One Fifth Avenue

Candace Bushnell

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Extract

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While there is an apartment building located at One Fifth Avenue in New York City and called One Fifth Avenue, the author has fictionalized all other aspects of her rendition of One Fifth Avenue, including but not limited to the exact look of the building, the interior of the building, the tenants, and the operations of the building.

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Prologue

It was only a part in a TV series, and only a one-bedroom apartment in New York. But parts of any kind, much less decent ones, were hard to come by, and even in Los Angeles, everyone knew the value of a pied-à-terre in Manhattan. And the script arrived on the same day as the final divorce papers.

If real life were a script, a movie executive would have stricken this fact as "too coincidental." But Schiffer Diamond loved coincidences and signs. Loved the childlike magic of believing all things happened for a reason. She was an actress and had lived on magic nearly all her life. And so she took the part, which required moving back to New York City for six months, where she would stay in the one-bedroom apartment she owned on Fifth Avenue. Her initial plan was to stay in New York for the duration of the shoot and then return to L.A. and her house in Los Feliz.

Two days after she took the part, she went to the Ivy and ran into her most recent ex-husband, lunching with a young woman. He was seated at a table in the center of the room, reveling in his new status as the president of a network, and given the deference the staff showed the young woman, Schiffer understood the young woman to be his new girlfriend. She was rumored to be a concert pianist from a renowned family, but had the glossy appearance of an expensive prostitute. The relationship was a

cliché, but twenty-five years in Hollywood had taught Schiffer that men never minded clichés, especially when the cliché concerned the penis. Shortly thereafter, when she handed her ticket to the valet and stood outside the restaurant in her sunglasses, she decided to sell the house in Los Feliz, make a clean break of it, and move back to One Fifth.

"Schiffer Diamond has taken a part in a TV series," Enid Merle said to her nephew, Philip Oakland.

"She must be desperate," Philip said, half-jokingly.

Enid and Philip occupied two of the second best apartments in One Fifth, located on the thirteenth floor with adjoining terraces, separated by a charming white picket fence. It was across this fence that Enid now spoke to her nephew. "It may be a very good part," Enid countered, consulting the piece of paper she held in her hand. "She's going to play a mother superior who leaves the church to become the editor in chief of a magazine for teenagers."

"Now, there's a believable concept," Philip said, with the sarcasm he reserved for most matters Hollywood.

"About as believable as a giant reptile that terrorizes New York. I wish you'd quit screenplays and go back to writing serious novels," Enid said.

"Can't," Philip said with a smile. "*I'm* desperate."

"It may be based on a true story," Enid continued. "There *was* a woman—Sandra Miles—who was a mother superior and became an editor in chief. Back in the seventies. I had her to dinner once or twice. A thoroughly miserable woman, but that may have been due to her husband's cheating. Being a virgin for so long, it's possible she never got the sex part right. In any case," Enid added, "the series shoots in New York."

"Uh-huh," Philip said.

"I suppose we'll be seeing her around the building again," Enid said.

"Who?" Philip said, trying to appear uninterested. "Sandra Miles?"

"Schiffer Diamond," Enid said. "Sandra Miles left New York years ago. She may even be dead."

"Unless she stays in a hotel," Philip said, referring to Schiffer Diamond.

"Why on earth would she do that?" Enid said.

When his aunt had gone back in, Philip remained on his terrace, staring out at Washington Square Park, of which he had a superior view. It was July, and the park was lush with greenery, the dry August heat yet to come. But Philip wasn't thinking about foliage. He was miles away, standing on a dock on Catalina Island twenty-five years before.

"So you're the schoolboy genius," Schiffer Diamond said, coming up behind him.

"Huh?" he said, turning around.

"They tell me you're the writer of this lousy movie."

He bristled. "If you think it's so lousy—"

"Yes, schoolboy?" she asked.

"Then why are you in it?"

"All movies are lousy by definition. They're not art. But everyone needs money. Even geniuses."

"I'm not doing it for the money," he said.

"Why are you doing it?"

"To meet girls like you?" he asked.

She laughed. She was wearing white jeans and a navy blue T-shirt. She was braless and barefoot and tanned. "Good answer, schoolboy," she said, starting to walk away.

"Hey," he called after her. "Do you really think the movie is lousy?"

"What do you think?" she asked. "Besides, you can never really judge a man's work until you've been to bed with him."

"Are you planning to go to bed with me?" he said.

"I never plan anything. I like to see what happens. Life's much more interesting that way, don't you think?" And she went to do her scene.

A minute later, Enid's voice startled Philip out of his reverie. "I just talked to Roberto," she said, referring to the head doorman. "Schiffer Diamond is coming back today. A housekeeper was in her apartment this week, getting it ready. Roberto says she's moving back. Maybe permanently. Isn't that exciting?"

"I'm thrilled," Philip said.

"I wonder how she'll find New York," Enid said. "Having been away for so long."

"Exactly the same, Auntie," Philip said. "You know New York never changes. The characters are different, but the play remains the same."

Later that afternoon, Enid Merle was putting the finishing touches on her daily gossip column when a sudden gust of wind slammed shut the door to her terrace. Crossing the room to open it, Enid caught sight of the sky and stepped outside. A mountain of thunderclouds had built up on the other side of the Hudson River and was rapidly approaching the city. This was unusual, Enid thought, as the early July day hadn't been particularly hot. Gazing upward, Enid spotted her neighbor Mrs. Louise Houghton on her own terrace, wearing an old straw hat and holding a pair of gardening shears in her gloved hand. In the last five years, Louise Houghton, who was nearing one hundred, had slowed down, spending most of her time attending to her prizewinning roses. "Hallo," Enid called loudly to Mrs. Houghton, who was known to be slightly deaf. "Looks like we're in for a big thunderstorm."

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Houghton said graciously, as if she were a queen addressing one of her loyal subjects. Enid would have been annoyed if not for the fact that this was Mrs. Houghton's standard response to just about everyone now.

"You might want to go inside," Enid said. Despite Mrs. Houghton's quaint grandeur, which was off-putting to some, Enid was fond of the old lady, the two having been neighbors for over sixty years.

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Houghton said again, and might have gone inside but for a flock of pigeons that flew abruptly out of

Washington Square Park, diverting her attention. In the next second, the sky turned black, and rain the size of pellets began to pummel Fifth Avenue. Enid hurried inside, losing sight of Mrs. Houghton, who was struggling against the rain on her spindly old legs. Another strong gust of wind released a lattice screen from its moorings and knocked the elegant old lady to her knees. Lacking the strength to stand, Louise Houghton tipped sideways onto her hip, shattering the fragile bone and preventing further movement. For several minutes, she lay in the rain until one of her four maids, unable to locate Mrs. Houghton in the vast seven-thousand-square-foot apartment, ventured outside and discovered her under the lattice.

Meanwhile, on the street below, two Town Cars were slowly making their way down Fifth Avenue like a small cortege. When they reached One Fifth, the drivers got out and, hunched against the rain and shouting instructions and oaths, began pulling out the luggage. The first piece was an old-fashioned Louis Vuitton steamer trunk that required the efforts of two men to lift. Roberto, the doorman, hurried out, paused under the awning, and called for backup before waving the men inside. A porter came up from the basement, pushing a large cart with brass poles. The drivers heaved the trunk onto the cart, and then one after another, each piece of matching luggage was piled on top.

Down the street, a strong gust of wind ripped an umbrella out of the hands of a businessman, turning it inside out. It scuttled across the pavement like a witch's broom, coming to rest on the wheel of a shiny black SUV that had just pulled up to the entrance. Spotting the passenger in the backseat, Roberto decided to brave the rain. Picking up a green-and-white golf umbrella, he brandished it like a sword as he hurried out from under the awning. Reaching the SUV, he angled it expertly against the wind so as to protect the emerging passenger.

A blue-and-green brocade shoe with a kitten heel appeared, followed by the famous long legs, clad in narrow white jeans. Then a hand with the slim, elegant fingers of an artist; on the middle

finger was a large aquamarine ring. At last Schiffer Diamond herself got out of the car. She hadn't changed at all, Roberto thought, taking her hand to help her out. "Hello, Roberto," she said, as easily as if she'd been gone for two weeks instead of twenty years. "Crap weather, isn't it?"

Act One

I

Billy Litchfield strolled by One Fifth at least twice a day. He once had a dog, a Wheaten terrier, that had been given to him by Mrs. Houghton, who had raised Wheaten terriers on her estate on the Hudson. Wheaty had required two outings a day to the dog run in Washington Square Park, and Billy, who lived on Fifth Avenue just north of One Fifth, had developed the habit then of walking past One Fifth as part of his daily constitutional. One Fifth was one of his personal landmarks, a magnificent building constructed of a pale gray stone in the classic lines of the art deco era, and Billy, who had one foot in the new millennium and one foot in the café society of lore, had always admired it. "It shouldn't matter where you live as long as where you live is decent," he said to himself, but still, he aspired to live in One Fifth. He had aspired to live there for thirty-five years and had yet to make it.

For a short time, Billy had decided that aspiration was dead, or at least out of favor. This was just after 9/11, when the cynicism and shallowness that had beaten through the lifeblood of the city was interpreted as unnecessary cruelty, and it was all at once tacky to wish for anything other than world peace, and tacky not to appreciate what one had. But six years had passed, and like a racehorse,

New York couldn't be kept out of the gate, nor change its nature. While most of New York was in mourning, a secret society of bankers had brewed and stirred a giant cauldron of money, adding a dash of youth and computer technology, and voilà, a whole new class of the obscenely super-rich was born. This was perhaps bad for America, but it was good for Billy. Although a self-declared anachronism, lacking the appurtenances of what might be called a regular job, Billy acted as a sort of concierge to the very rich and successful, making introductions to decorators, art dealers, club impresarios, and members of the boards of both cultural establishments and apartment buildings. In addition to a nearly encyclopedic knowledge of art and antiquities, Billy was well versed in the finer points of jets and yachts, knew who owned what, where to go on vacation, and which restaurants to frequent.

Billy had very little money of his own, however. Possessing the fine nature of an aristocrat, Billy was a snob, especially when it came to money. He was happy to live among the rich and successful, to be witty at dinner and house parties, to advise what to say and how best to spend money, but he drew the line at soiling his own hands in the pursuit of filthy lucre.

And so, while he longed to live at One Fifth Avenue, he could never raise the desire in himself to make that pact with the devil to sell his soul for money. He was content in his rent-stabilized apartment for which he paid eleven hundred dollars a month. He often reminded himself that one didn't actually need money when one had very rich friends.

Upon returning from the park, Billy usually felt soothed by the morning air. But on this particular morning in July, Billy was despondent. While in the park he had sat down on a bench with *The New York Times* and discovered that his beloved Mrs. Houghton had passed away the night before. During the thunderstorm three days ago, Mrs. Houghton had been left out in the rain for no more than ten minutes, but it was still too late. A vicious pneumonia had set in, bringing her long life to a swift and speedy end and taking much of New York by surprise. Billy's only consolation was that her

obituary had appeared on the front page of the *Times*, which meant there were still one or two editors who remembered the traditions of a more refined age, when art mattered more than money, when one's contribution to society was more important than showing off the toys of one's wealth.

Thinking about Mrs. Houghton, Billy found himself lingering in front of One Fifth, staring up at the imposing facade. For years, One Fifth had been an unofficial club for successful artists of all kinds—the painters and writers and composers and conductors and actors and directors who possessed the creative energy that kept the city alive. Although not an artist herself, Mrs. Houghton, who had lived in the building since 1947, had been the arts' biggest patron, founding organizations and donating millions to art institutions both large and small. There were those who'd called her a saint.

In the past hour, the paparazzi apparently had decided a photograph of the building in which Mrs. Houghton had lived might be worth money, and had gathered in front of the entrance. As Billy took in the small group of photographers, badly dressed in misshapen T-shirts and jeans, his sensibilities were offended. All the best people are dead, he thought mournfully.

And then, since he was a New Yorker, his thoughts inevitably turned to real estate. What would happen to Mrs. Houghton's apartment? he wondered. Her children were in their seventies. Her grandchildren, he supposed, would sell it and take the cash, having denuded most of the Houghton fortune over the years, a fortune, like so many old New York fortunes, that turned out to be not quite as impressive as it had been in the seventies and eighties. In the seventies, a million dollars could buy you just about anything you wanted. Now it barely paid for a birthday party.

How New York had changed, Billy thought.

"Money follows art, Billy," Mrs. Houghton always said. "Money wants what it can't buy. Class and talent. And remember that while there's a talent for making money, it takes real talent to know how to spend it. And that's what you do so well, Billy."

And now who would spend the money to buy the Houghton place? It hadn't been redecorated in at least twenty years, trapped in the chintz of the eighties. But the bones of the apartment were magnificent—and it was one of the grandest apartments in Manhattan, a proper triplex built for the original owner of One Fifth, which had once been a hotel. The apartment had twelve-foot ceilings and a ballroom with a marble fireplace, and wraparound terraces on all three floors.

Billy hoped it wouldn't be someone like the Brewers, although it probably would be. Despite the chintz, the apartment was worth at least twenty million dollars, and who could afford it except for one of the new hedge-funders? And considering some of those types, the Brewers weren't bad. At least the wife, Connie, was a former ballet dancer and friend. The Brewers lived uptown and owned a hideous new house in the Hamptons where Billy was going for the weekend. He would tell Connie about the apartment and how he could smooth their entry with the head of the board, the extremely unpleasant Mindy Gooch. Billy had known Mindy "forever"—meaning from the mid-eighties, when he'd met her at a party. She was Mindy Welch back then, fresh off the boat from Smith College. Full of brio, she was convinced she was about to become the next big thing in publishing. In the early nineties, she got herself engaged to James Gooch, who had just won a journalism award. Once again Mindy had had all kinds of grand schemes, picturing she and James as the city's next power couple. But none of it had worked out as planned, and now Mindy and James were a middle-aged, middle-class couple with creative pretensions who couldn't afford to buy their own apartment today. Billy often wondered how they'd been able to buy in One Fifth in the first place. The unexpected and tragic early death of a parent, he guessed.

He stood a moment longer, wondering what the photographers were waiting for. Mrs. Houghton was dead and had passed away in the hospital. No one related to her was likely to come walking out; there wouldn't even be the thrill of the body being taken away,

zipped up in a body bag, as one sometimes saw in these buildings filled with old people. At that instant, however, none other than Mindy Gooch strolled out of the building. She was wearing jeans and those fuzzy slippers that people pretended were shoes and were in three years ago. She was shielding the face of a young teenaged boy as if afraid for his safety. The photographers ignored them.

"What is all this?" she asked, spotting Billy and approaching him for a chat.

"I imagine it's for Mrs. Houghton."

"Is she finally dead?" Mindy said.

"If you want to look at it that way," Billy said.

"How else can one look at it?" Mindy said.

"It's that word 'finally,'" Billy said. "It's not nice."

"Mom," the boy said.

"This is my son, Sam," Mindy said.

"Hello, Sam," Billy said, shaking the boy's hand. He was surprisingly attractive, with a mop of blond hair and dark eyes. "I didn't know you had a child," Billy remarked.

"He's thirteen," Mindy said. "We've had him quite a long time."

Sam pulled away from her.

"Will you kiss me goodbye, please?" Mindy said to her son.

"I'm going to see you in, like, forty-eight hours," Sam protested.

"Something could happen. I could get hit by a bus. And then your last memory will be of how you wouldn't kiss your mother goodbye before you went away for the weekend."

"Mom, please," Sam said. But he relented. He kissed her on the cheek.

Mindy gazed at him as he ran across the street. "He's that age," she said to Billy. "He doesn't want his mommy anymore. It's terrible."

Billy nodded cautiously. Mindy was one of those aggressive New York types, as tightly wound as two twisted pieces of rope. You never knew when the rope might unwind and hit you. That rope, Billy often thought, might even turn into a tornado. "I know exactly what you mean." He sighed.

"Do you?" she said, her eyes beaming in on him. There was a glassy look to *les yeux*, thought Billy. Perhaps she was on drugs. But in the next second, she calmed down and repeated, "So Mrs. Houghton's finally dead."

"Yes," Billy said, slightly relieved. "Don't you read the papers?"

"Something came up this morning." Mindy's eyes narrowed. "Should be interesting to see who tries to buy the apartment."

"A rich hedge-funder, I would imagine."

"I hate them, don't you?" Mindy said. And without saying goodbye, she turned on her heel and walked abruptly away.

Billy shook his head and went home.

Mindy went to the deli around the corner. When she returned, the photographers were still on the sidewalk in front of One Fifth. Mindy was suddenly enraged by their presence.

"Roberto," Mindy said, getting in the doorman's face. "I want you to call the police. We need to get rid of those photographers."

"Okay, Missus Mindy," Roberto said.

"I mean it, Roberto. Have you noticed that there are more and more of these paparazzi types on the street lately?"

"It's because of all the celebrities," Roberto said. "I can't do anything about them."

"Someone should do something," Mindy said. "I'm going to talk to the mayor about it. Next time I see him. If he can drum out smokers and trans fat, he can certainly do something about these hoodlum photographers."

"He'll be sure to listen to you," Roberto said.

"You know, James and I do know him," Mindy said. "The mayor. We've known him for years. From before he was the mayor."

"I'll try to shoo them away," Roberto said. "But it's a free country."

"Not anymore," Mindy said. She walked past the elevator and opened the door to her ground-floor apartment.

The Gooches' apartment was one of the oddest in the building, consisting of a string of rooms that had once been servants' quarters and storage rooms. The apartment was an unwieldy shape of

boxlike spaces, dead-end rooms, and dark patches, reflecting the inner psychosis of James and Mindy Gooch and shaping the psychology of their little family. Which could be summed up in one word: dysfunctional.

In the summer, the low-ceilinged rooms were hot; in the winter, cold. The biggest room in the warren, the one they used as their living room, had a shallow fireplace. Mindy imagined it as a room once occupied by a majordomo, the head of all servants. Perhaps he had lured young female maids into his room and had sex with them. Perhaps he had been gay. And now, eighty years later, here she and James lived in those same quarters. It felt historically wrong. After years and years of pursuing the American dream, of aspirations and university educations and hard, hard work, all you got for your efforts these days were servants' quarters in Manhattan. And being told you were lucky to have them. While upstairs, one of the grandest apartments in Manhattan was empty, waiting to be filled by some wealthy banker type, probably a young man who cared only about money and nothing about the good of the country or its people, who would live like a little king. In an apartment that morally should have been hers and James's.

In a tiny room at the edge of the apartment, her husband, James, with his sweet balding head and messy blond comb-over, was pecking away mercilessly at his computer, working on his book, distracted and believing, as always, that he was on the edge of failure. Of all his feelings, this edge-of-failure feeling was the most prominent. It dwarfed all other feelings, crowding them out and pushing them to the edge of his consciousness, where they squatted like old packages in the corner of a room. Perhaps there were good things in those packages, useful things, but James hadn't the time to unwrap them.

James heard the soft thud of the door in the other part of the apartment as Mindy came in. Or perhaps he only sensed her presence. He'd been around Mindy for so long, he could feel the vibrations she set off in the air. They weren't particularly soothing vibrations, but they were familiar.

Mindy appeared before him, paused, then sat down in his old leather club chair, purchased at the fire sale in the Plaza when the venerable hotel was sold for condos for even more rich people. "James," she said.

"Yes," James said, barely looking up from his computer.

"Mrs. Houghton's dead."

James stared at her blankly.

"Did you know that?" Mindy asked.

"It was all over the Internet this morning."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you knew."

"I'm the head of the board, and you didn't tell me," Mindy said. "I just ran into Billy Litchfield. *He* told me. It was embarrassing."

"Don't you have better things to worry about?" James asked.

"Yes, I do. And now I've got to worry about that apartment. And who's going to move into it. And what kind of people they're going to be. Why don't we live in that apartment?"

"Because it's worth about twenty million dollars, and we don't happen to have twenty million dollars lying around?" James said.

"And whose fault is that?" Mindy said.

"Mindy, please," James said. He scratched his head. "We've discussed this a million times. There is nothing *wrong* with our apartment."

On the thirteenth floor, the floor below the three grand floors that had been Mrs. Houghton's apartment, Enid Merle stood on her terrace, thinking about Louise. The top of the building was tiered like a wedding cake, so the upper terraces were visible to those below. How shocking that only three days ago, she'd been standing in this very spot, conversing with Louise, her face shaded in that ubiquitous straw hat. Louise had never allowed the sun to touch her skin, and she'd rarely moved her face, believing that facial expressions caused wrinkles. She'd had at least two face-lifts, but

nevertheless, even on the day of the storm, Enid remembered noting that Louise's skin had been astoundingly smooth. Enid was a different story. Even as a little girl, she'd hated all that female fussiness and overbearing attention to one's appearance. Nevertheless, due to the fact that she was a public persona, Enid had eventually succumbed to a face-lift by the famous Dr. Baker, whose society patients were known as "Baker's Girls." At eighty-two, Enid had the face of a sixty-five-year-old, although the rest of her was not only creased but as pleasantly speckled as a chicken.

For those who knew the history of the building and its occupants, Enid Merle was not only its second oldest resident—after Mrs. Houghton—but in the sixties and seventies, one of its most notorious. Enid, who had never married and had a degree in psychology from Columbia University (making her one of the college's first women to earn one), had taken a job as a secretary at the *New York Star* in 1948, and given her fascination with the antics of humanity, and possessing a sympathetic ear, had worked her way into the gossip department, eventually securing her own column. Having spent the early part of her life on a cotton farm in Texas, Enid always felt slightly the outsider and approached her work with the good Southern values of kindness and sympathy. Enid was known as the "nice" gossip columnist, and it had served her well: When actors and politicians were ready to tell their side of a story, they called Enid. In the early eighties, the column had been syndicated, and Enid had become a wealthy woman. She'd been trying to retire for ten years, but her name, argued her employers, was too valuable, and so Enid worked with a staff that gathered information and wrote the column, although under special circumstances, Enid would write the column herself. Louise Houghton's death was one such circumstance.

Thinking about the column she would have to write about Mrs. Houghton, Enid felt a sharp pang of loss. Louise had had a full and glamorous life—a life to be envied and admired—and had died without enemies, save perhaps for Flossie Davis, who was Enid's stepmother. Flossie lived across the street, having abandoned One

Fifth in the early sixties for the conveniences of a new high-rise. But Flossie was crazy and always had been, and Enid reminded herself that this pang of loss was a feeling she'd carried all her life—a longing for something that always seemed to be just out of reach. It was, Enid thought, simply the human condition. There were inherent questions in the very nature of being alive that couldn't be answered but only endured.

Usually, Enid did not find these thoughts depressing but, rather, exhilarating. In her experience, she'd found that most people did not manage to grow up. Their bodies got older, but this did not necessarily mean the mind matured in the proper way. Enid did not find this truth particularly bothersome, either. Her days of being upset about the unfairness of life and the inherent unreliability of human beings to do the right thing were over. Having reached old age, she considered herself endlessly lucky. If you had a little bit of money and most of your health, if you lived in a place with lots of other people and interesting things going on all the time, it was very pleasant to be old. No one expected anything of you but to live. Indeed, they applauded you merely for getting out of bed in the morning.

Spotting the paparazzi below, Enid realized she ought to tell Philip about Mrs. Houghton's passing. Philip was not an early riser, but Enid considered the news important enough to wake him. She knocked on his door and waited for a minute, until she heard Philip's sleepy, annoyed voice call out, "Who is it?"

"It's me," Enid said.

Philip opened the door. He was wearing a pair of light blue boxer shorts. "Can I come in?" Enid asked. "Or do you have a young lady here?"

"Good morning to you, too, Nini," Philip said, holding the door so she could enter. "Nini" was Philip's pet name for Enid, having come up with it when he was one and was first learning to talk. Philip had been and was still, at forty-five, a precocious child, but this wasn't perhaps his fault, Enid thought. "And you know they're not young ladies anymore," he added. "There's nothing ladylike about them."

"But they're still young. Too young," Enid said. She followed Philip into the kitchen. "Louise Houghton died last night. I thought you might want to know."

"Poor Louise," Philip said. "The ancient mariner returns to the sea. Coffee?"

"Please," Enid said. "I wonder what will happen to her apartment. Maybe they'll split it up. You could buy the fourteenth floor. You've got plenty of money."

"Sure," Philip said.

"If you bought the fourteenth floor, you could get married. And have room for children," Enid said.

"I love you, Nini," Philip said. "But not that much."

Enid smiled. She found Philip's sense of humor charming. And Philip was so good-looking—endearingly handsome in that boyish way that women find endlessly pleasing—that she could never be angry with him. He wore his dark hair one length, clipped below the ears so it curled over his collar like a spaniel's, and when Enid looked at him, she still saw the sweet five-year-old boy who used to come to her apartment after kindergarten, dressed in his blue school uniform and cap. He was such a good boy, even then. "Mama's sleeping, and I don't want to wake her. She's tired again. You don't mind if I sit with you, do you, Nini?" he would ask. And she didn't mind. She never minded anything about Philip.

"Roberto told me that one of Louise's relatives tried to get into the apartment last night," Enid said, "but he wouldn't let them in."

"It's going to get ugly," Philip said. "All those antiques."

"Sotheby's will sell them," Enid said, "and that will be the end of it. The end of an era."

Philip handed her a mug of coffee.

"There are always deaths in this building," he said.

"Mrs. Houghton was old," Enid said and, quickly changing the subject, asked, "What are you going to do today?"

"I'm still interviewing researchers," Philip said.

A diversion, Enid thought, but decided not to delve into it. She

could tell by Philip's attitude that his writing wasn't going well again. He was joyous when it was and miserable when it wasn't.

Enid went back to her apartment and attempted to work on her column about Mrs. Houghton, but found that Philip had distracted her more than usual. Philip was a complicated character. Technically, he wasn't her nephew but a sort of second cousin—his grandmother Flossie Davis was Enid's stepmother. Enid's own mother had died when she was a girl, and her father had met Flossie backstage at Radio City Music Hall during a business trip to New York. Flossie was a Rockette and, after a quick marriage, had tried to live with Enid and her father in Texas. She'd lasted six months, at which point Enid's father had moved the family to New York. When Enid was twenty, Flossie had had a daughter, Anna, who was Philip's mother. Like Flossie, Anna was very beautiful, but plagued by demons. When Philip was nineteen, she'd killed herself. It was a violent, messy death. She'd thrown herself off the top of One Fifth.

It was the kind of thing that people always assume they will never forget, but that wasn't true, Enid thought. Over time, the healthy mind had a way of erasing the most unpleasant details. So Enid didn't remember the exact circumstances of what had happened on the day Anna had died; nor did she recall exactly what had happened to Philip after his mother's death. She recalled the outlines—the drug addiction, the arrest, the fact that Philip had spent two weeks in jail, and the consequent months in rehab—but she was fuzzy on the specifics. Philip had taken his experiences and turned them into the novel *Summer Morning*, for which he'd won the Pulitzer Prize. But instead of pursuing an artistic career, Philip had become commercial, caught up in Hollywood glamour and money.

In the apartment next door, Philip was also sitting in front of his computer, determined to finish a scene in his new screenplay, *Bridesmaids Revisited*. He wrote two lines of dialogue and then, in frustration, shut down his computer. He got into the shower, wondering once more if he was losing his touch.