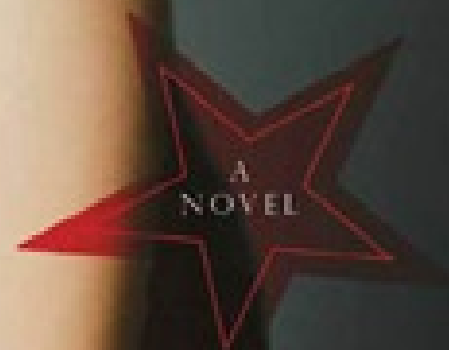
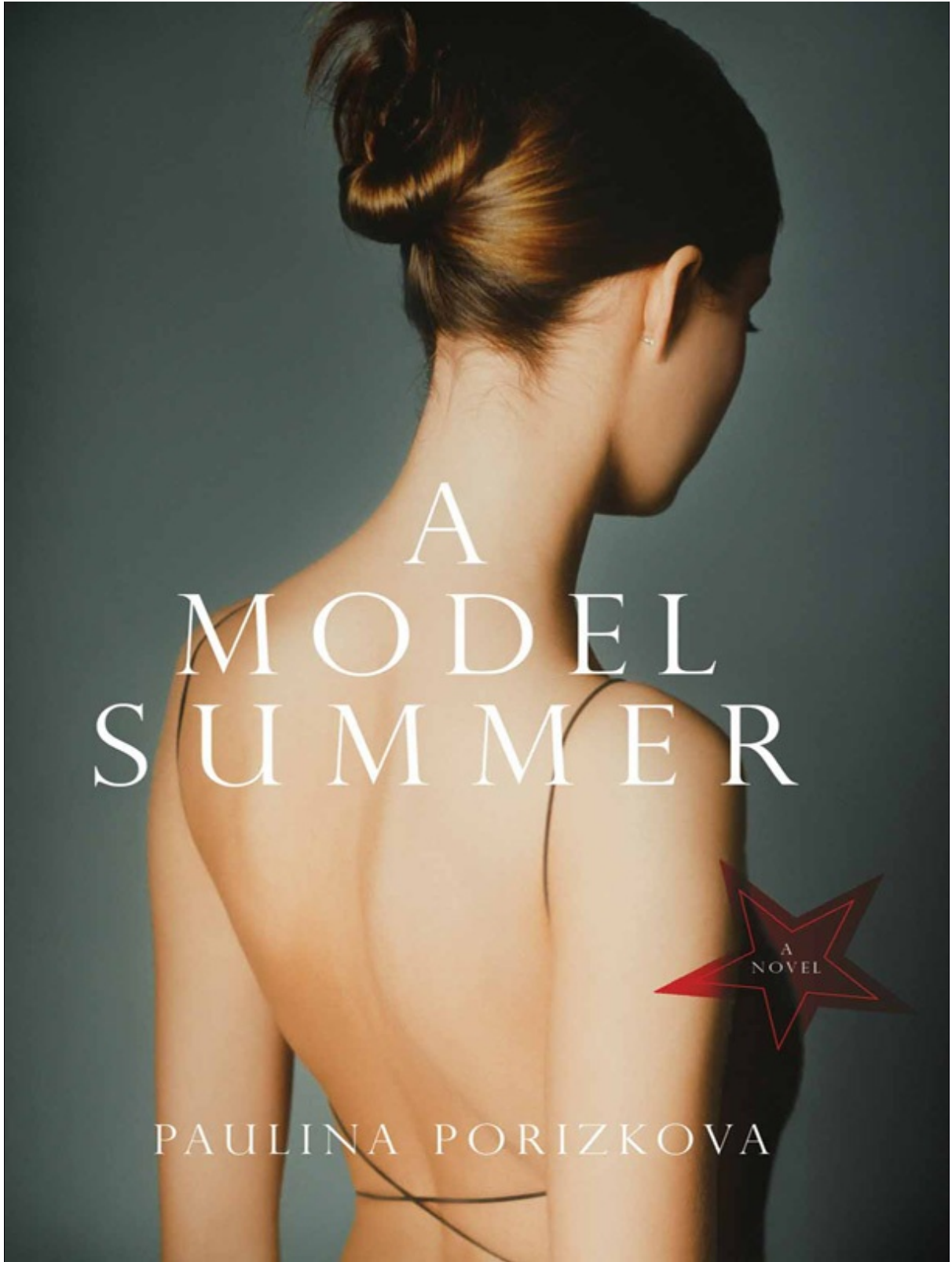




A
MODEL
SUMMER



PAULINA PORIZKOVA



A
MODEL
SUMMER

PAULINA PORIZKOVA



A
Model
Summer



Paulina
Porizkova



For Monique Pillard, my Momo

In youth and beauty wisdom is but rare.

—Alexander Pope

Contents

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

CHAPTER 1

June 1980.

It's not as if I'm scared to fly.

Even after the divorce, my mother usually scraped together enough money to take us on a reduced-fare vacation each year. But this trip is different. My mother, her ever-changing boyfriends, and my little sister Kristynka are still snugly ensconced in our small apartment back in Lund, while I am on my way to Paris, alone.

Well, alone except for Britta, whom I met less than an hour ago here at the airport. After introducing ourselves, we immediately sized each other up. Britta, with her long golden hair, dark eyes, and soft curves is nearly my exact physical opposite. I have straight brown hair cut in a bob, pale green eyes, and am as tall and flat-chested as the guys in my ninth-grade class. That I got selected for the high-fashion world of models not only confused my classmates, but also made me suspect I was the target of some elaborate joke. I still half expect someone to pop up from behind a hidden camera and laugh in my face, like on that AmericanTV show.

"Flight 343, final boarding call," a female voice announces over the loudspeakers.

I look over at Britta. She is standing with her mom near the security gate, hugging tearful good-byes as I wait on the other side. My own mother had full confidence in my ability to make it to the airport by myself, though the trip entailed three buses, a ferry to Denmark, and an additional bus ride to the terminal. "If you can't get to the airport on your own," she said, "how are you going to model in Paris all by yourself?"

"WHAT WOULD YOU LADIES like to drink?" the stewardess asks with the kind of smile all flight attendants seem to spray on before starting their shifts. "We have a nice red Jacques Dubois, Beaujolais Village, and a crisp white Burgundy."

My jaw drops to the vicinity of my knees. This is the first time anyone has taken me for a grown-up. I nudge Britta. She may be my modeling competition, but right now, she is also my only potential friend. What better way to break the ice than to share in the bounty of a stewardess who has mistaken us for alcohol-worthy adults? But Britta looks as though she's fallen asleep.

"What?" she moans, and opens her eyes.

"Drinks," I tell her, wide-eyed, nodding toward the wine bottles held up for our

inspection.

The stewardess, seeing my expression, retracts the bottle and her grin, and grabs a can of Coke. “A soft drink, perhaps?”

We each get a Coke, Britta completely unaware of our missed opportunity.

She sits up and rubs her eyes. “Sorry, I must have dozed off—I had a late night with Lars yesterday.” She sighs. “He’s worried I’m gonna forget about him or something, you know, being around all those gorgeous French male models and stuff. But I told him—‘Look,’ I said—‘I’m sixteen and you’re twenty; if we find somebody else, then it just wasn’t meant to be, right?’”

I nod understandingly, as if I ever had a real boyfriend. Bengt hardly counts.

She pops her can open and pours the Coke into her plastic cup. “So, how do you pronounce your name, anyway? My mom and I couldn’t figure it out from the spelling.”

“*Yee-ree-na*,” I tell her, mangling my actual name, Jirina, in the familiar Swedish way. The correct pronunciation, *Yee-r-shi-nah*, I hear only at home. My name has always been a sore spot for me. Why my parents cursed me to navigate a world of Anikas and Gunillas with a name that so clearly indicates an immigrant background (a communist background at that), was, and still is, incomprehensible to me. To top it off, there is also my last name: Radovanovicova. It’s a mouthful even in my parents’ native language.

“Wow, is that, like, Russian?” Britta says. I think I can detect a slight wrinkling of her nose, a common reaction to my “communist” roots.

“No, Czechoslovakian.” Not that that’s much better. “My parents are from there. But I was born in Sweden,” I quickly clarify, “so I am Swedish.”

Britta looks at me with raised eyebrows and I’m immediately afraid she doesn’t believe me.

“You want to see my passport?” I offer.

But she just shrugs. “I believe you,” she says, and takes a gulp of her drink. “So, how did you get discovered?”

Relieved, I babble on about my best friend, Hatty, to whom I owe this outing in the clouds. It was her obsession with fashion and makeup that led her to find an ad in the local paper for a modeling seminar, run by a “famed modeling scout to the most exclusive modeling agencies in the world,” whose only requirement was a fee of twenty-five kronas. Hatty seized this as an opportunity to offer her services as a makeup artist to a bunch of model wannabes and convinced me to tag along to keep her company. The class was held in the living room of the famed scout, and we turned out to be her only clients.

Malin, an older woman with dyed-red hair set in waves, pale, papery skin, and arched, black, stenciled-on eyebrows, looked like a nineteen fifties glamour shot that had been crumpled into a ball and smoothed out. Her living room was a mess of photos, many of which were old modeling shots of herself. They consisted of hand and foot ads from ancient newspapers. She removed her brown sneakers to let us admire her famous feet and I noted with a touch of horror that her toenails were long, filed pointy, and the same dried-blood color as her fingernails. Malin fluttered her hands about her as she went through stacks of magazines, clicking her nails against glossy pages. “Did you know Mia is missing a finger? No, you wouldn’t because of the way

she has learned to hold her hands. Do you see this smile? How real and inviting it looks? That's because this girl is really smiling, inside. Do you understand? You have to feel the smile on the inside." For three hours, we sat on her couch, nodding politely as she shuffled through page after page of models with perfect teeth, abundant hair, and never-ending smooth legs, while she pointed out their poses and expressions with a steady torrent of words, of which I retained about a third. How to merge this information with my life remained a mystery. At the end of the so-called seminar, Malin nodded at me and announced I had definite possibilities. She didn't specify, and as Hatty and I walked home, she was convinced Malin was talking about modeling. Yeah, right. Only a few days before, my classmate Pelle had whacked me over the head with his history book to "kill the lice," though my hair was, as always, spotlessly clean.

I don't tell Britta this part. Instead I describe my meeting with Jean-Pierre—the owner of Sirens agency in Paris—which Malin had set up right before my fifteenth birthday. The meeting took place on a bench in a mall and lasted all of five minutes. Jean-Pierre complimented me on my pretty skin, told me he appreciated conservatively dressed girls, and asked me if I wanted to model in Paris over the summer. As if I'd say no. Britta finishes her Coke and orders another.

"Hey, are you gonna eat those nuts?" She eyes my pack of peanuts. I put them on her tray. I haven't the slightest hint of an appetite.

"How about you?" I say. "How did you get here?"

"Well, I was shopping at the mall with my mom and they had this contest thing. So my mom signed me up, they took a Polaroid of me, and I won the contest. The prize was meeting Jean-Pierre, to see if I would fit in his agency." She pops a handful of nuts into her mouth and chews with relish, her mouth open. My mother would slap me if I ate like that. "What did you think of Jean-Pierre?" Britta asks, munching away.

"Uh, he was nice. I didn't really hang out with him," I say and try to ignore the squelching sound of nuts and saliva.

"I think he's hot. My mom said he looks like Alain Delon."

I compare my impression of Jean-Pierre's cow eyes and overbite to the dashing French actor. "They both have dark hair," I concede. "But isn't Jean-Pierre kind of old—like thirty or something?"

"I like older men," Britta says with a wink. "My mom thinks it's because my dad died when I was a baby."

My Coke burns my throat. "I'm so sorry!" I'm suddenly no longer resentful of her loud chewing. At least I have a father, even though his presence in my life is as intangible as the Holy Ghost.

"It's okay," she says and pats my arm. "I don't remember him at all."

She shakes the last morsel into her mouth and pulls out her Walkman. It's the new model, bright yellow and waterproof. If I had the money for one, I'd definitely get the smaller metal one.

Britta puts her headphones on, shutting me out. I take my book out of my backpack: Kafka's *The Castle*. My father's only comment about my summer plans was to voice his fear that my IQ would shrink to my bra size. He handed me the paperback before I left, making me swear I'd write a twenty-page book report to hand him upon my return. The cover of my book shows an ominous silhouette of a castle set against a

deep red background. I open it, but after the first paragraph, I space out. My hopes and anxieties are as high as my current altitude. I lean my head against the window, which is warmed by the high sun and vibrates like a purring cat. I'm on my way to Paris! Me, the girl with an unpronounceable name, second-hand clothes, and a smile that reveals wide-spaced front teeth. When Hatty informed everyone at our school of my summer plans, it was greeted with the same disbelief as if she had just announced I was a secret love child of King Carl Gustaf. I stood at my locker where someone had scribbled in black magic marker, "Hot chick NO, hot chicken YES," a few months back. Despite my vigorous attempts to remove it, it remained imbedded in the orange paint; a clear, if somewhat faded statement of who I was. But now, I was someone different. I was someone to be envied. I straightened my back for the first time in nine years, and felt the unaccustomed warmth of self-confidence. That is, until Kristel slammed her locker next to me and, with a toss of her hair in my direction, exclaimed, "Well, if *that* can be a model, then even Fatty Hatty stands a chance."

Hatty, to whom I owe this outing in the clouds. Of course, her name is not really Fatty, or Hatty for that matter. Her Egyptian mother named her after Queen Hatshepsut, which forever condemns Hatty to people "sneezing" her full name and shouting, "bless you!" I must admit she's a bit on the pudgy side, although she has the most beautiful, black, almond-shaped eyes. We bonded immediately on our first day of school, since I had the dubious honor of bearing the other unpronounceable name and questionable background.

The engines of the plane suddenly switch from an even purr to a heavy rumble. My ears pop. I know this signals a landing and my stomach twists into knots. With a sweaty palm, I shake Britta.

"Wake up, we are about to land."

She opens her eyes and, for a fleeting moment, I think I detect in them a hint of panic mirroring my own. She removes her headphones and leans over my lap to look out the window. We are floating through dark rain clouds. Drops of water streak the window. The noise intensifies and I yawn to unclog my ears. "Are you scared?" I shout to Britta, who has resumed her position.

"Gosh no, what is there to be scared of?"

BRITTA HAS A NICE, sleek suitcase with polished metal locks, but it hits the luggage carousel at the very end along with my lumpy orange duffel. So much for my theory that nice luggage travels faster.

We get in line for a taxi and inhale French air, which seems mostly composed of cigarette smoke and diesel fumes. It's a little past noon and the flat, leaden sky threatens rain. My stomach lurches uncomfortably. At this point I'm not sure if it's due to hunger or nerves.

By the time we get into a taxi, sharp raindrops tap the windshield. The car also smells of cigarettes, but if I roll the window down I get wet. Windows up—I can't breathe. So I alternate between the two as I watch Paris approach.

At first, the city is an indistinct mass on the horizon. Soon, we leave the billboard-littered plains behind and enter upon avenues lined with trees and the elegant, haughty buildings of the city. Magazine stands grow from cement like pointy green

mushrooms. A red blur of a woman walks her poodle. In outdoor cafés customers peruse newspapers under burgundy awnings. A man with a beret huddles against a wall, trying to light a cigarette. A stone wall drips with blooming lilacs. Short women in perfect shoes clutch thin baguettes under their arms. Eventually, the avenues become small twisted lanes overflowing with boutiques, gourmet shops, and bakeries.

Our taxi comes to a stop and we get out in front of a large green door. It leads into a courtyard, set with cobblestones, where a brass plaque hangs on the smoky glass doors of a carriage house. The engraved letters, darkened by time, announce SIRENS.

I wonder if anyone would notice if I puked into the nearby potted palm. I fall back a little, so Britta walks in first. The people who gather around us in the square white room are at first indistinct, but then I recognize Jean-Pierre. True, his eyes are large and rich brown, shaded by lashes any woman would kill for, but Alain Delon he's not. I smile at everyone with my lips closed, so as to not reveal my teeth, though pretending I'm mute doesn't seem a viable long-term option.

A pretty brunette with a pug nose eyes me suspiciously; a blond woman with very short hair and an Asian guy both wave hello. "Bienvenues" and "Bonjours" are exchanged.

My stomachache has intensified; I am in immediate need of a bathroom. It's located behind an L-shaped white Formica desk with four chairs. From within, I overhear the smatter of rapid-fire French and realize that if I hear them, they certainly hear me. I flush obsessively, unsure of which is worse, the explosive sound of troubled intestines or the repeated rumble of someone trying to cover it.

When I finally exit—closing the door firmly behind so no offensive odor escapes—Britta is being shown around the office. In truth, there is not much to see. The desk takes up most of the room and the white walls are lined with black-and-white checkered posters of passport-size heads, which on closer inspection don't bear much resemblance to actual passport pictures, since every person exhibited is too gorgeous for real life. I glimpse a few faces familiar from magazines and Hatty's sermons: Evalinda, the blond Swedish goddess; redheaded Mia who, according to Malin, is missing a finger.

We are shown the intricacies of the desk, where the three people I've just met, "bookers," sit all day, taking and making phone calls, booking jobs. When they get a call for a girl, they fish around for her chart from a deep round bin set in the tabletop, a sort of Rolodex set on its side. The charts have a month's calendar printed on them with cryptic words scribbled in ink or pencil across the days: *Confirmed*, *On Hold*, *Second Hold*, *Booked Out*.

Our charts are pulled out, blank and clean.

But my name is there!

All conversation is conducted in English, which is a relief. I, like everyone else, have had English classes from third grade on, and am by now perfectly comfortable with the language. My French, started in grade six, is still on par with a three-year-old's. I understand the small exclamations that litter the booker's English, the "ah bon's," the "ça va's," and the "comprends," but unless they ask me for a yellow pencil that just so happens to be on the table, I will be out of my depth.

The pug-nosed brunette introduces herself as Anne, and pulls out a tape measure.

"We must now see your sizes, so we can write them on the chart and also on your

composites,” she says.

I have no idea what a composite is, but there is no time to ask.

Anne winds the red-and-white strip around Britta’s chest, waist, and hips with a slight frown. “Dis donc,” she says. “You are a little fat. Have you gained some weight since Jean-Pierre saw you last?”

I’m shocked. Britta has a perfect hourglass body.

Britta blushes. “My mom hasn’t had the time to cook lately, so I’ve been eating a lot of pizza.”

Jean-Pierre sidles over to her and puts an arm over her shoulders. “The pizza no more. Tu comprends? Only the healthy French food now and you will be fine.”

Britta laughs with obvious relief. Her measurements, thirty-six, twenty-five, thirty-five, are noted, as is her height, five-eight; hair color, blond; and eye color, brown. This does not in any way do her justice. Why not describe her hair as gold with hints of champagne, and her eyes as chocolate?

The bookers scrutinize her perfectly manicured hands at close range, debating whether she merits an “Extraordinaire” under the heading of “Special Qualities,” and decide against it. Britta doesn’t look too crestfallen. She sits on the countertop, kicking her legs and chatting with the short-haired woman, whose name is Odile, I think.

Anne slides the tape around my sweating body. “Thirty-four, twenty-two, thirty-three,” she says, and smiles. “Perfect.”

This is a word I have never heard in regard to myself. I flame up in gratitude.

“You are”—Anne pauses, pencil hovering above paper—“what? Sixteen, yes?”

“Fifteen,” I correct her.

She looks at me with momentary surprise. “Mon Dieu, si jeune,” she mutters. This I understand from my school French. *My God, so young.* I hold my breath. Is that bad? Should I have lied?

“Listen, we will say you are sixteen, for purposes of, um, taxes. Okay?”

I nod my head frantically. Right now I’d agree to have both my arms amputated if it meant staying in Paris. The thought of going back home—to drizzling skies over windswept fields, our cement apartment block, and, worst of all, my mother, smug in her knowledge she was right—that no one else wants me either—is as pleasant as a slow death from mushroom poisoning.

“I finished ninth grade,” I tell Anne. “You see, I started school a year early, so I’ve always been in class with kids a year older anyway.”

“Ah bon.” She nods, seemingly satisfied. “So let us then keep it our little secret.” She jots down my height, five-ten; my eyes, green; and stops at my hair color.

“Dis donc,” she says, “what color would you say your hair is?”

The first thing that flashes through my mind is “poop brown,” a term Kristel and Anika came up with. Greetings of “poop head” and “frog eyes” were liberally thrown my way whenever they passed me in the hallways.

I shrug uncomfortably. “Brown?”

Anne laughs. “Mais oui, brown. But it is like the brown of this small animal, I cannot think of the name—”

Mouse? Rat? Embarrassment for showing up with the hair color of “a small animal” stabs through me. Come to think of it, nearly all models I’ve seen in magazines are blondes.

“It will come to me.” She waves her hand and writes down “brown.”

Then she asks me for my photos and waits patiently as I free them from my underwear in my duffel.

There are three of them, printed on eight-by-ten glossy paper, all from my one and only photo session to date. The first photograph is of my face in muted pastel colors and soft focus. My eyes are staring at some invisible spot behind the camera, which was in fact the photographer’s balding pate. He was a soft-spoken Indian man who ran a pizza parlor by day and did test photos for Malin as a hobby. The other two are black-and-white prints of me sitting in a window, dressed in a lace camisole and a frilly skirt. It was an attempt at copying Brooke Shields in *Pretty Baby*, which fails in part, I think, because of the clearly visible toggle from the drawn-up blinds that hangs next to my left ear.

Anne hands them around, and everyone comments on them too quickly in French for me to fully understand—something about beautiful eyes, and something else “ça va pas,” which I know means “is not good.” I break out in new sweat. Is it my teeth? So far, nobody has mentioned them and I’ve been feeling as though I’ve gotten away with a naughty prank. Will they be my undoing now? I remember Mother once mentioning to an Uncle that I would be quite pretty if it weren’t for my teeth, and I’ve tried to smile with my mouth shut ever since. I anxiously glance around at the bookers, but they have moved on. Shoji, the Asian guy, brings out a water-blue portfolio embossed with a gold Siren logo, and slides the photos under transparent plastic. Anne hands me the portfolio and adds two books with the same covers. “This little book contains all the information you need, plus addresses and phone numbers to all the photographers and studios,” she says as she waves the thinner one. “And here,” she says, opening the first page of a diary, “are your appointments for tomorrow.” Britta comes up behind me and looks over my shoulder. “How do we get to them?” she asks Anne. “Does someone drive us?”

Anne laughs. “Ah non. This you must learn by yourselves, you will have many to go to.” She tells us to get a Plan de Paris and leave plenty of time before the appointments—which are called go-and-sees—“in case you get lost.”

We scoop up our bags, books, and portfolios, and lug them outside. The rain hasn’t let up. But somehow, rain in Paris, rather than being depressing and cold, seems mysterious and romantic, like a thin gray veil over a beautiful woman’s face. Jean-Pierre pulls up in his car. Britta eyes it with obvious admiration, which seems to please Jean-Pierre. “Not many people in France have a Rolls Royce,” he says proudly. I can’t help but think it looks rather like a white refrigerator on wheels. Jean-Pierre helps Britta with her suitcase and opens the front passenger door for her while I struggle to heave myself and my bag into the backseat. Jean-Pierre steps on the gas and we speed off to settle into our home for the summer: his apartment.

CHAPTER 2

After the magnificent turn-of-the-century façade, the sweeping circular staircase, and the intricately wrought iron elevator, the apartment is a disappointment.

A narrow dark hallway with high ceilings opens into a living room where an enormous aquarium presides over the entire back wall. It effectively blocks both windows and turns all available sunlight watery blue, which spills over a hodgepodge of black leather couches and rickety coffee tables that are topped with overflowing ashtrays. Jean-Pierre sets down Britta's suitcase and rings his keys like a bell.

"Cherie, on viens d'arrive!"

His cherie shuffles to greet us from the depths of the murky hallway like some creature from an Edgar Allan Poe story. Jean-Pierre introduces her as Marina.

"Bonjour," she says in a raspy whisper, revealing the large yellowed teeth of an old piano. She's a good foot taller than her husband, and in the rippled, watery light—with her stringy blond hair and unfocused pale eyes—she looks like a mermaid gone to seed. Jean-Pierre pecks her on the cheek, murmuring something in French, and heads back out the door. "I'll see you for dinner," he says.

The three of us stand in silence, uncertain of protocol.

"Hi, I'm Jirina, it's a pleasure to meet you." I reach out and shake Marina's hand, which is appropriately damp and limp.

Britta introduces herself and then Marina sticks her hands in the pockets of her dingy blue satin robe and fishes out a small cigarette and a lighter. She lights up and a sweet aroma of burning hay covers the reek of old cigarettes and fresh toilet bowls. Marina inhales and keeps the smoke inside her lungs for what seems an eternity. Britta and I stand, waiting for her to exhale. My lungs start to burn and I realize I've been holding my breath along with Marina. Finally she blows out a cloud of smoke.

"Venez," she says.

She rushes us through a tour of the apartment. There is only one bathroom we are all to share, tiled in dark blue and lit with fluorescent lights. "Keep it clean," Marina says and flicks cigarette ashes into the bathtub. She shows me the toilet—housed by itself with a stack of out-of-date magazines in a claustrophobic closet accessible only from the hallway—while Britta reapplies her lip gloss in the bathroom. From here, the hallway veers a sharp right, leading into complete darkness. "Our bedroom is that way," Marina points. "There is no need for you to ever go there." She pivots on her heel and loses a slipper. "Goddamn fucking motherfucking piece of shit." She kicks it with her bare foot, takes three steps to the left, and opens the door to the kitchen.

My ears still burn with Marina's vulgarity as sunlight temporarily blinds me. I

blink. A big wooden table sits in the middle of the room, a large stainless steel range looms against the right wall, and white glass-fronted cabinets exhibit stacks of dishes. It's bright and cheerful and as incongruous in this apartment as coconut palm trees on a Swedish beach. A faded red vinyl high chair with an empty bowl on the tray stands by one of the French windows.

"You have children?" I say, with more than a little surprise.

"One," Marina replies with the tone of someone recounting cancerous tumors.

Nonetheless, it cheers me enormously. I already miss Kristynka with the same sharp pangs as hunger.

She was born after my father left us, the year I turned seven. At first I had no idea why my mother suddenly swelled up and turned even more irritable than usual. I figured it was somehow my fault, like so many other things: the unwashed dishes in the sink, my father leaving, the crack in the kitchen wall, my bad grades in math, the disappearance of the scissors, and my audacity for physically resembling my father when he became the person most hated on my mother's list.

But from the moment my mother brought Kristynka home, all peeling, furiously red and bald like a baby vulture, my loneliness dissipated. Here, finally, was someone who needed me. I fed her formula, burped her, learned to change her diapers, and, as soon as mother had trained me, gave her baths so mother could go to her night classes. I used to sleep on the floor by the crib when Kristynka had colic, and the next day I would be walking around in a blurred stupor in school. My grades suffered, which infuriated mother on the odd night she was home. But Kristynka became my real live doll; my baby. When she first said "ma-ma," it was to me.

I wish I had brought her picture to put on my bedside nightstand, like Britta's photo of her mom. The room Marina dubs ours is painted a muted green, but saved from the Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea decor by a large floor-to-ceiling window and a cheerful, if somewhat dirty, floral carpet. Britta has claimed the twin bed on the left wall.

"I have to call Mom and tell her I've arrived," she says and readjusts her picture so it faces her bed.

Of course she's arrived. What else could she do? I begin to unpack my things and put them into a large wooden chest of drawers at the foot of Britta's bed.

She pulls the phone from the fireplace mantel to the floor, sits down cross-legged, and picks up the receiver.

"Mommy! I'm here—Yes, I miss you too already!" Her voice is suddenly high-pitched and babylike. I can't fathom speaking to my mother like that.

"Um, Britta, which drawers do you want?"

"I don't care." She shifts her body so her back faces me, and she cradles the phone. "The top ones, I guess."

I remove my things from the top drawers.

HATTY PICKS UP on the second ring. "Are you there? How is it? What did they say?"

I describe my trip, while Britta repeatedly slams the drawers in the background.

"What's she like?" Hatty says. For a moment, I'm discombobulated, and then I

remember. Once Hatty found out I was to travel with another girl, she made me swear I wouldn't like the new girl more than I liked her.

"Okay, I guess," I say, and realize this is the wrong answer. But Britta has unpacked, and sits on her bed watching me, so what am I supposed to say?

"Okay?" Hatty's voice is shrill. "How okay?"

"How is Claudius?" I quickly insert our code for "I can't talk, person is in the room," which we came up with after watching every episode of *I, Claudius*.

"Oh, got it," she says. "Call me soon when she's out so we can dish some dirt."

I hang up, slightly annoyed. Britta is my only safety from utter loneliness, and I like her, I think. I glance at her, sitting on her bed with her big brown eyes staring at me.

"Was that your mom?" she says.

I shake my head. "No, my friend Hatty."

"Your mom not home?"

"I don't know. My mother doesn't expect to hear from me until the weekend."

Britta cocks her head in surprise.

"It's cheaper that way." I shrug. No need to add that my father doesn't expect to hear from me until the summer's end. I think he was relieved he no longer has to drive the fifty kilometers from Malmö, where he lives with his new wife, to pick me up for the monthly weekend.

Krystynka is a different story. She hardly ever sees my father, in part because father doesn't like small children, but mostly because he suspects Krystynka is not his child anyway.

I pull out *The Castle*, and set it down on my nightstand next to *Anna Karenina* and my well-worn copy of *The Wild Ass' Skin*. Britta hops over to browse through my reading selection, and wrinkles her nose. "Don't you have any magazines?"

MARINA STANDS BY the stove when we enter the kitchen, stirring the contents of a large pot. A cigarette bobs in her mouth and gently deposits ash into what, I presume, is our dinner. Britta sits down next to Jean-Pierre and I take a seat on the opposite side of the table. Jean-Pierre pours everyone red wine and lifts his glass in a toast. "A vôtre bienvenue."

"*He just poured us wine,*" Britta says to me in Swedish with an unutterably goofy expression, and gulps the contents in one go. Jean-Pierre watches her with an amused smile. "You Swedish girls, such big drinkers, always, eh?"

"This is how we drink in Sweden." Britta shrugs.

"Yes, alcohol and sex, the most popular Swedish pastimes," Marina mumbles from the stove.

Britta lets Jean-Pierre refill her glass. "Sex is a very healthy pastime," she says and giggles.

I'm immediately reminded of my own shameful little secret: still a virgin at fifteen. Since I have nothing to add to this conversation, I sip my wine. It's kind of bitter; I thought it'd be more like grape juice.

"Oh yes." Jean-Pierre nods. "I very much like the Swedish approach to the human body."

Marina snorts and burbles something that sounds like “Yeah, you would.”

“It is something perfectly natural,” Britta carries on, oblivious to Marina’s frown.

“One shouldn’t be ashamed of one’s body and its need for happiness. Sex is like—like having a really good dessert, minus the calories!”

This sends Jean-Pierre into a cavalcade of baritone laughter. Marina removes the pot and slams it on the table before us. The room goes quiet. My grandma used to say that an angel flew over the table when dinner conversation came to a halt. A whole horde of angels must be flying over now.

The pasta proves to be better than expected—though it remains uncertain whether it’s because we are now so famished that jellied ants would be a treat, or because cigarette ash is a tasty food additive. Marina sits down next to me with a few lone noodles, which she twirls with her fork on her plate, and continues to smoke. The only sounds are the rasp of cutlery on plates and muted traffic outside.

“So, where is your daughter?” I say and feel my words fall into the silence with the subtlety of a hand grenade.

Jean-Pierre looks to Marina for confirmation of their child’s whereabouts and she takes a deep drag. “Olympe? With the nanny, bien sur.” She has twirled her noodles into a neat spiral.

“At least she knows her kid’s name,” Britta says to me in Swedish.

I feel my ears burn. “We shouldn’t speak Swedish in front of them, it’s impolite,” I say. I take a gulp of my wine, trying to shake the feeling I’m acting like some prissy fifty-year-old.

“Oh, what the hell, they don’t understand,” Britta says.

As if to confirm, Jean-Pierre calmly pours her yet another glass, without remarking on our exchange. She drinks it up and ends with a slight burp.

“Oopsie.” She bursts into giggles again and playfully slaps Jean-Pierre on the chest. “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

Marina parks her cigarette in the noodle spiral on her plate and stands up. I have a sudden vision of her walking around the table to punch them. But she turns away and heads for a drawer by the stove and emerges with a chocolate bar, which she nibbles between puffs of her cigarette, while keeping a cold eye on Jean-Pierre’s arm across Britta’s shoulder.

Britta falls asleep in her clothes without even brushing her teeth. I pull on my pajamas and crawl under sheets that don’t exactly smell freshly laundered and open the Sirens book. It has three sections: model’s memo, pratique, and addresses. The first section is written in English and French, but the other two are in French only. I guess “pratique”—with what appears to be emergency telephone numbers, obligatory vaccination for residents of France, and five pages of small print that I think may be something to do with the law and the rights of models—is exclusive to French models since there is no translation. I skim through the first section. Go-and-sees, bookings, the voucher where I find out a “composite” is a model’s calling card, and it is “essential to leave one with every client.” When I get to: *Tarif 6. For a three hour booking, the sum on the voucher in 1980 should be F.1 386,00 H.T.*, I feel as though I’m reading Chinese and nearly give up. Numbers and math have never been my strong suit.

One page, however, gives me pause. Page ten, *List of Necessary Accessories*, tells

me I must have a complete makeup kit containing: *makeup remover, skin toner, light foundation, dark foundation, loose powder, compact powder...* it goes on and on listing beautifying equipment, half of which I've never heard of. I'm also told I need "*different shades of panty hose, flesh-colored lingerie, slips, scarves, and jewelry,*" and that I needn't be reminded that my lingerie and myself should be impeccably clean *for my own image*. I glance over at Britta, who's splayed out and gently snoring. Does she have all those things? How the hell am I supposed to acquire them with a hundred francs? And where?

These thoughts may keep me up all night. That, and Britta puking into the wastebasket. She's obviously not as used to alcohol as she is to sex.

By two A.M. she finally falls asleep, leaving me perfectly awake after the endless runs to the kitchen for another glass of water. Not that I mind. I know that because of my ministrations, she can't just dismiss me now. With each kind act, I barter her precious friendship. Eventually I drift off to an uneasy sleep and dream of trying to purchase makeup in a French hardware store.

AFTER A QUICK BREAKFAST, Britta and I hit the streets. We study the Plan de Paris on a bench close to the newsstand where we purchased our copies. It is a small book, with a map of the subway on the inside front cover and then maps of the city divided by arrondissements, from one to twenty.

Our go-and-sees are different from each other's, meaning Britta and I will have to figure out how to get around the city for ourselves. But it also means we aren't competing for jobs, today at least.

My first go-and-see is in Port de Clignancourt, at the very end of a yellow subway line. "It's in the boondocks," according to Britta.

"Yeah, but it's for *Elle* magazine," I say and watch her face drop a little.

We descend into the Metro together and buy a carnet de ticket, ten small yellow tickets stapled together.

"Break a leg," I shout to Britta over the din of trains and French babble that echoes in the white-tiled tunnels.

"Kick ass!" she yells back.

The doors of the Metro car swallow me with a hiss. I sit down on an orange plastic seat and marvel at the darkness rushing by outside. I've never been on a subway before. After a while, the novelty of being underground wears off and my eyes refocus to my reflection in the window glass. This other me, floating in the windowpane, has hollowed eyes and cheeks, and looks very young and scared.

Port de Clignancourt is full of small pastry shops, dusty drugstores, and cars parked haphazardly on the narrow sidewalks. I negotiate through them with my portfolio under one arm, my diary, address book, and Plan de Paris in a plastic shopping bag in the other, while keeping a busy eye on storefronts for any signs of cosmetics sales.

I find a heavy burgundy door with the corresponding number, and push my way into a long white hallway lined with poster-size *Elle* covers. A receptionist with sunglasses doesn't smile back, and points me in the direction of a small room crammed with racks of clothing where a sparrow of a woman emerges from the folds

of fabric.

“Buh-joooh,” she says and narrows her dark eyes into slits. Her cigarette is somehow glued to her bottom lip, impeding her speech. She extends a leathery brown hand adorned with a trillion thin silver bracelets, which tinkle like bells when I shake it.

“Bonjour.” I smile at her and pump away so energetically I nearly break a sweat. Her face remains impassive and when my arm finally gets tired and drops to my side, her hand remains outstretched. So I grab it again and shake some more, but this time with less vigor. “Bonjour,” I repeat.

She shakes her head. “Your book.”

“I am sorry?” Does she want to know what I’m reading? Good thing it’s Kafka, because that sounds pretty intellectual.

“Your *book*. Your portfolio.”

Ah! I fumble with my portfolio and place it into her hand. She opens it to the first page and studies the picture. Then looks at me. Then looks back at the picture. Then looks at me again. My cheeks are trembling in a fixed, lip-locked smile.

She turns to the other two photos but doesn’t linger over them, and flips through the rest of the blank pages.

“C’est ça? Is this all?”

I nod and feel horribly inadequate.

“Can you take off the pants?” she says.

Is this a joke? I smile uncertainly.

“I am waiting,” she says.

“Oh. Like, now?”

She puts her hands on her hips and scowls. “I do not have the time to wait until tomorrow, non?”

I kick off my Converse and unbutton my jeans, excruciatingly aware of my tattered undies and the smell of my socks. I wore them yesterday, a fact I now sorely regret.

She looks at me, her frown never changing. “Merci,” she says and lights another cigarette off the stump of its predecessor.

Is this it?

I don’t dare to ask, so I pull my jeans back on and leave.

The streets have suddenly lost some of their charm. I squeeze between two cars parked on the sidewalk and hit my knee. Why can’t the French park like normal people? A tickle of tears nestles in my sinuses. What now? Will the woman call the agency and tell them to fire me? I imagine them all sharing a chuckle over “the poor, dirty commie cow” who thinks she can be a model.

My next appointment in Les Halles is diagonally across the city, according to my Plan de Paris subway map. I distract myself by studying the huge posters in every station, ads for panty hose, yogurt, car tires, perfume, and sometimes pictures that are flat-out puzzling, like the giant billboard of a girl clothed in a white bikini standing in front of a turquoise ocean, her back facing us, and the text, “*La semaine prochaine j’enleverai le haut.*” As far as I can tell, it means she will remove something next week. Why, and what I’m supposed to buy, remains unanswered.

The train arrives at my stop and the first thing that hits me is a god-awful smell when the train doors open. Les Halles appears to have a sewage problem, because the