

TWO

Sophie

February 1963

"You're not saying anything to Mom about this, right?" Sophie warned her sister. She lit a cigarette and puffed, holding it between two fingers as she'd seen it done in the movies.

"I won't tell if you give me a drag," Julia said, leaning over the car seat from her place in back.

"You won't tell because I'll pound you into dust if you do."

From her position in the driver's seat Sophie could look in the rearview mirror at Julia, which gave her, she believed, extra credibility in that she didn't have to turn around to deliver her threat. To emphasize the seriousness of her words she narrowed her eyes menacingly, the act aided by the smoke that was getting in them and making them squint up anyway.

They were in Rocky's mother's car, which Sophie was driving because Rocky didn't like to drive the old Woody wagon. But they liked to take the wagon because Rocky's mother smoked, allowing them to do so without being detected. Rocky sat in the front seat next to Sophie, and Julia and Irene were in the back because Irene didn't mind sharing the back seat with Sophie's little sister. It was past ten-thirty, after their basketball

game against Garnerville, the school that was Hudson Valley's main competition and avowed enemy. As seniors, Sophie, Irene and Rocky were allowed the privilege of bypassing the bus ride home if they had reliable transportation and permission from their parents. They had the car, they had permission, but Sophie's mother had outsmarted them by insisting the girls give Julia a ride home as well. This was her way of adding a chaperone to the mix, because Louisa Everett knew the girls were less likely to find trouble after the game if they had a thirteen-year-old in tow.

It was true that Julia did slow them down, but she didn't entirely stop the seniors from testing the limits of what they could get away with.

After taking a dizzying drag, Sophie passed the cigarette back to Irene, dodging Julia's attempt to nab it.

Irene took it with some reluctance. "Maybe we shouldn't..." she began, but at a look from Sophie she put it to her lips and sucked in. She didn't inhale. She'd never really gotten the hang of it, but she did take the smoke into her mouth and released it with an impressive puff a moment later. At least she *looked* like she was smoking, even if it never quite reached her lungs.

Sophie and Rocky had changed from their basketball uniforms into jeans and sweaters after the game, and both were wearing their letter jackets. Sophie was the star of the team, and they only had a few games left before the season would end and she'd be done playing team basketball forever. They'd lost the game that night, which meant they were less likely to get to the division finals. Rocky was second string. Though taller than Sophie, she wasn't quite as good, probably because she didn't have the enthusiasm that Sophie did. But Rocky was more saddened by the thought of it all ending. She didn't

know what she'd be doing after graduation, whereas Sophie and Irene at least had college plans.

Irene, who was a cheerleader, was still wearing her uniform, the pleated, knee-length skirt showing off her legs to full advantage. She was pretty and petite, with chin-length blonde hair that was styled just like Sandra Dee's, and a sweet smile that everyone said was her best feature. She'd been homecoming queen, as much because everyone liked her as for her looks.

They were parked at Little Tree Lake just outside of town. The lake, a converted gravel pit, was ice-covered this time of year, and they kept the engine running to keep warm.

"I can't believe that Hal," Rocky said, taking the cigarette from Irene's willing hand. "What a jerk, showing up at the game drunk like that. This is one he won't be able to keep a secret from Mom. The ladies at the beauty shop'll be scrambling to tell her all about it first thing in the morning."

Hal DeLuis was Rocky's brother, older by two years, and he and his best friend Jones Ingram had been loud and obnoxious in the bleachers, cat-calling to the girls down on the court until Principal Davis had climbed the bleachers, grabbed each of them by an arm and escorted them from the gym. Down on the court Rocky had been humiliated by her brother's behavior, but Sophie had found it amusing. Sophie'd been dating Hal for the past few months, and, still basking in the glow of early romance, hadn't yet tired of his antics.

"It wasn't so bad," she said. "They were just having fun. It's not like *we've* never had a drink."

"We haven't been so obvious about it. Jeez, ever since he quit college he's been a bigger ass than ever." Rocky's mouth twisted in disapproval. "And you know what? Even if Mom does hear about it she won't do a thing about it. Hal never does anything wrong where she's concerned, but if it was me, if *I* came home drunk and puked on the bathroom floor like Hal did last week, she'd be all over me like ugly on an ape."

In the backseat, Julia snickered. "Did he really puke? I think Hal's funny." She grabbed for the cigarette, which had found its way from Rocky back to Sophie, but Sophie held it out of her reach.

"You think he's funny because he pays attention to you," Sophie said. Whenever Hal came to the house, to pick her up before a date or just to hang around, he always took the time to talk to Julia and make her feel grownup, turning his 100-watt smile on the girl until she dissolved into giggles. Sophie didn't mind that Hal was nice to her kid sister, though she did sometimes think he overdid it with the flirting. But it was Hal's nature. He was good-looking, no one denied that, and college had been a disappointment, so he overcompensated by trying to charm everyone. It usually worked, but his need to always be the center of the universe could be tiring.

To change the subject, Sophie said, "My dad wants me to work full time in the hardware store over the summer."

"Are you going to do it?" Irene asked.

"I don't know. I wanted to find something else. Maybe at Penney's. At least there I'd get an employee discount and I could buy clothes for school in the fall. I'm so sick of the hardware store. I want to look at something else besides screwdriver sets and assorted nails by the pound for a change."

"Dad'll make you do it," Julia said.

"Damn." Sophie rolled down the window on her side to toss the cigarette butt. It sizzled and expired in the snow before she rolled the window back up.

"It's only for a few months," Irene said. "Then you'll be gone and you can do whatever you want."

She and Sophie sighed in unison, seeing their futures stretched out ahead of them in endless possibility. Sophie was especially eager to go, and knew it would be the end of her relationship with Hal when she did, but she considered that a small price to pay for finally getting out of Hudson Valley. Irene would be leaving too, but in her case college was something her family expected of her, and when she was finished she'd come back to town and marry a nice boy who'd work the family farm. It was all she'd ever wanted, and she wished could skip the college part altogether.

"Turn the radio up, I like this song!" Julia yelled. She leaned over the seat to reach for the radio. Sophie slapped her hand back, but obligingly turned up the volume until Chubby Checker and "Peppermint Twist" rocked the interior of the car.

"Oh, God, no, not that one again," Rocky cried, holding her head in both hands.

"I love it!" Julia bounced on the back seat, her elbows jabbing into Irene as she twisted in the cramped space.

"Hey!" Irene cried, laughing, and moved as far over against the door as she could.

"You're such a child," Sophie said, but she was smiling. The windows of the car were steamed up, and she wiped at the inside of the glass with her hand.

"What time is it?" Irene asked.

"Ten to eleven, we better get going," Rocky said. The older girls had a curfew of eleven o'clock. Normally Julia would have to be home earlier, but when she was with Sophie she was allowed some extra time.

The song ended and Sophie lowered the volume again, ignoring Julia's protests. She was about to put the car in reverse when the relative calm inside the vehicle was shattered by a loud rapping on the driver's-side window, and all four girls shrieked.

