



The Dollhouse: A Novel

By Fiona Davis



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Fiona Davis's stunning debut novel pulls readers into the lush world of New York City's glamorous Barbizon Hotel for Women, where in the 1950s a generation of aspiring models, secretaries, and editors lived side by side while attempting to claw their way to fairy-tale success, and where a present-day journalist becomes consumed with uncovering a dark secret buried deep within the Barbizon's glitzy past.

When she arrives at the famed Barbizon Hotel in 1952, secretarial school enrollment in hand, Darby McLaughlin is everything her modeling agency hall mates aren't: plain, self-conscious, homesick, and utterly convinced she doesn't belong—a notion the models do nothing to disabuse. Yet when Darby befriends Esme, a Barbizon maid, she's introduced to an entirely new side of New York City: seedy downtown jazz clubs where the music is as addictive as the heroin that's used there, the startling sounds of bebop, and even the possibility of romance.

Over half a century later, the Barbizon's gone condo and most of its long-ago guests are forgotten. But rumors of Darby's involvement in a deadly skirmish with a hotel maid back in 1952 haunt the halls of the building as surely as the melancholy music that floats from the elderly woman's rent-controlled apartment. It's a combination too intoxicating for journalist Rose Lewin, Darby's upstairs neighbor, to resist—not to mention the perfect distraction from her own imploding personal life. Yet as Rose's obsession deepens, the ethics of her investigation become increasingly murky, and neither woman will remain unchanged when the shocking truth is finally revealed.



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Editorial Review

Review

"Rich both in twists and period detail, this tale of big-city ambition is impossible to put down."—*People*

"*The Dollhouse* is a thrilling peek through a window into another world—one that readers will savor for a long time."—**Associated Press**

"An ode to old New York that will have you yelling for more seasons of *Mad Men*."—*New York Post*

"Davis paints a scene of Darby's 1950s glamour for her audience that's a smart juxtaposition to Rose's modern-age New York, jumping between time periods clearly with often elegant prose. . . . Davis's descriptive words are transporting. . . . [A] poignant beach read."—*New York Daily News*

"In her page-turning debut, Fiona Davis deftly weaves the storylines of two women living at the famed Barbizon hotel for women. . . . Davis alternates the chapters between each woman until the twists and turns of their respective storylines ultimately weave together, upping the anticipation along the way."—*RealSimple*

"This suspenseful novel about a woman who took a decidedly different path—and the journalist who wants to uncover her secrets—will quicken your pulse."—*InStyle*

"Davis layers on relationships and intrigue, while building tension through her story structure. . . . The pace quickens as the story hurtles to its surprising—but satisfying—end. Who said history had to be dull, anyway?"—*BookPage*

"Davis's impeccably structured debut is equal parts mystery, tribute to midcentury New York City, and classic love story. . . . Darby and Rose, in alternating chapters, weave intricate threads into twists and turns that ultimately bring them together; the result is good old-fashioned suspense."
—**Publishers Weekly** (starred review)

"Fiona Davis's debut novel deftly blends the contemporary and midcentury storylines to form a wholly absorbing and entertaining read. . . . Period fiction mingled with twists and turns that keep the reader engrossed until the very last page."—**Bookreporter.com**

"Davis's debut novel . . . [is] a lively one, tripping along at a sprightly clip."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Get ready for glitz, glamour, and a whole lot of sleuthing."—*Brit + Co*

"Clever and full of twists. . . . A story well told."—*New York Journal of Books*

"Sensory and vivid. . . . A zippy plot and [a] refreshing focus on the lives of women many would overlook."—*The Dallas Morning News*

"Highly readable, *The Dollhouse* conjures up 1950s New York convincingly. In particular the now-vanished world of the Barbizon Hotel for Women, with its antiquated rules and intriguing array of female personalities and tragic fates, lives on in the pages of the novel in delectable detail. . . . This is no mere

'chick-lit,' but feminist-inspired entertainment."—**Historical Novel Society**

"Fans of Suzanne Rindell's *Three-Martini Lunch* will enjoy this debut's strong sense of time and place as the author brings a legendary New York building to life and populates it with realistic characters who find themselves in unusual situations."—**Library Journal**

"Davis delivers a fast-paced, richly-imagined debut that's almost impossible to put down."—**Kathleen Tessaro**, author of *The Perfume Collector*

"The ghosts of the famed NYC women's hotel come to life in *The Dollhouse*. Davis expertly weaves together the stories of several women who lived in the Barbizon during its heyday in the 1950s, and the broken-hearted journalist who decides to get the 'scoop' on a decades-old tragedy that happened in the building. A fun, page-turning mystery."

—**Suzanne Rindell**, author of *The Other Typist* and *Three-Martini Lunch*

"Multigenerational and steeped in history, *The Dollhouse* is a story about women—from the clicking anxiety of Katie Gibbs's secretaries to the willowy cool of Eileen Ford's models, to honey-voiced hatcheck girls and glamorous eccentrics with lapdogs named Bird. Davis celebrates the women of New York's present and past—the ones who live boldly, independently, carving out lives on their own terms."—**Elizabeth Winder**, author of *Pain, Parties, Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953*

"Two coming-of-age stories rolled into an ode to New York City and the young women—of past and present—who have tried to forge lives and careers there. Poetic, romantic, crushing, and soulful."

—**Jules Moulin**, author of *Ally Hughes Has Sex Sometimes*

About the Author

Fiona Davis was born in Canada and raised in New Jersey, Utah, and Texas. She began her career in New York City as an actress, where she worked on Broadway, off-Broadway, and in regional theater. After ten years, she changed careers, working as an editor and writer specializing in health, fitness, nutrition, dance, and theater.

She's a graduate of the College of William & Mary and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, and is based in New York City. She loves nothing more than hitting farmers' markets on weekends in search of the perfect tomato and traveling to foreign cities steeped in history, like London and Cartagena. *The Dollhouse* is her first novel.

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Chapter One

New York City, 2016

She'd forgotten the onions.

After all of the preparation, the lists, the running out of work early to finish shopping and buy everything she needed for their special dinner, Rose had forgotten a key risotto ingredient. She checked the pantry, but the basket was empty save for a few remnants of the papery outer layers.

Griff had raved about her risotto soon after they'd started dating, and she remembered how proud she'd been listing off the more surprising ingredients.

"The coconut milk is the secret to it," she'd confided.

"Why coconut milk?" He sat back in the rickety chair she'd bought at the thrift store on Bleecker, his long arms and legs far too unwieldy for her small studio apartment.

"I find it makes the texture especially creamy." She said it lightly, as she collected their plates, as if cooking was easy for her, just another thing she did well, rather than a panic-inducing race to the finish line. "I slowly add the chicken stock and coconut milk to the rice and spices until all the flavors have melded."

"I like the way you say that. *Melded*. Say it again."

She did so, the way she would on camera, her pitch slightly lower than her conversational voice, clear and sure.

Then he'd swept her up and made love to her on her bed with its tasteful handmade quilt. She'd stifled the impulse to sweep it to the side, so as not to have to send it to the dry cleaners tomorrow, and had instead surrendered to the enormity of him, all muscles and sinew, an athlete's body even at forty-five.

She missed the simplicity and the heat of their life back then, before the angry ex-wife and the surly children punctured their cocoon of happiness. Before she'd given up her apartment and they'd moved into the Barbizon condo on the Upper East Side.

Of course, his ex-wife and children wouldn't share her perspective. To them she was the interloper, taking up Griff's attention and love. She checked the clock on the oven. Almost six. If she was fast, she could run out to Gourmet Garage and pick up white onions before Griff got home from City Hall.

Her cell phone rang. Maddy again. The fourth call this hour.

"What, Maddy?" She tried to sound irritated, but laughed before Maddy could reply.

"I know, I know. You don't have *any* time to talk to your best friend right now. You're far too busy doing the dutiful housewife thing, right?"

"Yup. And you're off to the Soapies?"

"Daytime Emmys, if you please. I wish you were coming, Ro. What shoes go with the Michael Kors? Nude or gold?" Maddy's career as an actress had taken off since they'd met in college. Maddy had landed a contract role out of school on a daytime soap opera, and this was her first nomination.

Rose swallowed her guilt at not being by her friend's side. "The nude, definitely. Text me a pic, okay?"

"Any idea what Griff's big news is yet?"

Rose smiled and leaned back on the kitchen counter. "Probably nothing so big, in the end," she lied. "Maybe he's been promoted again? Such an overachiever."

"I don't think so. Do the math: It's been a year since his divorce was finalized, you've been living together for three months, and it's time to set a date."

“He has been acting weird lately. But what if I’m getting way ahead of myself?”

“Trust your gut.”

“My gut says something’s up. Even though sometimes it still feels like it’s early stages. I mean, we haven’t even furnished the apartment yet.”

The apartment she both loved and hated. Loved for its tall French casement windows, for its Wolf range and spacious closets. Loved for the air of promise it held in its baseboards and crown moldings and Bolivian rosewood floors.

But hated for its emptiness. She and Griff both worked too many hours during the week to take a real stab at furniture shopping, and weekends he went to his house in Litchfield with his kids, his wife off gallivanting with her other divorced friends. *Ex-wife*, she corrected.

So much work needed to be done to make it homey. The wallpaper in the smallest bedroom was covered in tiny climbing monkeys. Delightful as nursery wallpaper, but not at all right for Griff’s teenaged daughters. The floorboards in the dining room were bare except for the ghost outline of the prior owner’s Oriental rug.

Rose often felt like a ghost herself on weekends, sitting in the window seat off the library, staring down at the traffic and pedestrians wandering in pairs below. The sounds of honking and laughter easily permeated their fifth-floor apartment, even when the windows were shut. The neighborhood, Sixty-Third Street just off of Lexington, lacked the character of her old West Village stomping ground, where the trees formed a canopy over the cobblestones. Up here the sidewalks were bare, the avenue crammed with gilded little shops selling white linen toddler dresses and antique maps of Paris.

Rose waited while Maddy grunted into her dress. “Jesus, this zipper is literally unreachable. I need another pair of hands.”

“Where’s Billy again?”

“Parent-teacher night. He and his ex are having dinner afterward to discuss school options for next year. And if I haven’t already mentioned it, I’m quite happy to have a Get Out of Jail Free card for that one.”

“I’d be there to dress you properly if I could, you know that.”

“Oh, don’t worry, honey, I know. I’ll text you a pic and you do the same once you get the ring.”

Rose hung up, laughing, and padded down the long hall to the master bedroom, where she slipped out of the sheath she’d worn that day. As usual, she’d overdressed. The rest of her barely legal colleagues at the media start-up, all younger by at least ten years, gravitated toward jeans and hoodies. She pulled on a pair of leggings and a soft cashmere V-neck, then touched up her lips in the mirror.

Griff liked to call her his pinup girl, an image she encouraged when they went out together with a shade of crimson lipstick that worked with her pale skin and dark, sleek bob. But lately she’d begun wondering if the color was garish for a woman in her mid-thirties. Like she was trying too hard.

Did a man wonder whether his face was too shiny, his hair curling unreasonably, or if his crow’s-feet had possibly deepened overnight? She couldn’t imagine Griff giving any of these things a second thought. He entered a room as an agent of change, a man who made the news. Not as the pleasant-featured girl who simply reported it. When she’d worked at the network, Rose wanted to be taken seriously and dressed the part even though her producer wanted plunging necklines. Quiet wardrobe choices aside, Rose was

dismissed as eye candy by a big chunk of her core audience—some of whom also liked to tweet nasty comments about her breasts and legs. At least her new job kept her out of the limelight.

The sounds of a horn drifted up through the open bedroom window. Not a car horn, though. A low, mournful longing, followed by the rasp of a drum. She wasn't sure who: Miles Davis was the only trumpet player she could name. Her father had liked to play Dave Brubeck records when she was young, and the memory brought a smile to her face. She'd download some Brubeck to her iPhone and play it when she visited her father this weekend. He'd like that. Or he'd throw the phone across the room. You never knew, these days.

She should get going, but the haunting melody pulled her toward the open window. She leaned on the windowsill, stuck her head out, and listened. The sound drifted up from the apartment below hers but stopped moments later, replaced by a tune sung by two women. One had an edgy alto, like Lucinda Williams. The other was sweet, high, and almost angelic. The juxtaposition of the voices was unbearably beautiful: pain and hope, mixed together. The song ended with what sounded like giggling, oddly enough.

Time to get moving. She needed onions.

The apartment phone rang. Hopefully, Griff was calling to say he was running late.

“Is my dad there?”

Rose still couldn't tell his daughters' voices apart. “Isabelle?”

“No, it's Miranda.” The girl let out an impatient huff. “Is my dad there?”

Neither girl would say Rose's name out loud. Maddening. Then again, they were young and their lives were difficult. Even though Griff and his wife had been separated for three years, divorced for one, Rose had become the touchstone for everything that had gone wrong between their parents. Maddy had lucked out, meeting a man whose kids were four and seven, magical ages when Maddy was simply an extra person to play with, to receive attention from, rather than a threat.

She brightened her tone. “Hi, Miranda. He's not home from work yet. Did you try his cell?”

“Yeah. Went straight to voice mail. That's why I'm calling here.” “Well, he must be in the subway. I'll let him know you called.”

No good-bye, just a click followed by a dial tone. Maybe she'd leave the monkey wallpaper up after all.

If Griff was indeed on the subway, she didn't have much time. Rose shouldered her bag and marched down the hallway, into the elevator.

After an interminable wait, the doors closed, only to open again one floor below.

A woman stepped forward, wearing white gloves and a beautiful darkblue straw hat with an ivory veil that obscured her eyes and nose. Her matching coat, far too warm for this time of year, flared out from a closely fitted waist. Only her tentative movements, as if the floor might give way beneath her ivory shoes at any time, and the lines around her mouth and down her neck, belied her advanced age. She clutched the leash of a small dog. Immediately, she turned around to face front. Rose's bright greeting went unanswered.

The fourth floor. When Griff and Rose were looking at the building, the real estate broker had mentioned in hushed tones that a dozen or so tenants were “leftovers,” long-term residents of the Barbizon who began as paying guests back when it was a women-only hotel in the last century. Instead of being evicted after the

building turned condo, they'd all been moved to rent-controlled apartments on the fourth floor.

The dog barked up at Rose and she leaned over and let him sniff her hand. The veiled lady didn't move a centimeter. The other residents sometimes groused about the fourth-floor tenants, women who lived in valuable real estate without paying the thousands of dollars in monthly common charges that the rest of them did, but Rose felt otherwise. They were here first, and they fascinated her.

What had it been like, when the exclusive address housed hundreds of pretty young girls? Several had gone on to great fame: Grace Kelly, Sylvia Plath, Candice Bergen; the list went on and on.

"I'm Rose Lewin." She couldn't help herself. The woman clearly wanted to be left alone, but Rose's inquisitive nature took over. "I've just moved in, a few months ago. I'm afraid we haven't met."

The woman turned, slowly, her lips pursed into a tight pink line. "Welcome." Her voice warbled with age.

The elevator door finally opened and Rose waited while her mysterious neighbor maneuvered onto the marble floor of the lobby. She walked carefully, taking small, wobbly strides and keeping her shoulders and head ramrod straight. The dog, a terrier of some kind, trotted an uneven staccato rhythm across the floor, as if the coolness of the stone hurt his thimble-size feet. Rose lagged behind them.

The doorman gallantly swept open the heavy front door. "Miss McLaughlin, greetings. And how is Bird today?"

"Fine, thank you, Patrick."

After they passed through, Patrick addressed Rose with a smile and a slight bow. "Miss Lewin. How are you this evening?"

"Fine, thanks. I'm off to the store, back in a moment."

She was still getting used to having a doorman. There was no need to tell him why she was going out, or to make small talk about the weather. Her tendency to do so drove Griff nuts. To him, getting out of the lobby was a mere blip in a long, busy day.

The woman and her dog turned toward Park Avenue, and Rose headed over to Second. Although the store was mobbed, she picked up two onions and a bunch of white peonies and made it through the express aisle in record time.

Patrick was standing out on the sidewalk when she returned, hands behind his back, looking up at the new building being constructed across the street. His stomach stuck out from above his belt buckle and his gray hair lifted in the breeze. She stopped and looked up with him.

"How big is it going to be?" she asked.

"Too big." He'd been working for the Barbizon since he'd arrived in America forty years ago, and she was fairly certain he played up his Irish accent to charm the ladies. "I was thinking about what it was like when our building was the tallest in the neighborhood. Can you imagine? I've seen a photo of it, towering above the brownstones. Now this monstrosity across the street is going to be double the size. We don't stand a chance."

"Everything's tall these days," Rose offered. "But that's probably what they said when our building went up." She'd admired its design the first time they'd come to view the apartment. It was solid, unusual. The

building grew thinner at the top, like a brick-and-sandstone wedding cake, the terraces decorated with grand Moorish arches.

“Patrick, when did you start working here?”

He turned to face her, eyebrows raised in surprise. She gathered that few residents asked him personal questions. “Back in the seventies. Things were very different then.”

She liked the way *things* came out as *tings*. “Do you know many of the older residents?”

“The ladies? Of course. I know them all.”

“What about the woman who left a little while ago? The one with the dog.”

He smiled. “Miss McLaughlin. And Bird. Odd woman.”

A woman with buttery blond hair clopped toward them, carrying several packages. Patrick left Rose’s side and scuttled over to her. Rose checked her watch. She really should get upstairs, not stand around chatting, but Patrick quickly reappeared. “Can I get you a taxi, Miss Lewin?” “No, no.” She waved her hand in front of her. “I was hoping you could tell me more about Mrs. McLaughlin.”

“Miss McLaughlin.” He was about four inches shorter than she was and he lifted his ruddy, round face to hers. “I don’t like to talk too much about the other residents, you know.”

Patrick loved to talk about the other tenants, but Rose put on a serious expression and nodded.

“She’s from way back, the fifties, that was when she first moved in. Came here to go to secretary school.”

“She seems like an interesting woman, the way she dresses and all.” “Not many friends in the building. Management can’t stand her. She kicked and screamed when they said she had to move from her apartment down to 4B, with the rest of the longtimers. Threatened to call her lawyer. But never did. In the end, I helped her pack up and move. She’s a retired lady, couldn’t afford proper movers, and I was happy to do it. She always remembers me at Christmas with a card and a small token.”

Apartment 4B was the one directly under theirs. The one with the music. “That was very kind of you, to help her move.”

“Terrible story, what happened to her.”

Leave it to Patrick to bury the lead. “What happened?” “There was a skirmish up on the terrace.”

“A skirmish?”

“Yes. I can’t say what happened exactly. She was up there with one of the maids. It was a hotel back then, not like today, employed a big staff. Anyway, the two girls got into a fight and the maid fell to her death.”

“Good Lord. That’s awful.”

“I know. I remember I talked to one of the older porters when I first came on the job. I noticed she always wore a veil, never saw her without it. I said, ‘Why does the woman always cover her face?’ He told me she can’t stand to be seen, ever since that day.”

“Why is that?”

A family of tourists interrupted them, asking the way to Bloomingdale’s. As if he knew Rose was on the edge of her seat, Patrick spent quite a while explaining the best route and recommending a decent bistro in the neighborhood. She really had to get upstairs. If they ended up ordering in dinner, the mood would be all wrong.

Rose was waiting for the elevator to descend from one of the high floors, when Patrick reappeared by her side.

“Anyway, like I was saying. Poor Miss McLaughlin. The old porter, you know, the one I mentioned I spoke with, he said she was going to secretarial school. She was one of the innocents that came from the boondocks, not knowing anything, and she got caught up in all kinds of trouble.”

“What kind?”

“That I couldn’t tell you.” He rubbed his temple. “But in the skirmish, as they called it, she was cut.”

“Cut?”

He made a motion from the corner of his forehead down through the opposite eye. “Cut. With a knife.”

Her stomach turned.

“She was left disfigured, horribly scarred. Poor, poor Miss McLaughlin.” He closed his eyes. “Hasn’t once shown her face to the world again since.”

The elevator door opened and Rose stepped inside, suppressing a shudder.

She should have never asked.

Chapter Two

New York City, 1952

The woman behind the desk at the Barbizon Hotel for Women looked up in confusion. “McLaughlin? I’m afraid we don’t have anyone here by that name.”

“But I’m not here yet, I’ve just arrived.” Darby bit her lip. If only Mother had come with her, she wouldn’t be in this situation. If Mother had come, she’d be telling the clerk to go back and check her records, that she’d sent a letter off last month stating that Darby McLaughlin was arriving on the fifth of September and enclosing the three letters of recommendation. Then she’d turn to Darby and tell her to stop biting her lip.

She bit her lip harder and tasted blood.

The woman wore spectacles that made her eyes look unusually round, and Darby couldn’t help but widen hers in sympathy.

A group of five or six girls her age flounced through the lobby, and Darby could have sworn she heard one of them making a hooting noise. The lady behind the counter appeared not to have noticed.

“You’ve just arrived, you say?”

“Yes, I just arrived from Ohio today, and my mother, Mrs. Saunders, made the reservation ages ago. I’m to be here through June.”

The idea of getting back on a train and returning to Ohio was daunting. Grand Central Station had frightened her to bits, the hordes of people walking this way and that, knowing exactly where they were headed and why. She had stood close to the big clock and clutched her suitcase, trying to get her bearings as if she were standing on the deck of a giant ship. The floor even seemed to sway ever so slightly under her black patent leather pumps.

Then she spied the sign for taxis and hurled herself toward it, bumping into people and apologizing furiously. Before she had a moment to watch the city whizzing by in the cab, she was dropped off in front of the Barbizon Hotel and found herself standing in the cool, cavernous lobby. The dark wood of an intricately carved balcony loomed over three sides, offset by bright white walls. Lush palm plants stood guard against the columns.

All she wanted, after the overnight train ride, with its fancy dining car and linen tablecloths, was to go to her room and lie down for a moment. To collect herself from the onslaught of sensations. And now they said she didn’t even have a room.

She knew no one in the city, no one at all. The Barbizon Hotel for Women was her only hope.

The clerk returned from a back room, clutching a white piece of paper. “Saunders is the name it was filed under.”

She breathed out a sigh of relief. “Yes, that’s my stepfather. Mother took his name after she married him. But mine remained McLaughlin.” The owl-eyed woman threw Darby a largely indifferent look. “Well, I have Saunders here, miss. Do you want me to change it?” “Yes, please.”

“Good enough. Wait here and Mrs. Eustis will be with you shortly.” She had no sooner sat on the hard bench than the woman appeared.

She was what Darby’s mother would describe as horsey: a tall, solid woman with an aquiline profile, wearing a navy suit that sported a floppy fabric corsage. Darby stood and shook her hand.

“You look exhausted, Miss McLaughlin. I hope the trip wasn’t too arduous.”

“No, not at all. I quite enjoyed it,” lied Darby. “Trains are terrific.”

Mother had handed her a book titled *The Art of Conversation* at the train station, and she’d dutifully read through it because the cover promised a “fascinating new way to win poise, power, personality.” *Make your rejoinders positive!* it had decreed.

Mrs. Eustis gave a curt nod. “Come with me and I’ll show you to your room. You’re on the fifteenth floor, and I think you’ll find it quite accommodating.”

The elevator doors opened. Darby tried not to stare when a young girl in a uniform yanked open the interior gates for them to enter. Mrs. Eustis indicated for Darby to step inside. “Male visitors must be signed in and are only allowed in the public lounges. The safety of our girls comes first.” The elevator girl rolled her eyes and Darby suppressed a smile. As they trundled up, Mrs. Eustis ticked off the pertinent information in such a rush that Darby was certain she wouldn’t remember a thing. “Meals are served in the second-floor dining

room. The hours are posted in the lobby, but you can always pop in to pour yourself a cup of tea or coffee. Socials are held every Thursday evening in the West lounge. Anyone found sneaking a man up into the private rooms risks expulsion. You may use the pool, gymnasium, and squash courts in the basement from eight o'clock in the morning to six o'clock at night. At the top floor you'll find the sky terrace and solarium. You're enrolled at Katharine Gibbs, is that correct, Miss McLaughlin?"

The elevator door opened and they stepped down a narrow hallway. "Yes, ma'am. I'm due to start classes Monday."

"Very good. I'm afraid there were no vacant rooms on the floors where the Gibbs girls are housed. You'll be here, with girls who work for Eileen Ford."

"Like the cars?" Darby asked. She imagined all the secretaries learning the names of automotive parts.

"No, not the cars." Mrs. Eustis let out a frustrated sigh. "Here we are." She stuck a key into a doorknob and opened the door. The long, narrow room smelled of mustiness and hair spray. Darby touched the surface of the bureau, happy to discover it wasn't sticky with residue.

A twin bed hugged one wall, with a small wooden desk and chair squeezed against the foot of it. The bedspread sported a garish poppy design, as did the curtains, which hung down almost to the floor, making the window appear longer than it actually was. A scuffed wingback chair, too small to curl up in, was wedged into the corner opposite the desk.

"No pets are allowed, no fish, no turtles, nothing of the sort."

Darby wasn't sure where she'd get a live fish in the first place. Did they have stores for such things in New York City? Of course they did. They had everything.

"You look quite dazed. I say, are you all right?" "I'm fine, Mrs. Eustis."

"Very well, then I'll leave you be. Most of the girls on your floor are out on a trip to the Natural History Museum today, so you'll find it rather quiet until they return."

Darby hung up her dresses in the closet and put away the rest of her clothes. She placed her brush and comb on the top of the bureau and lay on the bed, unsure of what to do next, and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

A girl's scream woke her. The noise was high-pitched and terrifying, and Darby sat up quickly. With a sinking heart, she remembered she was in the middle of a strange city, alone. Out the window, the sun had disappeared behind the horizon in a dull haze, lending an otherworldly glow to the rooftops and water towers.

The scream dissolved into helpless laughter as the racket outside her door increased. The Ford girls must have returned from their outing.

Darby got up and brushed her hair, then put on her favorite dress for courage. It was a creamy cotton that buttoned right up to the neck and had short, cuffed sleeves. The dress flowed out from the belted waist, from which dozens of images of closed umbrellas and parasols hung down among the many pleats. The varying shapes and colors made her smile whenever she looked down.

In the mirror, her face had a sallow cast and her brown hair hung limply in the heat, making her ears seem bigger than normal. The Ear Beautifier that Mother had ordered and insisted she use nightly hadn't made them any less pronounced. Still, the dress was awfully pretty.

Taking a deep breath, Darby ventured into the hallway.

A gorgeous redheaded girl stopped mid-stride. “Well, hello.”

Darby stuck out her hand. “Hello, I’m Darby McLaughlin.” She plastered a bright smile on her face.

“Darby, I’m Stella Conover. I haven’t seen you before.” Stella stood several inches taller than Darby and had the tiniest ears she’d ever seen. “No. I’m here for secretarial school. From Ohio. Just arrived today. For a moment they didn’t have my reservation, and I figured I’d have to turn around and go right back. But then they found it. They’d put it under my stepfather’s name instead of mine. He’s Saunders, I’m McLaughlin.”

She was babbling. This was not at all what *The Art of Conversation* advised.

“Well, I’m glad it was sorted out.” Stella took her by the arm. Maybe Darby hadn’t sounded idiotic. “I love your dress, by the way.”

Stella brought her to an open door. Inside, six or seven other girls lolled about while one read out loud from a fashion magazine. When Darby appeared, they all stared up at her.

They looked as if they’d drifted right out of the pages of the magazine. One wore a bright-red lipstick that showed off her perfect bow lips, while another had a touse of golden curls. Their clothes were tailored and crisp: embroidered white blouses atop pencil skirts, rayon dresses in colorful stripes. A bevy of princesses holed up in a high tower. Even though she’d be turning eighteen in three months, Darby felt more like an anklebiter in the presence of such beauties.

“Ladies, this is Darby; she just arrived today for Katie Gibbs.” Stella pointed to each girl, their names tripping off her tongue. “We’re all with Eileen Ford, the modeling agency.”

That explained it. She was terribly out of place, like a panda in a room full of gazelles.

The girls said hello, and the one with the magazine, named Candy, invited Stella and Darby to join them. Darby tucked herself into the corner, eager to deflect any attention.

“I was just reading the newlywed tips from *Mademoiselle*. Do you read it, Darby?”

“Of course.” Well, not exactly. Mother bought the latest issue for her every month, and Darby would pretend to leaf through it. The willowy models, with their knowing gazes and impossibly tiny waists, intimidated.

“Anyway, here is the advice, ladies. Number one: ‘Comb your hair and wash your face before breakfast and put lipstick on before you put the coffee on.’ Number two: ‘Never touch your husband’s razor or tidy his desk.’ ”

“Ugh, I wouldn’t want to touch his razor.” The blonde tossed her head and grimaced. Even while making an ugly face, she was pretty.

“Number three: ‘The first time your baby and your husband call you at the same time, go to your husband.’ ”

Darby imagined a baby crying its head off in hunger, while the husband needed help looking for a missing sock. Didn’t seem right.

“Number four: ‘Don’t compete with your husband.’ And finally, number five: ‘Remember that marriage is fun.’ ”

The girls clamored to comment, the words tumbling out.

“I comb my hair before coming downstairs anyway; that wouldn’t make much difference to me.”

“And I’ll have a nurse to see to the baby, so I’ll be free to mind my husband.”

“What do you think, Darby?”

Candy stared at her. This was a test. She needed to respond with an air of élan and a witty comment. If she did, she’d make friends for life, and these girls would ask her to be a bridesmaid at their weddings and invite her to their baby showers and they’d exchange letters, remembering their time together in New York City when they were young and the world was ahead of them.

“I don’t plan on marrying,” Darby said.

Candy’s jaw dropped open. She fiddled with the pearls around her neck. “Ever?”

“That’s why I’m here, to go to school and learn how to earn my own wage. I don’t want a man to support me.” She remembered the look on Mother’s face, both stricken and triumphant, when Daddy had passed away. The other girls stared at her, dumbstruck, and she tried to explain. “A woman shouldn’t have to depend on a man.”

“Right. Maybe you prefer to depend on a woman instead?” “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Candy’s eyes shone with a menacing glee. “You really don’t know what I’m talking about?”

“All I’m saying is that I plan to make enough money to support myself. Isn’t that what you want? Isn’t that why you’re here?”

Candy cackled. “No, sugar. I’m looking to find the richest man I can. Don’t be a nosebleed.”

Before she could respond, Stella announced it was time for dinner, and the gaggle sprang up and trotted out the door. The magazine fell to the floor and Darby carefully picked it up and laid it back on the bed.

She’d said the wrong thing. She smoothed her umbrella dress and

followed them down the hallway.

The clattering of dishes and lively chatter rebounded around the dining room, which was as fancy as any restaurant Darby had been to, with crisp white tablecloths and an art deco chandelier of Odeon glass hanging from the ceiling. Darby followed Stella like a lost puppy, trailing behind the one person who’d been kind. Stella filled her own plate with broccoli and a spoonful of mashed potatoes, but Darby was famished and asked for an extra chicken filet. Her girdle would be tight afterward, but she didn’t care.

“Now, tell me, where are you from in Ohio?” asked Stella once they’d sat down at the table filled with their hall mates.

“Defiance.” *Keep your answers short and sweet; don’t drone on.*

“What an original name for a town. Much better than Granite Falls, anyway—that’s where I’m from in North Carolina.” Stella took a dainty bite of potato and continued. “It’s strange they put you on the same floor as the models, though. The Gibbs girls are up on sixteen and seventeen.” She put a hand on Darby’s arm.

“We’re happy to have you, of course.”

“Why, thank you. Happy to be had.” Wrong. Stupid. Stella threw her an odd glance.

Darby wished she were at home, cuddling her dogs while Mother cooked, enjoying the few quiet hours after school and before Mr. Saunders came home. She’d brought several books with her, including her beloved anthology of Shakespeare’s plays, and part of her wanted nothing more than to run up to her room and lose herself in *Twelfth Night* or *Cymbeline*, imagining the stage sets and costumes in her head as she read. “I’m sorry, I’m out of my element here.” Darby fiddled with her cutlery as tears pricked the corners of her eyes.

“There, now.” Stella lowered her voice. “I felt the same way before I settled in. Granite Falls doesn’t even have a bus depot, so you can imagine how overwhelming this was for me when I arrived.”

For the first time, Darby noticed the other girl spoke with a soft Southern lilt. Her voice was musical, like a song. “I like your accent.”

“Thank you. I try to play it down—the modeling agency thinks it makes me seem unsophisticated.”

“How can they say that? It’s beautiful, like a melody.”

Stella drew back, pleased. “That’s so well put. You should be a writer.” “You’re kind, but I can’t waste time daydreaming. I’m here to learn to be a secretary. Mother used all of the insurance money she got when Daddy died to get me here. I won’t have another chance.”

“I see,” said Stella. “And where would you like to work once you’re through with Katie Gibbs, Little Miss Serious?”

Darby smiled. “Funny, I hadn’t thought that far ahead.” The din was nice; it offered them a cocoon of privacy.

“Well, I think you should aim high. You could be the secretary to a top businessman, to someone who runs a publishing house or a fashion line. Someone who’ll appreciate a girl who has a way with words.”

“That sounds like a dream. But we don’t have any such people in Defiance.”

“So don’t go back to Ohio at all, then. You can stay here in New York City.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t do that.” “But why not?”

Darby wouldn’t dare explain why. That she’d miss her dogs too much, and Mother would be left alone with Mr. Saunders and his moods and temper.

“Did you hear what happened last year?” Candy addressed the entire table, cutting into Darby and Stella’s conversation.

“No, what?” asked Stella, turning away from Darby.

“I heard one of the girls jumped to her death from the fourteenth floor.”

“Hush, Candy. That’s just a rumor and you know it.”

“No, it’s true.” Candy stared right at Darby. “One of the doormen told me all about it. Said they covered it up

so the papers wouldn't find out, just shoveled up the body and sent it home to wherever she was from."

"Awful!" The girls' protests rang out.

"We're not supposed to know. And apparently another girl used a gun to shoot herself in the head in her room several years ago. Her ghost still walks the halls, half of her head gone."

Stella pushed away her plate. "Lord, Candy. I'm still eating. You could at least wait until bedtime for such gruesome stories."

"She wasn't a guest editor or a model, I know that much. Probably a Katie Gibbs girl. You better watch out, Darby." The room began to spin.

"You don't look very well," said Stella.

"I'm fine." Darby wiped her mouth with her napkin and offered up a weak smile.

"You know, I have a powder that would be perfect for the shine on your nose." Stella again, saving the day. Bored with the line of conversation, the other girls turned away. "I'll give it to you when we go back to our rooms. Would you like that?"

"I would like that very much. Thank you." Embarrassed, Darby patted at her cheeks with her napkin, hoping to tone down the oily sheen that had haunted her since she was fourteen. She was way out of her league with these girls: ugly, uninformed, and dull-witted. How many dinners would she have to sit through before she could return to Defiance? September through June, ten months, seven dinners a week, four weeks a month: two hundred and eighty, minus some for the holiday vacations.

Back in her room, Darby threw herself facedown on her bed and silently wept into her pillow. She had just wound down when a knock sounded on her door.

"Darby, I brought your powder. Pond's Angel Face; it's to die for." Stella stepped in and closed the door behind her. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

Darby sat up and wiped her eyes. "I want to go home, Stella. I don't want to be here."

Stella joined her on the bed and put her arm around her. She smelled of vanilla, and Darby couldn't help but lay her head on her shoulder. Stella didn't flinch, as she might have, and this small kindness almost set off another round of tears.

"There, there." Stella reached around with her free hand and tucked

Darby's hair behind her ear. "You'll settle in soon enough." "Do you really think there's a ghost?"

"No. I think Candy's a first-class brat. Don't let her get to you. You're a Barbizon girl now; you're one of us."

The dull panic that had clutched her heart since she'd left Ohio loosened, just a little, and Darby let out a deep, sad sigh.

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