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Midnight in Manhattan

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Prologue

In my job as the relationship advice columnist for *GirlTalk* magazine, I receive thirty letters a day. Teenage girls, as many keen academics and social scientists have observed, have a lot of insecurities: how to kiss, when to kiss, whom to kiss, how to flirt, how to steal your best friend's boyfriend, how to admit you're not a virgin when you've pretended to be one. Because I'm twenty-six years old, I'm not so far away from any of these crises to have trouble sympathizing with them, yet I'm also supposedly old enough to have accrued the wisdom and experience readers are looking for when they send their most pressing questions to "Annie Answers." Sometimes I worry about these kids, actually. What does it say about our culture that ten thousand teenagers a year solicit counsel on the most intimate matters of their personal lives from a total stranger without a graduate degree? Possible research topic for the above-mentioned keen academics and social scientists.

To backtrack: my name isn't Annie. Anne Chang-Hirosaki, my predecessor in this job, quit magazines for business school, and has now launched a line of press-on tattoos sold in the makeup sections of high-end department stores. People can make lives out of ventures like that. Anyway, when Anne quit, I happened

to be answering phones for the editor-in-chief of *GirlTalk*—temping, really, and adjusting to the daily humiliations of post-college life in Manhattan. My boss liked me, or at least liked the way I collated and stapled large copy jobs, and before she hired a replacement for Annie Answers, I asked for a shot at the column. For some reason (probably the prospect of saving $40,000 a year in staff salary) she gave it to me. The column's name stayed the same, which is fine with me. First of all, who needs a fifteen-year-old stalker who's pissed that her boyfriend dumped her after you told her to admit that she'd cheated on him? Second of all, my name is Rosalie Preston, which, at least when paired with *Answers*, lacks something in alliterative pizzazz.

The twist here, or the "hook," as the pack of *GirlTalk* editors who wish they worked for real news magazines are fond of saying, is that I don't want to be an advice columnist. It's a perfectly good day job, and it makes for easy dinner-party conversation with strangers ("Yes it's true, the letters *are* real!"), and it calms my art-phobic parents to think that I have a real, life-sustaining spot on a corporate payroll. But what I really want to be is an actress. That's why I moved to New York in the first place. That and the fact that when you graduate from an Ivy League college and your chances of a career in politics have already been dashed by drug experimentation and unpaid parking tickets, New York is the only place people really move to. Except for the vegetarians, who go to San Francisco.

So I arrived here four years ago, after a miserably lonely post-college year abroad in Ireland, and joined up with my five closest friends. Together we set out to start our own acting company. Turns out a lot of young people have that idea, but we had a few

advantages in our corner: we're not as experimental as most—no staged pubic-hair shaving, no animal puppets, nothing designed explicitly to alienate the few paying audience members we're lucky enough to attract. (Here my pride compels me to add that while I'm an aspiring actor, you might not know it at first glance: I don't sing loudly in elevators, I speak with the standard slurred intonation of my generation, rather than the painfully enunciated English promoted by voice coaches, and I've never had any part of my body surgically altered for a film role.) Back to the group: we also make a good ensemble. I get the feeling that in most fledgling acting troupes, 98% of the members secretly think they're the stars. We're decent sports about rotating out of the limelight—I've played Grocery Checkout Clerk #2 for every time I've played Ophelia, and never held a grudge.

Finally, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit this was our most important asset, our producer is rich. Staggeringly rich, New York rich, as in her dad's name is carved on the marble donor columns of museums and libraries and hospitals all over the city. And since Bella herself—that's my friend the producer—doesn't have a day job, she can spend all of her non-spa time hustling donations out of her parents' friends, most of whom love to think of themselves as patrons of the downtown art scene.

A word about money, which I now know is the prerequisite to understanding any New York story: most of my friends have a lot of it. I don't know how that happened, exactly, except that I went to Harvard, where the admissions officers were clearly lying about 78% of students being on financial aid. I myself am the only child of a dentist and a piano teacher, Tom and Joan Preston, of Hanson, Massachusetts, a workaday town on the South Shore.

While I grew up wanting little, mine was a one-house, two-car family operation, where I did chores for my allowance and took one vacation a year, usually to visit my grandparents in their *Golden Girls*–esque Sarasota retirement community. I'm not a have-not, by any stretch of the imagination, and wouldn't claim to be one. But I somehow fell in with a crowd that was more upper than middle in the broad belt of the upper middle class, and these distinctions have daily manifestations in New York life. It's easy to tell how much money a girl in this city has, even though we all wear black and carry small purses crammed with portable electronic devices. I rely solely on the subway, for example; my friend Bella takes cabs.

Since I'm a theater person, it seems fitting to close out these program notes with a brief dramatis personae for the events you're about to see, events which began just about a year ago. The members of the First Born Company, which is the name of our troupe, are Grace Lerner, Jacob Braverman, Camden Post, Bella Starker, Evan Weiner, and Rosalie Preston: me. Grace, Jake, Cam, and I are the actors; Bella's the producer; and Evan is our exacting director. I could say, and will say, a great deal more about each of them, but to start with what you need to know is this: we were friends in college, are surprisingly optimistic for non-union actors heading into year five of total professional anonymity, and are all convinced that we will succeed and flourish in the little pack we've always been. It goes without saying that stories like this one end in a different place than they begin, and since I earn my keep as an advice columnist, I have, at least, to play at being sage and jaded in the ways of the world. But I'll tell you the truth, which is a new habit I'm trying to get into: last summer, I

felt confident that I understood some of the intricacies of ambition, talent, money, sex, and friendship that characterize adult life in this frenetic city. If I'd only paid more attention to that horrid *Education of Henry Adams* book I was forced to read twice in college, I would have known that mine was the self-assurance of someone whose education had yet to begin.

Dear Annie,

I'm thirteen, but I have the hormones of a fifteen-year-old. My problem is that my mom thinks I am too young to date, which is a joke since I am taller than she is and way more mature than my older sister, who has had the same stink-punk boyfriend for the past three years. How can I convince my mom to let me go out with guys? All of my friends are allowed to, and I'm really losing good chances right and left.

—Locked Up in Maryland

Dear Locked Up,

If only you could take a skin patch test, or pass a multiple choice exam, to prove to your mom that you've got the common sense to earn your dating license. But until Congress passes a federal Romance Law with a minimum age requirement, you're pretty much stuck following your parent's rules, whether or not you like them or think they're fair.

I say your best bet for a more boy-friendly arrangement is to talk to your mom, using your calmest, most grown-up conversational skills (i.e., no cracks about her height). Ask her for some clear, specific instructions about how you can *earn her trust* (moms love that

one) and prove to her that you are, in fact, mature enough to hang out in public non-school locations with members of the opposite sex. Would going out in a group reassure her? Would it help if you promised to get grown-up rides to and from the movies, say, or the mall? Would meeting the boy-predator in question beforehand put her heart at ease? Would she like to consult with any of your friends' moms about how they reached their decisions?

Hopefully, once your mom understands your willingness to compromise and meet her halfway, you'll be on the path to a more satisfying social life. Because here's the thing: maturity and savvy don't really get measured in *years*. If they did, none of the boys in your class would still be into action figures. No, behavior and experience are far more accurate ways to judge maturity. And those, fortunately, are under your control.

Trust me. I've lived through it.

Annie

Chapter One

In the northeastern reaches of the Adirondacks, halfway between Tupper Lake and Saranac, lies a large private property called the Fort Sassquam Association. Several stuffed black bears frozen in menacing poses flank a "No Public Admittance" sign just outside its iron gates. On either side of the road, which remains rough enough to justify the use of sport utility vehicles for those who travel it regularly, stand two wooden posts bearing the names of Fort Sassquam's members. The posts are old; the names are older. Bella Starker's family has owned property on Fort Sassquam Lake since the nineteenth century, when the Adirondacks became the country's hotspot for tuberculosis rest cures. New York Society has always clung together, in sickness and in health.

The camps themselves (that's what the residents call them, in the spirit that might prompt Queen Elizabeth to call Buckingham Palace a studio) form a loose ring around the large mountain lake. They are grand homes, built in the time of Teddy Roosevelt and with his spirit of aristocratic ruggedness. Modern renovations have tried to preserve this aesthetic, resulting in such rustic touches as exposed-log saunas and antler-shaded light fixtures. On the Starker property the eco-landscapers allow no non-

native flora, which accounts for the woodsy, flowerless look of the place, a haven for mosquitoes, ticks, blackflies, and all manner of biting thing. Indoors, the mounted animal carcasses are trophies from the surrounding Adirondack National Forest. When I first saw the gallery of stuffed deer heads lining the dining room walls, I remarked that hunting is the pastime of the very rich and the very poor. My friend Camden, who grew up in the gun-happy state of South Carolina, took offense, so I have amended my observation to include the very rich, the very poor, and Southerners.

Since becoming friends with Bella, I've been an occasional guest at Starker estates throughout the continental U.S., mooching wine from her dad's cellars, learning how to ski downhill and sail boats without motors, generally playing the supporting role of Unathletic Friend With Rough Edges. I may as well come right out and admit that Bella's family fascinates me, with its many branches and demesnes and soap opera divorces that inevitably make the gossip columns in and around New York City. The Starkers are what my own parents persist in calling "high society" people, though I have tried to talk my parents out of such (antiquated) one-dimensional categorizations. In any case, last summer's weekend itinerary was no different from any other. So it was that I found myself stretched out on Bella's dock on the breezy Saturday morning of the Fourth of July, staring at the glittering surface of Fort Sassquam Lake, and scribbling down possible leads for this month's Annie question, which was due almost immediately upon my return to work: *"I've been going out with my boyfriend for two and a half months, and he still won't tell me he loves me. How long do you think I should I put up with this*

crap?" People my age like to snicker at the questions I'm paid to answer; it makes them feel mature and adult to pooh-pooh the dramas that kept them up tossing and turning a few years back. But Sick of It in Wisconsin, though she's on a problematically accelerated schedule, is trying in her own teenage way to navigate some of the deeper waters of relationships: commitment, trust, balance, patience. Who among us can pretend to have solved all that?

I was halfway through a vamp on letting romance evolve at its own pace when footsteps rocked the dock where I lay. I sat up and turned around, surprised, since I'm usually the first member of my vacation cohort awake by hours. It was Camden, wearing boxer shorts and a faded T-shirt, carrying a Frisbee with several strips of bacon on it.

"Did you cook that?" I asked, impressed by this step up in his culinary repertoire. I had to shield my eyes from the sun, which was rising directly behind him.

He nodded, and handed me a piece. Cam has a remarkably blithe, handsome face, so that on the rare occasions when he looks downcast, as he did that morning, you suspect the world may be minutes away from nuclear devastation. "Something wrong?" The bacon was overcooked, halfway to pork jerky.

"Evan. I called 'line' so many times yesterday he almost asked Vicki to play my part."

Evan, as I mentioned, is our director, and Vicki is the Starkers' local housekeeper, and calling "line" means you don't have your role memorized well enough to rehearse it. Which was what we'd come up to Fort Sassquam that weekend to do—rehearse our entry in the Footlights Festival, a week-long show-

case of young acting companies, all performing material on a single pre-determined theme. This year's theme was Disease, a challenge for a troupe as consummately healthy as ours, and also a summer-long buzz kill, since it meant spending night after night in grungy practice halls, trolling the imaginative depths of wheelchairs and iron lungs. We'd settled on performing a series of scenes and sketches rather than a single piece; I was doing a Mary Tyrone monologue from *Long Day's Journey into Night,* for which I was about thirty years too young and way, way too sober. Evan had us on a tight rotation up at the Fort, and since Bella's father and his fourth (third? fifth?) wife were off trout fishing in Montana, we had the place to ourselves and nothing to do but rehearse in it. I'd watched a bit of Cam and Jake's run-through yesterday—they were doing Genet, from *The Balcony,* and it was true: Cam knew his lines about as well as I know the Lord's Prayer, which is to say he could have mumbled them convincingly if there'd been a large crowd around to blend into.

"Do you want to do me a huge favor and run my scene with me?" Cam asked, holding his script in my direction.

"I can't. I have to work on my column." Juggling my full-time magazine job with my acting career has turned me into an efficient time manager, and I have the unattractive habit of lording that skill over other, less organized people. Cam has a freelance job doing something computer-related for a medical advertising firm, which allows him to work from home and at odd hours of the night, whenever *SportsCenter* isn't on. Time management isn't his forte.

He stretched and scratched the back of his head, shaking off

sleep. "How about I write your column for you and you memorize my lines for me?"

I shook my head and turned back to my notebook. "It's illegal for minors to sell nude pictures of themselves to *Penthouse.* Beyond that, I can't think of what you'd advise."

He smacked my shoulder with his script and sat down. The dock dipped an inch in his direction; I grabbed my pen before it rolled.

"I thought of getting Jake up to run lines," Cam said, looking out at the water. "He could use the practice, too, you know."

"And?"

"His room was empty. He must be with Grace."

The summer's headline social development was a new inbred romance, one of the only unexploited mathematical possibilities left to us: Jake, Cam's roommate and scene partner, and Grace, my closest friend. While I love them both, I must say they made a frighteningly unlikely couple—not the way sitcom odd couples do, not like perfectly calibrated opposites whose strengths and weaknesses balance out to the letter. No, they were more on the order of Genghis Khan and Heidi, characters from such opposing genres they could only share the stage for something like Ice Capades. Jake comes from Berkeley; he talks very quickly and mostly about himself, and has more notches on his proverbial bedpost than I'd care to count. Grace grew up in Providence, on one of those beautiful old streets called Hope or Faith or Charity, and she's never quite sloughed off the Emily Dickinson complex that comes from having attended an all-girls school. Even their looks are ill matched: Jake is thin and dark, always one too many days from his last shave and slightly greasy,

as if he just emerged from a bed whose sheets need to be changed. Grace has the fair-haired, doe-eyed thing down so well she actually gets carded in New York bars. I knew they'd come to terms with their incompatibility on their own soon enough, so I was biding my time, curbing my natural instinct to contribute my opinion, smiling patiently whenever the mood struck Grace to share some new absurd detail from the annals of their courtship. And I was not taking gossip bait from Cam, or anybody else who strung it up.

"You know how to learn lines on your own. Work for a while and then I'll test you."

That quieted Cam down, and I went back to thinking about the impatient Wisconsin kid, though I wasn't as focused as I had been because of Cam's habit of moving his lips while he silently recited his part. He has a lot of tics like that, that could be indicative of either a chronic need for attention or a slight intellectual deficit; I go back and forth on assigning cause. Anyway we were quiet, and the fish occasionally jumped and the breeze occasionally ruffled the pages of my steno pad, and I felt peaceful and nature-y, which I wouldn't describe as characteristic. After some length of time I had another piece of bacon, and the sun felt hot enough to signal noon, which was when rehearsal was scheduled to start. Cam hoisted me up by the elbows, with an obnoxious little grunt that made me feel self-conscious about my weight (which is totally average, by normal human standards, and irritatingly above average, by emaciated actor standards). And off we went, up the flagstone path to the Big House, to see who else was awake.