don’t care what you think. I’m going to LaGuardia,” Amelia announces. “Ben thinks I’m really good, and Dad can get me in.”

“Dad would do anything to mess with Mom’s big plans to turn all three of you into beauty queens,” I announce. “And Ben has a

boner for you. And you can't decide you're going to be a concert pianist when you're fourteen. You have to have some lunatic parent decide you're a genius when you're six or something, and then they torture you to death making you practice eighteen hours a day until you're Mozart, and then *maybe* you get into the most famous school for the performing arts in America. You're going to LaGuardia. Give me a break."

"That is not how it works."

"You know it is."

"Ben says—"

"And you called Dad? Are you insane?"

"I love the piano. I'm really good at it. I'm going to LaGuardia."

"Aside from the fact that that's impossible, Mom won't let you. If she finds out that Dad had anything to do with it, she'll put a stop to it before you've made it to the subway station."

"She won't be able to."

"Dad can't get you into LaGuardia."

"Yes he can, he knows the chairman of the board or something."

"So *what?*"

"That's how things are done in New York."

"You've gone insane."

"You just said I was good. I'm good on the piano. Ben thinks I'm really good."

"Ben wants to—"

“Could you not say that again, huh? I mean I found it really offensive the first time.”

“I don’t care if it’s offensive or not, it’s true.”

“Since when do you know everything?”

“Yeah, okay, maybe I don’t know everything, but I do know something about guys who want to bone your sister, and I also know you can’t suddenly decide you’re going to be a concert pianist just because you played the first movement of the *Pathétique Sonata* pretty good one day in high school.”

“I’m going to LaGuardia.”

“You’re full of shit.”

I don’t know why I got so mad all of a sudden. I just did. And all the feeling just swell about what a good time we had at that stupid recital got rained right out of us. By the time we got home, we were both soaking wet and mad as hell and of course no one even bothered to ask Amelia how it went.

So the next morning I’m feeling rather hopelessly lousy, and I am in no mood to hear about fingernail polish and agents and modeling careers and lipstick shades at the breakfast table. I particularly am in no mood to hear about my idiot father who has of course run off to Brazil for who knows what reason. My head hurts and I’m tired and no one will look at me or even acknowledge that I’m sitting there eating a two-year-old lemon Zone bar, which just isn’t enough—there’s never enough food around our house because, in spite of the fact that all my sisters plus my mother are pretty much rail-thin, they’re always afraid

they're getting fat—and I am frankly just starving to death. So I'm thinking about how hungry I am, and why isn't there ever more food in our house, and I'm feeling a little light-headed and not fully paying attention, and then breakfast proceeds to go south, at approximately eighty miles per hour.

“My piano recital went great last night, in case anyone is interested,” Amelia announces. It all seems innocuous enough to start; of course it does, it always does.

“That's terrific, sweetheart,” says Mom, while she whips up some kind of inedible shake full of flax and ice cubes.

“Good for you, honey.” Polly is all warm and fuzzy, in a completely self-absorbed way. “That's sensational.”

“Great,” says Daria, pouring herself a glass of water. Apparently she has decided to see if she can live on water; I don't think I've seen her eat any actual food since their big-deal photo shoot.

“I mean, I never played that good in my life. Or at least, that's what I thought, but then Ben said I've been playing really well for a while and that if I just keep practicing the way I have been, I could really be good.” This is an approximation, obviously, of the conversation, but the tone is what I'm going for here. I mean, the whole thing sounded completely surreal to me, kind of way too bright and people kept saying things like “great” and “terrific” and “really really good,” but it was hard to keep straight what was so good, like the thing everyone was talking about was just somewhere else, or maybe didn't even exist at all.

“Philip said I was great,” Amelia continues. I roll my eyes at this, as it is strictly true but nowhere near the whole truth, but no one is actually all that interested in having me leap into this noteworthy conversation. Least of all Amelia, who is rolling along now, in her great and fantastic and really really good universe. Which leaves me sitting there, waiting like a dolt for the punch line. “Ben thinks I should maybe even be training.”

“Training?” Mom says, her voice going up a little too high. My mother is not necessarily bright, but she is not necessarily stupid, either. She’s starting to get wind that this little story about what a swell time everyone had at the piano recital isn’t going to end well, as far as she’s concerned.

Daria pours herself another glass of water. “What do you mean, training?” she asks. She is very cool. Polly is listening, also cool, while she scrapes the thinnest layer of tofutti imaginable along the inside of a hollowed-out bagel. No kidding, I would eat the bagels, except our housekeeper Lucinda has orders to scrape the insides out of them before I can even get a shot at one. Then she freezes them, these little skins of bagels, so that any time someone wants a damn bagel that’s all that’s available to you, frozen bagel skins.

So everybody’s sitting around, hovering around the word “training,” instinctively knowing that there’s another shoe going to drop around whatever the word “training” is actually going to mean.

“Yeah,” says Amelia. “Like for now I think he’s just talking

about maybe doing another lesson a week, but more practicing, you know, and then maybe in six months or something I'd be ready to audition for someplace really good."

The train wreck is picking up speed.

"Is that what you want to do, sweetheart?" says Mom. Her voice is so phony now you could put her on television.

"Yeah, I do. I really, I do." Amelia is getting good and firm. I think this plan of hers is a total crock but I also admire its strange daring. "I don't have to practice at home all the time, 'cause I know that probably could get really annoying—"

"Not at all," says Mom, tilting her head, poised.

"... Ben says I can use one of the rehearsal pianos at school, he'll help me with that—"

"I think maybe I should have a talk with Ben before we let this plan get finalized, sweetie," Mom coos.

"It's just that if I'm really going to take this seriously, because he seriously thinks—"

"I'll call Ben and find out what he thinks, honey," says Mom. Polly and Daria are just watching now.

"Yeah, but—"

"I'm so excited for you, sweetheart! The recital must've really gone well. I'm so sorry I missed it."

"You got to talk to Ben."

"I will. Oh, and I've left a message with Mrs Virtudes about picking you up at two today. The appointment with Collette isn't until four, but I don't know what traffic is going to be like, the

bridges are always such a mess, and I think she's enough of a pain, we don't want to start off on the wrong foot."

Amelia looks at the table. Polly licks her fingers, as if there's a shred of spare tofutti somewhere to be found. Daria sips her water. My stupid Zone bar tastes like straw.

"I can't go," says Amelia. "Ben and I have to talk about my rehearsal schedule."

"Don't be ridiculous. You just had a recital last night. You can take one day off from practicing, darling. You've been practicing so much lately the rest of us can hardly think without hearing da, da, daaaaah ..." Mom does her little musical bells laugh as a finish to this clever speech.

"I can't go, Mom. I can't go," Amelia says.

"She has to go," Daria tells Mom. She is not happy with any of this.

"Why do I have to go?"

"Collette wants to meet all three of you."

"I don't want to be a model. I'm a little kid," Amelia points out.

"I think you should leave that to her to decide," Mom smiles.

"Ben wants to meet with me. How am I going to—"

"Jesus." Daria is really disgusted now, and making no attempt to hide it. Which pisses Amelia off.

"What do you care?" she asks. "I'm not saying you can't go off and be some kind of idiot model. I'm just saying, I don't want to do it, and I especially don't want to do it today. I have something else to do today."

“What, be a pianist?” Polly is laughing at this, and she always has that attitude thing going, which doesn’t help, when she laughs. It makes her look like she’s sneering, which isn’t necessarily what she means. Sometimes it is what she means, it’s just hard to tell, all the time. And now she’s got the spiky hair thing going too, from the shoot, so she’s really got attitude now. Which means Amelia is starting to bristle.

“Fuck you,” she says. “I’m not doing it.”

Mom jumps up, shocked, *shocked* to hear such language come out of the mouth of her youngest daughter.

“That is quite enough, young lady,” she says. “I won’t have that kind of language in this house.”

Amelia rolls her eyes, which doesn’t help, as Mom sees it and puts her lips together, determined that her own child is not going to look down on her. “You’re coming, and that’s that.”

“You can’t yank me out of school for some stupid meeting with some stupid *agent*,” Amelia retorts. “What kind of a mother are you?”

“What did you say?” says Mom. She looks like she might actually strike somebody.

This is stupid, I’m thinking. I’m also thinking, Amelia hasn’t even played her trump card yet; she has yet to even mention the word “Dad” and this whole thing is already a mind-numbing mini-disasteroid.

At which point, Daria lets loose. She’s not sneering, like Polly, nor is all superior and hurt and outraged like Mom. She’s just

straight out pissed off. “Believe me,” she announces, “it was never my plan to drag my sisters along on my *life*, but now that I’m stuck with you, I’m not going to let either one of you screw it up. You’re coming. Amelia, and you’re going to keep your mouth shut and do whatever anybody tells you to do.”

“For-fucking-get it,” says Amelia.

“I’ve already warned you about that word, Amelia,” Mom announces, like a queen.

“I’m going to LaGuardia next year; Dad said he could get me in,” Amelia tells her. “So I have to practice and I’m not going into midtown to meet some stupid FUCKING agent.”

Okay. This announcement has the hoped-for effect of silencing the entire room. Daria looks like she’d like to stab Amelia with something, but all she has in her hands is a glass of filtered water.

“She talked to Dad?” says Daria. She turns to Mom, filled with outrage. “She talked to Dad?”

Mom is no longer posing for the camera. “Is that what you did, Amelia?”

“I just said I did! Are you deaf? He thinks it’s a good idea!”

“This conversation is over,” says Mom. “I will let your father know he has nothing to say about—”

“About what? About me taking piano lessons? That’ll look good.”

“I don’t care how it looks.”

“He’ll get custody of me,” she announces.

Everybody stares at her. I start to sense once again that being a boy is a distinct disadvantage in this world. I mean, this plan Amelia's cooked up just so she can get out of being a model has levels I never even dreamed of.

"Your father is not getting custody of anybody. The courts made that clear a long time ago," Mom announces.

"Let her go. See how she likes it," Daria says. Mom turns on her, going white. This is apparently the worst thing anyone has said all morning.

"That's enough, Daria. That's enough out of all of you."

"I'm calling Dad," says Amelia. Like so many smart people, she simply doesn't know when she's lost. Which I could have told her, bringing Dad up would end any shot she had of getting out of this, which was never a good one anyway.

"I am NOT TALKING about your father ANYMORE," Mom hisses at her. It's impressive when she loses her temper, it really is. She's like Medea or something; you take it seriously. Even so, it looks like Amelia's about to go head to head with Medea, so I finally put my foot in.

"He's in Brazil," I announce. "You can't call him anyway, you told me yourself, he's in Brazil."

This silences everybody, and a sort of dread calm descends. Dad's in Brazil. That's that.

"Brazil, huh," says Polly, looking out the window. "I'd like to go to Brazil, sometime."

"Sometime, but not today," says Mom, shoving books

together, pushing them at me and Amelia abruptly. “If you don’t get out the door right now, you’re going to be tardy.”

“Mom—”

“We’ll pick you up at two.”

Amelia is going to make one last stab. “The stupid meeting’s not till four!”

“You need time to change and do your face. You can’t just show up for these things.”

“I’m not doing my face,” says Amelia.

“I’ll do it for you,” says Polly. “Eat it, Amelia. They want all three of us. You’re not getting out of this.” And she pushes us to the door, and shuts it behind us.

The elevator ride is grim. Amelia hates losing more than any person I’ve ever met.

“You were a big help,” she tells me.

“I tried to help you last night,” I tell her back. “It’s a dumb idea.”

“Why? Why is wanting to play the piano any *dumber* than being a model?”

“Because you actually have a *shot* at being a model,” I tell her.

“Fuck you,” she sends back. This use of the word “fuck” is a new thing with her. She does pretty well with it. I mean, she’s not one of those people who doesn’t know how to land it. It sounds pretty authoritative, coming out of her perfect little rosy pink mouth.

Obviously I was not involved in the first big agent powwow.

While Amelia was being dragged away from the Garfield Lincoln School and her stunning career as a glamour-babe pianist, I was finishing a physics lab which had something to do with creating alternative energy sources out of teeny-tiny waterwheels. It was sort of relaxing, truth be told, sort of like building a Lego castle and then seeing what happens when you pour water all over it. So I built my waterwheel, which was boring but fun, and then I went to soccer practice, which was just boring, and then I stopped for pizza on the way home, had four slices, and then I went home. No one showed up until nine-thirty, so it was a pretty good thing that I stopped for the pizza.

By the time they showed up, I have to confess I was dead curious about how it went. Although by then it's not exactly a big mystery, is it; if the stupid agent didn't want them, it's doubtful it would have taken her until nine-thirty to drop the boom. So I'm zoning in front of the television set, zipping the clicker coolly, as if I have no interest in anything whatsoever, when the four of them waft into the apartment. Mom leads the way, opening the door and turning to usher them in, cooing over all three of them like they were precious baby chicklings, or a hot piece of real estate.

"It's been a big night. All three of you should probably head straight to bed," she announces.

"It's nine-thirty, Mother," says Daria. Daria is all flushed and haughty; she's standing so tall she looks like someone cast a spell over her and she grew into a pope or something, like the woman

in that fairy tale where the fish gives the fisherman too many wishes. Polly, on the other hand, looks short. This is the only thing I can think about for a minute—why does Daria look so tall and Polly look so short? Did they do something to them at the modeling agency, to make the threesome more marketable?—and then I realize, duh, that Polly took her shoes off because her feet had started to hurt.

“I think we should celebrate,” she announces. She goes to the mini-fridge where Mom keeps the alcohol, and grabs herself a beer. Which all of us have done many times, just not in front of Mom.

But Mom doesn't notice, or at least she doesn't care to notice; she's still floating around the room like a dazed and happy flower, bobbing in a cool breeze on somebody's deck or something. Amelia tosses herself on the couch, next to me, rolling over the back and landing like a ton of bricks. Before I can give her a hard time about it, she is laughing at pretty much nothing.

“What a dweeb. What a dweeboid you are. What are you watching? I'm not watching *Star Trek*, how many times can you watch that stupid show? Give me the clicker.” She grabs it off me and immediately concentrates on channel flipping even faster than I do.

“You know how many calories there are in a beer?” asks Daria. Polly laughs.

“I know exactly how many calories there are in a beer, and tonight I don't care,” she says, waving the bottle in Daria's face.

“So it went good, huh?” I ask.

Amelia shrugs. “It was about what you’d think,” she says. She doesn’t seem too bothered by it, though, and then she starts to laugh again, all flushed and happy and transfixed by the surreal shenanigans of some pink cartoon dog with a hole in its tooth. She’s all flushed and happy, Polly’s all flushed and happy, Mom’s all flushed and happy, and Daria’s just flushed—who can ever tell if she’s happy? So it doesn’t take a brain surgeon to figure out that all four of them are pretty well tanked.

Which makes me mad, frankly, although it’s not like I don’t believe in people getting tanked, or like I’ve never seen it or anything. It’s not like I’ve never done shots of tequila in the laundry room of Jack Metzger’s sister’s apartment on Sterling. Amelia is tanked, and I’ve never seen her tanked and, the fact is, the last time I saw her she said she didn’t want to be a model because she was just a little kid. I mean, you can’t say you’re a little kid one minute and then go and get tanked with your mother that afternoon. You can’t watch cartoons, and be tanked. You can’t do both.

This logic seems pretty irrefutable to me but, such a surprise, I seem to have no clear idea how to be the cool, rational, not-tanked person in a room full of tanked women. So instead I act like a big baby and grab the clicker from Amelia. “What are you watching?” I mumble, and I start to zip through all the channels again.

“Hey!” she says. She shoves me. “I was watching that.”

“You’re drunk,” I say, quiet, like an insult. Which is relatively stupid, as Amelia is the one who snuck me up in the elevator and got me to my room, and later to the bathroom, without anyone knowing, after the tequila episode.

“I’m not drunk,” she says, and then she starts to laugh like an idiot, like “I’m not drunk” is the most hilarious thing she’s ever said in her life. I swear, she thinks this whole situation is just hilarious.

“What did you say?” asks Mom, all fake-startled and guilty as hell.

“Philip thinks I’m *drunk*.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Philip.”

“*Mom*,” I say back. Like there’s nothing else to say, really; sometimes, there just isn’t, and this is one of those times. Not that she’s going to give an inch.

“Today was a big day for everyone, and if you can’t be happy for your sisters, then I think you might want to think about that.”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll do that, Mom,” I tell her. And that’s all I say about it. Amelia keeps giggling, and Mom goes into the study, probably to sneak another drink, because she’s got liquor stashed in there too, and Polly and Daria drift back into their bedrooms to consult with the stars, and I find a *Star Trek* rerun, the one where Captain Kirk falls in love with an android and then she dies at the end of the episode because she learned that feelings hurt too much to live with. I swear, that show was really brilliant, it really just was, and I’m not embarrassed to mention it. I mean,

I'm not one of those idiots who goes to conventions and dresses up like Mr Spock. I'm just saying. That show was not near as stupid as everything that's been on television since.

CHAPTER THREE

No one ever said Herb Lang was overrated, and the fact is, he isn't overrated. He's a very good photographer, even if he is a bit spooky in person. So the picture, when it comes out, is very hot. Daria the Ice Queen has a big smile on her face, her head is tipped back and she looks like joy, she just does. Polly looks like she's grabbing Daria and trying to push her out of the frame, which maybe could be a little too accurate, in terms of the reality of their relationship, but it doesn't look mean or competitive. It just looks nice, like a nice sisterly sort of thing to do. The spiky hair is great, the little green dress with the black beads, also great. She has a killer pair of heels on, also great. And then there's old Amelia, all the way on the other side of the frame, with her blue jeans and T-shirt, and those nutty little bare feet and little green toenails. She's sort of half in profile, head down, but looking up, right at the camera. And she just looks smart, and a little bit devilish and like someone you just want to know, who also happens to be so pretty you need to fall over. The whole thing is killer, there's no question.

When Mom took it out of the FedEx envelope, it was pretty wild. We were all sitting around the kitchen—I don't know why we always hang out in the kitchen, there's never any food there—but anyway we were hanging out in the kitchen, collectively on

pins and needles, while Mom took her own damn time opening that FedEx.

“Just a minute, just a minute, would you please?” she laughed, turning away from Polly and Daria, both of whom were actively trying to rip it from her hands.

“Mom, it doesn’t take normal people sixteen minutes to open a FedEx!” Polly screeched, still grabbing.

“Well, then I’m not normal,” Mom informed her, elegantly cheerful. “I just want to savor this, is that all right with you?” What an act. I thought Daria was going to brain her with the blender. Amelia was sitting next to me, trying not to care, but even she couldn’t stand the tension finally, and she practically knocked her chair over, bolting to the other side of the table so she could get a good look as soon as the thing was out of the envelope. It was kind of goofy and sweet, honestly; all of them were laughing and nervous and happy and shoving at each other to get the best look. And then they all saw it, at once, and I’m not kidding, they all just shut up. That picture shut them all up. Because it was impossible to look at it and not know that something was going to happen. You just couldn’t not know.

This was like two days before the magazine hit the stands, that’s when they finally sent us a so-called “advance” copy. I thought for sure they’d give us more preparation than that, but that old Collette apparently really had to pull strings just to get that much special treatment. Anyway, things had gotten pretty hot by then. In those six weeks while we were waiting for the

magazine to come out, Collette set up a whole mess of meetings all over town with different ad agencies and magazines and stylists and publicists, TV execs, talk-show producers, it went on and on. Amelia spent the entire time kicking and screaming and saying “fuck you,” and then getting dragged to all the meetings anyway. Which meant that she missed quite a bit of school, which meant that several of her teachers started calling to give Mom a hard time about it. No one particularly cared about Polly virtually dropping out; that was sort of understood as the sort of thing that was just going to happen, and Polly was always a little bit of a hell-raiser anyway, so truth be told I think the school was finally glad that she was taking off of her own accord. But Amelia was a freshman and known to be a fairly responsible little student, so the school got bent out of shape about her not showing up for algebra tests, and Amelia was bent out of shape, and Mom was bent out of shape. And then Ben the piano teacher got way bent out of shape, probably because, as I think I’ve mentioned, he had a completely illicit and illegal crush on her, which he had to pretend was, like, a more legal kind of concern about her development as an artist. So Ben called Amelia at home about six times, about missed lessons, and then he called Mom, who told him off, and then Amelia called Dad, who was back from Brazil, and he called Mom and expressed his supreme disapproval, and he reamed her out for yanking Amelia out of school, and Mom reamed him back, which just bent Polly completely out of shape, and sent Daria into a complete shrieking rage. So that’s what life

was like, up until the day we got that picture in the mail and realized that, as weird as it all was getting? It was about to get worse.

The next day, it did. The phone rang. Mom picked it up, listened for no more than fifteen seconds, hung it up, turned around and informed everyone that they were going into Union Square to have drinks with a movie star whose name I cannot mention because he'd definitely sue me. This is a true story. One of the things that happen in New York, that people don't always put together is, there are plenty of famous people out there who would like to meet pretty girls who are about to become famous themselves. PR people and agents do this sort of thing all the time; it's their job to arrange these meetings between the famous and the nearly famous at a time when photographers might be around to snap some so-called candid shots of these exceptional encounters. So our friend Collette is somewhat on the ball, it seems, because Mom suddenly announced that Amelia, Daria and Polly had to go doll themselves up fast, because this major movie star was going to be holding court at W in an hour, and he wanted to meet them.

Which frankly floored all of us, even Amelia. She said, "Who?" And Mom said the name of this movie star again, we'll just call him "Rex Wentworth" for now, although we could just as easily call him Bruce or Arnold or George. So Mom said, "Rex Wentworth," and everybody just sat there. If that's the sort of thing that impresses you, you had to be impressed.

Although I have to admit that even now I'm not a hundred percent clear even on why movie stars actually are such hot shit. I have spent a good deal of time thinking about this and it continues to perplex me. As far as I can tell, they don't really do anything except parade around with machine guns or pistols shouting things like "Get in the truck!" Plus, when you check out their shenanigans when they're not on screen, you really start to wonder. You read *Rush & Molloy*, or *Page Six*, about movie stars shoplifting and trashing hotel rooms and smacking around their girlfriends or getting blow jobs from transvestite hookers, I mean, it's not like I'm saying there's anything wrong with things like that, but it's also not particularly something you have to admire. And then in the same issue you can read about how some studio handed over thirty million dollars or something, to one of these lunatics, so they can make some crazy movie that is just going to be so bad that your brain just starts to fry while you're watching it. And these are the people we're supposed to get all excited about, in America. I realize that I'm not saying anything particularly fresh here. But you have to wonder, over time, what the continued fascination is, you really just do.

Except that on the evening in question, all three of my sisters and my mother thought that meeting one of these guys was about the most mind-numbingly fantastic thing that had ever happened to them. They ran around like gorgeous birds, half-plumed, tossing shoes everywhere; even Amelia, who I would have sworn couldn't give a shit about shoes. But there she was,

hungrily swiping a pair of strappy taupe heels off the floor of Polly's closet, and then acting all guilty when Polly walked in on her, having just ripped off a gold-sequined halter top from some reject pile in Daria's room.

"Do you need these?" says Amelia, as if it's actually possible to "need" strappy shoes with three-inch heels.

"Well, no, but you might try asking," Polly snips. "I *am* asking," snips back Amelia, to which Polly replies with the age-old witticism, "Whatever." So Amelia shrugs, pissed about something, but who knows what, since she was the one who actually got caught stealing red-handed, and she trips away haughtily, carrying off those noteworthy spikes. On the way back to her room she passes me, as I'm sitting on the floor of the hallway and have witnessed the whole ridiculous exchange.

"What are you looking at?" she asks, in the same snippy tone. Which I'm not sure why, if you're off to meet a movie star, and you're stealing shoes on top of it, you have to snap at people.

"Nothing," I said. I suppose I could have waxed poetic about how dumb it all seemed, but suddenly I just got real depressed. Not that I wanted to go with them, but not that I particularly wanted to spend another night alone channel surfing either. I was also wondering if I was going to be able to find anything to eat, as an actual dinner for me didn't seem to be on my so-called mother's agenda. The possibility that I might spend the evening doing schoolwork vaguely crossed my mind, as being too pathetic to be believed, while the rest of my family was off carousing with

movie stars in Union Square. And that was pretty much what was going on in my head.

“So what’s *your* problem?” Amelia suddenly yells. I mean it. She just started to yell at me. “I mean what, really ... what ... you really are, you know—forget it! Just forget it!” That’s what she said, more or less. It was quite dramatic. I just stared at her, and then she turned red, threw the shoes on the floor, and went to tell Mom she wasn’t going because Philip was being an asshole about everything.

I just want to make this clear. She’s the one who was yelling. I didn’t say anything. That is exactly how it happened. You can’t make this crap up.

In any case, as per usual, Mom wasn’t too interested in Amelia’s protests. By then it was pretty clear that, for some reason, all three of them were the deal. You don’t get just two sisters at any given moment, even though Polly and Daria together are not unimpressive. What people wanted was all three. Movie stars included.

So I ended up sitting in front of the television again, totally deserted by the whole female menagerie, eating the tail end of three bags of soy chips, two cans of Diet Pepsi Twist, and an orange and a banana. And then I got bored. I mean, of course I got bored. Everybody kept deserting me and I hadn’t had a decent meal for three weeks, why shouldn’t I be bored? And then I finally got tired of channel surfing, and so then I hacked around with the PlayStation 2 for about an hour, and I murdered

about seven hundred aliens, and then I got mad, all of a sudden, and I picked up a six-thousand-dollar crystal sort of thing off the coffee table and threw it at the wall, where it made a dent but didn't actually break. Which may have been prompted by an hour's worth of murdering aliens on the PlayStation 2, but in all honesty, I think it was more of a someone-has-to-think-about-feeding-me sort of situation.

In any case, after this impressive display of impotent teenage rage, I got bored again, put on my jacket, and decided to go out and stalk my own sisters.

It's ridiculously easy to get to Union Square from where I live. I'm a two-minute walk from the Seventh Avenue Station on Flatbush, and I picked up a Q Train right away. Then there's only five stops between Seventh Avenue and Union Square and the W bar is right there, just off the square, half a block up from the subway station. The point being that, I got there so quickly, the whole idea that maybe stalking my own sisters wasn't the brightest choice I could make never even occurred to me. I just spotted the bar, and walked right in.

It was hot in there. Not "hot" hot, just plain hot, like eighty degrees, the air recirculated so many times it just couldn't recreate itself into something breathable anymore. I didn't at first make it past the foyer, where there were like seven bachelors and bachelorettes, all of them squeezed into tight little business suits and looking like they were auditioning for one of those reality shows, where average people dress up like television stars and

then pretend to be real in the most unreal circumstances some idiot at the network could cook up. So they were all squashed in there, in their great-looking suits, looking kind of uncomfortable and anxious, while this totally skinny girl in a tight black dress at a kind of mini-podium kept looking down at what might be a seating chart. Then she'd look up, and look over her shoulder at the crowded room, and then she'd sigh, and then she'd whisper to some passing person in another great suit, and then she'd laugh, carelessly, not worried at all about the sweaty crowd waiting in front of her, and then she'd look down at her seating chart again. All the bachelors and bachelorettes shifting on their tight shoes, and trying to act huffy, and it seemed to have occurred to none of them that this was, after all, a bar, not a restaurant; there is no seating, you can just shove your way into the room, push to the bar and get your own drink, can't you? It's a goddamned *bar*.

"Excuse me," I said to the first bachelorette, and I pushed right by her. She looked pretty annoyed at this, but that's kind of where she was even before I showed up. Anyway, I just slammed right through all of them, and went right to the podium, and said to Miss Little Black Dress, "I'm here with Rex Went-worth."

Well. Talk about the magic words. Little BD looks at me, startled, but then she stops, and thinks for a second. But I gave her pause. I mean, I did, after all, know that Rex was there, somewhere. That meant that I was potentially somebody who she really better not throw out.

So she looked at me, suspicious but cool, you know, not too

rude but not friendly either, and once again she ran her eyes up and down me fast, clearly considering what I was wearing—a pair of jeans and sneakers, a T-shirt, a flannel shirt over that, completely normal for a teenager who could give a shit, but not exactly the kind of thing you would expect for a member of a movie star’s entourage.

Just then, behind me, someone murmurs, “What’d that kid say? Rex Wentworth is here?”

Little BD gets a kind of look of panic in her eyes. She’s in a bind now. She’s got a weird cool loser in front of her, who’s just loudly running around, asking for Rex, and the word is about to get out that Rex is somewhere in some back room in her crummy overrated bar.

“He’s kind of waiting for me,” I said. “Is there a problem?”

“What’s the name?” she asks me, eyes narrowing.

“Philip Wentworth,” I tell her.

It did the job. Little BD blinked, tipped her head to one side, briefly, trying out her memory about what Rex’s family situation actually was, how many children he had out there, actually: Was it a possibility that I was Rex’s son? Was that a possibility? Maybe I’m a nephew. She is looking down at another list, totally professional, seeing if the name “Philip Wentworth” has been written down anywhere so that she doesn’t have to make a decision about anything, she can just let me in if this totally fraudulent name is anywhere at all; her brain is moving fast because she only has mere seconds to contemplate all of this

before Rex will get wind that she kept his nephew/son/career-ruinous adolescent boyfriend waiting at the front door for no reason at all.

“There a problem?” I ask. “You want me to call his cell?” I reach into my pocket, pretending to have a cell. She looks up at me, very friendly, smiles. “No, of course not. Why don’t you just follow me?” And with that she swivels and strides straight back into the promised land.

Okay, this all happened in about five seconds, and while it may sound like I vaguely knew what I was doing, I was actually pulling major shit out of completely thin air. I mean, I did follow this insane woman back into the bar, and I did my best instinctively to slouch and shrug and look around, bored as shit, but frankly the whole performance was a complete joke, because I was in truth utterly clueless. Little BD had hauled out of a pocket somewhere—where, I will never know, because that dress was too small to hide so much as a BIC pen—one of those giant walkie-talkie things that military personnel use when they’re in the middle of the desert trying to coordinate some sort of crack offensive. And then she started murmuring with a kind of discreet determination into the speaker, “Hi, it’s Shelly. I have someone here who claims to ...” I was sort of slouching along behind her, acting like this was totally protocol, I was used to babes in black dresses talking in walkie-talkies and checking me out with the security team that constantly surrounds my putative father the movie star. Meanwhile of course I was more or less in a total state of

interior panic. I mean, it did suddenly occur to me that I was now not actually stalking my sisters; in actuality, what I was now doing was stalking a movie star. And that's the kind of peculiar behavior in actuality which gets people tossed in prison.

So now I'm glancing around with casual desperation, wondering what bright idea is out there for me to just glom my brainless self onto, to get myself out of this, now that I'm in it, and Little BD is watching me carefully, as she snakes through the restaurant, and it is kind of occurring to me that in fact she never bought one bit of any of it, she's heading for some sort of back hallway, at the end of which there seems to be a kind of sinister back office, where three massive security-looking guys are clustered around a door, staring at the kid who is about to spend the next six months in juvie. I mean, these guys were not amused, and they were not kidding, either. The true insanity of what I was doing sank in. I stopped. Shelly kept going. The security gorillas all took a step forward, seeing quite clearly that I had decided to bolt in the opposite direction and make a terrible scene crashing back through the overdressed bachelors and bachelorettes, all clustered together in their misery. I mean, things were about to get way worse, when behind me someone yells, "Philip! Hey, Philip!"

The teeny little black dress in front of me stiffens as Shelly hears this, but, as she's swiveling, Amelia's already got her hands on my arm, and she's yanking me back into the bar. "Where are you going? There's nothing back there but offices," she tells me.

Shelly, suddenly confused again, steps forward. "I'm sorry, do you know this person?"

"Yes, he's with us, with Rex, I mean," Amelia says, matter of factly. "Come on, come on, I'm so glad you're here, this is such a huge bore, it's hilarious that you came, what are you wearing, Mom is going to throw a fit ..." Shelly and the giant security guys all relaxed and kind of grinned at each other; it's amazing what a pretty girl can achieve, without even trying.

So next thing I know Amelia has me by the arm, and she's dragging me back into the throngs of bachelors and bachelorettes, hopping a little every now and then, because she's so short, and she seems to be looking for somebody. "Come on, I'll get you a drink. Do you see a waiter with like kind of blue stuff in his hair? He's our waiter, you just tell him what you want and he brings it. Like anything. You just say, I'll have like a mango margarita and they bring it to you. I had one but I drank it too fast and I got one of those headaches in your nose. Can you believe that? Like is it not even noticeable to anybody that I'm, like, fourteen years old? And they're serving me margaritas? This is so stupid. Maybe now that you're here, Mom'll let me go home, I have so much homework to do. Hi, can we get another mango margarita?" She found the waiter with the blue hair, who was at the bar receiving thousands of drinks from about four bartenders. "Sure, absolutely, not a problem," says blue hair, and he turns back, calling suavely, "I need another Em Em."

Amelia grabs me by the arm and pulls me in the opposite

direction now, still yakking. “Can you believe that?” she says, without even looking back. “So now they’re giving out total alcoholic beverages to total teenagers, it’s pathetic, someone should report these people. Rex is a complete drip, it’s hilarious, you have to come meet him, what a jerk. How old do you think he is, forty or something? He’s like got his *hand* down Polly’s pants, I’m not kidding. What a sleezeball.” And she shoves me into another room.

And there, sitting straight across the room, lit by moody little tubes of something approximating light, is Rex. Even in the dark you can tell that he has a tan, and he’s leaning back on this big slick banquette, with six or seven people lounging around him, looking like Henry the Eighth, with one arm stretched out along the back of the banquette, and the other arm around Polly, his hand discreetly stuck down the back of her pants. It was spooky, really; he looked just like he looks in the movies, where he’s always waving a giant weapon around and screaming, “Get in the truck!” But he had no weapon, and he looked real little. That’s something I never considered when I thought about meeting movie stars ... usually, when you see them? They’re like four stories tall, on some giant movie screen somewhere. But when you meet them, in person? They’re actually just sort of people-sized. Which makes the whole experience kind of surreal, if you haven’t thought about things like that ahead of time. Plus, if the guy has his hand down your sister’s pants, he looks significantly less like a movie star, and more like your average piece of shit

asshole.

Not that Polly seemed to mind. She was leaning in and telling him some sort of secret, it looked like, and he grinned at whatever it was she said, not like it was earth-shattering, but like it was a good minor joke, and he was enough of a mensch to give a small smile to this pretty girl less than half his age, while he meanwhile had his hand down her pants. He didn't actually look at her, but he was conscious enough of the social protocols that it was a definite smile. Mom, sitting across from the banquette, was deep in consultation with an enormous woman who was wearing something that looked like a giant green sack. She also had this major bead thing going on, strings and strings of them, big stone-like things, and crystals hanging off silver chains. She was seriously the only person in the room dressed worse than me, but Mom was hanging on her every word.

“Daria's pissed because Polly got to sit next to Rex,” Amelia narrated. “She clearly doesn't know about the hand down the pants part of the deal. He tried it on me, and I shoved my elbow in his stomach. Then I acted like it was an accident so he couldn't get mad. What a creep. His last movie sucked anyway, I don't know why people think he's so hot. He smells, too: I think he went to the gym and then didn't take a shower. Isn't that gross? Plus all those guys who hang out with him? They're like total morons. I told Mom I wanted to go home like an hour ago—she keeps ignoring me. She thinks he's so great, she should try sitting next to him. I thought meeting a movie star would be cool but

it is so totally no fun. How'd you get here, the subway? Let's go home."

"You think I could get some food first?" I really was hungry by this point, plus now that I had made it past all the different levels of security and screeners and fact checkers into the inner sanctum, I didn't want to just turn around and go home. Besides which, standing around and holding a huge drink in front of a bunch of adults who couldn't have cared less really does have a kind of weird thrill. Unfortunately, Amelia didn't have to fight her way in there past the gate keepers; she wasn't hungry and she was really bored. "We can go get some pizza," she said. "Come on. I got homework to do. I have a chemistry test tomorrow."

"Who's the lady in the green tent?" I asked.

"Philip, who cares? These people are creeps. I'm not kidding. This is no fun. We have to get out of here."

"You want to leave, and not tell Mom?"

"We'll tell one of the waiters to tell her. Or call her cell from the street. Come on. She won't care."

But a waiter with a giant sort of pu-pu platter of appetizers was heading across the room, toward the near end of the banquette, where the lady in the green tent and Mom were deep in consultation. "I've been eating pizza all week," I said. In retrospect, I wish I had just done whatever Amelia said. That is generally what I think about life anyway: Just do what the fourteen-year-old tells you, you know she's right. But I was hungry, and no one ever invited me to hang out with a movie star

before. I wanted some pu-pu platter.

“Hey, Mom,” I said, sliding into the chair next to her. Behind me, Amelia was hopping up and down, nervous. I pretended I didn’t see her while I eyed the Chinese appetizers and bolted my margarita.

“Philip,” Mom observed. “I’m surprised to see you, darling.”

“Who’s this?” said the woman in the tent, smiling. “Your son? You didn’t tell me you had a son.” This woman, whoever she was, had an incredible voice, musical and light, every syllable perfectly modulated with amusement and kindness and intelligence. No kidding, it was startling, to hear this beautiful voice come out of a woman wearing a green tent, so I may have stared.

“His name is Philip,” said Amelia. “He’s come to take me home.”

“Philip!” smiled the green ogress. “I’m Maureen. I’m Rex’s producer.” It was hard to see her face in the weird light, but her crystals and beads sparkled on her massive chest. The beads in particular were quite distracting, they were enormous, egg-sized pieces of amber, six or seven strands of them. The whole look was puzzling and a little magical.

“It’s really nice to meet you,” I said. “Um, can I have one of those?” I pointed to the pu-pu platter, which looked unbelievably delicious—golden egg rolls piled neatly on top of each other, little meats on little sticks, plump little dumplings. I can still remember the way it smelled, that’s how hungry I was. My mouth

was actually starting to water, so before anyone could say no, that's for Rex, I just grabbed some food with my fingers, and stuffed it into my mouth. It tasted delicious.

"Philip, *please*," said Mom, handing me a napkin. Maureen the giant laughed, a beautiful bell of a laugh.

"Boys," said Maureen. "They're different from girls."

"Oh yes," said Mom. I thought, if this is the quality of the evening's conversation, no wonder Amelia is ready to bolt. But then Mom said, "Philip loves Kafka. Tell Philip about your great-grandmother, Maureen. Philip, you'll find this interesting."

Now, I can't remember the last time my mother worried about me finding anything interesting, and I also can't remember the last time my mother was interested in the works of Franz Kafka, so I knew immediately that this remarkable statement was for Maureen's benefit. But as long as they'd let me keep eating, I was more than willing to play along.

"Sure, Kafka's great," I said. "I wrote a paper on *The Castle* last month, for AP English."

"He's our deep thinker," Mom cooed.

"The heir apparent to, what was his name?" asked the ogress. She seemingly was not one of the people who cared about "The Terror of the New."

"Leo, Leo Heller," Mom smiled, gracefully dancing over the intellectual faux pas. Then she came out with a doozy. "Maureen's grandmother was Kafka's daughter!" she cried. "Franz Kafka was her great-grandfather. Can you imagine? Isn't

that incredible?” She was all proud and giddy. Because I actually am the grandchild of a minor literary figure, or a majorly minor one at least, I do have some inkling of what it might be like to have a famous writer lurking in your pedigree somewhere. But, frankly, I was more than a little confused by all of this.

“Really?” I said, trying to sound impressed rather than incredulous. “Wow. Because, wow, I read, you know, that he died kind of, didn’t he die, did he have kids? I didn’t know that.”

“My great-grandmother was a prostitute,” Maureen said, with great dignity. “Most young girls of a certain class were, in Prague, at the turn of the century. Kafka was quite taken with her for a time.”

“Wow,” I said.

Exuberantly interested, suddenly, in Franz Kafka, my mother picked up the narrative thread of Maureen’s saga. “He used to talk to her all the time about coming to America,” Mom announced. “He wrote a novel about it, he was writing it, I mean—is that right?”

Mom looked to Maureen, who nodded benignly. “Yes, he was writing *Amerika*, he spoke to her about it all the time. She was full of his stories. When she became pregnant, she knew what she had to do. She didn’t want to stay in Prague, there was nothing for her and her child there, it was a prison. And he could do nothing for her if she stayed. No one knew, of course, that he would soon be hailed as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. He had no money, he lived with his parents, you know the whole

story.”

“Oh yeah,” I said.

“Philip, come on,” whispered Amelia. She had no interest in Franz Kafka; at Garfield Lincoln, you don’t do Kafka until your junior year. “We got to go.”

I was still eating, though. “So they just came here. Wow. Huh. And then what happened?”

“Oh, it wasn’t until long after that they realized,” said Maureen. “In the thirties, it wasn’t until then that my grandmother, and my great-grandmother, realized who Kafka was. My grandmother was a young woman, living in New York City, she came home one day from a café, where she had been meeting friends, and she had a copy of one of his books! Someone had given her a copy of *The Trial*, and she brought it home with her, and my great-grandmother saw his name, right there on the cover of the book, and she looked at my grandmother and said where did you get that? And my grandmother saw how upset she was and so she said why, what’s the matter? What’s the matter, Mama? And she told her. She was so stunned she just came right out and said it, she said, that man is your father.”

“That is so amazing,” said Mom. “I have goose bumps. And they never told anybody! That is even more astonishing.”

“They tried,” shrugged Maureen, bitterly accepting her fate. “No one believed them.”

“So you’re Kafka’s, uh, great-granddaughter,” I said. “That’s pretty cool.” I smiled politely. But Maureen narrowed her eyes.

Now, it may be that occasionally a kind of skepticism sometimes creeps into my manner. I heard later, from Amelia, that in fact not only did I sound actively sarcastic, I also quite literally rolled my eyes before stuffing my mouth with some sort of fried shrimp thing. At which point she, of course, pinched my leg and started snickering. Such a surprise, neither Mom nor Kafka's gigantic offspring found any of this completely juvenile behavior from me and Amelia all that remarkably clever. "Kafka was one of the greatest minds of the Twentieth Century," the jolly green giant informed me, as if I needed to be informed, as if that were in fact what I was rolling my eyes about.

"I am ... I love Kafka," I responded, my mouth full of gourmet Chinese food. Amelia, oh so helpfully, continued to snicker.

"Philip. Amelia. Please," whispered Mom, mortified.

"Never mind," laughed the giantess, waving her hand with gay dismissal of my hopeless social ineptitude. Instantly, Mom laughed with her, all that beauty queen charm eddying in new directions, right on cue. "Oh Philip, you're hopeless," she sparkled. "And frankly I'm surprised to see you here, don't you have homework?" she asked, tipping her head toward the door.

"I have homework, Mom," said Amelia, renewing her mission to escape. "Philip said he'd take me home, you guys can stay, this is so total fun, but I really have to go study. I have a chemistry test tomorrow." This last bit was politely addressed to the magical ogress Maureen, who smiled benignly on the whole act. "It's just like a third of my grade and I *really* have to study." She was

yanking on my arm, which I kind of enjoyed—it was annoying, I mean, but it was also nice to have someone paying attention to me for once, even under such bizarre circumstances. I stood up and grabbed a couple of dumplings and an egg roll to go.

“What an extraordinary girl,” said Maureen. “Most girls her age would give their eye teeth to meet Rex, but I honestly don’t think Amelia is all that impressed.”

“Of course she’s impressed! Good heavens, you should have seen us all when we got your call, what a flurry of nerves we were. And here’s Philip, who decided to party crash I’m sure because he just couldn’t stand his sisters having all the fun, isn’t that right, Philip?” This sentence I could not even figure out, so I looked at my hostile mother and said, “What?” in an overtly teenage way that I was sure would work her last nerve.

Amelia butted in again. “He came because I called him, Mom,” she lied. “I knew you wouldn’t want me taking the subway by myself. This way you and Polly and Daria can stay, ’cause this is so cool. I really do think it’s cool, I so love it, and please tell Rex I had such a cool time.” She was laying it on thick now, with her hand on my sleeve, pulling. The ogress was watching her and, I have to say, she was not impressed. She was kind of leaning back out of the light again, and all those crystals and giant beads were left sparkling on her chest, while her eyes were in shadow. It was quite peculiar, really. Amelia was, as usual, right; this party had a bad feel to it, as did Kafka’s massive green great-granddaughter. I slammed back the rest of my mango margarita and stood. It

was time to cut our losses and beat it out of there.

“Of course, I completely understand, Amelia. It’s so lovely to see a girl with the right priorities,” said the ogress, in her perfectly modulated voice. She held out her hand to Amelia, and gave her a friendly little good-bye shake.

“Rex!” she called, leaning back and smiling at him, “Amelia is saying good-bye.”

The great man turned and looked at us. His hand was still down Polly’s pants, and she seemed pretty happy, curled under his arm, but his interest had already started to roam. In retrospect, I have to say, I found this aspect of movie stars to be the most peculiar of all: They were bored with the girls they were screwing, even before they had screwed them. This guy had not even done my gorgeous and smart and fun sister Polly, who truly was gorgeous and smart and fun, in addition to being less than half his age. He planned to, and he was working on it, and he knew it was going to happen, maybe a couple times, even, and then he would get bored and dump her. But psychologically, he had already skipped the ride and gone straight to the boredom. And I’m pretty sure he didn’t even know why. I don’t know why everyone thinks it would be so great to be a movie star; aside from the fame and the money and everybody sucking up to you all the time, there doesn’t seem to be a lot in it.

Anyway, as soon as the ogress tipped old Rex Wentworth off as to Amelia’s escape plans, his future boredom with Polly peaked. She didn’t even exist anymore. “No, come on, what are

you talking about? Hey, where you going? Get over here, short stuff. You're not getting off that easy." Rex grinned, a really fun guy, just a swell fun camper, and he leaned out, away from Polly, and reached across the table to grab Amelia by the arm. In his swell-guy, fun-party mode, he was going to playfully grab her, I guess, make her sit in his lap, and tickle her, or something.

Amelia took a step back, so Rex's arm swung through midair.

Okay. A second before, old Rex couldn't have been less interested in what was going on at our end of the table; there were something like twelve people hanging on his every word, waiters coming and going, drinks and people laughing and talking about nothing, and he wasn't anymore interested in Amelia than he was in anything else. But boy, that little step back got to him. He looked at her, surprised, and then you could tell he really liked that. That she wouldn't let him grab her by the arm, and make her sit on his lap? He thought that just was so cool.

"Whoaaa. Hey, what's that? Where you going? What's that, what's that?" He was on his feet now, reaching for her, forcing her to dodge him, making what looked like a game out of it. Amelia laughed at him, playing along, batting his arms away from her, and the hangers-on all started to laugh. Then old Rex grabbed Amelia and swung her in the air, just like somebody having a good time rough-housing with a little kid. She was kind of laughing and squirming, like a little kid, trying to keep it light, even though it wasn't light, the whole thing was creepy as hell. Rex started to whisper something in Amelia's ear, or maybe he

was blowing in it, I don't know, she was smiling and wriggling and pushing his hands down, away from her chest, and he was holding on tight, enjoying every last bit of this. Polly was watching this with no expression on her face, looking more like Daria than like herself. Daria by this point was in the dark, you couldn't even see her, all the way down in Siberia at the far end of the banquette.

Someone snapped a picture. Rex swung Amelia into the air, grabbing her in between her legs, by her crotch, making like he was going to carry her off. And she bit him.

She did, she bit him. On the arm. And she must've bit him pretty hard, because he suddenly howled and dropped her, yelling, "Jesus Christ!" Everybody leapt to their feet and a couple of the hangers-on rushed to Rex's side, including Mom, even though Amelia was the one who got dropped on the floor.

"She bit me!" Rex yelled. "That little bitch bit me!"

Then there was a moment of huge chaos, people looking for napkins and ice water and smelling salts, during which Amelia rolled away from the table, got up, and took a few steps backward. She was mad and scared and totally confused; later on she told me that for a second there she thought maybe she could get arrested. For biting a movie star? That has to be against the law, at least in SoHo. She didn't mean to do it, she told me, but she just freaked, this total strange guy had his hands all over her, and she freaked. But for about ten seconds, at least, no one was paying attention to Amelia freaking. They were all obsessed with Rex, who was, no surprise, kind of a big baby.

“No, it’s okay,” he said, tough, like he had survived a gunshot wound, and wanted to make sure his men knew he could still lead the assault. “I don’t think it broke the skin.”

“You should have someone look at that, man, it could get infected,” said one of his genius friends.

“It didn’t break the skin, I said!” said Rex.

“It’s gonna bruise, though. Wow, she really got you, man.”

“Relax, it’s not that big a deal,” said Rex, magnanimous now that he had had his moment of making a big deal out of it. And then he looked over at Amelia, not very friendly, but ready to make up.

Amelia by this point was long gone. I was too. We ducked out during the mayhem and didn’t stop running until we were on the Q Train, snaking our way back to the relative sanity of good old unhip, movie-star-less Brooklyn. We stopped for pizza and coke and, when we got home, I walked her through all the shit she missed in chemistry, while she was off taking meetings with agents and PR people, so that she had a shred of a chance of passing that test. Mostly I was walking her through all that chemistry so that we both could focus on something other than the disaster that was right around the bend. And sure enough, when Mom and Daria and Polly finally got home, Mom reamed us both. I’ve never seen her so mad; she was purple and kind of spitting, which Mom obviously never does because it isn’t attractive, but she was really mad. At one point she threatened to ground us both, but we knew she’d never make that stick. The

New Yorker was hitting the newsstands the next day, and drinks with Rex Wentworth was maybe the tip of the iceberg as far as their social life was concerned, so there was no use pretending to ground Amelia.

Later on, Polly snuck in to Amelia's room to tell her what happened after we left. I heard them giggling in there, so I snuck in too, and she told us how everybody had gone ballistic about Amelia and the fact that she was maybe unhinged, or had rabies or something. We all thought this was hilarious, but not as hilarious as the end of the story, when the mighty Rex decided that, after all, they *should* take him to the emergency room at St Vincent's, just to "make sure" he was all right.

My favorite part of the story involved Maureen Kafka, the green ogress, who really was all for dragging Amelia into court on grounds of assault—apparently you actually *can* get arrested for biting a movie star—until Daria pointed out that to a lot of people, it might actually look like Rex was the one who was doing the assaulting. Apparently that insinuation shut old Maureen up, and it also seems to have turned the tide on the let's-arrest-Amelia issue.

And it's the only part of the whole mess that I was sorry to have missed. Daria doesn't say much, but she's no idiot. None of my sisters are.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Rough-housing with the stars got a little rough Tuesday night at W, where pint-sized It Girl Amelia Heller took a bite out of

Rex Wentworth,” claimed Rush & Molloy the very next day. There was a huge photograph of Rex swinging Amelia through the air right before she bit him, and an unnamed source giving it up that Rex had to go to the hospital, although there would be no charges filed.

Meanwhile, everyone in America was paging through their *New Yorker*, and stopping to look at a spectacularly fun picture of three gorgeous redheaded teenagers, dressed in green, dancing and looking like fairies or princesses or mermaids or whatever your own particular female fantasy might be. Under the picture they ran the clever cutline, “Daria, Polly and Amelia Heller, granddaughters of lit giant Leo Heller, on the verge of their own breed of greatness. Herb Lang photographs the terrific trio in a loft on Spring Street, high above the isle of Manhattan, site of their grandsire’s many triumphs.” Cool, huh? But that old La Aura, the hair stylist, was dead right: Nobody really cared about who our literary grandfather was. What they really cared about was: “Which is the one who bit Rex Wentworth?”

School was hell. Everyone was screaming at me all the time. “Did your sister really bite Rex Wentworth? What’s that about? Is she crazy? Awesome, man! Were you there? Did you see it? Why’d she bite him? Your sisters are hot. Are they all like, going out with movie stars now?” All the teachers spent the whole day digging me out from gangs of kids I didn’t even know. I mean, the Garfield Lincoln School isn’t exactly Stuyvesant; there are only sixty kids per grade level, so you pretty much know everybody in

the high school by the time you're a junior. But kids I never even heard of were everywhere all of a sudden, swarming all over me like a pack of rats.

Polly actually made an appearance at school that day, because who in their right mind would miss this spectacular opportunity to be the center of so much attention? She totally enjoyed the whole ruckus, wearing her fishnets, posing in the hallways, laughing and tossing her new spiky do about like a total pro. She was brilliant. You really do have to give it up to Polly; she makes being famous look like more fun than anybody I ever saw. I mean, she was having a great time, until it sank in that the picture was losing first position to the biting incident, as reported in the *Daily News*. I passed behind her, in the middle of the chaos, and heard her explaining, in the most discreet terms, that it wasn't Amelia who was the center of the Rex Wentworth event, actually. It was *her*. "She didn't bite Rex—god, that whole thing is just, you know, the newspapers are always *sooo* full of shit," she bubbled, in a kind of edgy way. "They were just horsing around. He's really fantastic. I talked to him for something like three hours, Amelia was *leaving*. That whole biting thing was a total nonevent. He's not even upset about it! I talked to him, this morning he called me, we're going to dinner tomorrow? And he didn't even mention it." This last bit, obviously, was a terrific whopper.

Amelia's life was a disaster. She has a bit of a temper, as I've mentioned, so all the kids surrounding her and screaming questions about why she bit Rex Wentworth set her off about

every two minutes or so. She never got to take that chemistry test; there was so much chaos in the chemistry lab they finally told her she had to go to Dean Morton's office. The chemistry teacher, Dr Nussbaum, was trying to explain to her that she could make the test up another day but that she needed to go see the dean and sort out the controversy. Amelia told me this later; she rather obsessively focused on being told that she had to go "sort out the controversy," because that struck her as being an especially stupid thing for old Nussbaum to say. And in fact, if you think about it, it *is* a pretty stupid thing to say to a fourteen-year-old girl who was being harassed by absolutely everybody in her high school, because she had bitten a movie star who was trying to feel her up. Anyway, at that point Amelia was so frustrated she started to cry, and then argue about how hard she had studied, and then she started babbling on even more, apparently, about how she's missed so much school and it wasn't her fault and were they all a bunch of fucking idiots, blaming her for this mess?

I'm not being euphemistic; she did in fact call Dr Nussbaum a "fucking idiot," which sort of finished off the question of whether or not she was going to the dean's office.

By the time Amelia got down to Morton's office, the whole situation—gorgeous redheads, the *Daily News*, a bitten movie star, screaming students everywhere—had exhausted the school so much that the dean instantly decided to simply send Amelia home. Which was not, technically, a brilliant solution, as the front sidewalk of the school was positively lousy with

photographers, and had been since ten in the morning. So when Amelia stormed out the front door, alone, at noon, there were thirty or forty of them waiting there, crawling all over each other and ready to commit multiple acts of homicide on the off-chance that it might net them an out-of-focus photograph of the fourteen-year-old girl who bit Rex Wentworth.

I could see all of it from the third floor, where I was trapped in a Spanish lab. That dipshit Morton hadn't even arranged for someone to come pick her up; it says in our files that we're authorized to walk ourselves home, but wouldn't you think he'd have a half a clue?

The paparazzi went haywire. I mean, as upsetting as it had been to be mobbed by our fellow students all morning, they were rank amateurs compared to these bozos. They descended as one, shouting questions, grabbing, pushing, shoving their cameras right into her face, acting really like she was some sort of stupid animal in a zoo, instead of just a little kid. Amelia stood on the front steps of the high school, frozen, and then she totally just disappeared. I mean, one minute she was there, and the next minute she wasn't. It was like they had eaten her.

I bolted. I mean, what else are you going to do, just sit there and watch your sister get eaten? Señor Martine (his real name is Mr Martin, but he makes us call him Señor Martine) shouted something at me in Spanish, but I was truly in no mood. I made it outside in maybe ten seconds, but the situation was already way out of control. The shoving was unbelievable, it was like being at

some insane British soccer match. Photographers were pushing and shoving and cursing wildly, and I had to literally pull at arms and legs and throw myself up against somebody to get him out of the way, just so I could clamber one or two inches further into the onion layers of photojournalists who had encrusted themselves around my little sister. People were screaming, “Fuck you, fucking asshole, get in line, fucker, hey who is this fucker?” while I pushed and shoved and yelled, “Amelia! Hey, Amelia, where are you?”

By the time I got to her she was just curled up in a little ball. Seriously, she was like all folded in on herself, a little turtle of a person, crouched down over her feet, her arms crossed over her head, down on the cement sidewalk. You got to wonder what’s wrong with those guys, why they thought this would be a cool picture to take, a little kid so scared she’s doing something that spooky. I mean, I wondered that about a minute later, but while I was surrounded by the crazy people with her, I was mostly just screaming at them to get away. Amelia was crying and hitting at me, because she didn’t want to move, that’s how freaked out she was, but I was pretty sure they’d just start stomping on her if I left her there, so I started dragging her back toward the front door of the school. They of course kept taking pictures and shoving at both of us. It was a ridiculous mess.

By the time we got back through the glass doors and into the security lobby, a whole bunch of teachers and students was gathering. Meanwhile, all those journalists were like in a feeding

frenzy or something; it was like once they got started on the craziness they didn't know how to turn it off, so they actually tried to come in after us. Which finally turned into a kind of a showdown. Señor Martine, Dean Morton and Luke, the black guy who sits at the front desk and makes you sign in if you're tardy, charged the mob and started yelling at them.

"This is private property! I am asking you to leave! You are not allowed entrance to this building! This is a private high school!" yelled Morton. He was actually holding his arms out, sort of like he was being crucified, but more like he thought those photographers were actually chickens or pigeons or something he could just shoo away. "If you do not leave this property immediately, we are calling the police!"

This was not good enough for Luke. "Motherfuckers! Get out of here, you fuckheads! The police are coming to kick your ass—get out—GET OUT." He grabbed one guy, a kind of short, fat guy with a big beard and a huge lens, who was shooting wildly at anything and everything.

"Don't you fucking touch me, man!" the short photographer yelled. "I can sue you! That's assault!"

"You take another picture of these kids, I'll show you what assault looks like," Luke told him, sticking his finger in the guy's face. Meanwhile, two other photographers were deep in it with Morton.

"The police are coming. You are not permitted in this building," Morton droned. These idiots started to argue about

freedom of the press.

“You want to do that? Show these kids that the press can be silenced? What’s that teaching them? This is a free society. This isn’t fucking China, we’re covering a legitimate story.” Meanwhile the rest of the gang behind them kept clicking away.

It really was enough to make you sick. Luckily Luke is rather large, and when he gets mad enough to yell it’s rather undeniable. “GET OUT OF HERE,” he yelled. “I DON ‘T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, YOU SHITHEAD, YOU THINK I WON ‘T HIT YOU, YOU TRY IT, MAN, JUST TRY ONE MORE STEP IN THIS BUILDING, THESE ARE MY KIDS. *MY* KIDS, MOTHERFUCKER.”

Dean Morton cringed a little at that; obviously he was not thrilled that Luke was cursing so freely in front of all us fragile teenagers, but there was no denying that it was an impressive performance. And all of us fragile teenagers were definitely stoked that our security guard was willing to slug it out with all of the representatives of the free press that New York could spare that morning. Truth be told I think Morton was impressed too. In any event, he didn’t say anything, and after they managed to get off another few hundred shots, the so-called protectors of all American freedoms finally took off.

Everybody got sent back to class and I got sent to the nurse’s office, because I had a scraped-up face and a split lip. By the time they patched me up, Amelia had already been sent home, which really pissed me off. I mean, they couldn’t wait and let us

go together? But people don't think of these things. Anyway, the next day we all got the beginnings of a clue as to how serious the shit was that Amelia had stepped in. The many pictures taken by all those protectors of a free press were really quite impressive. And they printed all of them. Pictures of Amelia screaming, Amelia hitting photographers, Amelia kicking photographers, Amelia kicking me. Amelia curled up in a little ball on the sidewalk; they printed that one, too. A couple of those geniuses actually had video of the whole thing, which they showed on three local news shows, *Entertainment Tonight* and CNN, which, due respect to CNN, but there was in fact a war going on in Iraq at the time; you had to wonder why they actually cared about some kid who hit a couple of photographers in Brooklyn.

In any event, they showed the footage on television quite a bit, and the story that went along with the visuals went something like this: "Pint-sized It Girl Amelia Heller is burning through her fifteen minutes as fast as she can. Recently showcased in the *New Yorker* magazine, the fourteen-year-old heiress to a major American lit legacy has been spending her nights partying with the likes of film actor Rex Wentworth, who she allegedly bit in a scuffle at a Manhattan hot spot last week. Here she lets the paparazzi get a taste of her teen angst. An unidentified fellow student comes to her aid ..."

The unidentified fellow student, that's me.

Polly and Daria were livid. Their moment in the sun had been completely obliterated by Amelia's shenanigans. Our home life

now veered between long stretches of sullen silence and endless hours of screeching female rage.

“This is not about you, Amelia. None of this was ever supposed to be about *you*,” Daria would hiss.

“I said, I didn’t want to do it in the first place!”

“Do you know, do you have any idea of how long it’s taken me to get my career to this point? Do you even have half a clue—”

“Oh, *what* career?”

“Look, people say that no publicity is bad publicity.” This halfway optimistic opinion, or something like it, coming from Polly.

“People who have never had this kind of spectacularly shitty publicity say that! And it’s not my fault! None of this is my fault! All of it is her fault, and she doesn’t even care!”

“I care! I want to go to school! I can’t even go to school, everybody hates me, and I hate everybody!”

This was occasionally punctuated by a series of slamming doors.

And in fact, she *couldn’t* go to school—Collette called, the first morning, and put everyone in lockdown. Nobody was allowed to leave the apartment, and nobody was allowed to talk to anybody, either. Which put everyone in an even worse mood. The phone would ring off the hook until Mom finally answered it, and then she would hold the receiver tightly to her ear, cover her face with one hand and melodramatically whisper, “No comment.” Then, infinitely bereaved, she would set down the receiver. It was

quite an act and, as far as I could tell, gained us not one shred of legitimacy from the reporters on the evening news, who just kept reporting, snidely, “No comment from the girl’s family. Looks like they’re trying to keep this under wraps.”

And then the anchor-idiot would say, “Little too late for that!” And they’d all chuckle. I mean, you really wanted to blow your brains out.

After three days of this I came home from school—the lockdown only counted for girl members of the family; nobody out there really seemed to give a shit, frankly, about the unidentified fellow student—to find Collette holding a major powwow around our kitchen table. In spite of how crucial she had become to everyone’s lives over the past six weeks, this was in fact the first time I had ever laid eyes on Collette, and she was, frankly, pretty impressive. She wore one of those perfect suits—tight, curvy, both sexy and severe—and she was drinking ice water, and crossing her legs to one side, so that anyone who entered the room could see right off what great legs she had.

“All right, the fact is, Maureen Piven got out in front of us in every media outlet,” she announced. “She had them all in her pocket within twenty-four hours, caught us absolutely flat-footed. She’s brilliant at this, absolutely flawless. I would have warned you ahead of time not to take her on, but I had no idea Amelia would do anything as stupid as *biting* Rex Wentworth.”

“He was—”

“Save it, Amelia. The damage is done.” Collette clearly was

not interested in discussion at this point, but the level of anxiety was pretty high. Mom leaned forward, wringing her hands.

“But why can’t we even defend ourselves? It’s not doing any good. We don’t say anything and it just keeps getting worse and worse and worse, what they’re saying about us, in the news papers, on the television—”

“I know it feels that way,” Collette nodded, not terribly sympathetic. “But you don’t want to provoke Maureen any further. This is completely personal to her. Karl Rove could take lessons from Maureen, when she’s in a mood like this. Did you guys do anything to piss her off? Besides biting Rex, did you say anything or do anything that I need to know about? Because we have maybe one shot to save this situation. I need to know everything.”

Amelia glanced at me, worried, then looked away. I looked down. We were fast, but not fast enough. Mom caught the look, thought for a moment, then another moment. She can be stupid about some stuff, but on other stuff she’s crackerjack. “Philip was rude to her,” she said. Daria and Polly turned and stared at me. Amelia kept looking at the floor.

“I wasn’t,” I said. “I barely said two words.”

“You were rude. She was telling us about her family, a story about her family, and Philip—”

“She said her great-grandfather was Franz Kafka!” I said.

Amelia’s face twitched. She was trying not to laugh. Daria caught it.

“You’re a moron, Philip,” said Polly. “What were you even doing there, anyway? No one invited you.”

“I was fucking polite! I was pretty fucking polite, if you ask me, about such a spectacular piece of bullshit!”

“He was polite about it, he really was, considering,” Amelia chimed in.

“No one was fooled, by either of you,” Mom snorted.

Really, the whole thing was ludicrous. It was suddenly my fault there were thirty crazed reporters in front of our building waiting to tear us all to pieces, because I didn’t say, “Oh really?” with enough conviction when a giantess in a green dress told me she was the direct descendant of a hooker who had once slept with Franz Kafka.

“Oh my god,” said Daria. “That’s what happened? That’s why they went after us? Because Philip was—”

“I wasn’t anything!” I yelled. “I hardly exist around here, you can’t dump this on me!”

“It doesn’t matter,” sighed Collette. “If that’s what’s behind it, the damage is done. She’s notoriously sensitive, so if she thought Philip was playing her she was going to punish everybody sooner or later. It’s just as well that we got it over with.”

“Is it over with?” Polly asked, raising an eyebrow. “Cause it sure doesn’t look like that from where I sit. We’re all under house arrest.”

“You let the story have its natural life,” Collette explained, standing and pacing now, like a drill sergeant. “I couldn’t have

you talking to the press because they want nothing more than to keep it all going—statements from you, statements from Rex, statements from Maureen—and she’s just too good at this. You go to war with Maureen Piven, you’re all dead before you’ve even started.”

“You mean we’re not? Dead?” said Daria. This was the news she was waiting for. And Collette sighed, apparently at our collective stupidity.

“No,” she said. “Not quite yet.”

Collette’s opening gambit, as it turned out, was to drag the two offending dimwits into the belly of the beast, whereupon both dimwits were expected to throw themselves on the beast’s mercy. I’m not kidding, that was the entire plan. We didn’t even call ahead; she just tossed us into the back of her town car and the next thing I knew we were standing around in the waiting room of the swankest offices I had ever seen. I mean, this place was spectacular: Leather chairs, walnut paneling, a little Jackson Pollock action on one wall and a full southern exposure of Central Park on the other. And that was the *waiting* room. A skinny guy in a white shirt and tie sat in a tiny cubicle around the corner; he had no expression on his face and kept telling people on his headset to hold, while he simultaneously listened to Collette explain that Maureen would see us.

“But she doesn’t know you’re coming,” he observed, with a kind of expressionless skepticism.

“No,” said Collette, smiling politely at this little shit.

“Nevertheless, as I said, I’m fairly sure that she will see us.”

“Hold please,” he said into his headset. “Take a seat, please,” he told Collette.

Since she was already in a power struggle with him, Collette opted to stand, but Amelia and I slouched in that leather furniture obediently. I kept trying to catch Amelia’s eye in some insane attempt to establish a kind of Vulcan mind-mold so that we might have something resembling a game plan when we went in and faced the Ogress, but no matter what I did she wouldn’t look at me. “Knock it off, Philip,” Collette told me, the third time I tried to get Amelia to communicate with me without actually saying anything. She clearly didn’t want us cooking anything up. We were just supposed to go in there and suck up.

Which I was fairly sure was never going to happen, since Kafka’s giant offspring kept us waiting just long enough for me to think this might turn into one of those stories about how they made you wait for two days and then said oh by the way that person isn’t even here! We were there a long time; and then we were there even longer. The sun was setting gloriously across Central Park, in fact, when suddenly there she was, herself, in a purple tent this time—mauve let’s say—again with those giant amber stones glittering on her chest.

“I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting,” the giantess sighed. “It’s just been a nightmare, I’ve been on conference calls about three different films all afternoon.” Then she smiled happily, as if we were the most delightful interruption she could ask for on

this busy afternoon. “It’s so good of you to come by.”

“Of course we wanted to come,” Collette smiled back.

“Amelia, the picture, in the *New Yorker*! Wonderful. You must be so pleased,” said Maureen as she opened the door to her office.

“Oh, sure, yeah. Oh! The picture. Yeah, it’s good, I guess,” said Amelia, completely confused. Who could blame her? They were being so nice. The whole thing was so weird you didn’t know what to say.

“No. It’s better than good. Herb Lang. He’s a genius. He did one of my clients years ago: It absolutely put her on the map. It made her. As I’m sure it’s going to make you,” Maureen nodded.

I had the total urge to say “make her what?” but Amelia stepped on my foot. So instead I said, “Oooooow, you stepped on my foot, jerk.” Which finally got Amelia to look at me, and shake her head and roll her eyes like, stop it, you moron. At which point apparently Collette knew that she’d better get us in and out of there fast, so she just launched in.

“We wanted to come by and see if there was anything we could do—any of us—about this terrible, terrible misunderstanding with Rex,” Collette began. “Amelia feels just terrible about it.”

“Oh,” said Maureen, taking this in as if it were entirely surprising information instead of the complete reason we were even there. She looked at Amelia, a little snake for a moment appearing behind those sincere, kind eyes.

Amelia jumped a little bit, startled, as I was, by the sudden

appearance of the snake. But she got right with the picture. “I’m really sorry, I really am,” she said. “I totally did not mean to bite anybody. Wow. I just don’t even know how it happened. And Philip and I also, you know, if you thought that we thought it was stupid that your great grandfather was Kafka? I so hope you didn’t think that. Because it is really awesome, that you, know, that you—Philip was saying—”

It was clearly time for me to chime in. “Yeah, I think it’s cool, I really do,” I said.

Kafka’s great-granddaughter thought about this, without responding, and suddenly turned to look out the window. There was a kind of creepy silence that settled in, while this enormous woman considered the intricacies of apologies, and what it means to make them, and what it means to accept them, and how long you should wait, in fact, before doing something so pedestrian. No one said anything. Just below, in Central Park, a couple of little kids suddenly bolted into the fading light of the sunset, and ran recklessly down the path, leaving their Jamaican nannies calling after them. They were all laughing, you could see it; the air was so clear, you could see them laugh. I totally wished I was out there.

“That story is very precious to me,” Maureen said. “I don’t tell it to everyone.”

“Well, no, I mean, I totally understand that,” I said. Which okay, that wasn’t what I meant, what it sounded like I meant? It’s just the whole thing was so stupid. “I mean, Kafka is really a

great writer and it is awesome that he's, you know."

Collette leaned forward, crossing her legs fast, like a pair of scissors. "Are you cast yet, on *The Fury of the Titans*?" she asked pleasantly.

"I saw you on the news, Philip," Maureen announced.

At this point I was ready to blow my own brains out. I mean, I could not follow any of this. The only thing that was clear to me was that I was completely tanking and that the only safe bet now was to say as little as possible. I kept my head down, figuring that she hadn't asked a direct question—maybe that meant I didn't have to respond.

"Philip was on television?" said Collette, surprised.

"It's cute, he feels protective of his little sister," Maureen said. "Isn't that what he was doing when she got attacked by the photographers?"

This floored Collette, it really did. "What do you mean?" she asked, curious.

"He's in all the pictures," Maureen informed her. That giant ogress with the magic stones on her chest was literally the only person who had figured out that the "unidentified student" was me. Collette looked back and forth between Maureen and Amelia, still not getting it.

"He saved me," said Amelia, simple.

"Yes, it was very sweet, very sweet," said Maureen. "I have a brother, too. He sells auto parts out of a storefront in Astoria. Every other year he sends me a screenplay that he's written with

one of his friends, every one of them worse than the next. My sister is married and living on Long Island. I hear from her when she needs money. But she's very sweet too. She has two hideously ugly daughters, they both want to be actresses. Do you want to be an actress, Amelia?"

Amelia squirmed like a six-year-old. "Not particularly," she said.

"No?" smiled Maureen Piven, all those stones winking on her chest. "I thought everybody did."

"I heard you were from Long Island, I didn't realize you still had family there," Collette purred, as if we were at a cocktail party. "They must be proud of you."

"I don't often speak to them," Maureen purred back. "The distance. You know. Where you're from and where you're going. They don't really mix."

"How did you manage it? I mean, how did you get from there—to here!" Collette wondered, astonished. "I've always wanted to ask, if it's not too personal."

"I stalked Sidney Lumet until I got him alone," Ogress laughed coyly, charmed to be asked to narrate the seminal event of her life's story. "He was waiting for a cab and I made a complete fool of myself, insisting that I wanted to work for him, that I'd do anything! He absolutely brushed me off but he'd had a couple drinks and I was pretty sure he wouldn't even remember what he actually said. So I showed up at his office the next day, and started making coffee. It took a week for everybody to realize

he hadn't actually hired me, but by then it was too late, I was indispensable."

"You started by making coffee for Sidney Lumet!" Collette bubbled, elegant.

"There are worse ways to start in this business, as I think you know," Maureen noted. The two women laughed one of those "boy do we ever" laughs.

"It sounds like you were a totally different person," Collette smiled, both sucking up and narrating. "You really transformed yourself, didn't you?"

"Just like *The Metamorphosis*," I said.

We were all there to suck up, right? And she was the one all hung up on the Kafka thing. They all stared at me, like I was suddenly speaking a foreign language.

"You know, *The Metamorphosis*," I said. "The guy wakes up one morning and he's a giant bug, and no one in his family knows how to talk to him anymore?"

"Really?" said Maureen, unfriendly as hell.

"You haven't read it?" I asked.

"No, I missed that one."

"It's pretty good."

"I'm sure it is."

"I just meant, you know, you were like, a different person and your family understood you and then you transformed yourself and now you're like totally mysterious to them. That's all," I concluded lamely.

“Thank you for the exegesis,” she said.

Okay, I happen to go to the Garfield Lincoln School, and I’m also the grandson of Leo Heller so I actually do know what “exegesis” means. “You’re welcome,” I told her, with a slightly edgy tone, to match her own.

“Is this you?” Collette cooed. “Look, Amelia, it’s a picture of Maureen with Ron Howard!” I was suddenly feeling like I was stuck in *The Castle*.

“Hey Collette, you know, I kind of have a lot of homework,” Amelia said. “This has been really fun and I’m so glad to see you, Maureen, and I’m really really sorry for biting Rex and I’m especially sorry if I said anything that bugged you that night in the bar, and Philip is too, but we need to get home, okay, Maureen?” Even though she was saying all the right things, Amelia sounded even worse than me. She has no idea how to spin anything. Next to Maureen and Collette we sounded like a couple of rude teenagers, and the fact is, we were there to prove that we *weren’t* rude teenagers. I actually saw Collette raise her eyes to the heavens for a split second. I couldn’t say that I blamed her.

But Maureen was suddenly in a forgiving mood. She smiled, half to herself, and leaned back, letting the side-lighting play on her giant beads on her giant chest. I swear, it is no wonder I thought of her in the light of *The Metamorphosis*; she really did look like a giant cockroach, with all those beady eyes.

“Amelia means—”

“It’s all right, Collette, I know what Amelia means. You too,

Philip. No hard feelings. But perhaps you'd better go before either one of you opens your mouth again." She twinkled at us, benign. Who could keep track of this? I was getting whiplash. But the offer to leave came none too soon.

"Yeah, thanks," I said. "I really do like Kafka, I really do."

"Good," she told me.

And everything would have been fine if we had just gotten our butts out of there before Rex showed up. Really. We were out of there; we were all about to stand up and wave goodbye to this whole hideous interchange when the door swung open and the king himself walked in.

"Oh hey, sorry, Maureen, no no, stay, you know you can use the place whenever you want, I just didn't know you were in here," he said, giving up the fact that this was his office, not hers, before he even saw that in fact Maureen was using his office to have a sit-down with the kid who bit him, along with her dorky brother. But of course we all turned to stare at him, and then he saw Amelia, who was unfortunately wearing a teeny little turquoise tank top over black jeans in which she looked awesome.

"Oh hi," Rex said. "Yeah, hi."

She didn't say anything. She just turned white.

"Nice picture. I mean, the thing in the *New Yorker*, that's ..." Rex trailed off. He was totally giving himself away. Amelia looked at the ground.

"Thanks," she said. That was it. She was not too nice about

it, either.

“Amelia and her brother came by to apologize about what happened at W the other night,” Maureen narrated, expressionless. I thought it was weird because she had been so nice to us and now here was Rex and she was suddenly a block of ice.

“Yeah, whatever,” said Rex. “Just finish it up, huh? I mean, it’s okay for you to use this place, but I wish you’d clear it with me ahead of time.” Maureen looked at him, sort of like a mother who is thinking about whether or not slapping her own kid is maybe a good idea. He looked back at her, like one of the shitty kids on the playground who’s getting off on being a jerk. “Is there a problem?” he asked.

“Not at all,” said Maureen, pulling out that dazzling smile. “As I said, we were just finishing up.”

“Whatever,” he said, and he grabbed the doorknob and turned to go.

And just as he did he snuck another look at Amelia. I saw him do it. And it was so clear, just in that one little sneaky look, that the asshole had the hots for her. I’ve seen it enough times, it’s not like I’m likely to miss it. That guy was forty years old, at least, and he had the hots for my fourteen-year-old sister.

But anyway, then he was gone and we were going. So Collette reached over and held Maureen’s hand meaningfully for a few seconds, smiling at her sincerely.

“I really appreciate your helping us through this,” she said.

“Of course,” said Maureen. I reached for the door.

“There’s just one thing,” she added. We all turned. Maureen, looking out the window, sighed. “It’s wonderful that you came by and apologized,” she noted. “But this really is so private. And the whole ... event ... wasn’t private, was it? Was it, Amelia?”

“What?” said Amelia.

“I just mean,” smiled Maureen, “for an event *that* public—the apology will have to be public too, won’t it?”

CHAPTER FIVE

The next thing we knew, Daria, Polly, and Amelia were on *Regis and Kelly*.

This took an endless amount of time to work out, even though it happened by the end of the week. Collette was on the phone with everybody in town for hours, but at first most of them were so mortally afraid of pissing Rex and Maureen off that none of them would touch us. So even though Maureen was the one who had insisted that the apology had to be public in the first place, it was apparently impossible to set up a public interview because that might make Maureen and Rex more angry, even though Maureen was the one who wanted it. It was like a Möbius strip of stupid logic that went on and on and on until almost out of the blue the whole situation flipped on its head and what we had was an exclusive on *Regis and Kelly*, the perfect chance to get those girls out in front of the public so that everyone could see that these were really very sweet and adorable teenagers, nothing like what had been reported by other media outlets. And,

during this exclusive, Amelia would find the perfect opportunity to apologize to Rex, on the air, for biting him.

By this point, we were all just doing whatever Collette told us. Of course we were; we were in deep shit and the only way out, seemingly, was to let that shapely barracuda call the shots. Everyone even let her pick out the outfits they would wear, which for Amelia turned out to be a subtle variation on the blue jeans/T-shirt ensemble she had on in the Herb Lang photo. “We want them falling in love with you because you’re such a great kid,” she announced. “You need to wear something simple. No one likes a sexy fourteen-year-old.”

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