
Once and for Always

by Leigh Michaels

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CHAPTER ONE

IT was hot, and the air-conditioning in the heavily loaded van hadn't worked right since they had picked it up at the rental place in Chicago that morning. That was enough to make everybody grumpy, even without Joe Niemann chain-smoking cigars and the assistant cameraman singing along with the hard-rock music that streamed from the tape deck.

It was not a good omen for a week's work on location, Jill Donovan thought, when the crew couldn't even get to the site without being at each other's throats. *I must be crazy to have signed on for a project like this*, she thought. *I'm going to be spending a whole week of July on location in the middle of a cornfield in Iowa, sitting on an all-terrain vehicle and smiling for the camera, when I could have stayed in New York.*

She sighed. *It pays the rent, Donovan*, she reminded herself. Not that she was in desperate need of work; she had always made good money in her modeling career. But, on the other hand, there had never been people lining up at her agency to ask Jill Donovan to model designer dresses and jewels for *Vogue*, either. Her jobs had been less glamorous ones—like posing for advertising photos of all-terrain vehicles, she reminded herself.

She pushed the button that let her seat lean back, and from behind her came a howl. "Donovan, are you trying to cripple me? You almost smashed my knee!"

She put the seat upright. "Sorry, Gareth."

"You could think ahead a little. I nearly pulled a muscle dodging you."

He sounded like a whiney child, Jill thought. That was the biggest problem with male models, she concluded: they were so ridiculously protective of their precious skins that they had little energy left to be interested in anything else.

"Why is it that pretty women never have any brains?" Gareth complained.

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“Thanks for the compliment,” Jill said crisply. She had known Gareth Morris for years; in fact, she had dated him a few times, but it hadn’t taken long for her to become disenchanted with the petty personality that lay behind the handsome face. Gareth was certainly good-looking, but his attitudes about women were strictly chauvinist. On the plane from New York to Chicago, he had passed the time by making off-color comments to the flight attendants. Jill, who had been sitting beside him, had not appreciated his wit.

“Oh,” he said, on a note of discovery. “You’re just jealous because I don’t find you particularly attractive any more.”

She longed to point out to him that he hadn’t been the one who had called a halt to their dates; she was the one who had suddenly been too busy. Had the egomaniac really not noticed?

“Well,” he said philosophically, “I suppose there won’t be much else of interest to do in this hick town we’re going to—what’s the name of it again?”

Joe Niemann, who was the advertising executive in charge of producing this new campaign for North Star’s all-terrain vehicles, puffed a particularly noxious cloud of cigar smoke into the van and said, “Springhill.”

“I didn’t know there were any hills in Iowa,” Gareth said.

“Maybe it was just wishful thinking when they named it,” the assistant cameraman volunteered.

Gareth had lost interest. He leaned across the seat and studied Jill’s profile. “What about it, Donovan? We might as well kill time together—have a little fun. I doubt there will be anybody interesting among the natives.”

And that, Jill told herself, was the other problem with male models; they were so convinced of their attractiveness that they believed every woman they met was eager to fall into bed.

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“And give Springhill a chance to see how the beautiful people behave?” Jill said, a little cynically.

“Why not?” Gareth shrugged. “No commitments, of course.”

“I know. You wouldn’t want me sitting on your door-step when you get back to New York. Thanks, Gareth, but I’m afraid I’ll be too busy to have time to party with you.”

Gareth frowned. “Doing what? We can’t work at night, you know. What do you plan to do with your time?”

Jill thought about telling him that she couldn’t wait to see how her crossword puzzle book turned out, but she thought Gareth was probably too dense to see the insult.

“Leave her alone, Gareth.” The head cameraman didn’t even turn his head, he just kept staring out of the window.

“What’s it to you, Danny?” Gareth challenged.

“I’m interested because we’ve got one week to shoot this ad, and that doesn’t leave time to wait while your bruises heal.”

Gareth recoiled. “Bruises?” he shrieked. “Are you threatening me?”

“Nope. But if you bother Jill, she may just punch you in the eye.” Danny turned then, and winked at Jill, who smiled back. She liked Danny Mitchell, and even though she didn’t really need defending, he was a dear to stand up for her. She could even forgive him for getting her into this ridiculous assignment. A magazine advertising campaign for a sort of three- wheeled motorcycle, running through a cornfield in the middle of Iowa . . . Whose crazy idea had this been, anyway?

Gareth settled into his seat with a little flounce. “Joe, would you mind putting out that cigar?” he called peevishly. “It’s terrible for my skin to be exposed to smoke. And it’s making Donovan here look absolutely haggard. Once a woman gets past a certain

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age, you know...”

Jill thought grimly, *You may not have to wait long for those bruises, Gareth. How in heaven’s name could I ever have dated the man?*

Joe Niemann, who had ignored the entire exchange while he puffed gently at his cigar, took it from between his lips. Instead of crushing it out, however, he waved it like a pointer. “I give you Springhill,” he said. “Your patience has been rewarded.”

The irony in his tone was drowned by the applause of the other five people in the van. Jill pulled the curtain back from the window and stared out across a little valley where a town nestled along the banks of a twisting river. There were hills, she saw, and plenty of them; the town crept up the sides of some, while others formed a sort of natural basin, their wooded slopes gently rolling against the horizon. At the moment, there was not a cornfield in sight.

As pretty as a picture-book, Jill thought. And just as dull. Once, in the heat of anger, she had declared that nothing could ever get her to set foot in the state of Iowa. Now here she was.

But not for long, she reflected. Surely a week wasn’t long enough for a case of terminal boredom to set in. Though, if it came to that, she had had plenty of practice at dealing with boredom in her seven years as a model. The resulting photographs might look glamorous, but the process, Jill had long ago discovered, usually wasn’t.

Seven years, she mused. It didn’t seem possible that it had been so long since she had gone to New York City, to the bright lights that had been beckoning to her since she was a child. Seven long years— She had been a little older than the average beginning model when she had been discovered, but then she had never really considered modeling as a career. There were so many other jobs, other challenges—anything was possible in the city.

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Once into the field, though, she had quickly found that the rewards could be great for a young woman willing to work hard. And Jill could work very hard indeed. There had been no commitment important enough, no opportunity intriguing enough, no entertainment fascinating enough to interfere with her work. Certainly there had been no man appealing enough to make her give it up.

And that devotion to work was explanation enough for her presence in a van crammed with crew and cameras and props, pulling a trailer loaded with two all-terrain vehicles through a landscape lined with cornfields. It had been a good many years since she had made that passionate vow never to enter the state. In any case, it had been a silly, childish thing to say, even in the midst of a quarrel.

She shifted uneasily in her seat at the memory. She had thought she had forgotten all that, buried it in the long-dead past. Well, it didn't matter, that was all, she told herself firmly. She would do her job the best she could and move on, and what difference did it make which state she was in?

The van pulled up under the broad canopy over the entrance to a sprawling motel complex, and the crew released a sigh of relief, almost in unison.

Jill zipped up her tote bag and settled her broad-brimmed hat over the knot of black hair at the crown of her head. She hoped there was no problem with checking in; all she wanted right now was a shower and a chance to stretch out in a quiet room.

"The Journey's End Motel?" Gareth said with a snort. "What a dumb name!"

Preferably, Jill thought dreamily, a room at least four blocks away from Gareth Morris...

"Journey's End?" he went on. "Who in their right minds would consider this to be the best place on earth?"

"A lot of very nice people," Danny Mitchell told him. "And a few stinkers. Pretty

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much like every other place you've been."

"You're such a philosopher," Jill murmured as Danny helped her down from the van. He shrugged, and she turned away with a smile.

The motel doors opened and suddenly the van seemed to be surrounded by men and women, all wearing forest-green blazers with gold emblems on the pockets. For an instant, Jill wondered if they'd landed in the middle of a convention. Then one of the blazers grabbed her hand and shook it painfully hard.

"As a member of the Diplomats' Club," he announced, "I'd like to welcome you to Springhill. We're a division of the Chamber of Commerce, and we always like to make our visitors feel welcome."

Jill retrieved her hand and cautiously flexed her fingers. Welcome was hardly the word, she thought; besieged might be more like it. Another green blazer had buttonholed Danny, she saw; Joe Niemann was surrounded by them. Two more blazers were studying the bright red paint of the pair of all-terrain vehicles on the trailer.

"Looks just like a souped-up motorcycle to me," one of them said, shaking his head.

I couldn't agree more, Jill thought. She saw another blazer hovering and clasped her fingers together in an operatic gesture in an attempt to ward off a handshake. "It is so nice of you to greet us," she began.

She was being watched. The hair on the back of her neck seemed to curl up in apprehension. *That's odd*, she thought, half-consciously. *I haven't felt like this since I was a teenager—clumsy and embarrassed.*

Jill Donovan had long ago come to terms with the fact that wherever she went, men were apt to be looking. She might not meet the strict interpretation of beauty, but she had the kind of face and figure that men of all ages seemed to find arresting, and she

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had stopped feeling awkward about it years ago. Sometimes she enjoyed the frankly admiring appraisals that came her way. More often, she simply ignored them. Once in a while, when an evaluation of her face and figure went on a bit too long for comfort, she would return the favor and stare the offending male into a shamed retreat. But she hadn't felt this way in years, as if she were being stripped for a man's private enjoyment.

She turned her head casually, trying to get a glimpse of the man who was so crude in his appraisal. Only a hick would behave like that, she thought contemptuously. Perhaps Gareth was right after all.

Then, across the sea of green coats, she saw a tall man who wasn't wearing green, a man with dark brown hair with a rebellious wave. He wasn't watching her—he was talking to Joe Niemann instead—and abruptly she forgot to look for the man whose stare had made her so uncomfortable.

No, she thought. It can't be.

Jill had never tried mind-expanding drugs, but she had been told that sometimes they made colors turn into symphonies and single words drag out for minutes. That was what it felt like in the aeons-long instant when she stood under the canopy at the Journey's End Motel and stared at the man who looked like Scott Richards' identical twin. Scott, the man who was the reason she had made that theatrical vow never to set foot inside Iowa. . . Except it wasn't a twin, she knew. It was Scott.

Springhill, she thought desperately, and searched her memory. It still didn't set off any alarms in her mind. She had never given a thought to Scott Richards, when Danny had told her about this job. There had been no reason to think of him, of course; all that was long dead and buried. But to find herself face to face with him now, here—

Had Scott even told her which small town in Iowa he had grown up in? Surely she couldn't have forgotten!

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I don't think he ever mentioned the name, she decided. And I certainly didn't ask him to point it out on a map. I had no interest in his past. It was only the future that mattered, and my future was in the city, not in some town scarcely big enough to need a set of traffic lights. And Scott's future was in New York, too—at least, I thought it was. Funny, that two people can spend so much time together, and share so many things, and yet know so little about each other.

She stole another look. He had turned towards her, and instead of a profile she could now see all of his face. It was thinner than she remembered, and there was a hint of silver in the dark hair at his temples. He's too young for that, she thought, with a pang of sadness. *He's only thirty—just a year older than I am.*

Another blazer-wearer captured her hand and squeezed. “We’re so glad,” a booming voice from near her shoulder level announced, “that North Star’s new advertising campaign will be produced right here in Springhill.”

“Save it for the welcoming party tonight,” a calm voice told him. “There’ll be plenty of time.”

Jill didn’t look up. She didn’t have to. His voice hadn’t changed. It still had that slightly husky timbre, the vibrant softness that was like an intimate hand stroking her skin. *I wonder if he still knows how to laugh,* she thought absently.

“Miss Donovan.”

She looked at him then, surprise brimming in her wide green eyes. She had to look a good six inches up at him, and that was something that didn’t happen to Jill Donovan very often. Her eyes were almost on a level with the cleft in his chin.

So it was going to be formal, was it? she thought. As if they had never met before, as if they had never shared— Her heart seemed to skip a beat as she remembered the things they had shared.

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“Mr. Richards,” she said, and didn’t realize, until she saw Joe Niemann at Scott’s elbow, with his eyebrows lifting in surprise, that she should have waited for the introduction. Joe never hesitated to ask uncomfortable questions, she thought. She just hoped he waited till the Diplomats all went away.

She singled out her two-suiter from the pile of luggage that the two bellboys were unloading from the top of the van. Scott picked it up; she pulled her hand away quickly, but she could feel the warmth of his skin even though their fingers hadn’t quite brushed.

He carried it into the lobby, where yet another bellboy took over. “In case you’re wondering,” he said, “when Joe made the arrangements to shoot this campaign in Springhill, he didn’t submit a list of his crew to the Chamber of Commerce.”

So Scott had been just as surprised as she was, she thought. And less than pleasantly, he seemed to be implying. She raised her perfectly arched eyebrows and said coolly, “After all, why should he?”

“No reason at all, of course. I’ll see you at the welcoming party tonight,” Scott said. “There are a lot of people who are anxious to meet you.”

Jill nodded, too preoccupied to take offence at his half-amused, half-cynical tone. The bellboy settled her into her room and went off, pocketing his tip with satisfaction, and Jill closed the door behind him and went to open the curtains. But she didn’t see the swimming-pool that lay in the courtyard under her window, its water a trembling sheet of silver under the brilliant sun. She was still seeing the handle of her suitcase, with Scott’s long strong fingers curved around it— And the heavy gold wedding ring he wore.

It should have been no surprise, of course, that Scott had married. *He wanted to*

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marry you, Jill, she reminded herself.

She closed her eyes, and suddenly she was no longer in the motel, but back in that little sitting-room in her sorority house, the room where they had had their first and final quarrel. She could even remember the pattern of the wallpaper—an old-fashioned print of pink roses clambering up shadowed trellises.

She hadn't been expecting him to come that evening, she remembered, and she had been in a frantic hurry to rush down to him. "You shouldn't do this, you know," one of her sorority sisters had warned as she started down the stairs. "You'll let him think that he owns you, and once a man believes he's got a permanent hold on you, there's no end to what he'll demand."

The advice had been almost prophetic, Jill thought, for permanence was exactly what was on Scott Richards' mind that night. Not that he had demanded, precisely. The poor fool had actually expected that she would jump at his offer, that she would be flattered . . .

There was a knock on the motel-room door, and Jill's heart jolted. Had he waited for the Diplomats to scatter, and then come here?

Don't be ridiculous, she told herself. *He as much as told you downstairs that he was going to treat it as if it never happened, and that would be the smart thing for you to do, too. You're here to do a job, Jill.*

She pulled the door open. Joe Niemann was in the hail, still puffing on his cigar. "Just checking to be sure you're comfortable," he said.

"You can come in," she told him, "if you leave that filthy weed outside. Gareth's right about smoke, you know, even if he did insult me with the way he said it. It's bad for the skin."

The director looked mournfully at his long cigar, then sighed and stubbed it out in a hall ashtray. Jill stopped blocking the door and let him in.

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“How’s the room?” Joe asked.

For the first time, she looked around. It was typical of mass-construction motels; two double beds, with the headboards permanently attached to the wall; a small desk, a table with two chairs, a tiny bathroom, a television set mounted to the wall. The color scheme was neutral, the art on the walls was mass-produced but inoffensive, the whole place was squeaky clean and nearly devoid of personality.

She shrugged. “It’s all right, I guess. Better than some I’ve stayed in. At least it looks as if there’s a good light to read by.” She sat down on the foot of one of the beds and started to take the pins out of her hair.

“It’s only for a week,” said Joe.

“Do you really think we can shoot it so quickly?”

“On the budget we’ve got, we’ll have to. North Star isn’t being terribly generous. But I don’t see any reason why we can’t do it; they only need one good photo, and if we take back half a dozen for them to choose from, the company will be thrilled.”

It made her feel better; it wasn’t that she didn’t trust Joe Niemann’s reputation, but his confidence was reassuring.

“Why do you ask?” he went on. “Have you got a hot date in New York next week?”

Jill smiled unwillingly. “Not exactly, but...”

“That must mean you’ve already got cornfield claustrophobia. I’m getting to be expert on the subject, because Gareth’s got a particularly bad case.”

“Gareth is an idiot.” Jill tossed her head, sending blue-black ripples of hair to her waist, and started to brush rhythmically. “He may have a gorgeous body, but he’s strictly absent-without-leave above the eyebrows.”

Joe chuckled. “That’s why I was so glad when Danny said you would take this

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job,” he confided. “I’ll have my hands full restraining Gareth, and I won’t have time to worry about you.”

Was that a warning? Jill wondered. “If he’s such a problem, why use him?”

“Because the people at North Star think he’s got a gorgeous body.” Joe rose. “The party starts at eight—it’s sort of a buffet dinner and reception, I guess, to let all the locals see that we don’t have two heads. They’re having it here at the motel for our convenience.”

She didn’t look at him, and she kept her voice carefully casual. “Do you mind if I just sit it out, Joe? Going to a party tonight to be inspected by the whole population of Springhill isn’t my idea of fun.”

“So don’t go,” said Joe, with a shrug. “It won’t keep me awake at nights. But I’ll warn you—if you don’t show up, it will just increase the curiosity level. Most of these people have never seen a real live New York model, you know.”

She eyed him warily, the brush suspended in mid air. “Do you mean they’re likely to be hanging around while we’re working, too?”

“Well, there is a public road within fifty yards of where we’ll be shooting, so I can’t exactly lock the doors to keep them away. But I don’t think that will be much of a problem, really, once they get over the novelty.”

“And the sooner they see us all, the sooner they’ll get over it?”

“Something like that. I think you’d be better off to get the public bit over with right away. Then they’ll leave you alone. But do as you like.” He reached into his pocket. “Here’s the schedule for tomorrow.”

Jill looked at it and groaned. “You want to be on the site by seven?”

“Soft morning light looks better out there, and it’s going to take a while to set up the equipment before we can even start to shoot.” He grinned. “So don’t worry about

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being trapped at the party all night, because I'll send you to bed early." He stopped in the hallway to retrieve the remains of his cigar from the ashtray. "By the way, Jill," he said, "in case you're trying to hide from Scott Richards, staying in your room isn't the smartest way to do it." Then he was gone.

Hide? The mere idea made her furious. She wasn't hiding. There was nothing to hide from. She was just tired from the long, hot drive, and she had a headache because of that blasted music.

But if Joe suspected that she was trying to avoid Scott, she realized, Scott might think the same thing. And she certainly didn't want him to get the idea that eight whole years later she might still be carrying a torch for him—or a grudge, either, if it came to that.

"All right, I'll go to the damned party," she told herself irritably, and went to take a shower. "I'll be charming and clever and urbane if it kills me, and I will not give Scott Richards the satisfaction of thinking I'm hiding from him!"

So Scott had gotten married. *Well*, she told herself, *wounds heal, and I'm glad that he didn't let my rejection turn him into a hermit. He's too nice a guy to spend his life alone.*

Scott had been a charming young man—talented, thoughtful, brilliant, and an almost perfect gentleman, she reflected. He would make a good husband and provider, assuming that the woman in question wanted to live in Springhill, Iowa.

Jill shivered. *It's fine for some people*, she thought, *but I just couldn't bear to be buried alive in a little town like this.* Why Scott couldn't understand that—

But he had refused even to try to comprehend her reasons. He was such a traditional man, as she had discovered that night when he had asked her to marry him and to go home with him. It was one of the things, she reflected, that she had never suspected

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about him, one of the important things that had never been discussed. She had assumed that when he got his degree in advertising, he would be off to work in one of the big agencies in Los Angeles or New York—he certainly had the talent, and the drive. Perhaps some day there would be an agency of his own . . . And instead, all the while, he had planned to come back here, to this crossroads of nowhere.

But perhaps that wasn't quite fair, she reminded herself. It hadn't been part of Scott's plans for his father to have that massive heart attack, in the autumn of Scott's senior year at the university. But there could have been other answers, things that would have solved the problem without Scott giving up his whole future—and hers, as well.

Instead, he had rushed back home to step into his father's shoes in the family hardware business. Hardware, of all things, Jill thought. It made her sick just to think of his talent mildewing while he sold bolts and wire and plumbing parts.

Eight long years, and here he still was. Was his father still alive, despite that heart condition, and refusing to let Scott go? Or was it Scott's own idea to stay here now?

Had he ever really wanted to live in the fast lane? It was the first time Jill had ever considered that possibility, but she vaguely remembered that it had been she who did the talking about how wonderful life would be in the city. Scott had smiled, and kissed her, and turned her attention to other things

I wonder, she thought, if even then he was certain that I'd put my dreams aside and come with him. I had no idea he was such a chauvinist, expecting a woman to give up everything for her man.

Well, obviously he had found a woman who agreed with him. She wondered, pettishly, how long he had been married. Had he found another girl on the rebound? Or had his wounded heart taken years to heal?

“Perhaps he didn't even really want to marry me at all,” she said, against the roar

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of the water. “Perhaps he just wanted to be married before he came back here, and he didn’t much care who it was.”

She wondered what his wife was like. A small-town girl, or a city import, as Jill would have been? Was she pretty, or just ordinary? Did she, perhaps, look a bit like Jill herself? And did she know that there had been another woman in his life?

Jill wondered with morbid interest if that was why Scott had addressed her so formally this afternoon, cutting off any possibility of an embarrassing public reunion. Just what would happen if Scott Richards’ wife was to find out that once upon a time he had proposed marriage to the woman whose face could be seen this month on the cover of *Today’s Woman*? It might be a bit difficult for him to explain now, if he had neglected to tell her long ago.

Jill turned the shower off and smiled at herself in the steamy mirror. It was a mischievous smile. “It would be rather fun to watch,” she mused. “Perhaps I should make sure she knows.”

Tonight’s party might not be boring after all, she decided.

She took particular care with her make-up. She didn’t use a lot of it—she never wore much except when the cameras demanded it—but the right shades, carefully applied, could change her from an elegant society type to a sultry siren who might have been spotted on any street corner. Tonight she deliberately chose the All-American-girl look, wide-eyed and natural. Any man in the room would swear that she wasn’t wearing a speck of anything on her face. The women would know better, but most of them wouldn’t have the vaguest idea how she had done it.

She pulled her hair straight back from her face and looped it into a sort of double ponytail. A few loose tendrils around her face softened the severity of the style and helped to emphasize the strong planes of her face, the prominent cheekbones, the huge

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eyes, the firm chin.

Not bad for a woman of twenty-nine, she told the mirror, no matter what Gareth Morris thought. She was not over the hill. A woman could model as long as she wanted, if she was willing to be flexible about her jobs, and if she didn't let her body go to ruin.

She hadn't brought many clothes. How much could it take, she had thought, for a week of rural rustication? Her entire wardrobe fitted into a tenth of the tiny wardrobe, and she looked at it with dissatisfaction. There was a crate of sports clothes for the photo sessions, of course, but nothing that she wanted to wear tonight. She thought longingly of a scarlet sequined dress that was hanging in her apartment in New York—that would get everyone's attention. But it wouldn't exactly fit the image she was so carefully creating, so it was just as well she hadn't brought it.

She turned back to her wardrobe with a sigh, and finally settled on a white skirt just a little longer than fashion said was proper this year, topped with a black blouse that was perfectly demure and yet somehow left nothing to the imagination. She added a row of bracelets, a chunky necklace, and earrings, all in a deep strawberry red, stepped into a pair of four-inch heels, and nodded at herself approvingly in the mirror.

The banquet room on the motel's lower level opened on to the pool area, but since the evening had not cooled off much, the glass doors were closed. The water looked inviting, Jill thought. Too bad it wasn't a bit more private; she would enjoy a dip just now.

From the sound of things, the entire population of Springhill had turned out. She stood in the doorway for a moment, just looking over the crowd. There were men in suits, in the green blazers of the Diplomats' Club, in jeans. There were women in diamonds and organza cocktail dresses, and ones wearing tennis clothes.

Danny saw her and brought her a glass of spring water. "Isn't this the damnedest

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thing you ever saw?” he said. “I’ve seen more good character types tonight than I have in a month in the city. I wish I dared to get my camera and just start shooting.”

She saw Scott across the room. He was in a group, and yet somehow he seemed to be alone. Until then, she hadn’t realized that she had expected to have no problem identifying his wife; Mrs Richards would of course be the little lady clinging to his arm. But there was no woman nearby who looked like a candidate. The one he was talking to would never see sixty again.

“Checking out the territory, Jill?” said Gareth, with no attempt to be quiet about it. “You shouldn’t have any trouble lining these hicks up—they’re standing over there staring as if they’ve never seen anything quite like you.”

Jill sipped her spring water and looked up at him with a saccharine smile. “Actually, I thought it was you they were studying, Gareth,” she murmured.

A teenage girl came up to them. “Are you the model?” she asked Jill. “You sure don’t look like I expected.”

“You’re too kind,” Jill said sweetly. She would have liked to grab a washcloth and wipe the mascara off the child’s eyelashes.

“I want to be a model,” the girl announced. “Maybe you can tell me what I should do.”

Learn to walk correctly, Jill thought. Learn to stand up straight. Learn to treat people with respect, instead of as if you’re already a superstar. “Perhaps later in the week I can find a few minutes to help you,” she murmured.

There was an amused feminine chuckle beside her. Jill looked down at the woman at her elbow. Something seemed to tickle her memory, and yet there was nothing familiar about this small and somewhat pudgy woman, a good eight inches shorter than Jill and probably twenty pounds heavier. Her face was round, but her eyes were bright, and her

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amusement was obviously genuine.

“I didn’t think you were insensitive,” Gareth accused her. “Everyone needs a helping hand, Jill.” He turned to the girl. “I’ll be happy to give you some tips,” he said, and the girl fluttered her eyelashes up at him.

Jill watched them irritably as Gareth guided the girl across the room to a private corner. But she saw from the corner of her eye that Joe Niemann hadn’t missed the byplay either, so she relaxed. Gareth’s conduct certainly wasn’t her problem.

The woman standing beside her gestured with her plate of hors d’oeuvres. “Apparently,” she said, “this is why our lives didn’t take the same sort of path. I get easily sidetracked by food and drink, while you—my God, Jill, you look wonderful!”

Jill searched her memory frantically. I can’t know anybody else in this town, she thought. It would just be too odd.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” the woman said. “Well, I’m not surprised. I almost didn’t come to the party, you know. I was ashamed to have you see me like this. You’re more gorgeous than ever, and I’m still trying to lose all the weight I gained while I was pregnant.”

The voice, Jill thought. I know the voice, and the eyes. “Cassie?” she said. Her voice came out in a sort of squeak. It was just too incredible that one of her sorority sisters should turn up in Springhill too. Of course, it had been a big house, and because Cassie was a couple of years younger than Jill, they had never been really close. But hadn’t it been Cassie, that night she had quarreled with Scott, who had told her never to let a man think he owned her?

“It truly is a small world,” Jill said. “I had no idea what had happened to you.”

Cassie hadn’t stopped talking. “But Scott made me come,” she said. “And I’m glad he did. You look wonderful, Jill, and I’d have hated not seeing you again. Can you

Once and for Always

by Leigh Michaels

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come and have lunch with me one day?”

And then Jill knew that it was not coincidence that had brought Cassie to Springhill. Cassie was the girl Scott had married.