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JENNIFER WEINER

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In Her Shoes

A NOVEL



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PART ONE

In Her Shoes

ONE

"Baby," groaned the guy—Ted? Tad?—something like that—and crushed his lips against the side of her neck, shoving her face against the wall of the toilet stall. This is ridiculous, Maggie thought, as she felt him bunching her dress up around her hips. But she'd had five vodka-and-tonics over the course of the last hour and a half, and at this point was not in much of a position to call anything ridiculous. She wasn't even sure she could pronounce the word. "You're so hot!" Ted or Tad exclaimed, discovering the thong that Maggie had purchased for the occasion. "I want the thong. In red," she'd said. "Flame," the salesgirl at Victoria's Secret had replied. "Whatever," said Maggie. "Small," she added, "extra small if you have it." She gave the girl a quick scornful look to let her know that while she might not know red from flame, she, Maggie Feller, was not worried. She might not have finished college. She might not have a great job—or, okay, after last Thursday, any job at all. The sum total of her big-screen experience might be the three seconds that a sliver of her left hip was visible in Will Smith's second-to-last video. And she might be just barely bumping along while some people, like namely he

sister, Rose, went whizzing through

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Ivy League colleges and straight into law schools, then into law firms and luxury apartments on Rittenhouse Square like they'd been shot down the water slide of life, but still, she, Maggie, had something of worth, something rare and precious, possessed by few, coveted by many—a terrific body. One hundred and six pounds stretched over five feet and six inches, all of it tanning-bed basted, toned, plucked, waxed, moisturized, deodorized, perfumed, perfect. She had a tattoo of a daisy on the small of her back, the words "BORN TO BE BAD" tattooed around her left ankle, and a plump, pierced red heart reading "MOTHER" on her right biceps. (She'd thought about adding the date of her mother's death, but for some reason that tattoo had hurt more than the other two put together.) Maggie also had D-cup tits. Said tits had been a gift from a married boyfriend and were made of saline and plastic, but this didn't matter. "They're an investment in my future," Maggie had said, even as her father looked hurt and bewildered, and Sydelle the Stepmonster flared her nostrils, and her big sister, Rose, had asked, "Precisely what kind of future are you planning?" in that snotty voice of hers that made her sound like she was seventy. Maggie didn't listen. Maggie didn't care. She was twenty-eight years old now, at her tenth high school reunion, and she was the best-looking girl in the room. All eyes had been on her as she strolled into the Cherry Hill Hilton in her clinging black spaghetti-strap cocktail dress and the Christian Louboutin stilettos she'd swiped from her sister's closet the weekend before. Rose might have let herself turn into a fat load—a big sister in more ways than one—but at least their feet were still the same size. Maggie could feel the heat of the gazes as she smiled, sashaying over to the bar, hips swaying like music, bangles chiming on her wrists, letting her former classmates get a good look at what they'd missed—the girl they'd ignored, or mocked and called retarded, the one who'd shuffled down the high school hallways swimming in her father's oversized army jacket, cringing against the lockers. Well, Maggie had blossomed. Let them see, let

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them drool. Marissa Nussbaum and Kim Pratt and especially that bitch Samantha Bailey with her dishwater-blond hair and the fifteen pounds she'd packed on her hips since high school. All the cheerleaders, the ones who'd scorned her or looked right past her. Looked right through her. Let them just feast their eyes on her now ... or, better yet, let their wimpy, receding-hairlined husbands do the feasting. "Oh, God!" moaned Ted the Tadpole, unbuckling his pants. In the next stall, a toilet flushed. Maggie wobbled on her heels as Ted-slash-Tad aimed and missed and aimed again, jabbing at her thighs and backside. It was like being bludgeoned with a blind snake, she thought, and snorted to herself, a noise that Ted evidently mistook for a groan of passion. "Oh, yeah, baby! You like that, huh?" he demanded, and started poking her even harder. Maggie stifled a yawn and looked down at herself, noting with pleasure that her thighs—firmed from hours on the treadmill, smooth as plastic from a recent waxing—did not so much as quiver, no matter how violent Ted's thrusts got. And her pedicure was perfect. She hadn't been sure about this particular shade of red—not quite dark enough, she'd worried—but it was the right choice, she thought, as she looked down at her toes, gleaming back up at her. "Jesus CHRIST!" yelled Ted. His tone was one of commingled ecstasy and frustration, like a man who's seen a holy vision and isn't quite sure what it means. Maggie had met him at the bar, maybe half an hour after she'd arrived, and he was just what she had in mind—tall, blond, built, not fat and balding like all the guys who'd been football gods and prom kings in high school. Smooth, too. He'd tipped the bartender five dollars for each round, even though it was an open bar, even though he didn't have to, and he'd told her what she wanted to hear. "What do you do?" he'd asked, and she'd smiled at him. "I am a performer," she said. Which was true. For the past six months, she'd been a backup singer for a band called Whiskered Biscuit that

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did thrash-metal covers of 1970s disco classics. So far, they'd booked precisely one gig, as the market for thrash-metal renditions of "MacArthur Park" was not overwhelming, and Maggie knew that she was in the band only because the lead singer was hoping she'd sleep with him. But it was something—a tiny toehold on her dream of being famous, of being a star. "You weren't in any of my classes," he'd said, tracing his forefinger around and around her wrist. "I would have remembered you for sure." Maggie looked down, toying with one of her auburn ringlets, debating whether she should slide her sandal along his calf, or unpin her hair, letting her curls cascade down her back. No, she hadn't been in his classes. She'd been in the "special" classes, the "remedial" classes, the classes with the scrubs and the burnouts and the big-print textbooks that were a different shape—slightly longer and thinner—than any of the books the other kids carried. You could tuck those books under brown paper covers and shove them in your backpack, but the other kids always knew. Well, fuck them. Fuck all of them. Fuck all the pretty cheerleaders and the guys who'd been happy to fool around with her in the passenger seat of their parents' cars but wouldn't even say "Hi" to her in the halls the next Monday. "Christ!" yelled Ted again. Maggie opened her mouth to tell him to keep it down, and threw up all over the floor—a clear spill of vodka and tonic, she noted as if from a great distance, plus a few decomposing noodles. She'd had pasta—when? Last night? She was trying to remember her last meal when he grabbed her hips and swung her around roughly so that she was facing the front of the stall, banging her hip against the toilet-paper dispenser in the process. "AGHH!" Ted announced, and came all over her back. Maggie whirled to face him, moving as quickly as she could through the sloshing vodka/noodle mess on the floor. "Not the dress!" she said. And Ted stood there, blinking, his pants puddled around his knees, his hand still on his dick. He grinned foolishly at her. "That was great!" he said, and squinted at her face. "What was your name again?"

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Fifteen miles away, Rose Feller had a secret a secret currently splayed flat on his back and snoring, a secret who had somehow managed to dislodge her fitted sheet and kick three pillows to the floor. Rose propped herself up on her elbow and considered her lover by the glow of the streetlights that filtered through her blinds, smiling a sweet, secret smile, a smile none of her colleagues at the law firm of Lewis, Dommel, and Fenick would have recognized. This was what she had always wanted, what she spent her whole life secretly dreaming of—a man who looked at her like she was the only woman in "the room, in the world, the only woman who'd ever existed. And he was so handsome, even better looking without his clothes than in them. She wondered if she could take a picture. But the noise would wake him up. And who could she show it to? Instead, Rose let her eyes take a tour of his body—his strong legs, his broad shoulders, his mouth, half-open, the better to snore with. Rose turned on her side, away from him, drew up the blanket tight under her chin, and smiled, remembering. They'd been working late on the Veeder matter, which was so boring that Rose could have wept, except the partner on the case was Jim Danvers, and she was so in love with him that she would have spent a week reviewing documents if it meant she'd be close enough to him to smell the good wool of his suit or the scent of his cologne. It got to be eight o'clock, and then it got to be nine, and finally they sealed the last of the pages into the messenger's pouch and he looked at her with his movie-star smile and said, "Do you want to get a bite to eat?" They went to the bar in the basement of Le Bee-Fin, where a glass of wine turned into a bottle, where the crowd dwindled and the candles burned down until it was midnight and they were alone and the conversation stuttered to a stop. While Rose was trying to figure out what to say next—something about sports maybe?—Jim reached for her hand and murmured, "Do you have any idea how

beautiful you are?" Rose shook her head because, really, she had no idea. Nobody had ever told her she was beautiful, except her father, once, and that didn't really count. When she looked in the mirror, she saw nothing but an ordinary girl, a plain Jane, a grownup bookworm with a decent wardrobe—size fourteen, brown hair and brown eyes, thick, straight eyebrows, and a chin that jutted forward slightly as if to say, You and what army? Except she'd always harbored the secret hope that someday, somebody would tell her that she was beautiful, a man who'd slide her hair out of its ponytail, slip her glasses off her face, and look at her like she was Helen of Troy. It was one of the main reasons she'd never gotten contacts. And so she'd leaned forward, every fiber of her being quivering, staring at Jim waiting for more of the words she'd always wanted to hear. But Jim Danvers just grabbed her hand, paid the bill, and whisked her out the door, up to her apartment, where he'd pulled off her shoes, shucked her skirt, kissed his way from her neck down her belly, and spent forty-five minutes doing things to her that she'd only dreamed of (and seen once on *Sex and the City*). She shivered deliciously, pulling the comforter up to her chin, reminding herself that this could be trouble. Sleeping with a colleague went against her personal code of ethics (an easy code to maintain, she admitted, because she'd never had a colleague who'd wanted to sleep with her). More problematic, though—relationships between partners and associates were explicitly forbidden by firm rules. Both of them could be disciplined if anyone found out. He'd get in trouble. She'd probably be asked to leave. And she'd have to find another job, start all over again—another round of interviews, boring half-days spent reciting the same answers to the same questions: Have you always wanted to be a lawyer? What areas of the law appeal to you the most? What kind of practice do you see yourself developing? How would you fit in with this firm? Jim hadn't been like that. He interviewed her when she came to Lewis, Dommel, and Fenick. It was a beautiful September afternoon

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three months ago when she walked into the conference room, in her navy blue interview suit, with the folder full of firm PR clutched to her chest. After five years at Dillert McKeen she'd been looking for a change—a slightly smaller firm that would give her more responsibilities. This was her third interview of the week, and her feet, in navy Ferragamo pumps, were killing her, but one look at Jim Danvers had banished all thoughts of aching feet and other firms. She'd been expecting a standard-issue partner, fortyish, balding, bespectacled, carefully avuncular with potential female colleagues. And there was Jim, standing at the window, and when he turned to greet her, the late-afternoon light turned his blond hair into a golden crown. Not standard issue at all, and not fortyish, either—maybe thirty-five, Rose thought, a baby partner, five years older than she was, and so handsome. That jaw! Those eyes! The tantalizing whiff of aftershave he left in his wake! He was the kind of guy who'd always been strictly off-limits to Rose as she'd toiled through high school, college, and law school, keeping her nose to the grindstone and her grades in the stratosphere. But when he'd smiled, she'd caught a glint of silver against his teeth. A retainer, she saw, her heart lifting, blossoming inside of her chest. So maybe he wasn't perfect. Maybe there was hope. "Ms. Feller?" he asked, and she nodded, not trusting her voice. He smiled at her, crossed the room in three long steps, and took her hand in his. It had started, for her, at that moment—the sun behind him, his hand wrapped around hers, sending bolts of electricity shooting straight between her legs. She'd felt something she'd only read about, something she wasn't even sure that she believed in—passion. Passion as hot and steamy as anything from her Harlequin romances, passion that stole the breath right out of her throat. She looked at the smooth skin of Jim Danvers's neck and wanted to lick it, right there in the conference room. "I'm Jim Danvers," he said. She cleared her throat. Her voice was breathy, husky, a wanton

rasp. "I'm Rose." Shit. What was her last name again? "Feller. Rose Feller. Hi." It had started so slowly between them—the glance held a beat too long while waiting for the elevator, a hand that would linger at the small of her back, the way his eyes would seek her out in a crowd whenever the associates and partners wound up in a meeting together. Meanwhile, she gleaned whatever gossip she could. "Single," said her secretary. "Extremely single," said a paralegal. "Serial heartbreaker," whispered a first-year associate as she reapplied her lipstick in the ladies' room mirror. "And I hear he's good." Rose had blushed, washed her hands, and fled. She didn't want Jim to have a reputation. She didn't want him discussed in bathrooms. She wanted him to be hers alone. She wanted him to tell her she was beautiful, again and again. In the apartment upstairs, a toilet flushed. Jim grunted in his sleep. When he rolled over, she felt his foot brush against her shin. Oh, dear. Rose ran an experimental toe up the length of her calf. The news was not good. She'd been meaning to shave her legs, had been meaning to shave them for some time, kept promising she'd shave them before she went to her aerobics class, but she'd last attended class three weeks ago, and she'd been wearing tights to work every day, and . . . Jim rolled over again, pushing Rose to the absolute edge of the mattress. She stared unhappily at her living room, which might as well have borne a sign: Single Girl, Lonely, Late '90s. A trail of his-and-hers clothing lay on the floor beside five-pound bright yellow dumbbells propped up next to a Taste Bo tape that was still in its original plastic shrink-wrap. The treadmill she'd bought to fulfill a get-in-shape New Year's Resolution three New Years ago was draped with her dry cleaning. There was a half-empty Passionberry Punch wine cooler on the coffee table, four shoe boxes from Saks piled by the closet, and a half-dozen romance novels beside her bed. Disaster, Rose thought, wondering what she could do before dawn to give her apartment the appearance of being inhabited by some In Her Shoes 1

one with an interesting life. Was there an all-night emporium that sold throw pillows and bookcases? And was it too late to do something about her legs? As quietly as she could, she reached for the portable phone and crept into the bathroom. Amy answered on the first ring. "Wassup?" she asked. In the background, Rose could hear Whitney Houston wailing, which meant that her best friend was watching *Waiting to Exhale* for the hundredth time. Amy wasn't black, but that didn't stop her from trying. "You won't believe it," Rose whispered. "Did you get laid?" "Amy!" "Well, did you? I mean, why else would you be ringing me now?" "Actually," said Rose, flicking on the light and studying her glowing face in the mirror, "actually, I did. And it was . . ." She paused, and gave a little hop in the air. "It was so good!" Amy whooped. "Way to go, girlfriend! So who's the lucky guy?" "Jim," Rose breathed. Amy whooped even louder. "And it was unbelievable!" said Rose. "It was . . . I mean, he's so . . ." Her call waiting beeped. Rose stared at the phone unbelievably. "Ooh, popular girl," Amy said. "Call me back!" Rose clicked over, glancing at her watch. Who'd be calling her at almost one in the morning? "Hello?" She could hear loud music, voices—a bar, a party. She slumped against the bathroom door. Maggie. Big surprise. The voice on the other end was young, male, and unfamiliar. "Is this Rose Feller?" "Yes. Who's this, please?" "Um . . . well, my name's Todd." "Todd," Rose repeated. "Yeah. And, um . . . well, I'm here with your sister, I guess. Maggie, right?" In the background, Rose could hear her sister's drunken shout.

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"Little sister!" Rose scowled, grabbing a bottle of shampoo—"specially formulated for thin, limp, lifeless hair"—and tossed it under the sink, reasoning that if Jim stayed for a shower, he didn't need to be confronted with evidence of her problem locks. "She's . . . um. Sick, I think. She had a lot to drink." Todd continued, "and she was . . . well . . . I don't know what else she was doing, really, but I found her in the bathroom and we were kind of hanging out for a while, and then she kind of passed out, and no she's, um, getting kind of loud. She told me to call you first, though," he added. "Before she passed out." Rose could hear her sister shouting, "I'm King of the World!" "How nice of her," she said,

throwing her prescription zit cream and a box of pantyliners in after the shampoo. "Why don't you just take her home?" "I don't want to really get involved. . . ." "Tell me, Todd," Rose began pleasantly, in the voice she'd practiced in law school, the one she imagined using to sucker witnesses into telling her what she needed to know. "When you and my sister were hanging out in the bathroom, what exactly was going on?" There was silence on the other end. "Now, I don't need to know specifics," said Rose, "but I'm inferring that you and my sister are already, to use your word, 'involved.' So why don't you be a stand-up guy about it and take her home?" "Look, I think she needs help, and I've really got to go. . . I borrowed my brother's car, I've got to get it back ..." "Todd ..." "Well, is there someone else I should call?" he asked. "Your parents? Your mother or something?" Rose felt her heart stop. She closed her eyes. "Where are you?" "The Cherry Hill Hilton. The high school reunion." Click. Todd was no more. Rose leaned against the bathroom door. Here it was—her real

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life, the truth of who she was, barreling down on her like a bus with bad brakes. Here was the truth—she wasn't the kind of person Jim could fall in love with. She wasn't what she'd made herself out to be—a cheerful, uncomplicated girl, a normal girl with a happy, orderly life, a girl who wore pretty shoes and had nothing more pressing on her mind than whether ER was a rerun this week. The truth was in the exercise tape she didn't have time to unwrap, let alone exercise to; the truth was her hairy legs and ugly underwear. Most of all, the truth was her sister, her gorgeous, messed-up, fantastically unhappy and astonishingly irresponsible sister. Only why tonight? Why couldn't Maggie have let her enjoy this one night? "Fuck," she groaned softly. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." And then Rose padded back into her bedroom, groping for her glasses, sweatpants, boots, and car keys. She scribbled a quick note for Jim ("Family emergency, be back soon") and hurried to the elevator, steeling herself to drive off into the night and pull her sister's chestnuts out of the fire yet again.

The hotel had a "Welcome! Class of '89" banner still drooping from the front door. Rose stomped through the lobby—all faux marble and crimson carpet—and into the deserted lounge, which smelled of cigarette smoke and beer. There were tables covered in cheap red-and-white paper tablecloths with plastic pom-poms as centerpieces. In the corner, a guy and a girl were making out, leaning drunkenly against the wall. Rose squinted toward them. Not Maggie. She walked to the bar, where a man in a stained white shirt was putting away glasses and where her sister, in a tiny dress that was inappropriate for November—or, really, for any appearance in public—was slumped on a barstool. Rose paused for a minute, considering her strategy. From a distance, Maggie looked just fine. You didn't notice the smeared makeup, the reek of booze and barf that surrounded her like a thick cloud, until you got up close. The bartender gave Rose a sympathetic look. "She's been here

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for half an hour," he said. "I've been watching out for her. She's just had water to drink." Terrific, Rose thought. Where were you when she was probably getting gang-banged in the bathroom? "Thanks," she said instead, and shook her sister's shoulder. Not gently. "Maggie?" Maggie opened one eye and scowled. "Leame lone," she said. Rose gathered the straps of her sister's black dress and lifted. Maggie's butt rose six inches off the seat. "Party's over." Maggie tottered to her feet and kicked Rose sharply in the shin with one silver sandal. Make that one Christian Louboutin silver stiletto sandal, Rose noticed as she looked down, one silver sandal coveted for three months, purchased just two weeks ago, and, she'd thought, still snug in its shoe box. One silver sandal now stained and splotched with the sticky residue of she didn't want to know what. "Hey, those are mine!" Rose said, shaking her sister by her dress. Maggie, she thought, feeling the familiar fury coursing through her veins. Maggie takes everything. "Fuck youuuu!" Maggie brayed, and twisted her body from side to side, trying to free herself from Rose's grasp. "I can't believe you!" Rose hissed, hanging on to the straps as Maggie thrashed, and the toes of Maggie's shoes—her shoes—kicked at her shins. Insult to injury, she

thought, imagining the bruises she'd find in the morning. "I haven't even worn them yet!" "Easy there," the bartender called, clearly hoping that this was going to turn into a sister-on-sister catfight. Rose ignored him and half dragged, half carried her sister out of the bar and deposited Maggie in her passenger seat. "If you're going to throw up," Rose advised, yanking the seat belt around her sister, "give me a little advance warning." "I'll send a telegram," Maggie muttered, reaching into her purse for her lighter. "Oh, no," said Rose, "don't even think about smoking in here." She flicked on the lights, wrenched the steering wheel to the right,

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and started driving out of the deserted parking lot and onto the highway, heading toward the Ben Franklin Bridge and Bella Vista, where Maggie had the most recent in her extended series of apartments. "Not this way," said Maggie. "Okay," said Rose. Her hands tightened on the wheel in frustration. "So where are we going?" "Take me to Sydelle's," Maggie mumbled. "Why?" "Just take me, okay? Jesus. I don't need to play twenty questions." "Of course not," Rose said tightly. "I'm just your personal taxi driver. No need to give me an explanation. Just call my number and I'll show up." "Bitch," Maggie said thickly. Her head lolled against the back of the seat, rolling back and forth each time Rose yanked on the wheel. "You know," Rose said, in her most reasonable tone, "it is possible to attend one's high school reunion and not wind up drinking so much vodka that you don't even notice that you've passed out in the ladies' room." "Whaddare you, a DARE officer?" asked Maggie. "It's possible," Rose continued, "to simply attend, to reacquaint yourself with old friends, to dance, to dine, to drink responsibly, to wear clothes that you've bought for yourself instead of the ones you've taken from my closet ..." Maggie opened her eyes and stared at her sister, noting the large white plastic hair clip. "Hey, 1994 called," she said. "It wants its hairstyle back." "What?" "Don't you know that nobody wears those anymore?" "So why don't you tell me what the really fashionable girls are wearing when they have to go pick up their drunk sisters in the middle of the night," said Rose. "I'd love to know. Have Nicky and Paris Hilton launched a line for us yet?"

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"Whatever," Maggie mumbled, staring out the window. "Are you happy this way?" Rose continued. "Drinking every night, running around with God knows who ..." Maggie rolled down the window and ignored her. "You could go back to school," said Rose. "You could get a better job." "And be just like you," Maggie said. "Wouldn't that be fun? No sex in, what's it been, Rose, three years? Four? When was the last time a guy looked at you?" "I could have plenty of guys looking at me if I wore your clothes," Rose said. "Like they'd fit," said Maggie. "Your leg wouldn't fit into this dress." "Oh, right," said Rose. "I forgot that being a size zero is the most important thing in the world. Because it's obviously made you so successful and happy." She honked the horn longer than was necessary to get the car in front of her to move. "You've got problems," Rose said. "You need help." Maggie threw back her head, cackling. "And you're just perfect, right?" Rose shook her head, thinking of what she could say to shut her sister up, but by the time she'd formulated her line of attack, Maggie's head was resting on the window, her eyes shut tight.

Chanel, the golden retriever—Sydelle the Stepmonster's dog—turned in wild circles up and down the length of the yard as Rose drove up the driveway. A light went on in an upstairs bedroom, and another light appeared in the downstairs hall as Rose grabbed Maggie by her straps and hauled her onto her feet. "Get up," she ordered. Maggie stumbled in her sister's grasp, weaving up the driveway until she arrived at the front door of the oddly shaped modern house that their father and stepmother called home. The hedges were pruned into tortured curlicues, per Sydelle's instructions, and

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the doormat read, "Welcome Friends!" Rose had always figured the mat had come with the house, as their stepmother was neither particularly welcoming nor especially friendly. Maggie staggered up the

path and bent over. Rose thought she was throwing up until she saw Maggie flip over one of the flagstones and fish out a key. "You can go now," said Maggie, leaning against the door and fumbling with the lock. She waved good-bye without turning around. "Thanks for the ride; now, get lost." The front door flew open as Sydelle Levine Feller stepped out into the night, lips pursed, bathrobe belted tightly around her five foot figure, face gleaming with skin cream. In spite of hours of exercise and thousands of dollars' worth of Botox shots and the recent addition of tattooed eyeliner, Sydelle Levine Feller was not a pretty woman. For one thing, she had tiny, dull brown eyes. For another, she had enormous, flaring nostrils—the kind of thing Rose always figured that the surgeons couldn't correct, because surely Sydelle had to have noticed that she could easily fit a Hebrew National salami up each one. "She's drunk," Sydelle said, her nostrils flaring. "What a surprise." As always, she addressed her most hurtful remarks to the air three inches to the left of the recipient's face, as if she were directing her observation to some invisible onlooker who would undoubtedly see her side of things. Rose could remember dozens—no, hundreds—of those catty observations zinging past her own left ear . . . and Maggie's. Maggie, you need to apply yourself to your schoolwork. Rose, I don't think you need a second helping. "Can't get anything by you, can I, Sydelle?" asked Maggie. Rose snorted in spite of herself, and for a moment, the two of them were a team again, united against a common, formidable enemy. "Sydelle, I need to talk to my father," said Rose. "And I," Maggie announced, "need to use the facilities." Rose looked up and saw the glint of her father's glasses through the bedroom window. His tall, thin, slightly stooped frame was floating in pajama bottoms and an old T-shirt, and his

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fine gray hair drifted up around his bald spot. When did he get so old? Rose thought. He looked like a ghost. In the years since they'd been married, Sydelle had gotten more vivid—her lipstick increasing brighter, her highlights ever more golden—and her father had faded, like a photograph left in the sun. "Hey, Dad!" she called. Her father turned toward her voice and started to open the window. "Darling, I'll take care of this," Sydelle called up toward the bedroom window. Her words were sweet. Her tone was icy. Michael Feller paused with his hands at the bottom of the window, and Rose could imagine his face crumpling into its familiar expression of sadness and defeat. An instant later, the light flicked off, and her father vanished from view. "Shit," Rose muttered, although she wasn't surprised. "Dad!" she yelled again, helplessly. Sydelle shook her head. "No," she said. "No, no, no." "This episode brought to you by the word No," said Maggie, and Rose laughed, then returned her attention to her stepmother. She remembered the first day Sydelle had showed up at their apartment. Their father had been dating her for two months and had gotten dressed up for this occasion. Rose recalled him tugging at the sleeves of his sport jacket, readjusting the knot of his tie. "She's very excited about meeting both of you," he told Rose, who was then twelve, and Maggie, who was ten. Rose remembered thinking that Sydelle was the most glamorous woman she'd ever seen. She'd worn gold bracelets and gold earrings and shiny gold sandals. Her hair was streaked with ash and copper, her eyebrows were plucked to thin golden parentheses. Even her lipstick had a golden tinge. Rose was dazzled. It wasn't until later that she noticed Sydelle's less-lovely features—the way that her mouth fell naturally into a frown, how her eyes were the color of a muddy puddle, the nostrils that loomed like twin Lincoln Tunnels in the center of her face. At dinner, Sydelle slid the bread basket out of her reach. "None for us!" she'd simpered, with what Rose thought was supposed to

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be a conspiratorial wink. "We girls need to watch our figures!" She pulled the same trick with the butter. When Rose made the mistake of reaching for a second helping of potatoes, Sydelle pursed her lips. "It takes the stomach twenty minutes to send a message to the brain that it is full," she lectured. "Why don't you wait a while and see if you really want those?" Her father and Maggie got ice cream for dessert. Rose got a dish of grapes. Sydelle had nothing. "I don't care for sweets," she said. The

whole performance made Rose feel like throwing up ... throwing up, and then sneaking back to the refrigerator for a belated bowl of ice cream. Which, if she remembered correctly, was exactly what she'd done. Now she stared at Sydelle, imploring, wanting desperately to be done with this task, to drop Maggie off and hurry back to Jim ... if he was even still there. "I'm very sorry," Sydelle said, in tone indicating that she was really anything but sorry. "If she's been drinking, she can't come in." "Well, I haven't been drinking. Let me talk to my father." Sydelle shook her head again. "Maggie is not your responsibility," she recited, parroting the speech she'd no doubt memorized from a Tough Love book. Or, more likely, a Tough Love pamphlet. Sydelle wasn't much of a reader. "Let me talk to him," Rose said again, knowing it was hopeless. Sydelle turned her body so that she was blocking the doorway, as if Rose and Maggie might try to sneak in past her. And Maggie wasn't improving the situation. "Hey, Sydelle!" she cawed, shoving her sister aside. "You look great!" She squinted at her stepmother's face. "You did something new, right? Chin lift? Cheek implant? Li'l Botox? What's your secret?" "Maggie," Rose whispered, grabbing her sister's shoulders and telepathically begging her to shut up. Which Maggie didn't do. "Way to spend our inheritance!" she howled. Sydelle finally looked right at them, instead of at the space between the two girls. Rose could practically hear what she was thinking, which was that her daughter, the much-vaunted Marcia,

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would never behave in such a fashion. Marcia—or My Marcia, as she was commonly called—was eighteen and a freshman at Syracuse by the time Sydelle and her father had wed. My Marcia, as Sydelle never tired of reminding Rose and Maggie, wore a perfect size six. My Marcia had been a member of the National Honor Society and the homecoming court. My Marcia had joined the best sorority at Syracuse, had graduated with honors, had worked for three years as an assistant to one of the top interior decorators in New York City before marrying a dot-com zillionaire and gracefully retreating into motherhood and a seven-bedroom showplace in Short Hills. "You both need to leave," said Sydelle, and closed the door, leaving Maggie and Rose out in the cold. Maggie stared up at the bedroom window, perhaps hoping that their father would toss his wallet down. Finally, she turned and headed to the driveway, pausing only to yank one of Sydelle's curlicued hedges out of the ground and throw it at the doorstep, where it landed in a rattling shower of dirt. As Rose watched, Maggie pulled off the purloined high heels and hurled them at her sister on the lawn. "Here you go," she said. Rose's hands curled into fists. She should have been in her apartment, in bed with Jim. Instead, here she was in the middle of the night, in the middle of a frozen lawn in New Jersey, trying to help her sister, who didn't even want to be helped. Maggie crossed the lawn on her bare feet and began limping down the road. "Where do you think you're going?" Rose called. "Somewhere. Anywhere." Maggie said. "Don't worry about me, I'll be okay." She'd made it almost to the corner before Rose caught up. "Let's go," Rose said roughly. "You can stay with me." Even as the words were exiting her lips, her internal alarms were sounding shrieking whoops of warning. Inviting Maggie to stay was like offering to host a hurricane, which she'd learned the hard way five years ago when Maggie had moved in with her for three horrible weeks. Maggie in your house meant that money would go missing along with your best lipstick, favorite pair of earrings, and costliest shoes.

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Your car would vanish for days at a time and reappear with an empty gas tank and brimming ashtrays. Your house keys would disappear, and your clothes would waltz off their hangers, never to be seen again. Maggie in residence meant mess and confusion, dramatic scenes, tears and fights and hurt feelings. It meant the end of any peace and quiet she might have been foolish enough to hope for. Quite possibly, she thought with a shudder, it meant the end of Jim. "Come on," Rose said again. Maggie shook her head back and forth, a child's exaggerated no. Rose sighed. "It'll only be for the night," she said. But at the touch of Rose's hand on her shoulder, Maggie whirled around. "No it

won't," she said. "What?" "Because I got evicted again, all right?" "What happened?" asked Rose, and restrained herself from adding, "this time." "I got mixed up," Maggie muttered. Mixed up, Rose had long ago learned, was Maggie's shorthand for the ways the world confounded her, the ways that her learning disabilities had her hamstrung and crippled. Numbers tripped her up, fractions and directions and balancing a checkbook were absolute impossibilities. Tell her to double a recipe and she couldn't. Ask her to find her way from Point A to Point B and Maggie would usually wind up at Point K, where she'd unfailingly locate a bar and have a few guys clustered around her by the time Rose showed up to retrieve her. "Fine," said Rose. "We'll figure it out in the morning." Maggie wrapped her arms around herself, and stood, skinny and shivering. She really should have been an actress, Rose thought. It was a shame all of this dramatic ability never got put to better use than extracting cash, shoes, and temporary housing from her family. "I'll be fine," said Maggie. "I'll just stay here until it gets light, and then ..." She sniffled. Goose bumps dotted her arms and shoulders. "I'll find somewhere to go."

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"Come on," said Rose. "You don't want me," Maggie repeated sadly. "Nobody does." "Just get in the car." Rose turned and started walking toward the driveway, and she wasn't a bit surprised when, after a moment, Maggie followed. There were some things in life you could always count on, and Maggie needing help, Maggie needing money, Maggie just plain needing was one of them.

Maggie was quiet during the twenty-minute ride to Philadelphia, while Rose tried to decide how she was going to keep her sister from noticing that there was a pantsless partner in her bed. "You take the couch," she whispered once they were in her apartment, hurrying to snatch Jim's suit off the floor. Maggie didn't miss a thing. "My, my," she drawled. "What have we here?" Her hand darted into the bundle of clothing in Rose's arms and emerged, seconds later, triumphantly clutching Jim's wallet. Rose grabbed for it, but Maggie jerked it away. So it begins, thought Rose. "Give that back," she whispered. Maggie flipped the wallet open. "James . Danvers," she recited loudly. "Society Hill Towers, Philadelphia, Pee-Aye. Very nice." "Shh!" Rose whispered, casting an alarmed glance at the wall behind which James . Danvers presumably slumbered. "Nineteen sixty-four," Maggie read in a stentorian voice. Rose could practically hear the gears turning as Maggie struggled to do the math. "He's thirty-five?" she finally asked. Rose grabbed the wallet from Maggie's hand. "Go to sleep," she hissed. Maggie selected a T-shirt from the clothes draped over Rose's treadmill and pulled her dress over her head. "Don't say it," she warned. "You're too thin," Rose blurted, shocked by the sight of the prominent sweep of Maggie's collarbone and the individual bumps of her vertebra, made all the more pathetic by her ridiculous store-bought breasts.

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"And you haven't been using the Ab Master I bought you," Maggie retorted, yanking the shirt over her head and snuggling into the couch. Rose opened her mouth, then shut it. Just get her to sleep, she told herself. "Your boyfriend looks cute, though," Maggie said, and yawned. "Could you bring me a glass of water and two Advils, please?" Rose ground her teeth, but fetched the medication and the water, and watched Maggie gulp the pills, chug the water, and close her eyes without so much as a "thank you." In her bedroom, Jim still lay on his side, snoring softly. She rested one hand lightly on his arm. "Jim," she whispered. He didn't move. Rose contemplated crawling into bed with him, dragging the blankets up over her head and handling the morning in the morning. She glanced back at the door, looked down at Jim, and realized that she couldn't. She couldn't sleep with a naked man with her sister in the next room. Her job was, and had always been, to set an example for Maggie. Shacking up with a man who was sort of her boss didn't qualify. And what if he wanted sex again? Maggie would overhear, or worse, walk in, and stare. And laugh. Instead, Rose pulled an extra blanket from the foot of the bed, grabbed a pillow from the floor, tiptoed back into the living room, and arranged herself on the

armchair, thinking that in the annals of romantic history, this was probably the worst way a night like hers could end. She shut her eyes and listened for Maggie's breathing, the way she always had through all the years they'd shared a bedroom. Then she rolled over, trying to stretch out as much as she could. Why didn't she at least get the couch? Why had she invited Maggie over at all? Just then, Maggie started talking. "Remember Honey Bun?" Rose closed her eyes in the darkness. "Yes," she said. "I remember." Honey Bun had come to them in the spring, when Rose was eight and Maggie was six. Their mother, Caroline, had Awoken them up early on a Thursday morning. "Shh, don't tell!" she'd

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whispered, hurrying them both into their best party dresses, then having them put on sweaters and coats on top. "It's a special surprise!" They'd called good-bye to their father, still lingering over coffee and the business section, hustled past the kitchen where the countertops were crammed with boxes of chocolate and the sink was filled with dirty dishes, and climbed into the station wagon. Instead of turning into the school entrance, the way she did most mornings, Caroline steered right past it, and kept going. "Mom, you missed the turn!" called Rose. "No school today, honey," their mother singsonged over her shoulder. "Today's a special day!" "Yay!" said Maggie, who'd gotten the coveted front seat. "Why?" asked Rose, who'd been looking forward to the day at school because it was Library Day and she'd get to pick out more books. "Because something very exciting has happened," their mother said. Rose could remember exactly how her mother looked that day, the way her brown eyes glowed, and the gauzy turquoise scarf she'd wrapped around her neck. Caroline started talking very quickly, her words tumbling over each other, looking over her shoulder to tell Rose the big news. "It's candy," she said. "Fudge, really. Well, different than fudge. Better than fudge. Like divinity. Have you girls ever had that?" Rose and Maggie shook their heads. "I was reading in Newsweek about this woman who made cheesecakes," Caroline rambled, speeding around a curve and lurching to a stop at a traffic light. "And all of her friends raved about the cheesecakes, and first she got one supermarket in her neighborhood to carry them, and then she got a distributor, and now her cheesecakes are carried in eleven states. Eleven!" A chorus of honks came from behind them. "Mom," said Rose. "Green light." "Oh, right, right," said Caroline, stepping on the gas. "So last night I was thinking, well, I can't make cheesecake, but I can make

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fudge. My mother made the best fudge in the world, with walnuts and marshmallows, so I called her for the recipe and I was up all night, making batches and batches, had to go to the supermarket twice for ingredients, but here!" And she jerked the wheel sideways, pulling into a gas station. Rose noticed that her mother's fingernails were broken and sooty brown, as if she'd been digging through dirt. "Here! Try!" She reached into her purse and came up with two wax-paper-wrapped squares. "and M for Fudge," they read, in what looked to Rose like eyeliner. "I had to improvise, of course, the packaging will change, but taste it and tell me whether that's not the best fudge you've ever had in your life!" Rose and Maggie unwrapped the fudge. "Delicious!" said Maggie, with her mouth full. "Ooh, yum," said Rose, struggling to swallow the lump of fudge, which was sticking in her throat. "and M for Rose and Maggie!" said their mother, starting to drive again. "Why can't it be M and ?" asked Maggie. "Where are we going?" asked Rose. "To Lord and Taylor," their mother said gaily. "I thought about supermarkets, of course, but what I decided is that this is really a gourmet product, not a grocery item and it should be sold in boutiques and department stores." "Does Dad know about this?" asked Rose. "We're going to surprise him," said Caroline. "Take off those sweaters and make sure your faces are clean. We're making a sales call, girls!" Rose turned on her side, remembering the rest of the day—the manager's polite smile when her mother had upended her handbag on the costume jewelry counter and dumped out two dozen squares of wax-paper-wrapped and M fudge (and two squares reading "M and

, " which Maggie had changed in the car). How their mother had whisked them up to the girls' department and bought them

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matching rabbit-fur muffs. How they'd had lunch in the Lord and Taylor tearoom, cream-cheese-and-olive sandwiches with the crusts cut off, tiny pickles barely longer than Rose's baby finger, slices of angel food cake with strawberries and whipped cream. How beautiful their mother looked, her cheeks flaring pink, her eyes sparkling, her hands fluttering like birds, ignoring her own lunch as she described her sales ideas, her marketing plans, how and M Fudge would be as popular as Keebler or Nabisco. "We're starting small, girls, but everyone has to start somewhere," she'd said. Maggie nodded and told Caroline how good the fudge was and asked for seconds on sandwiches and cake, and Rose sat there, trying to force down a few bites of her lunch and wondering whether she'd been the only one to notice the manager's raised eyebrows and overly polite smile when all that candy came cascading onto the countertop. After lunch they went walking through the mall. "Each of you can get one present," their mother said. "Anything you want. Anything at all!" Rose asked for a Nancy Drew book. Maggie wanted a puppy. Their mother didn't hesitate. "Of course a puppy!" she'd said, her voice rising. Rose noticed other shoppers staring at the three of them—two little girls in party dresses, one woman in a skirt printed with red poppies and a turquoise scarf, tall and beautiful, carrying six shopping bags and talking way too loud. "We should have gotten a puppy a long time ago!" "Dad's allergic," Rose said. Her mother either didn't hear, or decided to ignore her. She grabbed her daughters by their hands and hurried them over to the pet shop, where Maggie picked out a small tan cocker spaniel puppy and named it Honey Bun. "Mom was nuts, but she was fun, wasn't she?" Maggie asked in her underwater voice. "Yeah, she was," said Rose, remembering how they'd come home, laden with shopping bags and Honey Bun's cardboard carrying case, to their father sitting on the couch, still in his suit and tie from work, waiting.

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"Girls, go to your room," he'd said, taking Caroline by the hand and leading her to the kitchen. Rose and Maggie, carrying Honey Bun in her box, walked quietly upstairs, but even through the closed bedroom door, they could hear their mother's voice rising to a shriek. Michael, it was a good idea, it was a legitimate business idea, there's no reason it won't work, and I just bought the girls a few treats. I'm their mother, I can do what I want, I can take them out of school once in a while, it doesn't matter we had a nice day, Michael, a special day, a day they'll always remember, and I'm sorry I forgot to call the school, but you shouldn't have worried, they were with me and I'm THEIR MOTHER I'm THEIR MOTHER I AM THEIR MOTHER "Oh, no," Maggie whispered, as the puppy started to whine. "Are they fighting? Is it our fault?" "Shh," said Rose. She gathered the puppy into her arms. Maggie's thumb crept into her mouth as she leaned against her sister, and they listened to their mother's screams, now punctuated with the sound of things being thrown and things breaking, and their father's murmur, which seemed to consist of a single word: Please. "How long did we have Honey Bun?" asked Maggie. Rose twisted in the armchair and struggled to remember. "A day, I think," she said. It was coming back to her now. The next morning, she'd gotten up early to walk the dog. The hallway was dark; their parents' bedroom door was closed. Their father was sitting at the kitchen table alone. "Your mother's resting," he said. "Can you take care of the dog? Can you get breakfast for yourself and Maggie?" "Sure," said Rose. She gave her father a long look. "Is Mom . . . is she okay?" Her father sighed, and restacked the newspaper. "She's just tired, Rose. She's resting. Try to keep quiet, and let her rest. Take care of your sister." "I will," Rose promised. When she came home from school that afternoon, the dog was gone. Her parents' bedroom door was still

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closed. And here she was, twenty-two years later, still keeping that promise, still taking care of her

sister. "It was really good fudge, wasn't it?" asked Maggie. In the dark, she sounded like her six-year-old self—happy and hopeful, a merry little girl who wanted to believe everything her mother told her. "It was delicious," said Rose. "Good night, Maggie," she said, in a tone she hoped would make it clear that she wasn't interested in any more discussion.

When Jim Danvers opened his eyes the next morning, he was alone in the bed. He stretched, scratched himself, then got to his feet, wrapped a towel around his waist, and went in search of Rose. The bathroom door was locked, and he could hear water running behind it. He knocked gently, sweetly, seductively, even, imagining Rose in the shower, Rose's skin flushed and steamy, Rose's bare chest beaded with water . . . The door swung open, and a girl who was not Rose stalked out. "Hlgho," said Jim, struggling for some combination of "hello" and "who are you?" The strange girl was slender, with long reddish-brown hair piled on top of her head, a delicate heart-shaped face, and full pink lips. She had painted toenails, tanned legs that stretched toward her chin, and hard nipples (he couldn't help but notice) poking against the threadbare front of her T-shirt. She scowled at him sleepily. "Was that even English?" she asked. Her eyes were wide and brown and rimmed with layers of liner and sleep-smearred mascara—hard, watchful eyes, the color of Rose's eyes, but somehow very different. Jim tried it again. "Hello," he said. "Is, um, Rose around?" The strange girl cocked her thumb toward the kitchen. "In there," she said. She leaned against the wall. Jim became aware that a towel was all he was wearing. The girl cocked one leg behind her, resting her foot flat against the wall, and eyed him slowly, up and down.

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"You're Rose's roommate?" he guessed, unable to remember whether Rose had mentioned a roommate. The girl shook her head, just as Rose rounded the corner, fully clothed, shoes and lipstick on, with two cups of coffee in her hands. "Oh!" she said, and stopped so quickly that coffee sloshed backward, splashing her wrists and the front of her blouse. "Oh. You guys have met?" Mutely, Jim shook his head. The girl said nothing . . . just kept staring at him with a small, sphinxlike grin.

"Maggie, this is Jim," Rose said. "Jim, this is Maggie Feller. My sister." "Hello," said Jim, and bobbed his head, clutching his towel tightly. Maggie gave a short nod. They stood there for an instant, the three of them, Jim feeling ridiculous in his towel, Rose, with coffee dripping from her sleeves, and Maggie staring back and forth between them. "She came last night," said Rose. "She was at her high-school reunion, and ..." "I don't think he needs details," said Maggie. "He can wait for the E! True Hollywood Story like everyone else." "Sorry," said Rose. Maggie sniffed, turned on her heel, and stalked back to the living room. Rose sighed. "Sorry," she said again. "It's always a production with her." Jim nodded. "Hey," he said quietly, "I want to hear all about it. Just give me a minute . . ." he said, nodding toward the bathroom. "Oh!" said Rose, "oh, I'm sorry." "Don't worry," he said, whispering, nuzzling her cheek and the soft flesh of her neck with his stubble. She trembled, and the remaining coffee quivered in the cups. When Jim and Rose left a half-hour later, Maggie had returned to the couch. One bare foot and smooth, naked calf poked out from the blankets. Rose was sure she wasn't sleeping. She was certain

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that this—the tanned curve of her sister's leg, the scarlet toenails— was a calculated display. She hustled Jim out the door, thinking that this had been what she'd wanted—to perform the classic kittenish Hollywood wake-up, all smudgy and glamorous and gorgeous, with the slow fluttering of eyelashes, the contented smile. And now Maggie got to be the smudgy, sexy, glamorous one, while she was bustling around like Betty Crocker, offering people coffee. "Are you working today?" he asked. She nodded. "Work on the weekends," he mused. "I'd forgotten what being an associate was like." He kissed her good-bye at her front door—a brisk, businesslike peck—and looked in his wallet for his parking stub. "Huh," he said, frowning, "I could've sworn there was a hundred bucks in here." Maggie

Rose thought to herself, even as she reached into her wallet for a twenty. Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, who always makes me pay.

TWO

Morning. Ella Hirsch lay alone in the center of her bed and assessed her various aches, pains, and maladies. She began with her cranky left ankle, progressed to her throbbing right hip, paused at her intestines, which felt both empty and knotted at the same time, and moved steadily upward, past the breasts that were shrinking each year, up over her eyes (the cataract surgery last month had been a success), and on to the hair that she wore unfashionably long and dyed a warm auburn—her one vanity. Not bad, not bad, thought Ella, as she swung first her left leg, then her right one, out of the bed, resting her feet lightly on the cool tiled floor. Ira, her husband, had never wanted tiles—"Too hard!" he'd said, "Too cold!" And so they'd had wall-to-wall carpeting. Beige. The day shiva was over, Ella had been on the phone, and two weeks later, the carpet was gone and she had her tile—a creamy white marble that felt smooth under her feet. Ella put her hands on top of her thighs, rocked back and then forth, once and then twice, and struggled, groaning slightly, out of the queen-sized bed—her second apres-Ira purchase. It was the Monday after Thanksgiving, and Golden Acres, "a retirement community for active seniors," was unusually quiet, because most of those active seniors had spent the holiday with their children and

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grandchildren. Ella, too, had celebrated, in her own little way. She'd had a turkey sandwich for dinner. She smoothed out her quilt and considered the day—breakfast, and the poem she had to finish, then she'd take the trolley to the bus stop and take the bus to her weekly volunteer session at the pet shelter. Then she'd come home for lunch and a nap, and maybe she'd read for an hour or two—she was halfway through taping a book of Margaret Atwood short stories for the vision impaired. Dinner was early—"Four o'clock's the late seating here," she'd heard somebody joking, and it was funny because it was true—and then the Clubhouse had Movie Night. Another empty day, stuffed as full as she could manage. She'd made a mistake, moving here. Florida had been Ira's idea. "A new start," he'd said, fanning the brochures out over the kitchen table, with the lights glinting off his bald spot, his gold watch and wedding ring. Ella had barely glanced at the glossy photographs of sandy beaches, surf and palm trees, white buildings with elevators and wheelchair ramps and showers with built-in stainless steel grab bars. She'd thought only that Golden Acres, or any of the dozen communities just like it, would be a good place to hide. No more former friends and neighbors to stop her at the post office or the grocery store, to place well-meaning hands on her forearm and say, How are you two holding up? How long has it been now? She'd been almost happy, almost hopeful, packing up their house in Michigan. She hadn't known, couldn't have guessed, could never have figured that the whole point of retirement community was children. They hadn't showed that in the brochures, she thought bitterly—how every living room she'd visit would have every available surface crammed with pictures of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. How every conversation would eventually make its way back to that most precious commodity. My daughter loved that movie. My son bought a car just like that. My granddaughter's applying to college. My grandson said that senator's a crook.

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Ella kept herself apart from the other women. She stayed busy. Pet shelter, hospital, Meals on Wheels, shelving books at the library, pricing goods at the thrift store, the column she wrote for the Acres's weekly newspaper. On that morning, she sat at her kitchen table, a cup of hot tea in front of her, with sunshine gleaming on her tiled floor, and took out her notebook and pen. She was going to finish the poem she'd started last week. Not that she was much of a poet, but Lewis Feldman, the editor of the Golden Acres Gazette, had come to her in desperation after the regular poet had broken her hip. The deadline was Wednesday, and she wanted to have Tuesday free for revisions. "Just Because I'm Old,"

was the title she'd come up with. "Just because I'm old," the poem began, "because my step's a little slow, because my hair has gotten gray, because I nap most ev'ry day ..." And that was as far as she'd gotten. She sipped her tea, considering. Just because she was old . . . well, what? "I AM NOT INVISIBLE," she wrote, in big bold capital letters. Then she crossed it out. It wasn't true. She did feel she'd turned sixty and been erased, somehow, and had been invisible for the last eighteen years. Real people—young people—looked right through her. But "invisible" would be a very hard word to rhyme. She decided to come back to 'invisible' and wrote, beneath it, "I matter." Matter should be easier . . . but then, what could she rhyme that with? "I can make a good cake batter?" "I can hear the trolley's clatter?" "Even though I've gotten fatter?" Yes! Fatter was good. People at Golden Acres would identify. Especially, she thought with a smile, her almost-friend Dora, who volunteered at the thrift shop with her. Dora wore elastic-waist everything, and always ordered whipped cream with dessert. "I spent seventy years watching what I ate," she'd say, spooning a mouthful of hot fudge or cheesecake. "My Mortie's gone now, so why should I worry?" "I matter. Even though I've gotten fatter, I'm still here," Ella wrote. "I have ears to hear the sounds of life around me . . ."

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Which was true, she mused. Except the sounds of life at Golden Acres were, if she was perfectly honest, the constant drone of traffic, the occasional wail of the ambulance siren, and people picking fights with each other because they'd left their clothes in the communal dryer at the end of the hall, or put plastic bottles into the "glass only" recycling bin. Not exactly the stuff of poetry. "The ocean's gentle thunder," she wrote instead. "The sound of children laughing. The music of sun and smiles." There. That was good. The ocean part was even possible—Golden Acres was a mile away from the shore. The trolley went there. And "the music of sun and smiles." Lewis would like that. In his life before Golden Acres, Lewis had run a chain of hardware stores in Utica, New York. He liked editing—"newspapering," he called it—a lot better. Every time she saw him, he had a red grease pencil tucked behind his ear, as if he might be called upon at any minute to dash off a headline, or edit some copy. Ella closed her notebook and took a sip of her tea. Eight-thirty, and it was already getting hot. She rose from her seat thinking only of the full day she had before her, the full week after that. Only, as she walked, she could hear the very thing she'd written about—the sound of children's laughter. Boys, from the sound of it. She could hear their shouts, and their sandals slapping as they ran back and forth along the corridor outside of her door, chasing the tiny, darting chameleons who sunned themselves on the ledge, most likely. They were Mavis Gold's grandsons, she thought. Mavis had mentioned she was getting ready for a visit. "I got one! I got one!" called one of the boys, his voice full of excitement. Ella closed her eyes. She should go outside and tell them not to be afraid, that the chameleons had more to fear from their clumsy, sweaty boy-palms and boy-fingers than the boys had to fear from the chameleons. She should go and tell them to stop shouting before Mr. Boehr in 6-B came out and started yelling about his insomnia. Instead, she turned her face from the window before she let her In Her Shoes 35 self open the blinds and look at the boys. Children hurt . . . even though it had been more than fifty years since her daughter had been a child, and more than twenty years since she'd last seen her granddaughters. Ella set her lips in a tight line and walked resolutely toward the bathroom. She wouldn't go down that road today. She wouldn't think about the daughter-who-was-gone, or the grandchildren she would never get to know, about the life that was snatched away from her, excised cleanly and completely as a tumor, leaving not even a scar for her to cherish, to remember it by.

THREE

More and more, Rose Feller was starting to think that her boss had lost his mind. Sure, she knew that everyone thought his or her boss was crazy. All of her friends—well, Amy—had the usual spate of complaints: the unreasonable demands, the inconsiderate treatment, the drunken ass-patting at the

company picnic. But now, filing into the conference room for the pep rally that Don Dommel had instituted as a Friday afternoon ritual, Rose was once again faced with the possibility that one of her firm's founding partners wasn't just eccentric or odd, or any of those polite adjectives reserved for powerful men, but he was actually honest-to-God nuts. "People!" the man of the hour bellowed, thwacking a PowerPoint chart of the firm's billable hours with his fist. "We have GOT to do BETTER than THIS! THIS," he continued, "is GOOD, but not GREAT. And with the talent we've got, even GREAT is NOT GOOD ENOUGH! We have to GRIND DOWN the handrail of mediocrity and OLLIE OVER to excellence!" "Huh?" muttered the associate on Rose's right. He had frizzy gingery hair and his skin, pale as skim milk, was a badge of honor in this place, the sure sign that he was making his minimum bill

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able hours and, hence, not getting out much. Simon Something, Rose thought. Rose shrugged at him, and slumped in her seat. How many law firms had pep rallies, anyhow? she thought. How many associates had received custom-made skateboards with the words "DOMMEL LAW" painted on the top, instead of the customary cash, for their holiday bonuses last year? How many managing partners delivered weekly speeches couched almost exclusively in sports metaphors, followed by an overamplified rendition of "I Believe I Can Fly"? How many law firms had theme music at all? Not many, Rose thought sourly. "Is an Ollie a person or a thing?" Simon Something persisted. Rose gave another shrug, hoping, as she did each week, that Dommel's Xtreme gaze wouldn't fall on her. Don Dommel had always been a jock, Rose knew. He'd jogged through the seventies, felt the burn during the eighties, even finished a few triathalons before plunging headlong into the brave new world of extreme sports and taking his law firm along with him. At some point past his fiftieth birthday he'd decided that conventional exercise, no matter how strenuous, just wasn't enough. Don Dommel didn't just want to be fit, he wanted to be edgy and hip, radical and cool. Don Dommel wanted to be a fifty-three-year-old lawyer on a skateboard. Don Dommel, apparently, saw no contradiction between those two things. He bought two specially-made skateboards and found a semi-homeless kid who seemed to live in Love Park to coach him (technically, the kid worked in the mail room, but nobody'd ever seen so much as the tip of his dreadlocks down there). He constructed a wooden ramp inside of the law firm's parking garage, spent every lunch hour on it, even after he'd broken his wrist, bruised his tailbone, and developed a limp that had him lurching through the firm's halls like an imperfectly rehearsed drag queen. And it wasn't enough that he himself wanted to become an urban warrior. Don Dommel had to extend his vision to the entirety

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of the firm. One Friday, Rose had come into work and found a nylon jersey shoved into her mail slot, with her last name on the back above the words I Can Fly! "Please," Rose had said to her secretary. "I can barely walk before I've had my coffee." But the jerseys weren't optional. A firm-wide e-mail said that all associates should wear them every Friday. The week after that, once she'd reluctantly tugged the jersey over her shoulders, Rose had put her mug under the coffee dispenser only to find that it, plus all of the firm's water-coolers and soda machines, were dispensing only Gatorade. Which, the last time Rose had checked, wasn't caffeinated. Which meant it was going to do her no good at all. So now she sat miserably in a seat in the center of the third row with her fly jersey pulled over her suit jacket sipping warm sports beverage and wishing desperately that she had coffee. "This is getting ridiculous," she murmured to herself, as Dommel once again dispensed with the afternoon's advertisement topic ("Effective Depositions," Rose remembered) in favor of a video of Tony Hawk highlights. "Psst," said Simon, out of the corner of his mouth, as Dommel tore into a cringing first-year. ("YOU! DO YOU BELIEVE YOU CAN SOAR?") Rose glanced at him. "Psst? Did you actually just say 'psst'?" "Are we in a detective novel?" Simon raised his eyebrows in an exaggerated sneaky manner and opened a brown paper bag. Rose's nose twitched at the scent of coffee. Her mouth watered. "Want some?" lie

whispered. She hesitated, looked around, considered the breaches of etiquette involved in sipping someone else's coffee, then decided that if she didn't get some caffeine, she'd be a jittery, worthless mess for the rest of the day. She ducked her head and gulped. "Thanks," she whispered. He nodded, just as Don Dommel's white-hot gaze fell upon him. "YOU!" roared Dommel. "WHAT'S YOUR DREAM?" "To be six foot ten," Simon answered without hesitation. A ripple of laughter started in the back of the room. "And to play for the

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Sixers." The laughter swelled. Don Dommel stood on the stage looking bewildered, as if his audience of loyal associates had suddenly turned into donkeys. "Maybe not as a center. I'd be happy to play guard," Simon continued. "But if that's not going to happen ..." He paused, and looked up at Don Dommel. "I'd settle for being a good lawyer." Rose giggled. Don Dommel opened his mouth, then shut it, then lurched across the stage. "THAT!" he finally announced, "THAT is the SPIRIT I'm looking for. I want EACH and EVERY ONE OF YOU to go BACK and THINK about that kind of WINNING ATTITUDE!" Dommel concluded. Rose had pulled her jersey off over her suit jacket and wadded it into her purse before his mouth was shut. "Here," Simon said, offering her his cup of coffee. "I've got more in my office, if you want this one." "Oh, thanks," Rose said, taking the cup, still scanning the sea of departing bodies for Jim's. She caught up with him by the receptionist's desk. "What in God's name was that about?" she asked. "Why don't you come into my office, and we can discuss it," he said, for the benefit of anyone within earshot, smiling a wicked smile, for her benefit alone. He closed the door and whirled her into his arms. "Umm, do I detect dark roast?" he asked, kissing her. "Don't rat me out," said Rose, kissing him back. "Never," he growled, lifting her hips (Oh, God, thought Rose, don't let him hurt himself!) and settling her on his desk. "Your secrets," he said, kissing her neck, "are safe and now his lips were sliding down her cleavage and his hands were busy with her buttons, "with me. FOUR

At eleven o'clock the following Monday morning, Maggie Feller opened her eyes and stretched her arms over her head. Rose was gone. Maggie walked to the bathroom, where she drank thirty-two ounces of water and continued with her in-depth examination of her habitat, starting with the medicine cabinet, where the shelves were so well-stocked it seemed as if her sister expected a dire medical emergency to befall Philadelphia, and that she alone would be called upon to play Florence Nightingale to the city's entire population. There were bottles of painkillers, boxes of antacids, a jumbo-sized jug of Pepto-Bismol, a family-sized box of Band-Aid bandages, and a Red Cross—approved first-aid kit. There was Midol and Advil and Nuprin, NyQuil and DayQuil, cough syrup and cold tablets and tampons. Here was a girl who made good use of the coupons at CVS, Maggie thought as she sorted through Ace bandages and multivitamins, calcium tablets and dental floss, rubbing alcohol and hydrogen peroxide, prescription-strength benzoyl peroxide and four unopened toothbrushes. Where was the eyeliner? Where were the blush and the concealer that her sister so desperately needed? Maggie hadn't found anything cosmetic except for a single half-used lipstick. There was makeup remover—a tub of

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Pond's cold cream—but no makeup. What did Rose think? That somebody was going to sneak into her apartment in the dead of night, tie her up, put makeup on her face, and then leave? Plus, there wasn't so much as a single condom or tube of spermicide, although there was an unopened package of Monistat—so just in case her celibate sister somehow managed to get a yeast infection from a toilet seat or something, she'd be ready. It was probably on sale, Maggie snorted, helping herself to a bottle of Midol. The bathroom was also minus a scale. Which wasn't a surprise, given Rose's history with bathroom scales. When they were teenagers, Sydelle had taped a laminated chart on the girls' bathroom wall. Each Saturday morning, Rose would stand on the scale, her eyes shut and her face

impassive, as Sydelle recorded the number and then sat on the toilet seat, quizzing Rose about what she'd eaten during the week. Even now, Maggie could hear her stepmother's too-sweet voice. You had a salad? Well, what kind of dressing was on it? Was it fat free? Are you sure? Rose, I'm only doing this to help you. I've got your best interests at heart. Yeah, right, Maggie thought. As if Sydelle was ever interested in anyone but herself, and her own daughter. In the bedroom, Maggie pulled on a pair of her sister's sweatpants and continued her inventory, gathering what she called Information. "You're a very smart girl," her old teacher Mrs. Fried used to tell her, back in elementary school. Mrs. Fried, with her gray curls and impressive shelf of a bosom, with her beaded eyeglass chain and knitted sweater vests, had taught Maggie what was euphemistically called "enrichment" (and what was known to the students as "special ed") from second grade through sixth. She was a kind, grandmotherly woman who'd become Maggie's ally, especially during her first months in a new school, in a new state. "Part of what makes you so smart is that you can always think of another way to get the job done. So if you don't know what a word means, what do you do?" "Guess?" guessed Maggie. Mrs. Fried smiled. "Figure it out through context, is how I'd

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put it. It's all about finding solutions. Solutions that work for you." Maggie had nodded, feeling pleased and flattered, which were not normally ways she felt during class. "So imagine you are on your way to the Vet, for a concert, but there's a big traffic jam. Would you go home? Skip the concert? No," Mrs. Fried had said, before Maggie'd had a chance to ask her who was playing at this theoretical concert so she could figure out how much effort it was worth. "You'd just find another way to get there. And you're smart enough to do it really well." In addition to figuring out a word's meaning from context, Mrs. Fried's alternative strategies taught Maggie to add numbers if she couldn't multiply them, to chart out a paragraph's meaning, circling the subject, underlining the verbs. In the years since school, Maggie had come up with a few new strategies of her own, like Information, which could be defined as knowing things about people that they didn't want or expect you to know. Information was always useful, and it was usually easy to come by. Through the years Maggie secretly perused credit-card bills and diaries, bank statements and old photographs. In high school, she'd located a battered copy of *Forever* between Rose's mattress and box spring. Rose had turned over her allowance for almost an entire school year before deciding that she didn't care if Maggie told her father how she'd dog-eared the pages with sex scenes. Maggie snooped over to her sister's desk. There were gas bill, electric bill, phone bill, and cable bill, all neatly paper-clipped together, the return envelopes already bearing stamps and address labels. Here was a receipt from Tower Records, which told her that Rose had purchased (and worse, paid full price for) a copy of George Michael's greatest hits. Maggie pocketed it, sure that it would be useful, even if she wasn't sure how. A receipt from Saks for a pair of shoes. Three hundred and twelve dollars. Very nice. A schedule of classes at the gym, six months out of date. No surprise there. Maggie closed the drawer and moved on to what was sure to be the depressing terrain of Rose's closet. She flipped through the hangers, shaking her head at the

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clothes that ranged in shade from black to brown, with the occasional gray sweater thrown in for fun. Drab, drab, drab. Boring suits all in a row, and dowdy sweater sets, a half-dozen skirts designed to hide Rose in the dead center of her calves, as if she'd picked them out to give her legs the illusion of maximum thickness. Maggie could have helped her. But Rose didn't want help. Rose thought her life was fine. Rose thought it was everyone else who had the problems. There was a time, when they were little girls, that people thought they were twins, with their matching pigtails and identical brown eyes and the defiant way their jaws poked forward. Well, not anymore. Rose was maybe an inch or two taller, and at least fifty pounds heavier, maybe more—Maggie could make out a faint slackening under her jawline, the beginning of the dread double chin. She had shirts in her closet from Lane

Bryant, which Maggie didn't even want to touch, although she knew that fat wasn't contagious. And Rose just didn't care. Her hair, shoulder-length, was usually shoved into an untidy bun or ponytail or, worse, done up in one of those plastic clips that everyone else in the world had tacitly agreed to stop wearing five years ago. Maggie wasn't even sure where Rose was still finding them—dollar stores, probably—but somehow she had an endless supply, even though Maggie made it a point to toss a few in the trash whenever she visited. Maggie took a deep breath, pushing the last jacket aside, and began with the thing she'd been saving for dessert—her sister's shoes. As always, what she saw dazzled her and made her feel sick, like a little kid who'd gorged on too much Halloween candy. Rose, fat, lazy, unfashionable Rose, Rose who couldn't be bothered to exfoliate or moisturize or polish her fingernails had somehow managed to acquire dozens of pairs of the absolutely most perfect shoes in the world. There were flats and stilettos and high-heeled Mary Janes, suede loafers so buttery soft you wanted to rub them against your cheek, a pair of Chanel sandals that were little more than a slim leather sole and wisps of gold wire and ribbon. There were

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knee-high Gucci boots in glossy black, ankle-high Stephane Kelian boots in cinnamon, a pair of crimson cowgirl boots with hand-stitched jalapeno peppers winding up the sides. There were lace-up Hush Puppies in raspberry and lime; there were Sigerson Morrison flats and Manolo Blahnik mules. There were Steve Madden loafers and, still in their Saks box, a pair of Prada kitten heels, white, with white-and-yellow daisies appliquéd over the toes. Maggie held her breath and eased them on. As always—as all of Rose's shoes did—they fit her perfectly. It wasn't fair, she thought, stalking into the kitchen in the Pradas. Where was Rose going to wear a pair of shoes like these, anyhow? What was the point? She scowled and opened a cabinet. Whole Wheat Total. All-Bran. Golden raisins and brown rice. Jesus Christ, she thought, wrinkling her nose. Was it National Healthy Colon week? And there were no Fritos, no Cheetos, no Doritos . . . nothing at all from the all-important Ito food group. She rummaged through the freezer, past the veggie burgers and pints of whole fruit all-natural sorbet sitting in a row until she hit pay dirt—a pint of Ben and Jerry's New York Superfudge Chunk, still in its brown paper bag. Ice cream had always been her sister's goto comfort food, Maggie thought, grabbing a spoon and proceeding back to the couch, where a section of newspaper sat at the center of the coffee table, with a red pen laid beside it. Maggie picked it up. Today's classified ads, thoughtfully provided by big sister Rose. Of course. Well, she thought, this was a pretty pass. That was one of the things Mrs. Fried used to say. Whenever something would go wrong in the classroom—a spilled can of paint, a lost book—Mrs. Fried would clasp her hands across her chest and shake her head until her eyeglass chain rattled and say, "Well, this is a pretty pass!" But even Mrs. Fried couldn't have predicted this, thought Maggie, eating ice cream with one hand and circling classified ads with the other. Not even Mrs. Fried could have seen Maggie Feller's downfall coming as swiftly as it had, so that Maggie still felt as if

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somewhere between the ages of fourteen and sixteen she'd walked off the edge of a cliff and had been falling ever since. Elementary school and junior high had been fine, she remembered, spooning the cool creaminess even faster past her lips (and not noticing when she accidentally dropped a chocolate-covered walnut on the shoe). She'd had to go to "enrichment" during recess three days a week, but not even that had mattered much, because she was still the prettiest, most fun girl in her class, the girl with the cutest outfits, the best Halloween costumes that she'd make herself, the most interesting ideas of what to do during recess. And after her mother died and they'd moved to New Jersey, when her father would be at work in the afternoons and Sydelle would be off at some volunteer committee thing and Rose, of course, would be busy with the chess club or debate team, she'd been the girl with access to an empty house and an unlocked liquor cabinet. She'd been popular. It was Rose who'd been the

nerd, the geek, the loser, Rose who'd skulked around with her thick glasses hiding half her face and dandruff silting her shoulders, Rose who'd been the one the girls had laughed at. She could close her eyes and still remember one afternoon at recess. She'd been in fourth grade and Rose was in sixth. Maggie was heading to play hopscotch with Marissa Nussbaum and Kim Pratt when Rose had strolled right through a game of dodgeball, oblivious, holding a book up to her eyes. "Hey, move it!" one of the older boys, a sixth-grader, shouted, and Rose raised her head and looked puzzled. Move, Rose, Maggie thought as hard as she could, as Kim and Marissa tittered. Rose kept walking, not picking up the pace when another one of the big boys picked up the ball and threw it at her, as hard as he could, grunting with the effort. He'd been aiming for her body, but his aim wasn't good, and he hit Rose in the back of her head. Rose's glasses went flying. Her books flew out of her arms as she staggered forward, got her feet tangled, and fell flat on her face. Maggie's heart stopped beating. She stood as if she'd been

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frozen, stood as still as the circle of sixth-grade boys, who'd looked at each other uneasily, as if they were trying to decide whether this was still funny, or whether they'd really hurt this girl and could get in trouble. And then one of them—Sean Perigini, most likely, the tallest boy in sixth grade—started laughing. And then they were all laughing, all the sixth-grade boys, and then all the kids who'd been watching, as Rose, of course, started to cry, and then wiped the snot off her face with a palm that was bleeding from her fall and started groping around for her glasses. Maggie had stood there, part of her knowing she shouldn't let them do that, and part of her thinking, cruelly, Let Rose figure it out. She's the one who's such a loser. She brought this on herself. Plus, Maggie wasn't the one who fixed things. Rose was. So she'd stood, watching, for what felt like an unbearably long time, until Rose found her glasses. One of the lenses was cracked, Maggie saw, as Rose lurched to her feet, gathering her books, and . . . oh, no. Her sister's pants had split right down the back and Maggie and everyone else could see her underwear, her Holly Hobbie underwear, which raised the pointing and laughing to a hysterical pitch. Oh, God, thought Maggie, feeling sick, why did Rose have to wear those today? "You're going to have to pay!" Rose was shouting at Sean Perigini, holding her broken glasses and probably with no idea that everyone could see her underwear. The laughter built. Rose's eyes swept the playground, past the kickball game, past the kids on the swing sets and jungle gym, through the big Sids, the fifth and sixth graders shrieking and clutching each other as they laughed at her, until finally she caught sight of Maggie, standing between Kim and Marissa on the little section of grass beside the flower bed that was, by unspoken consent, reserved for the most popular girls. Rose squinted at Maggie, and Maggie could read the hatred and misery in her sister's eyes as clearly as if Rose had walked over and shouted in her face. I should help, a voice inside of her whispered again. But Maggie just stood there, watching, listening to the other kids laugh, In Her Shoes 47

thinking that this was somehow some dark part of the bargain that had made her the pretty one. She was safe, Maggie thought fiercely, as Rose wiped her face, gathered her books, and, ignoring the taunts and laughter and the singsonged catcalls of "Hol-ly! Hob-bie!" that a few of the fifth-grade girls had already taken up, walked slowly back into the school. Maggie'd never make the mistake of wandering through a dodgeball game and she'd certainly never wear cartoon-character underwear. She was safe, she thought, as Rose pushed through the double glass doors and headed inside—to the principal's office, no doubt. "Do you think she's okay?" Kim had asked, and Maggie had tossed her head scornfully. "I think she's adopted," she'd said, and Kim and Marissa had giggled, and Maggie had laughed, too, even though the laughter felt like gravel in her chest. And then, as fast as a dodgeball flying through the air to whack her unsuspecting head, everything changed. When, exactly? Her fourteenth year, at the tail end of eighth grade, in the gap between junior high, where she'd ruled, and high school, where everything had fallen apart. It had started with the standardized assessment test. "Nothing to worry about!" Mrs. Fried's junior-high replacement had said in a falsely cheerful voice.

The new "enrichment" teacher was ugly, with caked-on makeup and a wart next to her nose. She'd told Maggie that she could take an untimed version of the test. "You'll do fine!" But Maggie stared at the page of blank bubbles that she was supposed to fill in with her number two pencil, feeling her heart sink, knowing that it wasn't going to be fine. You're a smart girl, Mrs. Fried had told her a dozen times. But Mrs. Fried was gone, back in the elementary school. High school was going to be different. And that test—"just for our records! Results kept confidential!"—had somehow tripped her up and ruined everything. She wasn't supposed to have seen her scores, but her teacher had left a copy on the desk, and Maggie had peeked, first trying to read the words upside down and then just grabbing the thing and flipping it around so

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that she could read it. The words hit her like a hammer. "Dyslexic," it said. "Learning disabled." It might as well have read, "You're dead," Maggie thought, because that was what those words really meant. "Now, Maggie, let's not get hysterical," Sydelle had said that night, after the teacher had called to share the "confidential" results. "We'll get you a tutor!" "I don't need a tutor," Maggie had said furiously, feeling tears scalding her throat. Rose, sitting in the corner of Sydelle's white-on-white living room, had looked up from *Watership Down*. "It might help, you know." "Shut up!" Maggie had said, the forbidden words flying out of her mouth. "I'm not stupid, Rose, so just shut up!" "Maggie," their father had said, "nobody's saying you're stupid... ." "That test said I was stupid," said Maggie. "And you know what? I don't even care. And why'd you have to tell her?" she demanded, pointing her finger at Sydelle. "And her?" Maggie continued, pointing at Rose. "It's none of her business!" "We all want to help," Michael Feller had said, and Maggie had ranted that she didn't need help, she didn't care what the dumb test said, she was smart just like Mrs. Fried had always said. No, she didn't need a tutor, no she didn't want to go to private school, she had friends, unlike some people she could name, she had friends and she wasn't stupid no matter what the test said, and plus even if she was stupid, she'd rather be stupid than ugly like four-eyes in the corner, even if she was stupid, that was okay, it was no biggie, she'd be fine. But she wasn't fine. When she started high school, her friends were placed in the honors-level courses, and Maggie had been sent to the remedial classes, with no friends. Mrs. Fried to tell her that she wasn't a dummy or a retard, that her brain just worked a little differently, and that they'd figure out tricks to get her through. She got stuck with the indifferent teachers—the burned-out older ones

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who just wanted to be left alone, like Mrs. Cavetti, who wore cockeyed wigs and too much perfume, or Mrs. Learey, who'd give them in-class reading assignments and then spend the entire period filling photo albums with endless pictures of her grandchildren. Maggie figured it out fast—the worst teachers got the worst kids as punishment, for being bad teachers. The worst kids got the worst teachers as punishment for being poor—or dumb. Which in this fancy town were often interpreted as the same thing. Well, Maggie figured, if she was someone's punishment, she'd act like punishment. She stopped bringing her books to class and started toting a toolbox-sized makeup kit instead. She'd take polish off her nails during the lectures, reapply a different shade during the pop quiz, after she'd answered all of the questions with the same letter —A for one class, for the next. Multiple-choice quizzes were all these teachers ever came up with. "Maggie, please come to the blackboard," one of the crappy teachers would drone. Maggie would shake her head without lifting her eyes from her makeup mirror. "Sorry, can't help," she'd call, fluttering her fingertips. "I'm drying." She should have flunked everything, should have been left back in every grade. But the teachers kept passing her—probably because they didn't want to see her again the next year. And her friends moved farther and farther away from her with each new school year. She tried for a while, and Kim and Marissa tried, too, but eventually the gap got too wide. They were playing field hockey, they were joining student

council, they were taking SAT prep courses and visiting colleges, and she'd been left behind. By sophomore year, Maggie decided that if the girls were going to ignore her, the guys certainly wouldn't. She started wearing her hair piled high and her cleavage leveraged higher by lace underwire bras that peeked through her shirts. She'd arrived for the first day of school in low-slung jeans that barely clung to the ridge of her hips, high-heeled black leather boots, and a consignment-store lace bustier beneath the army jacket she'd swiped from her father.

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Lipstick, nail polish, enough eye shadow to paint a small wall with, an armful of black rubber bracelets, and big, floppy fabric bows in her hair. She took her cues from Madonna, whom she idolized, Madonna, who was just starting to have her videos played on MTV. Maggie devoured every scrap of information about the singer she could find—every magazine interview, every newspaper profile—and marveled at the similarities. They both had dead mothers. They were both beautiful, both talented dancers who'd studied tap and jazz since they were little girls. They were both street-smart, with sex appeal to spare. Boys buzzed around Maggie like flies, buying her packs of cigarettes, inviting her to parties where no parents were present, keeping her cup filled, holding her hand, walking her into an unused bedroom or the backseat of a car when it got late. It took a while for Maggie to notice that they weren't calling, or asking her to dances, or even saying hello to her in the halls. She'd cried about it—late at night, when Rose was asleep, when nobody could hear her—and then she'd decided not to cry. None of them were worth her tears. And they'd all be sorry, ten years down the road, when she was famous and they were nothings, stranded in this shitty little town, fat and ugly and unfamous, not special at all. So that was high school. Cringing around the edges of the popular crowd like some kicked dog still holding on to the memories of the days when they'd petted and praised her. Parties on weekends at the house of whoever's parents were away. Beer and wine, joints or pills, and they'd be drunk and, eventually, she figured it was easier if she was drunk, too, if things were a little blurry around the edges and she could imagine seeing what she wanted in their eyes. And Rose . . . well, Rose hadn't gone through the kind of John Hughes metamorphosis where she shed her glasses, got a good haircut, and the football captain fell in love with her at the prom. But she did change in smaller ways. She stopped having dandruff, for one thing, thanks to Maggie's not-so-subtle trick of leaving large bottles of Head and Shoulders in the shower. She still wore glasses, still dressed like a geek, but somewhere along the line she'd

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acquired a friend—Amy, who was, in Maggie's opinion, just as weird as Rose was—and didn't seem bothered by the fact that the pretty girls still laughed at her, or ignored her, and still occasionally referred to her as Holly Hobbie. Rose was in the honors classes, Rose got straight A's. Maggie would have dismissed all of those things as further signs of her sister's social hopelessness except that those accomplishments had started to matter. "Princeton!" Sydelle had said, over and over, when Rose was senior and her acceptance letter had come in the mail. "Well, Rose, this is quite an achievement!" She'd actually cooked Rose's favorite foods for dinner—fried chicken and biscuits and honey—and she hadn't said a word when Rose reached for seconds. "Maggie, you must be very proud of your sister!" she'd said. Maggie had just rolled her eyes in an unspoken "whatever." Like Princeton was such a big deal. Like Rose was the only person who'd ever succeeded in spite of a dead mother. Well, Maggie had a dead mother, too, but did she get extra points for that? No, she did not. She just got questions. From neighbors. From teachers. From everyone who knew her sister. "Can we expect great things from you?" Well, obviously, they couldn't, Maggie thought, inking an emphatic red circle around an ad for waitresses at a "busy, successful Center City restaurant." She'd got the body, Rose

had gotten the brains, and now it was looking like brains might count for more. So Rose graduated from Princeton while Maggie put in a few half-hearted semesters at the local community college. Rose had gone to law school, and Maggie had waitressed at a pizza parlor, done baby-sitting and housecleaning, dropped out of bartending school when the instructor tried to stick his tongue in her ear after the lesson on martinis. Rose was plain, and fat, and frumpy, and up until this morning Maggie had never known her to have a boyfriend except for, like, ten minutes in law school. Yet somehow she was the one with the great apartment (well, the apartment that could have been great if Maggie had decorated it), and with money and friends, the one people looked at with respect. And this guy,

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Jim Whatever, was cute in a semi-nerdy way, and Maggie just bet that he was rich, too. It wasn't fair, thought Maggie, stalking back to the kitchen. It wasn't fair their mother had died. It wasn't fair that she'd somehow used up her handful of good years by junior high and was now living in her sister's shadow, doomed to watch Rose get everything she wanted, while she got nothing at all. She crumpled up the empty container of ice cream, gathered the newspaper, and was getting ready to toss them both when something in the paper caught her eye. It was the magic word: auditions. Maggie dropped the icecream carton and turned her full attention to the newspaper. "MTV Announces Auditions for VJs," she read. Excitement rose within her like a balloon, along with panic—what if she'd missed it? She scanned the story as rapidly as she could. December 1. Open call. In New York. She could be there! She'd tell Rose she had a job interview, which was technically sort of the truth, and she'd get Rose to lend her money for a bus ticket, and clothes. She'd need an outfit. She'd have to buy something new; she could see that instantly; nothing she had was even remotely right. Maggie folded the newspaper carefully and hurried to her sister's closet to see which shoes she'd wear to the Big Apple.

FIVE

Lewis Feldman ushered Mrs. Sobel into his office—a converted closet with the words Golden Acres Gazette stenciled on the glass—and closed the door behind them. "Thank you for coming," he said, pulling the red grease copy editing pencil from behind his ear and setting it on his desk. Mrs. Sobel perched on a chair, crossed her ankles, and clasped her hands in her lap. She was a tiny woman with blue hair and a blue wool cardigan sweater and blue veins pulsing in her hands. He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. She gave him a tentative nod. "Let me just begin by saying how grateful I am for your help," he said. "We were really in a pinch." Which was true—ever since the Gazette's previous food critic, the Noshing Gourmet, had suffered a heart attack that had landed him facedown in a western omelet, Lewis had been stuck recycling old reviews, and the natives had been getting restless, not to mention tired of reading about the Rascal House yet again. "This was a very fine first effort," he said, spreading the tear sheet on his desk, so Mrs. Sobel could see what her review looked like, laid out on the page. "Italian Restaurant Tempts Tastebuds," read the headline, beneath a drawing of a winking little bird—the Early Bird, of course—with a cartoon worm clutched in its beak. "I had

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just a few suggestions," said Lewis, as Mrs. Sobel gave another trembly little nod. He braced himself—running hardware stores hadn't been nearly as tough as taking the fragile egos of retired women in his hands on a biweekly basis—and began to read. " 'Mangiamao's Italian Restaurant is located in the shopping mall on Powerline Road, next to where the Marshall's used to be, and across from the frozen yogurt shop. It looks like it should be easy to get to, but my husband, Irving, had a very difficult time making the left-hand turn.' " Mrs. Sobel gave another nod, this one slightly more assertive. Lewis kept reading. " 'The restaurant has red carpet, white tablecloths with small candles on them. The air conditioner is turned up very high, so you should bring a sweater if you go to Mangiamao's. The minestrone soup was not the way I make it. It had kidney beans, which neither I nor Irving enjoy. The

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