

Family Reunion



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author of *The Girl Who Invented Romance*

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Chapter 1

*I*t began when we found out that our new summer house had an old bomb shelter in the backyard, and my brother, Angus, decided to sell condominium time-shares in it. Angus is twelve and a terrific salesman. He used to sell my Girl Scout cookies and calendars for me, and not once did a customer ask why a boy with a crew cut was in the Girl Scouts. He has red hair and freckles, and I think there is something about red hair and freckles that makes strangers relax their defenses, and buy, buy, buy.

Soon after we examined our bomb shelter, Angus divided the year into fifty-two weeks and went off to sell ten shares per week of year-round, lifetime, come-as-you-are survival shelter use.

It was that "come-as-you-are" line that people liked. You could tell it soothed them to know that when the bomb fell, they didn't have to dress up to take advantage of their time-share.

I said, "But Angus. What if the bomb falls in

September, and somebody bought a lifetime, first-week-in-March use?"

Angus drew a long, slow, sad finger across his throat. "Poor planning," he told me. "People have to think ahead. Know their global politics." He turned to his latest potential buyer, an innocent Vermont child with an untouched allowance. "Or better yet," Angus said joyfully, "buy a share in each week of the year! That way you'll never have a worry."

Before Daddy found out and stopped him, Angus had sold seventy-two shares. Angus even had a computer program worked out for dividing each shareholder's right to the cans of Campbell's soup that were in there, too. (Although I personally would be worried about chicken noodle soup from 1958.)

Daddy went berserk.

"We bought this summer house because you were going to enjoy fresh air! Swim in the lake, fish for trout, climb every mountain. People said that children need a backyard for a normal, stable upbringing, and so I said, okay. June through August they'll have a backyard. I'll make these kids stable if it kills me. So what happens? You come up here from New York City, demoralize all these nice Vermont kids, rip off their allowances, and sell them—"

Daddy paused. He was praying Angus would admit he hadn't really sold time-shares to a bomb shelter; he had really gotten all that money from a paper route.

"Dad, it's a new idea," said Angus proudly. "A fresh concept. I bet nobody else in Vermont is doing it."

Daddy got a grip on himself and asked what Angus had been charging.

"Five dollars a share, Dad. It's a bargain. Everybody saw that right off."

My father is a large man—well over six feet, with shoulders like a yardstick. Whenever he has to deal with Angus he takes very deep breaths, so his chest rises, and his suit jacket lifts, and his tie swings free. It's like watching a rocket preparing for launch. You're always a bit worried about the explosion. "Angus," said my father, "we have hardly arrived in this town. So far I know the guy who pumps my gas, the mailman, and the short-order cook at the coffee shop."

"Gee, Dad, that's a shame. I've met everybody. I've been going door-to-door for days."

Daddy's chest sank back to resting position. He looked up at the ceiling, which in the summer house is quite close to his head, and he frequently communes with the cracks there. Then he stared at his sweet-faced, freckled son and said that he had just remembered pressing business back in New York City. He'd be gone for weeks now. Possibly all summer. That it was up to Angus and me and Annette (our stepmother) to go door-to-door, return all the money, and apologize for Angus being such a sick puppy that he would even think of selling bomb shares.

Angus had, after all, earned three hundred sixty dollars, and the thought of giving it back was not a happy one. He put on the expression of a puppy at the pound, entreating us to give him love and affection. Earnestly he explained that this sort of thing would look really great on a college application.

Daddy said this kind of thing would make any reasonable college admissions office bar the door.

Angus said he thought he would write Grandma about it, because Grandma was always proud of him, even if nobody else was.

Daddy said if Angus went and told Grandma, Daddy

would kill him. Daddy's chest began to expand alarmingly. Angus backed up a bit.

I backed up completely and said I would go check the mail.

Mail is the best thing about having a summer house in Vermont. The big black mailbox pokes up out of tall white daisies and high grassy weeds on the other side of a narrow country road, and when the little red flag is down, you know somebody has written you.

Vermont is entirely treed. You'd think they had a genuine fear of meadows, open spaces, and views. Trees curve in over the roads and houses and towns, wave upon wave, as if local zoning laws require you to live in a green aquarium. Only the lake, being filled with water, is barren of trees.

I walked through the filtered sun and pulled down the little curved door of the black mailbox.

The only mail was a letter from Aunt Maggie.

Aunt Maggie is Daddy's older sister. She lives out in the Midwest, where she and her family lead A Perfect Life. We call them The Perfects, because it's rather like their real last name, which is Preffyn. In the old days, when we were sort of perfect ourselves, we used to visit them, but we don't anymore. Daddy says he doesn't have the energy.

Aunt Maggie married Uncle Todd, and she is lovely and he is handsome, and she is chairman of the school board and he is a pharmacist. They have a backyard, of course, have always had a backyard, and therefore their children, Brett and Carolyn, are also Perfect. Brett is sixteen and handsome and Carolyn is fourteen and beautiful. They were never awkward and fat, never had braces, never had pimples, and never got anything below a B plus. In gym they are always chosen first for teams. That is just the kind of family they are.

When they visit us in New York City, we like to walk down the sidewalk and point to perfectly innocent people waiting for the bus and whisper, "Careful—drug deal." Carolyn and Brett always fall for this, and tell their mother, and Aunt Maggie says if we just had a backyard to play in, we would be stable, like her kids.

Stable is a big word in Aunt Maggie's life. She has stability, Carolyn and Brett have tremendous stability, but we have none. We are unstable, unbalanced, and at risk.

She loves that one: *at risk*.

As if my brother and sister and I are poised at the edge of a cliff, teetering dangerously, nobody within reach to pull us away from a smushed-to-slush death.

When we were younger, you see, our mother fell in love with a dashing, romantic, handsome French newspaper reporter who was at that time covering the United Nations for a Paris paper. Mother left Daddy and went to live with Jean-Paul, and a few years later they went on to Paris.

We stayed with Daddy. This was partly because we wanted to stay with Daddy, and partly because Mother wasn't sure we would fit in with her new lifestyle anyway. Although we could agree that Angus wouldn't fit easily into anybody's lifestyle, my sister Joanna and I did not like hearing that we wouldn't either.

Joanna, who is the oldest, is spending her entire summer with Mother and Jean-Paul; she is the first of us to visit France. Joanna left the very afternoon that school ended—June 17—and won't be back till school starts again—September 8.

Daddy likes us to write to Mother.

We have a bad attitude toward doing this, especially since Mother doesn't write back, she telephones.

A few weeks ago, I wrote that Angus was enjoying his new leg.

Mother telephoned, horrified, demanding to know what had happened to Angus's old leg. Angus said it had gotten all crushed and thrown in the dump, but he had gotten a new one cheap, and Mother wasn't to worry about the bill.

Mother telephoned Daddy at work in New York City for details. (It is hard to say which of them hates these phone calls more.) Of course Daddy didn't know Angus had any fake legs, let alone cheap ones, so it was just the sort of conversation that made Mother abandon Daddy in the first place. Mother called back to Vermont and demanded to speak to Annette about the leg, but Annette is afraid of Mother, and whispered to Angus to say she wasn't home, and Angus of course said, "Annette says to tell you she's not home."

By then I don't think Mother really cared about Angus's leg. I think she called Daddy in New York again just to be difficult. This time Daddy remembered that Angus likes to use an old hollow detachable mannequin's leg as a briefcase, or tote bag, and he was ready with a sane, reasonable explanation for Mother. Mother did not think anybody in the picture was being either sane or reasonable.

But that was the past. Nobody cared about Angus's leg any more. We just wanted to take the pressure off the bomb-share deals, so I ran into the house to read Aunt Maggie's letter aloud.

My father had sunk into the only chair in the summer house large enough to support him. Summer house furniture turned out to be quite flimsy, but Annette doesn't mind, as this means she gets to redecorate and replace it all.

The house in Vermont has no curtains on any of the downstairs windows. By day the sun moves slowly from one pane of glass to the next. Hot little squares of sun lie first on the living room floor, slide to the table, drift into the next room and become late afternoon slants across the kitchen counters.

The summer heat was already vanishing, and Daddy had yanked off his tie, tossed his jacket over a chairback, and was closing his eyes. The afghan on the back of the easy chair was pale blue with pink flower trim. It sank down when Daddy did and lay on his shoulders like a baby blanket on a grizzly bear.

I said, "You want to hear a letter from Aunt Maggie?" I didn't give anybody a choice. I read, " 'Dear Brother Charlie.' "

Daddy said that made him sound like an inmate at an institution for adult mentally handicapped. We did not tell him he also looked like one, what with the baby blanket scooped around his cheeks.

" 'It is hard to believe, but Todd and I are approaching our twentieth wedding anniversary!!!!!!' " I went on.

Eight exclamation points. Enough to make anybody gag, but especially Daddy, who did not reach a first anniversary on Wife Number One, hit a twelfth with Wife Number Two (our mother), and is barely within reach of a second on Wife Number Three (Annette).

"Don't worry, Dad," Angus consoled him. "All those exclamation points mean Aunt Maggie is as surprised as anybody that it lasted all those years."

" 'And of course,' " I quoted on, " 'we want to have a big and wonderful family celebration of this unique event.' "

"Notice how she's rubbing in how unique it is," said Daddy.

I kept reading. " 'So we've planned a family reunion gala for August!' "

My aunt Maggie is known for her great enthusiasms, which tend to tire out everybody but Aunt Maggie. Now even her handwriting was bigger and more excited. I made a note to get a library book on how to analyze handwriting because I was sure there were depths to plumb in Aunt Maggie's.

" 'We're even getting in touch with old friends from high school, Charlie!!!! We'll want everybody to come!! Joanna must fly back from Paris and this will be our chance to get to know dear Annette at last, and how wonderful it will be for Shelley and Angus to be back in Barrington again!!!!' "

"Where they have all those backyards," said Angus.

Annette looked as if she would rather postpone meeting The Perfects for another hundred years or so. In her situation I would certainly feel the same, since Annette does not measure up to anybody, especially Wife Number Two (Mother) and Aunt Maggie. Annette began playing with Angus's Queen Anne's lace. Angus read that you could dye Queen Anne's lace, so he has bunches sitting in glasses of water and food coloring. Nothing has happened with yellow and green, but red and blue have promise; they are now a sick pastel instead of white. Annette shifted Queen Anne's lace glasses all over the table.

"Can I telephone Joanna and tell her about the family reunion?" I begged. "Please, please?"

Daddy looked wary. He likes talking to Joanna, but he's afraid Mother will be home and he'll have to talk to her, or worse, that Jean-Paul will be home and

they'll have to have a civilized conversation. The crummy thing about divorce and remarriage is how you're required to be civilized about it, and not scream ugly things, especially when several years have gone by and if you have any stability at all, you have gotten over it.

"I'll tell Joanna you're not home," I said kindly.

I didn't get the usual lecture on How Expensive It Is To Telephone Across The Atlantic Ocean, nor even the secondary lecture on You Should Write More Letters Instead. Daddy was weak from dealing with Angus and didn't even remember to tell me to set the timer so I wouldn't talk more than fifteen minutes.

Annette remembered. I think that is probably a stepmother's role in life, remembering the toll-call timer.

I ran upstairs to my bedroom.

Vacation bedrooms are different from real bedrooms. In New York, my half of the room is lined with shelves and cabinets. Each shelf has a front and a back layer of books, cassettes, games I used to play, dolls I used to collect, papers I wrote last year. The drawers are stuffed with sweaters and sweatshirts, and socks pop out when you tug them open. My view is limited to Joanna's side of the room, which is even more cluttered because she's had more years to clutter in. There is no visible wallpaper because we've been taping up posters for years, without ever taking the first ones down, so that formerly adored stars have only their feet showing beneath the hair of the currently adored rock stars, who are partially obscured by the perfume advertisements Jo cuts from magazines and the cartoons I cut from the newspaper.

In Vermont my room is utterly bare. It has a gleaming wooden floor, white walls, and nothing of me except my clothing, hidden in closet and bureau. The

view through two narrow windows, curtained with white, flower-sprigged muslin, is the treetops shading the mailbox. The leaves are never quiet. They shift, as if they are straining to see more. In a high wind the leaves run in place, like basketball players who finally get off the bench and into the game.

I sat cross-legged on the bed and dialed the twelve digits to reach Joanna. I love dialing direct to France; I feel so sophisticated.

I have this terrible fear that Joanna will fit perfectly in Mother and Jean-Paul's lifestyle and that she will stay there forever and not come home in September.

Every time I talk to her, and she's bubbling away about staying in kings' castles, and eating dinner at ten P.M., and strolling around Paris eating real croissants (as opposed to the shabby make-believe ones we eat in New York), I feel as if I am losing her. Joanna and I don't share a bedroom anymore, and she hasn't seen the bomb shelter, and she hasn't lived in the summer house, and she didn't help Angus with the computer program for Campbell's soup, and she probably thinks it's more fun in France, and will probably vanish like Mother.

So actually Aunt Maggie's Perfection was good timing. Joanna would have to come home in August and we would all get very stable from all those Barrington backyards and Joanna would stay in our family after all.

But when I read Aunt Maggie's letter out loud to her, Joanna said, "Mid-August?" in a distracted voice. "Impossible, Shelley. Out of the question. Simply cannot make it. Jean-Paul and Mother and I will be in England. We have our theater tickets in London all arranged."

I plucked at the telephone cord as if it were a guitar string. Outside the chorus of insects picked up and rasped as if planning an assault on the bedroom window. "You'd rather go to theater in London than have a watermelon-seed-spitting contest with Brett and Carolyn?" I said to my sister.

Joanna laughed. "That was three years ago. Only Angus is enough of a baby to do that now. You're going to be so jealous of me, Shell. While you're escorting Annette in among The Perfects, I shall be walking down the aisle where Diana married Prince Charles, or standing where Lady Jane Grey was executed."

"Daddy will make you come," I said, knowing he would not.

"He can't. It's Mother's time."

In divorce you cannot trespass on the other parent's time. It's a rule. Of course you do, all the time, but you do it quietly and sneakily. I said, "Oh, just skip London."

"Nope. I've been to Barrington. I've never been to London." Joanna changed the subject quickly, because I am very good at making people feel guilty. I am as good at that as Angus is at selling Girl Scout cookies. Once my mother said she needed the Atlantic Ocean between us because of all the guilt I lay on her if she's closer.

"But Jo, you have to come!" I cried. "I need you. Angus needs you."

"Nonsense. You guys will be fine. Just leave Annette at home. She'll embarrass you if you bring her."

I could not think of any easy way to leave my stepmother at home. "Lock her in a closet with enough water to last her a week?" I said.

Joanna felt I should give this serious thought. She

believed that Daddy's standards had fallen over the years. "Mother is incredibly more intelligent, beautiful, interesting, and bilingual than Annette," she said.

"Annette is hardly even one-lingual," I told her. "Especially after Angus has worked her over." I told Joanna about the bomb shares.

Joanna laughed for an entire two minutes of expensive transatlantic phone call. She has such a wonderful laugh, all loud and boisterous and room-filling. It hurt to listen to her laugh and not have her in the room with me. Which would I rather have? I thought. A room here all to myself, with privacy and quiet and bare walls? Or Joanna sharing, getting ready for dates, eating cookies and getting crumbs on my bed (she's never dumb enough to eat Oreos on her bed) and borrowing my earrings?

No contest.

"Ooooooh," Joanna whispered suddenly. "I just thought of something, Shelley. You know who else you might meet at a big reunion where they're even inviting Daddy's old high school friends? I bet you'll finally meet Wife Number One! Celeste."

I have always been terribly grateful to Celeste for preferring her career in Chicago over Daddy, because if she hadn't, we would not have been born. I think my father is perfect, and I cannot understand how Celeste, who knew him when he was so young and handsome, could have thought anything different. But it's just as well she did.

"I always used to think," said Joanna, her voice dreamily crossing two thousand miles of choppy blue ocean, "that Daddy and Celeste had a son they never told us about. A boy a few years older than me. And somehow I would meet him, all unknowing, and we