

Speak Softly, She Can Hear

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Chapter One

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It was pitch-black. Black above and below. The only way to know up from down was by the pinprick stars. Ahead the sounds of Eddie Lindbaeck's boots fell heavily in the snow, his full weight coming down and then pushing off. Carole's footsteps were quieter because she'd worn her new Capezio flats to make her feet look pretty and to impress him. Capezio flats, black stretch pants with the loop under the arches to keep them from riding up, Naomi's gold mohair sweater, and her aunt Emily's brown parka with the cream vee. She couldn't help the jacket. It was all she could scrounge up in the warmth department. But now her feet were numb. She had to come down hard on her heels to get any traction at all, and it made her feel foolish.

She had the sinking feeling he'd forgotten she was even here. If anything, he was getting farther ahead. When he'd picked her up at the Double Hearth, he'd been aloof, not at all like he was on the train. A car passed them, whipping their shadows together. Afterwards, it was even blacker than before.

'Is it much farther?' she called to him.

The sound of his boots stopped somewhere up ahead. 'Is she tired?'

'No,' she said. 'She isn't. She's just cold.' She wouldn't want him to send her back to the Double Hearth and ask for Naomi tonight instead. She'd won going first, and she was going through with this no matter what.

‘It’s not far,’ he said. ‘It’s something out of *Cannery Row*. You girls didn’t exactly go all out, did you?’

‘You’re the one who made the reservations.’

Another car beamed from behind them, and she saw the sign up ahead. ‘Snowtown Motel’. She knew exactly how far it was now because it was where the taxi had dropped him off after the train today. After the turn, the driveway snaked through a forest and then ended up at a clearing and the bunch of cabins, a big ring of them, with an office off to the left. Maybe it was crummy, but she wasn’t going to take the blame for it. He was the one who’d supposedly been here before.

‘You didn’t give me much to work with.’ When she caught up, he put an arm around her shoulder and breathed into her ear. ‘No matter,’ he said.

The sound of his words triggered a spreading warmth, followed by a tight cluster of sensation, as though a string were being tugged deliciously somewhere deep within her. Naomi said the whole world is divided between those who have done it and those who haven’t. *Men can tell*.

‘I couldn’t believe what you did this morning,’ she said.

Carole and her mother had arrived at Grand Central early and had had to wait near the information booth, where the floor was disgusting. Carole had Aunt Emily’s skis and was wearing Emily’s urine-coloured stretch pants. In her suitcase she had Aunt Emily’s long underwear and a hat she wasn’t going to be caught dead in. She’d never carried skis before, and she kept hitting people with them by accident. When she set them down, they slithered every which way. Her mother kept trying to kick all the equipment into a tidy pile.

Carole had felt a little bad that her mother had gone to all the trouble of getting the skis from Emily when Carole didn’t care about skiing. They’d had to get the car out of the garage and drive up to Tarrytown. Aunt Emily had taken the bindings to be oiled or something, and had the sides sharpened, and it was a very big production. She’d shown Carole and her mother those old pictures from a hundred years ago when she

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had been, in her words, *a big girl too*. Before she'd dieted herself into oblivion. Back then you had to walk up and ski down. Emily had said that a hundred times. Now they had chair lifts. Emily thought walking up made her superior. Emily was always saying things like that.

So Carole and her mother had been standing there waiting when they heard a voice bellowing out across the whole station. 'You guys!' There Naomi was with Eddie right next to her on that giant marble landing that looked out over all of Grand Central. Carole had frozen on the spot. What did Naomi think she was doing? She had on all black and one of those serape things her father and Elayne were always bringing her back from South America. A sort of shawl in bright red. The odd couple, Carole thought. Eddie had looked preppie in his grey Shetland sweater and tweed jacket. He had blandly handsome features, a Scandinavian face – wide, high cheekbones, narrow dark blue eyes, and a full mouth. His lank hair was the colour of sand. Naomi's eyes were thick with kohl, something she'd just started doing. Carole counted. *One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand*. She knew exactly what was coming. On *four one-thousand* her mother leaned over. 'Isn't it a shame what Naomi does to herself. She could be such a pretty girl.'

Naomi and Eddie came barging through the crowd towards Carole and her mother, Naomi in the lead, Eddie following, carrying both their suitcases. Naomi pretended not to know his name. She called him 'this nice man' and said he'd been kind enough to share his taxi, that if he hadn't, she'd have missed the train for sure. Eddie had grinned shyly as though embarrassed at all the fuss, as if, aw shucks, all he'd really done was what any decent person would do. Carole had held her breath in desperate, paralysing fear that any minute now her mother would catch on and Carole would be in the biggest trouble of her young life.

But her mother hadn't had a clue. She'd believed what Naomi had said and shaken Eddie's hand, her manner the same as when she met Carole's father's business associates – overly chatty and nervous. *What a nice thing it was of you to do . . . People in this city don't usually . . . Now where I'm*

from . . . On and on, blushing and squirming in her coat like a complete idiot. She was forty, for God's sake, and Eddie was twenty-six. It killed Carole the way her mother could get, especially when *she* was the one going to bed with him later. It was so pathetic. She hadn't dared to look at Naomi, who she knew would be smirking dangerously.

'The nerve of you,' she had said to Naomi when they finally ditched her mother and got on the train. 'The absolute balls!'

They managed to get two pairs of seats facing each other and throw their stuff all over the other two. Then they'd had to fight people off who wanted to sit with them, saying the seats were taken. Naomi was best at that, coolly and calmly putting her hand on the vacant seat and saying, 'I'm afraid these are already spoken for,' ignoring people's dirty looks once the train got going and the seats stayed empty. If it had been up to Carole, she would have given them away. She was weak when it came to things like that.

Somewhere in Connecticut, Eddie made his way up the aisle and flopped down in the seat next to Carole. He leaned against her, and she let him, feeling his warmth. But that was nothing. The next thing she knew, Naomi, who was sitting opposite, slipped her stockinged foot between Eddie's big boots, inched it up the front of the seat between his knees, and rested it right between his thighs, wriggling her toes and laughing. Where had she learned to do that? He made a kissing motion at Naomi and then at Carole, and Carole dared to make the same noise back. After that, anything went. Whatever they felt like doing, they did. Whatever they felt like saying, they said. What a feeling it was. Think it, do it. For mile after mile of swaying tracks and stops and people getting on and off, staring at them, some of them making remarks. They switched places, took off their shoes and socks, touched his feet, one another's feet and ankles, until, some time in the afternoon, they all fell into a semi-sleep, tangled and barefooted.

'So I'll see one of you later,' he said as the train was pulling into the Waterbury station.

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‘Me.’ Carole was drunk with him. Eddie had bedroom eyes, half shut all the time, with fat lids. And thick lips. His whole face reminded Carole of sleep, like you’d have to stick a pin in him to get his attention. So sexy, she thought.

‘We had a race, and she won,’ Naomi said.

‘You did?’ Eddie said, waking up, a little confused. ‘A footrace?’

‘Sort of,’ Carole said. Eddie’s expression bothered her, and she didn’t feel like giving him the details. It had been her idea and now it seemed sort of dumb and she was embarrassed. She and Naomi had chosen a course. Carole would start at 100th and Madison, while Naomi started at Twentieth and Madison. Whoever got to Sixtieth and Madison first, the exact midpoint, won the right to go first with Eddie. Carole had won by six minutes.

‘You must have cheated, eh?’ Eddie pressed two fingers into Carole’s belly and jiggled them. She knew what he was thinking. That she was too fat to outrun Naomi. But she’d only had to outwit Naomi. She’d zig-zagged through the city and jaywalked mid-block. She counted on Naomi’s getting distracted by stores and people, and she had.

‘No,’ she said.

‘Well, lucky me,’ Eddie said.

In the headlights of an oncoming car she saw him ahead now, getting ready to cross the road to the motel. He waited for the car to pass and then ran for it. She wished he’d wait for her, but maybe it was because he was an actor that he was this way. Maybe he was going over lines in his head or thinking about how to do a scene. She’d read in *Confidential Magazine* that Danny Kaye did that all the time. People would see him on airplanes and ask for his autograph, and he wouldn’t even hear them because he was so preoccupied with a script.

He waited for her to cross the road. She couldn’t see him very well and had to grope for him in the dark. Her hands hit the soft layers of his jacket. ‘Hold still,’ he said. His gloved hands came to rest on her arm,

and she smiled secretly. He tucked her hand under his elbow and pressed it hard against his side. 'Come on,' he said. 'It's fucking cold out here.' The word thrilled her. She'd never heard it spoken like that, so casually, as if he said it all the time. He set off fast, but she couldn't keep up and soon her hand slipped from under his arm. He took a few steps without her and then stopped. Utter silence. She could be anywhere with anybody – it was that dark. She was too scared to take any more steps by herself.

'Eddie?' She groped the dark again. 'Come on. This isn't funny.'

He grabbed her from behind and she screamed. He clamped a leather glove that smelled like gasoline over her mouth. 'Sshh,' he said and kissed her, the warmth of his lips and tongue a sudden shock, more terrifying still. 'Come on. Not much more.' By now she could see a little bit of light through the trees ahead. She had her hand tucked in again between his elbow and his side and she was a little bit behind him. She liked it this way, the feeling of being taken somewhere. Against her will, but not really.

He led the way to the second cabin from the left. The ones to either side were dark, and the office was dark except for a neon sign with pieces of the letters missing. The cabin was dark wood, or painted brown, she couldn't tell. It had white shutters tilting off. She knew what he meant about it being crummy. 'Ours is only a dorm,' she said about the Double Hearth, where she and Naomi were staying. 'At least you have some privacy.'

He fumbled in his pocket for the key, opened the door, and switched on the light. 'See what I mean?' It smelled of bats and mice inside, like a summerhouse that had been closed up. There were two twin beds with beige-and-brown-striped bedspreads, an armchair, and a bureau. His suitcase lay open on the floor. It was one of those fibreglass ones that you could drop from an airplane and it wouldn't break. His shaving stuff was spread out on a fake mantel. There was an electric heater. He switched on the heater, and they both watched the coils start to glow red. He went

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to one of the beds, jiggled the mattress, and grinned. He sat on the bed, took off his parka and sweater, and threw them into a corner. He started undoing the top button of his shirt and then stopped. 'Don't just stand there,' he said.

Her parka crackled with static electricity when she took it off. The yellow mohair sweater came way down over her hips, but even so she tugged it down and sat on the bed across from him, holding the parka in her lap. She had never thought about this part, the part right before. She had no idea how they were ever going to get from here into one of the beds. How she'd even get out of her clothes. How Eddie would. She studied the lamp on the table between the beds. It had a cowboy roping a steer on the shade. He probably wished Naomi was here instead of her.

Eddie unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt, took it off, and threw it on top of the sweater and parka. She wondered if he would just keep on going and take off all his clothes. Then what? It was all happening too fast. But he stopped and sat staring at her in his undershirt and khaki slacks. Her father sometimes looked at her the same way. He'd once said she was never going to be cute. 'No sirree,' he had said. 'You're going to be handsome. A handsome woman.' She hadn't dared to tell that one to Naomi. She didn't want anybody to know. It was so awful. At the time, she didn't even dare ask what he meant — what women did he think were handsome? What if he said Golda Meir or Lillian Hellman? Well, no, she *knew* she didn't look like them. That much she could say. She didn't have a great big nose and little eyes, for one thing. Her nose was nice. And she had arresting eyes, everybody said, which was, in her opinion, too much like 'handsome' to be much comfort. Her eyes were pale blue, like ice. In her wildest dreams she wondered about Sophia Loren. She hoped to God that Sophia was handsome. Generous features on Sophia, that was for sure. But dark. And Carole was so fair. Maybe, just maybe.

'Stop that thing with your foot, will you?' Eddie said. 'It makes me nervous.'

She took a breath and looked around.

‘So?’ he said.

‘So?’ she said.

He took a bottle of Scotch from his suitcase, poured two little cone-shaped paper cups, and handed her one. The hot liquor ran down to her stomach like fire. He poured her another. ‘So you’re eighteen?’

She remembered what Naomi had said. *Whatever you bloody do, don’t bloody tell him you’re only bloody sixteen.* Bloody was Naomi’s word of the month. Naomi said he might not go through with it if he knew. He might think she was too young. ‘I got held back in the fourth grade. I couldn’t get my multiplication tables.’ She added the last bit to make it authentic. Actually, she was young for her year and headed to Vassar in the fall. She had been accepted on early decision, the only girl in her class who had, and she would turn seventeen in her first month of college. She was a brain. She’d spent her whole life getting straight As. Eddie crumpled the cup in his hand and looked her up and down. There was something so bold in the way he stared at her breasts that it took her breath away, and when he raised his slow eyes to meet hers, she felt so weak she could barely move.

‘Give,’ he said. He reached for the parka she held, loosely now, in her lap. ‘Stand up and turn around. Let me get a look at you.’

The old dread came back full force. She was fat, and her thighs rubbed when she walked.

‘Just be natural. Trust me. Look at yourself in the mirror.’

She stood and turned to the mirror over the dresser. Her face was flushed from the walk and the liquor. ‘Nice,’ he said. He stood behind her, examining her in the glass. He cupped her chin, pulled her hair back. It was blond and curly, almost frizzy. He lifted it from her back to the top of her head and kissed her neck, playing with the hem of her sweater at the same time. When she felt his hands along her bare midriff, she pulled in her stomach on reflex. ‘Don’t do that,’ he said. ‘Just relax. You’re fine.’

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‘I don’t know what to do.’

‘It isn’t what you do. It’s what *I* do. Lesson number one.’

His hands lifted the sweater and she raised her arms automatically, like a child. When he pulled the sweater over her head, she was ashamed of the twisted and frayed straps of her bra. She covered the rolls of fat on her midriff with her arms as best she could, but again Eddie stopped her, smiling at her from behind in the glass. He undid the hooks of her bra and pulled it away. ‘Look,’ he said. She watched in shock as his fingers took her nipple and pinched it. It hurt just a little, but she didn’t let him know that. She wanted to be brave. ‘They change.’ His smile held a trace of cruelty that only made her like him better. ‘Did you know that?’

Of course she did, but she shook her head. He’d said it was what *he* did, after all.

He unhooked her pants, ran the zipper down, and pulled them to the floor. She shut her eyes. She hated seeing herself all bigger than life. Without looking, she remembered the underpants she had on and blushed. They were grey and soft from so many washings. He pulled them to the floor and stood up behind her as his hands slid across her belly, down to the place between her legs, his fingers making small circles that suddenly felt good. Incredibly good. ‘You like that, don’t you?’ he said, and she opened her eyes and glanced at what he was doing, riveted now by the sight of his hand on her and the feel of his breath on her shoulder. She nodded. She could not speak.

Then he turned and went to the bed, where he lay down, leaving her stranded, with her panties and slacks around her feet. She wished he’d make this easier. But he didn’t. He didn’t tell her anything now, which wasn’t fair. It was supposed to be about what *he* did.

He lay back on the pillows. ‘Beautiful,’ he said, and she was able to smile for the first time all night. ‘You’re a diamond in the rough, you know that?’ He beckoned her over and she went, kicking out of her pants. She lay down beside him easily. She felt as fluid as water while his hands travelled over her body, exploring, and she was carried along for

what seemed like hours until he rolled away, stood beside the bed, dropped his pants, picked them up, and took something from the pocket. A rubber. He fumbled with himself, and she saw for the first time his thing in the dim light, bobbing and unruly. She couldn't take her eyes off it. The bulk of it, and that stocking thing dangling off the end. The fact of her looking at it that way did something to him, made him bigger. He lay down next to her. He touched her. 'God, you're wet,' he said.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

It made him laugh so hard that he had to roll onto his back. He turned back to face her. 'It's a *good* thing,' he said. 'I see we've got a lot of ground to cover.'

She felt pleased with herself for making him laugh out loud, thrilled at his evident enjoyment of her although she didn't know exactly what had been so funny. Well, not funny. The way he laughed wasn't so much comic as appreciative. He liked her better for what she had just said. *It's a good thing*. She smiled, remembering the nice way he'd said that, as she felt his hands trace lightly over her abdomen and breasts and then make gentle, tantalizing circles, spreading slowly down, to her navel, below her navel. Her hand slid down his arm to his hand, wanting, needing whatever was next. She opened easily to him and felt again that sweet tugging and the sense that the place between her legs was the only part of her that existed, that everything else – body, thought, even consciousness – was gone, fully in the service of this sudden enlargement.

And then there was a moment of searing pain, and she realized that he was inside her. He started pumping rhythmically against her, aggravating the pain. She didn't want to cry out in case she was mistaken again and lay waiting for that flicker of pleasure to return, but it didn't. She shifted under him a little, and it did something odd. He hesitated as though he was listening for something, his body rigid and absolutely still. He seemed to get a second wind and boom boom boom. Then he slumped down on top of her with all his weight and

stayed there until she could hardly breathe and had to squeeze out from under him.

Were they finished, or was this still the middle? She waited for some other new thing to happen, but nothing did. She was getting her own second wind and wanted to go another round or whatever you'd call it. This couldn't possibly be all there was to it, not after what everybody said. 'The central moment of the young wife's life,' according to the book her mother had made her read. But he was snoring. She felt so wide awake. How could he be asleep so soon? She stared at the ceiling. It reminded her of summer camp with its plain pine boards. She used to lie on her bunk and stare at the knots until they looked like faces or animals, but she was too jumpy for that now. She considered racing out of here so she could tell Naomi. For once she'd have a leg up on Naomi. I did it *first*. But if she left, she might miss something. It wasn't even nine o'clock.

She looked around the room for something to do. There was no TV or radio. Not even a book as far as she could see. Just his stuff. She tiptoed to the suitcase on the floor and opened it up, but it was cold in the room and she went back and got his T-shirt from off the floor. The suitcase was olive green. Inside were a few pairs of those same khakis, all folded, and some shirts and underwear. She opened a drawer. Inside, there were a magazine, a box of rubbers, and some ten-dollar bills in a paperclip.

She opened the magazine. It was a dirty magazine on bad paper, with drawings of naked men and women in it and some fuzzy photographs. She pulled it out carefully and looked through it, glancing often at Eddie in case he woke up. She had a feeling he'd be mad if he knew she was in his stuff. She'd never seen pictures like this. Everything was the colour of raw beef.

She opened the other top drawer and started to fill it with his underwear until it occurred to her that if he found all his things put away, he'd know she'd seen the magazine. That might not be okay. She didn't really know him that well. What if he thought she had taken some of the

money? She undid everything, quietly slipping the clothes out of the drawer and back into his suitcase.

She went to the mantel, where his shaving things were all lined up. There was a little rectangular hairbrush and a tortoiseshell comb. She ran her hands over all his things as though they were her own. She picked up the hairbrush and ran it through her tangled curls. He had a leather toilet kit filled with half-used tubes and bottles. She went into the bathroom and emptied it out on the top of the toilet tank, held it under hot water, and scrubbed. She flattened his toothpaste and rolled it tightly from the bottom. She wanted to take care of him now. Make everything easy and clean for him.

Her mother had explained about sex when Carole turned ten. It had been just awful. Her mother had been embarrassed, looking away most of the time and not meeting Carole's eyes. She had said that one day Carole would fall in love, get married, and then have intercourse. She'd blushed when she got to the part where the man's penis became rigid and was inserted into the woman's vagina. Even at ten, Carole had been pretty sure something was missing from the explanation, and now she knew. Her mother had left out the urgency of it all, how at a certain point there was no stopping. It had to be the whole reason anyone wanted to do it in the first place. Sex wasn't a chore at all but an unstoppable pleasure that could have gone on forever if only Eddie hadn't fallen asleep. When Carole had asked her mother about falling in love – what it meant, how it happened, how you knew – her mother had said, 'You'll just know.' Maybe it was happening right now.

'Where'd you go?' He was calling from the bedroom. She opened the door and looked out at him. 'Don't go touching my stuff.'

She sat on the side of the bed. 'Do I look different? Now that, you know. They say girls look different after. That men can tell. I just hope Daddy can't tell. He'd kill me.'

'You look fine. Don't worry.'

'I feel different.'

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‘You should.’

‘Can I see you back in New York?’

He lay back down and grinned at her. ‘So?’ he said.

‘So what?’

‘Do you like me?’

‘Yes,’ she said, flattered and a little taken aback to be asked. She wouldn’t have dared ask him that question herself. What if he said no?

He pulled her down beside him. ‘Sure, you can see me back in New York.’

‘Can I go to one of your actor parties?’ There was no question in her mind that he’d want her to. That really, she was just making this easier for him. Saving him from having to ask. He’d said she was beautiful, after all.

‘Maybe I can come to your place,’ he said.

The thought of Eddie in her bedroom electrified her.

‘So tell me,’ he said. ‘You walk into your apartment, and what’s there? Is it like a hall or what?’

She walked him through the apartment, starting with the dining room and the den off that, the corridor to her parents’ room. He wanted every little detail – what was on the walls, what the furniture was like, what they could see out the window. She told him about the home for unwed mothers across the street and all the pregnant girls her age who played cards, watched TV, and waited for their babies. Her mother said it served them right.

‘She’s pathetic, isn’t she?’

‘Who?’

‘Your mother.’

She’d said her mother was pitiful a thousand times to Naomi. But she hated hearing him say it. ‘I don’t know.’

‘I know, and I only met her for two minutes.’ He laughed. ‘Hot to trot.’

‘She has a hard life.’ What she meant was personally. Her mother

wasn't cut out for the life she was leading. She should have stayed in the Midwest, where the people didn't scare her. Her father's business friends made her mother so nervous that she sometimes drank too much.

'What if she knew?' Eddie said and laughed. 'About this. Her little girl giving up her virginity to a cad.' He rolled over and started kissing her neck, her breasts. 'What if she knew I was doing this?' His hand slid down between her legs. 'So answer me. What if they knew? Your parents.'

'Well, they *won't*.'

'But just say, just *suppose* you were going to give me something in return for my keeping our little secret. What would it be?'

'That's not funny.'

He sighed and rolled onto his back. 'It's a *game*, for Christ's sake. Pick me out a present.'

'Well, you don't have to shout,' she said. Eddie sighed deeply. 'Okay,' she said. 'There's a silver cigarette box lined in ivory, about yea big.' She made the small shape with her hands. 'There are always cigarettes in it left over from parties.' It was her favourite thing. She loved the way it smelled of tobacco and the smooth cool bone lining.

'You can do better than that. Something big,' he said. 'Something valuable.'

She was a little hurt because she treasured that box. The only expensive items they owned, or at least the only ones she could think up, were the ancestor prints in the hall, but they were huge.

'Oh, forget it. Turn over,' he said. She lay with her back to him so he could curl himself around her. 'I like you,' he said, running his hand back and forth along her thigh, then pushing up the T-shirt to help her remove it. 'I like big women. That Naomi is skin and bone. A real Bony Maroni.'

'She's going to be beautiful. Everybody says.'

'Not if she doesn't put some meat on her.'

Carole took a deep breath and relaxed. She'd never once expected him to like her better. It just never happened. 'Naomi's mother went

insane,' she said and then stopped short. Maybe she shouldn't be telling him this.

'Oh, yeah?' Eddie said. She could hear the interest rise in his voice.

She nodded. Now she hoped he'd just let it go. She shouldn't have said anything.

'Insane how?' He tickled her side. 'Come on, Carole. How?'

Well, when she thought about it now, she remembered how on her first day at Spence, Amanda Howe had pointed out Naomi and said, 'That's the girl whose mother slit open her wrists with a fork and bled to death in a mental hospital.' Her words exactly, so okay, maybe it wasn't really privileged information. It wasn't as though Naomi had ever sworn her to secrecy. Everybody knew.

'She died in an institution. She killed herself. Her stepmother, Elayne, she's Czech, she does Hazel Bishop commercials on *What's My Line?*' She paused to let him speak, but he didn't. 'You know, Dorothy Kilgallen, Bennett Cerf, Arlene Francis, John Charles Daly. When they have a break, this red light goes on over on the left side of the set, which means she's on. Then her hands get all lit up. She's only twenty-four. She holds up a bottle of nail polish so you can see the lipstick and nails together.'

Eddie ignored the story. 'I bet that Naomi ends up in an institution too. Like mother, like daughter, don't you think?' It shocked her again, the way he was talking, but she liked it even though she shouldn't. 'That one has a screw loose, no question about it.' Eddie turned over, and in a few moments he began to snore again.

She'd been so afraid that she wouldn't know what to say, and there she was saying too much. And it had all been so different from what she'd expected. Nothing like that idiotic book of her mother's, which mostly told how to use your elbows to keep a boy from touching your breasts. Oh, cripes. She had been afraid of Eddie seeing her naked, but he'd liked the way she looked. She'd been afraid he'd like Naomi better, and here he thought Naomi was skinny and crazy. She'd been afraid of everything, and now here she was, perfectly relaxed, and not a virgin any more. She

pulled the covers to her chin and smiled. It must have been midnight, and he expected her to stay overnight. She had never dared to think that might happen. Never in a million years.

She woke later because of a meowing sound at the door. It took a minute to remember where she was. The sound was human, though, somebody pretending to be a cat. Eddie sat up like a shot. 'I'll get it,' he said.

'They'll go away.' Carole grabbed for his arm. 'They'll go away if no one answers the door.' She was afraid it was Naomi barging in, ruining her night.

'Let go.' Eddie pulled away, wrapped the bedspread around his waist, and went to the window. He opened the curtain and strained to see out. Then he let the curtain fall. 'Oh, for crying out loud,' he said.

'Who is it?'

He turned the doorknob. Carole sat up, drawing the covers over herself.

Eddie opened the door slightly and pressed against the opening, whispering to whoever was out there. Carole strained to see, but Eddie was in the way. Then he said something she couldn't make out. She got up and stood behind him, her hand on his bare back. Startled, he turned from the door to face her. The woman outside used the opportunity to push herself past him and into the room. She shuddered, hugging herself and stomping her feet against the cold.

She had on a fur hat, pointed on top and tied under the chin, a navy-blue parka that came almost down to her knees, and big men's boots. She was carrying a large plastic pocketbook. Carole thought it was the motel owner's wife, here to kick her out. She'd heard you had to register as man and wife, and even then they made you prove it. You had to show them something with your married name on it. The owner must have figured out that Eddie had sneaked Carole in and wasn't going to have 'it' going on in his establishment. She braced for the woman's anger, for a scolding. But instead the woman came in, took off her hat, and smiled.