

As Ben Baker walked up the path to his home he noticed it was particularly dark inside the house. He thought that Bella, his wife, or at least one of his two sons, Jeff or Sam, should be home. It was 6:30 PM. It was the time he usually arrived home from his work in the city as an attorney. Typically he would walk through the door and, like most husbands and fathers, be ignored by his family until it was time for dinner. He would be left to go upstairs, change his clothes, come back downstairs, pour himself a drink, sit in his comfortable chair and turn on the television to watch the news. Then his wife would summon him to the table to consume whatever she had had time to throw together and call "a meal". But, he suspected, tonight he would have to fend for himself if he wanted to eat something. He was disappointed.

At the door, without the porch light being turned on, he had to fumble in the darkness for his house key. The door was not usually locked, but it was this time. He inserted his key into the door in a very inelegant, fumbling way, turned it, and pushed the door forward so he could walk into the house. As he did there was an explosion of light. All the interior lights went on at once and a large gathering of people yelled

Bella

"Surprise!" That was the very first moment during the entire day that Ben had remembered that today was his fortieth birthday. Bella was right at the doorway, to give him a kiss on the cheek and hug him. He glanced around the room and saw every relative, neighbor, friend and co-worker he had in the world standing, smiling and holding a drink of some sort. He acted stunned; not so much because he was stunned, although he was, but because he knew it was expected of him to look and act surprised. He was ashamed that he looked so worn out and wrinkled. He didn't want to disappoint anyone, especially Bella.

"What is this?" is all he could think to say.

Bella replied, "It's your birthday, Dear. Everyone came to wish you a happy birthday."

"How nice of all of you. Thank you," Ben said so everyone could hear. "I think I need a drink."

Bella walked into the kitchen where liquor bottles had been lined up on the island and told one of the caterers to pour Mr. Baker a very large whiskey and water on the rocks - his favorite drink. After she saw the caterer deliver the drink to Ben, she again kissed him on the cheek and whispered into his ear, "Why don't you circulate a bit?"

Ben set his trench coat down over one of the living room chairs and started visiting with each and every guest. There must have been about forty of them. He and Bella had big

Bella

families and they were very popular among the neighbors. Also, he made a special effort to find his boss, Pete Gray, and Pete's wife, Annie, to thank them for coming. Ben had always been keenly aware of the politics within a large law firm and had made every effort to excel at cow-towing and schmoozing with the higher-ups. He noticed his "partner" at work, Miles Smith, who worked with him in the estate and probate department at the firm of Hawkins, Gray and Ballard, but didn't make any special effort to address him immediately.

As Ben wound through the crowd, shaking hands, accepting hugs and kisses from the women, he was observing some interesting facts: He was the most disheveled and poorly-dressed man in the room. But, of course, that was because he hadn't had a chance to freshen up and the other people had. Also, there was music softly playing in the background from the stereo system that had been installed in the living room a couple years ago. Show tunes - Bella's favorite - were playing. And then there was Bella. Of course, she looked stunning. Bella always looked stunning. She was breathtakingly beautiful in a way that only years of study of her and closeness to her could reveal. Her physical appearance was appealing to everyone. But it was the combination of her body, her face, her demeanor, her speech, the look in her eyes, her makeup, her movements and her attitude that created a masterpiece of a woman - a woman who could never

Bella

be forgotten or ignored. She wouldn't let anyone do either. In keeping with that goal, tonight she was wearing a red, sequined, scoop-necked dress that barely covered some of her most appealing assets. She looked somewhat like a Roaring-Twenties flapper, without the headband. But the eyes of every person whom she faced were immediately and inexorably drawn to her breasts, which she attempted to prominently display to one and all. She was wearing bright red lipstick. All this red contrasted wonderfully with her pale, white, porcelain skin. There weren't many whose skin was as pale as Bella's. It wasn't ghoulishly pale, but it reminded one of alabaster porcelain. It was flawless and alluring. Her platinum blonde hair that was cut in a tuck-under "bob" further accentuated her skin tone. To say that she was sexy would make one think that it was her physical appearance that made her so. Of course, that was partially the reason. But the greater reason Bella Baker was so erotic was tied more to her actions and her words. Bella knew what to say to each person to pique their interest in her and her body. Yes, she was flirtatious. Yes, she was provocative. But she did it in such a subtle and non-obvious way. Everyone maintained their high regard for her, no matter how brazen she might appear to the casual observer. She was sweet, kind, caring. Yet she didn't kill the hope that men and women had of getting closer to her, both physically and emotionally. Bella gave the impression that

Bella

she was open to possibilities, not just sexual, but also romantic. She never made the first move, but she knew how to rebuff without totally shutting out the idea of a future liaison.

Her reputation was affected by her sexual demeanor. Even though every report of trysts, surreptitious meetings and dalliances were untrue, people had seen what they had seen and had heard what they had heard. As a result, men pursued her by sending her flowers and asking her to meet them. Without crushing their egos or destroying whatever hope they harbored, Bella had thus far been able to remain faithful to Ben, and to prevent him from exploding with jealousy. Her motives for being flirtatious had nothing to do with Ben or her interest in sex. In fact, Bella wasn't really interested in sex. When she and Ben had met in college - she was a sophomore undergraduate and he had been a second-year law student - there had been the normal passionate, yet fumbling intercourse. She had enjoyed it, but, actually, it was the adoration and attention she had enjoyed much more than the act of accepting insertion and feigning orgasm. Ben had been a prize specimen of a man who had a bright future. And there was no doubt he adored her. She had been living in a large rental house with three other girls. On Bella's twenty-first birthday, Ben had sent her twenty-one dozen roses. You can imagine the envy and respect for Bella that had

Bella

been instilled into her roommates.

Bella craved adoration. It was the result of the inattention garnered on her by her father and, to some extent, by her mother. They took her beauty and charm for granted and didn't seem to have the time or interest to dote on her or to share her special gifts with others. Bella would look into the mirror and look at her schoolmates and realize that she was fabulous in every way, especially compared to the average girl. She didn't understand why not everyone was fawning over her and fainting at the very sight of her. So, in adulthood, she was doing all she could to make sure that she was adored, pursued and worshipped.

Chapter Two

The party continued. The caterers were still circulating among the crowd, refilling drinks and offering hors d'oeuvres. More substantial food for the guests was situated on the dining room table, along with plates, silverware and napkins. It was a buffet from Ben's favorite restaurant, Rossini's. Bella had turned the volume of the music up a bit, so those who were interested could actually hear Ezio Pinza, Howard Keel, Gordon Macrae and Shirley Jones belting out songs from their musicals. Bella's love of the theater and, especially of musicals, was

Bella

unequaled among the attendees that night. But she didn't care what they wanted to hear. She knew what she liked and what the crowd should be listening to.

Eventually the moment came when Bella was going to present Ben with his birthday present. She said, "May I have your attention, please? It's time to honor the man of the hour and for me to give him his birthday present - at least the one you can watch me give him." There was tittering from the group, but, those who knew Bella well had expected some reference to sex somewhere in the proceedings. The room quieted. Bella walked over to the fireplace in the center of the living room. There was a fireplace screen draped across the opening. It was a wooden panel that folded into thirds. It was covered with a Michaelangelo-like painting of cherubs. She pulled it aside and struggled to pull a large object out of the fireplace. It had a large red bow on it. It was a new golf bag filled with a complete set of new golf clubs. There was applause. Ben was obviously pleased.

"Honey, I'm overwhelmed. Thank you so much," said Ben, as he leaned over and gave Bella a quick kiss on the mouth. "But don't think this will get you out of that other present you promised to give me later," Ben said. More tittering from the group. Ben didn't mind playing along with the image that Bella was a very sexual creature and that he and he alone derived the

Bella

benefits from such a propensity. It raised his status as a man and as a husband, he thought. Even though he knew it was mostly a charade they both played in order to achieve the status and adoration they both craved, he felt very lucky to be married to such an alluring woman. He was perfectly willing to do anything necessary to enhance that image of Bella in the eyes and minds of his friends, family, neighbors and business partners.

Chapter 3

As the night wore on only the hardcore well-wishers remained. Drinking increased along with the volume of the music. When there were only about fifteen guests left, Bella thought she should go upstairs, use her bathroom and freshen up her makeup. She hadn't been drinking which meant she was beginning to get annoyed with those who had been. She needed a break. After using her toilet, she sat at her makeup mirror and reapplied her lipstick. She was adding some concealer to her face when she heard the door to the bedroom open behind her. She turned to see Pete Gray stumbling through the doorway.

"There you are," he slurred. "I bet you thought you could hide from me, but you can't. It's fate, Bella. I've been telling you that for years." Bella didn't want to hear Pete's suggestions, entreaties or conclusions. She had heard them before and, until tonight, had managed to keep him at arm's

Bella

length without offending him. She wasn't sure how she was going to do it tonight. But she knew she would find a way.

"Pete. Did you lose Annie? Why don't you go find her and the three of us can have a drink together?" said Bella.

"Now, Bella. What fun would that be? You know I came to find you so we could be alone. You can't tell me you don't want that. I can see it in your eyes. And why not? You know I love you. Let me show you," Pete implored.

As he walked closer to her, Bella stood up so she would be in a better position to push him away as he came at her. "Now, Pete. We've always been good friends and, I'll have to admit, there's always been something there. But we've been smart enough not to do anything foolish. We both have great lives and aren't going to throw them away for one foolish night, are we?"

Just then Pete leaned over and kissed Bella on the cheek. The only reason he didn't kiss her on the mouth was that she moved fast enough to turn the front of her face away from him. She put her hand on the back of his neck. "Pete. Pete. Be a good boy and go downstairs. Don't get me into trouble. The chemistry we have is special, but we're not going to change our lives, are we?"

"I don't know," stammered Pete. "I want to. I want to be with you, Bella. God! You're so beautiful. How can any man with eyes stay away from you?"

Bella

"Well, because not only does every man have eyes, but he has a brain, too. At least most of them. So he thinks better of acting foolishly and chooses his wonderful life over a living hell that would happen if he was with me."

"Living hell?" quizzed Pete. "Do you think Ben would say he's in a living hell?"

"No, I don't think he would. But it's taken us years to get to the point where we respect and love each other the way husbands and wives should. If you had only a few minutes with me you would painfully regret it tomorrow. And so would I. Now go downstairs. Go downstairs before I get mad at you," said Bella in her most motherly manner. She pushed lightly on Pete's chest to move him closer to the door. As his back reached the closed door, Pete said, "OK. But just one more kiss. Then I'll go. I promise."

Bella didn't like it. But she knew how insistent Pete could be. There had been an incident at Pete's house about three years ago when she hadn't been sure she was going to get out of his house without giving up something dear to her.

"OK, Pete. Put your left hand on the doorknob." Pete obeyed. Bella leaned over and placed her lips on the corner of Pete's mouth and gave him a little peck. Pete, of course, attempted to parlay this peck into a slobbering, tongue-wrestling French kiss. But Bella was adroit at cutting kisses

Bella

off short and managed to avoid any of Pete's tongue or slobber. She backed away and said, "OK, now turn the doorknob and go downstairs. Now."

Her emphasis on the word "now" made Pete turn the knob and leave the bedroom. Bella wondered how many more of these close calls she would be having not only with Pete, Ben's boss, but with other various men she encountered during her life. It was a fine line she was walking between encouraging and discouraging men to pursue her. And there might not be a net to catch her if she fell.

Chapter 4

Bella Baker was the worst kind of flirt - an incurable one. She was the epitome of a romantic. Her true life lay not with her husband or her children or the rest of her family. Her true passion and purpose was cultivated during her college and graduate school years. She had read romances since she could open a book. She became a fan of Jane Austen, the Brontes, Fitzgerald, Maugham. Any story that contained true love and, frequently, a happy ending, thrilled Bella. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in literature. While an undergraduate, she had taken drama classes and joined the Drama Club. She became involved not only in the re-creation of famous plays, but she also attempted to write one or two of her own productions. She never thought of herself as a singer, but the Drama Club was putting on a production of *South Pacific* one semester. Bella was so beautiful, had perfect blonde hair and the faculty advisor of the Drama Club, Dr. Chambers, like every other man who had come into contact with her, was in love with her. Bella was a skilled enough flirt by now that she could charm her way into making Dr. Chambers give her a chance to try out for the lead in the play, *Nellie Forbush*.

"But you've never sung or acted before, Dear," said Dr.

Bella

Chambers as he looked into her beautiful blue eyes.

"Yes, that's true, Dr. Chambers. But I know I can do it. I have done some singing in a choir. I was never a soloist, but people always say they like hearing me sing," said Bella as she batted her eyes. "And I have a rather flexible body, so I think I can dance sufficiently to fill the role. I'll be able to draw attention to Nellie on the stage, I'm sure."

Dr. Chambers was delighted to respond, "You certainly have gathered a lot of attention around here. I suppose there's a certain magnetism there." He warmly smiled at Bella and grabbed her hand to give it a little squeeze. She smiled adoringly at him.

As a result, she was cast as Nellie Forbush, even though she had never sung nor acted. At first she was scared and floundered in her attempts to sing, dance or act. But, as she realized how much attention would be focused upon her as the lead, she redoubled her efforts to put on a great performance. The one thing that hooked her on the idea of being Nellie Forbush was that Emile sung *Some Enchanted Evening* to her and *This Nearly Was Mine* about her. The boy playing Emile was quite handsome. Bella's knees went weak when he looked into her eyes and sang

Some enchanted evening

Bella

*You may see a stranger,
you may see a stranger
Across a crowded room
And somehow you know,
You know even then
That somewhere you'll see her
Again and again.*

*Some enchanted evening
Someone may be laughing,
You may hear her laughing
Across a crowded room
And night after night,
As strange as it seems
The sound of her laughter
Will sing in your dreams.*

*Who can explain it?
Who can tell you why?
Fools give you reasons,
Wise men never try.*

*Some enchanted evening
When you find your true love,
When you feel her call you
Across a crowded room,*

*Then fly to her side,
And make her your own
Or all through your life you
May dream all alone.*

*Once you have found her,
Never let her go.
Once you have found her,
Never let her go!*

This experience, more than any other, was to define who Bella would be for the rest of her life. After the thrill of hearing a man tell her that she had inspired him to give his heart to the woman of his dreams and "never let her go", she knew that the love described in that song and others - ones she would eventually sing and hear in the musical productions in which she starred - was the reality she would seek for the rest of her life. Musical theater became her passion. She pursued a master's degree in drama and musical theater while Ben was establishing himself as a junior attorney at Hawkins, Gray and Ballard. After she obtained her degree, she was equipped to teach many types of English and drama at two-year colleges and to assist a full professor at a four-year university. More than anything she wanted to be an actress and playwright. She didn't

see herself as a teacher, but was willing to be one if that's what it took to keep her involved in her passion.

One thing that hindered her march to Broadway and its lights was the fact that she was pregnant. Becoming a mother imposed a different type of reality over her dreams. After giving birth, she was a doting mother, caring for her son as carefully as any mother ever had. She loved him very much. But her heart was not full. It needed the constant stimulation of romance and she knew she would continue to seek the type of love and life that, as far as she knew, had only been depicted in songs and stories. She wasn't sure that that type of love existed, or was only imagined. But she knew she would continue to look for it and do everything to be in the spotlight when it was discussed or performed. Being a wife and mother, she knew, was noble. And it wasn't without its rewards. But, to Bella, it wasn't her reality. It wasn't her destiny.

As soon as she could arrange for adequate child care for Sam, Bella joined the amateur musical troupe in the city. She was willing to be a "grunt" until the director of the troupe recognized her talent and gave her a chance to appear in a performing part in one of the productions. While working as a set designer, she warmed up to some of the singers and musicians in the group. She hadn't lost her ability to attract attention with her looks and her sultry ways. It wasn't long before she

Bella

was appearing in the chorus. The director of the troupe, Mr. Wilson, had trouble taking his eyes off Bella. Realizing this, she befriended him and turned on her charm. "Inadvertently" giving him a long look down her blouse or up her skirt at her long, naked legs facilitated her remaining on Mr. Wilson's radar as an actress who might have a bright future. He anticipated having a "hands on" approach with coaching her: positioning her within certain scenes and guiding her necessary motions and turns on stage. He used any excuse to touch her. Bella soon became the understudy for the lead in *The Music Man*. And, as fate would have it, after four weeks of rehearsals and four sold-out performances, the actress playing Marion the Librarian came down with the flu. It was Bella's time to shine.

Bella invited Ben to attend her first performance as Marion. She didn't really care if she impressed him or not. But she thought having him in the audience might calm her down and give her a focus for her attention when she had to sing her solos. It worked. When it was time for her to sing "*Till There Was You*", she looked right at Ben, who was beaming. The performance went off without a hitch. Bella and the rest of the troupe got a standing ovation. The applause crescendoed when Bella came onto the stage to take her bow. The next night, when the audience knew Bella would be playing Marion, about ten dozen red roses were thrown at her feet during the final applause.

Bella

Bella's heart was racing. She had never been happier. She was a star and admired by everyone who had seen her. This was the life she wanted.

Unfortunately for Bella, the original Marion the Librarian got over the flu and returned to her role, pushing Bella back into the chorus. Bella had been the star for five performances and had been very well-received. She knew she would soon be cast as the lead in an upcoming production. Her self-confidence continued to grow.

Chapter 5

By now Sam, her son, was four years old. Although it was becoming easier to find childcare for him so Bella could spend as much time as possible rehearsing at the theater, Ben was growing weary of being alone most nights to fend for himself and care for Sam. Bella sensed Ben's discomfort at the situation and tried hard to assuage his loneliness. She stepped up her passion in the bedroom and increased the frequency of initiating intimacy. She even played a game with herself to keep herself interested. She would assume the identity of one of the characters in her current production and pretend to be her while she was seducing and making love with Ben. Ben didn't mind. He loved anything she did with him that remotely had anything to do with sex. She told him that playing these characters always put

Bella

her in a more romantic mood. How could he object to that? He couldn't.

Ben and Bella's finances were adequate, but, at times, the extra childcare and expenses coupled with Bella's avocation of acting put a strain on their budget. Ben's income was a good one. Attorneys at large firms in the city commanded a reasonable salary. And Bella had a modest income from a trust fund left to her by her dead father. It wasn't enough to support her or her family, but it was a good supplement. Still, there was a financial strain. They had a big, fancy house and lived very well. They discussed it and decided that perhaps Bella should begin putting her degrees to use in order to generate some income. They didn't need much. There was no reason for her to work full time. But maybe she could teach a class or two at the junior college, or become a teaching assistant for a professor of drama at the university.

Bella had become slightly bored in her role as a minor player within the local theater troupe, even though she and everyone else knew she was destined to become a leading lady very soon. Still, it was an amateur troupe. There was no money being made by anyone. Bella dreamed of a lucrative career in the theater. She was never going to get it by working as an amateur.

Chapter 6

Bella

Bella told Glen Wilson, director of the amateur troupe, that she'd like to discuss something with him in private. Could they meet for coffee somewhere soon? With his heart racing, he eagerly accepted her request for a date. The next day Glen appeared at a local Starbucks to find Bella sitting at a table for two, alone. Her smile brightened when she saw him. She looked so lovely when she smiled, he thought. Glen ordered a latte, then joined Bella at the table. She already had a mocha in front of her.

"Hi, Glen. Thanks for meeting me," cooed Bella.

Thinking this might be the time for moving the intimacy between the two of them along, Glen put his hand over hers and said, "You know I'll always be available to you - for any reason - don't you?"

"Yes, Glen. I do. And I appreciate it," said Bella. Just then the barista called Glen's name. He stood up, walked over to the coffee bar and picked up his latte and quickly brought it back to Bella's table.

"So what did you have in mind, Bella?" Glen hopefully asked.

"Well, Glen, I don't know if you know this about me or not, but I have a degree in literature and a Master's degree in drama. I'm serious about my chosen profession and have the credentials to move on up the ladder. I know I don't yet have

Bella

much experience, but it's hard to get quality experience that would propel me to the big time. Not that I'm not grateful for the chances you've given me to display my talents." She put her hand over his. "Thank you very much. I'll always owe you," she said as she gave him a sly smile. He intently smiled back.

"It's time for me to try to make some money as an actress. I can't move to New York so I can attend numerous auditions. But I was hoping you might have some connections there and put in a good word for me so I might have a chance to apply for some roles without having to move there." She looked hopefully into his eyes. Her eyes were huge and there were tears beginning to form at the bottom of them. Her hand was still holding his. She was irresistible.

"Uh, Bella. I would so hate to lose you as a player in our troupe. I'd miss you so much," Glen said, looking directly into her captivating eyes.

Bella replied with, "I just want my one chance, Glen. You can understand that, can't you?"

Sheepishly, Glen acknowledged that he understood. "I know some people who work in off-Broadway productions. You know - one or two steps from the big time." He smiled. "They put on productions in places like New Haven, Philadelphia, Newark, trying them out for audience acceptance. If the work is good enough, they look for a theater on Broadway and the financial

Bella

backing to move the plays there. I'll tell them I have an actress who could make the difference for them - someone who could be an undiscovered star. How would that be?"

Bella leaned over and kissed Glen on the cheek as she pulled his face to her with her hand behind his neck. "Oh, Glen, thank you so much. I knew you would understand. And you wouldn't let me down. I can always count on you, can't I? You're such a good man."

Glen pondered those last statements. They didn't seem like ones a woman would make to a man with whom she wanted to become more intimate. But they were positive ones and he took them as hopeful.

"I'd be willing to start at the bottom, of course. But, like all actresses, I think I need just one big break - one chance - to strut my stuff. And then I'll be on my way," Bella said.

"I think you're right, Bella. You definitely have something special. You are something special, very special. I can't imagine a world that doesn't have you in it. I've never met another woman like you. And I doubt that I ever will," Glen admitted.

"Aren't you sweet?" said Bella. "Thank you so much. If you could make something significant happen, I'd be very grateful," Bella said, looking directly at Glen. That statement was like a

Bella

punch directly into Glen's heart. It woke him up to possibilities that he had previously imagined, but, until now, had no hope of realizing. Of course it was Bella's way to make grandiose promises and then fall short of delivering the goods. But Glen didn't know that. Bella had a reputation as a free spirit, a loose woman, if you had to give it a name. So he remained hopeful. Bella stood up, put her arm around Glen's neck and back and whispered, "I'll see you tomorrow, Hon." She left Glen as she had intended - beaming and anxious to make something wonderful happen for her - and for himself.

That night Glen spent a great deal of time on the telephone, talking to old friends of his who were still "in the game" in and around New York City. He told them about a woman in his troupe who was "quite special" and "uniquely beautiful and talented". He told them she was desperate to transition to the professional side of the business and he knew she wouldn't let them down if they gave her a chance to audition. He tried not to make promises Bella wasn't willing to keep, although he couldn't imagine what those might be. They all told him they would keep her in mind and would let him know when and if something came up. Glen was satisfied he could tell Bella that he thought he had moved her career along, even though, in his mind, he suspected he would never hear from these "friends" again.

Bella

Chapter 7

Bella was hopeful Glen's contacts would find an opportunity for her to audition for an upcoming role near or in New York City. But she wasn't relying on it. She had another contingency plan for gaining fame and fortune. Unfortunately she was going to have to put that plan on "hold" for a while. About five years after giving birth to Sam she learned she was, once again, pregnant. She wasn't happy about it. But she told herself that it was making Ben so happy that she was paying him back for whatever grief she eventually would have to give him for the sake of her career.

She continued performing in the amateur troupe in the city. She spent most of her time in the chorus, but, once in a while, there was a secondary part open up for her where she had some lines or even got to sing a solo occasionally. But, for Bella, she was merely treading water. As soon as she could get this whole pregnancy and birth thing behind her and regain her girlish figure, she was going to set out for New York to find an agent who could launch her career.

Bella gave birth as expected. It was another boy. The sex didn't really matter to Bella. It seemed to make Ben happy, so she was happy. She did the "mother" thing for about six months, then found a way to arrange childcare while she went back to

Bella

pursuing her stage career.

All she had to go back to was her place as a player in the local amateur troupe. She reunited with Glen, the director of the troupe, and told him she was once more available for whatever he and his New York friends could arrange for her in the way of auditions for parts. The troupe was currently performing "Damn Yankees". She desperately wanted to play the part of Lola, not only because it was the starring female role, but also because it was singing role for a very seductive and sexually powerful woman. Bella thought she fit that role perfectly. But, since another troupe member already had the part, Bella had to content herself with singing in the chorus and acting in an "extra" role. She understood. She knew she had the power to convince Glen to give her the role of Lola, or, at least, Lola's understudy. But she chose to not use the tools at her disposal to make that happen. She still envisioned herself as a good wife and mother and didn't want to waste her virtue on getting such a small role in a small production in a small town. She knew the time would come for her to go "all in" for her art. This was neither the time nor the place.

About four months after she returned to the troupe, Glen told her he wanted to talk to her in private. She agreed to meet him for coffee after the next rehearsal. They met at a coffee shop about a mile from the rehearsal theater.

Bella

"Bella," Glen began. "A couple of days ago I got a call from one of my New York cronies, Shorty Finnegan. He's a freelance casting director. Right now he's working for a company that is trying to revive a classic off Broadway, with hopes of making it to Broadway within six months. He had remembered I had told him over a year ago about a bombshell blonde I had tucked away who had unlimited talent. He'd like to audition you for the starring role."

"That's wonderful, Glen," Bella said breathlessly. "What is the role?"

"It's Maggie the Cat," replied Glen.

"You're kidding!" exclaimed Bella. "Maggie the Cat! That's fantastic. Talk about a dream role for me!"

"That's what I told Shorty. You were made to play Maggie. And you'd be very grateful for the chance, right?" inquired Glen.

"Oh, God, yes," said Bella, fearing what "grateful" might really mean to Shorty and to Glen. But she was so excited she couldn't think straight and knew she could overcome any obstacle that might get in her way of getting the starring role in an off-Broadway production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. She would be well on her way to the big time.

Chapter 8

As soon as Bella got home from her meeting with Glen, she telephoned Shorty Finnegan in New York. He told her Glen had made her sound terrific and he hoped she was.

"I am," Bella joked. "All I need is a chance to show it."

"I know you'll get your chance with me, Dear," Shorty said. "I'll arrange a hotel for an audition and call you back with the details. Can you be in New York the day after tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes. Do I have to wait that long?" panted Bella.

"I'm afraid so, Dear. Don't worry. I won't forget you," said Shorty.

Bella hung up the telephone and caught herself breathing rapidly. This felt like the break she needed.

She couldn't wait; she got herself to New York City the next day, even though her audition wasn't until the following day. She wanted to have some time to relax and to practice a passage for "Cat" which she planned to recite for Shorty. Looking back on it now, although Bella seemed to be relatively worldly compared to other members of her social group, she was hopelessly naïve when it came to the theater and stage people.

Bella remembered that in the scene she hoped to re-create, Maggie wore a white chiffon dress that was scoop-necked and sleeveless. She brought such a dress to wear at the audition.

Bella

That night in her hotel room, she practiced her lines, including body gestures, and drank a little too much, which resulted in her falling asleep sooner than she had hoped she would.

Chapter 9

When Bella awoke the next morning, she discovered that her heart was beating more rapidly than usual. She was excited to be getting her big break. She knew that she might have to make sacrifices to achieve her goal. She had talked herself into being willing to make those sacrifices, no matter what they might be.

Her appointment with Shorty was at one o'clock in the afternoon at a nearby hotel. She was ready and anxious at ten o'clock. At twelve-thirty she flagged down a taxi in front of her hotel and told the driver the name of Shorty's hotel. She was already sweating a little, and knew she would have to gather up all her courage to perform for Shorty Finnegan. She was wearing a red cloth coat over her white chiffon dress. Her shoes were white four-inch heels.

When she walked into the hotel, she went to a house phone and asked for the room of Mr. Finnegan. The phone rang. A voice that sounded somewhere between Nosferatu and The Grinch said,

Bella

"Yes, this is Shorty."

"Mr. Finnegan, this is Bella Baker," Bella managed to squeak out.

"Come on up to six-thirteen, My Dear," said Shorty. They both hung up the phone and Bella looked for the elevator. She found it. There was no attendant. She looked down at the floor while the elevator rose up to the sixth floor. During that trip Bella talked herself into expecting the worst. She had heard horror stories of "casting couches" and expected nothing less gruesome than the worst. She was hoping to be pleasantly surprised.

Bella tapped lightly on the door of six-thirteen and heard a voice should, "Come in, Bella." She turned the handle and pushed the door in. The room was dimly lit. On the left side of the room was a couch on which sat a creature who looked a little more palatable than she had envisioned. He was relatively short, had a large, mussed head of hair and was wearing a vertically-striped long-sleeved shirt with suspenders. His trousers were wrinkled and soiled and extended down to his stockinged feet. No shoes were in sight. Shorty didn't attempt to get up to greet her. He extended his hand out to her and expected her to come to him. She did and warmly shook his hand. He smile - a rather weak, ghoulish smile and motioned for Bella to sit on the couch next to him. She made sure there was some distance between them.

Bella

She continued to smile at him, but was not moving toward him whatsoever.

Shorty said, "You've come some distance for this audition, haven't you,"

"Not too far," said Bella. "I think it's about three hundred miles."

"Well, according to most theater people, three hundred miles from New York City is on the other side of the moon," Shorty remarked to her.

Bella smiled coyly while keeping her distance from him. She had noticed that on the other side of the room from the couch there was a huge fireplace. Logs were burning, but it didn't make the room seem too warm. She said to Shorty, "Mr. Finnegan, would you like me to audition for you?"

Shorty responded, "Dear, please call me 'Shorty'. When you get to know me better, you'll see why." He smirked at her and continued, "Sure, why don't you step in front of the fireplace and do whatever it is that you had planned on doing."

Bella slithered to a spot in front of the fireplace, but not too close as to get burned or even heated. She imagined herself looking at herself from the audience and struck a pose that was about three-quarter front, but turned her head toward Shorty. She was sincere when she said with a practiced Southern accent:

Bella

You know, our sex life didn't just peter out in the usual way, it was cut off short, long before the natural time for it to, and it's going to revive again, just as sudden as that. I'm confident of it. That's what I'm keeping myself attractive for. For the time when you'll see me again like other men see me. Yes, like other men see me. They still see me, Brick, and they like what they see. Uh-huh. Some of them would give their--Look, Brick!

[Cassie stood before the imagined long oval mirror, touched her breast and then her hips with her two hands. She 'accidentally' touched the bodice of her gown in order to further open her décolletage to expose at least one nipple for Shorty]

How high my body stays on me!--Nothing has fallen on me--not a fraction-- Other men still want me. My face looks strained, sometimes, but I've kept my figure as well as you've kept yours, and men admire it. I still turn heads on the street. Why, last week in Memphis everywhere that I went men's eyes burned holes in my clothes, at the country club and in restaurants and department stores, there wasn't a man I met or walked by that didn't just eat me up with his eyes and turn around when I passed him and look back at me. Why, at Alice's party for her New York cousins, the best lookin' man in the crowd--followed me upstairs and tried to force his way in the powder room with me, followed me to the door and tried to force his way in!

As Cassie breathlessly collapsed her stance and took one of the wingback chairs next to the sofa, she glanced at Shorty for an approving stare. He was smiling, obviously pleased. By now her dress was pulled back together, hiding her nipple once again.

"Dear. . . Bella. . . isn't that your name, Dear?" he asked. "What you did up there was start to seduce Brick, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes, I guess it was," she answered, still somewhat out of breath.

Bella

"Well, why you don't pretend I'm Brick and try to finish the job over here on my lap?" Shorty requested.

Bella took her cue, trying not to think of what lay ahead for her. She sat on Shorty's lap, put her arms around the back of his neck and gazed deeply into his eyes. "This is the best part, isn't it?" asked Bella. "The anticipation."

"Honey, when you're as old as I am you've used up your quota of anticipation and are more than ready to move onto the main event," declared Shorty as he pulled her head to him, licked his lips and planted a firm and wet one onto Bella's mouth. Next, his tongue found hers and his saliva combined with hers. She quickly and markedly withdrew her tongue and tried to back away from his. But Shorty was insistent and continued to push forward, holding the back of her head tighter and tighter. Bella attempted to stop thinking about what she was doing and to relax. It was difficult, but she somewhat succeeded in becoming less passionate and more matter-of-fact in her movements.

Soon she felt Shorty's hand reaching inside the bodice of her dress and tweaking one of her nipples. She tried to smile and slightly backed away.

"You call this seduction?" growled Shorty.

"I like to go slowly," quickly uttered Bella.

"I don't," said Shorty, as he peeled off the top of her dress, lowering it down to her waist. Her breasts were naked in

Bella

front of him, and he wasted no time putting his mouth to each of them. She was grateful he suckled, rather than bit. She didn't like it, but she didn't hate it either. She thought it could be worse. And soon it was. Her legs were exposed up to her panties. Shorty pried them farther apart and started fingering her within the crotch of her panties. He found wetness, and pushed his fingers in and out of her slit. Bella couldn't help but begin to groan. "So you like that, huh?" queried Shorty.

"It's getting better," replied Bella, knowing that's what he wanted to hear. Her breathing was becoming more uneven. She tried to recapture her wits so she could begin bargaining. "So if I do really well on this audition, you'll recommend me for the role of Maggie?" she asked, trying to sound rhetorical.

"Well, said Shorty, "you know you're not the only girl trying out for the part. I'll have to compare your performance with those of the other girls and, if you stack up," he said as he fondled her nipples, rubbing them hard back and forth," of course I'll recommend you, Honey." He pushed her onto her back on top of the couch, spread her legs apart with his hands and pulled her panties off. They were soaked. Shorty held them up to his nose and deeply inhaled. "Wonderful, just wonderful," he said to Bella.

Then he threw the panties on the floor and dived with his nose into Bella's crotch. He stuck out his tongue and began to

Bella

lick her lips and inserted his tongue into her vagina, swishing it around to obtain the most favorable taste he could. He swung her long, smooth legs up over his shoulders and told her to dig her stiletto heels into his back. She tried to hurt him, but he just became exalted at the feeling of pain she caused. He continued to suckle, lick and kiss her with longer strokes. He was one of those men who could never get enough. Bella knew there was more to come, but, for now, she thought this wasn't so bad.

"You just continue to reach for that perfect performance and we'll see where it goes, OK?" Shorty asked. With that Bella squeezed his head with her thighs and began to rub his face back and forth with her legs. She thought he would like that.

After about fifteen minutes of Shorty's mouth and tongue devouring Bella's private parts, he put his hand behind her back and propped her upright. "Now it's your turn, Honey," he said. With that he pulled her head to bob down between his legs where his member was extended up and out and aimed her mouth so it engulfed it. She knew what to do. She had only performed fellatio on Ben and, more recently, only on his birthday. Shorty was shorter and not as aesthically pleasing, but she was determined to get the job done, then forget all about it. A very short time elapsed before exploded and spewed his semen down her throat. She knew he would expect her to swallow, rather than spit it out. So she swallowed, then quickly withdrew her mouth from the

Bella

general area of Shorty. Bella pulled away and ran to the bathroom where she could rid herself of whatever vestiges of Shorty remained on her body.

Once Bella regained her composure, she wondered why there had not been intercourse. Even knowing that most people considered cunnilingus and fellatio to be more intimate than intercourse, she thought Shorty would have gone for the trifecta. He soon explained, "I know we didn't fuck, technically, but I like to get the best out of the way first. You know, in case you skip town or die or something. I'm not going anywhere and you'll have to re-audition in a month or so. We'll get it out of the way then, OR ANYTIME I SAY SO!" he emphasized, wickedly smiling. Bella was hoping he would forget about a return engagement, but could tell he wouldn't.

"Will I hear from you soon?" Bella asked.

"About what?" Shorty asked.

"About the job, the role as Maggie," she stated.

"Oh, you've got the job, Doll," Shorty replied. "Just don't let us down. You were good today. Be good everyday, OK?"

"I will be, Mr. Finnegan. I mean Shorty," Bella corrected.

"A girl I can count on is rare and unexpected," Shorty said. "If you're both those things, you will be rewarded. We open rehearsal at the Schubert Theater next Wednesday. Be there. We plan on opening in Philadelphia twenty days later. You'll be

Bella

paid \$300 per week for rehearsals and \$500 per week for the real performances. You'll perform an evening show on Tuesday and Wednesday, you'll have Thursday off (the understudy will perform) and you'll play Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, as well as Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Seven shows a week for you. And your co-star will be Gregg Zahn."

"Gregg Zahn?" she asked. "Are you kidding me? How's he going to tape his soap opera every day?"

Shorty laughed. "He tapes those a couple weeks ahead, then goes back to tape five more shows on the next Thursday and Friday."

"Gregg Zahn?" Bella exclaimed again. "He's wonderful. Handsome, talented, and he looks a lot like Paul Newman."

"Ha, ha," laughed Shorty. "Don't get your hopes up, Honey. He's got lots of women hidden around Broadway. He won't have time or interest in you."

Bella thought, "I'm not looking for a hook-up with Gregg. But maybe I'll prove Shorty wrong. That prick!" With that she ran out of the room, full of happiness, expectation and excitement and forgetful of the things she had to do to get that way.

Chapter 10

Bella ran home to her hotel. She was out of breath when she arrived, but phoned Ben to tell him the good news. He seemed

Bella

happy for her, although he wasn't fond of continuing to have his wife away from home for an extended length of time. And he had never heard of Gregg Zahn. Then she called Doctor Chambers. He shared her enthusiasm and her pride. "How did you like Shorty?" Dr. Chambers asked with a knowing countenance.

"We got along fine," said Bella, not sure of to what she was admitting. She could feel Dr. Chambers grin on the other end of the phone line.

"I'm glad it went well for you, Bella. Some women have difficulty acquiescing to his demands. I knew you'd be a trooper. And you're so damn pretty, too.

"Oh, and I forgot to tell you the best part. My leading man - my Brick - is Gregg Zahn! Can you imagine?"

"That's wonderful, Dear. But be careful. Gregg has quite a reputation with the ladies. Don't let him snare you. Save yourself for someone who's known you a little longer," Dr. Chambers said hopefully.

"Don't worry, Dr. Chambers. I remember where I came from and who helped me when I was there," stated Bella. Of course she had no intention of rewarding Dr. Chambers for setting her up with Shorty - maybe a kind smile and a touch on his arm, but not anything near what he wanted. She allowed herself to beam at becoming more adept at this game. The right words and actions came easier to her than they once did.

Bella

Bella's first rehearsal started at 7:00 AM two days after the audition with Shorty. Of course Bella was early. When she arrived at the theater, there were only two other people there, the stage manager and the director, Armand Scott. Scott introduced himself to Bella by saying, "Hello, I'm Armand Scott, your director."

Bella replied cutely, "Hi, I'm Bella Baker, your Maggie." The director looked askance at Bella, wondering how she knew she was going to be Maggie. Filling all parts was up to the director except when the producers made a strong suggestion. After all, they were the ones putting up the money. He had heard nothing of "Bella Baker" or why she was supposed to be cast as Maggie, but he figured he'd hear soon enough.

After all potential cast members and others associated with the production had assembled, Armand announced, "OK. Nothing is set in stone. We're going to have read-throughs with various people who are trying out for various parts. While these readings are going on the rest of you please be patient. You'll get your chance soon enough. The first tryouts will be for Gooper and Mae. Those men who are here to try for Gooper please lineup on the left side of the stage and those women here for Mae lineup on the right side. We'll give you lines to read to each other when you meet in pairs in the middle. The rest of you remain quiet".

Bella

Bella didn't like hearing the "nothing is set in stone" remark. She knew she had the part of Maggie and didn't like to see others competing for it. As the Goopers and the Maes took their turns auditioning, she looked around among the other girls to try to guess who else might be up for "Maggie". She saw three other actors who looked like they might be trying for that part. Comparing herself to them, she thought she was definitely the best-looking woman and besides, Shorty had guaranteed the part to her. She hadn't swallowed all that goop and submitted to all that groping and fondling and filthy kissing so she would be passed over. But she thought better of making a scene. She would play along with the game until the inevitable was announced. She WOULD BE Maggie.

As the auditions proceeded she found her heart was beating a little faster and she was starting to perspire. What if she completely flopped? She would still get the part, but the other candidates would realize she wasn't getting the part because of her talent - that there must be some other reason for her good luck. They would ultimately conclude that it was because she had performed extra favors for some of the people in charge and they would think she was a slut. She wouldn't mind them thinking she was a slut; what she would mind was them thinking she wasn't talented enough to have legitimately earned the part. She knew she was, but needed to convince everyone.

Bella

The Gooper-Mae auditions seemed to be over. Armand said, "That concludes today's auditions for Gooper and Mae. Now we'll move on to Brick and Maggie. We already know that Gregg Zahn will be our Brick. But he'll need understudies and backups. So we'll be testing pairs of you next. Maggies, you'll be reciting the soliloquy at the beginning of the play - the scene where she tries to seduce Brick."

Bella's heart raced again. This was the exact passage that she acted out for Shorty. She knew it by heart. She knew it so well that she could put every bit of emotion into it that was possible. She was going to ace this audition!

Luckily, her name was called first. Her "Brick" stood by until her part was over so he could say his few lines. She stepped to the center of the stage and began. She belted it out, she cried, she laughed and gave Brick the come-hither look called for in the stage lines. When she was done, some of the others being auditioned started to clap. In her mind and, obviously in the mind of many others, she WAS Maggie. She stepped to the back of the stage and waited while the others took their turns. She almost couldn't bear to watch or listen. The others were so bad compared to her. She hoped that fact was obvious to Armand. She had been so engrossed in her performance that she hadn't noticed that while she had been speaking, a nondescript man had approached Armand and had whispered something into his

Bella

ear. Armand had nodded and sent the man on his way, while continuing to watch and listen to Bella.

After all the performances for Brick and Maggie, Armand announced, "Will the following people report here tomorrow at eight AM. To the others, thank you for your interest and good luck in the future. OK, the Goopers . . . he read three names. Now for the Maes . . . again another three names. The Bricks . . . three more names. The Maggies . . . blah, blah, and Bella Baker." A big smile came to Bella's face. She gave Armand a flirtatious look and quietly left the building.

When she got back to her hotel room, she poured herself a stiff drink and got on the phone. First she called her husband, Ben, and told him she had made the cut down to the final three. He feigned excitement and pride. He didn't really understand what all of it meant. But he was happy that Bella was happy. Then she called Dr. Chambers. He reinforced the fact that he always knew she had it in her to be successful and didn't doubt for one second that she would be the Maggie chosen. After that she called Shorty. She explained the bit of confusion over having to audition and come back for the final audition when Shorty had promised she had the part sewn up. "My dear," said Shorty. "You do have the part sewn up. But for appearance's sake, we have to jump through the hoops to make it look as if there was some competition. You can understand that, can't you?" Bella

Bella

said that she did. Then Shorty said, "You know, when you're officially named 'Maggie', I'll expect a 'thank you' visit.

"Sure, Shorty. Of course," is all she could think to say, not really meaning it.

"OK, Darling," said Shorty. I'm looking forward to your success and our time together. I miss you."

"OK, Shorty. Good-bye," Bella croaked out.

Bella looked forward to the next day with trepidation - wondering if her audition as "Maggie" was finally over or if there would be more distasteful hoops through which she would have to jump. She would be reluctant, but eventually willing.

