

Chapter 1

Carrie Schmidt stood at the bus stop with her grandmother, flipping slowly through *Life* magazine. The sweltering heat made the pages sticky and limp. Right in the middle, an advertisement for hair dye caught her eye.

Can you just shampoo in BORN BLONDE?

Of course.

Isn't this 1967?

No question about it, the Born Blonde girl was pretty. But she wasn't spectacular like the woman on the cover—Veruschka, the most famous model in the world, with thick dark blonde hair like a lion's mane. Carrie made sure to read every word of the article on Veruschka, who was a towering 6 feet 4 inches, 120 pounds, and “miraculously pleasant.”

Wait a minute, Carrie thought. She's over a foot taller than me but weighs six pounds less!

In one picture, Veruschka held a dandelion between her lips, and the caption quoted her—“*They say I have the 'future look,' as if I'm looking beyond the camera into something else.*”

“I know about that girl,” Carrie's grandmother said, pointing at *Life*. “She's German. Her father did get killed—executed—for plotting to kill Hitler.”

Carrie sighed. “Hitler is not a miraculously pleasant subject, you know.”

“And why should we not discuss Hitler?” her grandmother said, sharp blue eyes on Carrie.

Carrie knew the look—*I talk, you listen, you talk, I listen. What's wrong with that?* “Because I'm hot, it's so hot,” Carrie said. “Because I need a nap.”

“Another one?”

Yes, she'd already taken a nap, after lunch, but it had somehow left her feeling more tired than before. “Because there must be other things to talk about while waiting for a bus.” The sun was hazy, making the air slightly blurry, almost visible. She wiped sweat off her upper lip.

“Carrie, why do you wear long pants in such heat?”

“I don't like shorts.”

“Why not? You'd be more comfortable.”

Trust her grandmother to find a subject as bad as Hitler. Carrie always wore big shirts and long pants in dark colors, clothes to cover her up and make her invisible—though that wasn't always possible, since sometimes you could practically see the air. "Where's the bus, already?" she muttered.

"Carrie, it's not yet twenty minutes."

But even fifteen minutes in Belle Heights, Queens, felt like an hour anyplace else. Tomorrow would be the first day of school, almost three weeks late because of a teachers' strike. Carrie was going to be "the new kid." New to eighth grade, new to the school, new to Belle Heights, new to the guest room in her grandmother's house—where she'd be living for a year, while her father was in Las Vegas, handling publicity for boxers.

"Oh, look," her grandmother said, squinting at something beyond Carrie. "Here's that woman and her daughter I did tell you about."

"What woman? What daughter?"

"I did tell you. You don't listen."

"But I—"

"Mrs. Brockner, how nice," her grandmother said, as Carrie spun around and clamped her mouth shut.

The woman hesitated. "I'm sorry?"

"We spoke not last week at the A&P, Mrs. Brockner."

"Yes, of course," Mrs. Brockner said, not remembering any more than Carrie did. Carrie could tell. She watched Mrs. Brockner take in all of her grandmother, who practically wore a sign around her neck—IMMIGRANT. After twenty years in this country, she still had a thick accent that seemed to get even thicker around strangers. Carrie even called her "Mutti," the German word for "mommy"—it rhymed with "sooty." Just a bit taller than Carrie, she wore a rain bonnet tightly tied at her chin, squashing her cloud of white hair, and held a clear plastic umbrella that, when open, looked like the Liberty Bell. She had on thick brown shoes, a sleeveless, stretchy plaid top, baby blue slacks, and no jewelry.

Mrs. Brockner could have worn a sign of her own—AMERICAN. Carrie figured she was American all the way back to flappers and bootleggers. Of course Carrie was American, too, born and raised in Spruce Hills, Queens, four miles and three buses away from Belle Heights. But she didn't feel American. At the luncheonette where Mutti worked, Carrie had

once tasted gazpacho. It was chillingly cold and crunchy, unlike “real soup” which was neither. Carrie felt about as American as gazpacho felt like soup.

Mrs. Brockner, on the other hand, was the real McCoy—sturdy, bouncy, comfortable inside her own skin. She wore shiny white sandals and a flowery pink-and-white baby-doll dress; her chin-length blonde hair curled behind dangling beaded earrings; she smelled wonderfully of lilacs, freshening even the muggy, polluted air of Belle Heights; and her perfect nails were polished cherry red.

Carrie tried to remember if her own mother had worn nail polish. If she had, what color? Four years after her mother’s death, almost all Carrie had left was an impression—that her mother was tall and serene, with a core of happiness that made her seem lit from within, reminding Carrie of how, as a kid, she’d put a flashlight against her palm to see the red glow between her fingers. But with each year Carrie lost more details, as if her mother were an Etch-A-Sketch drawing slowly being turned over and shaken.

“You must call me Rochelle,” Mrs. Brockner said. “And this is my daughter.”

The daughter looked mad. That was what Carrie noticed first. As if someone had just said something to her and she sure didn’t like it. She could be pretty, if she didn’t look so mad. Thin, on the tall side, with smooth, pale skin, and hair that was long and dark and straight as thread. Carrie’s hair was shorter and always frizzy, even more so on hot days. The daughter carried a small folded-up umbrella and wore plain white Bermuda shorts and a sleeveless pale blue top—just clothes, nothing more. Carrie always made an effort to look like she didn’t care what she had on. This girl really didn’t care.

“...Carrie, my granddaughter,” Mutti was saying, gently pushing Carrie forward. “It’s short for Carol. Such a pretty name, Carrie’s mother always said, a song for a name.”

“Carol is a perfectly charming name,” Mrs. Brockner said. “You’re the same age as my Mona, aren’t you?”

“Thirteen,” Carrie replied, thinking that *Mona* wasn’t a particularly charming name. It had “moan” in it.

“Yes, you’ll be in eighth grade together—tomorrow, thank heaven. I mean, teachers deserve the money, heaven knows, but wasn’t this strike awful?”

“Yes and no,” Mutti said—which was how she often answered questions. “Carrie did just move here, not three weeks ago. It did give Carrie a chance to settle down.”

“We adore Belle Heights!” Mrs. Brockner opened her arms, embracing the street behind the bus stop—typical Belle Heights, with a curvy concrete sidewalk lined with brownish trees, a couple

of plain shop fronts, a long row of semi-attached houses behind patches of lawn. “It’s so calm and peaceful here, a pocket of quiet. No crime, no antiwar demonstrations, no riots...”

To Carrie, Belle Heights, out in the far reaches of an outer borough of New York City, also felt more like an absence than a presence, a nothing instead of something. It wasn’t quaint and friendly, like a small town. It wasn’t thrilling, like the center of a big city. It wasn’t hushed and beautiful, like the countryside. In fact, it looked washed-out, colorless—a smudge of a neighborhood.

“She’s German,” Mona said, pointing at Veruschka.

Mrs. Brockner laughed. “So what, darling? Maybe this nice lady is German, too.”

“Born in Austria,” Mutti said. “Do you now”—which was how Mutti sometimes said “Do you know”—“that Veruschka’s father did get killed for trying to kill Hitler?”

“Yes,” Mona said. “He was part of a whole group that tried and failed. They came awfully close.”

“What can you do?” Mutti smiled sadly. “You can nothing do.”

Carrie winced. Why did Mutti have to talk backward like that? How was Carrie ever going to get through life without her mother and with somebody like Mutti?

“Oh, look!” Mrs. Brockner cried out. “Carol’s got the most adorable dimple, right there.”

Carrie couldn’t believe it. No one, not even Mutti or her own best friends back home, had ever noticed that dimple, a tiny line between her chin and right cheek. No one, that is, except for Carrie’s mother—who also called her *Carol* even after everyone else had switched to *Carrie*. “No one ever notices it,” Carrie said.

“You should wear your hair back, so it’s easier to see.” Mrs. Brockner stared hard at Carrie. “You have a lovely shape to your face, and completely acceptable features, but your hair just sticks out, and those bangs don’t suit you—”

Mona said, “*Mother.*”

“Well, it’s true. Carol doesn’t mind a few personal remarks, do you, Carol?”

“No.” Carrie looked directly at Mona. She figured Mona would get even madder, but the expression in her large blue eyes had changed. Somehow, Mona, too, had that look. The Future Look.

“Of course,” Mrs. Brockner said, “we can’t all have hair like Verushcka’s.”

“Her hair’s amazing!” Carrie said. “It’s like a lion’s mane.”

“Why, yes, that’s true!” Mrs. Brockner smiled at Carrie, who felt warm all over—not in a bad, sweaty way, either.

“I see you also did bring an umbrella,” Mutti said to Mona.

“You never know.” Mona shrugged. “It’s been raining all summer.”

“I thought it was the Summer of Love, not the Summer of Rain.” Mrs. Brockner winked at Carrie.

For Carrie, it had been the Summer of Busses—visiting her best friends in Spruce Hills, Lolly and Trippy. Days with them just slipped by so comfortably—braiding Lolly’s waist-length hair, eating Yankee Doodles, making fun of shows on TV while carefully watching them, anyway. But it felt strange, too, knowing that in the same big building a whole other family was living in the Schmidts’ apartment—a mother, a father, and two boys. It was only for a year, but still.

“And now, we really must go,” Mrs. Brockner said, with her pleasant smile. She placed a hand on Mona’s shoulder, who flinched. “Relatives coming for dinner, you understand.”

“Oh, yes.” Mutti nodded. “We’re going downtown, to buy Carrie some closes for school.” *Clothes*, Carrie wanted to explain to Mrs. Brockner, who looked a little confused. More big shirts, more long pants—more darker darks, if that was possible. “Downtown” meant the heart of Belle Heights, not far-away Manhattan—where Carrie went by subway maybe once a year, to see a show at Rockefeller Center.

“Nice to see you again, Mrs. Brockner,” Mutti said. Carrie wanted to nudge her. Mrs. Brockner had insisted on *Rochelle*. Now that was a charming name. Kind of French. “Nice to meet you, Mona.”

Mona took a step forward and shook Mutti’s hand. “Nice to meet you, too.” She sounded like she actually meant it. Then she shook Carrie’s hand, without a word. Carrie noticed that Mona was a terrible nail biter, fingertips red and raw, but her hand actually felt cool on this hot, muggy day.

As Mrs. Brockner and her daughter walked away, three busses screeched toward Carrie and Mutti. It always happened like that—you waited and waited, and then they all came at once, like locusts, or tests, or cliques. But two of the busses rattled by, as if going to a party Mutti and Carrie hadn’t been invited to; only the most crowded one stopped.

“So, what did you think of her?” Mutti asked, looking up at Carrie. She had a seat because a barefoot guy with a ponytail had instantly stood up for her.

“She’s great.” Carrie strained to grab the rail high over her head. Veruschka could have reached it, easy. But Carrie couldn’t picture Veruschka on a Belle Heights bus. “I liked her nails.”

Mutti paused. “I did mean the daughter.”

The bus lurched, groaned, shuddered. Belle Boulevard was a busy, two-way street, hilly as a roller coaster, and they were on a tight curve. “She’s all right.”

“I did like her. Very much.”

“You mean—Mona?”

“I mean Mona.”