

BARBARA DELINSKY

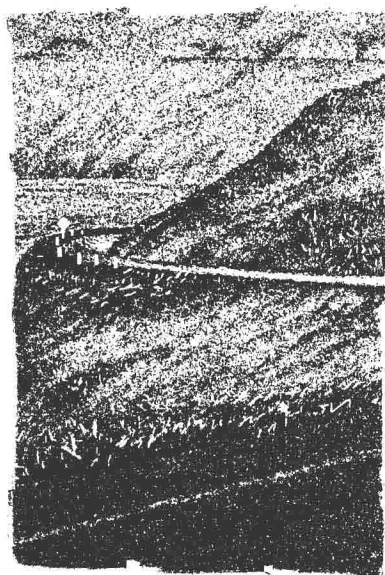
AUTHOR OF *THREE WISHES*



BARBARA DELINSKY

Coast Road

A NOVEL



SIMON & SCHUSTER



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Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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ALSO BY BARBARA DELINSKY

Three Wishes

A Woman's Place

Shades of Grace

Together Alone

For My Daughters

Suddenly

More Than Friends

The Passions of Chelsea Kane

A Woman Betrayed



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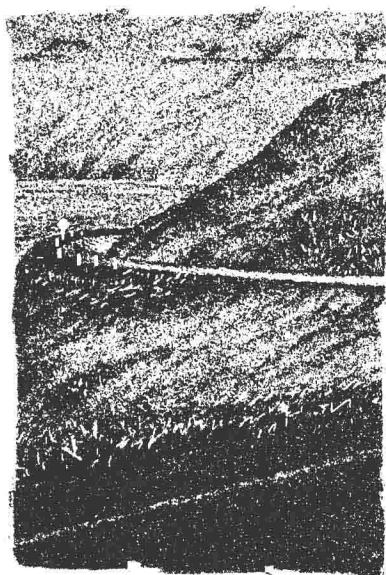
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acknowledgments

Coast Road was born of three things I admire—the Big Sur coast, people with artistic ability, and men who rise to the occasion. My own instinct as a woman, plus an annual trip to Big Sur, helped with research into those things, but there were other elements of the book that required outside expertise.

I wish to thank Nancy Weinstein, nurse-educator of the Critical Care Unit at the Newton Wellesley Hospital, for the generous sharing of her time, knowledge, and imagination. Likewise, and not for the first time, my thanks to Margot Chamberlin for advice on the nuts and bolts of being an architect. For their help framing Rachel's pieces, I thank Renata, Rob, Chris, and Steve, of the Renjeau Gallery. For her assistance, her ear, and great color, I thank Barbie Goldberg.

As with any large project, some things inevitably hit the cutting-room floor. Although none of the 1950s trivia that Elaine Raco Chase sent made it into this book, I am grateful for her tireless efforts. Nor did anything of Pukaskwa make it into *Coast Road*, despite the generous contributions of Margaret Carney, writer, naturalist, and friend; and Bob Reside, Park Warden, Pukaskwa National Park. I was deeply impressed with the beauty and isolation of Ontario, north of Lake Superior, and imagine that it will appear in a future book.

My book group. Ah, my book group. How long have I talked about writing its story? The full focus that I had initially intended went the

way of 1950s trivia and Ontario, but what remains is true. No, no, guys. Don't look for yourselves in any of my characters. I promised I wouldn't, and I didn't. I do believe, though, that you will identify with the deeper meaning of the group, as do I.

Again and still, I thank my agent, Amy Berkower, who has worked nearly as hard on this book as I have. I am also grateful to her partner, Al Zuckerman, for his gracious input, and her assistant, Jodi Reamer, for being there every single time I call. I thank my editor, Laurie Bernstein, for making me one of the pins she juggles.

As always, for their enthusiasm, support, and patience, I thank my family—my husband, Steve; my son and daughter-in-law, Eric and Jodi; and the twins, Andrew and Jeremy. Those twinges Jack feels when he thinks of family? Autobiographical all the way!



prologue

WHEN THE PHONE rang, Rachel Keats was painting sea otters. She was working in oils and had finally gotten the right mix of black for the eyes. There was no way she was stopping to pick up the phone. She had warned Samantha about that.

"Hi! You've reached Rachel, Samantha, and Hope. We're otherwise occupied. Please leave your name and number, and we'll call you back. Thanks."

Through a series of beeps, she applied a smudge of oil with a round brush. Then came a deep male voice that was too old to be calling for Samantha. Rachel would have pictured a gorgeous guy to go with the voice, but he'd said his name too fast. This man wasn't gorgeous. He was a ticket agent, a friend of a friend, more sleeze than style, but apparently good at his job. "I have in my hand three tickets for tonight's Garth Brooks concert," he said. "San Jose. Gooooood seats. I need to hear from you in five minutes or I'm moving down my list—"

Rachel made a lunging grab for the phone. "I want them!"

"Heeeey, Rachel. How's my favorite artist?"

"Painting. You need a credit card number, right? Hold on a second." She put the phone down, ran through the house to the kitchen, and snatched up her wallet. She was breathless reading off the number, breathless returning to the studio. She swallowed hard, looked at the canvas on the easel and six others nearby waiting to be finished,

thought of everything else she had to do in the next three weeks, and decided that she was crazy. She didn't have time to go to a concert.

But the girls would be absolutely, positively *blown away!*

She threw the window open and leaned out into clear, woody air.

"*Samantha! Hope!*" They were out there somewhere. She yelled again.

Answering yells came from a distance, then closer.

"*Hurry!*" she yelled back.

Minutes later, they came running through the woods, Samantha looking every bit as young as Hope for once, both with blond hair flying and cheeks pink. Rachel shouted the news to them even before they reached her window. The look on their faces was more than worth the prospect of an all-nighter or two.

"Are you *serious?*" Hope asked. Her eyes were wide, her freckles vibrant, her smile filled with teeth that were still too large for her face. She was thirteen and entirely prepubescent.

Rachel grinned and nodded.

"*Awesome!*" breathed Samantha. At fifteen she was a head taller than Hope and gently curved. Blond hair and all, she was Rachel at that age.

"*Tonight?*" Hope asked.

"*Tonight.*"

"*Good seats?*" Samantha asked.

"*Great seats.*"

Hope pressed her hands together in excitement. "Are we doing the whole thing—you know, what we talked about?"

Rachel didn't have the time for it. She didn't have the money. But if her paintings were a hit, the money would come, and as for time, life was too short. "The whole thing," she said, because it would be good for Samantha to get away from the phone and Hope to get away from her cat and, yes, maybe even good for Rachel to get away from her oils.

"Omigod, I have to call Lydia!" Samantha cried.

"What you have to do," Rachel corrected her, "is anything that needs to be done for school. We leave in an hour." She was *definitely*

crazy. Forget *her* work. The girls had tons of their own, but . . . but this was *Garth*.

She returned to her studio for the hour and accomplished as little as she feared her daughters had. Then they piled into her sport utility vehicle and headed north. Having done her research during the some-day-we-will stage, she knew just where to go. The store she wanted was on the way to San Jose. It was still open when they got there, and had a perfect selection. Thirty minutes and an obscene amount of money later, they emerged wearing cowboy boots under their jeans, cowboy hats over their hair, and smiles the size of Texas.

Thirty minutes after that, with the smell of McDonald's burgers and fries filling the car, they were flying high toward San Jose.

Nothing they saw when they got there brought them down. There were crowds and crowds of fans, light shows and smoke, sets that rose from nowhere to produce the man himself, who sang hit after hit without a break, longer-than-ever versions of each, and how could Rachel not be into it, with Hope and Samantha dancing beside her? If she was conservative through the first song or two, any self-consciousness was gone by the third. She was on her feet dancing, clapping high, singing. She cheered with Samantha and Hope when familiar chords announced a favorite song, and shouted appreciatively with them at song's end. The three of them sang their hearts out until the very last encore was done, and then left the arena arm in arm, three friends who just happened to be related.

It was a special evening. Rachel didn't regret a minute of it, not even when Samantha said, "Did you see that girl right in front of us? The tall one with the French braid? Did you see the tattoo on her arm? The rose? If I wanted something like that, what would you say?"

"No," Rachel said as she drove south through the dark.

"Even a tiny one? A little star on my ankle?"

"No."

"But it's *way cool*."

"No."

"Why *not*?"

"Because she was older than you. When you're twenty-five—"