

RADIO GIRL

Carol
Brendler



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Holiday House / New York

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ISBN 978-0-8234-3008-6 (ebook)w
ISBN 978-0-8234-3009-3 (ebook)r

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Brendler, Carol.

Radio girl / by Carol Brendler. — First edition.
pages cm

Summary: In 1938, fourteen-year-old Cece, an aspiring radio actress, encounters lies, secrets, and hoaxes both at home and in the studio where she is transcribing the script for Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" broadcast.

ISBN 978-0-8234-2861-8 (hardcover)

[1. Radio broadcasting—History—Fiction. 2. Family problems—Fiction.
3. Secrets—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.B7512Rad 2013

[Fic]—dc23

2012045937

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*For Sarah, Tim, Uma, and Leda,
and in memory of Pop*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book simply would not *be* if it weren't for lots of people. My most heartfelt thanks go to my MFA advisers, Leda Schubert, Uma Krishnaswami, Tim Wynne-Jones, Sarah Ellis, and to the faculty and alumni of the Writing for Children and Young Adults Program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. Also, many thanks in particular to my classmates, the Cliffhangers, and most especially to Trent Reedy and Patti L. Brown, who read the manuscript probably one thousand times each and without whose guidance I would not be a novelist at all.

Thanks to my talented writing group in Ottawa—Stephanie Rainey, Sarah Goldstein Lines, Deirdre Mander, Roy Reed, and Monique Comeau—who gave the work careful study and offered me sage advice.

To Henry Treftz, for his true story about reading Morse code by ear; to Carol Tracy, reference librarian extraordinaire; and to the many veterans and fans of the golden age of radio who wrote about their experiences or uploaded recordings. Please know that I am eternally grateful for your expertise and enthusiasm.

Thanks to my agent, Ammi-Joan Paquette, who has the tenacity of a foxhound but is way more charming and a better conversationalist. And thanks to my brilliant Holiday House editor, Julie Amper, who held me to the highest standards—pinned me up against them, really.

To my husband, Ralph, who drove me up and down South Orange Avenue one sunny afternoon for the sole purpose of gathering intel, who bought me my very first Sabrett's, and who still puts up with my saying "And how!" which I do more often than is probably necessary, or wise. To him I say thanks x 1,000,000 (and it still doesn't seem like enough).

Most of all, I thank my father-in-law, Henry Albert Brendler (aka Pop), who was listening to the "panic broadcast" on his radio in the apartment above the hardware store on South Orange Avenue that Halloween Eve in 1938. He helped me tremendously with details about riding Newark's trolleys, about West Side High School and the Florham Park roller rink, and so much more. I regret that he passed away at the age of ninety-one while I was still working on this story. How I wish he could have been here to see how it all turned out.

CHAPTER 1

"Criminiy," I said, rushing across the parlor. "Why haven't you got the radio on? It's almost time." I glanced at the clock. It figured, the trolleys just *bad* to run slow, today of all days. I dropped my skates next to the Zenith console and clicked it on.

My aunt Nory sat on one of the mismatched davenports that cluttered the room, her feet tucked under her, reading a magazine. She looked up at me, then over at the radio. "Is it five-thirty already?"

"Will be, by the time this old thing warms up," I said. "I can't believe we almost missed the beginning."

Nory still had on her pink A&P supermarket smock with "Noreen" embroidered on the pocket. She smelled faintly of vanilla extract. "Where've you been all afternoon?" she asked.

"Sledding," I said, pointing to my roller-skate bag. "Where d'you think, Nor?"

I waited for the set to crackle to life. "A proper copper coffeepot," I recited, tapping out the rhythm on the radio. "A proper copper coffeepot, a proper copper coffeepot."

Nory groaned. "*Can it*, can't you?" she said. "I swear, you'll drive me crazy with those tongue twisters."

"I'm practicing."

My aunt Nory was only seventeen but she still made a hobby

out of bossing me around. She had been living with us for three years now, which added up to over one thousand days of me, Cecelia Maloney, having to share my room, my hair dryer, and my radio with my father's youngest sister. On most days this situation griped my soul. Today, though, nothing could spoil my mood.

I felt the top of the radio console to make sure it was warming up. "A proper copper—"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Nory flung her magazine at me. "Enough already!"

I ducked. The magazine missed me by a mile.

Static came through the Zenith's speaker. I twisted the dial past lousy cowboy music on 860, past a boring news report on 810, and finally to 710, WOR and the Mutual Broadcasting System. Pop's station. That was the place to be Sundays at five-thirty. Especially *this* Sunday, the start of the 1938 radio season and all the new fall serials.

"A proper copper coffeepot," I said again. "A proper copper coffeepot." There wasn't a single mistake in my pronunciation. I was one slick number and I couldn't wait to show Pop. "Don't you get it, Nor? I have to practice. My very future depends on having Utterly Perfect Elocution."

"*Elocution?*" Nory wrinkled her nose. "Where do you come up with those big words, anyhow?"

"It's radio talk, is all," I said. "You wouldn't understand."

Aunt Nory didn't give a fig about the radio business. She wasn't the least bit interested in anything but church and working at the A&P. Truth was, only two people in the Maloney family knew anything about radio: Pop was one, seeing as how he was the best sound-effects man on the East Coast; and I was the other, because I was going to make a career out of radio acting myself. Pop had promised months ago to get me a weekend job at his radio station now that I was old enough—so long as he could convince Ma to let me. I had pleaded with her all summer for permission, but

she wouldn't budge. I guessed my Utterly Perfect Elocution didn't work on Ma, but surely Pop's boyish charm would.

Once I was "in" at the Mutual, it was only a matter of time before I landed a role on a program like *Hilltop House*, the-continuing-story-of-a-woman-who-must-choose-between-love-and-the-career-of-raising-other-women's-children, presented by Palmolive soap.

The radio announcer came on to remind us to buy Reinfeld's Frankfurters.

So be sure to ask for Reinfeld's. They're a treat to eat!

"All right, already! Enough about franks—get to Pop's program, bub!" I kicked aside the magazine Nory had thrown at me and flopped down on the rug, my head just inches from the Zenith. My ankles ached on account of roller-skating all afternoon at the Florham Park rink, but I barely noticed. "A proper copper—hey, where's Ma, anyhow?" I asked. "Doesn't she want to listen?"

Nory didn't answer. She stared out the window, rubbing at a cross on a chain around her neck.

Pop had been away for eleven months now, traveling with President Roosevelt's Federal Theater Project. The radio station had loaned him out to the FTP on account of he knew all about installing sound equipment in the auditoriums for plays they were putting on across the country. But tonight he was finally coming home. We had a very special supper planned for him, a fancy meal with the good tablecloth and matching plates. On the menu: pork chops—Pop's favorite, and a rare treat around here. A person might think my mother would be eager to see him, so eager that she'd already be heating up the oven. But Ma was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Ma?" I asked again. Still no response. Seemed like Nory had something weighing on her mind. "A proper copper, proper copper cof-fee-pot," I recited, good and loud.

That snapped her out of it. "I said to can it, didn't I, Cece?"

Cece, that was my nickname—rhymes with peace, which I wished Nory would give me once in a while.

You're listening to WOR, part of the Mutual Broadcasting System.

Nory kept on rubbing her cross. Sometimes I wondered whether she was trying to rub her sins into it, or trying to rub some of Jesus off on herself. A moment later she dropped the cross back down the front of her smock and, stepping over my legs, went to the windows looking out onto South Orange Avenue.

"Nor-*een*! What are you doing? Pop's on any minute now! Your own brother, for crying out loud." I nudged her foot with my saddle shoe. "And where's Ma? I mean, geez Louise."

"Hmm?" Nory shifted out of nudging range. "Oh, Alma? She's downstairs."

"In the store?" I asked. "What for?"

"Phone call."

Ever since Ma had canceled our telephone service last winter, we had to go all the way to Loomis Hardware below our apartment to make and take phone calls. My mother was completely and utterly certifiable.

Nory had a funny look on her face, with her mouth all puckered up like she'd swallowed a stale Communion wafer. "I think I'll go see what's keeping her," she added, drifting toward the stairs.

Our clock chimed five-thirty. The familiar organ chords on the radio started up. I fine-tuned the dial to clear the static so the music could ooze from the Zenith and spread out across the rug where I lay. When the organ faded, there came that eerie laugh which everybody on the planet recognized, and finally:

Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!

Then another creepy laugh, the Shadow's laugh, one of Pop's sound-effect inventions. I bet other listeners didn't know that the announcer held a glass up next to his mouth to make his laugh all echo-y like that. Crazy keen, and all Pop's idea.

The organ chords swelled again, and then the announcer returned:

Ladies and Gentlemen, before the curtain goes up on the Shadow's latest exciting adventure, let me say this...

...and he told us to order Blue Coal for our furnaces this winter. *Colored blue for your protection!*

The Shadow, Lamont Cranston, a man of wealth, a student of science, and a master of other people's minds... Never seen, only heard... As inevitable as a guilty conscience.

I cranked up the volume loud enough that folks could hear our Zenith all over Newark, and lay back on the rug. I didn't care what Nory or Ma would say.

Don't bother to try and see where I am, gentlemen. You can't see me. I am *the Shadow*.

The new actor playing the Shadow was a certain Mr. Orson Welles and I had to admit it: He sent me over the moon. Twenty-three years old and already the star of not one, but two radio shows. Yowsah! Of course Ma would say he was too old for me just yet, but in four years I'd be eighteen and famous and he'd be twenty-seven and more famous. And we'd fall in love. That's how I pictured it. Anyhow, starting tonight, Pop would be working with Mr. Welles *in person* at the Mutual Broadcasting System studios. Soon I'd be working at "the Mutual," too, as a page—running errands, delivering scripts, things like that. In New York City. With Orson Welles himself. Then we'd be on the radio, Orson and me, sharing a microphone, and later sharing an order of lobster thermidor and caviar in a corner booth at the Stork Club.

I leaned closer to the set and let Orson-Welles-as-Lamont-Cranston's deep voice soak into my pores. A voice like that made it easy to imagine that the Shadow really did have "the power to cloud men's minds." And knowing Pop was there, too, that we were connected by the airwaves—it was just like

old times. I tried identifying every sound effect in the background, picturing Pop like I'd seen him the times he had snuck me into the studio. Pop, with his shirtsleeves rolled up. Pop, with turntables and records on one side of him and oodles of gadgets and odd machines on the other. When the wealthy-young-man-about-town-Lamont-Cranston and his trusty-friend-and-companion-the-lovely-Margo-Lane sailed on the ocean, the stormy winds blowing outside the cabin were really Pop cranking the wind machine I'd helped him make with canvas from Mr. Loomis's hardware store and the slats from my old baby crib. The sound of an airplane engine came from a recording Pop had made at the Newark airport. Many of the effects on Pop's programs were fake, but they sounded real over the air.

When actress Agnes Moorehead as Margo Lane said her lines in tonight's exciting episode, I listened closely to her and noted how she elocuted things. When their plane was about to go down in the South Pacific, Margo Lane cried out, all agitated:

Look! We're heading toward that island!

Just the way I would do it once I had my chance in front of the microphone. *Look, I'd say, we're heading toward that island!* And instead of millions of radio fans listening to Agnes Moorehead, they'd be listening to me.

Tonight's episode was riveting. There was this island with a giant magnetic field around it and a bunch of chanting natives with torches. And an evil scientist. I couldn't wait to hear how the Shadow was going to cloud someone's mind to get them out of this one. Then, just when some man was about to get dropped into a volcano, the station took a break. Time for a word from our sponsor, Blue Coal. That's when Ma finally came upstairs, with Nory right behind her.

"You missed half of it already," I told them.

"Why's it turned up so loud?" My mother brushed past me

and dialed the volume way down. "Get up off the floor, sweetheart. You'll wreck those pleats."

Ma tucked a lock of graying hair behind her ear. "Your father just called, Cece." She glanced at Nory.

My heart leaped the way it did every time I learned that Pop had telephoned. But then I realized it couldn't be. "That's booshwash," I said. "He's on the air."

"No, he's not," said Nory. That cross of hers was getting a nice polishing. "Jack's not even coming home tonight. He's still in Philadelphia."

"Aw, tell me another." I reached over and twisted the volume knob all the way up. Eerie organ chords came out of the Zenith again.

"He's been delayed," Ma said, turning the sound back down. "He won't be home until tomorrow morning."

"But he promised," I insisted. "He promised me when we talked last time." Pop never broke his promises.

"Honey, I know he promised, but"—a look passed between Ma and Nory—"he'll be here as soon as he can." Ma folded her apron over her arm. "Tomorrow, all right?"

I looked away.

She turned to Nory. "Do you think the pork chops will be okay until tomorrow, Noreen?"

They left me alone in the parlor where I gave myself permission to fall into a full sulk. Orson burst back into the room. He and Margo had made their way inside the volcano. Although the radio's volume was low, Orson's voice was still clear and deep:

There's water down below. Dive into it, Margo!

I stared at the cracked ivory knobs on the old Zenith. More sound effects came, splashing sounds made with a plunger in a bucket. Not Pop after all, but some other sound artist.

I reached over and clicked the set off.

CHAPTER 2

The pipes next to my head made a murmuring sound as I lay there in the gray dawn. I watched my pinups of radio stars flutter in the breeze from the open window: Orson Welles. Ursula Parker. Deanna Durbin, only fifteen and already a star. Mickey Rooney, ditto.

Murmuring pipes meant that T.K. Loomis was downstairs in his little room in back of Loomis Hardware, talking on his ham radio. The Loomises lived up on the third floor and kept the hardware store down on the first floor. Us Maloneys, we lived right in between on the second floor. Ma called our setup a Maloney sandwich. It was cozy, all right. We knew where everyone was in the building on account of the plumbing's being such a good broadcaster.

I put an ear to the pipes, listening to the buzz of T.K.'s voice.

Nory lay in bed next to me, snoring gently. Soon the alarm would ring and she'd be up and getting ready for Monday morning Mass with Ma. I could stay in bed and risk having to go with, or I could escape now and wait for Pop from the safety of T.K.'s ham radio room. I scuttled out of bed and got dressed.

I tapped on the pipes to see if the coast was clear. "Clear"

meant Mr. Loomis, T.K.'s father, wasn't lurking downstairs. If Mr. Loomis caught me he'd send me back up to face Ma and Mass.

Dab-dab-dab, dab-di-dab. That was T.K.'s answer to my taps, Morse code for "OK."

I hardly made a sound climbing out of the window onto the fire escape. This was my escape route when I was under house arrest for sassing Ma, the only way to get downstairs without passing both my parents' bedroom and the kitchen. T.K. kept a pocket-sized radio in his room just for me so I could tune in to my programs even when I was supposed to be missing them.

I stood on the fire escape's landing for a moment, taking in the Eau de Alley fragrance, a mix of horse manure (courtesy of the milkman's brown mare) and the smell of malt that wafted over from the breweries. The pink morning sun snuck down the alley, putting the shine to everyone's trash cans. It filled me so full of optimism that I even waved at crabby old Mrs. Kam-meyer pinning up her wash across the way.

"Hey, pup," T.K. said as I swung my legs over the window-sill. "Aren't you going to church?"

"It's Monday," I reminded him. "Me and you and God had a nice visit just yesterday." I reached under the desk and pulled out my usual seat, a little folding stool T.K. kept around just for my visits.

Timothy Kelsey Loomis, called T.K., was eighteen, and the youngest of the Loomises' five children. The rest had all married and moved away. T.K.'s mother died soon after he was born, so my ma kind of helped Mr. Loomis raise him. He was like a brother to me.

"I got Calcutta, Cece. Listen," he said. He put a pair of headphones over my ears. "The signal's not too strong."

T.K.'s ham radio equipment filled an entire room behind

Loomis Hardware. I didn't know why he called it "ham." All I knew was, he was as crazy about amateur radio as I was about the real thing. He sat at an old oak desk loaded down with all kinds of electronic boxes and gadgets. There was a microphone, a notepad and pencils, and a Morse code thingamajig like a little stapler-shaped paddle, which he called a straight key. The walls were plastered with hundreds of postcards from other ham radio people all over, places like California and Iceland.

I adjusted the headphones so they fit snugly over my ears. "Hello? This is Cecelia Maloney. In Newark, New Jersey, United States of America. Do you read?"

I could just barely hear the man in Calcutta. "I am being very pleased to meet you, Y.L. You are a friend of KM2SO, yes?"

"Roger," I said. KM2SO was T.K.'s ham radio name. "What's Y.L.?" I whispered. That was a new one on me.

"Short for Young Lady," T.K. said.

I nodded, then continued talking. It was truly like being "on the air" with my voice going into those little black wires and through the sky to faraway places. It was beyond crazy keen to think I was actually speaking to a man on the other side of the *planet*. And he was listening to *me*. Next thing we knew, T.K. and I would be yapping with little green men from Mars.

The man's voice crackled. "Uh-oh," I said, "I'm losing him, T.K."

T.K. took the microphone from me and I fitted the headphones over his dark, curly hair. "QSB, QSB," he said into the transmitter. "You're breaking up. Signal's fading."

A moment later, he pulled off the headphones. "Calcutta! Incredible." He found a straight pin and poked it into India on the world map over the desk. There were lots of pins sticking

out of all forty-eight states and quite a few in Europe. T.K. radioed oodles of people living in France and England. I guessed that was why he was always talking about the crisis across the Atlantic. And why he wanted to go for a soldier one day, even though Mr. Loomis was dead-set against it. T.K. kept saying that if it came to war against Germany the United States should join in and help our allies. He thought it could turn into another Great War.

I thought he was certifiable. President Roosevelt had promised we wouldn't get involved. Our president would keep his word.

T.K. began fiddling with the dials, hunting for Morse code messages. "Heard your dad didn't make it home last night."

"He just got delayed, is all."

"Sure." He tossed his stub of a pencil into a coffee mug full of even stubbier pencils. "Sure, if that's what he told you. *Delayed.*"

"Cecelia!" My mother's voice called out from the top of the stairwell. "I know where you are."

Those ding-danged pipes! Ma could hear us. I kept quiet as she and Nory clomped down the stairs, on their way to Sacred Heart. "We're leaving, Cece!" she called out cheerily. "Last chance to come out of there and go along."

"You should go with them," T.K. said, grinning.

I shook my head. "Isn't it enough I have to go Sundays?"

He made as if to grab me and haul me out into the open.

"No!" I cried, pulling away. "I'm not going."

I waited until the bell jingled on the hardware store entrance, signaling that Ma and Nory had given up on me and left. "Geez Louise, Teek. Thanks a lot."

"Don't mention it." T.K. twisted another dial on his set. He held one earpiece up to his ear, listening for a signal. "Listen,

Cece. Do you think . . . Nory would like . . . has she seen *Carefree* yet?"

"How should I know? You'd have to ask *her* what movies she's seen."

He sighed.

"Oh, for crying out loud." I leaned forward, trying to catch his eye. "Still?"

T.K. had had a crush on Nory ever since she moved in with us. But would he ever get up the nerve to ask her out on a date? Not hardly. A person would think that a boy who talked to people all over the world would be able to ask one lousy girl living in his very own building out to the pictures.

"She's probably seen it," T.K. said, his voice dripping with utter despair and wretchedness.

"She probably *hasn't*," I corrected him. "Nory never goes to the pictures. She spends all her time at work and church." After my granny died, Nory wanted to keep attending West Side High, so Ma insisted that we take her in, on account of our apartment being convenient to school. Was I ever annoyed later when Nory quit school anyhow, during her junior year.

"She does spend a lot of time at Sacred Heart," T.K. said.

"And how! I'm beginning to think the only man she'll ever keep company with is our-trusty-friend-and-companion-the-Lord-Jesus-Christ."

T.K. nodded, the headphone earpiece still held against his ear. "I think she'll become a nun."

"Yeah, she probably will, if no boy ever asks her out." I shoved him in the shoulder. "Just gather up your courage and start a conversation. Easy."

He sighed again, shook his head, and fitted the headphones back over both ears—which was just the way our conversations about Nory always seemed to end.

I drummed my heels on the floor, watching T.K. tap on the straight key and take notes. It was getting close to the time when I would have to go back upstairs and finish getting ready for school. If Pop didn't come home soon I wouldn't see him until that night.

"Lovely lemon liniment," I said.

"What was that?" T.K. asked, lifting an earpiece.

"Just a tongue twister."

"Oh." He nodded. "I get it. You're practicing—what's that you call it?"

"Utterly Perfect Elocution," I said. "It's all about breathing properly, see, and exercising my vocal apparatus." I squared my shoulders. "Lovely lemon liniment. Lovely lemon liminent, limen—oh, nerts."

T.K. snickered. "Better work on that one some more." He scribbled down some notes.

"Lovely. Lemon. Liniment," I elocuted, thinking maybe I ought to head back upstairs for some breakfast. "Lovely lemon. Lemon liniment."

Just then an engine revved in the back alley. Could it be . . . ? I jumped up and looked out the window. The passenger door opened on a big cream-colored Packard and a red-haired man hopped out.

"It's Pop!" I squealed, bouncing on my toes.

"A convertible," murmured T.K. He had gotten up and was looking over my shoulder. "Don't see many of them around here."

The car drove off. Pop stepped onto the back porch, whistling:

Would you like to swing on a star?

I ran to the screen door at the back of the hardware store and whistled the next line:

Carry moonbeams home in a jar?

"That's my girl!"

"Pop!" I whipped open the screen door.

Pop dropped his suitcase in the hall and took me up in his arms. He tried to twirl me around, but being as how I had an inch or two on him, he had to put me down. "Hey, baby," he said. I leaned down so's to let him kiss my forehead. "You've grown even taller, I swear. How's tricks?"

"Great, now you're home." I shut the door behind him. "You look great, Pop. You look ducky."

"Ducky, eh? I don't feel so ducky. What's the hot stuff, Timothy?" He stuck out his hand toward T.K., who had followed me into the hall.

"Not much, Jack." T.K. didn't shake. He was busy fastening his work apron. "That was some fancy car you rode up in."

"Huh?" Pop said. "Oh, that. Yeah. Just someone from the station dropping me off, is all." Pop clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Say, you kids eat yet? What say we get my bags upstairs and have us some breakfast?" He punched T.K.'s shoulder. "How about it, old sport? You hungry for some Vim?"

"No, thanks," T.K. said, twisting away. "Store's about to open."

"Well, we'll see you later, then. C'mon baby-girl. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

CHAPTER 3

Upstairs in our kitchen, I reached up to the top shelf and got down our last box of Vim cereal. Before Pop left to work on the FTP, he was Vim cereal's official radio jingle whistler, and one time he brought home an entire case of Vim, a present from the sponsor. *Enjoy more vigor with Vim!* I had been saving the last box for Pop's first breakfast back home. While he took his shower, I set the table with bowls and spoons and took a fresh bottle of milk out of the icebox.

As soon as I heard the shower turn off and water running in the bathroom sink, I went and grabbed my work permit form off my dresser and a pen and knocked on the bathroom door. "You decent in there?"

"Come on in."

It was steamy inside and smelled of Lifebuoy. Water filled the sink. Pop's towel lay on the floor next to the tub. He wore a clean undershirt and trousers, but his hair was still wet and rumpled. Even rumpled, though, my pop was a looker. He had the Maloney red hair with blond mixed in, with a cowlick that always managed to work itself loose and fall across his forehead. A few faint freckles were scattered over the bridge of his nose. Nothing like my own freckles, which by this time in

September weren't scattered just across my nose but also across my chin and forehead and even my ears, for crying out loud.

"Why are you up so early anyway?" he asked, yawning.

"To see you, of course!" I said. "Sign this." I handed him the form and pen.

"Well, shucks. I'm happy somebody's home to welcome me and my ugly mug back." He held the form against the mirror and scribbled his signature on the line. "Where's your mother?"

"Her and Nory went to Mass. Didn't you see them walk by when you drove up?"

"Nope. Came the other direction. What did I just sign here?" he said, handing me back the form and pen. "Going on a class trip?"

"It's my working papers. You know. For the job."

"Uh-huh. There's always something. Always paperwork." Pop yawned again and got out his shaving mug. He worked up a lather in it, then took the brush and slathered cream on his neck and face. "Mass on weekdays now, huh?" he said, taking his first swipe with the razor. "Guess they didn't have enough room for you in the pews?"

"Uh-uh." I grinned at his reflection in the mirror.

He knocked his razor against the rim of the sink. "Say, you're in high school now. You like it?"

"It's fine," I said. "It's boring. Promise you'll be here for supper? Ma's got pork chops and everything."

"All right, if she won't mind having them real early. I have rehearsal tonight."

"Rehearsal?" I edged in closer. "Can I come?"

"What? Oh, no, probably not tonight."

"I'll finish my homework first. Please?"

"Hmm?" He turned his face this way and that, checking the mirror. "What's that?"

"I'll come with you. Now that you signed the work permit, I can fill out a job application when I'm there."

"Work permit?"

"This," I said, waving the form in the air. "You just signed it."

"I did?" The razor glided along his jawline. "Heck, I'm so tired, I guess I'd sign anything right now."

"So, can I come to rehearsal?"

"I don't think so, baby-girl. Not tonight." Pop leaned toward the mirror. He seemed more interested in the stubble on his chin than in what I was saying, probably on account of he was so tired and all. He scraped with the razor and rapped it on the sink again. "I'm hungry," he said. "You hungry, baby? Have we got any cream? I could sure go for some cream on my cereal this morning."

"Sure, I'm hungry. But Ma doesn't order cream anymore, just milk." I grabbed hold of the doorknob, twisted it, and let it go. Click. "So, how's about it, Pop?"

"Milk's fine."

"No, how's about the station tonight?"

"You lost me, baby."

"You said now that I'm fourteen I could work there as a page, and—"

"Hold on." Pop's razor stopped, mid-scrape. "Work at the *Mutual*?"

I flinched. He sounded as surprised as if I'd just told him that I wanted to become a longshoreman on the Hoboken docks. "You promised, remember? You said you would talk Ma into it."

"When did I promise this?"

"Aw, g'wan, Pop." He had to be teasing. I twisted the door-knob again and let it go, over and over. "We talked all about it that time you called," I said, my voice rising into wheedling range. "You said you could—"

"I said, I said." He tossed the cowlick out of his eyes. "Doesn't matter what I said. You know how your mother feels about this. Remember what happened the time we auditioned for Major Bowes?"

Back in seventh grade, Pop signed us up to try out for *Major Bowes' Amateur Hour*, but Ma nixed the idea. She didn't want me performing, not no way, not no how. Pop snuck me out of school and over to New York anyhow, and we whistled "Lullaby of Broadway" in harmony on the show. It was our little secret—until Ma found out. She refused to speak to either of us for a week afterward.

"Come on, Pop." I let go of the doorknob and the door banged against the towel bar. "You said a page job could lead to an audition, remember? And then—"

"Dammit!" He'd nicked himself with the razor.

I jumped back, startled. I'd never heard Pop swear before. Never. He reached for a styptic pencil and dabbed at the cut with it.

"That must smart," I said quietly.

"Sure does." Pop reached behind the door and grabbed a towel. "Look, Cece, I'm sorry. I just—I've got a lot on my mind, what with coming back to work and all. I didn't mean to snap at you. But you know your mother won't agree to any show-business job, even just a page job."

Pop had slicked back his hair and put the towel over his shoulders. He washed his hands. "Listen, can you reach me my comb out of that bag?"

"Sure, Pop," I mumbled.

His shaving kit was perched on the toilet tank, so I slid around him and sat on the toilet lid. The kit released a whiff of leather and peppermint when I unzipped it and dug around inside for his comb.

"Can't you at least *ask* Ma for me?"

"Tell you what," Pop said, uncapping his tube of Brylcreem and squeezing a ribbon out onto his palm. "Why don't you ask your mother about working with Nory at the A&P?"

"The A&P? Aw, don't joke. I'm serious."

Pop sighed. "Isn't my comb in there?"

I found the comb, a black Bakelite one with "Pingpank Barber Shop" stamped on it in gold letters. While Pop parted his hair and shaped it like a sculptor working with a palette knife and some clay, I fumed. "Listen," I said, "I just know you can talk Ma into it. About the Mutual, I mean, not the A&P. Just on Saturdays?"

Pop gently nudged his hair with the heel of his hand, making sure the comb lines showed. "I don't think so, baby. Hang this back up for me, will you?" Pop handed me the damp towel and pulled the plug in the sink. He caught my eye in the steam-streaked mirror and smiled that twenty-two-dollar smile of his. "Aw, don't pull a face like that, Cece. There's plenty of time for you to get famous." He patted me on the head. "Now, what say we get us some Vim?"

Pop made for the kitchen while I stayed seated on the toilet lid, the work permit rolled up in my hand. I watched the water in the sink swirl and swirl and finally disappear down the drain, leaving Pop's reddish-blond hairs and bits of shaving cream behind.

"I don't think so, baby," Pop had said. *I don't think so*. Just like that, my dreams of a radio career went down the drain, too.

CHAPTER 4

I was at the roller rink in Florham Park the following Saturday, the very day when I should have been taking the ferry to the Mutual with Pop. Beverly Kilgallen, my best friend since sixth grade, was working her new job at the rink in the skate rental booth. I rolled over to her window and leaned against the counter. A greasy bag of butter-soaked popcorn sat in front of her, along with pairs of recently returned skates.

"So, Cece, are you still sore at him?" Bev asked me. She smelled the inside of one of the skates and made a face.

"What?" I couldn't hear her over the organ music.

"Still sore at your daddy?" she said, louder this time.

"Nah, I'm not sore at *him*," I said, reaching for some popcorn.

A couple of kids came up to the rental window and told Bev their skate sizes. She disappeared for a moment and returned with two pairs of rentals. "Ten cents," she said. "No pushing, no gum, no refunds." They nodded and paid and collected their skates. Bev dropped the coins into a cash register.

"See, it's my mother that's the problem," I said.

"What?"

"My *mother*," I elocuted louder. "It's her fault. She is ruining my future, utterly."

Bev nodded. "Mothers! Who needs 'em?" She pushed the smelly skates to one side. "Have you ever asked her why she's so dead-set against the Mutual?"

"Only a hundred times," I said. "Every time it's a new excuse. I'm too young. It's too far away. My grades will suffer. It's not a job for girls, you name it. She won't budge."

The Major Bowes program wasn't the only time Ma had tried to keep me away from performing. She wouldn't let me take ballet when I was eight, on account of the cost. When I was eleven it was a big n-o to clarinet lessons because the noise would bother the neighbors. She nixed the acting classes I had begged for all last summer, saying the school was too expensive and too far away. She said she didn't want me getting my hopes up, reminding me that few girls ever succeed in show business. What she didn't get was, I was going to be one of those few.

A flock of junior-high kids gathered around the window, clamoring for skates. I snatched up the popcorn and rolled off to one side. Kids brushed past me going every which way, their skates slung over their shoulders, calling to friends, counting change for the concession stand. Girls from school skated around the rink, some with brand-new white skates that practically glowed under the blinking lights. My skates were hand-me-downs, so scuffed and lumpy I was sure they had been worn by Maloney females going all the way back to the Cretaceous Period. There were couples everywhere, and lots of boys, wearing neckties and white shirts with dark trousers like the rink rules required. The older boys eyed Bev's blonde permanent waves as they rolled by the rental counter, and I suspected they stole looks at her grown-since-last-year bustline, too.

Yes, Bev Kilgallen grew a pair of bosoms over the summer. The only thing I grew was taller.

"No pushing, no gum, no refunds," Bev repeated as the last of the big group of kids stepped away with their skates.

"Look, Cece," she said when I rolled back up to the counter and set the popcorn down between us. "There's got to be other ways to get on the radio. If your folks are blocking your path to stardom, go around them."

"You think?"

"Sure," she said. "If they don't play fair, why should you? I mean, take your mother. Where does she get off telling you that you can't become a radio actress? Didn't she used to be in show business herself?"

"Yeah, she was a dancer. That's how she met Pop."

"Well, then it's not fair to tell *you* to stay away from it." She pushed the popcorn bag away. "I've simply got to stop eating this stuff. I'm watching my figure."

"So's every last fella here," I said.

"You think?" Bev snorted. "Listen, Cece"—she pointed out all the returned rentals piling up on the counter—"I better do some work. I've got to check these here returns off the sheet."

While Bev turned to her rental tally, I skated away and scanned the crowd, trying to catch even one boy looking my direction. No such luck. It didn't matter that I had four months on Bev, agewise. She was the one that the boys made eyes at. It reminded me of something I'd heard Pop say about some actor once: "That kid's got a great face for radio." That was me, all right. A face for radio and bosoms to match.

When Bev finished her tally she beckoned me over. "See that fella at the organ? That's Henry." She waved at him. "I'm going to get him to take me to the Harvest Dance."

"The *organist*?" I looked over at the giant Wurlitzer against the wall and the skinny boy with round eyeglasses playing it. "I thought your mother said no dating until you're seventeen."

"She said that?" Bev snorted. "I guess I wasn't listening. Henry's a senior, you know. Hi, Henny-Hen!" She waved again.

When the organist made out that it was Bev calling to him, he waved a crumpled handkerchief in our direction.

"I think he's ducky," Bev said.

"Aw, g'wan."

"And he's rich." Bev checked her smile in a little mirror she kept behind the counter. She fished a popcorn kernel out from between her teeth. "Plus, he's a senior, which means he's going to need a date for the prom in the spring. A girl has to think of her future, *dumplin'*. You don't mind if I call you that, do you, dumplin'? Like Bette Davis in *Jezebel*, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

Bev's dating plans stretched all the way from the Harvest Dance in October to the senior prom in May. Way back in eighth grade, she vowed that she would never miss a dance once we were at West Side High. "Henry's got a nice—chin," she said, snapping her mirror shut. "Don't you think he has a nice chin?"

I shook my head. "Can't see you going steady with that chin from now until May."

"No." Bev sighed. "Maybe not. But Henry's got to have some friends. Did you ever think of that, dumplin'? Better-looking friends, maybe." Her dimples deepened as she smiled.

"So you'll just keep Henry as long as you can stand him and his chin, then find yourself someone better before the prom?"

"Now you got it, dumplin'. Oh, look. He's on break and it appears that—can it be?—yes—he's heading our way!" She wiped the corners of her mouth. "Here goes nothin'."

Bev soon captured Henry's undivided attention. I skated off, letting the current of the rink sweep me up in its human whirlpool. But I kept thinking about my best friend. Beverly Kilgallen stood out in any crowd, even though she was only

five-foot-three. Not only did I envy Bev her looks, but her determination, too. If a page job at the Mutual hadn't worked out for Bev, she wouldn't have let that stop her. No, she would have just found some other radio station to work at.

I nearly lost my balance. Hey! Why not? There was more than one radio station in New York City. It all became clear—clear as a ten-thousand-watt signal with no interference from any direction. I'd sneak across the Hudson and become a page at some other station! I'd keep it a secret from my family until I landed a real acting job with a big paycheck and a solid contract. Sure, my mother would blow a fuse when she found out, but by then it would be too late to stop me. Like Bev said, if Ma wouldn't play fair, why should I? I figured Ma couldn't stay mad at me, anyhow, when my picture appeared on the cover of every *Radio Guide* at newsstands across the tri-state area, making her the envy of all the other mothers on the block. I guessed she couldn't stay mad when I was making enough money to pay all our bills.

The more laps I skated around the rink, the better the idea sounded.

That night I sat in bed next to Aunt Nory, memorizing the parts of a cell. After trying without success to come up with a way to remember the difference between chloroplasts and cytoplasm, I tossed the book aside and picked up the latest *Radio Guide*. Time to choose my future workplace.

I worshipped the *Guide*, and not just because I planned to grace the cover one day. It had everything an aspiring radio actress wanted to know, like stories about the stars and how they got their first on-the-air breaks, and features on popular serials. There were all the show schedules for the fall season, with times and stations, which I could practically recite from memory.

Nory lounged next to me, running her cross back and forth

on its chain and looking at a magazine. The cover was folded under so I couldn't see what it was, but when she flipped it over an advertisement for Lux caught my eye. *Nine out of ten film stars use Lux Toilet Soap!*

"Hey!" I snatched it away from her. "This is my *True Confessions*." I checked the front. Sure enough, it was the September issue. The headlines stood out in red letters on the front: MONEY FOR A BROKEN HEART and THE WOMAN BETWEEN US. "Can't you ask first?" I said. "I mean, geez."

"It was just lying around. Besides," Nory said, looking intently at the magazine, "I wasn't reading it. It's nothing but trash." She reached for it. "Does Alma know you read this stuff?"

"Ma wouldn't care," I said, holding it out of reach.

"She would too care. She'd have to light another candle for you at church if she knew what was in there. All that s-e-x."

"I thought you said you didn't read it." Nory was such a mope.

"I might've read one story." She touched her cross. "One or two."

I shook my head and went back to my *Guide*.

But Nory kept talking. "Did you see the part at the back?"

"Back of what?"

"*True Confessions*, what else? Those love story contests."

"Yeah, but I don't have any love stories to confess." I tossed the magazine back to her. "G'wan and keep it if you want, now that it's got your germs all over it."

Nory picked up my magazine. I returned to the *Guide*. There was a feature article about Major Bowes and his amateur hour, the one Pop and I had tried out for. I turned the page. Smack-dab in the center was a snapshot of radio actress Ursula Parker. She looked way more glamorous in real life than the character she played on the long-running daytime serial *Beacon of Hope*:

Elaine Meldman, mild-mannered-shopgirl-from-Iowa-trying-to-make-it-on-her-own-in-Grand-City. Miss Parker, it said, had been fifteen when she landed her first radio role, and only seventeen when she first appeared on *Beacon of Hope*.

"Rumors are," the caption beneath the photo said, "that Miss Parker, star of CBS's *Beacon of Hope*, newly returned from her work for the government's theatrical circuit, has been spotted this week in the halls of the Mutual Broadcasting System in Times Square. Could another program be in the works for the star of America's most popular daytime drama?" Crazy keen! CBS stood for the Columbia Broadcasting System. It was an even bigger station than the Mutual, with more listeners. And CBS produced *Beacon of Hope*, with its thousands of followers of the torrid loves and tormented lives of the residents of Grand City! If I could find a place at Columbia, I could be working alongside Miss Parker by my fifteenth birthday. I turned down a corner of the page so I could find her photo again later to add to my pinup wall.

An article on the next page was all about a fourteen-year-old who would be appearing on a new fall program for the NBC Blue Network. NBC was the National Broadcasting Company. It had two networks, Blue and Red, and plenty of listeners. "With a speaking voice that is indeed alluring, Myrt Gilbertson is sure to transfix the listeners of NBC's latest offering."

That got me thinking. I set the *Guide* in my lap. "Nor?"

She ignored me. I flicked her on the arm. "Nor-eeen?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you think my voice is 'indeed alluring'?"

"Sure." Nory turned a page. "Like honey on a Uneeda biscuit."

"Aw, c'mon. I'm serious. Listen: Truly rural, truly rural, truly rural. Does that transfix you?"

She looked up. "*Transfix* me?" She shook her head as if to suggest that I was a hopeless case.

"You just don't get it," I said. "You don't want a career like I do."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Nory fluffed her pillow and leaned back, clutching *True Confessions* to her chest. "I did want a career before I quit school. Maybe I still do."

"Booshwash! Being a nun ain't a *career*."

"A nun?" Nory looked at me. "Where'd you get the idea I wanted to be a nun?"

"Everybody thinks so," I said. "Let's face it, you're a confirmed Catholic, right? You never go out. You're always at church. That's where the nuns are, last I checked."

"You ought to have your head examined," Nory said. "I don't want to be a nun. Someday I want to get married." She threw off the covers and flung her legs over the side of the bed. "When the time comes."

Now, that was extra-extra-read-all-about-it news. Nory wanted to get married.

She put on her robe and left to brush her teeth. I returned to my *Radio Guide*. Farther down the same page with the article about Myrt Gilbertson, a name caught my eye. "Broadcasting's boy wonder and recent phenom of the Harlem stage, Orson Welles, has been granted permission to continue his Sunday dramatic series, *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, for the CBS network."

Orson Welles! Just what I was looking for. Like Ursula Parker, lots of radio artists worked for more than one station, and Orson was one of them. He appeared as the Shadow at the Mutual, but he had this other program going weekends at Columbia. Ursula Parker *and* Orson Welles, both at Columbia. I flipped through the magazine until I found the address for the CBS studios: 485 Madison Avenue, New York, New York. It was settled. If Orson Welles worked weekends at the Columbia Broadcasting System, then Cece Maloney could work weekends at the Columbia Broadcasting System, too.

CHAPTER 5

The minute Ma and Nory left for Mass on Saturday morning, I emptied out my skate bag, shoving my skates under the bed as far as I could reach. The bag was my cover. If anyone asked, I was just going to the roller rink, like every weekend. I threw my pocketbook into the bag, along with my working papers and a dollar I had borrowed from Ma's rainy-day jar. I would need money for trolley fares and the ferry. Next, I dragged out the least shabby of my blouses and my new school skirt, the only one that fit. I cuffed my bobby socks neatly and laced up my saddle shoes.

All week long I had practiced tongue twisters and read up on Columbia's programs in *Radio Guide*. All I had to do next was get out of the apartment before Ma and Nory came back from church, drop my skate bag off at Bev's place, then head for 485 Madison Avenue in Manhattan and the offices of CBS.

"What'll I say when I get there?" I asked Bev, following her up the steps to her apartment not twenty minutes later. "I was going to ask to be a page—you know, a sort of errand girl—but what if they don't use pages?"

"Just say you'll take *any* job, mope," Bev said, dragging me down the hallway. Violin music was coming from the Victrola

in the séance chamber across the hall. The smell of patchouli filled the air. "Say you'll work for peanuts," Bev added, shutting us in her room.

I sneezed. Patchouli always did that to me. Bev's apartment continually smelled of it. Her mother, Charlotte Ann Kilgallen, had become a spirit medium and fortune teller after Bev's father disappeared back when we were in seventh grade. Lots of folks came to Charlotte at all hours of the day to have their fortunes told or to communicate with long-lost loved ones beyond the grave.

"What if CBS makes me fill out an application?"

"Just fake it." Bev stood in front of her vanity mirror, analyzing her attire. She unbuttoned the top button of her blouse. "It's all booshwash, anyhow. Put down your experience. Put something about that radio set of T.K.'s."

"T.K.'s ham set?" I said, stifling another sneeze. "Do you think that counts as radio experience?"

"It all counts, dumplin'. Anything counts when there's something important you want. Here." Bev handed me a tube of lipstick. "Put this on. It's Peony Pink. It'll bring out your eyes. Listen, just tell them you've worked in a radio studio."

"But I haven't, really," I said, in between dabbing on lipstick in Bev's mirror. I pressed my lips together a few times. The lipstick was very pink on me. *Very* pink. I wasn't so sure it brought out my eyes. Seemed as though it just brought out my mouth.

"Oh, Cece, you'll do fine," Bev said. She was just about to spritz me with her new perfume, *My Sin*, when the doorbell buzzed downstairs. The Victrola music stopped and the door to the séance chamber creaked open.

"Cripes, that's mother's first client of the day," Bev said, setting down the perfume bottle. "We better go. Come on, I'll walk with you to the trolley stop. I have to meet Mabel Ann there."

"Bug-eyed Mabel Ann?" We all despised Mabel Ann Warden on account of how she was always talking out of turn in typing class, which annoyed Miss Calicchio, who in turn assigned us extra timed tests.

Bev sighed. "The very same. She just got hired at the rink."

"Really?" I said. "Lucky you."

"I know, I know," Bev said. "Bug-eyed Mabel Ann. We're going to be working rentals together."

Out on South Orange Avenue, Bev offered me one last piece of advice. "Listen, Cece. You've got to expect good things to happen. *Expect orchids*, that's my new motto." We crossed Munn Street and stopped in front of Ziegelmann's Pharmacy. "Honey," Bev continued, "when a girl expects orchids, she gets orchids. Expect gardenias, you'll end up with nothing but gardenias."

I promised her I would try. Before I expected orchids, though, I expected to get some change for the trolley, so we parted ways in front of the drugstore.

"Morning, Mrs. Ziegelmann," I said to the plump, aproned woman behind the counter. "Can you break a dollar?"

"Sure, hon." Mrs. Ziegelmann poured a cup of coffee for a businessman in shirtsleeves. "Eddie, get some change for the young lady," she said, taking Ma's rainy-day dollar from me.

While her son, Eddie, hunted around in the cash drawer, I noticed this mope from school, Bucky Mason, over by the magazines. His nose was buried in the latest *Popular Mechanics*. He was humming a tuneless version of a song from the pictures:

Pack up your sins and go to the devil in Hades.

You'll meet the finest of gentlemen and the finest of ladies.

I tuned him out as I examined the cover of the latest *Movie Mirror*. Bette Davis was sharing her plan for happiness. Wished

I could spare the dime to see what the plan was, but all I had would go toward fares.

"Dimes and nickels okay?" asked Eddie.

I put *Movie Mirror* back on the rack. "Sure." I returned to the counter. "It's for the trolley." Eddie counted out the change into my palm.

"You?" Bucky leaned on the counter next to me. "Where are you heading off to?"

"None of your business, mope," I said, squinching up my nose at him. Bucky was one of the few male students still attending West Side High School, thanks to this Great Depression we were having. So many boys had had to leave school in order to find a job that even the popular girls in my class had slim pickings when it came to dates and school dances.

Bucky looked me over. "What happened to your face? Is that lipstick?"

"Shove off, Mason," I said. "Isn't there a lollipop you need to steal from some baby or something?"

Eddie Ziegelmann snickered.

"Quit it," Bucky grumbled at Eddie.

"Make me." Eddie picked up a dishrag and held it taut. I knew Bucky wouldn't take up that challenge. Eddie Ziegelmann was a tough guy. He had a habit of getting into trouble with the cops.

"It's okay, Eddie," I said, heading for the door with a dollar's worth of change in my pocketbook. "Bucky doesn't bother me."

But I was lying. Bucky did bother me. That song he was singing, it shook me up the whole two blocks to the trolley stop. *Pack up your sins*. Add to that the fact that it was about a thousand degrees out on a September morning, just like Hades itself. I had slathered on a few dollops of Nory's Mum brand deodorant that morning, but by the time I reached my stop I

was sweating under the armpits. I took out my handkerchief and wiped off my Peony Pink mouth. I was considering giving up my trip across the Hudson and going to Florham Park with Bev and bug-eyed Mabel Ann instead, like a good girl.

But, heck, I *had* to get this job. I *had* to. I didn't want to be like Nory at age seventeen, quitting high school for a job baking batches of brownies at the A&P, or like Ma, working for Mr. Loomis sweeping up nails and listening to old men complain about the Nazis and the weather.

Expect orchids.

"Miss Maloney, is that you? Hello!"

I jumped back, startled on account of how I was standing there arguing with myself. "Criminy!" I blurted out.

It was Father Kelly, the new priest at Sacred Heart. He walked toward me, carrying a bag of groceries. "Now, now. Tell me I didn't hear the word I think I just heard." He was grinning, thanks be to God.

"No, Father." I hugged my pocketbook to my chest. "No, you didn't hear that."

"That's what I thought," Father Kelly said. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He must have been hot under that collar. "Going somewhere all by yourself this morning?"

"Just—shopping, I guess."

That was lying to a priest, something for which I would surely go to Hades. My blouse clung to my armpits.

"Well now, we missed you at church this morning. Your mother's quite dedicated, at early Mass every day. I've become accustomed to seeing her there, right up front. Noreen, too. I know they would like it if you attended more often as well."

"Sure." I nodded. "They would like that."

"Alma tells me you have trouble rising early."

"Sorry, Father. It's a glandular condition, I think." What was

I saying? Another lie. Luckily, Father Kelly laughed. He had a nice smile.

"There's a good girl. Now, I'll see you at Mass tomorrow, right? Then I'll look for you with Noreen and your mother, say, Monday morning then?"

"Sure." As I uttered this third lie, which no doubt sealed my fate with the devil, the trolley came into view. "Well!" I said, backing away, "I'd better go. I bet you have a lot of sermons to write and stuff."

He laughed. "I don't know about that, but I do have some groceries here that are going to spoil if I don't get them into the icebox. So, see you in church."

I hopped the trolley and slumped down in my seat, fanning myself with my pocketbook. The temperature must have risen ten degrees in the last two minutes, I'd swear it on a stack of prayer missalettes. I couldn't believe I'd committed a mortal sin by lying to a priest, and three times, too, for crying out loud. It was hotter than Hades, all right, and I had just stepped into the thick of it.

Bucky's lousy song popped into my head:

Pack up your sins and go to the devil in Hades.

You'll meet the finest of gentlemen and the finest of ladies.

If you care to dwell where the weather is hot

H-e-double-l is a wonderful spot.

Expect orchids. Even in h-e-double-l. I was going.

Thirty minutes later I had left behind the brewery smells of Newark. I leaned against a damp railing on the Hoboken ferry, bound for the Thirty-ninth Street dock. The mist on the river cooled my face and arms. Waves on the Hudson caught

the sun and glimmered like the sequins on a radio star's evening gown. I'd never been across the Hudson by myself before, and the freedom of it made me feel like one snappy piece of work.

My excitement grew as the ferry neared New York and the brown and gray haze in the distance took the shapes of buildings and piers. As I looked out over the water, I sure wished I could tell Pop where I was right then. I would break the news to him as soon as I had landed a part on some program. Me, a teen star, transfixing an audience. Wouldn't he just bust out grinning?

As we neared the shore, I could make out oodles of people working on the pier. T.K. had once told me there were seven million people living in this city. I wondered what they were all doing right now. I scanned the windows of the buildings near the water, thinking about the people behind them. Seven million different lives. People just waking up. People just going to sleep. Singing. Arguing. Maybe right now, I thought, some girl's meeting a swell boy, the one she'll someday marry. Maybe someone's just found his long-lost nephew, or is worrying about his stepson who's in the hospital and the doctors have given him six months to live, like poor little Victor Cliff on *Wait for Tomorrow*.

But this wasn't a daytime serial. These were real people, the ones behind those windows. It made me think of all the folks that T.K. talked to on his ham set. Those pins on T.K.'s map in the ham shack weren't just pins; they stood for real people all over the planet.

When the ferry sidled up next to the dock, the crew threw ropes around the pilings. "Unique New York," I whispered. "Unique New York." The city lay before me, with seven million future fans, and I couldn't wait to get started.

CHAPTER 6

The streets were packed with people, shouting, running, hailing cabs. I hurried up to Forty-second Street, then headed east, passing shopkeepers propping open tavern doors and sweeping stoops. Wisecracking men unloaded trucks. Horns honked. Bellhops stood outside of hotels, and there were already lines at the banks.

Flattened chewing gum and old stogies dotted the sidewalks. I passed a Chinese restaurant smelling of boiled cabbage, then crossed another alley that smelled of rotten vegetables and exhaust fumes. On Fifth Avenue, I squeezed past fancy-dressed ladies in wide-brimmed hats walking their toy dogs. I passed a Sabrett's hot-dog cart on the street. There were businessmen in smart suits and fedoras rushing by shabby folks sitting against streetlamps selling pencils or asking for spare change. More horns honked. Motor oil on the street shimmered in the sun. At the corner of Madison and Forty-sixth, a Buick nearly ran over the toes of my saddle shoes.

Finally there it was, twenty-four stories high. Four hundred eighty-five Madison Avenue, the Columbia building. Its windows were like mirrors, reflecting the even taller skyscrapers all around. I stood in front for a minute, taking it all in. This was

a moment I would always remember, the beginning of my rise to radio stardom.

I licked my thumb and rubbed the scuff marks off my shoes, nodded at the doorman, and pushed through the revolving door.

The lobby was beautiful—shiny floors, swanky furniture. Potted palms stood against every pillar, electric fans blowing their leaves back and forth. Every sound echoed, the clacking of heels on marble and men in hats clearing their throats and jangling change in their pockets. People walked out of a luncheonette at the far end of the lobby, coffee in one hand, cigarette in the other, and newspapers tucked under their arms. Others came and went from a bank of elevators.

A sign on the wall listed the employment office as room 301. Next to it, an elevator door opened and the operator called out, "Lobby!" People stepped off. I stuck my pocketbook under my arm and followed other people on.

The elevator operator closed the metal doors. "Floors?" he asked.

People called out their numbers. "Three," I said, using my vocal apparatus to its utmost.

A few moments later the operator announced, "Third floor!" and some of us stepped off. A door across the hall stood open. PERSONNEL, 301 was printed on the glass in gold lettering. I took a deep breath and walked in.

Personnel, 301 was lined with chairs and every single one of them was taken. The office walls had windows covered with yellowed blinds, some raised, some lowered. I could see into the offices on either side and watch the people working in them. Two large windows at the back were propped open and a small fan whirled in one of them.

Behind a sort of railing in the center of the room was a desk

with a typewriter on it. Behind the desk sat a tiny, dark-haired woman in a gray suit. "Yes?" she said briskly when I approached. She didn't look up, didn't even stop typing.

"Good morning," I said, elocuting for all I was worth. "I would like to apply. For a job."

"You, too, huh?" This time she glanced up at me. "Do you have an appointment?"

Appointment? Appointment, like for the dentist's office? "No, ma'am, I just thought, since I was in the neighborhood . . . I thought I'd drop by and let the manager know about my, uh, my qualifications." Qualifications. That sounded good.

The woman sighed. She leaned back in her chair and gave me the once-over. Finally she waved her arm and said, "Look around, kid. What do you see?"

The office was full of tired-looking men and women, lounging in the wooden chairs, leaning against the wall, even sitting on the railing that surrounded the secretary's desk. They were all talking, and most were smoking. Judging by the number of cigarette butts in the ashtrays, more than a few of them had been there all morning.

"They all want jobs?" I ventured.

"You bet," she said. "These are all aspiring radio actors and actresses. The Hopefuls, I call them. You aren't the only one who wants to be on the radio."

"But I don't expect to be an actress just yet," I told her. "I'm applying as an errand girl, a page. Do you have any openings for pages?"

The secretary shook her head. "Mr. Wilson is in charge of hiring pages. He's out at the moment."

"Can I—may I wait?" A tiny quaver had crept into my voice.

"No, you may not wait. He won't return for hours." Her phone started ringing. "Oy! I'm sorry, kid, but you're wast-

ing your time." She picked up the phone. "Yes. . . . Okay, how many?"

Wasting my time? I scanned the papers on her desk, trying to come up with a way to persuade her to let me stick around for this Mr. Wilson.

"Right away, Richard," she said, and replaced the phone receiver, sighed, and climbed down off her chair. The woman was so small, she was actually taller sitting in her chair than standing on the floor. "Listen up!" she shouted.

Nobody heard her. The Hopefuls kept on talking and puffing away and cracking jokes.

The secretary pulled the plug on her fan. She cleared her throat and tried once more. "Listen, folks."

Still no one turned. Her voice just didn't carry. I felt bad, knowing what it was like to be ignored. We looked at each other. She shrugged. "Happens every time. You'd think they would pay attention, since I'm the one who has the jobs."

"Mind if I try?" I said.

"Be my guest."

I put two fingers in my mouth and whistled.

The chatter stopped instantly. Every head snapped in our direction. "Listen up!" I yelled. My elocution practice was paying off. My voice really filled the office. I pointed to the little woman. "She's got something to say."

"Oy." The secretary looked up at me admiringly. "That's some whistle," she said. "Some whistle, all right. Thanks."

I grinned. "Anytime."

"As I was trying to say," the secretary addressed the ladies and gents, "we've got two openings for singers right this minute, one male and one female. I'll take you and you. Up to twenty-one with you and ask for Richard. Step lively, now."

The man grabbed his hat and the woman collected her

gloves and pocketbook. They nearly knocked each other down rushing for the elevator.

The secretary flashed me what I guessed was supposed to be a smile, then climbed back onto her chair and started going through her desk drawers.

"Well," I said, turning to go, "thanks anyhow, ma'am."

"Now hold on, hold on," she said, slamming one drawer shut and opening the next. "One good turn deserves another. Here." She slid a form across her desk. "Let's have your working papers. You go on and fill this out. I'll see that Mr. Wilson gets it. No guarantees, you hear?"

It was an application for employment at the Columbia Broadcasting System! The secretary gave me a pen and placed an inkwell in front of me, then plugged in the fan again and went back to typing. The noise level in the room rose back to what it had been.

I stood next to the secretary's desk since there still weren't any free chairs, and filled in the application. I was about half-way through when the door opened so quickly the windows rattled. A tall woman strode in, the smell of her perfume blending with the cigarette smoke in the room.

"Polly, where's my paycheck? I expect to find it in my box before noon."

There was no mistaking that voice. The woman who stood before me untying her scarf was Ursula Parker, star of *Beacon of Hope*, also known as Elaine Meldman, mild-mannered-shopgirl-from-Iowa-trying-to-make-it-on-her-own-in-Grand-City!

Yowsah! I put a hand on the edge of the desk to steady myself. The office went quiet.

The secretary, the woman Ursula Parker had addressed as Polly, sighed and rummaged through a stack of white enve-

lopes sitting on her desk. She mumbled something about having other things to do, but Miss Parker wasn't listening. She impatiently stuffed her scarf into her pocketbook and checked her gold watch.

"Well, just *look* at this one, will you, Polly?" Miss Parker said a moment later.

She was looking directly at me. I was dumbstruck.

"Kid, if you don't close that mouth of yours," she said, "a spider's going to walk right in and build itself a web!"

The Hopefuls laughed at her remark. Polly shook her head.

I closed my mouth, all right. Miss Parker, star of *Beacon of Hope*, participant in the torrid loves and tormented lives of the residents of Grand City, had spoken to me!

Before I knew what was happening she had swiped my application off the desk and was looking it over. "'Cecelia Maloney,'" she read. "Maloney. Here all the way from Newark, I see," she added, looking up from the paper to examine my face. "Your parents know you're here?"

"Um, well. Not exactly, ma'am," I said quietly to keep the secretary from overhearing, "but my pop—"

"Ha-haaaaaah, I knew it! He doesn't know!" Miss Parker took me by the shoulder and pulled me aside, looking me over. "Why, you're nothing but a baby! Some red hair this one's got, huh, Polly?" Leaning in close, she whispered, "Your secret's safe with me, honey, but watch it with this one." She nodded toward the secretary. "She'll send you straight back to Newark if she finds out your parents aren't wise to your whereabouts."

Polly held out an envelope, which Miss Parker ignored. Instead, she turned and addressed her audience, the Hopefuls, who were already giving her their undivided attention. "This child, Cornelia Maloney, is hoping to get her start in show business, everyone! Bless her heart."

I opened my mouth to correct her about my name, but she continued, "Same as I did, ladies and gentlemen. I walked into a radio station quite like this one at the tender age of fifteen, and just like that, landed my very first part. True story."

"Good for you, kiddo," she said to me, handing me my application, adding quietly, "If I had obeyed *my* father, the listening public wouldn't have the pleasure of hearing my voice every day on the radio!"

Polly tapped the envelope on the desk. "Here's your check, Ursula," she said flatly.

Miss Parker took her check, but stopped once more to look at me and smile. She consulted her watch again. "Good heavens! Dicky's going to hit the ceiling if I don't get up to the studio this instant." She turned to me. "A word of advice from a pro, kid—never, ever be late for a script reading."

She winked at me and in another instant she was gone. Just her perfume lingered behind.

The Hopefuls went back to their conversations. Polly glanced toward the door and rolled her eyes at me. "Don't let her get to you," she said. "She's always like that."

"Like what?" I said. "So glamorous! I can hardly believe she spoke to me!"

Polly sighed and shook her head. "You almost done with my pen?"

"Almost." I finished filling out my application and handed it back to Polly. "Thanks," I said, laying the pen back on the desk.

"Don't mention it." She looked over the application. "Available weekends only, I see," she said. "That's good. A girl should stay in school these days, I say. Get that diploma." She finished reading. "So. You're a Jersey girl, Miss"—she referred to my application—"Cecelia Maloney?"

I nodded. "Newark."

"You came here all the way from Newark? My, my." She pointed at herself. "Hoboken. Lived there most of my life. We're practically neighbors. I have cousins right up the road from you, in the Oranges. Name's Polly, by the way."

We shook hands. "Pleased to make your acquaintance," I said.

"Likewise." She reviewed my working papers. "Everything seems to be in order. Tell you what. I'd hate for you to have made this trip for nothing. You seem like a nice kid."

I smiled and tried to look like a nice kid, but inside I was a jumble of nerves. I was gripping my pocketbook so tightly I could feel every coin through the cloth.

Polly picked up the telephone. "Sit tight a minute," she said, dialing. "I believe I'll get a page to take you up and see Richard after all."

I exhaled, possibly for the first time since Ursula Parker had stopped in. The office seemed a little bit brighter. I could even feel a breeze from the fan.

"Hi, Charlie," Polly said into the telephone. "Listen, send Francis down here, will you?" She covered the receiver. "This might take a while," she said, her face softening. "Have a seat."

There weren't any seats to be had, so I sat on the edge of the railing. Polly explained about me to the person on the other end of the line. "So have Richard talk to her about it, okay? It shouldn't take but a minute."

She hung up the phone, made a notation on my application, and filed it in a drawer. "You can leave your pocketbook here with mine," she said. "Coffee? Water?"

"No, thank you." Fact was, my stomach was squeezed so tight I didn't think anything I drank could find a place to land. Balancing on the railing, I realized that I, myself, had just now

become a Hopeful, sitting and waiting in Personnel, 301 amid the languid swirls of cigarette smoke.

Soon the door opened and a boy of about sixteen slipped inside. Polly collected a stack of envelopes and rapped them on the desk. "Here's Francis," she said.

The boy wore a black uniform with gold epaulets and brass buttons in two rows down the front. A page uniform. So this boy had a page job. I hoped he realized how lucky he was.

"You wanted me, Poll?"

"Show Miss . . . Maloney here up to the control room. Richard's expecting her. And mail these for me, while you're at it."

"Yes, ma'am."

I left my things with Polly and followed the boy into the hall. Did she just say the control room? Where the shows were produced? Maybe I would be on the air before the day was out!

"You a new secretary, or what?" the page asked. He dropped Polly's letters down the mail chute between the elevators, then waited for me to catch up.

"I don't know," I said. "Could be."

He grinned. "I bet you want to perform, though, right? Most of us do." He tugged on the jacket of his uniform. "Me, I'm aiming for reporter."

"You don't say." I was so nervous and excited, I could barely keep up my end of the conversation.

"Oh, yeah, a field reporter. Maybe over in Madrid. Or London, like Murrow." He stuck out his hand. "Name's Francis, by the way. Frank, to my friends."

We shook. Francis was cute, as cute as Mickey Rooney, at least. He had hair like dry grass and his nose stuck out like a rudder, but somehow it all fit together to make him awful good looking. And he was tall. Tall enough. Which is to say, taller

than me. I wondered if he worked every Saturday. I wondered if he knew Orson Welles.

When we got off the elevator on the twenty-first floor, I followed him down a dim corridor. He pointed out various rooms along the way: "Musicians' practice rooms. Writers' offices, across the hall. Here's Studio B."

"Where's Mr. Welles's office?" I asked, peeking in doors as we went by.

Francis laughed. "Every office is Welles's when he's here. He kind of takes over the place."

We stopped outside a plate-glass window. "This is Studio A," he whispered. He pointed up at a lighted ON THE AIR sign. "Quiet. They're on the air."

Of course I already knew what the ON THE AIR sign meant but I didn't mention it. Anyhow the broadcast studios at Columbia were so much larger than the Mutual's that I had no trouble looking impressed, which seemed to be what Francis was hoping for. Through the plate glass, we had a perfect view of everything happening on Columbia's Studio A soundstage. There were camp chairs and music stands for the orchestra, along with a harp and some drums. We could faintly hear chords coming from an organ. A group of men with cowboy hats and guitars had gathered around a microphone, sipping from paper cups. Meanwhile a man with a script in his hand stood at another microphone, waiting for a cue from the director. And to my surprise, there was a woman working the turntables, headphones on. A lady sound-effects artist!

At the right was the control room, a little booth with a window overlooking the soundstage. Francis waved to one of the men in the booth. Once he had the man's attention, he pointed to me. The man took a cigar out of his mouth, looked at me, and mouthed the word *You?* I nodded. He replanted the cigar and beckoned me inside.

"Don't call him Mr. Wilson," Francis whispered as he held the door for me. "And never call him Dicky. He hates that. It's just Richard."

"Got it," I whispered back. "Thanks, Francis."

"It's Frank," he said. "Call me Frank."

"Sure—Frank." I nodded and slipped past him into the control booth.

Richard stood up, and right away I offered my hand for him to shake.

"You are—?"

"Cecelia Maloney."

"Maloney. As in Jack, over at the Mutual?"

Nerts. I hadn't expected that. I wondered if everyone in radio knew my pop. It could be true, since he was the best at sound effects. I just hoped no one would know him well enough to tell him I was here today. "We're . . . distantly related," I managed to say, hoping Richard wouldn't ask how distant. Let them think I was only Jack Maloney's third cousin twice removed, or something.

"I knew it!" Richard said. "That red hair's a giveaway. Jack's a great guy, for sure." He unfolded a chair for me. "Well, now, I understand you're looking for a job."

"I was hoping for a page job," I said, taking the chair.

"So Polly tells me. But the weekend positions are all full." He put his headphones back on.

I waited while Richard twisted a couple of dials and cued the announcer to introduce the cowboy band. Once they started singing and strumming, he took his headphones off again.

"Well, Miss Maloney, I hear you traveled a long way to see us today." He rubbed his chin.

"Yes, I did, Mr.—Richard."

"Hate to see that kind of effort go to waste."

The door to the control room opened and an old man came in. "Hey, chief!" he said. He lowered himself onto a folding chair next to Richard.

"Good morning, Charlie! Cecelia, this is Charlie."

"Why, hello!" With great effort, the old man rose to his feet again. He stepped over to shake my hand. "Charmed, I'm sure." He must have been at least seventy years old, with wispy white hair and little red sores sprinkled across his cheeks and forehead. His broad grin instantly made me feel less nervous. That, and the way he made a big show of our introduction, as if he'd been waiting to meet me all his life.

"She's related to Jack Maloney, you know, over at the Mutual."

"Oh, sure!" Charlie said. "Jack and I go way back. Quite a charmer, that fella. Worked with him for a time in Newark, it's been, oh, fifteen years now. Haven't seen him in ages."

"Oh," I said, knots tangling up inside me again.

Richard checked the clock on the wall and signaled the cowboys to stretch out the song they were playing to fill the time slot. "I'm afraid, Cecelia," he said, "there's just nothing available."

"I—I'll work for peanuts," I stammered like a mope. "I mean, for fare money. Golly, Mr.—Richard—I'll do anything. Sweep up, wash windows, move pianos, anything. You've just got to give me a chance."

Richard laughed. "How is it that I can tell you're angling for an audition someday, too?"

"You know, chief," Charlie said, "we've been looking for someone to finish up that *Gal Sunday* giveaway. You think this one could handle it?"

Richard seemed to consider that for a moment. "All right," he said finally. He placed a hand on old Charlie's shoulder. "For

now, I'm going to have Charlie here give you a little task to work on and we'll go from there, okay? If you'll work for fare money, I think we've got a deal."

"Thanks, Richard," I said, "and Charlie." We shook hands again and the knots in my stomach loosened up a bit. "And about that audition, well, that would be keen, too."

"Now, now." Richard smiled and shook his head. "Let's just start with this. Charlie, why don't you take her down to the mailroom?"

"Will do, chief." Charlie stepped into the corridor. "Come on," he said, shuffling along at a snail's pace. "Keep up."

Keep up? I wanted to run or skip or do the jitterbug all the way to the mailroom. Sure, I didn't have a part on a daytime serial just yet, or even a page job, but at least I was still in the building. And that suited me just fine.

CHAPTER 7

Charlie showed me into a little windowless room with a wooden counter and bins and boxes full of envelopes everywhere. "See, here. This is where we sort the performers' mail," he explained. "Fan mail, most of it." One wall was fixed up with pigeonhole mail slots, each marked with the name of a Columbia performer or staff member. "Here's Al's," he said. He pointed out the compartment for singer Al Jolson, who had his own show. Charlie also pointed out boxes for interviewer Mary Margaret McBride, singer Nan Wynn, and of course Orson Welles and Ursula Parker. Their slots were stuffed with envelopes.

"There's more in here," he said, nudging a box labeled MISS PARKER with his shoe. Sure enough, it was overflowing with fan mail.

I picked up a few and looked at the postmarks. Denver. Charleston. Archbold, Ohio. "Does she answer all of them?"

"Who, Ursula?" Charlie laughed. "No, she can't be bothered. I believe the girls in the secretarial pool answer quite a few. The rest, they get pitched." He rooted around under the counter. "Here's what we came for today. What Richard wants done." He dragged out a box of white Bakelite sunglasses, each

in its own pasteboard box. "These are the giveaways from Aero White, for the listeners of—"

"*Our Gal Sunday!*" I interrupted. I loved that program! I had seen the advertisement for those sunglasses in *Radio Guide*. Send in a box top from Aero White Shoe Cleaner plus a dime and you get a pair of glasses from *Our Gal Sunday*, the program that asks the question: Can this girl from a little mining town in the West find happiness as the wife of a wealthy and titled Englishman? I wouldn't have minded landing a part on that show.

"My friend said these glasses are probably cheap," I said, taking out a pair and trying them on. "Seem all right to me."

"No, your friend's right," Charlie said. "They aren't made to last."

I took off the specs. "They're not?"

"One thing about the radio biz, young lady, it's just smoke and mirrors. It's making people think they're getting something they're not. It's cheap plastic sunglasses and faked sound effects. Smoke and mirrors. 'Cept the news, of course, that's for real."

My job, Charlie explained, was to open the requests from listeners of *Our Gal Sunday*, throw away the box tops, collect the dimes and make address labels for mailing glasses out.

"I'd best get back to the booth," Charlie said after I got situated. "I'll come by now and again, see how you're coming along."

"Thanks, Mister..."

"Call me Charlie. Everybody does."

He left me to my task and I got right to work. I can't say it was an exciting job, writing out address labels and pasting them onto flimsy boxes. But I didn't mind it, so long as I was working for real. By now, the knots in my stomach had untied themselves and disappeared. All I had to do next was keep my eyes peeled for a way to finagle myself a more permanent position.

The mailroom was awful quiet. I longed for a radio I could switch on but there was nothing in the room but mail and paste and sunglasses. So I started whistling to fill up the dead air. I began with the theme song to *Our Gal Sunday* and moved on to "April Showers." As the morning wore on, people wandered in to pick up their mail. Some said hello, others didn't, but they all listened to my whistling, I could tell. A couple of hours went by. Box tops, dimes, labels, sunglasses, over and over again. Charlie checked on me once or twice, and gathered up the dimes to deliver to some other office downstairs. My hand cramped up from writing out the addresses of radio listeners whose eyes needed shading from the sun. And pretty soon I had run out of labels.

I searched the mailroom, but there weren't any labels like the ones I'd been using. I went to find Charlie to ask him what to do.

In the corridor two little kids stepped off the elevator, one carrying a clarinet, the other a saxophone. They seemed to be in a big hurry to get somewhere and hardly looked at me. I was jealous, knowing they were probably about to perform on the air—and they were only about half my age. I peeked in some doorways, but except for a couple of singers warming up in a room marked REHEARSAL #3 and a man alone in a writers office surrounded by a sea of crumpled-up paper, there was no sign of Charlie.

Next thing I knew I was standing in front of Studio A. I told myself I was still looking for Charlie, but the truth was, I was drawn to those microphones like the milkman's horse to a carrot. The ON THE AIR sign was off. The control booth was full of people. Those little musicians had become part of a kid orchestra tuning up on the soundstage.

The door to the control booth opened. I stepped out of the way. One man stood out among the others coming through

the door—very tall, dark suit, with eyes like windows into the depths of his soul: Orson Welles! He spoke, and the others seemed to hang on his words. I backed up against the wall.

"What about the script?" one of the men asked.

"We've got a script," Mr. Welles said, clearly annoyed. "We'll have a script by airtime." His voice was every bit as deep as it sounded over the air. I sighed.

Polly trailed along behind them, a clipboard in her hand. She spotted me flattened against the wall, and waved.

"Polly"—Orson turned toward her—"have you got those notes?"

"Yes, Mr. Welles. Right here."

He backtracked to us, taking the clipboard from Polly and riffling the papers on it. The radio phenom, with his day's growth of beard and the smell of coffee and cologne lingering around him, was close enough to touch. A lock of hair hung in his eyes. And those eyes! When he looked my way, I could feel them penetrating straight into my heart.

I had to say something. "M-Mr. Welles?"

He glanced down.

"My name's Cecelia Maloney," I said quickly, offering my hand, "and I'm a big fan of your—"

"Maloney, did you say? Any relation to Jack?"

"I—I don't think so," I blurted out. Criminy! The first words I ever spoke to Orson Welles were a lie.

"Well, Jack's a good guy. Very talented and—ho!" He reached toward me. "What have we here?" he said. "Look, gentlemen, the kid had a shiny, new quarter tucked under all that rusty hair."

The others laughed as Orson waved the quarter under my nose. I felt my face coloring to match my hair.

"Thanks," I said, taking it. "That's some trick, all right." I

didn't think he heard me, though. He walked off with the other men, leaving Polly and me standing there alone.

"And that," said Polly dryly, "is the one and only Orson Welles."

"He's ducky," I said, looking after him. I held the hand he'd touched up to my heart as if it had been blessed by the pope himself.

"Oy! Ducky? After what he just pulled? He treated you like a four-year-old."

"Huh?" I said dreamily, then realized Polly was waiting for a reply. "Oh, the quarter. Yeah, but he's so . . . so . . . tall and all."

I turned the quarter over and over in my palm as I watched him walk down the corridor, talking with the other men. They got on the elevator and the hall went silent. I sighed. Would I see him again today?

There must have been a lovesick expression on my face, because Polly looked me up and down and shook her head. She snapped her fingers. "Snap out of it, Maloney. Now tell me how much you like working the mailroom. Charlie says you're doing a terrific job."

"I . . . it's interesting work," I said.

"Oh, come now. No, it isn't."

"Well, I don't mind it much. But I'm out of labels. And I'm kind of thirsty."

"That, we can fix," Polly said. "I'll find you more labels, and there's a water cooler right here in the control room."

Polly poured us each a cup of water. "Sorting that mailroom mess out is about as exciting as watching grass grow. That's my opinion." Her face brightened. "Say, speaking of grass growing, get a load of that." She stood on tiptoe and pointed through the window of Studio B. "Guess who gets to water that lawn?"

I spotted what Polly was talking about, a low box about six

feet square, with what looked like real grass growing in it. Sitting next to it was a push mower.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"Beats me. Your tall Mr. Welles ordered it brought up here. Something to do with a sound effect where a character's got to cut grass. He wants realism for his show, he says, so I get the job of keeping the grass alive until then. You should have seen the looks Francis and some of the other pages got, bringing that turf up in the elevator, in wheelbarrows!"

"Can't they just use something else to make the right sound?" I asked. "Like shredded newspaper in the mower blades?"

"Well, listen to you! You're a regular sound artist, you are! I guess they tried something like shredded paper, but no luck. Welles insisted on the real thing." Polly sipped from her cup. "You should have been here the time he wanted the sound of footsteps on a beach. Sand was everywhere. Half of Rockaway, dumped right here in the studio." She shook her head at the craziness of it. "Some days I simply cannot wait for them to leave for lunch. It's the only time I get to recover my sanity. Did you bring anything?"

"For lunch, you mean?" I shook my head. "I didn't think of it."

"That's all right." She took my elbow. "Keep your cup and I'll split my soda pop with you. Come on and let's find Charlie. His wife makes the best raisin cookies."

CHAPTER 8

We met up with Charlie down on the third floor, in the employee lunchroom. He smiled when Polly told him I hadn't brought lunch.

"That's all right," he said, tucking a paper napkin into his collar. "My wife always packs more than I can eat." He opened his paper bag and took out a half dozen raisin cookies and two Spam sandwiches, handing one to me. "Francis is joining us for lunch. Unless you ladies would rather go down to the lobby to ColBees? They make a great cheese soup."

"No, thanks," I said quickly. I couldn't afford a restaurant lunch. I had just enough in my pocketbook to get me back to Newark and of course I would never in a million years spend Orson's quarter.

Polly seemed to agree. She climbed into her chair and, as promised, split her Coca-Cola with me. Charlie was awful generous, giving us all of his raisin cookies. Frank joined us and hung his page jacket on the back of a chair. He sat down and began unwrapping an egg salad sandwich. "Any word about a permanent job for Cecelia?" he asked right away.

"I was just going to ask that," I said, shooting Frank a grate-

ful look. "And call me Cece," I said. "All of you. Everybody does." In the brighter lights, I could see that Frank had very nice brown eyes.

"Richard says all the page jobs have been filled," Polly said. She took a sip of her soda pop.

"Maybe he could hire me on as a reporter," Frank said. "That would open up a page spot."

"Don't count on it," said Polly. "Nice try, though."

I watched the Coca-Cola bubbles in my paper cup rise while my hopes fell. "It doesn't sound like I'll ever become a page," I said.

"Now, now," Charlie said. "Don't be discouraged. You've shown me you're a good, steady worker. Polly, did you see how many of the *Gal Sunday* orders she processed?"

"Ran out of labels already," Polly said, nodding. "We've been trying to get that promo mailing caught up for weeks now. She's fast."

I was fast, sure, but that didn't mean they would keep me. I sipped my drink and worried, worried, worried.

Expect orchids. Something just had to turn up.

On my way back to the mailroom after lunch, I passed one of the writers' offices, then backtracked to it again. A man I'd noticed earlier was still pecking out words on his typewriter at a rate of maybe ten per minute. The pile of crumpled paper around him was taller than before. The man would squint down at a pile of notes and then stab at the keys on the typewriter, letter by letter. Most of the other writers had gone for lunch, leaving this wretched mope to struggle along by himself. A crazy keen idea formed in my mind, so I gathered up my courage and stepped into the room.

"Excuse me, mister," I said.

He didn't seem to hear my approach. There was a stack of dog-eared handwritten notes next to his typewriter. An unraveled spool of faded typing ribbon spilled off the desk onto the floor.

"Beg your pardon?" I tapped him on the shoulder. "Listen, can't you get someone—"

"Huh?" The writer's head snapped up. "Oof!" His ink-stained fingers went to the back of his head. "Did you hear that crack-ing sound? That was my neck."

"Sorry, mister," I said. "I didn't mean to startle you, but I just have to ask—can't you get someone else to type that for you?"

"I wish," he said. He referred to his handwritten pages and punched a few more keys on the typewriter. "There's only so many copygirls to go around, and senior writers get first dibs. I'm a junior here, see."

"Not enough copygirls, huh?" I looked through the glass into the adjoining office. There were a couple of typists at work in there, and some writers were typing up their own stories, but they were much faster than this man. "Jeepers, sir. It'll take forever using two fingers like that."

"You got a better idea?"

"I just might," I said. "I can type lots faster than you." I had endured endless timed tests in Typing I with Miss Calicchio for nearly three weeks now. "Supposing they hired me to come in on Saturdays and help you out?"

"I'd take any help I could get," the writer said.

I thanked him and told him to expect to see me again real soon. Then I got on an elevator and went straight down to see Polly in Personnel, 301.

There was a line of people all the way from the door to Pol-

ly's desk, where she was handing out application forms like the one I had been given that morning. "Fill it out, front and back," she said, over and over again to each person, "then, please, go on home. We'll call you."

I reached the head of the line.

"Thank you," Polly said, "we'll call—" She looked up and saw me. "Now, wait just a minute. What are you doing in line, Jersey girl? You've got work to do."

"I forgot to put something down on my application. I can type."

"And—?" Polly cocked her head to one side.

"*And* they need some typists up in the writers' offices."

Polly sighed. "Oh, so that's it." She reached out to collect more applications as the Hopefuls turned them in. "Thank you," she said to each one. "We'll call you." To me, she said, "Those writers have been asking for another copygirl for months, Cece. . . . Thank you, we'll call you. . . . but it isn't in the budget. . . . Thanks, we'll call you."

"But Polly, if you saw what I've seen. Writers, some of them, trying to type whole scripts with just two fingers. It's positively *excruciating* to watch."

"Excruciating, huh?"

"Well, yes. They need someone like me, you know, to help out on Saturdays." I clasped my hands behind my back.

"Well, I don't know," Polly said.

"I come cheap."

"Yeah?" She put a hand on her hip. "Like, how cheap?"

"Like, fare money cheap," I said. "You don't even have to give me a raise. So come on, Polly, how's about giving me a try?"

"We'll see. . . ."

I grinned.

"Don't you go counting on it just yet," Polly warned. "This

isn't for sure. I'll have to fix it with Richard. But I'll see what I can do. Now get back to work, kid."

I spent the afternoon in the mailroom, head down, determined to finish every last order. Hour after hour, and still there was no sign of Polly. Frank came in for someone's mail and caught me whistling. He smiled. "What'd you stop for?"

I sighed. "Whistling isn't—polite."

"Polite? Holy Toledo! If I could whistle like that, I'd be whistling all the time. You have to teach me."

"Really?"

"Yeah. How'd you learn to do that?"

We talked for a minute until Charlie stopped by for more dimes and told Frank to move along. I asked Charlie about the typing job, but he hadn't heard anything. I was becoming convinced the day would end before Polly sent any news to me. Then finally, at twenty minutes to five, Richard walked in to check his mailbox.

"Oh, yeah. Hey, kid," he said when he noticed me behind a mountain of *Gal Sunday* boxes. "About that copygirl job."

"Yes, sir?"

Richard shifted his cigar to the other side of his mouth. "You sure you can be here every Saturday? No taking time off for pep rallies or dance marathons or whatever it is you kids do nowadays?"

"Oh, no. Not me. I'll be here. You can count on me, Richard."

"All right," he said. "How does twenty-five cents an hour sound for working Saturdays as a spare copygirl?"

"Keen!" I said.

"What's that?"

"I mean—that sounds very fair. Thanks, Richard."

Twenty-five cents an hour! Sure, it wasn't a part on *Beacon of Hope* just yet, but at twenty-five cents an hour, I could afford to buy my own Coca-Colas for lunch.

At five o'clock Charlie collected the last of the dimes and sent me home. It was beginning to rain, so I ran, head bowed, down Madison Avenue toward the Thirty-ninth Street dock. In Times Square, I spied Polly about a half block ahead under a black umbrella, her short legs measuring out two steps to everyone else's one. Once I reached the dock, there she was, waiting in the rain for the next ferry.

"You always work weekends?" I asked.

"Who, me? Yeah. Eight to four-thirty, both days. I got an aunt in Hungary who I'm trying to bring over here before it's too late." She rummaged in her pocketbook. "I'm working seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, trying to save up for her ticket."

'Before it's too late'? What's wrong with your aunt?"

"It's not her, it's the Nazis. I want her out before the war starts. Things aren't so good over there for us Jews, you know? Want some?" She held out a stick of Doublemint.

"Sure. Thanks." *Doublemint. For a double lovely you.*

One thing I noticed about Polly, she almost never smiled. I figured that's why I'd thought she wasn't so nice at first. But once a person got to know her, Polly was real swell. "When do you think you'll have the money for your aunt's ticket?" I asked.

"Can't be too soon." Polly folded her stick of gum into her mouth. "Now that my mother's passed away, Aunt Zia, she's all I got."

"Sorry," I said.

"Eh." She shrugged. "We do what we can."

We sat chewing our Doublemints and watching the ferry crew throw wet ropes. When they called for us to board, we

walked the plank with the rest and found ourselves a couple of dry seats.

The boat sliced a path through the Hudson, toward the rusted shipyard cranes of Hoboken, while I thought over my day at Columbia. Especially about my first meeting with Orson Welles. One day, when I was next to him at the microphone, he'd see me differently. Not as some kid, but as a woman, an actress. Our scripts would brush against each other with the crinkly sound of budding romance, and his eyes would peer into the depths of my soul, and his voice would broadcast itself into my heart. I thought about how all those men in the studio listened to him, completely and utterly hanging on his every word. Yowsah!

I turned to Polly. "Do you think Orson Welles is talented?"

"Oh, sure," she answered, chewing slowly on her gum. "He's talented, all right. I'll give you that. People haven't heard the last of him, mark my words."

CHAPTER 9

On the train to Newark I was still soaked through to the skin, but at least it had stopped raining in Jersey. There was a man sitting a few seats ahead of me who looked like Pop from behind, red hair under a gray fedora. I just about melted into the floor under my seat. Then the man turned, and I saw that it wasn't Pop.

Some Saturday, I realized, I could run smack into my father on the way to or from CBS. That was one meeting sure to cut short my career, especially if word traveled back to Ma. All this sneaking around and worrying about getting caught was going to fray my nerves to pieces. I needed an excuse, a cover story for where I was going to be every Saturday.

Dripping wet and more tired than I'd ever been from actually roller-skating, I stopped at Bev's place to retrieve my skate bag. She wasn't home from work yet, but Mrs. Kilgallen brought down my things. I asked her to have Bev call me right away. Then I lugged my bag down South Orange Avenue and up the stairs to our apartment.

Nory was in our room, wrapped in her robe, humming happily and filing her nails in bed. "How was skating?" she asked, glancing at my skate bag.

"What's it to you?" I said, stuffing the bag under the bed.

"It's nothing to me," Nory said, fixing the quilt over her lap.

"Only your skate bag is dry and you're not, is all."

Uh-oh. I hadn't counted on Nory's noticing anything. She usually ignored my very existence.

When I set my shoes on top of the radiator to dry, she caught my eye again and frowned. I would have to watch my step.

I glanced at Nory a few times as I changed into dry clothes, listening to her emery board scritch-scratching across her nails. Her hair was up in rollers and the room smelled of Cadbury's soap. I noticed a brand-new dress pattern from Woolworth's on the nightstand.

Golly. Why all the beautifying stuff? Was it possible that Nory had gotten herself a boyfriend? I always figured that Noreen Maloney had about as much chance of going out on a date as I did of growing bosoms. But now I wondered. It wasn't just her appearance that was changing. Lately she had taken to scribbling away in a little blue notebook. She hid it somewhere when she went out and I'd had strict warnings to keep out of it, both from Nory and from Ma. What secrets did that diary hold? Surely, there was only so much a person could write on the subjects of holy water and genuflecting, so what else—or who else, besides Jesus—could be inside those pages?

After supper that night I rapped on the pipes. *Dab-dab-dab, dab-di-dab*. T.K. was in the ham shack, so I headed down. I just had to tell someone about my day before I popped like an over-filled balloon.

The folding stool scraped the floor as I slid it out from under the desk.

"Hey, Cece," he said, adjusting his headset. "What's up, pup? Where've you been all day? Skating that whole time?"

"Listen, can you keep a secret?"

"Of course." T.K. crossed his heart.

I told him everything about CBS. He didn't raise an eyebrow, or tsk-tsk me, or anything like that. He just listened.

"Wait'll Pop finds out," I said, "once I've landed a part on some program. He'll be so impressed, he might change his mind about getting me into the Mutual."

"Well, I don't know about that."

"And T.K.," I said, "I met Orson Welles!"

"No kidding?" He turned back to his ham equipment. "What's he like?"

"Well, tall." I smiled, thinking back to that moment when our eyes met. "Handsome."

"Hold on." He held up a hand while he tapped something out on the straight key. "There," he said, pushing the key away and smiling at me. "Tall and handsome. What else?"

"He sounds just like he does on the radio. *And* he can do magic tricks." I showed him the quarter Orson had given me. I planned to keep it upon my person at all times, now and forever, amen.

"You sure about sneaking out like this, Cece? If your mother finds out, you'll be in awful big trouble."

"I know," I said, "but—"

"Never mind," he interrupted. "It's not much different from what I did yesterday. I stopped into a recruiting office on my lunch hour."

"Oh, no! You didn't enlist, did you?"

"Not yet." He showed me an army recruiter's business card he had tacked to the wall. "But I kept the sergeant's card. He says they need guys like me."

"He probably says that to every mope he meets."

"Nah, this was different. He was interested in how I could understand Morse code by ear."

"You mean, without having to write it down? That always amazes me, Teek."

"Well, I never thought much about it, but it turns out the army's looking for hams who can do that. Seems it's a rare talent."

I looked at the card and handed it back to him. "But what about Nory?"

T.K. replaced the army officer's card just below his QSL postcards.

"Because I have some news about her," I went on. "Nory doesn't want to be a nun after all. She wants to get married."

"Really?" T.K. cleared his throat. "Are you sure?"

"She wants to get hitched someday, that's what she said."

Just then, Mr. Loomis's voice boomed out from behind the counter in the hardware store. "Cecelia! Telephone!"

"I'm right here, Mr. Loomis!" I yelled back. "Coming!"

I skittered into the hallway in my bobby socks and pushed open the swinging door into the store. It smelled of kerosene and turpentine and Mr. Loomis's Briggs pipe tobacco. Faint sounds of traffic floated in from South Orange Avenue. I sock-skated across the worn floorboards all the way up to the counter, where Mr. Loomis was counting out the day's receipts.

T.K.'s father was a big man, with thinning hair and a huge walrus mustache that wiggled when he talked. The counter in front of him was a mess of paper and cash that he had been tallying up and recording in his ledger. "It's your friend, there," he said, gesturing toward the telephone. "Your partner in crime." He took his pipe out of the dollar bill compartment of the cash register and relit it.

Next to a rack of keys, the telephone receiver lay waiting. I picked it up. "Hello?" I said, moving a can of shellac off a stool so I could sit down.

"Hey, Maloney," Bev's voice came through. "Why haven't you called me?" I pictured Bev lounging on her bed, the phone cord twisted around her finger and trailing out the door and down the hall to their kitchen.

"I thought you were still at the rink," I said. "I asked Charlotte to tell you to call me. She looked awful mad when I picked up my skates this afternoon."

"And how. Henry took me out for a hamburger after work, to Halo Malts. Things worked out just like I wanted, Cece. He asked me to the dance!"

"Crazy keen!"

"It was heavenly at the Halo, dumplin'. Actually, Henny-Hen didn't bring me home until twenty minutes ago. Of course, Mother exploded. She slammed the door in his face even."

"No! Did you get in trouble?"

"Did I get in trouble? Is the Passaic River wet? And get this, Cece, if I can't sweet-talk my boss into giving me more hours at work, I'll never be able to save up enough cash to buy the party dress I want. Mother promised to chip in, but now she won't."

"All because Henry brought you home late?"

"Right again, Professor Quiz!" There was a crinkling sound. Bev must have been unwrapping some gum. "I ask you, how's a girl supposed to Lindy Hop at the Harvest Dance in a box-pleat skirt and a button-down blouse?"

"Gosh, Bev."

"I know. Just a tiny setback, though. I'm still getting that dress money out of her, you watch." She chewed loudly. "Orchids, orchids, orchids. So anyhow, spill," she said, snapping her gum right into the mouthpiece. "How was it?"

"CBS?" I checked to make sure Mr. Loomis wasn't paying attention. He had disappeared into the store. A ribbon of smoke from his pipe curled upward between the shelves.

"Like a dream, Bev!" I said, cupping my hand around the mouthpiece. "Columbia is aces. I met Orson Welles."

"Eh. Was he everything you imagined he would be?"

"Everything and more." I brushed my fingers across the rack of keys on the counter and watched them swing. "Bev, he's even more handsome in person."

"I'll just bet. Who else did you see?"

"Ursula Parker. You know, Elaine Meldman on *Beacon of Hope*."

"The mild-mannered-shopgirl-from-Iowa-trying-to-make-it-on-her-own-in-Grand-City? Tell me another!"

"For real," I said. "And I'll be working there every Saturday afternoon from now on. They hired me to type stuff. At twenty-five cents an hour."

"Oh."

"Like scripts maybe," I said brightly, hoping to impress her. "Maybe scripts for Orson Welles."

"Orson Welles. Schmorson Schmells. Were there any other boys there?" Bev said.

"A few. There's this Frank."

"Ooh, spill it! Is he cute?"

"Yeah, and he's real nice. He's got kind of a big nose, though."

"What, like John Barrymore big, or Jimmy Durante big?"

"Barrymore. Geez, Bev. Anyhow, he's cute, but he's no Orson."

She snapped her gum. "Know what I think? Orson Welles is going to be fat."

"He is not!"

"Cecelia. Just look at his face. It's like warm dough about to rise."

I took a deep breath. Bev was getting into a mood.

"Aw, heck, I'm sorry," she said a second later. She sighed into the phone. "I guess I'm just snitty on account of Mother."

"Your mother's certifiable," I agreed.

"Yours and mine both."

"Listen, Bev, I need a big favor. I need you to act like I started working Saturdays with you at the rink."

"Sure, I get it. I'm your alibi."

"Exactly. So, you'll do it?"

"Leave it to me, sister," Bev said. "I can make anyone believe anything."

I heard footsteps coming from the stairs. "Nix, nix," I said. "Someone's coming."

"Understood," Bev said quickly. "No more alibi talk."

"Peter?" It was Ma, looking for Mr. Loomis.

"Yardsticks!" Mr. Loomis called out his location.

Ma came down the main aisle, her green Loomis Hardware apron rolled up under her arm. "Hello, Cecelia. I left the dishes in the rack for you to put away."

"Ma, I'm on the *phone*."

"Hang up, then. Dishes come first."

Mr. Loomis appeared with two fistfuls of yardsticks.

"Peter," Ma said, "I've thought of a new way to arrange those fasteners to make more room." She leaned toward me. "I said hang up, Cecelia."

I turned my back to her. "Listen, I'll call you tomorrow, okay?" I said into the mouthpiece. Then I whispered, "There's too many big ears around."

"Loud and clear," Bev said. "Over and out."

I hung up, and when I turned around again Ma had set her

apron down. Mr. Loomis was watching me with a big walrus grin.

"What?" I said, staring him down.

He chuckled. "Telephone calls. Whispered conversations. I've raised two daughters. I know what we got here. Cece has got a fella, Alma. Mark my words."

"She had better not," said Ma. She took a handful of yardsticks from Mr. Loomis and calmly spread them out on the counter. "She's much too young."

"The truth is," I said, "I just got a job."

Ma looked up. "What?"

"Well, congratulations!" Mr. Loomis said.

"Thanks. That was Bev calling me with the news. She talked the manager at Florham Park into it. From now on I'll be working Saturdays with her at the rink."

"Oh, Cecelia," Ma said. "At the skating rink? Now, wait a minute. Let's discuss this. I was just talking to Nory about getting you in at the bakery."

"Too late. It's all settled. I start next weekend."

"Already?" Ma said. "Well, we still need to talk. This is a big step, sweetheart."

"Sure, I know."

And Ma laid down some rules. I had to agree to set up a savings account at the bank. I had to promise I would be careful around the skate racks in case they should tip over, and not talk to older boys unless they were renting skates, and not eat too many snacks, which would spoil my dinner. She was still iffy on the idea until Mr. Loomis reminded her how important it was for a teen-aged person to have a job and learn responsibility—and finally Ma came around to accepting the idea of my working at Florham Park.

Which I wasn't. My lies today alone would fill a ticker tape all the way from here to Cape May.

CHAPTER 10

As I walked through the revolving doors at Columbia the next Saturday, I vowed to work my hardest and type as fast as I could manage. I hoped that four weeks now of keyboard training under Miss Calicchio would be enough to see me through.

Polly brought me back up to the writers' offices on the twenty-first floor. In each office the air was stuffy, like it had been steeped in tobacco and stale coffee. Sunlight shone in through dusty blinds, making stripes across the linoleum. Desks lined the walls. Some writers click-clacked away at their typewriters while others sat on desks, telling stories and cracking wise.

"You'll be in here," said Polly when we came to the last writers' office on the end of the corridor. "We've set you up right there against the wall."

"Jeepers!" I said. "My own desk?"

"Naturally." Polly dropped a ream of paper and a few carbons next to the typewriter on the desk that was going to be mine. I tried out the chair. She showed me the features of my typewriter, a Remington Noiseless No. 10, and pointed out a drawer in the desk where there were spare ribbons and an eraser brush.

She had situated me directly across from the wretched

writer I'd talked to last Saturday, the one who couldn't type. He was there again—or maybe *still*. He looked as if he hadn't even moved since last weekend. "This is Bayard Cook," said Polly. "He works on scripts."

Mr. Cook lifted a hand, acknowledging this introduction without looking up from his yellow notepad.

"We've met," I said. "Sort of."

"As I mentioned," Polly said, "this is where they produce the scripts. But it's also where the on-air news copy is written." I followed her to the far wall where a large, black metal box sat on a table, a ticking Teletype machine. It was spitting out a news feed onto long rolls of paper.

"Your main job will be to catch the news stories off this contraption," Polly explained. "Tear the pages right off and take them to Bob in the office next door." She pointed out which room. "He'll edit them and bring them back for you to type up. Triple-spaced, mind you, and all caps. Then you run them over to the booth for the newsman to read over the air. Got it?"

I nodded. "I got it. But, Polly, aren't I supposed to type scripts?"

"That, too." She cranked a sheet of paper into the typewriter. "Richard wants you helping with the Teletype feeds as well. There'll be slow times when you can help out Mr. Cook with scripts. Look, there's a story printing out right now. Step lively. The news can't wait."

"All right," I said. "You can rely on me."

My office-mate, Mr. Cook, was concentrating so hard on whatever he was writing on his yellow notepad that he didn't even raise his head while Polly went over this with me. After Polly left, I tore my first news feed off the Teletype and read it over, ignoring Mr. Cook right back.

It began:

Chamberlain remains at Godesburg, in talks with Hitler regard-

ing Czechoslovak crisis. Fears remain in Britain as to the likelihood of war in Europe.

I ran it over to this Bob person next door. Minutes later, Bob returned with a longer version for me to type up.

I shouldn't have been so worried about whether I could keep up on the typewriter. The Remington No. 10 in front of me was brand spanking new. None of the keys stuck like on the old machines we used at school, so typing words like *Czechoslovak* wasn't as difficult as I had expected. As the morning wore on and news stories came and went, I was already typing faster than I ever had at school, and making fewer mistakes. After I had typed up Bob's edited copy, triple-spaced and in all capital letters, I would hurry it over to the broadcasting booth.

The morning continued like this, with me rushing to the Teletype, running the feed next door and then returning to my desk to type the story, then handing it over to the announcer in the broadcast booth, over and over again. I didn't exchange so much as a toodle-oo with Bayard Cook until much later when I returned from delivering a story. He held out his coffee cup, blocking my way to my desk. "Make yourself useful, kid," he said.

I was useful already, I thought, being as how I'd been running news copy back and forth for over two hours. But he looked so miserable that I took his cup and refilled it from the coffee-pot resting on a hot plate near the windows. "What's that you're working on?" I asked. I set his cup down near one of the dried coffee-cup rings linked together like a necklace across his desk.

"Huh? Oh, it's something for Welles."

My heart did a little jitterbug. Bayard Cook must be a writer for *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, Orson Welles's Sunday night program. Suddenly, Mr. Cook became a lot more interesting. "A dramatization?"

"A pile of horsesh—horsefeathers right now. It's supposed

to be Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* squeezed into one forty-five-minute program."

"Why don't you cut the trip to forty days?"

Mr. Cook chuckled. "Never thought of that." He ripped off a page, crumpled it up, and shot it in the direction of the trash can. He sipped his coffee. "Thanks for this."

"Don't mention it," I said. I was going to like Mr. Bayard Cook.

Later I was typing my heart out when Frank moseyed in between his errands. "How do you like it so far?" he asked, peeking over my shoulder. I couldn't say I minded the interruption.

"Typing news stories?" I shrugged. "It's all right. I'd rather be typing something for Orson Welles, or for *Beacon of Hope*."

The Teletype started ticking again. Frank bounded over to it, and I followed. While we waited for the next feed to print out, I smiled at him. Those brown eyes.

"I didn't know there would be so much news on a Saturday," I said, making conversation the way I figured an older girl probably would, "but there's plenty."

"And how!" Frank had brown eyes, all right. Soft, U-Bet-chocolate-syrup-brown eyes that were locked on mine. I forced myself to look away.

"Let's see," I said, picking up the papers churning out of the machine. "Japanese troops occupy this. Spanish nationalists declare that."

The Teletype spit out another story and Frank pounced on it. "Yowsah! Listen to this: A typhoon just hit Tokyo. Hundreds dead!" He beamed at me. I tried hard to feel interested, but world news was T.K.'s area, not mine.

"Aw," Frank said. "Don't tell me this bores you."

"No, it's not boring," I answered quickly. I tore another feed

from the Teletype. "Not too much. It's kind of interesting. Hundreds dead, and all. So far away."

"I'll say."

I took the feed next door and brought back a story to type. Frank was still there, watching for the next feed. "Golly, Cece," he said. "I'd give my right arm to be sent overseas to cover any one of these stories."

"Really?" I sat down in front of my typewriter and fed a clean sheet of paper into it. "You'd travel to a typhoon?"

"Yeah, sure. Maybe someday they'll send me to Japan. I could be their Asia correspondent, like Edward R. Murrow in London. 'This... is Tokyo,' I'd say."

"Hey!" I said, and stopped cranking the roller. "I've heard that reporter who says 'This... is London.' That's Edward R. Murrow?"

"Sure, that's him. Murrow. He's on his way to becoming famous someday."

Maybe I ought to listen to more news programs. Stories coming out of the Teletype, they were real, true stories. Frank seemed to like that. I wondered what it would be like to touch Frank's hair.

"Heck," he was saying, "I'd be satisfied just to break my first story on my own, as a reporter."

"Break a story?"

"You know. To be the one who discovers the story, reports it first. Tell you what." He searched his pockets and came up with a scrap of paper. "I'll give you my phone number. If you ever come across a good story, like on the subway or in your backyard or wherever, tell me first, okay? I'm in Washington Heights, but I'll go anywhere to break a story. Got a pencil?"

I found a pencil, all right, and fast. I'd never had a boy's

telephone number before. Suddenly, finding news stories sounded like the best way a girl could spend her time. I folded up the piece of paper with Frank's phone number on it, hoping I'd run across a story awful soon.

Those were some brown eyes, all right.

Two men came into the room, Bob from the office next door and another man. Their shirtsleeves were rolled up just like Mr. Cook's, and like him, they had pencils behind their ears. I gathered it was coffee break time, on account of they each carried a cup.

"I heard some dame had septuplets, Roger," Bob said to the second man. "In Timbuktu."

"Sure, and your mother wears—dammit, Cook drank all the java again." The second man, Roger, turned the coffeepot upside down and let the last of it drip out onto the linoleum.

Bob laughed. "Poor Bayard. Having one of those days? Somebody, call down to ColBees and have them send up a new pot."

Bayard waved a hand toward Frank. "The kid here will fetch it."

"Who, me?" said Frank. "I got scripts to deliver."

"The gal, then."

"Now, wait just a minute," I said, holding up a mess of papers. "There's all these stories I have to type up. Like those septuplets. That's big news."

The writers from next door laughed. "She's got us there," Bob said. "Can't sit on a story like septuplets."

"What's so funny?" I demanded.

"Yeah." Frank folded his arms across his chest. "What's the big joke?"

They laughed even more at that. "Listen, kids," Bob said, "let us know when the coffee arrives. You know where to find us." And with that, they turned around and left.

Frank cleared his throat. "Well, I ought to get cracking," he said briskly. "I really do have to deliver some scripts."

"And I really do have a lot to type up," I agreed. I guessed we were both embarrassed about not getting the joke.

Not long after Frank left, Mr. Cook dug around in his pocket for some change. "Here's some tin, kid." He flipped a few coins across my desk. "Be a good sport and get that coffee, strong as they can make it."

I sighed. I explained that I would get the coffee once I was good and ready, and settled down to finish what I was typing. The typhoon in Tokyo. The civil war in Spain. Real stories, all right, straight out of the Teletype. I recalled the story Bob and the other writer had been talking about minutes before. The septuplets born in Timbuktu. Fascinating—seven babies at once! But something about it didn't sit right with me.

"Wait a minute," I said, looking through the Teletype feed sheets. "Mr. Cook?"

"Hmm." He was X-ing out a fat section of *Around the World in Eighty Days* with broad strokes. "Oh, call me Bayard."

"What about the septuplets from Timbuktu—Bayard? There hasn't been anything about them on the Teletype."

He looked up, confused for a moment. Then he said, "Oh, Bob's septuplets routine. That's nothing. Didn't happen. He's just bringing up a sore spot, about a mistake Roger made a while ago." He raised his arms over his head and stretched. "It's sort of a funny story. You see, an article came out in the *New York Times* back in April about some woman in San Salvador. It said she'd given birth to five kids at once. And Roger, why, he wrote up a story about it, 'The Mother Who Matched the Dionne Quints.' See?"

Everyone knew all about the Dionne quintuplets up in Canada. I'd even seen their movies at the Strand. Five baby girls, famous just because they had the same birthday, same

year. "Sure, I see," I said. "So a woman in San Salvador had five babies, too?"

"Nah," Bayard said. "It never happened. It was a hoax. Never was a woman in San Salvador. It was an April Fools joke someone played on the *Times*. Roger should have looked at the calendar. Didn't check his facts, poor fella, and he broadcast a story that wasn't true."

A hoax, huh? But the fake story had appeared in the newspaper anyhow, even though the *Times* was supposed to be all true. How could a reporter from such a respected paper be fooled so easily?

"Now how's about you go get that java, please?" Bayard asked.

I sighed. "Sure. Soon as I type this last part." I picked up the coins Bayard had tossed my way.

"And maybe you could do me a favor and type this mess up when you get back?" Bayard said, indicating the work in front of him.

"Really? For Mr. Welles? Crazy kee—uh, that would be fine."

Later I was coming out of the elevator on twenty-one with a hot pot of java when I bumped into Frank. "Say, you're just the girl I was looking for," he said.

It was the steam from the coffee and not the pleased look on Frank's face that caused me to go all hot and bothered clear up to my eyebrows, honest. He took the coffeepot from my hands.

"I hope you're in the mood to whistle, Cece."

"Well, I—" I was going to remind him I had a real job now, but he interrupted.

"No, no. Not to teach me. They've got a sponsor in the studio who says he wants his jingle whistled, not sung."

A jingle! My chance to record something to play on the air? Well, that changed everything. "Where do I go?"

"Let's ditch this coffee and I'll take you over to Mrs. Michaels in the studio." Frank led me by the elbow back into the writers' office. Yes, the elbow. His warm fingers lightly touched my elbow just below the sleeve of my cotton blouse. Frank with the darling nose and soft brown eyes had touched *my* elbow. He set the pot on the hot plate. "Let's go, before the sponsor changes his mind. They pay seven dollars a pop!"

Seven dollars? Yowsah! A paid spot!

I practically clipped Frank's heels on the way to Studio A. "But what about the news feeds?" I said. "Shouldn't I ask Polly first?"

"No time." Frank opened the studio door. "It's now or never."

The lady sound artist waited on the platform, positioning a microphone. The control booth was crowded with men in dark suits with their arms crossed and their eyes on us.

"You must be Cecelia," said the lady sound artist.

"Yes, ma'am." I bounced on my toes and tried real hard not to grin like a fourteen-year-old mope. If I blew this chance . . . I wouldn't allow myself to think about it. Expect orchids.

Mrs. Michaels was tall and as skinny as I was, but probably as old as Ma. She wore a plain calico dress, and had dark pin curls tucked in close all over her head. "I'm Audrey Michaels, one of the sound artists," she informed me. There wasn't a bit of nonsense about her, judging by the direct way she spoke. "Do you know what sound effects are?"

"Sure." Did I ever.

She stepped away to adjust some of the recording equipment. "Look here," she said, motioning me over to the back table, "they're telling me you're a terrific whistler."

I shrugged. "I'm all right."

Audrey Michaels gave me the once-over, a hand on her hip. "Just all right? Don't be modest. We can't use 'all right.' We need terrific. The sponsor in that booth is about ready to pop his top button if we can't get his ad spot right." She leaned over and flipped a switch. "So, let's hear you whistle something."

No time to warm up. No time to run through proper copper coffeepots or lovely lemon liniments. All I could do was give it my best. I figured "April Showers" was as good a song to whistle as any, so I whistled "April Showers" just like Pop taught me, with lots of trills and grace notes and such.

"All right, all right," Audrey said. She placed a recording disk on a turntable. "Better than all right, I'd say. You've got talent. Go on over." She pointed to the platform. "Now, think of the song 'Happy Days Are Here Again.' You know it?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Good," she said. "What we want is something like that, only different. It's got to sound different enough that we won't get sued for using it. So whistle something just as happy. Make it sunny and light as a bird in springtime and all that sort of crap."

I'd never heard a woman use that word before, but there wasn't time to be shocked about it. Audrey set the stylus on the disk to record my performance, Richard gave us a signal, and I whistled for all I was worth.

I watched the men in the control booth. They watched the expression on one particular man's face, a sourpuss in a dark suit and a tan fedora. I guessed he was the sponsor we were trying to please. So I watched him, too. He didn't look around, just stared at Mrs. Michaels and me with his arms crossed.

"Again," Richard said.

They made me whistle my tune what seemed like forty-seven times—though it was probably only fourteen—until my

throat felt like it was full of sand and I thought my lips were going to fall off. I didn't mind, though.

Finally, the sponsor's face softened. He nodded. They all nodded. Richard smiled and gave me the thumbs-up signal. Audrey clicked off the recording equipment. "Well done, Cecelia," she said. "Consider yourself Weston's Superior Cod-Liver Oil's official whistler."

Yowsah! "Thanks," I said. "And say, if you ever need me again, just send for me." I raised my voice, hoping Richard could hear me in the booth. "I've got perfect elocution and I can act, too."

"Sure you can," Audrey said, shooing me off the platform. "Sure. If we need you, we'll let you know."

I was heading for the door when, to my surprise, Richard waved me over. "Mr. Weston," he was saying when I stepped into the control room, "I thought you'd like to meet your whistler." He shoved me toward the man in the tan fedora. "This is Cecelia Maloney."

"Well, now!" said Mr. Weston, shaking my hand like it was a pump handle. "What a charmer! Too tall to be my own Shirley Temple, but a helluva lot cheaper. I'll take her, I'll take her! Miss Maloney, you can whistle like nobody's business."

I was just about to thank Mr. Weston when who should burst into the room but Ursula Parker, brushing past Charlie and me. "Business?" she said. "Whose business? Why, it's Benny Weston!"

"Miss Parker!" Mr. Weston boomed. He took her hand and kissed it. An honest-to-goodness kiss on the hand. I had always thought that only happened in the movies. "First my whistler," he said, "now my star."

His star. That meant that Weston's Superior Cod-Liver Oil was this season's new sponsor of *Beacon of Hope*! My whistle would be heard by legions of followers of the torrid loves and tormented lives of the residents of Grand City.

Ursula's perfume and the faint odor of cigarettes filled the control booth. She kept her hand in Mr. Weston's. "I trust you've been satisfied with your recording session today?"

"Why, it's been capital! Just capital! They've found me a gal who can whistle like a canary, this one here." Mr. Weston beckoned for me to come forward.

"A whistling canary, eh?" Ursula looked at me for the first time. "Oh, it's the Maloney girl! Isn't she just precious, Benny?" She rested a hand on my shoulder. "We're great friends, she and I."

I hadn't known we were great friends, but if Ursula thought so, that was all right by me.

"She wants to be a radio actress, you know," Miss Parker continued. "Hold on." She gave my shoulder a little shake. "Miss Maloney, I've just had the most brilliant idea. If Benny says it's all right, how would you like to spend a day in the studio with me, watching me work?"

My eyes widened. "Honest?"

"I never lie, honey," Miss Parker said.

Richard cleared his throat. "Ursula."

"Oh, Dicky, come on! It'll be fun! I'll teach her the ropes, as it were. She'll be like my personal assistant for a day." Ursula took Mr. Weston's arm. "What do you think, Benny?"

"I think it's brilliant, Ursula," Mr. Weston said. He patted her hand. "The best learn from the best, I always say."

Ursula squeezed his arm. "My thoughts exactly."

"Hold on a minute," Richard said. "Cecelia will have to clear it with Polly first."

"Who? Oh, Polly." Ursula dismissed that with a wave of her hand. "I'll take care of *her*. When do you come to work next, Cynthia?" She looked at me expectantly.

"Well, I—" I glanced at Charlie. "Not till next Saturday."

"Perfect! It's settled then. Meet me in the ladies' dressing room, first thing next Saturday morning."

"Yes, ma'am. And it's Cecelia, ma'am."

Ursula didn't seem to catch that last part. "It has always been a mission of mine," she was telling Mr. Weston, "to foster and encourage new talent, and I want you to know that, Benny. Especially children! Naturally, they have a way of bringing out the very best in me." She steered Mr. Weston toward the door. "Listen, do you remember that little café where we used to run into each other now and again, before the FTP? Over on Broadway, by the Mutual? Well, they've come up with the most delicious..." Her words faded out as they disappeared into the corridor.

The door closed behind them. Charlie cleared his throat. "Well, *Cynthia*," he said, "you'd better talk to Polly about this today, before Ursula does, because she'll never agree to it if that woman suggests it first."

Richard agreed. "Polly's your supervisor, not Mr. Weston—despite what Miss Parker may have implied."

"But I can't go all the way downstairs now," I said. "What about the news stories? I've already been away from the Teletype for too long."

"Call her up," Charlie said. "She loves phone calls."

Before I left the studio, I looked across the empty soundstage. I was picturing me and Ursula, working side by side there. Going over scripts with red pencils. Elocuting lines out loud. My career was cued up like a recording disk on a turntable. Next Saturday was going to be crazy keen times a hundred. But first I had to clear it with my boss.

CHAPTER 11

Polly didn't quite see things the way Ursula and I did.

"Polly here," she said when she answered the phone.

"Hi, Polly. This is Cecelia, up on twenty-one."

"Is that so? I don't hear any typing."

"Well, no," I explained. "I can't type and make a telephone call at the same time."

"Well, I can. You should learn. Listen, somebody tells me you've been moonlighting over in Studio A today."

"Um, yes. I'm sorry. I would have asked you first, but they needed me in a real hurry. My whistle."

"So I hear. You're back at your desk now, I hope?"

"Yes—er, no. I'm using the phone across the room." Bayard Cook had finally gone to lunch. I had the writers' office to myself. "Say, Polly. I have a small favor to ask you."

"Get in line," she said, but relenting she added, "oh, all right, go ahead and ask it."

"Well, I know I promised to work every Saturday," I began, and I explained about working alongside Miss Parker for a day. When I finished there was nothing but the clicking of a typewriter on the other end of the line.

"Polly?"

"That woman sure has taken a shine to you, young lady," Polly said finally. "What's her angle? I wonder."

"Are you asking me?"

"No. Not really. You *want* to follow her around all day?"

"And how!" I said. "I mean, I like being a copygirl and all, but—"

"But yes, you want to follow Ursula Parker around." Polly sighed. "All right, then. I'll make a note on my calendar. Just for one day, and we won't pay you for that day. Got that?"

"Sure, I understand. Gee, thanks, Polly. You're the greatest!"

Ursula Parker and me. It seemed too good to be true. But it was true.

After that, going back to typing news stories might have seemed like drudgery of the worst kind, but I was so happy about my scheduled day with Miss Parker and my "spot" on the air and the seven-dollar check which would soon be in my pocket-book that nothing could pull me down off my cloud. I had Frank's phone number, and later Polly allowed me to type up Bayard's *Eighty Days* and I felt happy and sunny and light as a bird in springtime and all that sort of you-know-what.

Back on South Orange Avenue, I rang the buzzer at Bev's apartment. "Guess what," I said when she came to the door. I was grinning like an organ grinder's monkey.

Her dimples deepened. "Frank asked you out," she said.

"No, this is better."

"You met *another* boy?" She grabbed my wrist and pulled me inside. "Tell me all about him."

"No, it's not a boy, Bev, listen. I get to work with Miss Ursula Parker!"

She shut the door behind us. "You mean *the* Ursula Parker?"

"The very one."

"Yowsah!" She squeezed my arm. "Oh, Cece, this is exciting! I want to know everything."

All the way up the stairs to her room, I filled Bev in on all the hot stuff about my jingle spot and about my day coming up with Miss Parker.

"So it's next Saturday," I said, plopping down on the bed. "But don't tell *anyone*."

"Not even Mabel Ann?"

"Not even!" I said. "She's got a mouth on her. Plus her ma shops at the A&P. Nory would know all about it before Saturday."

"And Nory would go straight to your mother," Bev added, nodding. "All right. I won't breathe a word, Cece. Not one word, not to anyone." She made as if to zip her lips shut.

Bev took a seat at her vanity. "I can't believe your whistling is really going to be on the air, Cece. I'm a little bit jealous."

Bev, jealous of me? That was new. I shot her a grateful smile.

She opened her vanity drawer and fished out a bottle of fingernail polish. "But about this day with Ursula Parker," Bev said. "I mean, well, I suppose we can get you fixed up by then." She shook the bottle of polish.

"What do you mean," I said, "get me fixed up?"

"A movie makeover, dumplin'. That's what I mean. It's all the rage in the magazines. Mabel Ann and I went to Bam's after school yesterday and—"

"Mabel Ann again?"

"Yeah. So?" Bev set the polish down. "She's actually pretty nice, Cece."

"But those bug eyes!"

"For your information," Bev said, "it happens to be a condition she's got that causes that eye problem. Something with her thyroid."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't know."

"I know. But don't call her bug-eyed anymore, okay? Anyhow, I've got lots of fun new makeup to try on you. I mean, if you're going to be seen next to Miss Parker, well . . ."

I looked myself over in Bev's vanity mirror. My button-down blouse and pleated skirt were a far cry from the glamorous get-ups I'd seen Ursula wearing. I figured I ought to start looking the part of a glamorous radio actress, myself. "How soon can we do it?" I asked.

"How's about Thursday, right after school?" Bev said. "Bring all of your very nicest clothes. Bring everything. I'll see what I can do."

That night's supper featured Ma's signature dish, cabbage noodle casserole, day three, this time à la mashed potatoes. It was like eating a science experiment.

"So, I said to Ruth"—Nory was telling a story about something that happened at the bakery—" 'Ruth,' I said, 'I didn't set the timer, did you?' And Ruth, she said, 'I thought *you* did.' So we both opened the oven and smoke poured out and the rolls were burnt, black as coal!"

Boring! I faked a big yawn. But Ma laughed.

Nory went on. "So then we . . ."

I tuned her out and picked at a piece of cabbage. When I was famous, eating supper with my husband, the dashing boy wonder and radio phenom Mr. Orson Welles, I'd never serve casseroles, not no way, not no how.

Ma scooted forward in her chair. "So what happened after that, Nory? Did you get in trouble?"

"Ruth did, because she's—"

"Pop's home!" I cried, having just heard the door open downstairs. I jumped up and threw my napkin on the table.

"Sit down, Cecelia," Ma said. "You haven't been excused."

I ignored her and rushed to meet Pop in the doorway. "Well! What have we here?" he said. "Three beautiful women! A hug for Cecelia, and this for you, Alma my dear." He whipped a bouquet of carnations out from behind his back.

Ma took the flowers. "Oh, Jack," was all she said, but she smiled when he gave her a squeeze.

"And for you, Noreen"—Pop wrapped an arm around Nory's neck and kissed the top of her head—"a kiss from big brother."

Nory stiffened at his touch. The minute he let go, she pulled out her cross and rubbed it between her fingers.

Ma got up to find a glass for the carnations. "Sit down and finish your supper, Cece."

"Aw." I sat, but the noodles on my plate were hard as Bake-lite and I wasn't about to swallow any more. I poked at them with my fork.

Pop loosened his tie and unbuttoned his sleeves, which were wrinkled from being rolled up all day. He followed Ma over to the sink where she ran water for the flowers, and gave her a proper hug and a kiss this time. She giggled and pushed him away. "You'll make me spill it," she said.

Ma was tall and slender as a sapling and when she stood next to Pop, the fireplug, they looked about as different from each other as a waltz does from a jitterbug. While Pop looked chipper, Ma had the careworn appearance of someone who hadn't been sleeping too well. Her apron was worn and stained. It occurred to me that she always had an apron of some kind on nowadays, except at church.

"Any supper left for me?" Pop said.

"I'm sorry, Jack," Ma answered. "We're just about finished. If I'd known you were going to be home early, I would have—"

"You don't want this anyhow, Pop," I cut in. "Tastes like . . . like rubber baby buggy bumpers."

"That's enough, Cecelia," Ma said.

"I'll say, that's enough," said Nory, shooting her brother a look. Jeepers, if her eyes could have launched torpedoes, Pop's ship would have sunk. "Be thankful we have anything at all for supper these days."

"Anything at all for supper'?" I said. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Now, Nory," Ma said. "Let's not point fingers. He's home, and we're happy to have him here this early. The flowers are beautiful, Jack," Ma said. She set the glass on the table and fussed with the arrangement a little. "Thank you."

"Amos 'n' Andy comes on soon," I reminded Pop.

"Does it, now?" He took off his tie and hung it on the back of a chair. "Well, I don't know, baby. I expect maybe I've had enough of radio for today."

"Please, listen with me? Like we used to?" I was thinking about my job at Columbia and feeling awful guilty for sneaking around behind Pop's back. So I cranked up the volume and added, "I'll let you have the big davenport."

"The big davenport, all to myself?" Pop grinned. "Now you're talking. All right, you're on."

Ma sat down across from me. "Dishes first, sweetie."

"Aw, Ma!"

"Tell you what," said Pop. "I'll go and switch on the set, baby-girl. You do what your mother wants." Pop glanced around the kitchen. "Is today's paper still here?"

"We don't take one," Nory said irritably. "Not anymore. Too expensive."

I couldn't get a fix on why Nory was crabbing at Pop, but try as she might, she could not shake him out of his good mood.

"Okay, then," he said cheerfully. "I'll be in the parlor. When you get settled, Cece, you can fill me in on all the news around here."

Once the dishes were dried and put away, I came and sat on the rug at Pop's feet. Ma and Nory had favors for the Altar Society to make at the kitchen table, so I had him all to myself in the parlor.

Pop had tuned in a news report:

Jewish lawyers in Hitler's Germany received notice today that they are forbidden to practice law, beginning November 30.

His hand went to his forehead.

Meanwhile, President Roosevelt has appealed to Chancellor Hitler and Premier Mussolini of Italy to come to a peaceful resolution to the situation in the Sudetenland.

The reporter talked about "the threat of war." That old story again. Pop sighed. He was sliding into a bad mood. Hitler had a way of doing that to people—I'd seen it happen to T.K. many times.

"Our boys will end up over there," Pop said, his eyes just shadows under his hand. "Mark my words."

I didn't want to think about us joining in any war. I didn't want to think about T.K.'s going for a soldier and maybe being sent across the Atlantic to fight the Germans. "No more news," I declared. I edged over to the radio and switched the dial to WEAf, the station *Amos 'n' Andy* was on. "There, that's better! No more sad stories, just fun."

It wasn't time yet for the program, but the station was broadcasting a jazz trio.

"That's the ticket!" Pop said as the clarinet music twisted and curled around us. "Keep it right there."

He stretched and cupped his hands behind his head. He closed his eyes. Soon his feet started tapping.

You're listening to the NBC Blue Network.

"Pop? What would you say if I told you—"

Amos 'n' Andy is brought to you tonight by Campbell's soup. And remember, folks, Campbell's soup is good food!'

"Pop?"

He had fallen asleep. I leaned over and brushed that wayward cowlick off his forehead. Pop rolled over onto his side. I turned down the volume on the Zenith so he could sleep. "Good night, Pop," I whispered, wishing like anything that I could let him in on my secret.

I lay on the rug for a while, next to the console, listening to Amos tell Andy he was broke again. Next they would cook up another money-making scheme. Their plans never succeeded, though, and they always ended up right back where they started.

Jeepers. I hoped my plans would turn out better than Amos and Andy's.

CHAPTER 12

I was hunting for spare change under the big davenport cushions on Monday morning before school when I spotted something else jammed between the seat and the back. Yowsah, yowsah, yowsah! Nory's blue diary! The minute Nory left for Mass with my mother, I slipped the diary into my schoolbag so as to have myself a little read on the way to school.

Bev met up with me in front of her apartment. We hopped the trolley heading toward West Side High.

"Don't forget about Thursday," Bev said after we'd paid our fifteen cents and found seats. "I have big, big plans for you."

"I won't forget. Believe me." I hugged my schoolbag close as the trolley rattled and bumped its way down South Orange Avenue. I was excited about my movie makeover, but also a little uneasy, since Ma had expressly forbidden me to wear makeup until I turned seventeen. Bev's makeover counted as another sinful notch on my belt, all right, a sin only a smidgen less mortal than lying to Ma about where I was going on Saturdays. I took it all as another sign that I was meant to dwell in h-e-double-l. But if I was going to be famous by my fifteenth birthday, sinning was part of the package. Completely and utterly unavoidable, in fact.

The trolley's bell rang and a moment later it jerked to a stop to drop off and pick up more passengers. I felt books shifting inside my schoolbag and remembered Nory's diary. "Oh, Bev, I almost forgot. You have to see this."

"What is it?" Bev leaned closer as the trolley rounded the bend at Vailsburg Park.

"This," I said, pulling out the small blue notebook. "The private diary of Miss Noreen Maloney."

A flash of interest crossed Bev's face, but then she smirked, saying, "Big deal. It's probably charts and graphs of how often she says the rosary."

"Maybe, maybe not. I think she might be sweet on some boy at the A&P." I opened to a random page and read aloud:

After that night I couldn't get Father Shelly out of my head. I saw his face everywhere, in the cans of tomatoes at the store where I worked, in my coffee cup each morning, and in the glow of the ceiling light each evening.

And I wondered, would he ever take off the clerical collar . . . for me?

I put down the book and gaped at Bev.

"Keep reading," Bev said, her dimples deepening. "You got my attention."

So I kept reading:

I began attending Mass every single morning. I just had to see his face, his gray eyes that teared up whenever he mentioned the troubles in Europe. My eager eyes took in his chiseled features, the delicate but confident gestures he made with his hands, and his broad shoulders underneath those pure white priestly robes. His sermons were like music to my ears. Every word fell like golden dew from his lips. And those lips! How I wanted to touch them, to feel them against my own, to consummate the fire of our forbidden love. An hour of watching Father Shelly—James—with the morning sun streaming

in different colors through the stained-glass windows gave me just enough happiness to make it through my dreary days.

Bev hooted. "Fan my brow!" she cried.

"Oh, Bev." I slammed the book shut. "I can't keep reading this! It's embarrassing."

"Give it here, then," Bev said. She took it out of my hands. "I'll read it to myself."

It wasn't hard to tell who Father Shelly was supposed to be. Imagine Nory in love with Father Kelly, our priest! How long had this been going on? Bev giggled and turned the page as she read to herself. Nerts. I had to know more. "Aw, go ahead and read it out loud," I said. "I can't stand the suspense."

And so Bev did:

I lowered myself down on the velvet kneeler, she read, and waited for Father Shelly's voice to come through the frosted glass partition. My heart pounded like a drum.

"Yes, my child?"

"Bless me, Father, for I have . . . sinned." I nearly choked on that last word. If he only knew what sort of sinning I'd been imagining all these torturous months!

He was silent for a moment. Then, "Nan . . . is that you?"

My heart skipped a beat. "Oh, Father," I said breathlessly. "Oh . . . James!"

"Nan," he cried. "What is it? What's the matter?" Now the window slid open and I found myself looking into those gray eyes. "Have I said something wrong?"

"No," I said. "You've said and done everything right. You're beyond reproach, but . . . oh, James! How long can we go on like this?"

Father Shelly reached through the tiny window and took my face in his hands, drawing it toward him. "Nan! Oh, my darling! I have both hoped for and

dreaded this day." His eyes searched my face. "You and I, for all these months, I've felt something between us. Something stronger than my vows to the church!"

"But Father, it's wrong!"

"Is it?" His lips trembled. "How can something wrong feel so . . . so right?"

We could stand it no longer. Our mouths met in one long, passionate kiss, followed by hundreds more raining down upon my lips, my eyes, my cheeks, my chin. Electricity coursed through my every nerve as I trembled in ecstasy. At long last, my fantasies had come true. James was mine!

Bev threw the diary back into my bag. "That's it. That's where it ends." She swatted my leg. "What a hoot! Think of all that hot, fiery passion oozing through your aunt's veins."

"Shh! Somebody might hear you," I said, grimacing.

"So? Think of that priest, actually having an affair right smack in his own little church. Sly as a farmyard fox."

"He could be defrocked," I said.

"By Nory, you mean? Or by the church?"

"Bev!" I looked around, making sure no one was listening.

"Oh, yeah, he'll be defrocked," Bev said. "No doubt. Maybe even excommunicated if this gets out."

"Maybe Nory has good intentions," I said hopefully. "They could get married."

Bev snorted. "Yeah, sure. Sounds like he's getting the milk for free, if you know what I mean."

"You mean, you think they've"—I lowered my voice to a whisper—"done *the deed*?"

"The date on that page was September 6. I don't know how fast a priest usually operates, but yeah, they've done it by now." Those deep dimples appeared again as Bev giggled. "What if Nory gets storked? Think a crib will fit in your bedroom?"

I shuddered. What would Pop say to this? His little sister.

The trolley picked up still more passengers. Our stop was next, so we let them have our seats and took hold of straps.

"What should I do?" I asked Bev. "Should I tell someone?"

"Stay out of it, dumplin'." Bev dismissed my words with a wave of her hand. "Nory's love life ain't your business, so just sit back and watch it happen."

"But what about her reputation? And Father Kelly's?"

"If we can believe what's in that there diary, the damage has already been done, Cece. She's already gone and spoiled her reputation. If you tell on her, it'll only make matters worse because then *everyone* will know."

West Side High came into view. The bell clanged again. The trolley slowed and finally creaked to a halt. As we worked our way down the aisle to get off, I was thinking about T.K. I was glad now that he had always been too chicken to ask Nory out. Glad that he wouldn't get all mixed up in a romance with her where he might get hurt. We stepped off the trolley and headed into school.

Mabel Ann Warden was waiting for Bev by our lockers. Mabel Ann accompanied her down the hall and up the steps to their first-period class, yakking all the way. Those two were getting awfully chummy. It puzzled me why Bev allowed her to tag along everywhere. Bev had always been the one coaxing us to snub Mabel Ann for causing all the extra timed tests in typing class. And Mabel Ann, being a popularity-seeker herself, had never shown a desire to be friends with us anyhow. Until now. It was very sad to learn that she had bug eyes on account of a broken thyroid, true, but that didn't excuse her behavior, in my opinion.

I jammed Nory's diary way to the back of my locker so I wouldn't see it every time I opened the door between classes. It was bad enough I had to see Beverly Kilgallen's dimples appear as she walked away from me with Mabel Ann.

After school, I hurried straight home and stuffed Nory's diary back between the davenport cushions before she came home from work. I turned on the Zenith and lay down on the davenport with some homework and a pencil. The static faded out and the jingle for Jell-O faded in:

Genuine Jell-O. Accept no substitutes!

Jell-O was the sponsor for the comedian Jack Benny's program. It used to sponsor *Beacon of Hope*, too. I knew this from listening to the daytime serial last season. Back in June, *Beacon of Hope's* Captain Peter Tremain had fallen in love with Elaine Meldman, who had been off the air for months while she languished in Grand City Hospital, bravely battling a mysterious tropical illness only to wake up one day completely recovered. That was Ursula, of course. I remembered thinking how Elaine had better hurry up and get married before she contracted another disease. I also remembered thinking that if she married Peter her name would become Elaine Tremain. But Elaine Meldman wouldn't marry him anyhow, because she was hiding a Dark Secret. Then the summer season ended so the actors could take a break, then school started for me and I never heard the episode where they revealed what that secret was.

Naturally that made me think of Nory. Some piece of work she turned out to be. My aunt, Miss Mary Immaculate herself, was carrying around her own Dark Secret, a lot worse than my secret about the Columbia Broadcasting System. And the worst part about it was that although Nory had to carry around just that one secret, now I had to carry two.

CHAPTER 13

On Thursday I flipped through my scanty wardrobe, wondering what kind of a silk purse Bev could possibly make out of my sow's ear of hand-me-downs. I wanted to look older at Columbia this Saturday, but all I owned were a couple of blouses with Peter Pan collars and my new skirt for school. Then there was Nory's violet calico hand-me-down dress, which Ma made me wear to church. Hardly the glamorous look I was after.

My aunt's clothes hung in the closet next to mine. Her things took on a new significance now as I imagined her buying certain items specifically to please Father Kelly. I wondered if he might have touched this blouse of hers or fondled that cardigan while his kisses rained down upon her face. Ugh!

I pulled out some of my blouses and my skirt and folded them into my schoolbag. As I reached for my shoes, Nory's gray suede Sunday-only T-strap high heels called out to me from the back of our closet, begging me to take them someplace that wasn't Father Kelly's confessional. So I grabbed them, too. She'd never miss them so long as I had them back in the closet come Sunday. I threw it all into my bag along with my home economics textbook. After supper, I told Ma I was going to Bev's to work on a sewing project for class. "I'll be home before the streetlights come on, I promise."

"Take a sweater," Ma said.

"Aw, Ma, geez. It's warm out."

"It won't be, later. Come on, now."

I threw a cardigan over my arm. "There," I said. "Satisfied?"

"Good girl! Love you, sweetheart."

"Ditto, Ma."

Bev buzzed me into her apartment. "Golly, I'm glad you're here," she said, meeting me on the landing. "Mother's been badgering me all afternoon about Henry. She wants me to tell him to stop coming around, on account of he's so much older. I mean, cripes."

"Mothers," I said, hanging the cardigan Ma made me bring on their coat rack. "I swear, their sole purpose on earth is to wreck their daughters' lives."

"And how! But Mother wouldn't dare bug me in front of company, so having you here will save me scads of aggravation."

We ran up the stairs, where the scent of patchouli filled the hall that led to Bev's room. Faint violin chords from her mother's Victrola floated out of the séance chamber as we walked by.

"Does she know I'm here?" I asked, meaning Bev's mother.

"Probably," answered Bev. "She knows everything. She's a medium, remember?"

I hoisted my schoolbag onto Bev's yellow bedspread. "Say," I said, entertaining a sudden thought. "Do you think your mother would tell *my* fortune? It might be fun to know how the day with Miss Parker will turn out."

"Sure," Bev said, "if you want, later."

I took a seat on the bench in front of Bev's vanity. "That's tough about Henry. Did you tell your mother how rich his family is?"

"Only about fifty-two times. Mother still thinks he's too mature." Bev pronounced it "*ma-tour*," imitating her mother's

way of speaking. "Cripes, it ain't like I'm carrying on with a priest, right? Henry's just an organist, for crying out loud."

Bev pawed through the clothes I had brought. She took one look at my skirt, shuddered, and dropped it back into my schoolbag. She brushed the blouses off to one side, and stood for a moment with her hands on her hips, thinking.

"Nothing?" I asked. I turned away to examine my freckles in the mirror.

"Just hold on a minute." Bev went over and began rummaging through her own closet, coming out with a green wraparound dress. She laid it across the bedspread. She emptied the bag of makeup products she had bought next to the green dress. Then she waved me off the bench in order to get to her top vanity drawer. Yanking it all the way out, she overturned it onto the bed, adding even more bottles and pencils and tubes to the makeup mix.

I sat back down. There were enough jars and lotions on that bedspread to restock the whole cosmetics counter at Bamberger's Department Store. "It's going to take all of these to fix me up, huh?"

"Not necessarily," said Bev. She busily sorted through the makeup, grabbing up certain pieces and arranging them on the vanity in front of me. "It's trial and error. You've got good bones to work with, so there's that in our favor. And I've got a secret weapon." Bev reached into her pocket and handed me a couple of folded pieces of paper. "The article you hold in your hands is worth its weight in gold. It was discreetly torn from an old *Movie Mirror* magazine, by me, at the dentist's office this week."

I unfolded the pages.

"Be gentle with it. Them pieces of paper cost me two fillings, and they're going to turn our Cece Maloney into one keen number."

The article was chock full of advice meant to help a woman

look her best. *Spare not the deodorant, the mouthwash, nor the dentifrice,* it warned. *Keep a close check on your stockings and don't let them wrinkle.*

"Pay extra attention to page eighty-one," cautioned Bev. "It's the rules about catching a man's attention and holding it."

"Whenever there is a man nearby and a door to be opened,'" I read aloud, "'stand in front of it as if you've never had the least experience with doors. Males will immediately cluster around to give you assistance.'"

"But I'm not trying to catch any males, Bev."

"Tell me another. You've been sizzling over that Orson Welles for months." She reminded me about the pinups of him on my bedroom wall.

"Okay," I admitted. "But you don't think I really have a chance until I'm older, do you? I mean, he's twenty-three. And married, for crying out loud."

"So? Them show-business marriages aren't made to last. Look, just memorize it, okay? There's other fellas working there, right? They ain't *all* married. What about that Frank you told me about? See? This article is going to come in handy."

I figured I ought to listen to Bev. She was, after all, an authority on the male of the species. She had spent all her time in junior high studying them in the movies and in magazines like *True Confessions*. Studying them thoroughly, like an actress studies a script. I had seen the exact same movies and read the exact same magazines, but I still didn't know half as much about boys as Bev did.

"You want these?" She held out a pair of silk stockings and a garter belt to hold them up with. "With your long legs, you'll look like Betty Grable," Bev said.

I told her she was certifiable, but I took them anyhow. "Thanks."

"Now take off them rags and put this on," she said, thrusting something at me that looked like one of her mother's work

robes. I slipped it on. It was a sort of Japanese kimono, dark blue, with a satin tie.

Bev was a font of wisdom when it came to cosmetics and fashion, too. She painted up my face with eye shadow and did my eyebrows like Claudette Colbert's. I tried on her green dress. It fit pretty well, being a wraparound style. Bev wanted to stuff something extra in my brassiere, but I eighty-sixed that idea.

"Why not?" she asked. "You're supposed to look older, right?"

"Yes, but you remember what happened last year." We had both tried stuffing our bras with cotton balls. We thought we looked pretty shapely when we got to school that morning. But one of Bev's artificial bosoms drifted southward by lunchtime. Our classmate LaVerne Kunkel began calling her Lopsided Lottie, a name that stuck for weeks. As for me, my endowments erupted like milkweed pods that afternoon when we dressed for gym class. I had to gather up the remains of my cottony bosoms, scattered across the locker room floor. "Never again," I said.

"Oh." Bev nodded, remembering. "Right. Forget I said anything, dumplin'."

I slipped into Nory's gray T-straps and pinned on Bev's last year's Sunday hat. Practically no piece of clothing on me was my own.

Bev looked me up and down and pronounced my *Movie Mirror* makeover a success. I looked at least seventeen, she said. "Honestly, you look better in that dress than I ever have."

"Thanks, Bev."

She leaned down and examined her permanent waves in the mirror. "I ought to wash and set my hair tonight. I've got that date tomorrow." Despite her mother's scolding, Bev was going out with Henry after school to see *Too Hot to Handle* at the Strand.

She frowned at the sound of jingling beads coming from the hall outside her door. "Oh, lord. Here it comes."

Her mother appeared in the doorway. "*What* date?" Mrs. Kilgallen said.

"I'm going to keep seeing him, Mother," Bev announced defiantly.

"No, you most certainly are not," her mother said. She glanced at me and turned on a smile. "Why, you have company! And don't you look pretty, Cecelia!"

Charlotte Kilgallen didn't have the same feelings about makeup that my mother did, probably on account of she wore plenty of it herself. I thanked her for the compliment. She nodded and turned back to Bev. Her smile disappeared. "We'll talk later."

"Yes, Mother," Bev said. "Whatever you say, Mother."

"Mrs. Kilgallen?" I asked, just as Charlotte was turning to leave. "I have to be home soon, but maybe—could you tell my fortune real quick?"

Mrs. Kilgallen looked at her watch. "I don't know. It's late."

"Aw, give her five minutes," Bev said. "No charge—she's a friend."

"Well." Mrs. Kilgallen hesitated. She looked thoughtfully at me. "All right," she said after a moment. "But while *we* consult the other side, Beverly, *you* will clean up this mess."

Bev saluted. "Yes, sir. Right away, Mother, sir."

Charlotte made a sort of harrumphing sound. But when she turned back to me, she changed her voice to be all smoky and deep. "Come along, Cecelia. I will perform a reading for you now. Please follow me to my chamber."

Bev snorted. "Can the twit, Mother. Cece knows your real voice. Just do the reading and send her back. I promise not to disrupt any *spirit vibrations*."

Mrs. Kilgallen ignored her. "Come," she said, turning to me and motioning with jangling bracelets toward her fortune-telling room. "All signs reveal that the spirit chamber has reached optimum levels of receptivity and perceptivity."

"Okay. Thanks, Mrs. Kilgallen."

"Please," she said, beckoning. "Call me . . . Madame Helene."

"Yes, ma'am. Madame." As I followed the train of her sequined black gown trailing across the carpet of the dim hallway, I smoothed the green dress and checked to see that my hat was pinned on straight, just in case the chamber spirits were real. I didn't want to offend them with a pleat or pin out of place. I didn't want to risk shorting out the connection to the "other side."

Mrs. Kilgallen read tarot cards, tea leaves, crystal balls, palms, the whole bit. In Madame Helene's darkened fortune-telling chamber and séance room, there was a sort of a throne she sat in to give readings. Her crystal ball was centered on a velvet-covered table.

She dimmed the oil lamps.

I sneezed. Patchouli was so thick in the room that it clogged the air. Madame Helene kept up with the spooky voice. "Please, be seated." She directed me to a plain, wooden chair while she proceeded to light some candles and then lower herself onto her throne. Her platinum pin curls shone like satin in the flickering light.

I had been in this séance chamber many times before with Bev, just goofing off when we were younger, burning candle wax and trying on Madame Helene's jewelry. But it was different this time, what with Madame Helene on her throne staring at me across the velvety table and the smoke from the candles rising between us. I shivered, even though it was warm in the room.

"Ah, you sense the presence of spirits, I see." Her features

had turned shadowy and strange in the candlelight, her eyelids as dark and smoky as her voice. "I thought you might, my dear, for you see, you have a deep soul."

"I do?" I sneezed again. The patchouli was awful strong.

"Oh, yes. Soon the spirits will see inside that very soul," she said.

I hadn't expected that. Nobody had ever told me that I had a *deep soul* before. As I took my seat across from Madame Helene, I began to wonder if maybe there was more to this fortune-telling business than I had realized. My deep soul felt the presence of *something*, it really did.

"Well," I said, ready to hear what the spirits would reveal. I pulled my chair in closer. "What I'd like to know—"

Madame Helene held up her hand, her bracelets clattering against each other. "Ah-ah. Do not tell Madame Helene. She will divine what your concerns are." She leaned over the table. The chains around her neck fell across the velvet with the clink of metal on metal. "Please," she said, "complete silence. We must both concentrate. Give me your hands."

We touched fingertips across the velvet. I couldn't help noticing the many rings stuck on her fingers, the same ones I had tried on so many times. Mrs. Kilgallen never wore so much jewelry. This was Madame Helene, though, not Mrs. Kilgallen.

I sat very still and let the spirits fog up or vibrate or whatever they did.

"Allow me to consult the mists of the crystal," Madame Helene said.

The mists of the crystal. Now we were getting somewhere. I waited.

Madame Helene cupped her hands around either side of the crystal ball without actually touching it. "The spirits reveal to me . . . that you have recently embarked upon new adventures."

Adventures! The spirits already knew about Columbia! "They're right," I said, leaning in. "Ask them when I'll be famous."

"Patience," murmured Madame Helene. "No questions yet, please." Patchouli drifted between us. Her eyes went soft and watery as she stared into the ball, caressing the air around it. I tried to see what she was looking at, but all I could see in there was her face turned upside down. "The spirits foretell of a coming event in your life." Her eyes caught mine for an instant. I scooted forward in my chair. "Very soon."

I nodded, eager for more.

"There you will meet someone . . . a person of some importance. Is that right?"

"Yes! That's it." I glanced at the ceiling. "Can they hear me? She's important, all right."

"This person, a woman, she is . . . older?" She glanced at me. I nodded.

"You admire her greatly," Madame Helene said with conviction.

"Yes, that's right, too. Jeepers!"

A moment slipped by while Madame Helene appeared to be mentally conferring with the spirit mists. Her eyelids fluttered, and finally she spoke: "Ah! The mists indicate their readiness for questions now. What do you wish to ask?"

"Uh . . . how about, What does my future hold?"

"The spirits prefer more specific questions," Madame Helene said, a hint of irritation in her voice. "Perhaps about this meeting?"

"More specific," I said. "Okay, let's see. Okay, ask if she'll get me an audition for *Beacon of Hope*."

Madame Helene stared into the ball again. "Madame Helene sees the mists rising. I can make out . . . the letter K."

"K?" I tried to figure that one out. There was no K in CBS.

There was no character whose name began with *K* on *Beacon of Hope*. *K* for *Kilgallen*? *K* for *Kalamazoo*? "What does *K* mean?" I said.

Madame Helene's fingers went to her temples. "Not *K*. No, not *K*." She went back to stroking the air around the crystal ball. "Lo! . . . The letter had not fully materialized. It is not *K*, but . . . *R*."

"*R*? For *radio*?"

"Hmm." Madame Helene glanced up at me. "Yes, that's it. Radio. The spirit mists say the part you seek has to do . . . with radios." Her eyes caught mine for an instant. "A role in broadcasting, perhaps?"

My eyes met Madame Helene's. Everything the spirits knew about me was correct so far. It was completely and utterly amazing. "Keep going," I said eagerly. "I'm listening."

Madame Helene nodded. "The mists are showing Madame Helene another letter. It is . . . *S*."

"*S*? Soon? Static?" What could it mean? "Saturday?"

Madame Helene's eyelids fluttered. "Esssssss," she said again.

I thought some more. "Studio? Serial?"

"That is indeed correct," Madame Helene answered.

"Which? Serial?"

"Serial?" Madame Helene seemed to concentrate very hard on the letters floating around in the ball. At last she sighed. "They will not elaborate."

"Aw, come on, spirits! Play fair." I pulled my hands away. "Tell them that's not fair, Mrs. Kilgallen. How come they won't tell me?"

"Ah-ah-ah." Madame Helene took her hands away from the ball. She closed her eyes. "Your tone of voice disturbs the mists of the crystal. The spirits may break contact entirely, should you continue in this manner."

"Sorry." Uh-oh. I didn't mean to disturb anyone. "Sorry, okay?" I tried to send friendly thoughts to the spirits, but I wasn't exactly sure where in the room to point them.

"Please, replace your hands," Madame Helene continued. "The spirits speak in many voices. Your future takes many paths, many turns . . . *but wait!*" She raised a finger. "A new voice has emerged, an urgent voice, with a warning for you, Cece-lia! . . . Someone very close to you—a young lady—is making a terrible, terrible mistake. A mistake . . . in romance."

The spirit mists knew about Nory! "They gave a warning?" I asked. "For me? Why me?"

Madame Helene nodded slowly. She stared into the ball. "The new voice is especially agitated. Hark!" She tilted her head to one side, as if to hear better. All I could hear was Madame Helene's clanking necklaces. I wished the voice would employ Utterly Perfect Elocution, being as how this was a very important message and was certainly no time to mumble.

Madame Helene drew in her breath. "It grows murky in the crystal . . . and now . . . what is this? . . . Ooooooh! Ooooooooooh! The spirit reveals your future. Bad luck lies in your path!"

"Bad luck? What path? When?" I scooted up to the very edge of my seat, trying again to see something in the crystal.

"Please, remain calm. In the crystal, Madame Helene sees . . . a crescent moon, and now, and now . . . nothing. The images have gone dark." She closed her eyes and sat back. "Madame Helene is afraid this is very bad news. A very serious warning, indeed."

"What warning? What sort of bad luck?"

"The spirit imparted this message," she said, opening her eyes. "*You* must turn a certain young lady who is very close to you away from the wrong path in love."

"Me?" I gulped. "Why me?"

"Lo! Heed this warning," Madame Helene said spookily.

She seemed to be staring past me, just over my head at a spot on the wall. "Or the spirits say you will suffer many days of bad luck."

"But what can I do about it? Bev said to stay out of it."

"Oh, no, no, no." Madame Helene shook her head so hard one of her pearl earrings fell off and rolled across the table. "Oh, no. You must convince her—this young lady to whom you are very close—to abandon this romance."

"But how? I mean, the romance, it seems awful serious. They might have even, um . . . well, they might have—"

"No!" Madame Helene gasped. "Did she tell you that?"

"Not in so many words, but Bev says—"

"Hush!" A shudder seemed to go through Madame Helene's large frame. When she spoke next, her voice had lost its power. "I—that is, the *spirit mists*—ask you not to continue."

"Oh, right." I nodded. "Of course. Because they already know all about it."

Madame Helene closed her eyes again and allowed her chin to drop down until it nearly rested against her necklaces. Her curls practically blinded me, the way they reflected the candlelight. Madame Helene seemed to have gone into a trance, or else she was praying, or maybe falling asleep.

I sat, waiting, with my hands still resting flat upon the velvet tabletop. I was just starting to wonder if I should speak, or cross myself like at church, or genuflect, or hum or recite a few Hail Marys, when slowly, slowly, Madame Helene's chin began to rise. It stopped when she noticed her earring lying on the velvet. She cleared her throat, picked it up, and clipped it back in place on her earlobe.

"Now then," she said, her smoky voice returning to its original strength. "Allow me to consult . . ." Her hands caressed the crystal ball once more. "Ah, yes. One final warning for you,

Cecelia. The spirits caution you never to reveal to anyone anything that occurred today within this chamber."

"Not even to Bev?"

Madame Helene shuddered. "My heavens, no, especially not to Bev. You see, her energies have a pronounced negative effect on the spirits. You would risk . . . everything."

"Everything," I repeated, "which means my future, huh?"

"The spirits have spoken." Madame Helene pulled her hands away. She motioned for me to rise. I thanked her.

"You are indeed welcome, Cecelia. May luck follow you wherever your path lies. Remember what you learned today. And return to the spirit connection here whenever you need guidance. Madame Helene will give you a nice discount."

I thanked her and left the fortune-telling chamber in a daze. I felt light-headed, as if I'd just traveled to outer space and back at rocket speed.

Back in Bev's room, Bev set down the crimson lipstick she had been dabbing on. "Spill it," she said, then mashed her lips together. "What did you ask? What happened in there? You look—I don't know—worried."

"I can't tell you. It must remain secret."

Bev rolled her eyes. "Mother said I gave off negative vibrations, didn't she?"

"It must remain secret," I said firmly. I unpinned Bev's hat and placed it on the bed. "Say, you didn't really clean up much in here." I didn't want Madame Helene to be mad at me about Bev's messy room. What if it aggravated the spirit mists? I figured they were aggravated enough already, thanks to Nory.

"Oh, no," Bev said, sighing. "I've been busy." She picked up the lipstick again. "I'll get to it when I'm good and ready."

"You did promise her, remember?"

Bev shrugged. "She'll get over it." She handed me a jar of

cold cream. "Listen, you ought to take that makeup off before you go home."

Boy, was I glad she reminded me! I changed out of the dress Bev had given me and rubbed off my eyebrows and cheeks and lips while she stuffed my bag full of clothes and all the cosmetics she had used on me.

It was getting late, so I grabbed my cardigan and schoolbag and took off for home, all the while thinking about the last part of my reading. It was serious stuff, what Madame Helene and her spirits had revealed to me. First of all, Nory was in trouble in romance, that was clear. But how could I turn her away from the wrong path in love? I wasn't even supposed to know about it. But if I stayed out of it like Bev suggested, bad luck would come my way. Just trying to figure it all out was giving me a headache.

I tried to cheer myself up by remembering that the spirits had also predicted that I would be working on a radio serial one day. At least I thought that's what they said. They had hinted at it, anyhow. Hadn't they?

CHAPTER 14

All day Friday I tried to think of a way to stop Nory's torrid romance without getting myself into trouble. In the meantime I expected the spirit mists to send bad luck my way at any moment, even after school when I visited T.K.'s ham shack and listened to *Little Orphan Annie* on the pocket-sized radio while he searched for news on his ham set. A hurricane had hit the coast of Long Island the week before, and the hams there were reporting that it was the worst they'd ever seen. T.K. said some people were calling it the Long Island Express. It was all the newsmen talked about, besides Hitler. Parts of Newark were still flooded, and it had poured for days.

That night I practiced tongue twisters in the parlor. Nory came in and tuned the radio to *Fibber McGee and Molly*. She kept giggling at all the gags. I couldn't elocute right, what with her laughing and all, so I gave up on tongue twisters and listened along.

Old Fibber wasn't too bright, as everybody knew. It was Molly who had the brains in that marriage. When Fibber McGee opened his world-famous jam-packed closet and stuff tumbled out with a tremendous crash I couldn't help but laugh, too. Pop had once shown me a picture of the contraption the sound-effects

artist used to make all that clatter, a portable set of steps with noisy things like pots and pans piled onto it. The sound man just tipped over one thing at the top and all the pots and pans fell like dominoes. There was no real Fibber McGee's closet. It was all fake, but it sounded real when it came through the Zenith.

Pop—I missed him. He was working awful hard at the Mutual, staying late every night. Before I got up in the morning he had usually already left the apartment. Sometimes it felt like he had never come home from the FTP.

Nory had her blue notebook out. I spied it next to her on the davenport with a pencil trapped in between the pages. She must have been adding more about Father "Shelly" and her. I itched to steal another look at it, and I blamed her for leading me into temptation. If only I could squeal on her. It would be like opening a closet door and having the truth spill out with a tremendous crash.

Finally Saturday came! I had survived a whole day so far without any bad luck blocking my path. My way to stardom seemed as clear as a radio transmission on a cloudless night.

Nory and Ma were already up and off to Mass and Pop was still asleep, so I was able get ready right at home. I plucked approximately eighty-seven rollers out of my hair and pulled out more bobby pins, I swear, than I had put in the night before. I slathered Mum on my armpits, drew on some eyebrows, lips, and cheeks, wrapped myself into the green dress, buttoned on a clean cardigan, pinned on Bev's hat, and packed myself a lunch, all in about thirty-one and a half minutes, give or take. Nory's T-strap heels came out from the back of the closet and I slipped them into my skate bag. I, Cecelia Maloney, was setting out on the path to teen stardom. The spirits' bad luck would have to move aside.

I had read Bev's article over and over until I practically had

it memorized. Mouthwash, check. Dentifrice, check. I had done everything it said, and I even felt confident enough to handle the catching-a-man rules, if the opportunity came up. My insides hummed; I tried out a new tongue twister: "Hugh snoozes in huge pews, Hugh snoozes in huge pews." My vocal apparatus was warmed up and ready for my role as Miss Parker's assistant for a day.

The door to my parents' room was ajar as I tiptoed past. Pop coughed and called out hoarsely, "Hey, baby-girl."

Nerts. "Yeah, Pop?" I stood just out of view so as to keep him from seeing how dolled up I was.

"Bring me a glass of water?"

Double nerts. No way around it. I was going to have to walk in. "All right," I said.

I fetched a glass from the kitchen. Pop was sitting up in bed, his hair sticking out on one side and flat on the other. His eyeballs were awful red.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

He reached for the water. "I'm fine. Just a hang—headache. Listen, can you see if there are any aspirins?"

I found him some aspirins and he placed them on his tongue, took a sip of water, and threw his head back to wash them down. "Where are you off to, all dressed up like that?"

"Oh, no place special," I said. "Florham Park."

"Florham Park." He set the glass down and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "The job at the rink. Sure."

"Well, I'd better get going," I said, heading for the hallway.

"Don't break any hearts at Florham Park," he called out.

"Don't worry, Pop. See you later."

By the time I walked through the revolving doors at 485 Madison Avenue, I was crazy with excitement. My future was

unrolling ahead of me like a red carpet, and I couldn't wait to step onto it.

In the lobby I caught someone's reflection in a mirror between the elevators. Then I realized that person was me, all spuzzed up and sophisticated looking. Here stood one Cecelia Maloney, career girl, indeed alluring in a fancy hat, stockings, and heels. Despite my best efforts, a smile spread across my face.

Before I was to meet with Ursula, there was the matter of a certain bonus check to pick up. So my first stop was Personnel, 301, where Polly sat at her desk, on the telephone. She motioned for me to wait. I found a seat easily on account of there weren't as many folks waiting around this time, just a few of them, lounging in wooden chairs, smoking, and sharing an ashtray already full of cigarette butts. While I waited, I concentrated on looking the part of a relaxed, poised, and unflappable actress, like Ursula.

"Yes, Mr. Welles," Polly said into the telephone. "At eleven o'clock. . . I'll tell him."

Mr. Welles!

Polly hung up the phone, glaring at each Hopeful in turn. "I told you meshuggeners already. We don't have anything today. Now get lost before I take a notion to call the security guard and have you thrown out."

They ignored her. She harrumphed. They took drags on their cigarettes. She watched them with a look on her face exactly like Mrs. Ziegelmann's when Bucky read all of her magazines and put them back the wrong way. Finally she noticed me.

"Oh," Polly said. "Cecelia Maloney, look at you, all fancied up! I have your check, and I've got you down for today with Miss Parker, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am." I took the envelope with my check in it.

"All right, then. She hasn't bothered to inform me of her

whereabouts, so why don't you hurry along and see if she's upstairs?"

I hurried along. On the elevator going up to twenty-one, where the actresses' dressing rooms were, I imagined how today was going to go. How Miss Parker would greet me with a friendly smile. Maybe she would shake my hand, or even kiss the air next to my cheek. She'd marvel at my understanding of the radio business. She'd pull me under her wing and teach me everything she knew about being a successful daytime drama actress and maybe even get me an audition before the day was out. Crazy keen!

I looked into every dressing room on twenty-one, but she wasn't in. I checked the soundstages and broadcasting booths and all the rehearsal rooms. There I was, in my borrowed dress and stolen shoes, and Ursula Parker was nowhere to be found. I did find her place in one of the ladies' dressing rooms, though. Amid a swarm of women laughing and gossiping, across from a paisley-covered davenport and a message board sprinkled with Actress Wanted notices, in the midst of a bank of mirrors and bright lights and a wall-to-wall vanity counter littered with scripts and makeup, Ursula's spot was a cinch to pick out. Hers was all fixed up with a mannequin head with a turban perched on top and a scarf wrapped around its neck, a crystal vase filled with real flowers, a mess of makeup jars and tubes, an ashtray full of cigarette butts, and two half-empty packs of Chesterfields. While the other actresses seemed content to sit on folding chairs as they primped in front of their mirrors, Ursula had prettied up her place with a white satin bench. I smiled to myself. If anyone could be said to expect orchids, it was Ursula Parker.

One of the actresses turned and noticed me. "Can I help you find something?"

My smile broadened because I recognized her from a recent

feature in *Radio Guide*. "You sing with the band," I said. "You're Kitty Barlow."

"In the flesh," she said. She seemed pleased that I knew who she was. "And you are—?"

"Looking for Ursula Parker."

"Oh, her." Kitty's smile disappeared. "I expect she'll be strolling in here at some point, if you want to wait around."

Sure, I wanted to wait. I tried out Miss Parker's bench. White satin, very classy. "Crazy keen!" I murmured.

"You're half right," said a woman sitting next to me. "Ursula Parker's all kinds of crazy." I recognized her, too, as none other than Sheila Tate, a regular on *Beacon of Hope*. She played Lucy Landsdowne, gold-digging-gossip-of-Grand-City.

"You'd best get off of there before she shows up," Sheila said, checking her teeth in the mirror. "Parker does not like anyone else's tush touching her throne."

"Oh, I don't think she'll mind," I said. "She invited me to watch her at work today."

Kitty glanced my way. "Come again?"

"I'm spending the day with Miss Parker," I explained. "She offered."

"Well, I'll be." Kitty looked me up and down. "Sheila, you hear that? Parker's letting this kid shadow her for a day."

"How generous," Sheila said. "Not to mention completely out of character."

Kitty laughed. "What do you suppose brought this on?"

"There must be something in it for her," said another woman, one of the staff organists. "Ursula Parker doesn't do anything unless it makes her money—or makes someone else look foolish."

"Ain't that the truth." Sheila looked at me. "How did you manage to talk her into it?"

"I didn't," I said. "Miss Parker suggested it herself."

Sheila and Kitty exchanged looks.

"Well, sister, make yourself comfortable," Kitty said. "She hardly ever comes in before noon on Saturdays. Unless it's payday."

Well, I never. These girls seemed awful ding-danged jealous. How could anyone criticize a brilliant and respected radio actress like Ursula Parker? I tuned them out, using my time instead to do little things for Ursula while I waited. I emptied her ashtray and lined up the things on her vanity: Woodbury's Germ-free Face Powder, about ten different brands and shades of nail polish, and a single tube of plum-colored lipstick called Tattoo. *Now with thrilling perma-color!*

Half an hour went by. Most of the performers left on account of they had script readings and rehearsals. The organist was making telephone calls and seemed to have forgotten all about me.

After another thirty minutes there was still no sign of Ursula, and by then even the organist had disappeared. I hunted down a clean mug for Miss Parker's coffee. I made a tidy pile of her scripts on the counter. I lined up her pens, blotters, and stationery within easy reach, and refilled her inkwell. When I ran out of things to straighten, I took to lounging on the paisley davenport, daydreaming about what part Ursula might have the writers create for me. Maybe I could be Elaine Meldman's younger sister, or another shopgirl and rival for Captain Tremain's affections. In a matter of hours, I could be learning my lines for a part on *Beacon of Hope*. By next Saturday I could be practicing tongue twisters with Ursula Parker and flirting with Orson Welles in the control booth between rehearsals.

Just as I was about to accept an offer to dine at the Palm Room with Orson, Frank appeared in the doorway, looking cautiously around the dressing room.

"There's nobody around. Come on in."

He stepped inside and closed the door. "I found part of yesterday's script for *Beacon* on the floor of the soundstage. You want it?"

"Gee, thanks." I took the script and looked it over. "This is swell!"

"It's a little dirty," he said, as if to apologize. "They throw the pages on the floor as they finish reading them."

I nodded. "It keeps the microphone from picking up rustling-paper sounds."

"Is that why?" Frank pulled over a chair. When he sat, I noticed that his trousers were wet almost up to the knees.

"Where have *you* been?" I asked.

"Long Island," he said. "The hurricane. Boss let me come along to have a look at the damage."

My eyes widened. "Is it as bad as they say?"

"Worse." Frank rubbed his cheek. "I'll never forget it. Power lines down, trees across the road. Whole houses, whole neighborhoods smashed to pieces."

"Oh, how awful!"

He nodded. "I wrote up a report. Richard says if it's any good he'll put it on the air."

"Really!"

"Anyhow, Richard went to lunch and, well, looks like you're still waiting for Miss Parker. If you wanted to practice some lines I thought, you know, maybe, um, I could read it with you."

"Well, maybe," I said, glancing toward the vanity counter.

"Studio A is empty right now. We could even set up a microphone, if you want. I mean, it's all right if you don't want to. I just thought—"

"No, it's a swell idea," I said quickly. "But what if Miss Parker comes while I'm gone?"

"Leave a note," Frank said.

Brilliant. I immediately wrote a message for Ursula using her stationery.

"Say," said Frank when I propped the note up between two bottles of nail polish, "that's a swell color on you."

"Huh?" I looked down at the dress I was wearing. "It's green," I said, like a mope.

"Green," he said, smiling. "Yeah. It's nice with your hair."

We both looked at my dress for a moment. It was green, all right. I glanced in the mirror to see whether it really did look nice with my hair. I guessed it was okay. Then I met Frank at the door and waited for him to open it for me. Door? What's a door?

"After you," he said. Bev would have been proud.

Over in Studio A, Polly's box of live grass was gone. So was the push mower. A piano had taken their place and camp chairs for the orchestra were scattered around, willy-nilly. Frank threw his page jacket over a chair. He took his place next to me—real close to me, on account of we had only one script—and adjusted the microphone. I flipped the switch to turn it on.

I took Sheila's part, playing Lucy Landsdowne, gold-digging-gossip-of-Grand-City. Frank read the lines for Roderick Sloan, respected-chief-surgeon-at-Grand-City-Hospital.

"Ready when you are," Frank said.

I cleared my throat, squared my shoulders, and elocuted:

LUCY: Just look at these bandages, Roderick! The doctors say I may never play the harp again!

RODERICK: You were in a very serious accident, Lucy. By the time I arrived, the ambulance had already brought you here to Grand City General Hospital.

It was a good thing Frank wasn't going for an acting job. He read a script as if it were news copy, each word shooting out of him like it was fired from a pop gun.

LUCY: Yes, I'm beginning to remember that night now, Roderick. There was a raging storm. I was waiting outside the playhouse while you went to get the car. It was then that the man's sedan came careering down the street. Oh, Roderick, the last thing I saw before his car skidded into me was that man's face. I shall never forget that face! His penetrating eyes, that twisted grin. I think . . . oh, Roderick! I think he drove onto the sidewalk on purpose. I think that man was trying to kill me!

We read the rest of the scene until the script pages ran out.

"That was aces!" Frank said. "Top-notch."

"You think so?" I laid the pages on a table where some other old, marked-up scripts had been left behind.

"The story's silly, though," Frank said. "I mean, car accidents, harpists, and a storm, all at once?"

"It's suspenseful," I said. "Not silly. I tell you, if I were Lucy Landsdowne, I wouldn't trust Roderick, not a bit. Even if he is a respected chief surgeon."

Just then the control-room door flew open. A crowd of people filed inside, Richard among them, and Audrey Michaels, too. Old Charlie saw us and gestured for us to clear out, pronto. I hurried across the studio to shut off the microphone. Frank grabbed his jacket. As we headed toward the studio door, Orson Welles and a group of other actors burst onto the stage. We sidestepped out of their way.

Outside the plate-glass window of Studio A, we stuck around to watch the "boy wonder" and his cast at work. *The Mercury Theatre on the Air* was producing an adaptation of *Dracula*, all directed and narrated by Orson Welles.

Orson wasted no time telling the actors how he wanted them arranged around the microphone. He cued Richard to start the sound check, not the other way around like it was supposed to be. While Orson was directing the director, the staff organist I'd seen in the dressing room took the bench in front of the organ, ready to provide chords of vampire terror. Audrey Michaels set up just about every sound-effect device Columbia owned: sheet metal to make thunder sounds, a wind machine even bigger than the one Pop and I had made for the Mutual, a hammer, a telegraph key, a box of gravel to re-create the sound of footsteps, a door mounted in a frame for opening and slamming shut. She cued up a recording of angry-villager noises, too.

The rehearsal began with an introduction to the program in Orson's deep voice. They were in Transylvania, but aside from that Orson's version wasn't much like the movie I remembered seeing at the Strand with Bev when we were kids. Audrey Michaels and Charlie did a pretty good job of baying like hound dogs, and later, howling like a pack of wolves. And the other actors elocuted masterfully, as a person might expect of actors hand-picked by Orson Welles. But their voices were nothing like his own, so resonant it made the plate glass in front of us vibrate. And as for style, well! Orson read his lines in an intimate way, as if he were telling the story to one listener only, while sitting in comfortable wing chairs in his well-appointed living room at home.

We watched almost the entire production until Frank pointed at the clock and asked, "You want to grab lunch?"

We found Polly in the lunchroom with a pencil behind her ear, a box of fresh doughnuts in front of her, and three empty chairs around her table. We asked if we could join her.

"Sure!" she said, and pushed the box of doughnuts toward us.

I had brought a cheese-and-tomato sandwich along with a few stale saltines. Those doughnuts on the table were looking awful ding-danged delicious. I couldn't remember the last time Nory brought home anything from the A&P bakery that wasn't at least a day old.

"How do you like tagging along with Miss Parker?" Polly asked.

I explained how my day was going so far. "I know she said to meet her in the dressing room, first thing."

"I guess she forgot," Polly said. "Ursula suffers from convenient amnesia."

"Just like half of the characters on *Beacon of Hope*," Frank joked. He tore open the waxed paper on his egg salad sandwich.

"Aw, not you, too," I said. "Everyone around here seems not to like Ursula Parker. I think she's swell."

"She's got a swelled head, that's for sure," Polly said between chews. "You want my advice? Forget about Ursula. There's plenty to do back in the writers' offices."

Forget about Ursula Parker? "But she's—"

"Listen, Cece," said Frank. "I'd have to agree with Polly. That woman's a real piece of work. Let me tell you a little story about the real Ursula Parker." He brushed some crumbs off his lap. "My first day on the job, Miss Parker sent me out in the snow for cigarettes. 'Parlez-vous brand,' she says, and throws me a quarter. 'Don't bother coming back without 'em or I'll see you get fired.' So I tromp all over Manhattan looking for the

things until my shoes are soaked through and my fingers are numb, but nobody's got Parlez-vous. Finally I come back without them, ready to turn in my uniform. As it happens, Miss Parker has already left for the day. And come to find out, there's no such thing as Parlez-vous cigarettes. One of her little jokes." He took a bite of his sandwich. "I kept the quarter, though."

"Why would she do that?" I asked.

Frank shrugged. "Beats me."

Polly shook her head sadly. "That Ursula, she's a dilly, all right. You never know from one day to the next what little stunt she'll pull."

I didn't care for their opinions of Miss Parker. Why would she send some page out for imaginary cigarettes? I tried to picture Ursula, the elegant, poised actress I knew as the charming Elaine Meldman on *Beacon of Hope*, playing practical jokes on people. It wasn't possible. Frank must have made a mistake. He had gotten the brand name of the cigarettes wrong, is all. And besides, Miss Parker couldn't have forgotten about today! She must have known how important it was for me.

I kept checking the door. The way I pictured it, she would appear, making her usual Grand Entrance. She'd step over to me, take me by the hands, and say, "There's my Cecelia! Sorry I'm late, but you know how it is, don't you? Come with me, darling, and we'll get right to work." She would ask me to help her learn her lines for Monday's episode—and I would give Polly and Frank an I-told-you-so look. So there.

That's what would happen. Any minute now. I chewed my sandwich slowly and had myself a doughnut for dessert. But still no Ursula Parker.

CHAPTER 15

A ctresses and musicians came in and out of the ladies' dressing room after I returned from lunch, but none of them was Ursula. I threw away the note I'd left for her. For a while I amused myself by trying on her turban. Then Sheila stuck her head in and told me she'd just seen Miss Parker getting off the elevator.

Finally! I whisked that turban off fast. I got off of her bench, too. Good thing, because Ursula appeared a moment later.

She hesitated when she saw me. "What a very—green—dress," she said, looking me over. "The Maloney girl, right?"

"Yes, ma'am." I put out my hand. "I'm ready to get started."

She brushed past my outstretched arm and laid her pocket-book on the counter. "Get started doing what, honey?"

"Well, watching you work," I said, pulling my arm back and folding it across my waist instead. "Assisting you. It's—you know—Saturday."

Her shoulders slumped. "Oh, was that today?"

So she *had* forgotten. I took a step back. "It's all right, Miss Parker," I said, hiding my disappointment behind a Pleasant Smile.

She lit up a Chesterfield. "Lord, how my head aches! These

Saturday rehearsals are bad for my health," she said, smoke pouring out of her nostrils.

"Oh, the rehearsal!" I reached for the papers on her vanity. "Your new script is right over here. Should I go with you?"

"Go with—no, not today."

"Oh. Then what *would* you like me to do?" I said. "I'm supposed to be assisting you."

"Oh, honey." Ursula puffed once more on her cigarette and stubbed it out. "Listen, I simply can't have you tagging along today, and frankly I have neither the time nor the inclination to come up with minor tasks to keep you busy. I'm running late as it is and, well, look at you. You're wearing green."

I glanced down at my dress.

"Green is bad luck in show business, didn't you know?"

I blinked, too astonished to answer.

Ursula picked up her pocketbook, and without another word or even a glance in my direction she turned on her heel and left the dressing room.

The room seemed to grow very big. I felt as if it might swallow me whole.

I sat on the paisley davenport in my unlucky dress, having myself a full sulk. No afternoon with Ursula, no pulling me under her wing—no audition, and I'd lost a whole day's pay. I belonged in this dressing room today about as much as a penny did in a nickel slot at the Automat. Not only were the spirit mists real, but they were right. Bad luck had arrived—and it would keep chasing after me until I managed to turn Nory away from the wrong path in love.

CHAPTER 16

On the menu at the Maloneys' that night: shepherd's pie. On my mind: getting rid of bad luck. I appeared for the meal dressed in my usual blouse, skirt, and bobby socks, having changed out of the green dress and suede T-straps at Bev's apartment.

While Ma asked me about my day, I kept stealing looks at Aunt Nory, hoping some plan would come to me about how to save her. The diary—it could be the key. If I could somehow get Ma to come across it on her own, maybe she would pick it up and read it. Ma would put a stop to their torrid love affair, if not for Nory's sake, at least for Father Kelly's.

I was pushing a lump of shepherd's pie around on my plate when Ma brought up the Altar Society meeting Nory had attended that afternoon over at Sacred Heart. "How was it?" she asked.

"Just fine," Nory said, "except when we got onto the subject of laundry." She told about a woman in the Altar Society who insisted on being the only one to launder the priest's vestments. "She says the rest of us don't use enough starch," Nory said. "But I specifically asked Father Kelly and he doesn't even like starch in his chasuble to begin with."

I almost choked on my pie.

Nory looked all innocent, showing not even the smallest hint of what was really going on between her and Father Kelly's chasuble.

"Some people are picky about starch," Ma said.

Nory nodded. "She wants us all to come to the sacristy tomorrow so she can show us the way she wants it done. I'm awful glad I have a previous engagement after church instead."

And there it was, the answer to how I was going to set up a meeting between Ma and that ding-danged blue diary.

Sunday came, and along with it the unholy pleasure of accompanying Ma and Nory and the Loomises to Mass, the last place on the planet I wanted to be, but Sundays were non-negotiable with my mother. They had been this way ever since last Easter, when Ma decided to get us some religion instead of getting us jelly beans. She had come back to being Catholic full speed ahead and I was dragged along for the ride.

I waited until Nory and Ma had put on their coats and headed downstairs before retrieving the diary. "Nerts!" I cried when I couldn't find it under the cushions on either davenport. "Where else would she put it?" Was it behind the radio console? No. Under her pillow? No. In her underwear drawer? No. Finally I checked the stack of books and magazines we kept under the night table and there it was. I brought it into the kitchen and laid it casually on the table. Ma was sure to find it when she came home.

The organ was playing as we filed into Sacred Heart that morning, our heads bowed. Each one of us crossed herself with holy water and we settled into an open pew near the front. Ma liked to sit as close to God as possible, and Nory—well, I knew now why Nory liked to sit up front as well. We slid onto the

kneeler and bowed our heads to get some praying in before the show started. Ma shook out her rosary and got busy.

Father Kelly approached the altar. As he began the Mass, all I could think about was forbidden love, and priests doing *the deed*. The image in my mind of him kissing Nory in the confessional was so completely and utterly revolting—and the more I tried not to think of it the worse it got. It was like I was sitting in the front row at the movies with Nory's face and Father Kelly's, too, ten feet high on the silver screen of my imagination.

Father Kelly droned on in Latin, and I tried to catch him telegraphing lovey-dovey looks at Nory, but he never did. Not even once, that I saw. Could that guy keep a secret! Nory followed the Mass closely, devoted to the very end. Latin must have been her language of love.

I was relieved when it was over. The congregation poured out onto the front steps of the church. I turned toward home, but to my surprise, Nory took T.K.'s arm and steered him in the other direction.

"What gives?" I asked Ma. We watched them turn the corner onto Hazelwood, deep in conversation.

"T.K. finally got up the nerve to ask her," Ma said, smiling. "I'd say from the looks of it he's very glad he did."

"What? Where are they going?"

"Just for a walk." Ma held her hat down as a gust of wind blew. "It's sweet, isn't it? I'm happy for T.K."

So this was the "previous engagement" Nory had mentioned. Criminy.

Father Kelly walked up to us, his robes flapping in the wind. Since he was smiling, I guessed he hadn't seen Nory leaving with another man. "Mrs. Maloney! Cecelia! Always a pleasure to see you here."

"Hello, Father," I said. I couldn't exactly look him in the eye.

"A lovely sermon, Father, thank you," Ma said.

"Oh, you're welcome, the topic came to me when . . ."

I excused myself and headed for home. Poor T.K. He had finally taken my lousy advice and asked her to go out with him—now, *after* I'd learned her true nature.

I consoled myself with the thought that it would all be over between them once Ma read Nory's diary.

When Ma got home a few minutes after me, I waited in the parlor listening to music on the radio while she headed straight for the kitchen. Any minute now, I expected Ma to scream and maybe slump to the floor in unimaginable distress and bewilderment. But the only sound coming from the kitchen was water running in the sink and Ma humming "Pennies from Heaven." Honestly, how on earth could she miss seeing the diary?

Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I made my way to the kitchen.

The table had been cleared. "Need any help?" I asked, coming over to the counter.

"You could chop up this celery for me." Ma handed me a few stalks.

I furtively glanced around the room, trying to figure out what she'd done with the diary. "You already wiped down the kitchen table," I said, hoping it would jog her memory.

"Yes, I did. Maybe you can set it for lunch when you're done."

"Sure." I lined up the celery stalks and found a paring knife in the drawer.

"You're in an unusually helpful mood today," she said. "Oh, that reminds me, you left your notebook on the table this morning."

Aha! "What was that?" I asked innocently. "A notebook?" I

kept chopping celery but my ears were like antennas, ready to pick up what she said next.

"A blue one." Ma reached up into one of the cupboards and took down the diary. "I found it on the table. Didn't want it to get wet when I wiped it down."

"That's not mine." I yawned as if I was completely uninterested. "Maybe it's Nory's," I said. "Did you—read it?"

"I looked inside, just to see whose it was."

Here's where I figured Ma would reveal to me the awful truth about Noreen Maloney. But all she said next was, "You girls should really put your names on things, the way you're always squabbling over whose stuff is whose." She set the diary down next to the toaster.

"What does it say inside?" I asked.

"Inside what? Oh, in the notebook? Well, that's the funny thing. Most of the pages are torn out. What's left is blank. I figured you had done your homework in it and turned in the pages at school."

"Blank?"

"Not even a stray pencil mark." She handed it over to me. "See for yourself."

Well, if that didn't beat all. The notebook had no words written in it. No tomato cans, no confessionals, no sinful kisses on velvet kneelers.

Had Nory somehow found out that I knew what was in it and decided to destroy the evidence? Criminy! Turning this aunt of mine away from the wrong path in love was becoming a ding-danged impossible undertaking.

Later, when Nory came home, Ma showed her the notebook. Nory, ever the immaculate, admitted it was hers without even a hint of embarrassment. She thanked Ma for finding it and wondered aloud about how it could have wound up in the

kitchen. Then Ma asked about her walk with T.K. and the diary subject was dropped.

That little sneak.

When *The Shadow* came on, I took my homework into the parlor to listen. Orson Welles starred as Lamont Cranston in his newest exciting adventure, with sound effects provided by one Jack Maloney, of course. In tonight's episode, the planet was overwhelmed by a black fog so thick it blocked out the sun, and because of it things were going haywire. Whole cities were seized by panic and terror, and only the Shadow could save them all from a horrible fate.

I stared at my biology notes, seething inside about Nory's empty diary and the horrible fate that awaited me because of it. The time ticked by, shows came and went on the radio, and all I had to show for my efforts was half a biology lab report written.

Finally I chucked the books and pulled a chair up close to the Zenith. It was time for *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, starring Orson Welles. Both shows were broadcast on the same night. I'd heard that Orson hailed a taxicab, ordering the driver to step on it, every Sunday night to get him from the Mutual to the Columbia building in time. I tuned in CBS, then flopped back into the chair and stared at the dials.

Are you missing happy days? said the announcer.

Why not try Weston's Superior Cod-Liver Oil supplements? You'll never miss a happy day again!

And there I was on the radio. My whistle, my happy, sunny tune on the air! A thrill bubbled up inside me as I thought about how many people were listening to me right that very minute. Maybe Frank was listening from his place in Washington Heights. Yowsah! Were the spirit mists giving me a break from bad luck? They *had* hinted at success in my career in the letters

revealed to Madame Helene. R for *radio* and S—maybe that was for Superior Cod-Liver Oil supplements?

Ma came around the corner. "Is that you, Cece?"

"Huh?" My knees stopped bouncing up and down.

"That whistling." She laughed. "Oh, it's the radio. I thought it was you. Sounds just like you, doesn't it?"

"Sort of," I mumbled.

Ma took a seat on one of the davenports and, to my dismay, set the rainy-day jar on her lap. "Cece, have you looked at this lately?"

Uh-oh. All of my excitement about being on the radio drained away. I hadn't replaced the dollar I'd borrowed from that jar yet. Ma must have counted the money and realized some was missing. Before I could make up my mind whether it was better to level with her about borrowing it or to deny it to the death, Ma laughed again and said, "Can you believe it's almost full? I was thinking, how would you like to go into New York one night this week, just the two of us? We could catch a show."

Phew! She hadn't counted it.

"Sweetie, I miss spending time with you. Now that you're in high school it seems like I hardly ever see you anymore, between school and homework and your job, and going places with your friends."

I stared at the radio console. The organist played the announcer in:

The Columbia Broadcasting System takes pleasure in bringing you its series of weekly broadcasts featuring Orson Welles and *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*. Tonight's adaptation, a quintessential tale of horror, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*...

"I just thought maybe we could spend a day together," Ma continued, talking right over the radio. She shook the jar.

"Maybe go shopping. I think you could use some new shoes. Something fancy for church, with heels."

"I don't know," I said, trying not to sound as uneasy as I felt. I scooted my chair even closer to the Zenith and turned the volume way up. "I can't hear my program, Ma."

Before the performance begins, here is the director of the Mercury Theatre, the star and producer of these unique broadcasts, Orson Welles.

Then Orson's voice came through:

Good evening, he began—

Ma came over and clicked off the radio.

"Hey!"

"That's it for now, young lady," she said. "If you can't be bothered to have a real conversation with an actual person in the same room, then the radio will stay off. Is your homework done?"

"Not exactly," I grumbled as I picked up my biology book.

"Well, then," Ma said, "finish it. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Ma, I'm listening."

Listening. I was always the listener, never the one *listened to*. But tonight, thousands of listeners had heard my jingle. Maybe they had become convinced that buying Weston's Superior Cod-Liver Oil supplements would truly bring happy days back into their lives! By the time I turned in my lab report tomorrow, stores across the country could be swamped with orders. Such was the power of radio. Such was the magic of being listened to. Maybe by tomorrow the Depression would come to an end when happy days returned across America, all on account of cod-liver oil and the whistle of one Cecelia Maloney.

CHAPTER 17

The week dragged along. I hadn't seen or spoken to Pop in days. Seemed like the nearest I got to Pop lately was listening to his sound effects on the radio. All the extra hours he worked probably made Ma happy, being as how it meant a fatter paycheck and more money in that rainy-day jar.

Nory spent any time she had off from work at church helping out with Altar Society projects, or so she said. But I knew differently. To my dismay, she accepted an offer from T.K. to see the latest Gene Autry movie on Thursday night. The nerve of some girls.

On Friday I set up a washtub full of scalding-hot water on the back stoop, and poured in a packet of dark blue Rit dye I'd brought home from Ziegelmann's earlier in the week. *Never say dye... say Rit!*

I wanted to change the color of the dress Bev had given me. I hoped to reschedule my day with Ursula Parker soon, and when that happened I would be attired properly.

T.K. came out to see what I was doing. "What's wrong with the current color?"

"It's bad luck, I guess." Blue-black water swirled around

in the tub. The broom handle I was using to stir the dye had turned blue.

"Green's bad luck?" T.K. said. "Go figure. I like green. You know, the smell of that dye almost cancels out the brewery smells out here."

The dye was strong, all right. The kind of smell that stung your eyes. I pointed to my dress hanging over the railing. "Hand me that, will you?" I lowered it into the washtub and watched it go all blue. "I hope this dress doesn't smell like dye tomorrow."

T.K. leaned against the railing, watching the cloth swirl around. "So you're still sneaking off to New York?"

"Shh!" I looked up at the open windows of our apartment, hoping our public address plumbing didn't work from out here in the alley. "Geez Louise. If they hear you, it's all over for me, Teek."

"They're in the kitchen," T.K. said. "I heard their voices just a minute ago."

I glanced up at the windows again. No one glared down at us. No urgent demands came from Ma to meet her in the parlor for an interrogation—which I would expect if they *bad* heard T.K.

"Yes"—I went back to stirring—"in answer to your question, I am still going there."

"Would it be all right if I told Nory? She suspects something already."

"No! Of all people, not *her*." I sighed. "Listen, about you and Noreen. Maybe you shouldn't spend so much time with her."

"What?" T.K. scratched his head. "You were the one who convinced me to finally ask her for a date. What gives?"

"It's Nory," I said, glancing up at the windows. "I—I just don't think she's the right girl for you, is all."

"Oh, come on." T.K. leaned back, his hands on the railing.

"I like Nory and I think she likes me back. We have so much in common. When I'm with her, there's . . . it's like time flies by."

"Criminy. Don't get all mushy on me."

"She's the sweetest girl I've ever known, Cece. Actually, I think I'm in lo—"

"Ack!" I interrupted. "Don't say it. Listen, T.K., we need to talk." I rested the broom handle against the railing.

"Whoa!" he said as I took his arm and steered him back into his ham shack. "What's the big deal?"

I shut the door and took out my little folding stool. It was time to set T.K. straight about Noreen Maloney, with or without the notebook as proof. "Sit down," I said. "This is going to be hard to hear."

He sat, and I spilled the whole story about Nory's diary, every ding-danged detail. I ended by telling him how the pages had all been torn out.

T.K. didn't speak for a long time. He picked up one of his QSL cards, the ones that came in the mail from ham operators all over the world, and pinned it on his wall. Then he sat some more. Finally he said, "Cece, why are you doing this?"

"Me? Why am I doing what?"

"Making up stories about Noreen. I mean, it's one thing to complain about her, but it's another thing altogether if you're going to tell lies about—"

"I'm not lying, I swear!" I shook my head. "I'm not lying, T.K. I read the diary and it was all spelled out, right there in Nory's handwriting."

T.K. pinned another QSL card into place. "Okay, then you're not lying."

"But you don't believe me." It was just as I had feared—without proof, no one was going to believe that Miss Mary Immaculate could ever do such a sinful thing.

"Well, it's a lot to swallow, Cece. I mean, our *priest*?"

"I wish I could prove it to you," I said. "I'd show you the diary if I could." I thought for a minute. "Hey, how's about you call Bev Kilgallen? She read it, too. She'll tell you I'm on the level."

T.K. sighed and picked up another QSL card. "I don't know, Cece."

"Bev has absolutely no reason to lie to you," I said. "Here's her number." I jotted it down on his notepad. "I mean it. It's as close as I can come to proving it to you."

T.K. pushed the notepad toward the back of the desk. He got up to tack the card into place on the wall.

"You call her and see." I got up and pushed my seat back under the desk. "I wouldn't lie to you, Teek."

I left him there staring at the ham set and went back outside to check on my no-longer-unlucky-green dress. The wrap-around had been sitting too long without being stirred. I picked up the broom handle. As I twirled the dress around in the blue dye, my thoughts were still back in the ham shack with T.K. Had I done the right thing, telling him? Would my bad luck go away now?

I let the dark water slow down to a gentle swirl. Finally the dyeing was done. I wrung out my new blue dress and took it to the sink at the back of the hardware store to rinse it. When I asked T.K. to help me carry the Rit water into the alley a few minutes later, he joined me on the stoop, looking pale.

"What's the matter?" I took a handle of the washtub.

He grasped the other. "I'm just—not feeling so good," he said.

We hauled the washtub down the back-porch stairs into the alleyway.

"You called Bev, didn't you?" I asked.

"Yeah, I called her."

"Now do you believe me?"

T.K. said something that sounded like "murrph." He set down his end and straightened up, his eyes trained on some distant spot down the alley. "That Bev, she sure can talk."

"Listen, I'm sorry we had to tell you about her," I said, trying to rub blue dye off my fingers.

"That's all right. Better that I know the truth." He sighed. "Let's dump this stuff."

We each grabbed a washtub handle and overturned it in the middle of the alley. The dye spread across the concrete like an invading army, darkening everything in its path—weeds, bottle caps, bits of paper—a shade of inky blue.

As I watched the dye creep into every crack, I sensed T.K.'s misery in the way he stood, his shoulders rounded, his head bowed slightly.

There were unforeseen consequences to obeying the spirit mists. In my latest effort to nip my own streak of bad luck in the bud, I had broken T.K.'s heart.

CHAPTER 18

The next morning I tried again to wash the blue dye off my hands, but with limited success. I spuzzed up my face and put on the now-blue wraparound dress. Then I headed over to Bev's apartment, my skate bag filled with a change of clothes for later.

Bev buzzed me in. "Come on up," she said. "We're in here."

Before I'd reached the landing I could hear Mabel Ann's voice. "So anyway," she was saying, "Sylvia made me swear not to tell anyone, but I know she didn't mean you, I mean, she couldn't have meant you."

I stood in the doorway. "Hi, Bev. Hello, Mabel Ann."

Bev beckoned me inside, but being as how Mabel Ann had my usual seat on the yellow bedspread, I set down my skate bag and stood by the door.

Bev sat at her vanity, applying hair spray to her platinum-blond curls. "Cece," she said. "Did you know that Ellen Anderson has a crush on Mr. Titus?"

"Who's Ellen Anderson?"

"She's this girl who—" Bev began.

"She wouldn't know her, Bev," Mabel Ann interrupted. "Ellen Anderson runs with the *sophomore* crowd."

"She's in our homeroom," Bev explained. "Ellen Anderson's in the same category as your aunt Nory. Hey, speaking of which, how did T.K. take the news?"

"Not well," I said. "Thanks for being my witness, though."

"No sweat." Bev turned away from the mirror. "He'll get over her. Pretty dress you've got on, Cece. Is it new?"

"Don't you recognize it?" I spread my arms wide so she could see it better.

Bev stared at it for a moment. "Wait. Is that mine? What happened to it?"

"I dyed it," I said. "Last night."

"You *what*?"

"Oh, my gawd," said Mabel Ann. "She dyed your dress? Oh, my *gawd*!"

Bev shot Mabel Ann an irritated look. "Cece, I can't believe you went and dyed my dress without asking."

"It's *my* dress now," I said. "You gave it to me. . . . I mean, didn't you?"

"Not hardly," Bev said. "Not for keeps."

I looked from her to Mabel Ann and back again. Both of them had expressions of utter dismay on their faces.

"What?" I said. "It was too small for you, remember? You said it was tight." I couldn't help myself—I glanced at Bev's waist.

"But it's still *my* dress." Bev folded her arms. "You ever hear of a reducing diet? I might get thinner and want it back someday. But now you've gone and ruined it."

"Well, I'm sorry, Bev."

She looked me up and down. "I'll just bet you are."

"The color's all wrong," Mabel Ann chimed in. "Navy blue went out last year."

"Can it, Mabel Ann," I said. "This is between Bev and me. Look, Bev, I'll buy you a new dress. I just got paid."

Bev put a hand on her hip. "Oh, so now you're throwing *that* up in my face, huh? Cece Maloney, big career girl, making five cents more per hour than me."

"Now, wait a minute." My pulse was racing. "I'm trying to make things right about the dress."

"You just don't get it, do you?" Bev said. "You, with your fancy job and your fancy new friends. It's more than just that there dress. It's like—like we aren't good enough for you anymore."

"Yeah," Mabel Ann said. "If you ask me, you're not good enough for *us*."

"Nobody asked you," I said, but her words stung.

Bev picked up my skate bag and handed it over. "Listen," she said, "you'd better go."

"Come on, Bev." I stepped back. "I'm sorry."

She thrust the skate bag at me again. "Take it," she said. "Keep the dress, too."

I took my bag out of her hands. I looked at them both, Bev's angry face and Mabel Ann's haughty glare. "All right, I will." I turned and left Bev's room, my skate bag hugged to my chest. Bev's bedroom door slammed behind me. In seconds I was down the stairs and out on South Orange Avenue, into the crisp October morning air.

As I walked to the trolley stop, I started feeling like I was at Coney Island. There was a room in the fun house there called the Arkansas Traveler. It was pitch black inside, and when you tried to walk across it the floor jerked forward and back, with nothing to hold onto but some flimsy handrails. Bev loved it when we were there, wanted to do it over again and again. I hated it. I hated that feeling of the floor shifting under my feet.

Here I was, miles from Coney Island, and I was walking that ding-danged Arkansas Traveler all over again. Why hadn't Bev just told me that talking about my job bothered her? I didn't

think I was too good for anybody. But what did it matter now? Mabel Ann Warden was stepping into the role of Bev's new best friend, and I was left out in the cold.

Good thing about the crisp October air there on South Orange that morning: It helped dry my tears.

CHAPTER 19

"A screamer? It figures." Polly was on the phone at her desk when I walked in later that morning, lugging my old skate bag. "Not a soprano in the batch," she said, looking over the lineup of radio Hopefuls slouched in the chairs lining the walls. "If I find one, I'll send her up. . . . What? Me?" Polly took the receiver off her ear and frowned at it, then put it back. "The only scream they'll get from me is if they try to drag me up there. . . . I know . . . get back to work, Charlie."

So, they were looking for a female voice upstairs. This was the chance I had hoped for. I put away the tear-stained handkerchief I had wadded up in my blue fingers and stepped forward.

Polly hung up the phone. "Back for more, eh?"

"It's a bad habit," I said. "Say, Polly, they need an actress, huh? Let me go up."

"You?" She crossed her arms and looked me up and down. "What about the typing we need done?"

"Aw, please? I can do both. You'll see. I'll work harder than ever."

"Nothing doing. I really need you today," Polly said. "The writers need a script typed up, quick."

I scrambled for a way to convince her. "I'll stay late and type

faster. I'll—I'll come in tomorrow somehow. I won't let them keep me for long. Just, please?"

Polly dropped her arms and sighed. "All right."

"Thanks!" I squealed, bouncing up and down on my tiptoes. "Oh, Polly! Thank you. Thanks a jillion!"

My mind was racing. What role awaited me upstairs? Would I play a farm girl? A debutante? Maybe a jailbird on the lam? Oh, it didn't matter. Me and my Utterly Perfect Elocution were ready for anything.

"Leave your things here," Polly said. "No use schlepping them upstairs. They need a 'fem' scream in Studio A. For Welles. Seven dollars." She took my skate bag and cardigan. "Go on, but listen, you get right to work afterward."

Just a scream? All right already, so it wasn't exactly a role on a daytime serial. Still, it would be my second time in Columbia's recording studio, and I hadn't needed Ursula Parker's help either time.

The elevator couldn't move fast enough. On twenty-one, old Charlie and Richard sat in the control booth with Audrey Michaels and Bayard. Bayard rubbed his hands up and down his cheeks, miserable as usual.

"But we need *walla-walla* at the same time," Richard was saying.

"I can layer that," Audrey answered.

I rapped on the door frame. "I'm here to scream?"

"Miss Cecelia! Here's just the girl!" Charlie cried, edging out of his chair. He shuffled over and led me to the microphone next to a table littered with paper cups, marked-up scripts, and an ashtray full of lipstick-stained cigarette butts. Charlie leaned in close. "All you have to do is scream, okay? They've been trying all morning to get the right sound."

"I'm your girl," I said. "I can do it."

"I don't doubt that for a minute."

When they needed a whistler last time, they had readied things awful fast. But this recording session got under way even quicker. Charlie beckoned me up onto the platform. He climbed a stepladder and adjusted the overhead microphone. In the control booth, Richard put on his headphones and rested his chin on his fists. Bayard and Audrey watched me, too. The tension in the studio was thick.

Audrey pushed a button on the control panel and her voice came into the room through a speaker. "We're looking for panicked shrieks. Can you do that? Scream like you've seen a creature from Mars."

I nodded. Charlie gave me a thumbs up. Richard's voice came over the speaker: "It's late on Halloween night. You've come to a place where a giant meteor from space has crashed into the earth. Suddenly the meteor opens up, and out of it climb little green men. Got that?"

I nodded again. Some kind of weird story Orson had going this time. Meteors? Green men from Mars?

I planted my feet and squared my shoulders. I dug deep inside for something scary enough to make me scream, like Ma's casseroles or seeing Nory starching Father Kelly's personal chasubles.

"Ready. Aaand . . . now!" Richard called through the speaker.

I screamed.

Audrey shook her head. "Not enough," she said. "It's got to sound—unearthly."

So I dug deeper. I just couldn't blow this chance. I thought about Polly's aunt in Hungary and the Nazis. I thought of Bev, and about T.K. when he found out Nory was having an affair. I thought real hard—and I took in a lungful of air and I screamed.

"Again," said Richard.

Nerts. I tried again—and again. I screamed as shriek-y and unearthly as I could manage, but Richard kept having me do another.

Between screams, two visitors appeared at the plate-glass window. The woman, wearing furs and a turban, was Ursula Parker—looking just as usual with her haughty pose and those plum-colored lips. She tapped an unlit Chesterfield against her wrist. A man stood next to her. I watched as he lit her cigarette. Then he moved his face toward hers—and they kissed the way lovers do in the movies. And oh, boy, did I ever scream then, because the man kissing Ursula Parker was my pop.

The studio went dead silent. Everyone stared. Finally, Audrey flipped a switch that turned on her microphone. "That's aces," she said.

CHAPTER 20

For weeks I had been so proud of my growing friendship with Ursula Parker. But now, as I stared through the glass at her standing there with my father, I felt numb.

Richard's head had snapped up the minute I stopped screaming. Now he threw off his headphones, threw back his chair, and leaped across the studio, grabbing my arms and shaking me. "That's it. That. Is. It!" he cried. "Did you get that, Audrey? Have her do it again. Let's get a few more on acetate." Richard congratulated the others, with sighs of relief all around.

My eyes locked on Pop. I watched a blush spread from his chin to cheeks to hairline.

Ursula broke loose from my father and strolled into the studio toward me, a smile playing upon those plum lips. The diamonds on her turban twinkled in the lights. "Miss Maloney! My pal! We meet again." She beckoned to Pop. "Let me introduce you two—or perhaps *you* should introduce *me*."

Pop slunk in behind her. "Ursula," he mumbled, looking at the floor as if he wanted to dig his way out of the studio with his bare hands.

"Oh, come on, Jack, honey." Her eyes flashed with vicious glee. "It's my little surprise for you. And a *big* surprise for her."

Jack, honey, she'd called him. It all rushed toward me at once: They must have met when Ursula worked for the FTP last spring, during the time Elaine Meldman was on a leave of absence from *Beacon of Hope*, suffering unspeakable torment from a mysterious tropical disease. Then they must have been meeting this fall, on the late nights that Pop had claimed were spent at the Mutual. *Jack, honey*. That kiss. No wonder Pop hadn't let me work at the Mutual. No wonder.

"Would you just look at her face!" Ursula said.

Pop would not meet my gaze. His Adam's apple rose and fell as he swallowed hard.

"You understand what this means, don't you, Jack?" Ursula said brightly, though her teeth were clenched. "Our secret's out. I defy you to talk your way out of this at home, now that your daughter knows."

I took a step back. I couldn't speak. I was sure my heart would jump right out of my mouth if I so much as opened it.

"Miss Parker," Richard interrupted through the speakers. "We're recording here."

"Oh, Dicky, I won't be another minute," she called out, then took a long drag on her cigarette. "We're in the middle of a cozy little family crisis, aren't we? Cynthia?"

"Cecelia," I croaked. My head felt wobbly. I needed to sit down, to get away. To run away. I made for the door.

"Oh, it's *Cecelia*!" warbled Ursula, blocking my path. "Of course. Cecelia Maloney, whom I met in the receptionist's office weeks ago. Cecelia remembers, doesn't she?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Let me by."

"Of course she remembers. See, Jack, I saw the name Maloney on her job application. Why, look here, I said to myself. Red hair. Name's Maloney. Newark address. It all adds up. This is Jack's little girl, the one he told me wants so much to be

on the radio. Later, I thought to myself, I'll befriend that little scamp and keep her around. She's bound to find out about Jack and me and he won't be able to deny it any longer. Then I'll present him with an ultimatum."

Smoke circled Ursula's turban like a halo. "So, consider this your ultimatum," she said. "It's Alma or me. Because you see, Jack, honey, I've never been very good at sharing."

Charlie had brought me a folding chair. "Sit," he ordered quietly. Then he turned to Miss Parker. "Maybe you and your escort could step outside? You understand, don't you, Jack? We're recording on a tight schedule here."

My father nodded.

"Certainly," said Ursula, curling her lip. "I just came by to pick up my paycheck, anyway." She paused to grind out her cigarette in an ashtray nearby. "Come along, Jack. Charlie's shooin' us out."

Pop cleared his throat, but still didn't speak. He shot me a pleading glance—which I answered by looking away—and followed Ursula out the door.

I collapsed into the chair Charlie had set out for me, sick enough to throw up. Too stunned to cry. I wanted to go home. Pop and Miss Parker—the truth was too much to bear. Not only was my father a cheat, but I had been cheated as well. Ursula hadn't noticed me on account of thinking I was a promising talent. I wasn't singled out because she wanted to help out a young, aspiring actress. No, everything had just been part of Ursula Parker's lousy scheme to break up my parents' marriage.

CHAPTER 21

I stayed at work after we finished recording my screams. I was supposed to type up the Martian script for Bayard, but I just couldn't concentrate. Something about spaceships and the government floated across the page, all a blur. The keys I punched weren't the same as the letters that showed up on the paper for some reason, and when my ribbon broke and I broke down sobbing, Frank went and found Charlie. They treated me to an early lunch at ColBees.

"Want a soda pop?" Charlie asked.

"Sure," I said, sniffing. I climbed onto the stool, my knees still wobbly. Frank tossed his uniform jacket onto one of the open tables and took a seat next to me at the counter. Charlie, wheezing and complaining about his creaky bones, climbed onto the seat on my other side.

I was embarrassed for Frank to see me like this, all puffy-eyed and blue-fingered and blowing my nose into an already soggy handkerchief. Charlie must have explained to him what had happened, because his chocolate-brown eyes were full of pity. I couldn't stand for him to know about my father. What sort of a family must he think I came from now?

"You going to be okay?" he said, leaning over to try to see into my face.

I nodded. "Uh-huh," I managed to say. Then it all came back to me in a wave, about Pop and Ursula, and I felt like the biggest mope in the history of mopedom. The tears sprang up again.

Frank ordered us the famous cheese soup. Our waitress put on her paper cap and apron and got busy right away. She spooned soup into bowls and slid them over to us while I snuffled and blew my nose. She set out glasses on the counter and poured our sodas while I dried my eyes.

Charlie pulled napkins out of the metal holder and tucked one under his chin. We three sipped in silence for a while. The hot soup felt good going down.

Frank asked for a couple of saltines. I blew my nose again.

The waitress coughed. She wiped some coins off the counter into her palm.

Charlie patted my back. He offered me a fresh handkerchief. What a mess I had become, falling apart like a dinged kid.

I was just beginning to feel all cried out when Polly joined us. "Hey, strangers. Mind a fourth?" Frank helped her up onto a stool. "I'll have what they're having," she told the waitress, slapping a dollar bill on the counter. "Cece, let's talk about what happened."

There was no question that Polly knew. And if people all the way down in Personnel, 301 knew about Pop by now, I doubted there was anybody left in the building who didn't.

Charlie leaned around me. "Aw, Polly, she doesn't want to talk about it." Frank and I were taller than both Charlie and Polly, so since we were sitting in the middle they had to talk around us.

"Does, too," Polly said. "Women know these things."

I nodded. I thought I did want to talk about it. This was my

father, after all. The father who had taken me to Point Pleasant Beach when I was small and to Newark Airport every spring to watch the barnstormers. This was the man who had taught me how a radio works and how to whistle and all the steps to the Lindy Hop. So even though a dull ache had taken up residence in my stomach, I figured talking might make it stop hurting.

"Whooo-wee!" Polly went on. "Your father with Miss Parker. I'm awful sorry you saw that."

"It's okay." I swished my spoon around in my soup. "I would have figured it out sooner or later." Swirl. Dip. Swirl.

"Maybe sooner's better than later," said Frank.

"Maybe," I agreed.

Swirl. Swirl.

The waitress brought Polly's soup and soda pop.

"Poor thing." Polly reached across Frank and patted my hand with her tiny fingers. "I wonder if your mother knows," she said just as I was taking a sip of soup.

It burned going down my throat. Ma. I hadn't even thought about what this all meant for her.

"Sure, her mother knows," Charlie said, leaning in. "Poor woman. Wives always know."

"Tell me another." Polly bent forward until she could see Charlie. "Haven't you heard? The wife's always the *last* to know."

"She knows," Charlie said.

"Well, if the wife doesn't know already, I say Cece should tell her."

"No, no. She should go to her father first." Charlie pushed aside his empty soup bowl and reached for some crackers. "Warn him that if *he* doesn't tell the mother, she will. Lay the burden on him."

My knees shook. My hand felt too weak to hold the spoon. I let it drop on the counter.

"I'd want to know," Polly said, "if it was my husband."

"I think—" I began, but the two of them were warming to their subject and there was no stopping them now.

"I'm telling you"—Charlie popped a cracker into his mouth—"she probably already knows. Stay out of it. It's not the daughter's job to get involved."

Polly leaned back. I scooted forward. "Cece should tell her," Polly said. "She'd want to know, and the sooner the better. The woman wouldn't want her daughter to suffer in silence."

"Nah, better to stay out of it," Charlie said.

"What do *you* know about it?" Polly's voice rose. "You ever been a jilted woman?"

"No, but I've been married going on forty-two years, and—"

"Cut it out," Frank interrupted, adding in a quieter tone, "I don't think Cece wants to hear this."

Frank had it right, but Polly and Charlie kept bickering. I sat there, letting the rest of my soup go cold. I thought about Ma, her tired smile, her graying hair pinned up off her neck. The waitress's back was to us, her hair pinned up the same way. She was thin, like Ma. When she took a wet dishrag to the coffee percolator, I noticed a bruise just above the elbow of her left arm. She rinsed out the rag, sighed, and then asked if we wanted anything else.

"That'll be it for us," Charlie told her. He laid four dollar bills on the counter to cover all of us and made Polly put her bill back in her pocketbook. "Keep the change, miss."

When we left, Polly and Charlie continued their argument about my parents. Frank walked at my side. I turned to look back at the waitress leaning against the counter, her arms crossed, staring into space. Her eyes looked watery. Her mouth seemed like it had forgotten how to smile. Even the way she leaned against the counter seemed weary. Suddenly I wanted

to see Ma. I wanted to tell her I was sorry for sassing her all the time, sorry for complaining so much and for not letting her take me shopping. Sorry for all the Saturdays I had lied about where I was going, too.

Before the elevator operator had even closed the door, I asked Polly's permission to go home early. "Of course. I'll get your stuff," Polly said. "I can't have girls weeping in my office, anyhow. It gives me hives."

Frank took my arm ever so gently while we rode the elevator to Polly's office. On any other day my heart would have leaped for joy because he had touched me, but being as how that same heart of mine was now nearly broken, all it could do was lie there heavily in my chest.

CHAPTER 22

The whole way back to Newark I thought about nothing else except curling up under my quilt at home and trying to get my hands and knees to stop shaking. The ferry, train, and trolley rides were all a blur to me. Before I knew it, I was climbing the stairs of 1032 South Orange Avenue and walking into our apartment.

I dropped my skate bag in the hall and washed off what remained of my makeup. Once in my room I took off the blue dress and hung it carefully in the closet. I stood back and stared at it, the dress I was wearing when I found out my pop was having an affair. The dress that wrecked my friendship with my best friend. I swore I would never wear it again. I got into my nightgown. The nightgown I was to wear the night after the day I found out Pop was having an affair.

I was now desperately and irrecoverably ill until further notice. I was suffering from an unknown tropical disease. A pox. The Plague. I crawled under the covers and clasped my knees up to my chest. As if that could make it so the day hadn't happened.

Ma came in after she finished up at work. I was all balled up and red-eyed. She put a hand to my forehead.

"Your head feels fine, sweetie." She patted my shoulder through the covers. "Is it something else?"

"No," I said. I thought about blurting out something about Pop, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. "I'm real sick, is all. I ache all over."

"Maybe I should call the doctor."

"No, um. No, I'll be all right."

"Okay, then. I'm going to heat up some casserole. You want some?"

"No, Ma." Good heavens, no. "I don't think I can keep it down," I said. Ma looked tired, and now I guessed maybe it wasn't just from working at the hardware all day. I fancied I could see Pop's betrayal etched into the lines around her eyes. It was unbearable, knowing what my pop was doing to her.

Ma asked again if I wouldn't have even a tiny bite of casserole. "At least let me fix this for you." She made me sit up and fluffed my pillow, then straightened out my quilt. "Now, are you sure you don't want some supper?"

"I just need to sleep," I told her. "Okay?"

"I understand. Sweet dreams, sweetheart." Ma turned out my light and closed the door behind her.

I couldn't sleep, though. The sound of my "panicked shrieks" echoed between my ears like someone had clapped a pair of cymbals around my skull. A thought came to me: The spirit mists had ordered me to steer someone away from the wrong path in love. Maybe it wasn't Nory at all? Maybe they had meant Ursula Parker. I had wasted all this time thinking it was Nory when maybe I should have been trying to stop Miss Parker from seeing my own father. No wonder the bad luck kept piling up.

Pop didn't come home that night or the next day. He probably thought I had told Ma what happened, but I couldn't tell on him because then he'd tell on me right back.

I continued to lie in bed, groaning and pretending I had a stomachache, which I kind of did. I got out of Mass on Sunday morning and stayed in bed all afternoon, too, thinking about my tortured life. Ma kept coming into the room to check on me, and every time I turned away. It broke my heart to see her looking down at me, to feel her hair brush against my cheek. I kept saying to myself, Does she know about Pop? Does she know, does she know? I thought again and again about saying something to her, to just blurt it all out, but my mouth wouldn't form the words.

I tried to decide about going back to work at Columbia. Was it just too humiliating to show my face there again? After what I'd been through, did I even want to be on *Beacon of Hope* anymore? Should I just chuck the whole plan out the window and order a pink smock? Could I, a red-headed, freckle-faced girl from a broken home in Newark, New Jersey, ever find true happiness giving up my dream of becoming a daytime serial star to settle for a job powdering doughnuts and frosting cakes?

CHAPTER 23

I kept clear of the ham shack all week so I wouldn't have to explain my mood to T.K. I arrived late to West Side High every school day so as to avoid Bev at our trolley stop, and I wandered through my classes making myself as invisible as the Shadow. I didn't laugh at people's jokes or pass notes. I didn't raise my hand to answer the teachers' questions. After my last-period class I left the building before Bev arrived at our lockers so I wouldn't have to watch her having a jolly old time with Mabel Ann. My best friend had abandoned me when I needed her the most. Happy days were over. Not even a whole bottle of Weston's Cod-Liver Oil could bring them back for me.

That lasted until Saturday when I telephoned CBS and left a message for Polly, saying I wasn't able to come in. I knew she'd understand.

I couldn't let a friendship I'd had since sixth grade fade away. I had come to realize that by avoiding Bev I was expecting gardenias instead of orchids. So I came up with a plan to go right up to her before she left for work that morning and insist that she accept my apology. I was hoping to take her out for an egg cream.

Egg creams are made with Fox's U-bet chocolate syrup,

milk, and a shot of seltzer water. No eggs—that's another secret people kept around here. It's the seltzer that makes an egg cream fizz, that brings it to life. Wouldn't be an egg cream without the seltzer, no sir. What I needed was a shot of seltzer called Bev, so was I ever glad when she answered her buzzer.

"What?" Bev snapped the minute her door flew open.

"Hi, Bev. Listen, I really need—"

"Wait a minute." Bev looked closely at my face. "Oh, Cece. You're all green around the gills. Get in here." She grabbed my arm and pulled me inside the building. "What's wrong?"

I *felt* green around the gills. That's what happened when a person walked the Arkansas Traveler for days on end. "I'm sorry about the dress," I said. "Really, truly sorry. But something's happened now and . . ." I swallowed hard. "You wanna go to Ziegelmann's? My treat."

Bev didn't hesitate. "I'll get my coat. Let me call the rink and tell them I'll be a little late."

We took a booth at Ziegelmann's. To my surprise, Bev apologized to *me* for how she had behaved before. "I think I, well, I guess I was jealous. You having this glamorous job and all and making more than I do."

"It's okay," I said. "So long as we're friends again."

"You bet."

After our drinks arrived I spilled everything about Pop and Ursula Parker.

"Golly, that's lousy," Bev said. "Here I've been feeling terrible about my sorry life, but your situation is a lot worse than what Mabel Ann did to me last Saturday."

"Mabel Ann? What happened?"

Bev explained how she was waiting in line to buy popcorn on her break at the rink. She had just made it to the front of the line when she turned to see Henry at the rental window, flirt-

ing with Mabel Ann. "Well, I paid for my popcorn and I walked right up to Henry and gave him what for," she said. Her upper lip trembled. "Can you imagine? Naturally I'm no longer speaking to either of them."

"The very nerve!" I said. I'd avoided Bev and Mabel Ann so much at school that I hadn't even noticed they weren't speaking. "Her eyes and his chin. Sounds like you're better off without them both."

"I'll say." She took up a napkin and started wiping mascara from under her eyes.

I felt better once Bev knew about Pop, though. She understood all about fathers ditching their families, because that's what her father did. "I've made a decision," I said. "I'm not going back to Columbia."

"What?" she said, lowering the mascara-smeared napkin. "Nuh-uh. I'm finding another boy for the Harvest Dance and you're going back to that station."

I stirred the foam in my glass. "I don't know."

"Cece, you're going back and there's no two ways about it. That boy Frank is there. Your future is there."

"D'you think?"

"I don't just think, I *know*, dumplin'." She flicked me on the arm. "You know it's what you want."

And that's when the shot of seltzer called Bev did its trick. The old feelings I'd once had about being on the air began to surge back through my veins. Bev was right, and I had known it all along, deep inside. I did want to go back. I did. And not just to see Frank. I wanted to be a part of radio. In spite of what I had learned about Ursula Parker, I wanted millions of people hearing my voice over the airwaves. That dream hadn't changed. "Okay," I said finally, "I'll go back."

"Hah!" Bev slapped the table. "That's more like it."

Mrs. Ziegelmann stopped over and asked how our egg creams were. We told her they were fine.

Bev giggled after she left. "She's trying to eavesdrop, can you tell? So," Bev said, a little louder, "tell me, how's old Noreen, the little piece with the priests?"

"Shh!" I kicked her under the table. "She's just as bad as ever, and I'm suffering on account of her."

"Suffering? How so?"

"Well, I wasn't supposed to tell you, but I guess it's okay now," I said. "Remember my reading? Madame Helene's spirit mists said I should turn someone close to me away from 'the wrong path in love.' I thought she meant I should stop Nory's affair, but now I think maybe it was all about Ursula Parker. I was supposed to stop her and Pop. Otherwise, bad luck awaited me."

"What?" Bev snorted. "Mother said that? Don't tell me you've been worrying your little redheaded self all to pieces because of some warning from Mother's so-called spirits."

I bit the end of my straw. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, Cecelia. It's all fake. You know that, right?" Bev's drawn-in eyebrows knitted together. She was sincere as a news-reel. "Mother doesn't have any special powers. There aren't any spirit mists. She makes it all up as she goes along."

"I sort of knew that but...well, I was there when it happened, you weren't. When Madame Helene contacted the mists, and they—I felt their presence."

"Baloney. Don't be so gullible, dumplin'. It's all a trick, a hoax. Mother has pretended to talk with so many spirits, the woman can summon them up in her sleep." Bev slurped up the foam from the bottom of her glass. "They don't give you as much in these things as they used to, I swear. Mrs. Ziegelmann, I'll have another egg cream, please."

Maybe I *was* gullible, like Bev said. I had been making

myself crazy about the spirits and the bad luck they had predicted for me. If there weren't any spirits, then everything that happened these past few days would have happened no matter what I did. And yet the spirits had seemed so real, and Madame Helene had sounded so convincing. Why would she lie to me? "But Bev," I said, "the spirits predicted bad luck and that's exactly what—"

"Look," Bev said. "You don't believe me? I'll show you just how Mother does it."

We waited until Mrs. Ziegelmann came with Bev's drink. Bev whispered to me, "Watch this."

"Here you go, miss." Mrs. Ziegelmann set another egg cream in front of Bev.

"Mrs. Z."—Bev's dimples appeared—"did you know I can read minds?"

"No kidding," Mrs. Ziegelmann said. "Move your arm, let me wipe off the table."

"Bev," I said, "let's not bother her."

"No, really, I can," Bev insisted. "Listen, Mrs. Z., I bet you the price of this egg cream that I can tell you what you're thinking about right now."

"Yeah?" Mrs. Ziegelmann crossed her arms over her big chest. "Go ahead, then. Tell me."

Bev put her fingers to her temples and made a sort of humming noise. Finally she spoke, her voice low and mysterious. "You're worried about something that happened very recently. Something painful, possibly. It's making it hard for you to sleep."

Mrs. Ziegelmann uncrossed her arms. "That's right. Go on."

"It happened recently," Bev said. She tapped her index fingers along her forehead, as if concentrating real hard. "Maybe even . . . last night? "

Mrs. Ziegelmann nodded. "My son Eddie, he—"

"No, no. No, ma'am. Don't tell me. It's becoming clearer now. Eddie was in trouble last night. Very late at night. An accident?" She glanced up at Mrs. Ziegelmann. "Or maybe . . . something with the police. I see a flashing red light."

Mrs. Ziegelmann's shoulders sagged. "They brought him home in a squad car."

"Yes, I see it now. Arrested again." Bev made as if to look sympathetic. She shook her head sadly. "Such a shame."

"That's amazing!" Mrs. Ziegelmann cried. "You're right, every bit of it." She picked up her dishrag, barely able to take her eyes off Bev. "That's some talent you got there, miss. Listen, you don't owe me nothing. You have this here drink on me, okay?"

Bev beamed at me.

My jaw nearly hit the table. As soon as Mrs. Ziegelmann was out of earshot, I said, "*That* was utterly incredible. How on earth did you know?"

"Well, I didn't," Bev said, sliding the coins for her egg cream back into her pocketbook. "But I could figure out a few things right away. Did you notice her uniform?"

"What about it?" I said.

"It hasn't been pressed. There's a stain on the front, same stain I saw yesterday when I came in for the new *Modern Screen*. She must not have washed that uniform last night, or ironed it. Must be the only uniform she's got, or she would've worn a clean one." Bev took a long sip of her egg cream. "Mmm, always tastes better when it's free, don't it?" She wiped her mouth with a fresh napkin. "So I thought to myself, what would keep Mrs. Ziegelmann from laundering her uniform? Something must've happened last night that had her too upset to think about the wash. Had she been sick? I wasn't sure, but then she mentioned Eddie. With Eddie Ziegelmann's reputation, it wasn't too hard to guess that he was the problem. A little probing, a few care-

fully placed hints and questions, and...voilà! I uncover her whole story. Heck, she told me most of it herself, when you think about it. And she thinks I can read her mind."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Craaaaazy keen."

"Aw, I'm just an amateur. My mother's the expert. How else do you think she put food on the table after Father ran off? People pay big money to be told stuff they already know, and to be lied to about their futures, so long as it's lies they want to hear."

I sipped my drink until the straw scraped the bottom of the glass. "So spirit mists really don't exist."

"Afraid not," said Bev. "I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts when Mother said you should turn someone away from the wrong path in love she meant for you to turn *me* away from dating Henry. But that's old news now, isn't it? I'm going to the Harvest Dance with some other boy. An even older one, maybe. And she'd better not try and stop me." Her dimples deepened. "Geez Louise, Cece. Don't look so stunned. I thought you knew Mother was a fake or I would've clued you in before. Madame Helene is pure booshwash."

CHAPTER 24

Sunday night came, the night before Halloween, and the screams I had recorded in Studio A would be broadcast on *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*. The last thing in the world I wanted was to listen to it. Or to think about anyone else listening to it. Just knowing what brought that sound out of me made me squeamish, and I planned to be nowhere near a radio when my scream went out over the airwaves to thousands of strangers. For once I was glad that Orson's pet program aired opposite the Edgar Bergen/Charlie McCarthy show on Sunday nights, which most of the planet would be tuned in to instead. They'd be laughing at a little wisecracking wooden puppet instead of hearing me scream at the sight of my father with *her*.

Ma and Nory were in the parlor listening to some singer on the Zenith. I kept busy in my room, ripping up the picture of Ursula Parker that had once graced my pinup wall. I had just finished turning Ursula into a million tiny, pulpy pieces when I heard murmuring in the pipes next to my head. T.K. was in his ham shack.

Good old T.K. The urge came over me to sit with him. I rapped on the pipes.

Dab-dab-dab, dab-di-dab. The coast was clear.

I climbed down the fire escape, scattering bits of Ursula all over the alley as I went. Seeing T.K. through the window, turning dials and making notes, made me smile. It figured. Everyone else in the country was in front of a radio listening to the Sunday night programs, but T.K. was in front of his ham set.

While I hauled out my little stool, T.K. pushed a pin or two into his map of the world. I sat with my hands in my lap, just plain enjoying being near all that familiar ham equipment. But something was different. T.K.'s desk was unusually clean and organized. The stubby pencils in the mug had been replaced with two brand-new ones. His usual pile of new QSL cards from around the world was tidied into a neat stack on a shelf. The only things on T.K.'s desk were the Morse code key, a notepad, and the army recruiter's business card that had been up on the wall.

Nerts. I grabbed the business card. "Teek, why is this here?"

He glanced over. "Oh, yeah. Don't say anything yet, but I enlisted on Friday."

"What?" I dropped the card. "You didn't."

"I did." He turned back to his ham set. He was so calm; it was like he'd just told me he switched toothpaste brands. "I marched right downtown and had a talk with the sergeant at the recruiting office. They need coders." He smiled down at his notepad. "They'll have me decoding right after basic training. Sergeant Morley says we're going to join the war and they'll start up a draft, and then there's no telling where they'll be putting fellas. But I shouldn't see any combat, because I joined up now."

I pictured T.K. working in some secret decoding chamber. I imagined him in an army uniform, translating Morse code for some general or maybe even Roosevelt himself. He wouldn't be getting shot at, sure. But still, we needed him here at home.

"T.K.," I said, "you can't go. What about the store? You *have* to stay here."

T.K. laughed. "The store doesn't need me. I've been loafing around here ever since I graduated." He sat back in his chair, stretching his arms over his head. "Anyhow, it's too late now. I signed the papers and I leave in two weeks."

"Did you tell Nory?"

"Under the circumstances I didn't think it was necessary. Do you?"

"I guess not."

"Anyhow, it's time somebody did something about Hitler. Someone's got to stop the Nazis."

"But our army isn't even going over there, remember? President Roosevelt promised."

T.K. shook his head. "Roosevelt won't be able to keep the States out, that's what Sergeant Morley says. You'll see."

"But he *promised*," I repeated.

"People are always making promises they don't intend to keep," T.K. said, busily tuning the dials on the ham set. "They're always saying things they don't mean, doing things they shouldn't be doing."

"Like me, sneaking off to the radio station," I said. "Or like Nory." I looked down at the wooden floorboards. "Or my pop."

T.K. stopped twisting dials. He looked at me and the room grew heavy with a silence that fell over us. I found a bit of fuzz on my skirt to pick at.

Finally T.K. cleared his throat. "Then you know about his cheating on your ma."

"Yes," I whispered. I couldn't meet his gaze. "You already knew?"

"Well, I was pretty sure. All those late nights. Driving up in

fancy cars. Not seeing him for days." He tapped his pencil on the notepad, thinking. "Your ma puts on a brave face."

I looked up. "Ma knows?"

"I think so," T.K. said. His pencil tapped faster. "Yes, she probably knows. If *you* know now, she's got to know by now."

T.K.'s jaw was clenched and no wonder. My ma was practically his mother, too. He looked at me, all the while tapping that pencil hard against the notepad. When the pencil fell from his hand and rolled to the floor, he yelled, "Dang it!" and his fist hit the desk. I jumped.

"It just makes me want to *punch* something!" There was a determination in T.K.'s voice I'd never heard before. "I'll tell you one thing," he went on. "If your father thinks he can keep this up, he's got another think coming."

The ham set started its dits and dahs again.

"Someone's trying to contact you," I said, motioning toward the equipment. "I think."

T.K. sighed. "Well..." he said, and cleared his throat. He picked the pencil up off the floor and turned back to the dials on the radio. "Well," he said again, taking a deep breath. He replaced his headphones. "Back to the airwaves."

I brushed fuzz balls off my lap, then watched T.K. work the ham set for a while. There was still tension in his jaw. His lips were pressed together so tightly they formed a thin, straight line.

Suddenly T.K. began scribbling furiously on a notepad. I leaned in, trying to decipher his handwriting: *meteor, explosion*, he wrote. Then: *N. Jersey*.

New Jersey? Meteor?

"What's happening?" I asked. "An explosion?"

He held up a hand to quiet me. "Not sure yet."

Middlesex/Mercer counties. Martial law. T.K. didn't take his pencil off the notepad.

"What is it?" I said. Maybe this was a news story for Frank to break. "What's martial law?"

The telephone in the hardware store rang. Mr. Loomis called out to us. "Timothy, come out here. If Cecelia's there, bring her, too."

"Be right there!" I shouted. What would Frank want me to do? I hunted down a scrap of paper in T.K.'s desk drawer and took the other pencil from his cup.

Heat ray, he wrote. I copied that down. "Tell me what's happening," I said, tapping T.K.'s headphones. I didn't know what a heat ray was, but if there was one in Mercer County, New Jersey, I could maybe get a report about it for Frank to write up for the CBS news broadcast.

"Timothy, now!" Mr. Loomis's voice was tight, strained.

I caught T.K.'s eye and pointed toward the store, mouthing the words *Your father wants you*.

T.K. shook his head. He hunched over his notepad, scribbling like crazy.

South Street.

South Street? There was a South Street in Newark. "Is it an attack?" I demanded, grabbing at his pencil to get him to look at me. "T.K., is it the Germans?"

"Maybe." He was dead serious. His eyes darted from the dials to his notes.

I wrote down *Germans*. In Jersey? Maybe I wouldn't have the chance to give this story to Frank after all, not if the German army was marching toward our . . . I didn't let myself think of it.

Mr. Loomis called to us a third time. The sound of footsteps on the stairs, followed by excited voices on the landing. Ma's voice. Nory's.

Gas masks, T.K. wrote.

The bell on the front door of Loomis Hardware jingled. I heard shouting in the street. A car horn blared. Then another.

I stood up, letting the pencil clatter to the floor. "What's happening?" I pinched the scrap of paper in my hand.

T.K. had taken off his headphones and was holding one earpiece to his ear. He scooted to the edge of his seat. "There's been an invasion," he said, still scribbling notes, "but it's not Hitler. Or maybe it is. But they're saying . . . hold on." He scribbled some more.

Raymond Blvd.

That did it. I knew Raymond Boulevard, all right. This was happening just a few blocks away. I felt nauseated.

Mr. Loomis appeared at the door. "They're down by the airport," he said, pulling at his mustache. "The radio says they're coming this way."

"Newark airport?" I asked, my voice catching in my throat. "Who's coming this way?"

Shouting poured in from the street. The bell on the front door jingled over and over again.

Mr. Loomis offered his hand to me. "Cecelia, we can't stay in. They want us out. To get out in the open air."

"Who's *they*?"

"I don't know. The authorities. The people in charge."

T.K. continued to listen on the ham set. He wrote something else, underlining it twice. As I shoved my seat back under the desk, I saw the last words T.K. had written:

Infantry called in.

Infantry, that meant the army. I took Mr. Loomis's hand. It was rough and warm—mine had gone cold. We were being attacked.

CHAPTER 25

Mr. Loomis led me straight through the store. He had already emptied out the cash register, and left the till open with the words NO SALE in the window. Out on the front stoop, Ma and Nory were waiting with their arms folded around themselves, looking up and down at a street dotted with jack-o'-lanterns. The cool air smelled of wet and burning leaves. The sky was getting dark and the streetlights were on.

South Orange Avenue was jammed with cars. The intersection at Sanford had gridlocked; that explained all the honking. People were trying to leave Newark in an awful hurry. A group of men had gathered on the sidewalk in front of the store.

Ma took my wrist and pulled me over to the stoop where she and Nory stood, watching. "We were listening to the radio," she said. "The announcer broke into a music program." She pulled up the collar on my blouse and tried to rub my arms, but I pulled away.

"What is it?" I asked. "Who's attacking?"

"Shh! Don't worry," Ma said. "We'll be fine. I wish you'd put some shoes on, honey, and a sweater. You'll catch your de— catch a cold."

Nory got out her cross and started rubbing. It looked like

she was going to cry. I shivered. An old couple tried to cross the street between the cars, holding handkerchiefs to their faces. Finally they gave up trying to cross and just kept walking. An ambulance siren wailed several blocks away. Someone screamed. I looked down toward Bev's apartment, but couldn't make out her or Mrs. Kilgallen in the crowd outside. I wondered where Pop was. How would he feel if something happened to us tonight? Would he feel guilty?

There must have been ten old men standing in front of Loomis Hardware, sharing a box of matches, lighting up Lucky Strikes.

"It's the Germans," said one of the men.

"Nah, it ain't the Germans," said another. "It's a fire, an explosion."

"If there was a fire on Raymond, we'd see smoke," said Mr. Loomis. He crossed the street to check the sky to the southwest.

The only smoke I could see was from the men's cigarettes. One man dropped a match and swore.

"Don't see a thing out that way," Mr. Loomis called out.

"It's too dark to see any smoke," said the first man. "I'm telling you, it's Hitler. He's cut off the streetlights over there."

If it was Hitler, everyone was staying awful calm. But what else was there to do? Run around shouting and waving our arms like lunatics? Jump into people's honking cars and creep along the avenue with a mess of other honking cars, moving at a pace slower than a person could walk? No, there wasn't a thing we could do but watch and wait.

Then someone mentioned the poison gas. "You breathe it in," he said, "next thing you know you're on the ground, twitching like a rat in a trap."

"I heard it suffocates you instantly," said another man. "People get knocked down in the street, one by one, like dominoes."

Now I understood why those old folks had handkerchiefs over their noses. The air itself had become our enemy. If we couldn't trust the very air we were breathing, what chance for survival did any of us have? Ma had shut her eyes. She made the sign of the cross. Nory seemed to be holding her breath. I wished T.K. would come out. Maybe he could fetch the delivery truck and somehow get us out of there.

"Gimme a light," said one of the men. "I want one last cigarette before the world ends."

That brought on some nervous chuckling. It made me shudder.

Several cars honked. The sirens sounded as if they were coming closer. Was it an ambulance? The police? The army?

A lady rolled down the window of her car and stuck her head out. "Ain't you listening to your radios? Get out of town! The radio says they landed in Grover's Mill and they're marching to New York City."

"The Germans?" Nory asked. She sniffled. Her hand went to her cross again.

"Nah, worse than that. It's men from Mars."

CHAPTER 26

Men from Mars.

The streetlights flickered, startling everyone. Nory gasped. Ma looked up at the sky. Fear and shock clouded the faces of the smokers. Everyone seemed to watch everyone else, trying to figure out what to think, what to do. But me, something else was going through my mind as I looked at the scrap of paper in my hand that said *beat ray* and *Germans*. Something clicked in my head about the transmission T.K. was getting over the ham set. I thought back to the day I'd tried typing that script for poor old Bayard, the same day they recorded my screams. My panicked shrieks. As if I'd just seen—

Then I almost laughed as I "read" what was happening just like it was written out on the feed coming from the Teletype at Columbia. For crying out loud. There were no Germans, no poison gas, no fires or explosions, and certainly no men from Mars landing in Grover's Mill, New Jersey. It was Orson Welles. It was Bayard's *War of the Worlds* program, right that minute being broadcast across the country in the form of a news report. I knew the script because I'd typed it up for Bayard—at least part of it, before my typewriter ribbon broke. Orson had planned all this, breaking into a fake music program and announcing that

the country had been invaded by Martian creatures. It was a dramatization, was all. *The War of the Worlds*.

And people were believing it.

Ma and Nory stepped out to the sidewalk and looked down the avenue, where cars were still blocking the turn onto Sanford, the way to East Orange and away from the Martians. Our neighbor Mr. Miceli stood on his roof across the street, waving a bottle. More people rushed by with suitcases. The citizens of Newark were being completely and utterly deceived by a simple radio show. What a story this was going to be on the news when it was all over.

"Cecelia, come." Ma came and took hold of my arm. "We're going to Sacred Heart." Her words were sharp and cold, like someone chipping ice off a block.

"Sacred Heart?" I let her pull me along toward Nory and the sidewalk. "Why?"

"We'll be safer there," Nory said, tucking her cross inside her blouse. "We'll feel safer." She took hold of my other arm.

I could stop this right now by telling them all it was just a dramatization. I could end this craziness. But if I told them, it would mean admitting that I knew about the broadcast beforehand. Ma would learn about CBS and that would mean the end of my radio career. I couldn't do it. I wasn't ready to give up my secret.

A woman passed by us carrying a baby and dragging a sniffling boy in a Lone Ranger costume along behind her. The boy looked up at me. I recognized them from church, this boy and his ma and her baby. No father. The boy's upper lip was wet from a runny nose, and there were red marks on his wrist where his mother had hold of him.

The woman lunged into traffic on South Orange, in the middle of the block. A driver swore at them to clear out of his way as other cars inched forward. Just as the man's car lurched ahead, the little boy pulled loose from his mother.

Brakes screeched. The boy fell under the man's car. His mother screamed. Ma cried out.

Nory and I rushed into the street. Nory took the baby from the mother so she could scoop up her boy. The woman knelt down, wrapped her arms around him, and rocked him, moaning. I picked up his little cowboy hat, which had rolled under the wheels. Nory tried to comfort the bawling baby. The driver got out of his car. Mr. Miceli yelled at him from the roof where he teetered on the edge. "You oughta watch where you're going!"

"It's all right!" I shouted to the people on the sidewalk. "He's okay." There was a little blood on the boy's costume from a cut near his ear, but he was alert.

Nory helped the woman up. "He's okay," she kept telling her.

"He's okay?" the mother repeated as if she didn't understand.

"Lucky kid, for now," said the driver, getting back into his car.

I handed the mother the boy's cowboy hat. "He seems all right, honest."

And he *was* okay, the little Lone Ranger boy from that little broken family, almost broken again, all because of an invasion that wasn't even happening.

As horns honked, we moved out of the street, all of us except Nory, who had joined Mr. Miceli in yelling at the driver. "You drive like you're unconscious!" she shouted. "Why, I've half a mind to—"

"Stop it, Noreen!" I ran back into the street and grabbed her wrist, hauling her toward the hardware store. Ma had already taken the mother and her children inside.

"What are you— Let go of me!" Nory cried. The blare of sirens nearly drowned out her words.

"Just stop it." I held tight to one arm while her other one

flapped like a crazy bird. "Nory, criminy. Get ahold of yourself. Come here." I pulled her onto the stoop.

Newark was going stark raving mad. It was like someone had opened up a giant version of Fibber McGee's closet and everything was tumbling down around us—only nobody was laughing. I had to stop this now.

Ma had come back out of the hardware store to stand in the doorway with us. She gave Nory a handkerchief. When my aunt finished blowing her nose, I spoke up:

"It's—it's just a radio program, is all. There aren't any Martians."

Ma gave me a strange look. "What do you mean?" she said.

"Don't ask me how I know," I begged, "but this radio report? It's just a dramatization. No invasion. It's just a show."

"You weren't even listening to the radio," Nory said, sniffing. "How could you know?"

"I just know. Listen to me, please?" I looked around. "Everyone, please," I yelled, "can you hear me?" Horns honked. The men on the sidewalk didn't budge.

All right already, enough of this. For once, everyone on South Orange Avenue was going to listen to me. And just like I'd done for Polly all those weeks ago in *Personnel, 301*, I put two fingers in my mouth and whistled.

"Stop!" I cried, cupping my hands around my mouth. "Stop it! There's no invasion! No poison gas! It's just a radio program."

Some people looked at me and kept going. Some stared. I whistled again. "Hey! There is no invasion!" I shouted. "It's just a radio show. I know, I was at CBS when they worked on the program."

Mr. Loomis and his gang on the sidewalk looked at me as if I'd lost my aggies.

"Listen! It's a radio program about an invasion from Mars. It's fake! It's booshwash! There's no meteor. No explosion." A

few car windows rolled down so people could gawk at me, but most of the honking stopped. "Go home. It's safe! Listen to your radios and you'll see!"

Finally T.K. came out. He joined in the shouting. "She's right! The hams are all saying the same thing. It's a hoax."

Mr. Loomis turned to his son. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"When they announced that the infantry had been called out, I knew it then, Dad," T.K. explained. "Eight divisions, they said. That many troops can't be mobilized so quickly. It'd take hours." He stepped into the circle of men, as bold and self-assured as any soldier. "It's all a fake. Just a story from a radio program."

"But what about them streetlights, flickering like that?"

"They always do that. You just don't notice it when you're not all worked up about Martians." There must have been something in the way T.K. and I sounded, sure of ourselves, like authorities and all, that seemed to have an effect on South Orange Avenue. Suddenly people around us were actually *listening*.

Mr. Loomis puffed on his cigar. "Come again?" he asked.

"It's just a radio drama." I glanced at Ma. "See, I've been working at Columbia on Saturdays for a few weeks now, and—"

"I knew it!" squealed Nory, then ducked her head when everyone turned to look at her. She shook out Ma's handkerchief and blew her nose.

"I—you see," I said, clearing my throat, "I was there when they recorded some of the sound effects. Last week. At my job at the CBS radio station." I wished I could melt into the concrete. Ma looked a little woozy. Nory took her arm. "I told you something was up," she said.

"I see." Mr. Loomis glanced at Ma. He stubbed out his cigar on the sidewalk. "Well, let's just go in and listen to this here fake radio program for ourselves."

Not everybody stopped leaving town just because of T.K.'s and my announcement. There was still a jam-up of cars outside when we—Ma and Nory and me and T.K. and some of the men—followed T.K.'s father inside.

Mr. Loomis turned on the radio behind the counter. It crackled and came to life. Everyone gathered around. First there was music. The room filled up with violins and cigarette smoke, and even though no one was panicked any longer, there was tension in people's faces. I sat on the stool behind the cash register, hiding behind the key rack from Ma's searching looks. I had betrayed her, and now she knew it. I was no better than my own pop, lying and sneaking around behind her back.

When the music faded away, Orson's voice came through the radio:

This is Orson Welles, ladies and gentlemen, out of character to assure you that *The War of the Worlds* has no further significance than as the holiday offering it was intended to be. The Mercury Theatre's own radio version of dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and saying Boo! . . . that was no Martian . . . it's Halloween.

We looked at each other. Someone sighed. One of the old men dropped his Lucky Strike on the floorboards and ground it in with his toe. "Rats," he said. "This means I still have to pay my butcher's bill."

Much later that night, I followed Ma back onto the front stoop. The cars had thinned out quite a bit. There were people walking toward Newark now, not away from it. The last trolley of the evening rattled by.

Ma sat on the steps, her long dancer's legs stretched in front of her. She had wrapped a sweater around her, the one with the baggy pockets, the same one she'd had for as long as I could remember. I sat next to her. I lined up my feet in their holey

bobby socks next to her old, brown Hush Puppies. My legs were every bit as long as hers now.

We both stared across South Orange Avenue. Someone's jack-o'-lantern grinned eerily at us. "I'm listening," Ma said.

That was my cue.

"First of all," I blurted out, my vocal apparatus sharp enough to stab holes in the air, "I haven't been working at the rink on Saturdays."

"We thought so."

"Huh?"

"Well, Nory did, anyhow. That Saturday a few weeks ago, when you came home soaking wet? Nory said your skate bag was dry. She thought something was fishy about it."

"Oh." I brushed a strand of hair out of my eyes. "No, I didn't need my skates where I was going."

"I see." Ma shifted, crossing her ankles. She leaned back, her hands flat on the concrete stoop. "You've been working with Pop."

"What? No, Ma. Not with Pop. I didn't—he wouldn't—I'm at CBS. You know, *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*. Orson Welles."

"Not with Jack?" Ma looked at me, surprised.

"No, I got the job all on my own. They've got me typing scripts—well, that and news copy. I typed part of that Martian broadcast. That's how I knew it wasn't real. And one time before that I did a jingle. You know, the one you heard? For Weston's Cod-Liver Oil?"

"That *was* your whistling?"

"Uh-huh, and I made a recording for tonight's broadcast. Not much. I screamed, actually. But they both pay. Seven dollars each."

"Well, I'll be," Ma said. "But you're just fourteen," she pointed out.

"I have working papers. It was on the level. Mostly."

"Mm-hmm." Ma nodded. She watched the cars pass for a few moments. "So your father didn't get this job for you?"

"No, ma'am. I did it all on my own."

"Good," Ma said. "That's good." She rubbed my knee. "Then it will be that much easier for you to quit. Tomorrow, you'll call them and say you won't be coming in anymore."

"But, Ma!" I stuck out my chin. "Don't make me quit."

"Cecelia."

"Listen, I told you about my job at CBS because everyone was going crazy out here. Also I felt terrible, sneaking around behind your back. I'm sorry about it and I'm trying to come clean."

She shook her head.

"Ma! Please, listen. This job, it's such a great job for me. I've been going every single Saturday for weeks and I've never had a problem getting there or getting home." I ticked the reasons for letting me keep my job off on my fingers: "I'm working hard and I'm good at it. I'm keeping up with stuff at school. I'm earning a pay-check. And I've made some friends there that I don't want to give up. I know it was wrong to lie, but don't make me quit now. Please?"

Ma stared out across South Orange Avenue. "You'll call them after school tomorrow."

I slumped, my chin in my hands. I had sinned and now I was paying for it. Sure, the world hadn't ended because of any old Martians, but *my* world was over. My rising radio star had just fallen out of the sky—probably landing somewhere near Grover's Mill, New Jersey.

CHAPTER 27

T.K. brought the Monday morning papers upstairs. It was the day after Orson's program, which some reporters had taken to calling the "panic broadcast." Ma and Nory had left for Mass, so we had room to spread the news stories out across the kitchen table.

"'A wave of mass hysteria seized thousands of radio listeners,' " T.K. read from the *New York Times*.

The papers said the telephone lines got all tied up. A New York City theater manager reported that a herd of playgoers rushed from his theater in a panic.

"It says here," said T.K., "that CBS announced four times that it was fictional."

"And the announcer said so at the beginning," I added, plunking a piece of bread into the toaster. "I typed that part of the script myself."

"Listen to this," T.K. said. "'The radio listeners, apparently, missed or did not listen to the introduction, which was: 'The Columbia Broadcasting System and its affiliated stations present Orson Welles and *The Mercury Theatre on the Air* in *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells.' Dad was listening to Charlie McCarthy in the hardware. He only switched over because

some singer came on that he didn't care for. He missed all that at the beginning."

"I guess most people did," I said.

The amount of reporting about the broadcast was huge, huge, huge. Almost as much as the hurricane. I was beginning to see what Frank meant about reporters. They had an audience bigger than any daytime serial star. Not that it mattered to me anymore, being as how I was destined for a life at home where my audience equaled zero.

"People are gullible," T.K. said, folding up the *Times*. "Welles had them eating out of his hand."

"Don't blame Ors—Mr. Welles," I said. "How could he know it would turn out this way? I mean, everyone's already on edge about Hitler and stuff like that. Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean it's true. Sometimes it's just"—I remembered something Charlie had once said—"just smoke and mirrors." I found a passage in the *Daily News* to prove my point: "Listen to this. 'We're sure the 23-year-old actor, Orson Welles, didn't realize—'"

"Alma, you here?" shouted a voice from the hallway.

It was Pop, home for the first time in over a week.

T.K. and I exchanged glances. We peered into the hall. Pop returned our puzzled looks with a weak smile, a suitcase at his feet. He smelled of cigarettes.

"Ma's at Mass," I said, my voice quavering as I stood up. "Nory, too."

Was he through with Ursula Parker? Maybe he had come home to make things right again with Ma and with me. Maybe he wanted to ask for our forgiveness. I started folding up the papers to make a space for him to sit.

Pop picked up the suitcase and brought it into the kitchen. It sounded hollow when he set it down again. It was empty. Pop wasn't here to stay; he was here to pack.

"You—you're leaving." I dropped the papers and looked him square in the eye. "Tell me the truth."

"Yeah, tell her." T.K. stood up. The look on his face could have knocked over a hundred German soldiers.

"Cece, I thought you'd be in school," Pop said. His eyes were on T.K., though.

"It's only seven-fifteen," I said.

T.K. clutched the back of a kitchen chair. "Look, Jack. Enough is enough. Tell her the truth. You're not really leaving now. No, you're not, because you actually left this family a long time ago." T.K. was breathing hard. "Cece already knows the worst of it. So tell her the rest."

"Now, you wait just a minute," Pop said, taking a step back. "Where do you get off talking to me like that?"

T.K. trembled with anger. He ignored Pop's question. "Tell her how you stopped sharing your paycheck with these girls when you started up with that woman." He let go of the chair, then took a step toward Pop, massaging his knuckles. "Come on, Jack, tell her. You haven't sent a paycheck home since Easter."

I gaped at Pop. "Is it true?"

"Sure, it is." T.K. answered before Pop could open his mouth. "It's time you knew. My dad's been loaning you Maloney girls cash out of the till for months, Cece. Why do you think Nory had to quit school and take that job at the A&P? And how do you suppose your ma's been feeding the three of you? 'Cause it ain't coming from this deadbeat."

"Shut up!" Pop stepped toward the suitcase. He reached for it, but his foot knocked it over. "Just shut *up*!" he repeated. He bent down and picked up the case. "It's none of your business." He headed for the hallway.

"Like hell it ain't." T.K. blocked Pop's access to the hall. "When it's my family that's supporting yours."

"Why, you—" Pop dropped the case and made fists of his hands.

"Pop!" I reached out for my father's arm as he lunged toward T.K.

T.K. lurched aside. Pop's fist slammed into the doorjamb. There was a crack. He groaned and slipped on the rug, falling toward T.K. His face was red and twisted.

T.K. flipped his hair out of his eyes. As Pop recovered his balance, T.K. grabbed his arm and wrenched it behind his back.

"Stop! Stop it!" I tried to get between them but only managed to knock over a chair.

"Stay back!" T.K. yelled at me. "And you," T.K. shouted at Pop, panting. He ratcheted Pop's arm up, making him wince in pain. T.K. spoke through gritted teeth. "Get the hell out." T.K. kicked Pop's legs out from under him and shoved him to the floor. With one final, disgusted grunt, he forced Pop's face down against the linoleum.

"Pop!" I reached for my father.

"Leave him be," T.K. said, letting go and stepping back. He ran shaky fingers through his tangled curls.

My hand covered my mouth. I could feel my chin quaking. Pop rolled over and lay on the floor, panting, examining his bleeding knuckles. His chin was tucked in, making ugly red folds in his neck. He didn't try to get up. He wouldn't look at me.

T.K. backed away and headed for our parlor. I picked up the chair and newspapers that had fallen to the floor. The toaster had overheated during the fight. Now smoke curled up from the slots. I didn't want to be there in the kitchen anymore with Pop on the floor and the smell of burnt toast all around. I stepped past him and went to my room.

But that picture stayed with me, of Pop lying on the floor. Just lying there. Lying.

CHAPTER 28

Everyone was talking about Orson Welles at school that day and I got awful sick of it. Bev told kids that I had been working at the CBS station and some of them decided that I was somehow in on the "hoax." But it wasn't until later, when LaVerne Kunkel followed me down the second-floor hall, saying, "Come on, Maloney, spill it. What do you know?" over and over again, that I decided I'd had all I could take. I ducked out a side door and hopped the trolley home in the middle of the afternoon.

At the sound of the bell on the door of the hardware store, Mr. Loomis looked up. "You're home early."

"Don't feel so good."

"Castor oil," he said. "Two tablespoons, never fails."

"Thanks, Mr. Loomis." I headed for the stairs.

"Oh, wait. There's a message here for you." Mr. Loomis opened the till. "Some boy called last night, after all the hubbub."

I waited while he poked around. A boy? Calling *me*?

"I stuck it in here somewheres. Aha!" He held out a piece of paper with a telephone number on it. "Wanted you to call him back, but I couldn't find you."

I looked at the number Mr. Loomis had written down and it was the one Frank had given me weeks ago. I had it memorized. The message said to call him right away. With a trembling hand, I dialed the number.

It rang a few times. I almost hung up, but then I figured nobody was home in the middle of the afternoon so I might as well waste time and let it ring.

There was a click, and then, "Hello?" It was Frank.

"You're home?" I said. "I mean, this is Cecelia. Cecelia Maloney." It seemed like a million years since I'd heard his voice.

"You got my message!" Frank said. "Yeah, I'm home already. The school let us out early for Halloween."

Halloween? Today was Halloween. I had forgotten all about it.

"I asked Polly for your number," Frank said. "Hope you don't mind."

"That's okay," I said. Geez Louise, 'course I didn't mind.

"You're in Newark, right?" Frank said. "You were there, in the heart of the panic?"

"Oh," I said, disappointed. So that was it. Like every other kid in the tri-state area, he wanted to talk about the panic broadcast. "Yes," I answered, sighing. "I was right in the path of the Martians." I pinched myself in the thigh for having had any mopey thoughts about romance and boyfriends.

Frank sounded thrilled. "Great!" he said. "Tell me you haven't already been interviewed. I was hoping for an exclusive."

"Exclusive?"

"You know. Just me and you, at Columbia next Saturday. No other reporters. I get you all to myself."

"Uh..."

"F-f-for an interview, I mean." There was suddenly a clatter and some scraping sounds. He must have dropped the phone.

"Still there, Cece?...Good. See, you experienced the panic broadcast from both sides of the microphone. You're an eye-witness *before*, here at the station, and *after*, in Newark. What self-respecting journalist could pass this up? So on Saturday, okay?"

"Well, I don't know," I said. "I'm not sure about coming back." I couldn't tell him my mother wouldn't let me go. It was too humiliating.

"Aw, come on. Say you'll do it. It's the scoop of the century! I'll write it up and see if Richard will use it on the news, just like the hurricane story."

How could I possibly sneak back to New York? It would take a miracle to cloud Ma's mind enough to escape the apartment now. Heck, I wasn't sure that even the Shadow himself could get past my mother. But Frank was so ding-danged excited about this interview. How could I turn him down?

"I'll try," I said. "But I can't promise."

"Thanks. I'll come looking for you on Saturday."

I climbed the stairs and went to my room where I noticed an envelope lying on the bed addressed to Noreen Maloney. I picked it up and was about to toss it on the dresser when the return address caught my eye:

*True Confessions Serial Editor
McFadden Publications, Inc.
New York, New York*

What could this be? It was unsealed, so I slid the letter out:

Dear Miss Maloney:

We are pleased to inform you that your serial true story, "Father Shelly and Me," has taken third place in our contest! Furthermore, your

work has been accepted for publication in a future issue of True Confessions magazine. Your writing captures the quality and human interest we always strive for to satisfy the discerning readers of all McFadden publications. Enclosed please find our payment to you, as promised.

A check fluttered onto the bed. A check for one thousand dollars. Yowsah! I double-checked the position of the decimal point, thinking I'd misread ten dollars or even a hundred dollars as one thousand, but it was a thousand, for real.

"It's a lot of money, isn't it?"

I turned to find Nory standing in the doorway in her A&P baker's smock, grinning. I waved the check in the air. "Nory, a thousand dollars!"

"I know!" She came over and took the check from me. "It came this morning. I still can't believe it. It's more than I earn in a year."

"But what is the check for? Did you send them something you wrote? What's this 'Father Shelly and Me'?" The minute I said it, I realized what it was. Nory had sent the contents of her blue diary to *True Confessions*.

"Just a little story I wrote," she said. "I typed it up on one of the typewriters in the church office and sent it in."

So that explained why the pages had been torn out of the notebook. "But Nory"—I swallowed hard—"what'll people think?"

"Hmm?" She held the check up to the light.

"I mean, when your story comes out on the newsstands, everyone will know about you and . . . you know."

"Oh, nobody'll know it's me." Nory waved the check dismissively. "They'll use a pen name, you know, a *nom de plume*. I've chosen Nancy DeVille. What do you think?"

I sat on the bed, not answering. Was the whole world turning inside out?

"You don't like Nancy DeVille?" Nory asked. "How about Nancy LaMonde?"

"Sure, either one," I said distractedly. "But . . . what if people find out? What will happen to Father Kelly, and all? What'll happen to him, his job?"

Nory tilted her head, looking confused. "Oh, my goodness!" she said suddenly. "Cecelia, you don't really think— No, you mope. It's all made up. I wouldn't dare, not with a priest. It's a fiction story. I never . . . oh, my goodness." She reached for her cross. "Not me and Father Kelly! It's a made-up story, I swear."

"Made-up?"

"Sure. I'd never . . . why, that's a *sin*. I just, well, a thousand dollars is an awful lot of money and they wanted something unique, so I read all your *True Confessions* magazines. They'd never published forbidden love like this before, as far as I could tell."

"You mean, you're not—with Father Kelly?"

"Not in a million years."

I looked at the floor. Nory and Father Kelly. Pure, unadulterated booshwash. I'd assumed that little blue notebook was a diary. I'd jumped to conclusions without checking the facts, just like that reporter at CBS with his false story about the quintuplets in San Salvador.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I thought you were—you know."

"I *told* you to stay out of my notebook. See what happens when you snoop?" Nory chuckled as she stuffed the check back into its envelope. "Anyhow, the important thing is, we really need the money."

"But Nory, you don't understand. After I read your diary—your story, I mean—I told T.K. that you and Father Kelly . . . you know."

"*What?*" Nory threw aside the envelope. "So it was you. You! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! That's why T.K. broke it off with me."

I swallowed hard. "I'm awful sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry doesn't even begin to fix this, Cece Maloney. Why, you—you—I oughta—" She hauled off and slapped me hard.

I fell back against the bed. My hand went to my cheek. It stung like crazy.

"Listen," I said, sniffing. "I'll tell him, okay? The truth." I slid off the bed, rubbing my burning face. "Right now."

"You bet you will." She yanked off her bakery cap. Bobby pins went flying. "No! Wait." She pulled me back. "Let me talk to him first."

"But it's all my fault."

"I know," she said. "And it's too late now anyhow. But I'll tell him." She undid the buttons on her A&P smock. "I want to be the one to explain. He doesn't know yet about the story. I'll tell him right now."

"I'm truly sorry, Nor. I didn't know. I'll make it up to you somehow."

"Oh, you'll make it up to me, all right," she said through clenched teeth. "You've ruined my love life. Maybe my whole life, forever. You'll pay, believe you me."

CHAPTER 29

Later that afternoon I found Ma in the kitchen. I was ready to launch into all the reasons why I should keep my job, when I saw that her eyes were red. My heart dived into my stomach.

There was no question about it now. She knew about Pop.

I took a seat at the table and watched her rinse vegetables at the sink while I tried to piece together the truths. I knew now why she had become so religious all of a sudden. I guessed that when Ma's marriage started unraveling, Nory tried to help her by bringing out the rosaries and dragging her to Mass. Ma went back to being Catholic because the church gave her something to lean on when she needed it.

Well, she had the Loomises and Nory to lean on, too. And she had me.

I waited a long time for Ma to speak. Every so often she sniffled, but she didn't say a word. Finally I went and blurted out, "Ma, I know what's going on. I saw Pop this morning."

She turned toward me, but didn't meet my gaze. "He's gone," she said matter-of-factly. "For good."

"Uh-huh." I swallowed hard. The place mat where I was

sitting had a gravy stain on it so I flipped it over. "You want some help with those vegetables?"

"I'm fine." She sniffled again.

"Okay." I stared at the linoleum. After another long while I said, "T.K. told me about how the Loomises have been helping us out, paying for things."

Ma turned the water off.

"Did you hear me, Ma?"

She turned the water back on and began scraping carrots into the sink.

"Well," I said, "if I kept working at Columbia, we could have more money." I let that sink in.

She kept scraping. And sniffing.

"It's only Saturdays now, but if you let me keep going there maybe I can work full-time over the summer and when I graduate I'll have a job already waiting for me. A future, and all."

Ma sighed. She put the paring knife down and left the carrot she had been scraping on the counter with the others.

I bit my lip, watching Ma open the cupboard next to the sink. Slowly she got down two glasses, one at a time. She took a bottle of milk from the icebox and brought everything over, setting it down between us. Then she sat without saying a word. I wasn't positive, but she didn't seem angry.

I poured us both a glass of milk. We each took a few long sips, not speaking.

"Cecelia," Ma said finally, "I have some things to tell you."

Uh-oh. I looked down at the back of the place mat, wishing awful hard that I hadn't brought up the job. I figured I was about to endure the biggest lecture of my life.

"I met your father when I was fifteen," Ma began. She laughed a little bit.

"You were eighteen, you mean," I corrected.

She shook her head. "I ran away from home, told everyone I was eighteen. Became a dancer. You know that part. Being so tall, and all—"

"You lied about your age?"

"I'm sorry, Cecelia. Yes, I lied."

"Then if you could be onstage at fifteen, why can't I—"

Ma put a finger to her lips to quiet me. "Let me finish my story. I was just fifteen when I left home. Almost sixteen by the time I met Jack. Your father was seventeen, going on eighteen. We had the world by the tail, with our futures spread out ahead of us. But then"—Ma scratched the back of her hand—"then I got pregnant."

"Oh." I swallowed hard. "Oh," I said again. "With me."

We didn't speak for a few minutes. I felt like I was walking the Arkansas Traveler again. I grabbed hold of the table, hoping the feeling might pass.

Ma took another sip of milk. "When you were born," she said, "I was the happiest mother in the whole wide world. I never once regretted having you, Cecelia." She turned the place mat in front of me over, saw the gravy stain, and flipped it back the way it was. "But once a dancer gets pregnant, her career's all over. And once a girl gets pregnant and isn't married, it's all over, period." Ma rubbed her chin. "My mother wouldn't have me back in her house. I lost my family and, because of it, my faith."

I reached for her hand and she took mine.

"Jack stuck by me then. He asked his old boss, Mr. Loomis, for help. Luckily, the Loomises took us in and let us live here, rent-free, so long as we got married."

I thought of stories in magazines like *True Confessions*. Sometimes the girls went all the way and did *the deed*. I could hardly believe my own mother had been one of those girls, and worse,

she'd gotten—storked. With me. It was like those magazine stories, or an episode of *Beacon of Hope*—only this really happened.

Ma tapped the side of her glass. "Show business is a rough world, Cecelia. It's...not real somehow, like you're in this make-believe place where you get blinded by all the footlights and glitter. It makes you think you're invincible one minute and the dirt under someone's shoe the next. It makes you do stupid things." She patted my hand. "I wanted to keep you away from all that. I want you to have both feet in the real world. Do you understand?"

"But I'm not you, Ma. I'm not going to get preg—" I sucked in my breath.

"I know," Ma said gently. "This morning, before he left, your father and I had words. He accused me of using you to correct what we'd done wrong when we were younger. I didn't think I was doing that and I told him so. But all day since, I've been thinking about it, and do you know what? He's right. I was shielding you from making my mistakes all over again."

I nodded. "You meant well, though," I said. I didn't want her to feel too awful bad about how she had raised me. She had enough to feel bad about.

"I did," Ma said. "That's true." She folded the gravy-stained place mat in half and set it out of the way.

"I'm sorry, Ma, about what I did. Sorry about Pop, too. What he's doing."

"No, don't you even worry about that. It's nothing to do with you." She took another sip of milk and wiped her lower lip. "I know you still love him, and no matter what he does, he's always and forever your father. *Forgive those who trespass*. Okay?"

"I'll try."

Ma sighed. "The truth is, I'm the one who should be apologizing."

"How's that?"

"I was wrong about you, Cece." She touched my hand again. "I've been too protective. You're a far more sensible girl at fourteen than I was, even at fifteen. And well, if you want to keep working at the radio studio"—she took a deep breath—"you go right ahead. I won't stop you."

"Honest?"

"Honest," Ma said. "I'm going to give you permission. But just . . . just be careful."

"I will."

The Arkansas Traveler finally shut down. There was solid ground under my feet for the first time in days.

I finished my milk and took both of our glasses over to the sink. "It's just us now, Ma," I said, rinsing them out. "But I think that's okay."

"I think so, too," Ma said. "I do."

"Ma?" I asked while drying my hands on the dish towel.

My mother smiled at me. "I'm listening, honey."

"Just . . . thanks."

It took all the rest of that day for it to sink in: I actually had Ma's permission to go to CBS! That night, just before bedtime, I got out the blue dress. I was going to need it next Saturday after all.

CHAPTER 30

There was a disturbance in the lobby at 485 Madison. Men shouting, popping sounds, and lights flashing. It was Saturday and I was back at the Columbia Broadcasting System studios. "What's going on?" I asked a woman nearby.

"Welles, that's what," she said. "Reporters. They've been hounding him all week. You know, because of the Martians."

I heard Orson's deep voice. "I haven't a clue, gentlemen," he was saying. Reporters in overcoats and fedoras surrounded him. The lights I'd seen and the popping sounds were flash bulbs going off.

"What about the deaths that occurred?" one reporter shouted.

"There were none, as far as we know," Orson answered. He shrugged off his overcoat and draped it over his arm.

"Tell us about the lawsuits pending."

"They're unsubstantiated," said Orson. "No one has a legitimate case."

"What's next, Mr. Welles?" cried another reporter. "Do you plan to unleash any more broadcast trickery upon the American public?"

"Trickery?" he replied. "I'd hardly call it that. No, I don't

think we will choose anything like this again, gentlemen." He smiled the same smile he had shown me when he found that quarter behind my ear all those weeks ago, and for a moment I wondered if he had known all along what the broadcast might do. Did Orson knowingly pull the biggest trick ever in radio history?

"What's next?" a reporter asked.

"That remains to be seen," answered Orson, walking backward toward the elevators. An operator was holding the door for him. "We've had interest from sponsors looking to underwrite *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, and we're in negotiations. I hope our listeners will tune in again tomorrow night. And now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

Orson stepped briskly into the waiting elevator and turned around. "Gentlemen, it's been a delight," he said. The operator blocked the way, keeping the reporters out. "Twenty-one," Orson told the operator. As the door closed, he tipped his hat. "Good day, fellas," he said.

The cameras were lowered and the flashes stopped. Reporters rushed to the pay telephones to call in their stories to the papers. Once the lobby cleared out I took the elevator up to Personnel, 301.

Polly had a check waiting for me. "Glad you decided to come back. We missed you last week. This is for you."

"Oh, my!" I'd forgotten all about my extra pay for recording that scream. "Seven more dollars! Thanks." I'd give one dollar to Ma to replace the money I'd borrowed from the rainy-day jar. The rest would go toward paying our part of the coal bill.

Polly cleared her throat. "Now on to business," she said. "I could use some help in the mailroom. But first, Frank tells me you agreed to an interview or something? He's sweet on you, Cece, I hope you know that."

"Aw, g'wan." I ran my hand along the railing. I hoped she was right.

As we got into the elevator, I asked Polly, "How many listeners do you think tune in to hear this Edward R. Murrow fella?"

"Oh, thousands. Millions, maybe. Why?"

I shrugged. "I think maybe I'd like to be a reporter someday, or even a news broadcaster."

"In your hat!" Polly swatted my arm. "I thought you wanted to be an actress."

"I know, but . . . it's hard to explain." Daytime dramas had lost their appeal. I was tired of pretenders and pretending and fakes and hoaxes and anything that wasn't real and honest. I'd begun to think about the news and facts and how reporters like Edward R. Murrow were always trying to dig up pure truth. I liked that.

"A woman delivering the news?" Polly shook her head. "A reporter, maybe. But who ever heard of a woman giving the news?"

"Who ever heard of little green men from Mars invading New Jersey?"

Polly laughed. "You've got me there. Well, if they ever let a woman broadcast the news, why, you'd be just the gal to do it." She gave the elevator operator our floor. "You give Frank that interview, and then I've set you up to handle a special project in the mailroom. It's not as glamorous as news broadcasting or typing scripts, but it needs doing all the same. You should be finished by lunchtime. It's a new giveaway cooked up for *Beacon of Hope*, to keep people tuning in now that they've killed off Elaine Meldman."

"What?" I hadn't listened to my former favorite daytime serial in ages. But I couldn't believe that they would actually snuff out the popular Elaine Meldman, mild-mannered-shopgirl-from-Iowa-trying-to-make-it-on-her-own-in-Grand-City.

"I thought you'd want to know." Polly almost smiled. "It's true. Ursula Parker's leaving for Hollywood. They've signed her on at some movie studio. So yesterday Elaine Meldman was crushed by a milk wagon. Very sad, no? I say good riddance."

I wondered if Pop would follow her to Hollywood. I guessed he would.

But as for me, I was sticking around. After my interview with Frank, I would spend the morning stuffing giveaway sets of *Beacon of Hope* measuring spoons into boxes, and by that afternoon I'd be typing up news reports from Edward R. Murrow all the way from London. Crazy keen.

"Twenty-one," the elevator operator said. We spotted Charlie at the far end of the corridor, outside the dressing rooms. "Charlie!" Polly called out. "She's back."

Charlie bowed to me. "That fat seven-dollar bonus check convinced you, huh?"

"I think it was you," I said. "Both of you. You make it fun here, and I mean it. Plus, you took care of me when...you know, that day."

"Aw, don't mention it," Polly said.

"And now that I'm back," I said to Charlie, "I'm available for an audition, anytime."

Charlie laughed. "I'll let Richard know."

Frank tracked me down in the mailroom later. We set up a couple of chairs. He got out a notepad and pencil and got right down to the interview.

"Miss Maloney," he began, his pencil at the ready, "tell us about the events that led up to the night of the broadcast."

In my mind, I ran through the last few weeks. It was a blur of typewriters, scripts, Charlie, microphones, Audrey Michaels, T.K., Martians, Orson's voice over the radio, Pop.

"It's a lot, Frank. I'm sorry, I don't know where to begin."

So Frank talked me through it. He scribbled it all down. It took up pages.

"Do people in Newark believe it was a hoax?" Frank asked. "Some say Mr. Welles perpetrated this event in order to call attention to himself. What do you think?"

"I think people should have questioned whether it was a real news report," I said. "If the listeners that night had just twisted their dials, they would have known the invasion was a fake. No other station was reporting men from Mars."

"Whoa! Slow down," Frank said. "I can't write that fast." When he was caught up, he asked for a minute to look over what he had written. Then he asked, "Do you feel that the listeners in Newark were at fault for creating the panic?"

"All I know is, you can't believe everything you hear, not even from an authority like a news announcer, or a fortune teller, or"—I fiddled with the tie on my dress—"or your own father."

Frank didn't say anything to that. We sat there for a few moments. Finally Frank cleared his throat.

"One last question," he said.

"Okay."

"Cecelia Maloney, will you join me for a chocolate malt after work today? I know a place that makes 'em thick."

I smiled a tiny smile which grew into a full-fledged grin. "Make it an egg cream and you got yourself a deal."

Frank laughed. He had a very nice laugh.

Old Charlie popped his head around the door. "Guess what I just heard."

Frank and I exchanged glances. Charlie looked around to make sure no one was listening, and leaned in close. "Orson's leaving us," he said. "I just overheard some of the fellas talking.

He's given up playing the Shadow over there at the Mutual, too. Going to Hollywood."

"Him, too?" I asked.

Charlie nodded. "Yes, indeed. The panic broadcast made him an overnight star. Word is, he can't keep up with the offers."

As I walked down Madison Avenue with Frank after work that day, wondering whether he might take my hand, I decided that my true story had every chance of getting straightened out, at least for the near future.

Bev's date for the Harvest Dance went great. She called me the next morning. "We're going steady!" she shouted into the telephone. "I think I'm in love!" Two weeks later, they broke up.

I never did see Orson in person again. He went on to direct and star in movies in Hollywood. I would one day spend the quarter he had given me to see his first feature film, *Citizen Kane*.

The news was coming along just as fast on South Orange Avenue as it did on the Teletype at work. T.K. forgave me for what I'd done, although I wouldn't have blamed him if he'd refused to speak to me ever again. He reminded me that he'd been thinking about signing up anyhow. So it wasn't all my fault he joined up. He and Nory made up and were seeing each other again, with plans to get hitched once his hitch was over. In just two years he'd be out of the army and then he and Nory would use some of her contest money for a wedding.

One morning before the sun was up, T.K. left for boot camp without telling his father or Ma or anyone but Nory. He telephoned to let us know where he'd gone, explaining that he just couldn't take a bunch of mushy good-byes from us. Mr. Loomis was completely and utterly livid and refused to answer the telephone for a week afterward. Our new soldier sent home regular letters, beginning with long paragraphs telling us how

great it was at boot camp. But in the last paragraph he would write about how things would be once he was discharged. I think he missed us.

Every time I read a story from Europe coming across the Teletype, I worried for T.K.'s safety. What if Roosevelt did break his promise and send our boys over there after all?

Ma kept working downstairs at Loomis Hardware. Mr. Loomis promised her a raise in pay, just as soon as business picked up. She wanted to wait until then to have a telephone installed again in our own parlor, but I insisted on paying for one now. I mean, geez Louise.

Nory assigned me penance for my sin of reading her blue notebook: seven Hail Marys *and* I had to take over all of her chores for a month. A tough sentence. I wondered if I might have gotten off easier by confessing to Father Kelly instead.

Richard finally agreed to grant Frank and me honest-to-goodness auditions before the year was out. Maybe I could become a hard-working radio announcer, with scads of loyal listeners counting on me for their news. In the meantime, I worked hard at becoming the best copygirl they'd ever seen in the writers' offices at Columbia.

Life was going to be hard on South Orange Avenue without Pop, awful hard. But heck, we'd survived an invasion from Mars. I figured we Maloney girls could survive anything.