

## ROSALIE

The dark mahogany, four-poster bed groaned as Rosalie inched her way toward the edge of the mattress. So as not to wake Jeff, she resisted the impulse to spring to the floor, instead she lifted her weight by small increments, from a sitting to a standing position. He rolled over and settled in the sagging middle part. She glanced at her husband's contour outlined against the moon-blanch window.

Never again would she sleep with this man.

Earlier, he had burst into the bedroom with his tie undone and the smell of beer on his breath. His words still rang in her ears. "I don't want you near that photographer ever again." He spoke with care so as not to slur his speech.

"What are you talking about?" She needed time to collect her thoughts.

"You never told me you worked naked."

He must have followed her to the studio. She suppressed her anger. "Don't be silly, I model beachwear for a catalogue. I'm not wearing a snow suit but I'm not naked. This is the thirties, not the stone age."

He steadied himself on the carved column of the matrimonial bed he had inherited from his parents. "Well, no wife of mine's gonna expose herself publicly like that. You're quitting that job as of this instant."

"Come on Jeff, you don't mean that." From his look, he did. "I've done nothing wrong. Why should I give up my new job?"

"Because I say so."

Her father had used the same words. "I'm not quitting."

"Fine. I'll do it for you. First thing in the morning."

"The heck you will." She headed for the door.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her onto the bed.

"Don't touch me," she warned.

"Don't worry." He shot out of the room. She heard him stomp downstairs.

Within minutes, he was back in the bedroom with his toolbox and a board. He slammed the door shut, placed the wooden slat diagonally over the doorframe and drove long nails into it. The first impact of the hammer stunned Rosalie. She was locked in a room with her tormentor. Hell no. When it hit the second nail, she made up her mind to leave Jeff.

Having feigned sleep for hours while planning her escape, Rosalie now moved swiftly. In the semi-darkness that precedes daybreak, she packed, selecting her clothes by touch. She put on the green dress that matched her eyes. The full skirt would be comfortable for the long train trip.

Jeff had fallen asleep in his clothes. When she snapped shut her suitcase, he turned, exposing his money side. With the skill of a pickpocket, she extracted his wallet and took out the bills. Without a sound, she searched his jacket for the coins she'd need for the bus.

Outside, glass clinked, followed by a thump. She waited for the milkman and the paperboy to turn the corner before opening the window. A recent coat of paint had sealed it shut. Rosalie suppressed a curse. She ran her nail file along the edges. Jeff sat up. She waited, still as a church statue, until he sank back on the pillow then she jerked open the window with a quick, upward motion. A cool wind swept past her, ushering in the smell of cut grass. Jeff hiccupped.

He didn't wake.

She wrapped her suitcase in the bedspread so it wouldn't explode on impact, and hoisted the bundle over the sill, aiming for the lawn. It landed with a thud. One last thing needed to be done. She pulled off her wedding band and placed it on the dresser. A second later she took it back and dropped it into her pocket instead. You never knew when a gold ring might come in handy.

Rosalie grabbed her reptile leather handbag and matching heels, and straddled the window's ledge. Wrapping her free hand around the thick wisteria vine she began her downward climb. A breeze made her dress billow around her bare legs. She was as sure-footed now as she had been six years ago when, at sixteen, she had escaped her father's strict curfew by sliding down a rusty gutter. She touched grass inches from her suitcase.

Rosalie used her skirt to wipe the dew from her feet. Before slipping on her shoes, she uncapped the milk bottle, took a slug of the cream that floated on top and grabbed the folded newspaper which showed half of Eleanor Roosevelt's smiling face.

Jeff's money paid for the bus fare and her train ticket out of Texas.

The men in Stetsons and boots raised their eyes from morning papers as she walked through the compartment. She sucked in her gut and let her hair bounce with every step. She felt their gazes follow her down the aisle. One man stood out. He wore a too-hot-for-August wool suit, brown shoes and dark glasses. He touched the rim of his Fedora and offered to help with her suitcase. She rewarded him with a smile. He shuffled other people's bags so as to place hers on the rack above her seat. All her possessions were now crammed into this valise but she wasn't complaining. Freedom had a price. Freedom: the word tossed in her mind like a balloon in a wind tunnel.

She had met Jeff in New York. He had been on a business trip. A storm brought them together. To avoid the rain, he wandered into the theatre where she was showing off her high-kicks as a chorus girl. He never took his eyes off her and returned four days in a row with flowers on his lap. Later, during their short courtship, he brought her food instead of flowers. She had been a kid during the Depression and she was still hungry.

When she ran off to Houston with him, she was sixteen and he forty. In the early days, she enjoyed the role of pampered wife, but it hadn't taken long for her to resent his possessiveness.

Amidst a metallic rattle, the train shook loose from the platform. As it left the station, plumes of steam escaped from the locomotive and formed a parallel line above the cars—first straight, and then serpentine as the connected cars embraced the curves of the tracks. With every turn, particles of airborne charcoal flew through the open window and nestled in her hair. In New York, there would be no one to notice her new blond look. A twinge of panic gripped her heart. Where would she stay? What if she didn't find a job? Had she made a terrible mistake?

As the sun rose high over the Texan landscape and the rotating fans were ineffective beyond a few feet of their locations, Rosalie visualized the two-piece swimsuit she was scheduled to model that morning. She had been accustomed to getting a paycheck. She unfolded Jeff's newspaper. "Tracking Down Lepke," she started to read the article. Tom Dewey, an ambitious district attorney was asking New York, City to offer a reward of \$25,000 for the capture of Louis Buchalter, head of Murder, Inc.

\$25,000! With a fortune like that, she'd be set for life. She'd never have to count pennies again and never, ever again have to skip breakfast. The thought of food made her stomach

giddy. Clutching her purse, she threaded her way to the dining car and opened the door. The effect was bedazzling: white tablecloths were adorned with starched napkins, folded like something she had seen on nun's heads. At the epicenter of each table stood a cut crystal vase with a single pink carnation. She fingered the change in her pocket. What the heck! Feast today, starve tomorrow. At the age of six, she had said that at the dinner table and her father had smacked her across the face.

The waiter's broad smile exposed sparkling teeth that matched his uniform and the rest of the decor. He pulled back the chair, unfolded the napkin and placed it on her lap.

"I'll have porridge and toast," she said without looking at the temptations on the menu. Oats expanded in the stomach and gave the sensation of fullness, she remembered from childhood. Coffee would be heavenly but she ordered water instead.

The man with the Fedora placed his hand on the back of the chair opposite her. "May I? Everything else is reserved."

She glanced at the empty dinning car. It made her laugh. "So, I see."

He sat but didn't remove his hat, nor his dark glasses. "I feel like celebrating. I'll treat you to a meal." he said.

"I ordered oatmeal."

"That's for orphans. I'm talking food." He had a New York accent.

"Normally I'd refuse but I'll make an exception."

"I'm honored. Name's Leo."

"Rosalie." His lingering handshake left her palm moist.

The waiter arrived with a steaming bowl placed on a doily on top of a large plate. The toast, accompanied by a little jug of honey rested on another doily placed on a smaller plate.

"Bring the young lady the filet mignon, coffee for me," Leo told the waiter.

Her mouth watered. She mustn't look too eager. "Actually...I'd prefer the spaghetti."

"Get both." He turned to the waiter. "Spaghetti, in addition to the filet mignon."

"Sir, I'm awfully sorry but we don't serve entrées until noon."

"You will today."

"I'll see what I can do." The waiter bowed.

"I'm fine with breakfast," Rosalie said.

"I'm not. You're going to get your entrées." He lowered his glasses over his large nose.

Rosalie saw a pair of piercing eyes. She blew on the porridge. "Mind if I start?"

Leo leaned back and watched her eat. "It's been a long time since I ate like that. So, where you headed?"

"The Big Apple. You?"

"Me too. I've been out of town, but New York always pulls me back. Should be called the big magnet." He placed a cigarette between his lips and lit it with a gold lighter.

"What's your line of work?" Rosalie spread honey on her bread.

"A little o' this, a little o' that. Enforcement mainly."

"You a cop?"

"I wouldn't say that but I keep people in line. How about you?"

"I did some acting. In Houston, I was modeling. I just quit my job. I plan to be a designer."

"How do you expect to break into the garment racket, I mean business."

"I'll get a job, and go to school at night." Rosalie licked honey from her finger.

"You've got spunk. No denying it." He lit another cigarette and leaned back.

The waiter brought the filet mignon on an oval plate and the spaghetti on a double dish.

"So, you located your entrée?"

"Yessir." A strong aroma of coffee filling the air as the waiter filled Leo's cup.

"Why the fashion business?" Leo exhaled.

"Since I was a kid, I liked fabrics."

"Special kinds?"

"Casket liners."

"Baskets liners?"

"No, caskets. We lived in Astoria near a funeral parlor. I got my first job there when I was five. I made a nickel a day sweeping the floor."

"A five-year-old pushing a broom around stiffs. That's a sight."

Rosalie took alternate bites of meat and spaghetti. "I was tall. I told Mr. Sweeney I was eight. Sometimes he gave me an extra penny to stop talking." She chewed while she spoke.

"Not only that, but I got to take home scraps. I brought a cigar box and crammed it with shiny pieces of satin."

"You didn't mind where they came from?"

"I thought pretty material was wasted on the dead. Most of the fabric was white, but there was pink from baby girls' coffins and blue from the boys'. When gangsters died, there were pieces of burgundy, even gold. Imagine gold? Sometimes the fabric was pleated. There were ribbons and silk flowers. You should have seen."

"What good were the scraps?"

"Mom made me blouses with the big pieces. The rest I cut to make dresses. I didn't have a doll but we had a jug that was narrow around the middle, kind of like a waist. I used it to shape my creations. Mom brought home needles and thread from the factory."

Leo finished his coffee, rinsed the cup with water from her glass and emptied it into the ashtray. Pulling out a flask from his pocket, he uncorked it and poured some whiskey-smelling stuff in the coffee mug. "Mazel tov!" He raised the cup and gulped down the content. "It's gonna be a long train ride. I have a sleeper, if you want to take a nap, I'd be happy to share it."

Rosalie put her fork and knife down on either side of her plate. "I wouldn't think of it."

"I meant we can take turns using it."

She couldn't see his eyes behind the dark lenses and it put her at a disadvantage. "Well, thank you for the offer but that's out of the question. I'm looking forward to reading Steinbeck's latest, *Grapes of Wrath*." She added, "I didn't think I'd be reading it on a train"

"Was this trip unexpected?"

"You bet." Rosalie dabbed her mouth with the starched napkin, careful not to smudge her lipstick. "Well, no. I actually planned it for a long time. I was waiting for a right moment to quit my job."

Leo lit a fresh cigarette from the one he was finishing. "I'm surprised you'd leave a job now, and not wait 'till the end of the month for your paycheck?"

"I believe in spontaneity. You can't schedule your emotions like a train. Sometimes you have to do things on the spur of the moment."

"I'll drink to the spur." Leo's mouth formed a pumpkin-like smile. He took a sip directly from his flask.

Rosalie flattened her napkin with both hands, displaying the hot pink nail polish that matched her lipstick. "Well, Mr. Leo, that was some meal. Meals I should say. I've just had breakfast, lunch and supper. Thank you very much."

"Reminds me of when I was a kid," he exhaled a long stream of smoke. "I never could get enough of anything."

"Are you satiated now?"

"I wish." He stood and reached into his pants pocket. Pulling out a roll of bills, he placed it in the center of her napkin. "Here's to your career. Good luck kid."

"I can't accept this." She kept the high pitch out of her voice.

He picked two corners of the stiff napkin and tied them. He did the same with the other two. "I can tell a runaway when I see one. This is your hobo sack. It'll give you a start."

"I can't take that." She knew about accepting favors. You ended up owing.

"I'm not a generous man but I may be going someplace where I can't use this. It's a spur of the moment thing." He bent over her. She smelled the liquor on his breath. He added softly, "No strings. Good luck kid."

"Well, thank you, Leo." She wrapped both hands around her future.

Standing unsteadily at the sink of the train toilet, Rosalie rearranged the contents of her overstuffed bag. She could barely breathe as she peeled off bills from the roll and suddenly caught a glimpse of Benjamin Franklin's face. The racket of the popcorn machine inside her ribcage kept her from hearing the banging on the door. She had counted over five thousand dollars when a loud man's voice yelled, "Are you all pissed out or did you die in there?"

Rosalie crammed the green stuff back into her alligator purse, applied neon pink to her lips and gave the mirror a parting kiss before opening the door.

"So sorry," she smiled at the line that had assembled in the aisle.

Upon her arrival in New York, she used the outer bills to pay for a hotel room. On the second day she got a job as a seamstress in the garment district and enrolled for night classes.

On the 24th of August, Rosalie signed a lease on a studio apartment. Elated, she bought a floor lamp and a spaghetti pot. She was on her way home when she caught sight of two men. One wore a Fedora hat and dark glasses. "Leo," Rosalie yelled as she started across the street. "I found a job, I'm going to school, I got an apartment." She waved her pot.

The man lowered his glasses, looked in her direction but gave no sign of recognition. The other man escorted Leo into an idling black car. A metallic chain linked the men at the wrists. Cars honked. An officer pulled Rosalie back onto the sidewalk.

"What's the matter, lady? You trying to stop traffic?"

The next morning, on her way to work a newsboy slapped a paper into her hand. "Hoover captures the Leopard." The boy was short. He stood on tiptoes. "Read about it in the *Daily Mirror*," he yelled.

"Who is he?" she asked the boy.

"The Leopard." He returned to his vendor's voice. "The *Mirror*'s got the scoop."

"What did he do?" she asked.

The boy put on an important look, "He's wanted for murder, and throwing acid in people's faces, that's what."

"Jesus!"

Rosalie put the lamp down and reached into her alligator purse. She pulled out a bill from the now diminished roll of money—blood money. She hoped it wasn't one with the face of Ben Franklin.

“Here kid.” To her relief, she handed him twenty dollars. “Have a feast.”

The day was balmy. Rosalie allowed a deep intake of air to fill her lungs—city air rich with the smell of tar and exhaust. A warm breeze flattened her dress against her legs. She adjusted the ankle straps of her alligator heels, sucked in her tummy and lamp in one hand, pot in the other, headed home with a high-step gait that made her hair bounce over her shoulders.