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ACT I

The Hopewell has been a family-run institution on the Upper East Side for over seventy-five years. It is a jewel box of a hotel, just a slender five stories in the East Sixties, just blocks from Central Park. Furnished in 1929 at the very height of Art Deco style by one of the top designers of the age, J. Allen Raumenberg, it remains a bastion of classic Jazz Age New York glamour. You can practically see the flappers walking across the herringbone lobby floor.

Each guest room is individually named and decorated with the original furnishings, and though time has taken a bit of a toll, they are still a marvel. Of special note is the Empire Suite, the last and most magnificent of Raumenberg's creations. The silver-blue wallpaper is prewar Parisian and is perfectly lit by the delicate, plum-colored crystal Viennese light fixtures and dramatically cone-shaped, rose-colored wall scones. The rosewood furniture was made in Virginia to his specifications, as was the hand-sewing of all the silver and rose-pink silk accompaniments.

The crowning glory, however, is the gigantic round mirror that sits above the dressing table—a sliver of the top smoked out, to look like a moon just on the verge of being full. There is something magical about this room. It has a spirit of romance and possibility that none of the major hotel chains can ever evoke.

Make sure to start each morning with the hotel's signature toasted cherry bread, decadent spiced hot chocolate, and the delicate sweet almond biscuits made by the brilliant in-house baker and chef.

What is most unusual about the Hopewell, though, is the total involvement of the large Martin family who own and run the hotel. Though the service is occasionally patchy, the personal touch makes all the difference....

—THE "WHADDYA SAY WE DO NEW YORK?" GUIDEBOOK, 8TH EDITION

A PARTY BEST AVOIDED

On the morning of the tenth of June, Scarlett Martin woke up to the sound of loud impromptu rap penetrating her thin bedroom wall from the direction of the bathroom next door. Scarlett had been trying to ignore this noise for fifteen minutes by incorporating it into her dream, but it was a difficult thing to weave the constantly repeated phrase, "I got a butt-butt, I got a mud hut" into a dream about trying to hide a bunch of rabbits in her T-shirt drawer.

She blinked, groaned the tiniest groan, and opened one eye.

It was hot. Very hot. The little window unit air conditioner in the Orchid Suite, the room she shared with her older sister Lola, hadn't really functioned correctly in years. Sometimes it left her shivering, and sometimes, like this morning, it did nothing at all except move the hot sheets of air around and give the humidity a nice fluffing up.

Hot weather made Scarlett's blonde, curly hair into a big fright wig. What in winter were chin-length ringlets became insane, puffed-up worm creatures as soon as June arrived. One of these sprung into action and jabbed Scarlett's eye as

soon as she opened it. She pulled herself upright in bed and opened the sheer purple curtain next to her bed.

It was a well-known fact that you could *almost* see the Chrysler Building from the Hopewell Hotel, if the other buildings hadn't been there. Still, she could see into the apartment buildings that backed up to the hotel, and that was always interesting. In a city with so many different types of people and so much competition, mornings were an even playing field where no one looked good or knew where anything was. There was the woman who changed her outfit four times each morning and practiced different poses in the mirror. Two windows over, the obsessive-compulsive guy was cleaning all the burners on his stove. A flight down, there was Anything for Breakfast guy who would (as his name implied) eat anything for breakfast. Today he was pouring melted ice cream over cereal.

Another neighbor, a woman of about seventy, was completely nude on the rooftop patio of the adjacent apartment building. She was reading *The New York Times* and carefully balancing a cup of coffee by squeezing it between her thighs, which was a completely unacceptable sight at this time in the morning. Or really, any time.

Scarlett reeled backward onto her bed. The rap got louder as the shower that had been running underneath it was turned off. The lyric had moved on to, "Got shoe and socko, get me a taco…"

"Tell me when you're done in there!" she yelled to the wall. "And shut up!"

The response came in the form of a cheery rhythm beat

against the wall. The rapping continued, but it was quieter.

Scarlett had almost nodded back off when her door flew open and her older brother, Spencer, leapt into her room triumphantly, arms raised above his head, like he'd just won the marathon. His wet hair was standing on end in a post-toweling shake, and his brown eyes were glistening manically.

"I...am...finished!" he announced.

Spencer rarely got to sleep past five in the morning because of his job doing the breakfast shift at The Waldorf-Astoria. Scarlett, who got up at normal-person hours, never saw him in his work clothes—the black pants and stiff white dress shirt that enlonged and slenderized his already very long and slender frame. As he stood over her bed, dripping water from his still-wet head onto her, he looked about eleven feet tall and dangerously awake. Any more than four hours of sleep was too much for him.

"Wake up, wake up," he said, giving her a friendly poke on the top of the head with each word. "Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up....Is this annoying? It *looks* kind of annoying, but only you can judge."

"I already saw Naked Lady on the roof," Scarlett protested, swatting at his hand and pulling up the sheet to protect herself. "I'm damaged. Stop tormenting me."

Spencer paused his poking and went to the window. He looked out for a moment as he fastened his cuff buttons, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"I don't know if you noticed where she's holding that mug," he said, "but I'm kind of worried that she might burn herself on the..."

Scarlett squealed and rolled over, stuffing her face into her pillow. When she looked up again, Spencer was leaning against her bureau, loosely looping a black tie around his neck.

"I switched shifts to be here this morning," he said. "I'm doing the host stand for lunch, which is really, really boring. See the lengths I go to for you? Am I your favorite brother?"

"Favorite and only."

"Words that warm my heart. Now, come on." He shook her blanketed foot as he left the room. "We do not get the *waffles* until you rise. So rise! Rise! Rise, sister!" He continued yelling the words, "Rise, rise!" all the way down the hall.

Scarlett slipped out of bed, grabbed her shower basket, and walked to the door. The long cuffs of her blue-and-white striped pajamas scuffed under her feet, getting trapped under her heels and making her stumble. It was even hotter in the fifth-floor hallway, which didn't even have a dysfunctional air conditioner to cool it.

As soon as she stepped out of her room, Scarlett had her second sibling encounter of the day. Her little sister, Marlene, had also just stepped out into the hall, answering the call of the waffle. Marlene took one look at Scarlett, squinting at her through her light hazel eyes that often had a truly disturbing golden appearance. The bathroom would only fit one. Scarlett was just about to open her mouth to begin the negotiation process when Marlene bolted for it, slamming the door shut behind her. Scarlett heard the faint scrape of the lock, and a single, sharp laugh of triumph, not unlike the sound of an angry Canadian goose.

It was 8:03 in the morning. And it was Scarlett's fifteenth birthday.

At 8:15, unshowered, one curl still poking her eye, Scarlett got into the ancient Art Deco elevator. She pulled the gate shut, the outer doors closed, and the elevator made its impossibly slow way down. She leaned against the massive silver sunburst on the back wall—one of J. Allen Raumenberg's (and Scarlett's) favorite touches. The elevator stopped just once to pick up one of their four current guests, a man named Mr. Hamoto who spoke no English at all.

All of their current guests were Japanese, from the same company. Mr. Hamoto nodded briskly, but looked a bit harried. He stared impatiently as the elevator creaked its way down to the lobby, then he almost sliced open his finger trying to get the outer gate open. Scarlett had to politely step in and release the catch. There was an art to it, and if you didn't know it, you could be trapped in the elevator for a while.

She walked through the empty lobby and slid back the doors of the dining room. This was the largest room in the Hopewell—its own little wing, with a high ceiling and a dozen tall, thin windows facing both the street and the building next door. Fifty years ago, this room was packed every morning with guests enjoying a hearty breakfast off prim bone-china plates, served up with silver cutlery and coffee pots emblazoned with the HH monogram. The china had long been chipped and retired. A drug-addled waiter stole the silver in the seventies. The floor was subsiding, the chairs no longer completely matched, and the chandelier was missing pieces.

Still, it was a happy room. It had been designed to amplify the best qualities of each part of the day. In the afternoon, it caught the breeze. In the evening, its diamond-cut top windowpanes caught the sunset and refracted it into a dozen colors. On sunny mornings like this one, it was drenched with light. In the sunniest corner, four tables had been pushed together to create one long family-sized table. There were balloons taped to the backs of the chairs, and blue and yellow streamers fanned down from the ceiling creating a colorful canopy. Scarlett recognized both the streamers and the balloons from Lola's high school graduation party four days earlier. Someone had gone to some effort.

Spencer was already seated, fork in hand.

"I did this," he said, pointing at one of the linen napkins. They had been folded into decorative cone shapes, and each had a single yellow tulip tucked inside.

"No, you didn't," Marlene said sourly, coming in behind Scarlett. "Lola did."

This, Scarlett already knew; she could recognize Lola's handiwork. Spencer had been joking, but jokes were not Marlene's strong point.

"Come," Spencer said, patting the seat next to him. "Sitteth next to me, so that I may chooseth the second-best waffle after you."

Martin family birthday breakfasts followed a strict tradition. First, there were Belgian waffles, made by Belinda, the beloved Hopewell Hotel cook. These were served up with an array of toppings: chocolate syrup, fresh lemon whipped cream, stewed strawberries, and powdered vanilla sugar. The air should have

been thick with wafflely perfume. Instead, there was an acrid, confusing smell, undercut by a light touch of smoke.

Scarlett looked to Spencer, and he met her gaze with a raised eyebrow. He smelled it, too.

"That's not right," he said.

The kitchen door swung open, and Lola emerged. She was immaculately dressed in her "beauty scrubs," lean black pants, a slim black T-shirt, and low heels. Her white-blonde, stick-straight hair was wound into a knot.

Lola always looked good. This was just one of the laws of Scarlett's universe. Like Spencer, she was thinner and taller than average. She had tiny, sharp eyes and thin lips, both of which managed to convey fullness. She was universally regarded as beautiful, in an easily-bruised and delicate kind of way. Painters would want to capture her beauty on canvas. Doctors would want to give her a blood transfusion. Such was Lola's appeal.

"Happy birthday!" she said with a smile. "This is really hot. Don't touch it for a minute."

She set down a small jug of chocolate syrup wrapped in a towel. The syrup, usually a gooey pot of chocolaty perfection, looked a bit more like something you might get if you melted down a tire with a pound of butter. Before Scarlett could ask why they were having buttery stewed tire for breakfast, her dad came bursting out with a large plate of waffles.

Scarlett's dad was frequently the most dressed-down of them all. He had an affection for a thrift shop in the village where NYU students tended to shop, so his wardrobe consisted of a lot of vintage T-shirts and hoodies, well-worn jeans, and

incredibly strange shoes. (Today, he was wearing his threadbare "My name is Mr. Pineapple" shirt.) People sometimes thought he was their older, blonder brother or cousin. Guests rarely ever thought he was in any way in charge of the hotel, much less its official owner.

"Belinda isn't here today," he said, settling down a plate of deflated, undercooked waffles, topped by a few deeply charred ones. "We did our best."

Truthfully, this was a disappointment. Birthday breakfasts were sacred events, but Scarlett wasn't about to scream in protest. Marlene, however, was more than prepared to do so.

"We can't eat *those*," she said.

"They're not that bad," her dad lied, picking through them. "This one looks okay."

He found one in the middle that looked like it had hit the waffle iron at exactly the right time, purely out of luck. He stabbed it with a fork and lifted it toward Marlene's plate. As usual, Marlene was the center of everything, even on Scarlett's birthday.

Lola was fidgeting with the syrup, even though she was one of the least fidgety people Scarlett knew. Spencer gave Scarlett a long sideways glance. Something was very much not right here.

Her mom followed a moment later, bearing the rest of the breakfast on a tray. There was something vaguely French about their mother—her pale skin and dark eyes and hair, the natural grace and poise (those went right to Lola when traits were being handed out). Like Scarlett, she had a head of thick curls. Unlike Scarlett, hers didn't look like they had been styled in space, where gravity is not a factor.

Her skills with food were not very French, though. It was clear that the whipped cream had come right from a tub in the freezer (and was, in fact, still in the shape of the upturned tub and glistening with ice crystals). The strawberries were raw and unevenly cut, instead of the warm, thick, stewlike version that made Scarlett's heart flutter. The sugar was just a bowl of sugar—not powdered, and not vanilla.

"I guess you heard," she said, giving Scarlett a birthday hug. "We did what we could. I hope it's okay. And, hey—presents!"

There was no choice but to accept the situation gracefully, so Scarlett smiled and thanked everyone. Given the choice between burned and slightly undercooked, she went with the latter and was presented with a floppy, vaguely wafflelike object. Spencer took three charred ones. Lola settled for a spoonful of strawberries. Her dad tried to tough out a plate of whatever was left, but her mom just stirred her coffee nervously. The eating part of the breakfast—usually the longest and most festive—was wrapped up with considerable speed and a lot of untouched food.

"Present time!" her dad announced.

These birthday events were probably the most organized and ritualized things the Martins did. Gifts always followed the same pattern—siblings presented first, oldest to youngest. Then there was the presentation from their parents. This year, however, was special, and Scarlett knew exactly what they would be giving her.

Spencer produced a slightly bent-up envelope from somewhere behind him.

"I know what you like," he said. "Happy birthday."