

Chapter 1

CONEY ISLAND, Memorial Day, 1957

The kind of night when neon signs dust the boardwalk with light like powdered jewels, when foghorns and roller-coaster screams drown out the brush-beat of the surf, when the ocean's salt breeze smells of vast windy skies, great clouds of mist roll in on the waves, and the lighthouse at Norton's Point shines a beacon for ships lost at sea.

It was that kind of night—a night like every night in the City of Fire.

An old man lurched out of the shadows.

“Give me two dollars for this gold doubloon!” he shouted. His face was smeared with dirt, his white beard matted, his eyes smoldering. “No, three dollars! No, one dollar! You, sir.” He poked his finger at a heavy-set man. “You buy it. I built the Half Moon Hotel, now look at me.”

The heavy-set man kept walking.

The beggar made a grab for a woman's arm, but she dodged out of reach.

“You, lady, buy it or I'll suck your brains out with a straw!” She walked faster. “Hey, don't run away like I'm a leper or something.” He turned and looked at me like he would suck *my* brains out with a straw. “How about you, girlie?” It's a real pirates' doubloon. Fifty cents.”

I grabbed Mom's arm, so skinny it felt like it might break. She jerked it back.

“Don't cling,” she said.

She'd been like this for a while now, ever since Dad's mama, my bubbie... Just skirting the memory crushed my chest.

Mom was wearing a lace-trimmed blouse too dressy for the boardwalk, even I knew that. It kept slipping off her shoulder, exposing her bra strap. She didn't notice.

She was still taller than me, but I was growing fast, would probably overtake her. I was skinny too, but normal skinny, kid skinny. I had her green eyes and rich dark hair, but mine was a little more red and I had a smattering of freckles like my dad.

"Mom?" I tugged at her arm again, got a whiff of her Arpège perfume, rose and jasmine. "Mom!" I shouted.

"What now!"

"When are the fireworks going to start?"

"Stop it, Sarah!" She pried my fingers off. "How should I know?"

She started scanning the boardwalk for Dad, trying to spot his red hair in the crowd, his sweet-natured face. He was out there somewhere, making the gears turn, but not for us.

"Sinners!" shrieked a preacher. He waved his hand at the crowd. "Filthy degenerates!" He pointed a tremulous finger at the saloon, brazenly open to the boardwalk, its crimson neon sign glowing: Max's Place. Dark and smoky, wallpapered in a flocked pattern of blood-red fleurs-de-lis, it had a horseshoe-shaped bar at its center, wrapped around a raised stage now in shadow. Max's reeked of whiskey, beer, and cheap perfume, the whole place pulsing with drunken laughter. I could just make out my gangster uncle Max, tapping his cigar into an ashtray at a table near the back. Of course he owned the joint.

Mom sighed. The saloon used to be her hangout, was where she met Dad, the beginning of everything as far as my existence goes.

“Blasphemers!” the preacher ranted. “Drunkards! Fornicators!” His eyes scanned the boozers inside the saloon. “You!” He pointed at a platinum blonde on a barstool. She was leaning forward, reaching for her drink, her low-cut dress barely able to contain her heaving white breasts. “Filthy whore!” he shouted. “Jesus died for your sins, yet you entice men to defile you!”

The lady took a sip of her highball with one hand, patted her stiff tower of bleached hair with the other.

A ceiling spotlight sliced a cone out of the curling smoke to reveal the singer on stage, seated at a baby grand. Lenny was a dreamboat in his black tuxedo and bow tie, his shiny dark hair casually tossed back.

“I used to date him, you know,” Mom whispered, as though everyone didn’t know that. He was in love with her before Dad stole her away.

Lenny glanced my way for the briefest of moments, his teeth flashing white against his tanned skin, eyelids half-closed. He tapped the microphone. Boom! Boom! Boom! The drunken laughter dropped away.

“Evening, ladies and gents.” He took a slurp of martini. “I can’t tell you how ring-a-ding-ding it is to be back here in crazy old Funville, U.S.A. Got my start here, you know, right here in Max’s Place, where the broads are stacked and the gasoline’s high octane. Hey, you.” He pointed at a bald man slouched against the bar. “Don’t stop guzzling on my account. You know what I always say, don’t you?”

“What, Lenny?” the platinum blonde called out.

“You’re not drunk...” He winked at her. “If you can lie on the floor without holding on.” He raised his martini glass with a flourish. “This song’s for you, baby. With a pair of charlies like you have? Va va va voom! You’ll never be lonely.

“And now...” Lenny’s fingers tickled the keys. He crooned, “One For my Baby.”

His voice mesmerized me, pulled me into the broke-down world of grownup love. I wished it was me up there, emptying my heart out, but I was just a kid, I wasn’t even *allowed* in there.

As he sang he inserted new lyrics:

It’s not time to go

I got a story, Sarah, that comes from below...

WHAT! *That’s my name!* He was singing to *me!*

We’ll drink little girl

To the end of someone you know...