

THE BRIDESMAID'S DAUGHTER

From Grace Kelly's wedding to a homeless shelter
– searching for the truth about my mother

Nyna Giles
and Eve Claxton

SAMPLE CHAPTERS



First published in the UK in 2018 by September Publishing

First published in the USA in 2018 by St Martin's Press

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Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by Hussar

ISBN 978-1-910463-51-2

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

PROLOGUE



The day my mother's story first slipped out into the world, I was twenty-nine years old. It was March 1989, and I'd just dropped my daughter at her nursery school before driving over to my local A&P supermarket to pick up groceries. My son was still a toddler, sitting in the shopping cart, kicking his little legs as he waited for me to pay at the checkout. I remember glancing down and smiling at him as I stood on the line. He was such a sunny and easy child; I looked forward to our time alone in the mornings together after his big sister went to school and before his midday nap.

My husband and I lived with our two young children in a nice, comfortable house in a suburb of New York, the same town that he'd grown up in. I was a stay-at-home mom; I spent my days taking my children to playgroups and nursery school, to their doctor's appointments and the supermarket. Our friends were my husband's college friends and their wives, people who knew almost nothing about my family or my past. I preferred it that way. I thought I could keep

everything neatly in its place, the same way I cleared up the children's toys before my husband came home at the end of the day.

That day at the supermarket, the woman ahead of me in the checkout was still unloading her groceries from the cart, so I turned to glance at the magazines in the rack as I waited. And that's when I saw it. The headline on the cover of one of the tabloids.

PRINCESS GRACE BRIDESMAID LIVING
IN N.Y. SHELTER FOR HOMELESS:
PHOTO EXCLUSIVE

I whipped around to make sure no one else had noticed. My face was on fire, my stomach tight.

No one in my world knew about my mother, about the connection to Grace. Would they even guess that the woman from the headline had anything to do with me? I grabbed a copy from the rack, tucking it under a quart of milk. Then, as fast as I could, I paid for the magazine and the groceries and fled to the parking lot, unloading the shopping bags and little Michael into the car, before climbing into the driver's seat and slamming the door behind me.

In the quiet of the car, I opened the magazine, searching for my mother.

There she was, on page nineteen. Gray circles under the hollows of her dark eyes and streaks of silver running through her cropped black hair. In the photograph, she was sitting on the steps outside the shelter where she lived, wearing a thick white scarf around her neck, pausing to place a small knitted hat on her head. For the most part, the article about her was accurate. My mother *did* sleep each night in a homeless shelter on the Upper East Side of New York. Her bed was number eighty-five, a small metal cot covered with a regulation

blue blanket, in an open dorm. Each morning at 7:00 A.M., the guards shook her awake, and she got up and left the shelter, going to Bergdorf Goodman's department store to wash in the basins of the ladies' lounge, spending her days in the local parks, libraries, and churches.

The part about Princess Grace was also true. My mother and Grace Kelly had first met in New York in 1947 when they were teenagers living in next-door rooms at the Barbizon Hotel for Women. Grace was studying acting; my mother was modeling for Eileen Ford, and had just arrived in New York from Ohio. After Grace became famous, the two women remained close, and when Grace married Prince Rainier in Monaco in 1956, my mother had been at her side as one of her bridesmaids.

The article went on to explain that since Grace's death, Carolyn's story had taken a very different turn. Now, only a few years after Grace's fatal car accident, Carolyn was "lonely and destitute," living in a shelter.

What the article didn't say was that while my mother may have been lonely, she was *not* alone. She had family who cared about her, who tried to persuade her to seek help, to find housing. Each month, I accepted her collect calls, and my husband and I paid a local diner so she could eat her meals there. I was the bridesmaid's daughter, and while I might not have told my friends and acquaintances about her situation, I thought about my mother all the time. I worried about her, hoped that she was warm enough, leapt every time the phone rang, terrified something had happened to her.

And as often as I could, I went into the city to visit her. My mother and I would meet in a little square set between buildings on West Fifty-eighth Street where she liked to sit and pray. She was religious, devoted to the Virgin Mary, and she believed the little square was

blessed. I knew I could always find her there, sitting on a bench, her head bowed, her hands clasped in prayer. From a distance, no one would have guessed my mother was homeless. Not a hair on her head was ever out of place. Proper appearance was always very important to her. She liked to wear white for purity: white slacks, white shirt, white scarf, white tennis shoes.

Together, we'd go to a nearby diner for lunch, spending the next hour or so picking at our food and trying to make conversation.

My mother usually wanted to talk about astrology. She was obsessed with star signs and the movement of the planets.

"The planets are colliding this week," she'd say, shaking her head. "We have to be very careful. It's a dangerous time."

She was always concerned, always anxious. She had a lot of advice. If I talked about my husband, she'd tell me I should leave him. If I brought up something about my children, she told me that I should take them to the doctor; she was worried about their health. She was concerned about me, too. She wanted me to see a doctor; I didn't look well.

"We need a miracle," she'd say to me. "I've been praying for a miracle for you."

But when I tried to talk to my mother about what we could do to improve her own situation—how we could help her find a stable place to stay—she'd shut me down.

"We'll talk about it when the sun is shining," she'd say.

And that was that. She didn't want my help. More than anything, she seemed to want to be left alone. I had spent so long trying to separate myself from my mother, forging my own life in order to survive; I'd even changed the name she had given me, Nina, spelling it with a *y*, to set myself apart. Now, as we sat on the opposite sides of the table at the diner, it was as if a thousand miles stretched

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between us. During those lunches, we were careful to avoid eye contact. My mother looked off to either side, remaining alert to danger. I stared at my plate. I didn't want to catch my mother's eye; if I did, I usually regretted it. She had the saddest eyes I'd ever seen.

After lunch, I got back in the car and drove home to the suburbs, back to the careful, normal life I had built for myself, my fortress.

My mother remained living at the shelter for a decade, until 1998. At that point, she developed a heart problem, which meant she could no longer legally stay at the shelter, and we were able to move her to an adult home on Long Island. She spent her last years at a nursing care center, where she died in 2007 at the age of seventy-nine.

When my mother was alive, I never managed to learn what had made her the way she was, why she was so removed from the world, how the once glamorous model and bridesmaid ended up sleeping each night in a shelter. It was only after she was gone that I was finally able to understand what had happened, to go back to the past, in search of the woman my mother had been before I was born—and to the childhood I'd lost after everything changed.

Part One



BEFORE



CHAPTER 1



Carolyn

The young woman in the photograph isn't my mother yet, and she isn't Grace's bridesmaid. It's the summer of 1947, and she's still Carolyn Schaffner, about to leave Steubenville, Ohio, for New York City. She's so young, barely nineteen years old, slender and pale-complexioned, with angled cheekbones and her dark hair in a pageboy, smiling out at the future ahead of her.

Carolyn had wanted to live in New York for as long as she could remember. Growing up in the little clapboard house on Pennsylvania Avenue in her hardscrabble hometown, she always felt as if she belonged someplace else, if she could only figure out how to get there. Her parents had divorced when she was young, her father moving away to Virginia. Her mother, Dorothy, was dark-haired like Carolyn, with the good looks of a movie star, and she quickly remarried. Dorothy had two more children with her new husband, Joe. Carolyn often felt that her half brother and half sister were her mother's real family, and that she—Carolyn—was somehow on the outside,

watching them from a distance. Joe ran a small laundry service. Carolyn's new stepfather was a tall, coldhearted man, who believed that her role in the house was to provide unpaid labor for the benefit of him and his children. There were always dishes for her to clean, messes to clear up, her brother and sister's clothing to wash. The smog of Steubenville's steel mills left behind a layer of grit on every surface of the house that, despite her weekly scrubbing with pine and Lysol, never stayed away. It was easy to displease Joe. If Carolyn missed her curfew in the evening by as much as a minute, her stepfather would bolt the doors and refuse to let her in. Then she would have to stay with her friend who lived across the street, or walk three miles to her cousins' house to find a bed for the night. When Carolyn returned in the morning, the stack of dishes in the kitchen sink was still there from the night before, waiting for her to wash them.

When Carolyn was younger, her birth father, Harold Schaffner, would occasionally come to visit. Each time, Dorothy would warn Carolyn, "the bad man is coming." Before long, the visits from the bad man stopped and it was only when Carolyn turned fifteen that she decided she wanted to seek out her true father. She went to the local police chief and asked for help. The police chief managed to track down Harold in West Virginia. That summer, Carolyn spent two months with her father, meeting her two half siblings there.

After she graduated from high school, she got a job in the local department store, in the children's shoe division. She worked and saved as much as she could, but she worried that if she stayed in Steubenville too long, she'd end up marrying a local boy, and then she'd never escape. There were so few options for a young woman in search of an exit, but Carolyn had an important asset. Ever since childhood people had complimented her on her appearance: her dark brown eyes, her winning, natural smile; her blue-black hair that lay

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sleek to her head. While she was still in high school, a teacher introduced her to a commercial photographer, who offered to take some test shots. Carolyn started reading every fashion magazine she could lay her hands on, studying the models, their expressions and poses, practicing at home in the mirror in her bedroom.

The summer after leaving high school, she saw her opportunity. Steubenville was celebrating the 150th anniversary of its founding—its sesquicentennial. As part of the celebration, the prettiest girl in town would be crowned Queen of Steubenville. First prize was either a trip to Hollywood for a screen test or five hundred dollars. Carolyn entered the contest and campaigned for her votes, knock-



ing on doors and enlisting promises of support. She won, none of the other girls coming close to her beauty. As queen, she presided over all the sesquicentennial activities, riding in the parade on the biggest float of them all with the words *HER MAJESTY* emblazoned on the side. Carolyn waved from her silvered throne as the people crowding either side of the street cheered for her. For four nights, she appeared in a historical pageant staged at the local stadium, playing the “Queen of the Festival” in front of an audience of thousands. Her photograph—wearing her blue and gold cape and jeweled crown—was front page in the local newspaper. People recognized her as she walked down the street.

When it came time to choose her prize, Carolyn turned down the ticket to Hollywood; she wasn’t interested in acting. Instead, she took the cash prize, using some of it to pay for a one-way ticket to New York City. Carolyn wasn’t going to follow the pattern set by Steubenville, or by anyone else’s expectations.

In New York, she would try her luck as a model.

A girlfriend drove her to the Steubenville train station to catch her train. Dorothy had to stay home and make dinner for Joe and the children that evening; she couldn’t leave them, even to say good-bye to her own daughter. So when Carolyn left, there was no one from her family to see her off. As the station platform and her hometown disappeared into the distance, it was almost as if she’d never been there at all.

Thinking about the day, I wonder how she got up the courage to do it. How did a young, single woman in 1947 find it within herself to leave her family and move to another city without any idea of what came next? How unhappy must her life have been at home with her stepfather on Pennsylvania Avenue that she felt so motivated to escape?

Perhaps my mother believed that staying in Steubenville would require a different kind of courage, one that she knew she couldn't muster.

A DAY LATER, Carolyn stepped down from her train at Penn Station, and caught a cab to 140 East Sixty-third Street. She read all the fashionable magazines, so she knew that the Barbizon Hotel for Women was the best place for a girl to stay while in the big city. Barbizon residents were models, actresses, singers, students, and secretaries, girls who, like Carolyn, wanted to make something of themselves. The hotel's rooms were reasonably priced, and most important, as male guests weren't allowed much farther than the lobby, she would be safe.

Most of the hotel's guests, not only the out-of-towners like Carolyn, would have been intimidated at first sight of the Barbizon. From the sidewalk, even if you craned your neck, it could be hard to see the tip of the building, twenty-three stories high, with dark brown brick terraces and setbacks, like a giant, somber wedding cake. Carolyn pushed inside the revolving doors and into the lobby, nearly as wide and as deep as the building, with a curved staircase sweeping up to an ornate wooden mezzanine. Nervously, she walked toward the front desk, where a small, smiling woman was waiting to greet her. This was Mrs. Sibley, the hotel's manager. Carolyn handed over her references while Mrs. Sibley looked her up and down.

Candidates for residence at the Barbizon were assessed on their references, as well as their age, looks, and background. The management's preference was for attractive girls in their late teens or very early twenties—and with a waiting list of at least one hundred names, Mrs. Sibley could have her pick. At nineteen, Carolyn met

the age requirement. As for her pedigree, Mrs. Sibley most likely assumed that Steubenville was a steel town and that Carolyn's parents were solidly blue-collar. Fortunately, Carolyn was pretty enough to pass Mrs. Sibley's test.

Then Mrs. Sibley read Carolyn the hotel rules and regulations. No cooking appliances in the rooms, lest the building burn to the ground. No liquor in the rooms. It was the hotel's preference that young ladies did not stay out late at night but returned to their rooms at a respectable hour. A warning would be given to anyone who didn't comply. If, after a warning, the girl continued to stay out late, Mrs. Sibley would have to inform management, who might decide to give her room to another girl. As a guest of the hotel, Carolyn had the use of its swimming pool, gym, library, and roof garden. In the afternoons, complimentary tea and cookies were served in the recital room, on the mezzanine above the lobby. Should she wish to join, backgammon and card games were held in the evenings in the recreation room, and there were regular educational lectures on a range of subjects, to improve the mind.

But Mrs. Sibley and her fellow staff of the Barbizon weren't only seeking to improve the minds of the young ladies of the hotel. They were also determined to protect their virtue. No men were admitted beyond the lobby, Mrs. Sibley warned Carolyn, unless a guest wanted to bring her date to the coed lounge on the nineteenth floor, in which case a special pass was required. And after sundown, male elevator operators were switched for female ones, in case any man should be tempted beyond his station.

CAROLYN'S ROOM WAS on the ninth floor, and like all the Barbizon's rooms, it was tiny and narrow; you could almost stretch out

your arms and touch the walls on either side. There was just enough room for a small single bed with a nightstand, a desk with a radio, and a table lamp. The green drapes matched the bedspread and the carpet. Bathrooms were shared and situated at the end of the hall. Carolyn didn't mind. From her window, she could look out across the rooftops of the tan-colored town houses of Sixty-third Street and beyond to the entire city. Even after midnight, she learned, the streets were alive with noises: traffic, taxi horns, and the voices of people passing down below. For twelve dollars a week, this world was hers.

At the Barbizon, Carolyn did her calculations. She had nearly two thousand dollars in her pocketbook, made up of her prize winnings and her savings. This was more money than she had ever possessed, but still, she wasn't naïve. She knew it wouldn't last forever. She thought about signing up for a modeling school but feared the cost. In her room, she kept her folder of test shots, taken back home in Steubenville. She had posed down at the golf course, wearing the dirndl skirt she'd made herself in black and white stripes, her dark hair like satin and her lips painted and full.

Each morning, Carolyn dressed as if preparing to go to work, pulling at the fingers on her gloves until they were perfectly straight, pinning her hat on her head at the ideal angle, then taking the elevator down to the lobby. There she stood and watched as the hotel's residents hurried out of elevators, chattering to one another as they pulled on their gloves and adjusted their hats, before streaming through the revolving doors, out into the world and their lives. More than anything, Carolyn wanted to follow them.

And so she did. Mostly, she walked, saving the subway or cab fare and learning the city as she went. She discovered Bloomingdale's department store, right around the corner from the hotel, where she could admire the latest fashions. Walking farther, she

stumbled on the Horn & Hardart Automat, just south and west of the hotel on Fifty-seventh Street. The food at the Automat was cheap and fresh, and stored in little glass boxes. You dropped the nickels in the slot, turned the dial, and then popped open the door to pull out your selection. Carolyn thought the Automat was so modern and clever, as if you'd just stepped into the future. No one minded if she stayed for hours, sitting by the window upstairs, looking out onto the hats of people passing by on the avenue below, only getting up to refill her cup of coffee from the spout in the wall. In Steubenville, when she went home at the end of the day, she spent her time clearing up after her younger siblings, washing dishes, cleaning house. But after she ate at the Automat there were no dishes to wash. And when she went back to the hotel, her room was her own; it was cleaned, and the bed made and turned down. She was free.

One day, only a week after she arrived in New York, Carolyn was at her usual spot at the Automat, looking out over Fifty-seventh, when a young man came up to her. He introduced himself as a photographer.

"You're an attractive girl," the young man said. "Ever thought about modeling?"

Carolyn told him yes, and that she'd even had some test shots taken while still home in Steubenville. The young man sat down; they started talking. The photographer knew people. He could introduce her.

Would she like to meet Harry Conover, owner of one of the oldest and largest modeling agencies in the country?

Carolyn nodded yes. The young man scrawled an address and number on a piece of paper—52 Vanderbilt Avenue. That day, Carolyn left the Automat and ran back to the Barbizon with the paper in her pocket, the ticket to her new beginning.

If you have enjoyed these sample chapters from *The Bridesmaid's Daughter*, you can buy the book from September Publishing and all good retailers.

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