

CHAPTER 12

When I got to the station, the agent told me the bus pulled away minutes ago and another wouldn't be leaving till late evening. That would mean about twelve hours hanging around doing nothing. I plopped myself down on a bench, thinking. I didn't have the patience to wait that long, and couldn't go back to the house, not with Cowboy probably still squatting at the table, either crying or getting drunk. Or both.

Then it hit me. Why not hitch a ride? I doubted it was even two hundred miles to the Big City. I've seen plenty of boys on the road hitchhiking. A couple of times I've even seen girls do it, so, I thought, why not me? If they can do it, why can't I?

I felt excited, but of course I was nervous, too. I'd heard stories of hitchhikers being murdered but knew it didn't happen often. Going to a strange town was scary enough, even scarier with no family or friends to meet me there. In my whole life I'd never gone anywhere by myself and I had no idea where to stay or if I could even get a job. My money wouldn't last forever, especially in the Big City, where I've heard everything cost an arm and a leg.

I picked a spot on the road where people couldn't see me from their houses, set my suitcase on the gravel and stuck out my thumb. A couple of tin lizzies whizzed past me like I was invisible. I started to lose my nerve. Standing there by myself on the side of the road made it even worse. I had a couple of sandwiches packed away in my bag, which I could eat later. That much was good. I had my money buried in my suitcase and kept some in my purse. To be extra sure no one could steal all of it, I folded a little wad and stuffed it in my bra.

With so few cars on the road and no one stopping to give me a ride, I was about to give up. The sun beating on my neck made me sweaty under my raggedy jacket. Maybe hitching wasn't such a good idea. I decided to wait five more minutes. If no one picked me up, I'd catch a train, even though it was a long walk back in the heat. I reached down for my bag when a car sped past me, then ground up gravel as it skidded to a stop on the shoulder of the road. Lugging my bag, I ran as fast as I could.

“Are you heading toward the Big City?” I asked, poking my head in the window.

He stared at me a moment. “Hop in.”

From the side, he looked like a girl about my age, the way his dirty blond hair hung to his shoulders. His scraggly beard made him look like a bum. The car jerked ahead before smoothing out. I tried to make conversation, telling him I was going to the city to start a new life. “Are you driving all the way there...I'm sorry, what's your name?”

He mumbled something, then said his name was Bob.

“I'm Violet.”

“What kind of a name is that?”

I twisted sideways to get a better look at him. “What do you mean?”

“You heard me. What kind of name is that?”

He puzzled me. “Are you saying you never heard the name 'Violet' before?”

He stared straight ahead. “Maybe. Is it your real name?”

“Of course it is. Why would I lie about a thing like that?”

“People lie all the time. You can't trust them.”

“Them?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “They could be anywhere.”

Confused, I tried to read his face. “They? Who are they?”

He got angry. “They! Them! They want me but I won't let them catch me. Not if I can help it!” He tromped on the gas pedal.

He was beginning to scare me. “Are you running from the police?”

“No, they're part of it, working with them,” he said, agitated and starting to weave all over the road.

I still didn't understand. “Did you rob a store or something?”

“I didn't do nothin'!” He looked at me wild-eyed. “Are you one of them? Because if you are---” He pulled a knife from his cruddy leather jacket and laid it on his lap.

“No, no,” I said, trying to convince him. “I'm running away from home. Are you running away from home, too?”

“You're lying to me like everybody else. You said you were going to start a new life.”

My brain was racing. “That's right, that's what I said. I'm running away, don't you see? To start a new life.”

“I don't believe you. Same as I don't believe them. They're smart. So smart. They got tricks. But they're not getting me, not again, not never.” He jammed down on the pedal.

I was finally catching on. “This guy, this Bob, was sick in the head, just like old Mr. Banner up our street. We called him the kook. He'd come outside half-naked early in the morning crying everybody was trying to kill him. When the neighbors couldn't take it anymore, they called the County. It didn't take long for them to haul old Mr. Banner away in a paddy wagon. Even Cowboy acted crazy like that sometimes when he'd stumble home blind drunk, yelling at ghosts he said were after him.

The car weaved and jerked, slowed down and sped up as he kept hitting the gas and the brake. He steered the car with one hand while the other fingered the knife on his lap. I knew I had to get out, and do it before this nut killed me. I felt for the door handle behind me. If I had to jump I would, even if

the car was going fifty.

“Bob, there are friends back there who'll protect you. Why don't you slow down and let's go back. It's not too late.”

“You got any money?” he said. “I'm gonna need gas.”

“Bob, don't be silly. Would I be hitchhiking if I had money?”

“You must have somethin'. What's in your purse?” he said, reaching over and causing the car to swerve off the road, but not before he caught the wheel and straightened out.

I pleaded with him. “Bob, turn around and go back. I have an uncle. He's very kind, always helping people. He can help you, too.”

“I can't. Nobody can help me now. It's too late. I stole this car.”

“It's OK. You made a mistake. You're bringing it back. If you have a problem I know my uncle can fix it.”

“I don't have any problems! They got all the problems! Nobody can help me. My girlfriend left me.” He looked over at me with sad eyes. “She told me she loved me. She swore it. And *she* lied, too.”

“Bob, I'm sure she still loves you.” I tried to be sympathetic.

“Stop calling me Bob! My name's Irving.”

“All right, Irving.”

“Sharon hates me. They all hate me. That's why they want to get rid of me.” He jerked around to look out the back window.

“No one's behind us, Irving,” I said, inching as close to the door as I could get.

“They're sneaky. Oh, they're sneaky all right. They can shoot out of nowhere.”

“Irving, you're not giving anyone a chance. I'm sure your parents love you. And you know Sharon loves you. In your heart you must know that.”

He turned tearful eyes to me. “Do you really think so?”

“I know so. I'm a girl. I know about things like that.”

He eyed me suspiciously. I saw his hand tighten around the knife. “Are you one of them?”

“Irving, no. I'm your friend. Don't you understand? I want to help you. Please believe me.”

He grew angry again. “You're lying, just like the whole pack of them.” The car sped up and swerved to the other side of the road and back again, dodging a car speeding head-on toward us with its

horn blasting as it swept past, narrowly missing us.

I found the door handle behind me and gripped it. “Irving, slow down. If you keep driving like this the cops are going to spot you.”

At that very moment a police car seemed to come out of nowhere with its siren blaring behind us and closing in fast. Panicked, Irving swerved and let out a yell as he slammed on the brakes, tires screaming across the pavement, and slid sideways over the gravel shoulder, sending a shower of stones flying. Flinging open his door, he leaped out and dashed through the dust cloud across the road into the woods.

A motorcycle cop pulled alongside the car, shouting for him to stop, but the woods had already swallowed him up in its shade.

The cop approached the car cautiously, then dropped low before coming up on the driver's side window with Irving's knife in his hand. He snapped off his goggles. “Who was that?” he demanded. “And who are you?”

He listened with a mixed expression of sympathy and disgust as I rattled off the details.

“Don't you know better than to go hitchhiking, a young girl like you?” he lectured, jotting notes in his pad. “Don't you read the papers?”

I apologized and gave him my name.

He looked up. “Sheehan? Any relation to Bill Sheehan?”

“He's my uncle.”

“Is that so? Well, one thing's sure, he won't be happy hearing about his foolish niece.” He walked back to his motorcycle and spoke into his radio microphone. “Bill, listen here....”

A short time later Uncle Billy's police car swung off the road, with gravel drumming under the fenders. I told him the same story I told the motorcycle cop.

I thought he'd be angry with me, but he took it OK. “You're a lucky girl, Violet. Get in a car with a stranger, anything can happen. And it's not usually good.”

“I know that now, Uncle.”

“Just don't forget it,” he said, taking my bag and helping me into his front seat.

“Uncle Billy, do you have time to drop me off at the train station. I guess I should have gone there in the first place.”

“Water over the dam, Violet.” He glanced over at me. “Still determined to go to the Big City?”

I nodded.

“Does Cowboy know?”

“Yes, he was up when I was leaving. He begged me not to go.”

“I can understand that.”

“Cowboy seemed different to me this morning.”

“Different how?”

“I don't know. Just different.” I wanted to say he seemed almost human, but I didn't.

“Well, I guess nothing a bottle of booze won't fix.” He looked ahead. “Violet, it was a couple of weeks ago, I heard through the grapevine you was leaving town for greener pastures.”

“I made up my mind before I graduated.”

He looked concerned. “You sure you want to do this? It ain't no piece of cake going to a strange place and getting set up, 'specially not knowing anyone or anything.”

“I know that Uncle. I'll be careful.”

“You have to be on the lookout all the time 'cause you never know what's sneaking up on you.” He pulled over to the curb.

“Thanks, Uncle,” I said, leaning over and kissing his cheek. I took my bag and hugged my purse to my side.

“Beware of strangers,” he warned, “specially them what wants to do you a favor.”