

IN MY SISTER'S COUNTRY

Chapter One

IN MY SISTER'S COUNTRY, the refrigerator is filled with half-empty jars of chocolate fudge and questionable eggs; the bathtub overflows because she falls asleep while the water rises to her nostrils; bottles of dark liquor move from cabinet to cabinet around the apartment as if they're trying to run from someone; cartons of cigarettes are tucked between her hatboxes so I can steal my smokes without bothering her; three televisions are always on with the day's news, on different stations; there are deadbolts inside her bedroom door so no one can get inside while she's in there, unless they climb three flights of brick wall, up the side of the building, like the spiders that look for a warm supper in her apartment.

-Do you have any concept of what you're doing? Amanda said one morning, throwing open the door into the guest room. I watched the doorknob dig a little deeper into the wall; she'd gotten mad before at someone sitting on that bed.

My sister wore this long, transparent nightgown, and her eyes worked themselves into a land of frenzy.

-It's a school assignment. I'm supposed to write about a family member as if they're a country, I said.

-Well, if you're a country, it must take the Polar Express to get there, she said. For emphasis, she went over to my window and tried to slam it shut. She had to brace her knee against the black snow on the ledge, and the cold Chicago air rippled through her gown. I heard the weights inside the frame knock against the wood, but the window barely budged.

-I told you, it's stuck. That's why I'm wearing my jacket, I said.

I wondered if Nathaniel liked that nightgown on her. I thought it was slutty. Now it had a big, black stain near one of the knees.

-Jesus Christ, Molly, there are janitors, fix-it men for this kind of thing. How many times do I have to say it? The spiders are driving me out of my mind! You have to keep the windows shut at night. During the day, you can only open the ones with screens on them.

-There *aren't* any screens.

-Because it's fucking winter! I mean, I'm digging my car out of the snow with a pickax every blessed day and you want *screens* on the window. You don't even know what season this is, do you?

She walked over to the closet and moved a rebel sweater of mine from the left side to the right so it no longer bothered her clothes.

-Don't give a shit about the heating bills, the hours put in, how often my car breaks down, what the asshole accountant said yesterday. It's just what the hell, right? Amanda's taking care of things.

I'd told her about the window, several times—and that I couldn't breathe when the heat was cranked up.

But I hadn't told her about Nathaniel.

When my sister was out of the room one night, a couple of weeks ago, he offered to give me a ride on his motorcycle sometime. It was the first time I'd run into him. Before that, I'd stayed in the guest room trying to catch a look through the keyhole. But on that particular night, I heard Amanda go off to the kitchen and I saw him lingering in the hall. Maybe he was trying to puzzle out the weird art on my sister's walls. I stepped out of the study into the hall with my back to him and pretended to fiddle with the door as if I couldn't close it. Nathaniel came up behind me. His whisper tasted like oysters and gin.

When I told him I'd think about that motorcycle ride, he slipped his fingers through my robe and into my panties, his eyelids as low as they could go without closing. Just then, Amanda called out from the kitchen. I pulled away into the study and he was gone.

-Molly! my sister shouted. I reflected her sour face back to her.

-Mom used to leave the screens on all winter, I said.

-What? You're holding *her* up to me? A woman who doesn't believe in maintenance? Like she's some kind of window-screen expert? Look, I'm not chasing the goddamn janitor down to ask him why he removes the goddamn screens in the goddamn winter, Molly. The fucking spiders are killing me! she screamed, and pulled her nightgown up so it was covering her head. She was all torso and legs and hair so black it was like blue fur. Her nipples hard stones, the appendectomy scar silver as silverfish. From her snatch to her breasts she had large red welts.

Through her nightgown, I saw her mouth move when she said: Spider bites.

She lowered her gown and threw herself into the chair in the corner, exhausted from trying to communicate with me.

-Maybe they're not spiders, I said, closing my notebook so she couldn't read what I'd written.

-They're spiders and they itch! One starts to go away and five more show up. New ones every morning. God-

She rubbed her palm over the black mark on the material-Now I'll have to throw this out, she said, calmer now.

-Maybe they're Nathaniel's.

She looked at me the way she does when I say something that makes her think of me as her little prodigy-though I'm long past the precocious age. Then she pulled a pack of cigarettes off the bookshelf and ran a hand down my hair.

-You aren't smoking these things, are you? she asked as she pushed the butts around in the ashtray, looking for something with my mark on it.

-Because I promised her you wouldn't smoke, no matter what, my sister said and struck a match. She dragged on the unfiltered tobacco. I tried to breathe in as much of the smoke as I could.

Her eyes suddenly welled up.

-I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you, she said, touching one of my knees.

She liked to tell me I had perfect knees and perfect ankles and that she hated me for them. Amanda's legs were like table-legs.

-I don't feel like work today, she said, slipping back into the loose cushions of the chair.

I looked at the family photos, the people I didn't know, on the bookshelf, surrounding Amanda—people that in all likelihood I will never know. There was the uncle my mother no longer spoke to, though I couldn't recall the story, and the tragic great-aunt who'd been crushed under a horse. My sister exhumed all of them from a box of photographs my mother didn't know what to do with; she had never identified or labeled them. In an enthusiastic moment, Amanda must have thought that their uncomfortable faces and nameless lives would make me feel at home. And then there was the picture of Amanda and me, one of the very few taken of us together.

She was seated on an unfamiliar couch in a light-filled room, holding me in her lap. I was the passive baby, blank, unwilling, perhaps awed by sunlight. But what perplexed me was my sister's expression. She appeared to gloat as if she was happy for my arrival, but I sometimes think her face was a threat, too, a superstitious warning of things to come. Our mother liked to call Amanda a love child; Amanda liked to call me a mistake, since I came so many years after her, when things were starting to fall apart.

—Let's go downtown and take in a matinee, and then we'll just shop until dinner and then go over to Harry's and have the fattest steaks. You need some clothes, you know. You look terrible. Let's see what you're writing, she said.

—It's private, I said, pulling the notebook into my chest.

—It can't be private if you're writing it for school.

I held onto the spiral tablet as if it was my last possession, which it practically was. But she tried to wrestle it from me. Then she laughed and held out her hand.

—Give it to me, Imp. I *am* your guardian, you know.

We struggled and the tip of the metal binding gouged into one of those perfect knees of mine, raising a red line, forming a demilitarized zone. My sister finally let go and I held my palm over the shallow wound. But then she caught my other hand, the one still clutching the notebook. She took her cigarette and held it right next to my skin. Amanda was the reactive one, strictly reactive.

—Go ahead, I said.

—Just give me the notebook.

I doubled my efforts to get free. The notebook flew and my sister got it first. She sat back in her chair again. When she finished reading, she said: If I got this across my desk at work I'd tell the copy editor to throw it down the incinerator.

-My teacher says I like to get strong reactions from my readers, I said.

-You don't even understand the assignment. This has nothing to do with describing a country. There's no geography, no infrastructure, politics, social system....This is self-indulgent crap, she said.

I looked for a clean T-shirt. Amanda got up from her chair and dug her fingers into her hair. This tightened the skin around her eyes until she looked like some kind of dry, clawing creature.

-Can I have ten dollars; I'm out of money, I said, while looking for my shoes under the bed.

-Maybe you can scrounge up some money selling my old fudge jars on the street.

When I looked up, I saw my sister shaking her head at my pathetic nature. She threw the notebook onto the bed and said: Show this to your teacher, bratto, and you can expect a visit from Family Services. I'll gladly help them pack your bags for the first foster home.

My sister's dirty nightgown fluttered out of the room. The smoke curled and sucked up behind her into the hall. I heard the bathtub run. There were three morning shows on her televisions. It was her job, she explained, to keep up with The Media.

I found a doughnut I'd forgotten in my jacket pocket. It had come loose from the napkin and the frosting smeared against the lining. I threw the jacket in the corner (an extra little treat to keep the spiders coming). I get too fat when I eat breakfast.

I found one of my sister's old coats in the hall closet. She has a terrible time parting with anything.

Just as Amanda began to scream, I unfastened the front door locks.

-Molly! Can you come here?! Please?! I'm late for work!!!!
MOLLY!!!!

I couldn't fathom what would be worse: losing Mom or trying to survive Amanda. My sister's voice sailed with me all the way down the three flights, through the two downstairs doors of her apartment building, and out onto the street.

I had enough money to take the bus, or buy a dinner roll and Coke for lunch, or get this pair of blue sunglasses I'd seen that Friday in a secondhand store near the new school. I decided to use the money to call Amanda's boyfriend. Sometimes I like to imagine that in the last second I changed my mind and listened instead to the coins dropping through the phone right into the coin return; that I went to school that day with the sole purpose of buying those blue glasses. I've often wondered if my sister understood that there was something fated about my relationship with Nathaniel. I wonder if she had dreams about the way things would turn out with him.

The phone booth was gummy with someone's spilled hot chocolate. I stuck and unstuck my shoes as I dialed. When Nathaniel's secretary asked who I was, I said an old friend from out of town.

She didn't like me or the idea of me, but she finally mumbled something and covered the phone. I heard her laugh with another woman, and then she rang me through.

I decided the best accent to use was French. I failed French three times, but my teacher always wondered how such a stupid girl could have such a flawless accent. I'm convinced all French teachers have bitter personalities. Probably because they had to leave France. I lit one of my sister's cigarettes and blew the smoke into the phone as if it was Nathaniel's ear.

-'Ello, I hope I don't catch you at a bad time, I said, letting my voice fill with the ambiance of Paris.

I could see him smiling at the other end of the line, charmed from the first. His office overlooked the choppy lake—and I was certain he stopped reading the papers on his desk and looked out at the mixed-up water.

-Who is this? he said in that mocking tone of his.

-I don't know how you say...it's about your motor scooter."

-Jesus. What...?

-Oh, *non, ce n'est rien*. Everything's fine. It's just...this will sound impossible to you, I'm afraid. I've seen your 'Arley parked on Sutton. I guess we're neighbors. And a friend of mine works at the, uhn, how you say, Vehicles Department?

My sister's apartment was on Sutton.

-Department of Motor Vehicles, he said.

-*Mais oui*. And I asked her if she could get your name for me and then you were listed in the book of the phone and I felt particularly, how you say, *courageuse*, this morning.

I lifted one of my shoes again just to hear the sound of it unsticking from the moist chocolate. Across the street in the park, a man pushed a girl on a swing, fighting the breeze off the lake. Some acts, some images make life seem so normal, I thought.

-Yes? he laughed. It would be like him to find something amusing about a word like "courage."

-Well, I'm looking to purchase an... 'Arley and I really don't know anything about American motor scooters and you seem to have such a...sympathetic *figure*, face. This truly is silliness, I'm sorry, I should not have disturbed....

Even then I knew that Nathaniel had anything but a sympathetic face. He said something but a semitruck went by and I had to shout: What?!

He wanted to know if some guy named David put me up to this. It took a while to convince him I was for real. Then he said: Look, could I call you back in a few minutes; something's come up here. What's your number?

I figured he'd try something clever like that. But I was prepared. I told him I was staying with this elderly couple, my sponsors, while I did modeling work in the States. I promised I wouldn't receive many phone calls at their place.

-But...perhaps you would let me buy you a cup of coff...an espresso for to bother you this way, I said.

-It would help to know your name, he said. He was such an easy man.

I had my thumb in *Beginner's French, Part Two*, and let it slide down the list of common female names.

-Yvonne, I said.

-Yvonne what?

Since I felt certain my troubles were seasonal in nature, I said: *Printemps*. Yvonne Printemps.

Then I lost my grip on the book and it hit the dead chocolate. I decided to leave it there for the next caller with a penchant for foreign languages. Meantime, I was sure Nathaniel put his shoes up on his desk and thought about the spring before he spoke again.

-Yvonne. Yvonne, he said, drifting for a while.

Drifting on the lake away from Amanda, where we all wanted to drift.

-You're a model, Yvonne?

Funny, but each time he said that name, Yvonne, it felt more possible to own it.

-Oui, uhn, lingerie, how you say, nightie gowns? Mostly for a French catalog.

-Yvonne...this is a practical joke. Right?

-No, no, no, I wouldn't....

-What the...alright, he said, laughing at himself. He asked if I was familiar with a little hamburger place called Drummond's and suggested we meet at one o'clock the next day.

The line went dead, but the phone continued to hum, spiked with all that current. I kept the receiver pressed to my ear, hoping to be electrocuted by his scent, by any trace moisture that might have seeped through the phone from his voice. It seemed obvious at the time, that he didn't love my sister or he'd never agree to meet a lingerie hanger. (That's what my sister called models-hangers-because they cost her magazine too much money.) I thought it was pretty obvious he was just one of many to her. But if I had come right out and asked her, if I had told her I had a terrible thing for her boyfriend, she would have suddenly thought she wanted Nathaniel like lungs want air. She would have tormented him for a month or two with overboard passion until she got sick of the game of him; my sister had her ways. And so, I figured, why put him through all that?

I opened the phone-booth door and lit a fresh cigarette.

It wasn't that cold out. There were holes in the dirty ice clinging to the curb and I watched the melted snow rush toward the gutters. I used to dread the warm seasons because I was impossible then. I couldn't stay in and I couldn't sit still and I couldn't breathe and I couldn't eat.

I knew my sister would kick me out when the spring got serious. I thought she'd find some lost aunt who never had children and send me to her. I considered, however, that the aunt would turn out to be a pushover who lived by herself on an old farm. In time, I'd inherit all the money stashed under the floorboards of her farmhouse. Then I could go over to Paris and model nightie-gowns.

Or Nathaniel would take me in.

I was cracking myself up when my sister's car cursed its way toward the curb.

-Get in, she said, opening the door. But as soon as I tried to, she made a pissy remark about the way the bottom edge of the door was scraping against the concrete and ice. So I backed up and said: I don't mind walking.

-Get in. Just pull up on the armrest.

I jimmied and played with the door and the amount of weight I put into the car so my sister's precious little roadster wouldn't suddenly roll over on its back, feet in the air, and die on her. I slammed the door and Amanda pulled into the stream of traffic heading downtown.

-I was calling to you before you left, didn't you hear me?

-No.

-Now I'm going to be even later. If you hear me screaming my head off, don't leave the house, okay? she said, honking at a sports car that wanted her lane.

-Okay.

-Here's fifty, is that enough?

I put the bills up to my nose, inhaling possibilities.

-This is for one week. *Alright?* Don't ask me for any more until Monday. Lunches, buses, and so on. *Alright?* Look, can I let you out here? I have to get on the Drive, she said, pulling over to the curb again.

-Jesus, I almost forgot. I set up a doctor's appointment for you. Here's the card, she said, drawing it from her wallet.

It read: DR. WILLIAM SANDERS, OB GYN, blah, blah, blah.

-That's today at four o'clock. Not next week. Or the week after. Today. He'll give you a prescription for the Pill. Just bring the prescription home. Edith can get it filled, okay? The thought of you getting pregnant is more than I can bear, she said. Her eyes began to swim again.

-Make sure and take the B train. God, whatever you do—she said to herself more than me—Don't take the A. I can just see you ending up on the West Side with some guy shoving a knife in your guts, and then you'll be in the hospital and Mom will be in the hospice and I'll be driving back and forth between the two of you all day, out of my mind.

I guess I didn't look sufficiently alerted.

-You have my number if anything happens to you. And Edith is there to help, okay?

I held the appointment card and said: But what if I'm still a virgin?

-That never lasts, she said in a cheerless way.

I hung on the door long enough to look at my sister. Amanda had a face Vermeer would have painted. She had a face shaped for ideal light, my mother liked to say. There was a sadness that had suckered every boy within reach since she was three years old—though she complained about the parts of her face as if she had a desperate need for reconstruction.

-I read that sperm can penetrate blue jeans, I said above the traffic noise.

-Just keep the appointment, she shouted. Then she leaned over, grabbed the door away from me and was gone.

I took a taxi to school that day and I really didn't mind that the driver kept getting lost along the way. You never know if it's intentional—that kind of getting lost—when you're suddenly driving down Chicago streets you've never even heard of, the meter out of control. But I cut the guy some slack, thinking maybe he was a foreigner or had a debilitating disease, or maybe he was an urban vampire dying at the wheel. Maybe the money he got from that one fare would support his family for a week, a day anyway. It didn't really matter in the end; the streets kept coming and I used the time to collect my thoughts. I would never understand my sister.

That pushy brain of hers was burning out like old paint cans and rags stored for the occasion.

I used to think the striking thing about Amanda was this intuitive stuff she had. Now I think we all have it, to one degree or another. Most of us try to keep it quiet because it isn't socially acceptable. Read enough *Ripley's Believe It or Not* and you realize most people are hiding something socially unacceptable. Or watch the news, or hang out anywhere really. You can see that people hide things in their faces. They'll let you see that much, that they're busy hiding something. And they always think those secrets make them more important than you, that it gives them some kind of godly power.

My sister hated her intuition because it was mostly about bad stuff. Nightmares that came true. So she tried staying up all night and she tried knocking herself out to avoid them. Sleeping pills, copious quantities of alcohol, light Chinese food before bed, heavy German breakfasts, bouts on the exercise bike, periods of lying on her bed like the Crucifixion but in a bloodless, groaning way from too much dark chocolate and coffee.

Her marriage was the worst.

She was nineteen and it lasted for all of six months. I was her only bridesmaid, so Amanda spent a ton on the clothes. She decided we were going to look like bored flappers with too much time on our hands. Something her fiancé Peter would find out too late. A Hungarian woman sewed thousands of dollars' worth of tiny colored beads onto our dresses. They crunched and chipped whenever I tried to sit on one of the dining chairs rented for the reception. I'm sure my sister was careful not to sit on anything hard or difficult the entire day.

The reception was held at our house, because Peter insisted on it, and he was footing the bill. My sister was so caught up in school—and the stellar career she intended from the first—she wasn't up for a fight. And then, as long as our mother was willing to do all the work....

I was looking for the long, ivory cigarette holder my sister paid too much for down in Chinatown. One of my bridesmaid gifts. I had just started smoking, to get through the event. When I couldn't find it in my bedroom, I walked into Amanda's room. Too drunk to turn on the high light, I let things slowly take form in the dim glow from the closet. I rummaged through the overflow of wedding presents on her dressers, my fingers playing along the tissue paper of the open boxes.

—Take anything you want! Amanda's voice jumped at me from the dark. She was always sneaking up on me in that old house, jarring my heart. I realized she had been sitting on the edge of her bed the whole time.

—Sorry. I was looking for the cigarette holder.

—I think Peter was playing with it, she said.

Whenever I think of Peter I think of his broken nose. I believe she married him for his broken nose. She needed someone she could pull in close, who looked to the world the way she felt inside.

—Sit down, she said.

I sat next to her and listened to the party growing drunk and stupid in our mother's house. Amanda found a couple of cigarettes for us. There was something pleasant about smoking with my sister in those days, when she didn't talk about lung cancer or her responsibility to watch out for me.

-I had the worst dream in the world last night, she said, blowing her words into smoke rings that caught the closet light and disappeared.

-I don't want to hear it, I said.

-She was dead....

I covered my ears.

When I thought Amanda was finished, I took my hands away.

She started in again.

-You wanted to bury her under the ballroom. We had these long crowbars....

-You're worried because you're abandoning her, I interrupted.

-No, she said and looked at me as if I would never get anything right.

-She *died* and we *buried her* underneath the floorboards of the ballroom.

My sister enunciated every word as if the problem, all of life's problems, was my hearing.

-God, I hate it when you start psychologizing, she said.

-Every other week it's some new shitty nightmare, I said.

-Like it's my fault, she said, laughing at her dumb little sister.

-Mom's not going to die.

I grew quiet; determined that Amanda wouldn't get to me this time.

-Remember when I saw our grandfather's death? And when I knew that woman Dorothy was going to get into a car accident? And....

She stopped, took the cigarette from my hand and stubbed it out next to her cigarette. Then she insisted on taking both of my hands in hers. There wasn't a thing I could do about it because it was her wedding day; I knew I had to try to be nice. And, if I struggled, the ashtray would dump over both our dresses.

-Look, Molly, what I'm trying to say is you'll never have to worry about someone being there for you as long as I'm around.

I slipped my hands away and reached over and blinded both of us when I turned on the bedside lamp.

-Are you on cocaine? I asked in all seriousness. I waited for her to open her eyes again so I could squint at her pupils.

-You sound like you're on cocaine.

-What do you know about cocaine, Imp?

-Probably more than you think.

I hadn't tried it, but a friend of mine had, in the bathroom at school. She told me it makes you larger than life—for a while. In any case, with my sister, even in those days, you had to sound like you knew everything; it was the only way she respected you.

She pushed her hip against mine, beads grinding against beads, to get me off her bed.

When I stood up, I think something occurred to her.

She said: I hope you aren't still worried about life being fair.