

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

V.C. ANDREWS®

THE FLOWERS IN THE ATTIC SERIES

THE
DOLLANGANGERS

FLOWERS IN
THE ATTIC

PETALS ON
THE WIND

IF THERE
BE THORNS

SEEDS OF
YESTERDAY

AND A NEW EXCERPT!



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V.C. Andrews

Flowers in the Attic Series:
The Dollangangers



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For a sneak peek at the next
V.C. Andrews novel

FORBIDDEN SISTER

Available February 2013 from Gallery Books

V.C. ANDREWS®

FLOWERS IN
THE ATTIC



POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney

This book is dedicated to my mother.

PART ONE



Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou?

Isaiah 45:9

Prologue



It is so appropriate to color hope yellow, like that sun we seldom saw. And as I begin to copy from the old memorandum journals that I kept for so long, a title comes as if inspired. *Open the Window and Stand in the Sunshine*. Yet, I hesitate to name our story that. For I think of us more as flowers in the attic. Paper flowers. Born so brightly colored, and fading duller through all those long, grim, dreary, nightmarish days when we were held prisoners of hope, and kept captives by greed. But, we were never to color even one of our paper blossoms yellow.

Charles Dickens would often start his novels with the birth of the protagonist and, being a favorite author of both mine and Chris's, I would duplicate his style—if I could. But he was a genius born to write without difficulty while I find every word I put down, I put down with tears, with bitter blood, with sour gall, well mixed and blended with shame and guilt. I thought I would never feel ashamed or guilty, that these were burdens for others to bear. Years have passed and I am older and wiser now, accepting, too. The tempest of rage that once stormed within me has simmered down so I can write, I hope, with truth and with less hatred and prejudice than would have been the case a few years ago.

So, like Charles Dickens, in this work of “fiction” I will hide myself away behind a false name, and live in fake places, and I will pray to God that those who should will hurt when they read what I have to say. Certainly God in his infinite mercy will see that some understanding publisher will put my words in a book, and help grind the knife that I hope to wield.

Good-bye, Daddy



Truly, when I was very young, way back in the Fifties, I believed all of life would be like one long and perfect summer day. After all, it did start out that way. There's not much I can say about our earliest childhood except that it was very good, and for that, I should be everlastingly grateful. We weren't rich, we weren't poor. If we lacked some necessity, I couldn't name it; if we had luxuries, I couldn't name those, either, without comparing what we had to what others had, and nobody had more or less in our middleclass neighborhood. In other words, short and simple, we were just ordinary, run-of-the-mill children.

Our daddy was a P.R. man for a large computer manufacturing firm located in Gladstone, Pennsylvania: population, 12,602. He was a huge success, our father, for often his boss dined with us, and bragged about the job Daddy seemed to perform so well. "It's that all-American, wholesome, devastatingly good-looking face and charming manner that does them in. Great God in heaven, Chris, what sensible person could resist a fella like you?"

Heartily, I agreed with that. Our father was perfect. He stood six feet two, weighed 180 pounds, and his hair was thick and flaxen blond, and waved just enough to be perfect; his eyes were cerulean blue and they sparkled with laughter, with his great zest for living and having fun. His nose was straight and neither too long nor too narrow, nor too thick. He played tennis and golf like a pro and swam so much he kept a suntan all through the year. He was always dashing off on airplanes to California, to Florida, to Arizona, or to Hawaii, or even abroad on business, while we were left at home in the care of our mother.

When he came through the front door late on Friday afternoons—every Friday afternoon (he said he couldn't bear to be separated from us for longer than five days)—even if it were raining or snowing, the sun shone when he beamed his broad, happy smile on us.

His booming greeting rang out as soon as he put down his suitcase and briefcase: “Come greet me with kisses if you love me!”

Somewhere near the front door, my brother and I would be hiding, and after he'd called out his greeting, we'd dash out from behind a chair or the sofa to crash into his wide open arms, which seized us up at once and held us close, and he warmed our lips with his kisses. Fridays—they were the best days of all, for they brought Daddy home to us again. In his suit pockets he carried small gifts for us; in his suitcases he stored the larger ones to dole out after he greeted our mother, who would hang back and wait patiently until he had done with us.

And after we had our little gifts from his pockets, Christopher and I would back off to watch Momma drift slowly forward, her lips curved in a welcoming smile that lit up our father's eyes, and he'd take her in his arms, and stare down into her face as if he hadn't seen her for at least a year.

On Fridays, Momma spent half the day in the beauty parlor having her hair shampooed and set and her fingernails polished, and then she'd come home to take a long bath in perfumed-oiled water. I'd perch in her dressing room, and wait to watch her emerge in a filmy negligee. She'd sit at her dressing table to meticulously apply makeup. And I, so eager to learn, drank in everything she did to turn herself from just a pretty woman into a creature so ravishingly beautiful she didn't look real. The most amazing part of this was our father thought she *didn't* wear makeup! He believed she was naturally a striking beauty.

Love was a word lavished about in our home. “Do you love me?—For I most certainly love you; did you miss me?—Are you glad I'm home?—Did you think about me when I was gone? Every night? Did you toss and turn and wish I were

beside you, holding you close? For if you didn't, Corrine, I might want to die."

Momma knew exactly how to answer questions like these—with her eyes, with soft whispers and with kisses.

* * *

One day Christopher and I came speeding home from school with the wintery wind blowing us through the front door. "Take off your boots in the foyer," Momma called out from the living room, where I could see her sitting before the fireplace knitting a little white sweater fit for a doll to wear. I thought it was a Christmas gift for me, for one of my dolls.

"And kick off your shoes before you come in here," she added.

We shed our boots and heavy coats and hoods in the foyer, then raced in stockinged feet into the living room, with its plush white carpet. That pastel room, decorated to flatter our mother's fair beauty, was off limits for us most of the time. This was our company room, our mother's room, and never could we feel really comfortable on the apricot brocade sofa or the cut-velvet chairs. We preferred Daddy's room, with its dark paneled walls and tough plaid sofa, where we could wallow and fight and never fear we were damaging anything.

"It's freezing outside, Momma!" I said breathlessly as I fell at her feet, thrusting my legs toward the fire. "But the ride home on our bikes was just beautiful. All the trees are sparkled with diamond icicles, and crystal prisms on the shrubs. It's a fairyland out there, Momma. I wouldn't live down south where it never snows, for anything!"

Christopher did not talk about the weather and its freezing beauty. He was two years and five months my senior and he was far wiser than I; I know that now. He warmed his icy feet as I did, but he stared up at Momma's face, a worried frown drawing his dark brows together.

I glanced up at her, too, wondering what he saw that made him show such concern. She was knitting at a fast and skilled pace, glancing from time to time at instructions.

“Momma, are you feeling all right?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” she answered, giving him a soft, sweet smile.

“You look tired to me.”

She laid aside the tiny sweater. “I visited my doctor today,” she said, leaning forward to caress Christopher’s rosy cold cheek.

“Momma!” he cried, taking alarm. “Are you sick?”

She chuckled softly, then ran her long, slim fingers through his tousled blond curls. “Christopher Dollanganger, you know better than that. I’ve seen you looking at me with suspicious thoughts in your head.” She caught his hand, and one of mine, and placed them both on her bulging middle.

“Do you feel anything?” she asked, that secret, pleased look on her face again.

Quickly, Christopher snatched his hand away as his face turned blood-red. But I left my hand where it was, wondering, waiting.

“What do *you* feel, Cathy?”

Beneath my hand, under her clothes, something weird was going on. Little faint movements quivered her flesh. I lifted my head and stared up in her face, and to this day, I can still recall how lovely she looked, like a Raphael madonna.

“Momma, your lunch is moving around, or else you have gas.” Laughter made her blue eyes sparkle, and she told me to guess again.

Her voice was sweet and concerned as she told us her news. “Darlings, I’m going to have a baby in early May. In fact when I visited my doctor today, he said he heard *two* heartbeats. So that means I am going to have twins ... or, God forbid, triplets. Not even your father knows this yet, so don’t tell him until I have a chance.”

Stunned, I threw Christopher a look to see how he was taking this. He seemed bemused, and still embarrassed. I

looked again at her lovely firelit face. Then I jumped up, and raced for my room!

I hurled myself face down on my bed, and bawled, really let go! Babies—two or more! *I* was the baby! I didn't want any little whining, crying babies coming along to take my place! I sobbed and beat at the pillows, wanting to hurt something, if not someone. Then I sat up and thought about running away.

Someone rapped softly on my closed and locked door. "Cathy," said my mother, "may I come in and talk this over with you?"

"Go away!" I yelled. "I already hate your babies!"

Yes, I knew what was in store for me, the middle child, the one parents didn't care about. I'd be forgotten; there'd be no more Friday gifts. Daddy would think only of Momma, of Christopher, and those hateful babies that would displace me.

* * *

My father came to me that evening, soon after he arrived home. I'd unlocked the door, just in case he wanted to see me. I stole a peek to see his face, for I loved him very much. He looked sad, and he carried a large box wrapped in silver foil, topped by a huge bow of pink satin.

"How's my Cathy been?" he asked softly, as I peeked from beneath my arm. "You didn't run to greet me when I came home. You haven't said hello; you haven't even looked at me. Cathy, it hurts when you don't run into my arms and give me kisses."

I didn't say anything, but rolled over on my back to glare at him fiercely. Didn't he know I was supposed to be his favorite all his life through? Why did he and Momma have to go and send for more children? Weren't two enough?

He sighed, then came to sit on the edge of my bed. "You know something? This is the first time in your life you have ever glared at me like that. This is the first Friday you haven't run to leap up into my arms. You may not believe this, but I don't really come alive until I come home on weekends."

Pouting, I refused to be won over. He didn't need me now. He had his son, and now heaps of wailing babies on the way. I'd be forgotten in the multitude.

"You know something else," he began, closely watching me, "I used to believe, perhaps foolishly, that if I came home on Fridays, and didn't bring one single gift for you, or your brother ... I still believed the two of you would have run for me like crazy, and welcomed me home, anyway. I believed you loved *me* and not my gifts. I mistakenly believed that I'd been a good father, and somehow I'd managed to win your love, and that you'd know you would always have a big place in my heart, even if your mother and I have a dozen children." He paused, sighed, and his blue eyes darkened. "I thought my Cathy knew she would still be my very special girl, because she was my first."

I threw him an angry, hurt look. Then I choked, "But if Momma has another girl, you'll say the same thing to her!"

"Will I?"

"Yes," I sobbed, aching so badly I could scream from jealousy already. "You might even love her *more* than you do me, 'cause she'll be little and cuter."

"I may love her as much, but I won't love her more." He held out his arms and I could resist no longer. I flung myself into his arms, and clung to him for dear life. "Ssh," he soothed as I cried. "Don't cry, don't feel jealous. You won't be loved any the less. And Cathy, real babies are much more fun than dolls. Your mother will have more than she can handle, so she's going to depend on you to help her. When I'm away from home, I'll feel better knowing your mother has a loving daughter who will do what she can to make life easier and better for all of us." His warm lips pressed against my teary cheek. "Come now, open your box, and tell me what you think of what's inside."

First I had to smother his face with a dozen kisses and give him bear hugs to make up for the anxiety I'd put in his eyes. In the beautiful box was a silver music box made in England. The music played and a ballerina dressed in pink turned slowly

around and around before a mirror. “It’s a jewel box, as well,” explained Daddy, slipping on my finger a tiny gold ring with a red stone he called a garnet. “The moment I saw that box, I knew you had to have it. And with this ring, I do vow to forever love my Cathy just a little bit more than any other daughter—as long as she never says that to anyone but herself.”

* * *

There came a sunny Tuesday in May, when Daddy was home. For two weeks Daddy had been hanging around home, waiting for those babies to show up. Momma seemed irritable, uncomfortable, and Mrs. Bertha Simpson was in our kitchen, preparing our meals, and looking at Christopher and me with a smirky face. She was our most dependable baby-sitter. She lived next door, and was always saying Momma and Daddy looked more like brother and sister than husband and wife. She was a grim, grouchy sort of person who seldom had anything nice to say about anybody. And she was cooking cabbage. I hated cabbage.

Around dinnertime, Daddy came rushing into the dining room to tell my brother and me that he was driving Momma to the hospital. “Now don’t be worried. Everything will work out fine. Mind Mrs. Simpson, and do your homework, and maybe in a few hours you’ll know if you have brothers or sisters ... or one of each.”

He didn’t return until the next morning. He was unshaven, tired looking, his suit ruffled, but he grinned at us happily. “Take a guess! Boys or girls?”

“Boys!” chimed up Christopher, who wanted two brothers he could teach to play ball. I wanted boys, too ... no little girl to steal Daddy’s affection from his first daughter.

“A boy *and* a girl,” Daddy said proudly. “The prettiest little things you ever saw. Come, put your clothes on, and I’ll drive you to see them yourselves.”

Sulkily, I went, still reluctant to look even when Daddy picked me up and held me high so I could peer through the nursery room glass at two little babies a nurse held in her

arms. They were so tiny! Their heads were no bigger than small apples, and small red fists waved in the air. One was screaming like pins were sticking it.

“Ah,” sighed Daddy, kissing my cheek and hugging me close, “God has been good to me, sending me another son and daughter as perfect as my first pair.”

I thought I would hate them both, especially the loudmouthed one named Carrie, who wailed and bellowed ten times louder than the quiet one named Cory. It was nearly impossible to get a full night’s rest with the two of them across the hall from my room. And yet, as they began to grow and smile, and their eyes lit up when I came in and lifted them, something warm and motherly replaced the green in my eyes. The first thing you knew, I was racing home to see *them*; to play with *them*; to change diapers and hold nursing bottles, and burp them on my shoulder. They *were* more fun than dolls.

I soon learned that parents have room in their hearts for more than two children, and I had room in my heart to love them, too—even Carrie, who was just as pretty as me, and maybe more so. They grew so quickly, like weeds, said Daddy, though Momma would often look at them with anxiety, for she said they were not growing as rapidly as Christopher and I had grown. This was laid before her doctor, who quickly assured her that often twins were smaller than single births.

“See,” said Christopher, “doctors *do* know everything.”

Daddy looked up from the newspaper he was reading and smiled. “That’s my son the doctor talking—but nobody knows everything, Chris.”

Daddy was the only one who called my older brother Chris.

We had a funny surname, the very devil to learn to spell. Dollanganger. Just because we were all blond, flaxon haired, with fair complexions (except Daddy, with his perpetual tan), Jim Johnston, Daddy’s best friend, pinned on us a nickname, “The Dresden dolls.” He said we looked like those fancy porcelain people who grace whatnot shelves and fireplace mantels. Soon everyone in our neighborhood was calling us

the Dresden dolls; certainly it was easier to say than Dollanganger.

When the twins were four, and Christopher was fourteen, and I had just turned twelve, there came a very special Friday. It was Daddy's thirty-sixth birthday and we were having a surprise party for him. Momma looked like a fairy-tale princess with her freshly washed and set hair. Her nails gleamed with pearly polish, her long formal gown was of softest aqua color, and her knotted string of pearls swayed as she glided from here to there, setting the table in the dining room so it would look perfect for Daddy's birthday party. His many gifts were piled high on the buffet. It was going to be a small, intimate party, just for our family and our closest friends.

"Cathy," said Momma, throwing me a quick look, "would you mind bathing the twins again for me? I gave them both baths before their naps, but as soon as they were up, they took off for the sandbox, and now they need another bath."

I didn't mind. She looked far too fancy to give two dirty four-year-olds splashy baths that would ruin her hair, her nails, and her lovely dress.

"And when you finish with them, both you and Christopher jump in the tub and bathe, too, and put on that pretty new pink dress, Cathy, and curl your hair. And, Christopher, no blue jeans, please. I want you to put on a dress shirt and a tie, and wear that light blue sports jacket with your cream-colored trousers."

"Aw, heck, Momma, I hate dressing up," he complained, scuffing his sneakers and scowling.

"Do as I say, Christopher, for your father. You know he does a lot for you; the least you can do is make him proud of his family."

He grouched off, leaving me to run out to the back garden and fetch the twins, who immediately began to wail. "One bath a day is enough!" screamed Carrie. "We're already clean! Stop! We don't like soap! We don't like hair washings! Don't you do that to us again, Cathy, or we'll tell Momma!"

“Hah!” I said. “Who do you think sent me out here to clean up two filthy little monsters? Good golly, how can the two of you get so dirty so quickly?”

As soon as their naked skins hit the warm water, and the little yellow rubber ducks and rubber boats began to float, and they could splash all over me, they were content enough to be bathed, shampooed, and dressed in their very best clothes. For, after all, they were going to a party—and, after all, this was Friday, and Daddy was coming home.

First I dressed Cory in a pretty little white suit with short pants. Strangely enough, he was more apt to keep himself clean than his twin. Try as I would, I couldn't tame down that stubborn cowlick of his. It curled over to the right, like a cute pig's tail, and—would you believe it?—Carrie wanted her hair to do the same thing!

When I had them both dressed, and looking like dolls come alive, I turned the twins over to Christopher with stern warnings to keep an ever observant eye on them. Now it was my turn to dress up.

The twins wailed and complained while I hurriedly took a bath, washed my hair, and rolled it up on fat curlers. I peeked around the bathroom door to see Christopher trying his best to entertain them by reading to them from *Mother Goose*.

“Hey,” said Christopher when I came out wearing my pink dress with the fluted ruffles, “you don't look half-bad.”

“Half-bad? Is that the best you can manage?”

“Best I can for a sister.” He glanced at his watch, slammed the picture book closed, seized the twins by their dimpled hands and cried out, “Daddy will be here any minute—hurry, Cathy!”

* * *

Five o'clock came and went, and though we waited and waited, we didn't see our father's green Cadillac turn into our curving drive. The invited guests sat around and tried to keep up a cheerful conversation, as Momma got up and began to

pace around nervously. Usually Daddy flung open the door at four, and sometimes even sooner.

Seven o'clock, and still we were waiting.

The wonderful meal Momma had spent so much time preparing was drying out from being too long in the warming oven. Seven was the time we usually put the twins to bed, and they were growing hungry, sleepy and cross, demanding every second, "When is Daddy coming?"

Their white clothes didn't look so virgin now. Carrie's smoothly waved hair began to curl up and look windblown. Cory's nose began to run, and repeatedly he wiped it on the back of his hand until I hurried over with a Kleenex to clean off his upper lip.

"Well, Corinne," joked Jim Johnston, "I guess Chris has found himself another super-broad."

His wife threw him an angry look for saying something so tasteless.

My stomach was growling, and I was beginning to feel as worried as Momma looked. She kept pacing back and forth, going to the wide picture window and staring out.

"Oh!" I cried, having caught sight of a car turning into our tree lined driveway, "maybe that's Daddy coming now!"

But the car that drew to a stop before our front door was white, not green. And on the top was one of those spinning red lights. An emblem on the side of that white car read STATE POLICE.

Momma smothered a cry when two policemen dressed in blue uniforms approached our front door and rang our doorbell.

Momma seemed frozen. Her hand hovered near her throat; her heart came up and darkened her eyes. Something wild and frightening burgeoned in my heart just from watching her reactions.

It was Jim Johnston who answered the door, and allowed the two state troopers to enter, glancing about uneasily, seeing,

I'm sure, that this was an assembly gathered together for a birthday party. All they had to do was glance into the dining room and see the festive table, the balloons suspended from the chandelier, and the gifts on the buffet.

"Mrs. Christopher Garland Dollanganger?" inquired the older of the two officers as he looked from woman to woman.

Our mother nodded slightly, stiffly. I drew nearer, as did Christopher. The twins were on the floor, playing with tiny cars, and they showed little interest in the unexpected arrival of police officers.

The kindly looking uniformed man with the deep red face stepped closer to Momma. "Mrs. Dollanganger," he began in a flat voice that sent immediate panic into my heart, "we're terribly sorry, but there's been an accident on Greenfield Highway."

"Oh . . ." breathed Momma, reaching to draw both Christopher and me against her sides. I could feel her quivering all over, just as I was. My eyes were magnetized by those brass buttons; I couldn't see anything else.

"Your husband was involved, Mrs. Dollanganger."

A long sigh escaped from Momma's choked throat. She swayed and would have fallen if Chris and I hadn't been there to support her.

"We've already questioned motorists who witnessed the accident, and it wasn't your husband's fault, Mrs. Dollanganger," that voice continued on, without emotion. "According to the accounts, which we've recorded, there was a motorist driving a blue Ford weaving in and out of the lefthand lane, apparently drunk, and he crashed head-on into your husband's car. But it seems your husband must have seen the accident coming, for he swerved to avoid a head-on collision, but a piece of machinery had fallen from another car, or truck, and this kept him from completing his correct defensive driving maneuver, which would have saved his life. But as it was, your husband's much heavier car turned over several times, and still he might have survived, but an

oncoming truck, unable to stop, crashed into his car, and again the Cadillac spun over ... and then ... it caught on fire.”

Never had a room full of people stilled so quickly. Even the young twins looked up from their innocent play, and stared at the two troopers.

“My husband?” whispered Momma, her voice so weak it was hardly audible. “He isn’t ... he isn’t ... dead ... ?”

“Ma’am,” said the red-faced officer very solemnly, “it pains me dreadfully to bring you bad news on what seems a special occasion.” He faltered and glanced around with embarrassment. “I’m terribly sorry, ma’am—everybody did what they could to get him out ... but, well ma’am ... he was, well, killed instantly, from what the doc says.”

Someone sitting on the sofa screamed.

Momma didn’t scream. Her eyes went bleak, dark, haunted. Despair washed the radiant color from her beautiful face; it resembled a death mask. I stared up at her, trying to tell her with my eyes that none of this could be true. Not Daddy! Not my daddy! He couldn’t be dead ... he couldn’t be! Death was for old people, sick people ... not for somebody as loved and needed, and young.

Yet there was my mother with her gray face, her stark eyes, her hands wringing out the invisible wet cloths, and each second I watched, her eyes sank deeper into her skull.

I began to cry.

“Ma’am, we’ve got a few things of his that were thrown out on the first impact. We saved what we could.”

“Go away!” I screamed at the officer. “Get out of here! It’s not my daddy! I know it’s not! He’s stopped by a store to buy ice cream. He’ll be coming in the door any minute! Get out of here!” I ran forward and beat on the officer’s chest. He tried to hold me off, and Christopher came up and pulled me away.

“Please,” said the trooper, “won’t someone please help this child?”

My mother's arms encircled my shoulders and drew me close to her side. People were murmuring in shocked voices, and whispering, and the food in the warming oven was beginning to smell burned.

I waited for someone to come up and take my hand and say that God didn't ever take the life of a man like my father, yet no one came near me. Only Christopher came to put his arm about my waist, so we three were in a huddle,—Momma, Christopher, and me.

It was Christopher who finally found a voice to speak and such a strange, husky voice: "Are you positive it was our father? If the green Cadillac caught on fire, then the man inside must have been badly burned, so it could have been someone else, not Daddy."

Deep, rasping sobs tore from Momma's throat, though not a tear fell from her eyes. She believed! She believed those two men were speaking the truth!

The guests who had come so prettily dressed to attend a birthday party swarmed about us now and said those consoling things people say when there just aren't any right words.

"We're so sorry, Corinne, really shocked . . . it's terrible . . ."

"What an awful thing to happen to Chris."

"Our days are numbered . . . that's the way it is, from the day we're born, our days are numbered."

It went on and on, and slowly, like water into concrete, it sank in. Daddy was really dead. We were never going to see him alive again. We'd only see him in a coffin, laid out in a box that would end up in the ground, with a marble headstone that bore his name and his day of birth and his day of death. Numbered the same, but for the year.

I looked around, to see what was happening to the twins, who shouldn't have been feeling what I was. Someone kind had taken them into the kitchen and was preparing them a light meal before they were tucked into bed. My eyes met Christopher's. He seemed as caught in this nightmare as I was,

his young face pale and shocked; a hollow look of grief shadowed his eyes and made them dark.

One of the state troopers had gone out to his car, and now he came back with a bundle of things which he carefully spread out on the coffee table. I stood frozen, watching the display of all the things Daddy kept in his pockets: a lizard-skinned wallet Momma had given him as a Christmas gift; his leather notepad and date book; his wristwatch; his wedding band. Everything was blackened and charred by smoke and fire.

Last came the soft pastel animals meant for Cory and Carrie, all found, so the red-faced trooper said, scattered on the highway. A plushy blue elephant with pink velvet ears, and a purple pony with a red saddle and golden reins—oh, that just had to be for Carrie. Then the saddest articles of all—Daddy's clothes, which had burst the confines of his suitcases when the trunk lock sprang.

I knew those suits, those shirts, ties, socks. There was the same tie I had given him on his last birthday.

“Someone will have to identify the body,” said the trooper.

Now I knew positively. It was real, our father would never come home without presents for all of us—even on his own birthday.

I ran from that room! Ran from all the things spread out that tore my heart and made me ache worse than any pain I had yet experienced. I ran out of the house and into the back garden, and there I beat my fists upon an old maple tree. I beat my fists until they ached and blood began to come from the many small cuts; then I flung myself down on the grass and cried—cried ten oceans of tears, for Daddy who should be alive. I cried for us, who would have to go on living without him. And the twins, they hadn't even had the chance to know how wonderful he was—or had been. And when my tears were over, and my eyes swollen and red, and hurt from the rubbing, I heard soft footsteps coming to me—my mother.

She sat down on the grass beside me and took my hand in hers. A quarter-horned moon was out, and millions of stars,

and the breezes were sweet with the newborn fragrances of spring. “Cathy,” she said eventually when the silence between us stretched so long it might never come to an end, “your father is up in heaven looking down on you, and you know he would want you to be brave.”

“He’s not dead, Momma!” I denied vehemently.

“You’ve been out in this yard a long time; perhaps you don’t realize it’s ten o’clock. Someone had to identify your father’s body, and though Jim Johnston offered to do this, and spare me the pain, I had to see for myself. For, you see, I found it hard to believe too. Your father is dead, Cathy. Christopher is on his bed crying, and the twins are asleep; they don’t fully realize what ‘dead’ means.”

She put her arms around me, and cradled my head down on her shoulder.

“Come,” she said, standing and pulling me up with her, keeping her arm about my waist, “You’ve been out here much too long. I thought you were in the house with the others, and the others thought you were in your room, or with me. It’s not good to be alone when you feel bereft. It’s better to be with people and share your grief, and not keep it locked up inside.”

She said this dry-eyed, with not a tear, but somewhere deep inside her she was crying, screaming. I could tell by her tone, by the very bleakness that had sunk deeper into her eyes.

* * *

With our father’s death, a nightmare began to shadow our days. I gazed reproachfully at Momma and thought she should have prepared us in advance for something like this, for we’d never been allowed to own pets that suddenly pass away and teach us a little about losing through death. Someone, some adult, should have warned us that the young, the handsome, and the needed can die, too.

How do you say things like this to a mother who looked like fate was pulling her through a knothole and stretching her out thin and flat? Could you speak honestly to someone who didn’t want to talk, or eat, or brush her hair, or put on the

pretty clothes that filled her closet? Nor did she want to attend to our needs. It was a good thing the kindly neighborhood women came in and took us over, bringing with them food prepared in their own kitchens. Our house filled to overflowing with flowers, with homemade casseroles, hams, hot rolls, cakes, and pies.

They came in droves, all the people who loved, admired, and respected our father, and I was surprised he was so well known. Yet I hated it every time someone asked how he died, and what a pity someone so young should die, when so many who were useless and unfit, lived on and on, and were a burden to society.

From all that I heard, and overheard, fate was a grim reaper, never kind, with little respect for who was loved and needed.

Spring days passed on toward summer. And grief, no matter how you try to cater to its wail, has a way of fading away, and the person so real, so beloved, becomes a dim, slightly out-of-focus shadow.

One day Momma sat so sad-faced that she seemed to have forgotten how to smile. “Momma,” I said brightly, in an effort to cheer her, “I’m going to pretend Daddy is still alive, and away on another of his business trips, and soon he’ll come, and stride in the door, and he’ll call out, just as he used to, ‘Come and greet me with kisses if you love me.’ And—don’t you see?—we’ll feel better, all of us, like he *is* alive somewhere, living where we can’t see him, but where we can expect him at any moment.”

“No, Cathy,” Momma flared, “you must accept the truth. You are not to find solace in pretending. Do you hear that! Your father is dead, and his soul has gone on to heaven, and you should understand at your age that no one ever has come back from heaven. As for us, we’ll make do the best we can without him—and that doesn’t mean escaping reality by not facing up to it.”

I watched her rise from her chair and begin to take things from the refrigerator to start breakfast.

“Momma ...” I began again, feeling my way along cautiously lest she turn hard and angry again. “Will we be able to go on, without him?”

“I will do the best I can to see that we survive,” she said dully, flatly.

“Will you have to go to work now, like Mrs. Johnston?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Life holds all sorts of surprises, Cathy, and some of them are unpleasant, as you are finding out. But remember always you were blessed to have for almost twelve years a father who thought you were something very special.”

“Because I look like you,” I said, still feeling some of that envy I always had, because I came in second after her.

She threw me a glance as she rambled through the contents of the jam-packed fridge. “I’m going to tell you something now, Cathy, that I’ve never told you before. You look very much as I did at your age, but you are not like me in your personality. You are much more aggressive, and much more determined. Your father used to say that you were like his mother, and he loved his mother.”

“Doesn’t everybody love their mother?”

“No,” she said with a queer expression, “there are some mothers you just can’t love, for they don’t want you to love them.”

She took bacon and eggs from the refrigerator, then turned to take me in her arms. “Dear Cathy, you and your father had a very special close relationship, and I guess you must miss him more because of that, more than Christopher does, or the twins.”

I sobbed against her shoulder. “I hate God for taking him! He should have lived to be an old man! He won’t be there when I dance and when Christopher is a doctor. Nothing seems to matter now that he’s gone.”

“Sometimes,” she began in a tight voice, “death is not as terrible as you think. Your father will never grow old, or infirm. He’ll always stay young; you’ll remember him that way—young, handsome, strong. Don’t cry anymore, Cathy,

for as your father used to say, there is a reason for everything and a solution for every problem, and I'm trying, trying hard to do what I think best."

We were four children stumbling around in the broken pieces of our grief and loss. We would play in the back garden, trying to find solace in the sunshine, quite unaware that our lives were soon to change so drastically, so dramatically, that the words "backyard" and "garden" were to become for us synonyms for heaven—and just as remote.

It was an afternoon shortly after Daddy's funeral, and Christopher and I were with the twins in the backyard. They sat in the sandbox with small shovels and sand pails. Over and over again they transferred sand from one pail to another, gibbering back and forth in the strange language only they could understand. Cory and Carrie were fraternal rather than identical twins, yet they were like one unit, very much satisfied with each other. They built a wall about themselves so they were the castle-keeps, and full guardians of their larder of secrets. They had each other and that was enough.

The time for dinner came and went. We were afraid that now even meals might be cancelled, so even without our mother's voice to call us in, we caught hold of the dimpled, fat hands of the twins and dragged them along toward the house. We found our mother seated behind Daddy's big desk; she was writing what appeared to be a very difficult letter, if the evidence of many discarded beginnings meant anything. She frowned as she wrote in longhand, pausing every so often to lift her head and stare off into space.

"Momma," I said, "it's almost six o'clock. The twins are growing hungry."

"In a minute, in a minute," she said in an off-hand way. "I'm writing to your grandparents who live in Virginia. The neighbors have brought us food enough for a week—you could put one of the casseroles in the oven, Cathy."

It was the first meal I almost prepared myself. I had the table set, and the casserole heating, and the milk poured, when Momma came in to help.

It seemed to me that every day after our father had gone, our mother had letters to write, and places to go, leaving us in the care of the neighbor next door. At night Momma would sit at Daddy's desk, a green ledger book opened in front of her, checking over stacks of bills. Nothing felt good anymore, nothing. Often now my brother and I bathed the twins, put on their pajamas, and tucked them into bed. Then Christopher would hurry off to his room to study, while I would hurry back to my mother to seek a way to bring happiness to her eyes again.

A few weeks later a letter came in response to the many our mother had written home to her parents. Immediately Momma began to cry—even before she had opened the thick, creamy envelope, she cried. Clumsily, she used a letter opener, and with trembling hands she held three sheets, reading over the letter three times. All the while she read, tears trickled slowly down her cheeks, smearing her makeup with long, pale, shiny streaks.

She had called us in from the backyard as soon as she had collected the mail from the box near the front door, and now we four were seated on the living room sofa. As I watched I saw her soft fair Dresden face turn into something cold, hard, resolute. A cold chill shivered down my spine. Maybe it was because she stared at us for so long—too long. Then she looked down at the sheets held in her trembling hands, then to the windows, as if there she could find some answer to the question of the letter.

Momma was acting so strangely. It made us all uneasy and unusually quiet, for we were already intimidated enough in a fatherless home without a creamy letter of three sheets to glue our mother's tongue and harden her eyes. Why did she look at us so oddly?

Finally, she cleared her throat and began to speak, but in a cold voice, totally unlike her customary soft, warm cadence. "Your grandmother has at last replied to my letters," she said in that icy voice. "All those letters I wrote to her ... well ... she has agreed. She is willing to let us come and live with her."

Good news! Just what we had been waiting to hear—and we should have been happy. But Momma fell into that moody silence again, and she just sat there staring at us. What was the matter with her? Didn't she know we were hers, and not some stranger's four perched in a row like birds on a clothesline?

“Christopher, Cathy, at fourteen and twelve, you two should be old enough to understand, and old enough to cooperate, and help your mother out of a desperate situation.” She paused, fluttered one hand up to nervously finger the beads at her throat and sighed heavily. She seemed on the verge of tears. And I felt sorry, so sorry for poor Momma, without a husband.

“Momma,” I said, “is everything all right?”

“Of course, darling, of course.” She tried to smile. “Your father, God rest his soul, expected to live to a ripe old age and acquire in the meantime a sizable fortune. He came from people who know how to make money, so I don't have any doubts he would have done just what he planned, if given the time. But thirty-six is so young to die. People have a way of believing nothing terrible will ever happen to them, only to others. We don't anticipate accidents, nor do we expect to die young. Why, your father and I thought we would grow old together, and we hoped to see our grandchildren before we both died on the same day. Then neither of us would be left alone to grieve for the one who went first.”

Again she sighed. “I have to confess we lived way beyond our present means, and we charged against the future. We spent money before we had it. Don't blame him; it was my fault. He knew all about poverty. I knew nothing about it. You know how he used to scold me. Why, when we bought this house, he said we needed only three bedrooms, but I wanted four. Even four didn't seem enough. Look around, there's a thirty year mortgage on this house. Nothing here is really ours: not this furniture, not the cars, not the appliances in the kitchen or laundry room—not one single thing is fully paid for.”

Did we look frightened? Scared? She paused as her face flushed deeply red, and her eyes moved around the lovely room that set off her beauty so well. Her delicate brows screwed into an anxious frown. “Though your father would

chastise me a little, still he wanted them, too. He indulged me, because he loved me, and I believe I convinced him finally that luxuries were absolute necessities, and he gave in, for we had a way, the two of us, of indulging our desires too much. It was just another of the things we had in common.”

Her expression collapsed into one of forlorn reminiscence before she continued on in her stranger’s voice. “Now all our beautiful things will be taken away. The legal term is repossession. That’s what they do when you don’t have enough money to finish paying for what you’ve bought. Take that sofa, for example. Three years ago it cost eight hundred dollars. And we’ve paid all but one hundred, but still they’re going to take it. We’ll lose all that we’ve paid on everything, and that’s still legal. Not only will we lose this furniture and the house, but also the cars—in fact, everything but our clothes and your toys. They’re going to allow me to keep my wedding band, and I’ve hidden away my engagement diamond—so please don’t mention I ever had an engagement ring to anyone who might come to check.”

Who “they” were, not one of us asked. It didn’t occur to me to ask. Not then. And later it just didn’t seem to matter.

Christopher’s eyes met mine. I floundered in the desire to understand, and struggled not to drown in the understanding. Already I was sinking, drowning in the adult world of death and debts. My brother reached out and took my hand, then squeezed my fingers in a gesture of unusual brotherly reassurance.

Was I a windowpane, so easy to read, that even he, my arch-tormentor, would seek to comfort me? I tried to smile, to prove to him how adult I was, and in this way gloss over that trembling and weak thing I was cringing into because “they” were going to take everything. I didn’t want any other little girl living in my pretty peppermint pink room, sleeping in my bed, playing with the things I cherished—my miniature dolls in their shadowbox frames, and my sterling-silver music box with the pink ballerina—would they take those, too?

Momma watched the exchange between my brother and me very closely. She spoke again with a bit of her former sweet

self showing. “Don’t look so heartbroken. It’s not really as bad as I’ve made it seem. You must forgive me if I was thoughtless and forgot how young you still are. I’ve told you the bad news first, and saved the best for the last. Now hold your breath! You are not going to believe what I have to tell you—for my parents are rich! Not middle-class rich, or upper-class rich, but very, very rich! Filthy, unbelievably, sinfully rich! They live in a fine big house in Virginia—such a house as you’ve never seen before. I know, I was born there, and grew up there, and when you see that house, this one will seem like a shack in comparison. And didn’t I say we are going to live with them—my mother, and my father?”

She offered this straw of cheer with a weak and nervously fluttering smile that did not succeed in releasing me from doubts which her demeanor and her information had pitched me into. I didn’t like the way her eyes skipped guiltily away when I tried to catch them. I thought she was hiding something.

But she was my mother.

And Daddy was gone.

I picked up Carrie and sat her on my lap, pressing her small, warm body close against mine. I smoothed back the damp golden curls that fell over her rounded forehead. Her eyelids drooped, and her full rosebud lips pouted. I glanced at Cory, crouching against Christopher. “The twins are tired, Momma. They need their dinner.”

“Time enough for dinner later,” she snapped impatiently. “We have plans to make, and clothes to pack, for tonight we have to catch a train. The twins can eat while we pack. Everything you four wear must be crowded into only two suitcases. I want you to take only your favorite clothes and the small toys you cannot bear to leave. Only one game. I’ll buy you many games after you are there. Cathy, you select what clothes and toys you think the twins like best—but only a few. We can’t take along more than four suitcases, and I need two for my own things.”

Oh, golly-lolly! This was real! We had to leave, abandon everything! I had to crowd everything into two suitcases my brothers and sister would share as well. My Raggedy Ann doll alone would half fill *one* suitcase! Yet how could I leave her, my most beloved doll, the one Daddy gave me when I was only three? I sobbed.

So, we sat with our shocked faces staring at Momma. We made her terribly uneasy, for she jumped up and began to pace the room.

“As I said before, my parents are extremely wealthy.” She shot Christopher and me an appraising glance, then quickly turned to hide her face.

“Momma,” said Christopher, “is something wrong?”

I marveled that he could ask such a thing, when it was only too obvious, *everything* was wrong.

She paced, her long shapely legs appearing through the front opening of her filmy black negligee. Even in her grief, wearing black, she was beautiful—shadowed, troubled eyes and all. She was so lovely, and I loved her,—oh, how I loved her then!

How we all loved her then.

Directly in front of the sofa, our mother spun around and the black chiffon of her negligee flared like a dancer’s skirt, revealing her beautiful legs from feet to hips.

“Darlings,” she began, “what could possibly be wrong about living in such a fine home as my parents own? I was born there; I grew up there, except for those years when I was sent away to school. It’s a huge, beautiful house, and they keep adding new rooms to it, though Lord knows they have enough rooms already.”

She smiled, but something about her smile seemed false. “There is, however, one small thing I have to tell you before you meet my father—your grandfather.” Here again she faltered, and again smiled that queer, shadowy smile. “Years ago, when I was eighteen, I did something serious, of which your grandfather disapproved, and my mother wasn’t

approving, either, but she wouldn't leave me anything, anyway, so she doesn't count. But, because of what I did, my father had me written out of his will, and so now I am disinherited. Your father used to gallantly call this 'fallen from grace.' Your father always made the best of everything, and he said it didn't matter."

Fallen from grace? Whatever did that mean? I couldn't imagine my mother doing anything so bad that her own father would turn against her and take away what she should have.

"Yes, Momma, I know exactly what you mean," Christopher piped up. "You did something of which your father disapproved, and so, even though you were included in his will, he had his lawyer write you out instead of thinking twice, and now you won't inherit any of his worldly goods when he passes on to the great beyond." He grinned, pleased with himself for knowing more than me. He always had the answers to everything. He had his nose in a book whenever he was in the house. Outside, under the sky, he was just as wild, just as mean as any other kid on the block. But indoors, away from the television, my older brother was a bookworm!

Naturally, he was right.

"Yes, Christopher. None of your grandfather's wealth will come to me when he dies, or through me, to you. That's why I had to keep writing so many letters home when my mother didn't respond." Again she smiled, this time with bitter irony. "But, since I am the sole heir left, I am hopeful of winning back his approval. You see, once I had two older brothers, but both have died in accidents, and now I am the only one left to inherit." Her restless pacing stopped. Her hand rose to cover her mouth; she shook her head, then said in a new parrot-like voice, "I guess I'd better tell you something else. Your real surname is not Dollanganger; it is Foxworth. And Foxworth is a very important name in Virginia."

"Momma!" I exclaimed in shock. "Is it legal to change your name, and put that fake name on our birth certificates?"

Her voice became impatient. "For heaven's sake, Cathy, names can be changed legally. And the name Dollanganger

does belong to us, more or less. Your father borrowed that name from way back in his ancestry. He thought it an amusing name, a joke, and it served its purpose well enough.”

“What purpose?” I asked. “Why would Daddy legally change his name from something like Foxworth, so easy to spell, to something long and difficult like Dollanganger?”

“Cathy, I’m tired,” said Momma, falling into the nearest chair. “There’s so much for me to do, so many legal details. Soon enough you’ll know everything; I’ll explain. I swear to be totally honest; but please, now, let me catch my breath.”

Oh, what a day this was. First we hear the mysterious “they” were coming to take away all our things, even our house. And then we learn even our own last name wasn’t really ours.

The twins, curled up on our laps, were already half-asleep, and they were too young to understand, anyway. Even I, now twelve years old, and almost a woman, could not comprehend why Momma didn’t really look happy to be going home again to parents she hadn’t seen in fifteen years. Secret grandparents we’d thought were dead until after our father’s funeral. Only this day had we heard of two uncles who’d died in accidents. It dawned on me strongly then, that our parents had lived full lives even before they had children, that we were not so important after all.

“Momma,” Christopher began slowly, “your fine, grand home in Virginia sounds nice, but we like it here. Our friends are here, everybody knows us, likes us, and I know I don’t want to move. Can’t you see Daddy’s attorney and ask him to help find a way so we can stay on, and keep our house and our furnishings?”

“Yes, Momma, please, let us stay here,” I added.

Quickly Momma was out of her chair and striding across the room. She dropped down on her knees before us, her eyes on the level with ours. “Now listen to me,” she ordered, catching my brother’s hand and mine and pressing them both against her breasts. “I have thought, and I have thought of how we can manage to stay on here, but there is no way—no way

at all, because we have no money to meet the monthly bills, and I don't have the skills to earn an adequate salary to support four children and myself as well. Look at me," she said, throwing wide her arms, appearing vulnerable, beautiful, helpless. "Do you know what I am? I am a pretty, useless ornament who always believed she'd have a man to take care of her. I don't know how to do anything. I can't even type. I'm not very good with arithmetic. I *can* embroider beautiful needlepoint and crewelwork stitches, but that kind of thing doesn't earn any money. You can't live without money. It's not love that makes the world go 'round—it's money. And my father has more money than he knows what to do with. He has only one living heir—me! Once he cared more for me than he did for either of his sons, so it shouldn't be difficult to win back his affection. Then he will have his attorney draw me into a new will, and I will inherit everything! He is sixty-six years old, and he is dying of heart disease. From what my mother wrote on a separate sheet of paper which my father didn't read, your grandfather cannot possibly live more than two or three months longer at the most. That will give me plenty of time to charm him into loving me like he used to—and when he dies, his entire fortune will be mine! Mine! *Ours!* We will be free forever of all financial worries. Free to go anywhere we want. Free to do anything we want. Free to travel, to buy what our hearts desire—anything our hearts desire! I'm not speaking of only a million or two, but many, many millions—maybe even billions! People with that kind of money don't even know their own net value, for it's invested here and there, and they own this and that, including banks, airlines, hotels, department stores, shipping lines. Oh, you just don't realize the kind of empire your grandfather controls, even now, while he's on his last legs. He has a genius for making money. Everything he touches turns to gold."

Her blue eyes gleamed. The sun shone through the front windows, casting diamond strands of light on her hair. Already she seemed rich beyond value. Momma, Momma, how had all of this come about only after our father died?

"Christopher, Cathy, are you listening, using your imaginations? Do you realize what a tremendous amount of

money can do? The world, and everything in it is yours! You have power, influence, respect. Trust me. Soon enough I will win back my father's heart. He'll take one look at me, and realize instantly how all those fifteen years we've been separated have been such a waste. He's old, sick, he always stays on the first floor, in a small room beyond the library, and he has nurses to take care of him night and day, and servants to wait on him hand and foot. But only your own flesh and blood means anything, and I'm all he has left, only me. Even the nurses don't find it necessary to climb the stairs, for they have their own bath. *One* night, I will prepare him to meet his four grandchildren, and then I will bring you down the stairs, and into his room, and he will be charmed, enchanted by what he sees: four beautiful children who are perfect in every way—he is bound to love you, each and every one of you. Believe me, it will work out, just the way I say. I promise that whatever my father requires of me, I will do. On my life, on all I hold sacred and dear—and that is the children my love for your father made—you can believe I will soon be the heiress to a fortune beyond belief, and through me, every dream you've ever had will come true."

My mouth gaped open. I was overwhelmed by her passion. I glanced at Christopher to see him staring at Momma with incredulity. Both the twins were on the soft fringes of sleep. They had heard none of this.

* * *

We were going to live in a house as big and rich as a palace.

In that palace so grand, where servants waited on you hand and foot, we would be introduced to King Midas, who would soon die, and then *we* would have all the money, to put the world at our feet. We were stepping into riches beyond belief! I would be just like a princess!

Yet, why didn't I feel really happy?

"Cathy," said Christopher, beaming on me a broad, happy smile, "you can still be a ballerina. I don't think money can buy talent, nor can it make a good doctor out of a playboy.

But, until the time comes when we have to be dedicated and serious, my, aren't we gonna have a ball?"

* * *

I couldn't take the sterling-silver music box with the pink ballerina inside. The music box was expensive and had been listed as something of value for "them" to claim.

I couldn't take down the shadowboxes from the walls, or hide away the miniature dolls. There was hardly anything I could take that Daddy had given me except the small ring on my finger, with a semiprecious gem stone shaped like a heart.

And, just like Christopher said, after we were rich, our lives would be one big ball, one long, long party. That's the way rich people lived—happily ever after as they counted their money and made their fun plans.

* * *

Fun, games, parties, riches beyond belief, a house as big as a palace, with servants who lived over a huge garage that stored away at least nine or ten expensive automobiles. Who would ever have guessed my mother came from a family like that? Why had Daddy argued with her so many times about spending money lavishly, when she could have written letters home before, and done a bit of humiliating begging?

Slowly I walked down the hall to my room, to stand before the silver music box where the pink ballerina stood in arabesque position when the lid was opened, and she could see herself in the reflecting mirror. And I heard the tinkling music play, "Whirl, ballerina, whirl"

I could steal it, if I had a place to hide it.

Good-bye, pink-and-white room with the peppermint walls. Good-bye, little white bed with the dotted-Swiss canopy that had seen me sick with measles, mumps, chicken pox.

Good-bye again to you, Daddy, for when I'm gone, I can't picture you sitting on the side of my bed, and holding my hand, and I won't see you coming from the bathroom with a glass of water. *I really don't want to go too much, Daddy. I'd rather stay and keep your memory close and near.*

“Cathy”—Momma was at the door—“don’t just stand there and cry. A room is just a room. You’ll live in many rooms before you die, so hurry up, pack your things and the twins’ things, while I do my own packing.”

Before I died, I was going to live in a thousand rooms or more, a little voice whispered this in my ear . . . and I believed.

The Road to Riches



While Momma packed, Christopher and I threw our clothes into two suitcases, along with a few toys and one game. In the early twilight of evening, a taxi drove us to the train station. We had slipped away furtively, without saying good-bye to even one friend, and this hurt. I didn't know why it had to be that way, but Momma insisted. Our bicycles were left in the garage along with everything else too large to take.

The train lumbered through a dark and starry night, heading toward a distant mountain estate in Virginia. We passed many a sleepy town and village, and scattered farmhouses where golden rectangles of light were the only evidence to show they were there at all. My brother and I didn't want to fall asleep and miss out on anything, and oh, did we have a lot to talk about! Mostly we speculated on that grand rich house where we would live in splendor, and eat from golden plates, and be served by a butler wearing livery. And I supposed I'd have my own maid to lay out my clothes, draw my bath, brush my hair, and jump when I commanded. But I wouldn't be too stern with her. I would be sweet, understanding, the kind of mistress every servant desired—unless she broke something I really cherished! Then there'd be hell to pay—I'd throw a temper tantrum, and hurl a few things I didn't like, anyway.

Looking backward to that night ride on the train, I realize that was the very night I began to grow up, and philosophize. With everything you gained, you had to lose something—so I might as well get used to it, and make the best of it.

While my brother and I speculated on how we would spend the money when it came to us, the portly, balding conductor entered our small compartment and gazed admiringly at our mother from head to toes before he softly spoke: “Mrs. Patterson, in fifteen minutes we'll reach your depot.”

Now why was he calling her “Mrs. Patterson”? I wondered. I shot a questioning look at Christopher, who also seemed perplexed by this.

Jolted awake, appearing startled and disoriented, Momma’s eyes flew wide open. Her gaze jumped from the conductor, who hovered so close above her, over to Christopher and me, and then she looked down in despair at the sleeping twins. Next came ready tears and she was reaching in her purse and pulled out tissues, dabbing at her eyes daintily. Then came a sigh so heavy, so full of woe, my heart began to beat in a nervous tempo. “Yes, thank you,” she said to the conductor, who was still watching her with great approval and admiration. “Don’t fear, we’ll be ready to leave.”

“Ma’am,” he said, most concerned when he glanced at his pocket watch, “it’s three o’clock in the morning. Will someone be there to meet you?” He flicked his worried gaze to Christopher and me, then to the sleeping twins.

“It’s all right,” assured our mother.

“Ma’am, it’s very dark out there.”

“I could find my way home asleep.”

The grandfatherly conductor wasn’t satisfied with this. “Lady,” he said, “it’s an hour’s ride to Charlottesville. We are letting you and your children off in the middle of nowhere. There’s not a house in sight.”

To forbid any further questioning, Momma answered in her most arrogant manner, “Someone *is* meeting us.” Funny how she could put on that kind of haughty manner like a hat, and just as easily discard it.

We arrived at the depot in the middle of nowhere, and we were let off. No one was there to meet us.

It was totally dark when we stepped from the train, and as the conductor had warned, there was not a house in sight. Alone in the night, far from any sign of civilization, we stood and waved good-bye to the conductor on the train steps, holding on by one hand, waving with the other. His expression revealed that he wasn’t too happy about leaving “Mrs.

Patterson” and her brood of four sleepy children waiting for someone coming in a car. I looked around and saw nothing but a rusty, tin roof supported by four wooden posts, and a rickety green bench. This was our train depot. We didn’t sit on that bench, just stood and watched until the train disappeared in the darkness, hearing one single, mournful whistle calling back, as if wishing us good luck and Godspeed.

We were surrounded by fields and meadows. From the deep woods in back of the “depot”, something made a weird noise. I jumped and spun about to see what it was, making Christopher laugh. “That was only an owl! Did you think it was a ghost?”

“Now there is to be none of that!” said Momma sharply. “And you don’t have to whisper. No one is about. This is farm country, dairy cows mostly. Look around. See the fields of wheat and oats, some barley, too. The nearby farmers supply all the fresh produce for the wealthy people who live on the hill.”

There were hills aplenty, looking like lumpy patchwork quilts, with trees parading up and down to separate them into distinct sections. Sentinels of the night, I called them, but Momma told us the many trees in straight rows acted as windbreaks, and held back the heavy drifts of snow. Just the right words to make Christopher very excited. He loved all kinds of winter sports, and he hadn’t thought a southern state like Virginia would have heavy snow.

“Oh, yes, it snows here,” said Momma. “You bet it snows. We are in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and it gets very, very cold here, just as cold as it did in Gladstone. But the summers will be warmer during the day. The nights are always cool enough for at least one blanket. Now if the sun were out, you’d be feasting your eyes on very beautiful countryside, as pretty as there is anywhere in the world. We have to hurry, though. It’s a long, long walk to my home, and we have to reach there before dawn, when the servants get up.”

How strange. “Why?” I asked. “And why did that conductor call you Mrs. Patterson?”

“Cathy, I don’t have time to explain to you now. We’ve got to walk fast.” She bent to pick up the two heaviest suitcases, and said in a firm voice that we were to follow where she led. Christopher and I were forced to carry the twins, who were too sleepy to walk, or make even an attempt.

“Momma!” I cried out, when we had moved on a few steps, “the conductor forgot to give us *your* two suitcases!”

“It’s all right, Cathy,” she said breathlessly, as if the two suitcases she was carrying were enough to tax her strength. “I asked the conductor to take my two bags on to Charlottesville and put them in a locker for me to pick up tomorrow morning.”

“Why would you do that?” asked Christopher in a tight voice.

“Well, for one thing, I certainly couldn’t handle *four* suitcases, could I? And, for another thing, I want the chance to talk to my father first before he learns about my children. And it just wouldn’t seem right if I arrived home in the middle of the night after being gone for fifteen years, now would it?”

It sounded reasonable, I guess, for we did have all we could handle since the twins refused to walk. We set off, tagging along behind our mother, over uneven ground, following faint paths between rocks and trees and shrubbery that clawed at our clothes. We trekked a long, long, long way. Christopher and I became tired, irritable, as the twins grew heavier and heavier, and our arms began to ache. It was an adventure already beginning to pall. We complained, we nagged, we dragged our feet, wanting to sit down and rest. We wanted to be back in Gladstone, in our own beds, with our own things—better than here—better than that big old house with servants and grandparents we didn’t even know.

“Wake up the twins!” snapped Momma, grown impatient with our complaining. “Stand them on their feet, and force them to walk, whether or not they want to.” Then she mumbled something faint into the fur collar of her jacket that just barely reached my keen ears: “Lord knows, they’d better walk outside while they can.”

A ripple of apprehension shot down my spine. I glanced at my older brother to see if he'd heard, just as he turned his head to look at me. He smiled. I smiled in return.

Tomorrow, when Momma arrived at a proper time, in a taxi, she would go to the sick grandfather and she'd smile, and she'd speak, and he'd be charmed, won over. Just one look at her lovely face, and just one word from her soft beautiful voice, and he'd hold out his arms, and forgive her for whatever she'd done to make her "fall from grace."

From what she'd already told us, her father was a cantankerous *old* man, for sixty-six did seem like incredibly old age to me. And a man on the verge of death couldn't afford to hold grudges against his sole remaining child, a daughter he'd once loved very much. He'd have to forgive her, so he could go peacefully, blissfully into his grave, and know he'd done the right thing. Then, once she had him under her spell, she'd bring us down from the bedroom, and we'd be looking our best, and acting our sweetest selves, and he'd soon see we weren't ugly, or really bad, and nobody, absolutely nobody with a heart could resist loving the twins. Why, people in shopping centers stopped to pat the twins, and compliment our mother on having such beautiful babies. And just wait until Grandfather learned how smart Christopher was! A straight-A student! And what was even more remarkable, he didn't have to study and study the way I did. Everything came so easily for him. His eyes could scan a page just once or twice, and all the information would be written indelibly on his brain, never to be forgotten. Oh, how I did envy him that gift.

I had a gift too; not the bright and shining coin that was Christopher's. It was my way to turn over all that glittered and look for the tarnish. We had gleaned but a bit of information about that unknown grandfather, but putting the pieces together, I already had the idea he was not the kind to easily forgive—not when he could deny a once-beloved daughter for fifteen years. Yet, could he be so hard he could resist all Momma's wheedling charms, which were considerable? I doubted it. I had seen and heard her wheedle with our father about money matters, and always Daddy was the one to give in and be won over to her way. Just a kiss, a hug, a soft

stroking caress and Daddy would brighten up and smile, and agree, yes, somehow or other they could manage to pay for everything expensive she bought.

“Cathy,” said Christopher, “take that worried look off your face. If God didn’t plan for people to grow old, and sick, and to eventually die, he wouldn’t keep on letting people have babies.”

I felt Christopher staring at me, as if reading my thoughts, and I flushed. He grinned cheerfully. He was the perpetual cockeyed optimist, never gloomy, doubtful, or moody, as I often was.

We followed Momma’s advice and woke up the twins. We stood them on their feet and told them they would have to make an effort to walk, tired or not. We pulled them along while they whined and complained with sniffling sobs of rebellion. “Don’t wanna go where we’re going,” sobbed a teary Carrie.

Cory only wailed.

“Don’t like walkin’ in woods when it’s dark!” screamed Carrie, trying to pull her tiny hand free from mine. “I’m going home! Let me go, Cathy, let me go!”

Cory howled louder.

I wanted to pick Carrie up again, and carry her on, but my arms were just too aching to make another effort. Then Christopher released Cory’s hand and ran ahead to assist Momma with her two heavy suitcases, so I had two unwilling, resisting twins to lug along in the darkness.

The air was cool and sharply pungent. Though Momma called this hill country, those shadowy, high forms in the distance looked like mountains to me. I stared up at the sky. It seemed to me like an inverted deep bowl of navy-blue velvet, sparkled all over with crystallized snowflakes instead of stars—or were they tears of ice that I was going to cry in the future? Why did they seem to be looking down at me with pity, making me feel ant-sized, overwhelmed, completely insignificant? It was too big, that close sky, too beautiful, and

it filled me with a strange sense of foreboding. Still I knew that under other circumstances, I could love a countryside like this.

We came at last upon a cluster of large and very fine homes, nestled on a steep hillside. Stealthily, we approached the largest and, by far, the grandest of all the sleeping mountain homes. Momma said in a hushed voice that her ancestral home was named Foxworth Hall, and was more than two hundred years old!

“Is there a lake nearby for ice-skating, and swimming?” asked Christopher. He gave serious attention to the hillside. “It’s not good ski country—too many trees and rocks.”

“Yes,” said Momma, “there’s a small lake about a quarter of a mile away.” And she pointed in the direction where a lake could be found.

We circled that enormous house, almost on tiptoes. Once at the back door, an old lady let us in. She must have been waiting, and seen us coming, for she opened that door so readily we didn’t even have to knock. Just like thieves in the night, we stole silently inside. Not a word did she speak to welcome us. Could this be one of the servants? I wondered.

Immediately we were inside the dark house, and she hustled us up a steep and narrow back staircase, not allowing us one second to pause and take a look around the grand rooms we only glimpsed in our swift and mute passage. She led us down many halls, past many closed doors, and finally we came to an end room, where she swung open a door and gestured us inside. It was a relief to have our long night journey over, and be in a large bedroom where a single lamp was lit. Heavy, tapestried draperies covered two tall windows. The old woman in her gray dress turned to look us over as she closed the heavy door to the hall and leaned against it.

She spoke, and I was jolted. “Just as you said, Corrine. Your children are beautiful.”

There she was, paying us a compliment that should warm our hearts—but it chilled mine. Her voice was cold and uncaring, as if we were without ears to hear, and without

minds to comprehend her displeasure, despite her flattery. And I was right to judge her so. Her next words proved that.

“But are you sure they are intelligent? Do they have some invisible afflictions not apparent to the eyes?”

“None!” cried our mother, taking offense, as did I. “My children are perfect, as you can plainly see, physically and mentally!” She glared at that old woman in gray before she squatted down on her heels and began to undress Carrie, who was nodding on her feet. I knelt before Cory and unbuttoned his small blue jacket, as Christopher lifted one of the suitcases up on one of the big beds. He opened it and took out two pairs of small yellow pajamas with feet.

Furtively, as I helped Cory off with his clothes and into his yellow pajamas, I studied that tall, big woman, who was, I presumed, our grandmother. As I looked her over, seeking wrinkles and heavy jowls, I found out she was not as old as I had at first presumed. Her hair was a strong, steel-blue color, drawn back from her face in a severe style which made her eyes appear somewhat long and cat-like. Why, you could even see how each strand of hair pulled her skin up in little resentful hills—and even as I watched, I saw one hair spring free from its moorings!

Her nose was an eagle’s beak, her shoulders were wide, and her mouth was like a thin, crooked knife slash. Her dress, of gray taffeta, had a diamond brooch at the throat of a high, severe neckline. Nothing about her appeared soft or yielding; even her bosom looked like twin hills of concrete. There would be no funning with her, as we had played with our mother and father.

I didn’t like her. I wanted to go home. My lips quivered. I wanted Daddy alive again. How could such a woman as this make someone as lovely and sweet as our mother? From whom had our mother inherited her beauty, her gaiety? I shivered, and tried to forbid those tears that welled in my eyes. Momma had prepared us in advance for an unloving, uncaring, unrelenting grandfather—but the grandmother who had arranged for our coming—she came as a harsh, astonishing surprise. I blinked back my tears, fearful Christopher would

see them and mock me later. But to reassure me, there was our mother smiling warmly as she lifted a pajamaed Cory into one of the big beds, and then she put Carrie in beside him. Oh, how they did look sweet, lying there, like big, rosy-cheeked dolls. Momma leaned over the twins and pressed kisses on their flushed cheeks, and her hand tenderly brushed back the curls on their foreheads, and then she tucked the covers high under their chins. “Good night, my darlings,” she whispered in the loving voice we knew so well.

The twins didn’t hear. Already they were deeply asleep.

However, standing firmly as a rooted tree, the grandmother was obviously displeased as she gazed upon the twins in one bed, then over to where Christopher and I were huddled close together. We were tired, and half-supporting each other. Strong disapproval glinted in her gray-stone eyes. She wore a fixed, piercing scowl that Momma seemed to understand, although I did not. Momma’s face flushed as the grandmother said, “Your two older children cannot sleep in one bed!”

“They’re only children,” Momma flared back with unusual fire. “Mother, you haven’t changed one bit, have you? You still have a nasty, suspicious mind! Christopher and Cathy are innocent!”

“Innocent?” she snapped back, her mean look so sharp it could cut and draw blood. “That is exactly what your father and I always presumed about you and your half-uncle!”

I looked from one to the other, my eyes wide. I glanced at my brother. Years seemed to melt from him, and he stood there vulnerable, helpless, as a child of six or seven, no more comprehending than I.

A tempest of hot anger made our mother’s ruddy color depart. “If you think like that, then give them separate rooms, and separate beds! Lord knows this house has enough of them!”

“That is impossible,” the grandmother said in her fire ice voice. “This is the only bedroom with its own adjoining bath, and where my husband won’t hear them walking overhead, or flushing the toilet. If they are separated, and scattered about all

over upstairs, he will hear their voices, or their noise, or the servants will. Now, I have given this arrangement a great deal of thought. This is the only safe room.”

Safe room? We were going to sleep, all of us, in only one room? In a grand, rich house with twenty, thirty, forty rooms, we were going to stay in one room? Even so, now that I gave it more thought, I didn't want to be in a room alone in this mammoth house.

“Put the two girls in one bed, and the two boys in the other,” the grandmother ordered.

Momma lifted Cory and put him in the remaining double bed, thus, casually establishing the way it was to be from then on. The boys in the bed nearest the bathroom door, and Carrie and I in the bed nearest the windows.

The old woman turned her hard gaze on me, then on Christopher. “Now hear this,” she began like a drill sergeant, “it will be up to you two older children to keep the younger ones quiet, and you two will be responsible if they break even one of the rules I lay down. Keep this always in your minds: if your grandfather learns too soon you are up here, then he will throw all of you out without one red penny—*after* he has severely punished you for being alive! And you will keep this room clean, neat, tidy, and the bathroom, too, just as if no one lived here. And you will be quiet; you will not yell, or cry, or run about to pound on the ceilings below. When your mother and I leave this room tonight, I will close and lock the door behind me. For I will not have you roaming from room to room, and into the other sections of this house. Until the day your grandfather dies, you are here, but you don't really exist.”

Oh, God! My eyes flashed to Momma. This couldn't be true! She was lying, wasn't she? Saying mean things just to scare us. I drew closer to Christopher, pressing against his side, gone cold and shaky. The grandmother scowled, and quickly I stepped away. I tried to look at Momma, but she had turned her back, and her head was lowered, but her shoulders sagged and quivered as if she were crying.

Panic filled me, and I would have screamed out something if Momma hadn't turned then and sat down on a bed, and stretched out her arms to Christopher and me. We ran to her, grateful for her arms that drew us close, and her hands that stroked our hair and backs, and smoothed down our wind-rumpled hair. "It's all right," she whispered. "Trust me. One night only will you be in here, and my father will welcome you into his home, to use it as you would your own—all of it, every room, and the gardens, too."

Then she glared up at her mother so tall, so stern, so forbidding. "Mother, have some pity and compassion for my children. They are of your flesh and blood too; keep that in *your* mind. They are very good children, but they are also normal children, and they need room to play and run and make noise. Do you expect them to speak in whispers? You don't have to lock the door to this room; you can lock the door at the end of the hall. Now why can't they have all the rooms of this north wing to use as their very own? I know you never cared for this older section very much."

The grandmother shook her head vigorously. "Corrine, I make the decisions here—not you! Do you think I can just close and lock the door to this wing and the servants won't wonder why? Everything must stay just as it was. They understand why I keep this particular room locked, for the stairway to the attic is in here, and I don't like for them to snoop around where they don't belong. Very early in the mornings, I will bring the children food and milk—before the cook and the maids enter the kitchen. This north wing is never entered except on the last Friday of each month, when it is thoroughly cleaned. On those days, the children will hide in the attic until the maids finish. And before the maids enter, I myself will check everything over to see they leave behind no evidence of their occupancy."

Momma voiced more objections. "That is impossible! They are bound to give themselves away, leave a clue. Mother, lock the door at the end of the hall!"

The grandmother gnashed her teeth. "Corrine, give me time; with time I can figure out some reason why the servants

cannot enter this wing at all, even to clean. But I have to tread carefully, and not raise their suspicions. They don't like me; they would run to your father with tales, hoping he would reward them. Can't you see? The closure of this wing cannot coincide with your return, Corrine."

Our mother nodded, giving in. She and the grandmother plotted on and on, while Christopher and I grew sleepier and sleepier. It seemed an endless day. I wanted so much to crawl into the bed beside Carrie, and nestle down so I could fall into sweet oblivion, where problems didn't live.

Eventually, just when I thought she never would, Momma took notice of how tired Christopher and I were, and we were allowed to undress in the bathroom, and then to climb into bed—at long last.

Momma came to me, looking tired and concerned, with dark shadows in her eyes, and she pressed her warm lips on my forehead. I saw tears glistening in the corners of her eyes, and her mascara pooled the tears into black streaks. Why was she crying again?

"Go to sleep," she said hoarsely. "Don't worry. Pay no attention to what you just heard. As soon as my father forgives me, and forgets what I did to displease him, he'll open up his arms and welcome his grandchildren—the only grandchildren he's likely to live long enough to see."

"Momma"—I frowned, full of anguish, "why do you keep crying so much?"

With jerky movements she brushed away her tears and tried to smile. "Cathy, I'm afraid it may take more than just one day to win back my father's affection and approval. It may take two days, or more."

"More?"

"Maybe, maybe even a week, but not longer, possibly much less time. I just don't know exactly ... but it won't be long. You can count on that." Her soft hand smoothed back my hair. "Dear sweet Cathy, your father loved you so very much, and so do I." She drifted over to Christopher, to kiss his forehead

and stroke his hair, but what she whispered to him, I couldn't hear.

At the door she turned to say, "Have a good night's rest, and I'll see you tomorrow as soon as I can. You know my plans. I have to walk back to the train depot, and catch another train to Charlottesville where my two suitcases will be waiting, and tomorrow morning, early, I'll taxi back here, and I'll sneak up to visit with you when I can."

The grandmother ruthlessly shoved our mother through the open doorway, but Momma twisted around to peer back at us over her shoulder, her bleak eyes silently pleading with us even before her voice sounded again: "Please be good. Behave yourselves. Don't make any noise. Obey your grandmother and her rules, and never give her any reason to punish you. Please, please do this; and make the twins obey, and keep them from crying and missing me too much. Make this seem a game, lots of fun. Do what you can to entertain them until I'm back with toys and games for you all to play. I'll be back tomorrow, and every second I'm gone, I'll be thinking of you, and praying for you, and loving you."

We promised we'd be as good as gold, and quiet as mice, and like angels we'd obey and keep to whatever rules were laid down. We'd do the best we could for the twins and I'd do anything, say anything, to take the anxiety from her eyes.

"Good night, Momma," said both Christopher and I as she stood falteringly in the hall with the grandmother's large cruel hands on her shoulders. "Don't worry about us. We'll all be fine. We know what to do for the twins, and how to entertain ourselves. We're not little children anymore." All of this came from my brother.

"You'll see me early tomorrow morning," the grandmother said before she pushed Momma into the hall, then closed and locked the door.

Scary to be locked in, children alone. What if a fire started? Fire. Always I was to think of fire and how to escape. If we were going to be here locked in, no one would hear us if we cried out for help. Who *could* hear us in this remote, forbidden

room on the second floor, where no one came but once a month, on the last Friday?

Thank God this was just a temporary arrangement—one night. And then, tomorrow Momma would win over the dying grandfather.

And we were alone. Locked in. All the lights were turned off. Around us, below us, this huge house seemed a monster, holding us in its sharp-toothed mouth. If we moved, whispered, breathed heavily, we'd be swallowed and digested.

It was sleep I wanted as I lay there, not the long, long silence that stretched interminably. For the first time in my life I didn't fall into dreams the moment my head touched the pillow. Christopher broke the silence, and we began, in whispers, to discuss our situation.

"It won't be so bad," he said softly, his eyes liquid and gleaming in the dimness. "That grandmother—she can't possibly be as mean as she seems."

"You mean to tell me you didn't think she was a sweet old lady?"

He sort of chuckled. "Yeah, you bet, sweet—sweet as a boa constrictor."

"She's awful big. How tall do you think she is?"

"Gosh, that's hard to guess. Maybe six feet, and two hundred pounds."

"Seven feet! Five hundred pounds!"

"Cathy, one thing you've got to learn—stop exaggerating! Stop making so much out of small things. Now, take a real look at our situation, and realize this is only a room in a big house, nothing at all frightening. We have one night to spend here before Momma comes back."

"Christopher, did you hear what the grandmother said about a half-uncle? Did you understand what she meant?"

"No, but I suppose Momma will explain everything. Now go to sleep, and say a prayer. Isn't that about all we can do?"

I got right out of the bed, fell down on my knees, and folded my hands beneath my chin. I closed my eyes tightly and prayed, prayed for God to help Momma be her most charming, disarming, and winning self. “And God, please don’t let the grandfather be as hateful and mean as his wife.”

Then, fatigued and drowning in many emotions, I hopped back into bed, hugged Carrie close against my chest, and fell, as I wanted, into dreams.

The Grandmother's House



The day dawned dim behind the heavy, drawn draperies that we had been forbidden to open. Christopher sat up first, yawning, stretching, grinning over at me. “Hi, tousle-head,” he greeted. His hair was as tousled as mine, much more so. I don’t know why God chose to give him and Cory such curly hair, when he gave Carrie and me only waves. And all boy that he was, he tried with mighty effort to brush out those curls, as I sat and hoped they would jump from his head over to mine.

I sat up and looked around this room that was, perhaps, sixteen-by-sixteen. Large, but with two double beds, a massive highboy, a large dresser, two overstuffed chairs, a dressing table between the two front windows, with its own small chair, plus a mahogany table with four chairs, it seemed a small room. Cluttered. Between the two big beds was another table with a lamp. Altogether there were four lamps in the room. Beneath all the ponderous dark furniture was a faded Oriental red rug with gold fringe. At one time it must have been a beautiful thing, but now it was old and worn. The walls were papered in cream with white flocking. The bedspreads were gold-colored and made of some heavy fabric like quilted satin. There were three paintings on the walls. Golly-lolly, they did steal your breath away! Grotesque demons chased naked people in underground caverns colored mostly red. Unearthly monsters devoured other pitiful souls. Even as their legs still kicked, they dangled from slobbering mouths filled with long, shiny, sharp teeth.

“You are now gazing on hell, as some might see it,” my know-it-all brother informed me. “Ten to one, our angel grandmother hung those reproductions herself just to let us know what we’re in for if we dare to disobey. Look like Goya’s work to me,” he said.

My brother did know everything. Next to being a doctor, he wanted to be an artist. He was exceptionally good at drawing, using watercolors, oil paints, and so on. He was good at most everything except picking up after himself, and waiting on himself.

Just as I made a move to get up and go into the bath, Christopher jumped from his bed and beat me to it. Why did Carrie and I have to be so far from the bath? Impatiently I sat on the edge of the bed, swinging my legs, and waited for him to come out.

With many little restless movements, Carrie and Cory fluttered awake simultaneously. They sat up and yawned, as if mirrored reflections, rubbed at their eyes, and looked sleepily around. Then Carrie pronounced in definite tones, “I don’t like it here!”

That was not at all surprising. Carrie was born opinionated. Even before she could talk, and she talked at nine months, she knew what she liked and what she hated. There was never a middle road for Carrie—it was down low, or up sky-high. She had the cutest little voice when she was pleased, sounding very much like a sweet little bird chirping happily in the mornings. Trouble was, she chirped all day long, unless she was asleep. Carrie talked to dolls, teacups, Teddy bears and other stuffed animals. Anything that sat and didn’t answer back was worthy of her conversation. After a while, I got so I didn’t even hear her incessant chatter; I just turned it off and let her rattle on and on.

Cory was entirely different. While Carrie chattered on and on, he’d sit and listen attentively. I recall Mrs. Simpson saying Cory was “a still water that ran deep.” I still don’t know what she meant by that, except quiet people did exude some illusion of mystery that kept you wondering just what they really were beneath the surface.

“Cathy,” twittered my baby-faced small sister, “did you hear me say I don’t like it here?”

Hearing this, Cory scrambled from his bed and ran to jump into ours, and there he reached for his twin and held her tight,

his eyes wide and scared. In his solemn way, he asked, “How did we get here?”

“Last night, on a train. Don’t you remember?”

“No, I don’t remember.”

“And we walked through the woods in the moonlight. It was very pretty.”

“Where is the sun? Is it still night?”

Behind the draperies the sun hid. But if I dared to tell Cory that, then he was for sure going to want to open those draperies and look outside. And once he saw outside, he was going to want to go outside. I didn’t know what to say.

Someone in the hall fumbled with the door lock, saving me from giving any answer at all. Our grandmother carried into the room a large tray laden with food, covered with a large white towel. In a very brisk, businesslike way she explained that she couldn’t be running up and down the stairs all day carrying heavy trays. Once a day only. If she came too often, the servants might notice.

“I think from now on I’ll use a picnic basket,” she said as she set the tray down on the little table. She turned to look at me, as if I were in charge of the meals. “You are to make this food last throughout the day. Divide it into three meals. The bacon, eggs, toast and cereal are for breakfast. The sandwiches and the hot soup in the small thermos are for your lunch. The fried chicken, potato salad and string beans are for your dinner. You can eat the fruit for dessert. And if at the end of the day, you are silent and good, I may bring you ice cream and cookies, or cake. No candy, ever. We can’t have you getting tooth cavities. There won’t be any trips to a dentist until your grandfather dies.”

Christopher had come from the bathroom, fully dressed, and he, too, stood and stared at the grandmother who could so easily talk of the death of her husband, showing no distress. It was as if she were speaking of some goldfish in China that would soon die in a fishbowl. “And clean your teeth after every meal,” she went on, “and keep your hair brushed neatly,

and your bodies clean and fully clothed. I do despise children with dirty faces and hands and runny noses.”

Even as she said this, Cory’s nose was running. Surreptitiously, I used a tissue to wipe it for him. Poor Cory, he had hay fever most of the time, and she hated children with runny noses.

“And be modest in the bathroom,” she said, looking particularly hard at me and then Christopher who was now lounging insolently against the doorframe of the bath. “Girls and boys are never to use the bathroom together.”

I felt a hot blush stain my cheeks! What kind of kids did she think we were?

Next we heard something for the first time, which we were to hear over and over again like a needle stuck in a scratched record: “And remember, children, God sees everything! God will see what evil you do behind my back! And God will be the one to punish when I don’t!”

From her dress pocket, she pulled a sheet of paper. “Now, on this paper, I have listed the rules you are to follow while you are in my home.” She laid the list down on the table and told us we should read and memorize them. Then she spun around to leave ... but no, she headed toward the closet that we hadn’t yet investigated. “Children, beyond this door, and in the far end of the closet, is a small door concealing the steps to the attic. Up in the attic there is ample space for you to run and play and make a reasonable amount of noise. But you are never to go up there until after ten o’clock. Before ten, the maids will be on the second floor doing their morning chores, and they could hear you running about. Therefore, always be conscious you can be heard below if you are too noisy. After ten, the servants are forbidden to use the second floor. One of them has started stealing. Until that thief is caught red-handed, I’m always present when they straighten up the bedrooms. In this house, we make our own rules, and execute the deserved punishment. As I said last night, on the last Friday of each month, you will go into the attic very early, and sit quietly without talking, or scuffling your feet—do you understand me?” She stared at each of us in turn, impounding her words

with mean, hard eyes. Christopher and I nodded. The twins only gazed at her in a strange kind of fascination, close to awe. Further explanations informed us that she would check our room and bath to see we left no hint of ourselves on that Friday.

Everything said, she left. Once more she locked us in.

Now we could breathe.

Grimly, with determination, I set out to make a game of this. “Christopher Doll, I appoint you the father.”

He laughed, then said with sarcasm, “What else? As the man, and the head of this family, let it be known hitherto that I am to be waited on hand and foot—the same as a king. Wife, as my inferior, and my slave, set the table, dish out the food, make ready for your lord and master.”

“Repeat again what you said, *brother*.”

“From now on, I am not your brother, but your lord and master; you are to do my bidding, whatever I say.”

“And if I don’t do as you say—what will you do next, lord and master?”

“I don’t like the tone of your voice. Speak respectfully when you speak to me.”

“La-dee-da, and ho-ho-ho! The day I speak respectfully to you, Christopher, will be the day you *earn* my respect—and that will be the day you stand twelve feet high, and the moon is at noon, and a blizzard blows in a unicorn ridden by a gallant knight wearing pure white shining armor, with a green dragon’s head perched on the point of his lance!” And so said, and so satisfied with his disgruntled expression, I caught hold of Carrie’s small hand and led her haughtily into the bathroom where we could take our time to wash, dress and brush, and ignore poor Cory, who kept calling out that he had to go.

“Please, Cathy. Let me come in! I won’t look!”

Eventually a bathroom grows boring, and we came out, and, believe it or not, Christopher had Cory fully dressed! And

what was even more shocking—now Cory didn't need to use the bathroom!

“Why?” I asked. “Now don't you dare tell me you got back into bed and did it there!”

Silently, Cory pointed to a large blue vase without flowers.

Christopher lounged against the highboy, his arms folded across his chest, pleased with himself. “That should teach you to ignore a male in need. We men are not like you sit-down females. Any little thing will do in an emergency.”

Before I would allow anyone to begin breakfast, I had to empty the blue vase, and rinse it out well. Really, it wouldn't be such a bad idea to keep the vase near Cory's side of the bed, just in case.

Near the windows we sat down to the little table meant for card-playing. The twins sat on doubled-over pillows so they could see what they were eating. All four lamps were turned on. Still it was depressing, having to eat breakfast in what looked like twilight.

“Cheer up, sober face,” said my unpredictable older brother. “I was only kidding. You don't have to be my slave. I just love the gems you spurt forth when provoked. I admit, in verbosity you females are blessed, just as we males are gifted with the perfect instrument for picnic bathrooming.” And to prove he wasn't going to be an overbearing brute, he helped me pour the milk, finding out, as I had, that hefting a gallon-sized thermos and pouring without spilling was no mean feat.

Carrie gave those fried eggs and bacon just one glance and she was wailing. “*We-ee* don't like bacon and eggs! *Cold CEREAL* is what we-ee like! We-ee don't want no hot, lumpy, bumpy food that's greasy. *Cold CEREAL IS WHAT WE LIKE!*” she shrieked. “*Cold CEREAL WITH RAISINS!*”

“Now you listen to me,” said their new, smaller-edition father, “you will eat what is put before you, and you will make no complaints, and you will not yell, or cry, or scream! Hear that? And it is not hot food, it is cold food. You can scrape off the grease. It is solid, anyway.”

In a wink Christopher gobbled down his cold, greasy food, plus his cold toast without butter. Those twins, for some odd reason I'll never understand, ate their breakfast without another word of complaint. I had the uneasy queasy feeling our luck with the twins just couldn't hold out. They might be impressed now by a forceful older brother, but watch out later!

The meal finished, I neatly stacked the dishes back on the tray. And only then did I remember we'd forgotten to say grace. Hastily we gathered together at the table and sat down to bow our heads, and clasp our palms together.

"Lord, forgive us for eating without asking your permission. Please don't let the grandmother know. We vow to do it right next time. Amen." Finished, I handed Christopher the list of do's and don'ts that were carefully typed in capital letters as if we were so stupid we couldn't understand longhand.

And just so the twins, who'd been too sleepy last night to understand our situation, fully realized what they were in for, my brother began at the top of the list of rules not to be broken—or else!

First he pursed his mouth up in a good imitation of the grandmother's hateful lips, and you'd never believe such a finely shaped mouth as his could be made to look so grim, but somehow he managed to mimic her austerity.

"One:"—he read in a cold, flat voice—"you are *always* to be fully dressed." And, boy, did he make "*always*" sound impossible.

"Two: you will never take the Lord's name in vain, and will *always* say grace before each meal. And if I am not in the room to see that you do this, you may be sure that He above will be listening, and watching.

"Three: you are *never* to open the draperies, not even to peek out.

"Four: you will *never* speak to me unless I speak to you first.

“Five: you will keep this room neat and orderly, *always* with the beds made.

“Six: you are *never* to be idle. You will devote five hours each day to studying, and use the remainder of your time to develop your abilities in some meaningful way. *If* you have any skills, abilities or talents, you will seek to improve upon them, and if you have no abilities, or talents, or skills, you will read the Bible; and if you cannot read, then you will sit and stare at the Bible, and try to absorb through the purity of your thoughts the meaning of the Lord and his ways.

“Seven: you will clean your teeth after breakfast each day, and before retiring each night.

“Eight: if I ever catch boys and girls using the bathroom at the same time, I will quite relentlessly, and without mercy, peel the skins from your backs.”

My heart seemed to flip over. Good-golly day, what kind of grandmother did we have?

“Nine: you will, all four, be modest and discreet at *all* times—in deportment, in speech, and in thought.

“Ten: you *will not* handle or play with the private parts of your bodies; nor will you look at them in the mirrors; nor will you think about them, even when you are cleansing those parts of your bodies.”

Unabashed, with a funny little gleam in his eyes, Christopher read on, mimicking the grandmother with some skill.

“Eleven: you *will not* allow wicked, sinful, or lusting thoughts to dwell in your minds. You will keep your thoughts clean, pure, and away from wicked subjects that will corrupt you morally.

“Twelve: you will refrain from looking at members of the opposite sex unless it is absolutely necessary.

“Thirteen: those of you who can read, and I hope at least two of you can, will each, alternately, take turns reading aloud from the Bible at least one page per day, so the two younger children will benefit from the Lord’s teachings.

“Fourteen: you will each bathe daily, and clean the ring from the tub, and keep the bathroom as spotless as it was when you found it.

“Fifteen: you will each learn, including the twins, at least one quote from the Bible per day. And if I so request, you will repeat to me such quotes as I demand, as I keep track of what passages you have read.

“Sixteen: you will eat all of the food I bring to you, and not waste one single bit, or throw it away, or hide it away. It is sinful to waste good food when so many in this world are starving.

“Seventeen: you will not stride about in the bedroom wearing only your nightclothes, even if you are only going from bed to bath, or bath to bed. You will, at *all* times wear a robe of some kind over your nightclothes, and over your undergarments if at some time you feel the need to suddenly leave the bathroom without fully dressing yourself, so that another child may enter in an emergency. I demand that everyone who lives under this roof be modest and discreet—in all things, and in all ways.

“Eighteen: you will stand at attention when I enter your room, with your arms straight down at your sides; you will not clench your hands into fists to show silent defiance; nor will you allow your eyes to meet with mine; nor will you seek to show signs of affection toward me, nor hope to gain my friendship, nor my pity, nor my love, nor my compassion. All of that is impossible. Neither your grandfather nor myself can allow ourselves to feel anything for what is not wholesome.”

Ohhh! Those were words to really sting! Even Christopher paused, and a flicker of despair fled over his face, quickly put away by a grin as his eyes met with mine. He reached out and tickled Carrie to make her giggle, and then he tweaked Cory’s nose, so he, too, giggled.

“Christopher,” I cried, alarm in my voice. “From the way she puts it, our mother can never hope to win over her father again! Much less will he want his eyes to rest upon us! Why? What have we done? We weren’t here the day our mother fell

from grace by doing something so terrible her father disinherited her! We weren't even born then! Why do they hate us?"

"Keep your cool," said Chris, his eyes scanning down the long list. "Don't take any of this seriously. She's a nut, a loony-bird. Nobody as smart as our grandfather can have the idiot ideas his wife does—or else how could he make millions of dollars?"

"Maybe he didn't make the money, but inherited it."

"Yes, Momma told us he inherited some, but he has increased that a hundred times over, so he must have a *little* brains in his head. But he somehow picked the Queen Bee nut from the balmy tree for his wife." He grinned and then went on with the rule reading.

"Nineteen: when I come into this room to bring you food and milk, you will not look at me, or speak to me, or think of me with disrespect, or of your grandfather with disrespect, for God is above and is able to read your minds. My husband is a very determined man, and seldom has any one bested him in any way. He has an army of doctors and nurses and technicians to tend to his every need, and machines to function for his organs in case they fail, so don't think something as weakly motivated as his heart can fail a man made of steel."

Wow! A man of steel to make the opposite bookend to his wife. His eyes must be gray, too. Flint, hard, steel-gray eyes—for, as our very own mother and father had proved, likes do attract.

"Twenty:"—read Christopher—"you will not jump, yell, shout, or speak in loud voices so the servants below can hear you. And you will wear sneakers and never hard-soled shoes.

"Twenty-One: you will not waste toilet tissue, or the soap, and you will clean up the mess if you clog up the toilet bowl so it overflows. And if you put it out of order, then it will stay that way until the day you leave, and you will use the chamberpots that you will find in the attic, and your mother can empty them for you.

“Twenty-Two: the boys will wash their own clothes in the bathtub, as will the girls. Your mother will take care of the bed linens and the towels you use. The quilted mattress covers will be changed once a week, and if a child soils the covers, then I will order your mother to bring you rubber sheets to use, and thrash severely the child who cannot be toilet-trained.”

I sighed and put my arm about Cory who whimpered and clung to me on hearing this. “Ssssh! Don’t be afraid. She’ll never know what you do. We’ll protect you. We’ll find a way to cover up your mistakes, if you make any.”

Chris read: “Conclusion, and this is not a do or a don’t, just a warning. She’s written: ‘You may rightly assume that I will add to this list from time to time as I see the need arise, for I am a very observant woman who misses nothing. Do not think you can deceive me, mock me, or play jokes at my expense, for if you do, your punishment will be so severe that your skins, and your egos, will bear lifetime scars, and your pride will go down in permanent defeat. And let it be known from now on, that never in my presence will you mention your father’s name, or refer to him in the slightest way, and I, myself, will refrain from looking at the child who resembles him most.’ “

It was over. I flashed Christopher a questioning look. Was he inferring, as I was, what that last paragraph implied—that for some reason our father was the cause of our mother being disinherited, and now hated by her parents?

And did he infer, too, that we were going to be locked up here for a long, long time?

Oh, God, oh God, oh God! I couldn’t stand even a week!

We weren’t devils, but most certainly we weren’t angels, either! And we needed each other, to touch, to look at.

“Cathy,” said my brother calmly, a wry smile cocking his lips while the twins looked from one to the other of us, ready to mimic our panic, our joy, or our screams, “are we so ugly and without charm that an old woman who very obviously hates our mother, and also our father, for some reason I don’t know, can forever resist us? She’s a fake, a fraud. She doesn’t

mean any of this.” He gestured toward the list, which he folded and flung away toward the dresser. It made a poor airplane.

“Are we to believe an old woman like that, who must be demented, and should be locked up—or should we believe the woman who loves us, the woman we know and trust? Our mother will take care of us. She knows what she’s doing, on that you can depend.”

Yes, of course, he was right. Momma was the one to believe in and trust, not that stern old crazy woman with her idiot ideas, and her gunshot eyes, and her crooked, knife-slashed mouth.

In no time at all the grandfather downstairs would succumb to our mother’s beauty and charm, and down the stairs we’d trip, dressed in our best, wearing happy smiles. And he’d see us, and know we weren’t ugly, or stupid, but normal enough to like a little, if not a lot. And perhaps, who knows, maybe someday he might even find a *little* love to give to his grandchildren.

The Attic



The morning hour of ten came and went.

What remained of our daily ration of food, we stored in the coolest spot we could find in the room, under the highboy. The servants who made the beds, and tidied up in the upstairs rooms of other wings, must surely have departed for lower sections, and they would not see this floor again for another twenty-four hours.

We were, of course, already tired of that room, and very eager to explore the outer confines of our limited domain. Christopher and I each caught hold of a twin's hand, and we headed silently toward the closet that held our two suitcases with all the clothes still inside. We'd wait to unpack. When we had more roomy, pleasant quarters, the servants could unpack for us, as they did in movies, and we could take off outdoors. Indeed, we wouldn't be in this room when the servants came in on the last Friday of the month to clean. We'd be set free by then.

With my older brother in the lead, holding onto the small hand of my younger brother so he wouldn't trip or fall, and with me close at Cory's heels, as Carrie clung to my hand, we headed up the dark, narrow, steep steps. The walls of that passageway were so narrow your shoulders almost brushed them.

And there it was!

Attics we'd seen before, who hasn't? But never such an attic as this one!

We stood as if rooted, and gazed around with incredulity. Huge, dim, dirty, dusty, this attic stretched for miles! The farthest walls were so distant they seemed hazy, out of focus. The air was not clear, but murky; it had an odor, an unpleasant

odor of decay, of old rotting things, of dead things left unburied, and because it was cloudy with dust, everything seemed to move, to shimmer, especially in the darker, gloomier corners.

Four sets of deep dormer windows stretched across the front, four sets across the back. The sides, what we could see of them, were without windows—but there were wings where we couldn't see unless we dared to move forward and brave the stifling heat of the place.

Step by step we moved as one away from the stairwell.

The floor was of wide wooden planks, soft and rotting. As we inched along cautiously, feeling fearful, small creatures on the floor went scuttling off in all directions. There was enough furniture stored in the attic to furnish several houses. Dark, massive furniture, and chamber pots, and pitchers set in larger bowls, perhaps twenty or thirty sets of them. And there was a round wooden thing that looked like a tub banded with iron. Imagine keeping a bathtub like that!

Everything that seemed of value was draped over by sheets where dust had accumulated to turn the white cloth dingy gray. And what was covered by sheets for protection shivered my spine, for I saw these things as weird, eerie, furniture ghosts, whispering, whispering. And I didn't want to hear what they had to say.

Dozens of old leather-bound trunks with heavy brass locks and corners lined one entire wall, each trunk stuck all over with travel labels. Why, they must have been around the world several or more times. Big trunks, fit for coffins.

Giant armoires stood in a silent row against the farthest wall, and when we checked, we found each one full of ancient clothes. We saw both Union and Confederate uniforms, giving Christopher and me much to speculate upon as the twins cringed close against us and looked around with big, scared eyes.

“Do you think our ancestors were so undecided during the Civil War they didn't know which side they were on, Christopher?”

“The War Between the States sounds better,” he answered.

“Spies, you think?”

“How would I know?”

Secrets, secrets, everywhere! Brother against brother I saw it—oh, what fun to find out! If only we could find diaries!

“Look here,” said Christopher, pulling out a man’s suit of pale cream-colored wool, with brown velvet lapels, and piped smartly with darker brown satin. He waved the suit. Disgusting winged creatures took off in all directions, despite the stench of mothballs.

I yelped, as did Carrie.

“Don’t be such babies,” he said, not in the least disturbed by those things. “What you saw were moths, harmless moths. It’s the larvae that do the chewing and make the holes.”

I didn’t care! Bugs were bugs—infants or adults. I don’t know why that darned suit interested him so much, anyway. Why did we have to examine the fly to see if men in those days used buttons or zippers? “Gosh,” he said, finally disturbed, “what a pain to unfasten buttons every time.”

That was his opinion.

In my opinion, olden-day people really knew how to dress! How I would love to flounce around in a frilly chemise over pantaloons, with dozens of fancy petticoats over the wire hoops, all bedecked in ruffles, lace, embroidery, with flowing ribbons of velvet or satin, and my shoes would be of satin and over all this bedazzling finery would be a lacy parasol to shade my golden curls, and keep the sun from my fair, unwrinkled complexion. And I’d carry a fan to elegantly cool myself, and my eyelids would flutter and bewitch. Oh, what a beauty I’d be!

Subdued by the immense attic until now, Carrie let out a howl that took me swiftly from sweet speculations and right back to the here and now, which was where I didn’t want to be.

“It’s hot up here, Cathy!”

“Yes, it is.”

“I hate it up here, Cathy!”

I glanced at Cory, his small face awed as he looked around and clung to my side, and catching his hand, and Carrie's, I left behind the fascination of the old clothes, and all of us wandered off to pry into everything this attic had to offer. And that was considerable. Thousands of old books in stacks, dark ledgers, office desks, two upright pianos, radios, phonographs, cartons filled with the unwanted accoutrements of generations long gone. Dress forms, all sizes and shapes, bird cages and stands to hold them, rakes, shovels, framed photographs of peculiar pale and sickly looking people who were, I presumed, dead relatives of ours. Some had light hair, some dark; all had eyes sharp, cruel, hard, bitter, sad, wistful, yearning, hopeless, empty, but never, I swear, never did I see any happy eyes. Some smiled. Most didn't. I was drawn in particular to a pretty girl of perhaps eighteen; she wore a faint, enigmatic smile which reminded me of Mona Lisa, only she was more beautiful. Her bosom swelled out beneath a ruffled bodice most impressively, making Christopher point to one of the dress forms and declare emphatically, “Hers!”

I looked. “Now,” he continued with admiring eyes, “that is what you call an hourglass figure. See the wasp waist, the ballooning hips, the swelling bosom? Inherit a shape like that, Cathy, and you will make a fortune.”

“Really,” I said in disgust, “you don't know very much. That is not a woman's natural form. She's wearing a corset, cinched in at the waist so much her flesh is squeezed out at the top and the bottom. And that is exactly why women used to faint so much and then call for smelling salts.”

“How can one faint and still manage to call for smelling salts?” he asked sarcastically. “Besides, you can't squeeze out at the top what isn't there.” He took another look at the shapely young woman. “You know, she kind of looks like Momma. If she wore her hair differently and her clothes were modern—she'd be Momma.”

Hah! Our mother would have more sense than to wear a laced-up cage and suffer. “But this girl is only pretty,” Christopher concluded. “Our mother is beautiful.”

The silence of that huge space was so deep you could hear your heartbeat. Yet it would be fun to explore every trunk; to examine the contents of every box; to try on all those rotting, smelly, fancy clothes, and pretend, pretend, pretend. But it was so hot! So stifling! So stuffy! Already my lungs seemed clogged with dirt and dust and stale air. Not only that, spider webs laced the corners and draped down from the rafters, and crawling or slithering things rambled about on the floor or up the walls. Though I didn’t see any, I thought of rats and mice. We’d seen a movie once on TV where a man went crazy and hung himself from an attic rafter. And in another movie, a man shoved his wife in an old trunk with brass corners and locks, just like these, and then he slammed down the lid and left her there to die. I took another look at those trunks, wondering what secrets they held that the servants shouldn’t know.

Disconcerting, the curious way my brother was watching me and my reactions. I whirled to hide what I was feeling—but he saw. He stepped closer and caught my hand, and said so much like Daddy, “Cathy, it is going to be all right. There must be very simple explanations for everything that seems to us very complex and mysterious.”

Slowly I turned to him, surprised he’d come to comfort and not to tease. “Why do you suppose the grandmother hates us, too? Why should the grandfather hate us? What have *we* done?”

He shrugged, as baffled as I was, and with his hand still holding mine, we both pivoted to look the attic over again. Even our untrained eyes could tell where new sections had been added to the older house. Thick, square, upright beams divided the attic into distinct sections. I thought if we wandered here, and wandered there, we would come upon a place for comfortable, fresh breathing.

The twins began to cough and sneeze. They fixed resentful blue eyes on us for keeping them where they didn’t want to be.

“Now look,” said Christopher when the twins started to really complain, “we can open up the windows an inch or so, enough to let in a little fresh air, and no one will notice such a little opening from the ground.” Then he released my hand and ran on ahead, leaping over boxes, trunks, furniture, showing off, while I stood frozen, holding to the hands of both my little ones, who were terrified of where they were.

“Come see what I’ve found!” called Christopher, who was out of sight. Excitement was in his voice. “You just wait and see my discovery!”

We ran, eager to see something exciting, wonderful, fun—and all he had to show us was a room, a real room with plaster walls. It had never been painted, but it did have a regular ceiling, not just beams. This seemed to be a schoolroom with five desks, facing a larger desk up front. Blackboards lined three walls over low bookcases filled with faded and dusty old volumes that my perpetual seeker of all knowledge had to immediately inspect by crawling around and reading the book titles aloud. Books were enough to send him off on a high tangent, knowing he had a way to escape to other worlds.

I was drawn to the small desks, where names and dates were etched, such as Jonathan, age 11, 1864! And Adelaide, age 9, 1879! Oh, how very old this house was! They were dust in their graves by now, but they had left their names behind to let us know that once, they, too, had been sent up here. But why would parents send their children into an attic to study? They had been wanted children, surely—unlike us, whom the grandparents despised. Maybe for *them* the windows had been opened wide. And for them, servants had carried up coal or wood to burn in the two stoves we saw in the corners.

An old rocking horse with a missing amber eye wobbled unsteadily, and his matted yellow tail was a woebegone thing. But this white-and-black-spotted pony was enough to bring a delighted cry from Cory. Instantly he clambered up on the peeling red saddle, crying out, “Getty-up, horsy!” And the pony, not ridden for ever so long, galloped along, squealing, rattling, protesting with every rusty joint.

“I want to ride, too!” bellowed Carrie. “Where is *my* horsy?”

Quickly I ran to lift Carrie up behind Cory, so she could cling to his waist, and laugh, and kick her heels to make the dilapidated horse go faster and faster. I marveled that the poor thing stayed hinged together.

Now I had the chance to look over the old books that had charmed Christopher. Heedlessly, I reached in and took out a book, not caring what the title read. I flipped through the pages and sent legions of flat bugs with centipede legs madly scampering everywhere! I dropped that book,—then stared down at the loose pages that had scattered. I hated bugs, spiders most of all, worms next. And what swarmed from those pages seemed a combination of both.

Such a girlish performance was enough to send Christopher into hysterics, and when he calmed down, he called my squeamishness overdone. The twins reined in their bucking bronco and stared at me in astonishment. Quickly I had to reach for my poise. Even pretend mothers didn’t squeal at the sight of a few bugs.

“Cathy, you’re twelve, and it’s time you grew up. Nobody screams to see a few bookworms. Bugs are a part of life. We humans are the masters, the supreme rulers over all. This isn’t such a bad room at all. Lots of space, full of big windows, plenty of books, and even a few toys for the twins.”

Yeah. There was a rusty red wagon with a broken handle, and a missing wheel—great. A broken green scooter, too. Terrific. Yet there stood Christopher looking around and expressing his pleasure in finding a room where people hid away their children so they couldn’t see them, or hear them, or maybe not even think about them, and he saw it as a room with possibilities.

Sure, somebody could clean all the dark secret places where creeping horrors lived, and they could spray all over with insect repellent so nothing sinister was left that was small enough to step on. But how to step on the grandmother, the grandfather? How to turn an attic room into a paradise where

flowers bloomed, and not just another prison like the one below?

I ran to the dormer windows and climbed upon a box to reach the high window ledge. Desperate to see the ground, to see how far we were above it, and if we jumped how many bones we'd break. Desperate to see the trees, the grass, where the flowers grew, where sunlight was, where birds flew, where real life lived. But all I saw was a slate black roof expanding wide beneath the windows, blocking out the view of the ground. Beyond the roofs were treetops; beyond the treetops, enclosing mountains hovered over by blue mists.

Christopher climbed up beside me and looked, too. His shoulder brushing mine quivered, as did his voice when he said softly, "We can still see the sky, the sun, and at night we'll see the moon and stars, and birds and planes will fly over. We can watch them for amusement until the day we don't come up here again."

He paused, seeming to think back to the night we came—was it only last night? "I'll bet if we leave a window open wide, an owl might fly in. I've always wanted an owl for a pet."

"For heaven's sake, why in the world would you want one of those things?"

"Owls can turn their heads all the way around. Can you do that?"

"I don't want to do that."

"But if you wanted to, you still couldn't."

"Well, neither can you!" I flared, wanting to make him face up to reality, like he insisted I do. No bird as wise as an owl would want to live locked up with us for even an hour.

"I want a kitty," spoke up Carrie, holding her arms up so she could be lifted to where she could see, too.

"I want a puppy," said Cory before he glanced out of the window. Then he quickly forgot about pets, for he began to chant, "Outside, outside, Cory wants outside. Cory wants to play in the garden. Cory wants to swing!"

Quickly Carrie followed suit. She too wanted outside, the garden, and the swings. And with her bull-moose voice, she was far more persistent with her wants than Cory.

Now they were both near driving Christopher and me up the wall with their demands to go outside, outside, outside!

“Why can’t we go outside?” screamed Carrie, doubling up her fists and beating them against my chest. “We-ee don’t like it here! Where is Momma? Where is the sunshine? Where did the flowers go? Why is it so hot?”

“Look,” said Christopher, catching her small battering fists and saving me from a bruising, “think of this place as outside. There’s no reason you can’t swing up here, like in a garden. Cathy, let’s search around and see if we can’t find some rope.”

We did search. And we did find rope in an old trunk that held all sorts of junk. It was very apparent the Foxworths didn’t throw anything away—they stored their trash in the attic. Maybe they were afraid of one day being poor, and suddenly needing what was put away so miserly.

With great diligence my older brother worked to make swings for both Cory and Carrie, for when you have twins, you must never, ever give them only one of a kind—of anything. For seats he used boards ripped from a lid of a trunk. He found sandpaper and smoothed away the splinters. While he did this, I hunted around until I found an old ladder with a few missing rungs that didn’t hinder Christopher in the least from quickly reaching the rafters high above. I watched him climbing nimbly around up there, crawling out on a wide beam—and every move he made endangered his life! He stood up to show off his balancing skill. He swayed suddenly off balance! Quickly he adjusted himself by putting out his arms, but my heart had jumped up, terrified to see him taking such chances, risking his life, just to show off! There was no adult to call him down. If I tried to order him down, he’d laugh, and do even more foolish things. So I kept my mouth shut and closed my eyes, and I tried to shut out the visions I had of him falling, splattering down, breaking his arms, legs or, even worse, his back or neck! And he didn’t have to put on any act. I knew he was brave. He had the knots securely tied, so why

couldn't he come down and give my heart a chance to beat normally again?

It had taken Christopher hours to make those swings, and then he risked his life to hang them. And when he was down, and the twins were seated on the swings, fanning back and forth and stirring up the dusty air, they were satisfied for, perhaps, three minutes.

Then it began. Carrie started off. "Take us out of here! Don't like these swings! Don't like in here! This is a baa-ad place!"

No sooner did her wails cease than Cory's began. "Outside, outside, we want outside! Take us outside! Outside!" And Carrie added her chants to his. Patience—I had to have patience, deep self-control, act adult, not scream just because I wanted outside just as much as they did.

"Now stop that racket!" snapped Christopher to the twins. "We're playing a game, and all games have rules. The main rule of this game is to stay inside and be as quiet as possible. Screaming and yelling is forbidden." His tone turned softer as he gazed down at their tear-streaked, grimy faces. "Pretend this is the garden under a bright blue sky, and tree leaves are overhead, and the sun is shining bright. And when we go downstairs, that room will be our home with many rooms."

He gave us all a whimsical, disarming smile. "When we're rich as Rockefellers, we'll never need to see this attic again, or that bedroom below. We'll live like princesses and princes."

"Do you think the Foxworths have as much money as the Rockefellers?" I asked disbelievingly. Golly-day, wow! We'd be able to have everything! Yet, yet, I was terribly troubled ... that grandmother, something about her, the way she treated us, as if we didn't have a right to be alive. Such horrible words she'd said: "You are here, but you don't really exist."

We rambled about the attic, half-heartedly exploring this and that, until someone's stomach rumbled. I glanced at my wristwatch. Two. My older brother stared at me, as I glanced at the twins. It must have been one of their stomachs, for they ate so little, but, nevertheless, their digestive systems were

automatically set on seven for breakfast, twelve for lunch, and five for dinner, and seven for bedtime, and a snack before.

“Lunch time,” I announced cheerfully.

Down the stairs we tripped single file, back into that hateful dim room. If only we could open the draperies wide to let in some light and cheer. If only . . .

My thoughts could have been spoken aloud, for Christopher was perceptive enough to say that even if the draperies were opened wide, this room faced north and the sunlight would never enter.

And my, just look at the chimney sweeps in the mirrors! Just like those from *Mary Poppins*, a spoken comparison to put smiles on the dirty faces of the twins. They dearly loved being compared with those charming people who lived in their kind of picture books.

Since we’d been taught from our earliest years never to sit down to eat when we were less than spotlessly clean, and since God had His keenest eye riveted on us, we would obey all the rules and please Him. Now, it didn’t really offend God’s eyes if we put Cory and Carrie in the same bathtub, when they’d come from the same womb, did it? Christopher took over Cory, as I shampooed Carrie, then bathed her, dressed her, and brushed her silky hair until it shone, and then I curled her hair around my fingers till it spiraled down in pretty coils. Next I tied on a green satin ribbon.

And it wouldn’t really hurt anyone if Christopher talked to me while I bathed. We weren’t adults—yet. It wasn’t the same thing as “using” the bathroom together. Momma and Daddy had seen nothing wrong about bare skin, but as I washed my face, the memory of the grandmother’s stern, uncompromising expression flashed before my eyes. *She* would think it was wrong.

“We can’t do this again,” I said to Christopher. “That grandmother—she might catch us, and then she would think it evil.” He nodded as if it didn’t really matter. He must have seen something on my face that made him move forward to the

tub so he could put his arms about me. How did he know I needed a shoulder to cry on? Which was exactly what I did.

“Cathy,” he soothed while my head was tucked down on his shoulder and my sobs came, “keep thinking about the future, and all that will be ours when we’re rich. I’ve always wanted to be filthy rich so I can be a playboy for a while, only a little while, for Daddy said everybody should contribute something useful and meaningful to mankind, and I’d like to do that. But until I’m in college, and med school, I could sneak in a little fooling around until I settle down seriously.”

“Oh, I see you mean do everything a poor guy can’t afford to do. Well, if that’s what you want, go to it. But what I want is a horse. All my life I’ve wanted a pony, and we’ve never lived in a place that would allow a pony, and now I’m too big for a pony. So it will have to be a horse. And, of course, all the while I’ll be working my way to fame and fortune as the world’s leading prima ballerina. And you know how dancers have to eat and eat or else they’d be just skin and bones, so I’m going to eat a whole gallon of ice cream each day, and one day I’m going to eat nothing but cheese—every kind of cheese there is, put on cheese crackers. Then, I want lots and lots of new clothes: a different outfit for each day of the year. I’ll give them away after one wearing, then sit down to eat cheese on crackers, and top it off with ice cream. And I’ll work off the fat by dancing.”

He was stroking my wet back, and when I turned to see his profile, he looked dreamy, wistful.

“You see, Cathy, it’s not going to be so bad, this short time while we’re shut up here. We won’t have time to feel depressed, for we’ll be too busy thinking of ways to spend all of our money. Let’s ask Momma to bring us a chess game. I’ve always wanted to learn to play chess. And we can read; reading is almost as good as doing. Momma won’t let us get bored; she’ll bring us new games and things to do. This week will pass in a flash.” He smiled at me brilliantly. “And please stop calling me Christopher! I can’t be confused with Daddy anymore, so from now on, I am only Chris, okay?”

“Okay, Chris,” I said. “But the grandmother—what do you think she’d do if she caught us in the bathroom together?”

“Give us hell—and God knows what else.”

Still, when I was out of the tub, drying off, I started to tell him not to look. However, he wasn’t looking. Already we knew each other’s bodies well, having been looking at them naked since I could remember. And in my opinion, mine was the best. Neater.

All of us wearing clean clothes, and smelling good, we sat down to eat our ham sandwiches, and lukewarm vegetable soup from the small thermos, and more milk to drink. Lunch without cookies was an abysmal thing.

Furtively, Chris kept glancing at his watch. It might be a long, long time before our mother showed up. The twins prowled around restlessly after lunch was over. They were cranky, and they expressed their displeasure with everything by kicking at it, and from time to time as they prowled the room, they shot both me and Chris scowling looks. Chris headed for the closet, and the attic, to the schoolroom for books to read, and I started to follow.

“*No!*” screamed Carrie. “Don’t go up in the attic! Don’t like it up there! Don’t like it down here! Don’t like nothin’! Don’t want you being my momma, Cathy! Where is my real momma? Where’d she go? You tell her to come back and let us go out to the sandbox!” She took off for the door to the hall and turned the knob, then screamed like an animal in terror when the door wouldn’t open. Wildly she beat her small fists against the hard oak and all the while she screamed for Momma to come and take her out of this dark room!

I ran to catch her up in my arms while she kicked and kept right on yelling. It was like holding a wildcat. Chris seized Cory, who ran to protect his twin. All we could do was put them down on one of the big beds, haul out their storybooks, and suggest naps. Teary and resentful, both twins glared up at us.

“Is it night already?” whimpered Carrie, gone hoarse from so many fruitless screams for freedom, and a mother who

wouldn't come. "I want my momma so bad. Why don't she come?"

"*Peter Rabbit*," I said, picking up Cory's favorite storybook with colorful illustrations on every page, and this alone made *Peter Rabbit* a very good book. Bad books had no pictures. Carrie had a fondness for *The Three Little Pigs*, but Chris would have to read like Daddy used to, and huff and puff, and make his voice deep like the wolf's. And I wasn't sure he would.

"Please let Chris go up in the attic and find himself a book to read, and while he does that, I'll read to you from *Peter Rabbit*. And let's see if Peter will steal into the farmer's garden tonight and eat his fill of carrots and cabbages. And if you fall asleep while I'm still reading, the story will end in your dreams."

Maybe five minutes passed before both the twins were asleep. Cory clutched his storybook against his small chest to make the transportation of *Peter Rabbit* into his dreams as easy as possible. A soft, warm feeling swept over me, making my heart ache for little ones who really needed a grown-up mother, not one only twelve. I didn't feel much different than I had at ten. If womanhood was just around the corner, it hadn't reared its head to make me feel mature and capable. Thank God we weren't going to be shut up here long, for what would I do if they got sick? What would happen if there was an accident, a fall, a broken bone? If I banged hard on the locked door, would the despicable grandmother come running in response? There was no telephone in this room. If I cried out for help, who would hear me from this remote, forbidden wing?

While I stewed and fretted, Chris was up in the attic schoolroom, collecting an assortment of dusty, buggy books to bring down to the bedroom for us to read. We had brought along a checker board, and that's what I wanted to do—not stick my nose in an old book.

"Here," he said, thrusting an old book into my hands. He said he'd shaken it free of all bugs that might send me off into

hysteria again. “Let’s save the checkers until later when the twins are awake. You know how you cut up when you lose.”

He settled down in a comfortable chair, flinging his leg across the fat, rounded chair arm, and opened up *Tom Sawyer*. I flung myself down on the only empty bed and began to read about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. And, believe it or not, that day a door opened I hadn’t known existed before: a beautiful world when knighthood was in flower, and there was romantic love, and fair ladies were put on pedestals and worshipped from afar. A love affair with the medieval age began that day for me, one I was never to lose, for, after all, weren’t most ballets based on fairy tales? And weren’t all fairy tales written from folklore of medieval times?

I was the kind of child who’d always looked for fairies dancing on the grass. I wanted to believe in witches, wizards, ogres, giants, and enchanted spells. I didn’t want all of the magic taken out of the world by scientific explanation. I didn’t know at that time that I had come to live in what was virtually a strong and dark castle, ruled over by a witch and an ogre. I didn’t guess that some modern-day wizards could weave money to create a spell

* * *

As daylight drew away behind the heavy drawn draperies, we sat down at our small table to eat our meal of fried chicken (cold) and potato salad (warm) and string beans (cold and greasy). At least Chris and I ate most of our meal, cold and unappetizing or not. But the twins just picked at their food, complaining all the time that it didn’t taste good. I felt that if Carrie had said less, then Cory would have eaten more.

“Oranges are not funny looking,” said Chris, handing me an orange to peel, “or supposed to be hot. Actually, oranges are liquid sunshine.” Boy, he did say the right thing that time. Now the twins had something they could eat with pleasure—liquid sunshine.

Now it was night, and really not much different than the day had been. We turned on all four lamps, and one tiny little

rose nightlamp our mother had brought along to comfort the twins who didn't like the dark.

After their naps, we had dressed the twins again in their clean clothes, and brushed their hair, and washed their faces, so they looked sweet and appealing as they settled down on the floor to put large pieces of puzzles together. Those puzzles were old ones and they knew exactly which piece fitted into the other, and it was not so much of a problem, but a race to see who could fit in the most pieces first. Soon the race to put puzzles together bored the twins, so we piled all on one of the beds and Chris and I told stories we made up. That too grew boring for the twins, though my brother and I could have gone on longer, competing to see who had the most imagination. Next we hauled the small cars and trucks from the suitcases so the twins could crawl around and push cars from New York to San Francisco, by route of wriggling under the beds and between the table legs—and soon they were dirty again. When we tired of that, Chris suggested we play checkers, and the twins could transport orange peels in their trucks and dump them down in Florida, which was the trash can in the corner.

“You can have the red pieces,” announced Chris patronizingly. “I don't believe as you do, that black is a losing color.”

I scowled, sulked away. It seemed an eternity had passed between dawn and dusk, enough to change me so I'd never be the same again. “I don't want to play checkers!” I said nastily.

So I fell on a bed and gave up the struggle to keep my thoughts from roaming up and down endless alleys of dark suspicious fears, and tormenting nagging doubts, wondering always if Momma had told us all of the truth. And while we all four waited, and waited, and waited for Momma to show up, there wasn't a calamity my thoughts didn't touch upon. Mostly fire. Ghosts, monsters, and other specters lived in the attic. But in this locked room fire was the uppermost threat.

And time passed so slowly. Chris in his chair, with his book, kept sneaking glances at his watch. The twins crawled to Florida, dumped their orange peels, and now they didn't know

where to go. There were no oceans to cross, for they had no boats. Why hadn't we brought a boat?

I whipped a glance at the paintings depicting hell and all its torments, and marveled at how clever and cruel the grandmother was. Why did she have to think of everything? It just wasn't fair for God to keep an ever watchful eye on four children, when outside in the world so many others were doing worse. In God's place, from His all-seeing perspective, I wouldn't waste my time looking at four fatherless children locked up in a bedroom. I'd be staring at something far more entertaining. Besides, Daddy was up there—he'd make God take good care of us, and overlook a few mistakes.

Disregarding my sulky ways and objections, Chris put down his book and carried over the gaming box, which held equipment enough to play forty different games.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, as he began to place the red and black rounds on the board. "Why are you sitting so quiet, so scared looking? Afraid I'll win again?"

Games, I wasn't thinking of games. I told him my thoughts of fire, and my idea of ripping up sheets and knotting them together to form a ladder to reach the ground, just like they did in many an old movie. Then if a fire started, maybe tonight, we'd have a way to reach the ground after we broke a window, and each of us could tie a twin to our back.

I'd never seen his blue eyes show so much respect as they lit up with admiration. "Wow, what a fantastic idea, Cathy! Terrific! Exactly what we'll do if a fire starts—which it won't. And boy, it sure is good to know you're not going to be a crybaby after all. When you think ahead and plan for unexpected contingencies it shows you're growing up, and I like that."

Golly-day, in twelve years of hard striving, I had at last won his respect and approval, and reached a goal I thought impossible. It was sweet knowing we could get along when shut up so close. Our exchanged smiles promised that together we were going to manage to survive until the end of the week.

Our newfound camaraderie constructed some security, a bit of happiness to grab hold of, like hands clasping.

Then, what we'd found was shattered. Into our room came our mother, walking so funny, wearing the strangest expression. We'd waited so long for her return, and somehow it didn't give us the anticipated joy to be with her again. Maybe it was only the grandmother, who followed so close at her heels, with her flint hard, mean gray eyes that quickly quelled our enthusiasm.

My hand rose to my mouth. Something dreadful had happened. I knew it! I just knew it!

Chris and I were sitting on a bed, playing a checker game and from time to time looking at each other while we rumped the bedspread.

One rule broken ... no, two ... looking was forbidden as well as rumpling.

And the twins had puzzle pieces here and there, and their cars and marbles were scattered about, so the room wasn't exactly tidy.

Three rules broken.

And boys and girls had been in the bathroom together.

And maybe we'd even broken another rule, for we were always to feel, no matter what we did, that God and the grandmother had some secret communication between them.

The Wrath of God



Momma came into our room this first night, tight-limbed and stiff-jointed, as if every movement she made hurt. Her lovely face was pale and bloated; her swollen eyes red-rimmed. At the age of thirty-three, someone had humiliated her so much she couldn't squarely meet a pair of our eyes. Looking defeated, forlorn, humbled, she stood in the center of the room like a child brutally chastised. Thoughtlessly, the twins ran to greet her. They threw enthusiastic arms about her legs, laughing and crying out in happy voices, "Momma, Momma! Where have you been?"

Chris and I ambled over to tentatively hug her. One might have thought she had been gone a decade of Sundays, and not just one Wednesday, but she represented our hope, our reality, our line to the world outside.

Did we kiss her too much? Did our eager, hungry, clinging embraces make her wince from pain, or from the obligations? While fat and slow tears slid silently down her pale cheeks, I thought she cried only for the pity she felt for us. When we sat, all wanting to be as close to her as possible, it was on one of the big beds. She lifted both twins to her lap so Chris and I could cuddle close on either side. She looked us over, and complimented our glowing cleanliness, and smiled because I had tied a green ribbon in Carrie's hair to match the green stripes on her dress. She spoke, her voice hoarse, as if she had a cold, or that fabled frog had lodged in her throat. "Now, tell me honestly, how did it go for you today?"

Resentfully, Cory's plump face pouted, mutely saying his day had *not* gone well at all. Carrie put her unspoken umbrage into words. "Cathy and Chris are mean!" she screamed, and it was no sweet bird twitter. "They made us stay inside all day!

We don't like inside! We don't like that big dirty place they told us was nice! Momma, it's not nice!"

Troubled and pained looking, Momma tried to soothe Carrie, telling the twins that circumstances had changed, and now they had to mind their older brother and sister, and think of them as parents to obey.

"No! No!" shrilled an even more irate bundle of red-faced fury. "We hate it here! We want the garden; it's dark here. We don't want Chris and Cathy, Momma, we want *you!* Take us home! Take us out of here!"

Carrie hit at Momma, at me, at Chris, yelling how much she wanted her home, as Momma sat there not defending herself, apparently unhearing, and not knowing how to handle a situation in which a five-year-old ruled. The more unhearing Momma became, the louder Carrie screamed. I covered my ears.

"Corrine!" commanded the grandmother. "You stop that child from screaming this very second!" I knew, just looking at her stone cold face, that she would know exactly how to shut Carrie up, and at once. However, sitting on Momma's other knee was a little boy whose eyes grew wide as he stared up at the tall grandmother—someone who threatened his twin sister, who had jumped down from Momma's lap and was now standing in front of the grandmother. Planting her small feet wide apart, Carrie threw back her head, opened up her rosebud mouth and she really let go! Like an opera star who'd saved her best for the grand aria finale, her former cries seemed like weak mewings from a small kitten. Now we had a tigress—enraged!

Oh, boy, was I impressed, awed, terrified of what would happen next.

The grandmother seized hold of Carrie by the hair, lifting her up enough to make Cory jump from Momma's lap. Quick as a cat he pounced on the grandmother! Faster than I could wink, he ran to bite her leg! I cringed inside, knowing now we were all in for it. She gazed down at him, then shook him off as one does a small, annoying lap-dog. But the bite did make

her release Carrie's hair. Down she dropped to the floor, to quickly scamper to her feet, and take a quick swipe, just missing the grandmother's leg with her foot.

Not to be outdone by his twin sister, Cory raised his small white shoe, took careful aim, then kicked the grandmother's leg as hard as he could manage.

In the meanwhile, Carrie had scuttled over to the corner where she crouched down and wailed like an Irish banshee set on fire!

Oh, indeed, it was a scene worthy of remembering, and recording.

So far Cory hadn't said a word, or uttered one cry, as was his silent and resolute way. But no one was going to hurt or threaten his twin sister—even if that “no one” stood close to six feet, and weighed in at close to 200 pounds! And Cory was very small for his age.

If Cory didn't like what was happening to Carrie, or the potential threat to himself, the grandmother didn't like what was happening to her either! She glared down at his small, defiant, angry face, which was tilted up to hers. She waited for him to cower, to take the scowl from his face, and the defiance from his blue eyes, but he stood determinedly before her, daring, challenging her to do her worst. Her thin and colorless lips tightened into a fine, crooked pencil line.

Up came her hand—a huge, heavy hand, flashing with diamond rings. Cory didn't flinch, his only reaction to this very obvious threat was a deeper, more fierce scowl as his small hands knotted into fists raised in professional boxer technique.

Good-golly day! Did he think he could fight her—and win?

I heard Momma call Cory's name, her voice so choked it was only a whisper.

Decided on her course of action now, the grandmother delivered against his round, defiant baby face a stinging slap so hard it sent him reeling! He stumbled backward, then fell to the floor, but was up in a flash, spinning around to consider a

fresh assault against that huge mountain of hateful flesh. His indecision then was a pitiful thing. He faltered, reconsidered, and common sense won out over anger. He scampered over to where Carrie crouched, half-crawling, half-running, and then flinging his arms about her, they knelt, holding one to the other, cheek pressed to cheek, and he added his siren howls to hers!

Beside me, Chris mumbled something that sounded like a prayer.

“Corrine, they are your children—shut them up! This instant!”

However, the buttercup twins, once started, were practically impossible to quiet. Reasoning never reached their ears. They heard only their own terror, and like mechanical toys, they had to run down from pure exhaustion.

When Daddy was alive and knew how to handle situations like this, he would pick them up as sacks of corn, one under each arm, and off he’d carry them to their room and order them sternly to shut up, or else they’d stay alone until they could, without TV, toys, without anything. Without an audience to witness their defiance, or hear their impressive wails, their screams seldom lasted more than a few minutes after the door closed on them. Then they would sulk out, quiet, meek and they would snuggle down on Daddy’s lap and say in small voices, “We’re sorry.”

But Daddy was dead. There wasn’t a distant bedroom where they could wind down. This one room was our mansion, and in here the twins held their captive audience painfully enthralled. They screamed until their faces went from pink to red, from red to magenta, and then on to purple. Their blue eyes went glassy and unfocused from their combined efforts. Oh, it was a grand show all right—and a foolhardy one!

Apparently, until now our grandmother had been held mesmerized by such a display. Then, whatever had held her motionless released its spell. She came alive. Purposefully, she strode over to the corner where the twins huddled. Down she reached to seize up ruthlessly, by their scruffs, two yelling

children. Holding them stiff-armed away from her, as they kicked, hollered, and flailed their arms, trying ineffectively to inflict some injury on their tormentor, the twins were hauled up before our mother. Then down on the floor they were dropped like so much unwanted trash. In a loud, firm voice that punctuated through their yelling, she stated flatly, “I will whip you both until the blood runs from your skin if you don’t stop that yelling this very instant!”

That inhuman quality, plus the cold force of this appalling threat, convinced the twins, as it did me, that she meant exactly what she said. In astonished and horrified belief, the twins stared up at her—and with open mouths they choked off their cries. They knew what blood was, and pain came with it. It hurt to see them handled so brutally, as if she didn’t care if frail bones broke, or tender flesh was bruised. She towered above them, above all of us. Then, she pivoted about and fired at our mother: “Corrine, I will not have a scene so disgusting as this happen again! Obviously your children have been spoiled and indulged, and are in desperate need of lessons in discipline and obedience. No child who lives in this house will disobey, or scream, or show defiance. Hear that! They will speak when spoken to. They will jump to obey my voice. Now take off your blouse, daughter, and show those who disobey just how punishment is dealt out in this house!”

During this our mother had risen. She seemed to shrink smaller into her high-heeled shoes as she turned waxen white. “No!” she breathed, “that is not necessary now. See, the twins have stopped crying . . . they are obeying now.”

The old woman’s face grew very grim. “Corrine, are you heedless enough to disobey? When I tell you to do something, you will do it without question! And immediately! Look at what you have raised. Weak, spoiled, unruly children, all four! They think they can scream and get what they want. Screams will not avail them here. They might as well know there is no mercy for those who disobey and break my rules. You should know that, Corrine. Did I ever show you mercy? Even before you betrayed us, did I ever let your pretty face and beguiling ways stay my ready hand? Oh, I remember when your father loved you well, and he would turn against me in defense of

you. But those days are over. You proved to him you are just what I always said you were—a deceitful, lying bit of trash!”

She turned those hard, flintstone eyes on Chris and me. “Yes, you and your half-uncle did make exceedingly beautiful children, I readily admit that, though they should never have been born. But they also appear soft, useless nothings!” Her mean eyes raked over our mother scornfully, as if we had caught all these demeaning faults from her. But she had not yet finished.

“Corrine, definitely your children need an object lesson. When they observe what has happened to their mother, then they will have no doubt as to what can happen to them.”

I saw my mother straighten and stiffen her spine, facing up bravely to the large, raw-boned woman who topped her by at least four inches, and was many, many pounds heavier.

“If you are cruel to my children,” began Momma in a voice that quavered, “I will take them out of this house tonight, and you will never see them, or me, again!” This she stated defiantly, lifting her beautiful face and staring with some determined fierceness at that hulking woman who was *her* mother!

A small smile, tight and cold, met Momma’s challenge. No, it was not a smile, it was a sneer. “Take them away tonight—now! Take yourself away, Corrine! If I never see your children again, or hear from you again, do you think I care?”

Our mother’s Dresden blues clashed with those steely tones while we children watched. Inside I was screaming with joy. Momma was going to take us out of here. We were leaving! *Good-bye, room! Good-bye, attic! Good-bye, all those millions I don’t want anyway!*

But, as I watched, as I waited for Momma to spin on her heel and head for the closet, for our suitcases, I saw instead something that was noble and fine in our mother crumble. Her eyes lowered in defeat and slowly her head bowed to hide her expression.

Shaken and trembling myself, I watched the grandmother's sneer become a large, cruel smile of victory. Momma! Momma! Momma! My soul was screaming. Don't let her do this to you!

"Now, Corrine, *take off that blouse.*"

Slowly, reluctantly, her face as white as death, Momma pivoted around, presenting her back just as a violent shudder shivered down her spine. Stiffly her arms lifted. With great difficulty each button of her white blouse was unfastened. Carefully, she eased down the blouse to expose her back.

Under the blouse she didn't wear a slip, or a bra, and it was easy enough to see why. I heard Chris pull in his breath. And Carrie and Cory must have looked, for their whimpers reached my ears. Now I knew why Momma, usually so graceful, had walked stiffly into our room, with eyes red from weeping.

Her back was striped with long, angry red welts from her neck on down to the waistband of her blue skirt. Some of the puffier welts were crusted over with dried blood. There was barely an inch of uncut, unmarred skin between the hideous whip marks.

Unfeeling, uncaring, disregarding our sensitivities, or those of our mother, new instructions issued from our grandmother: "Take a good long look, children. Know that those whip marks go *all* the way down to your mother's feet. Thirty-three lashes, one for each year of her life. And fifteen extra lashes for each year she lived in sin with your father. Your grandfather ordered this punishment, but I was the one who applied the whip. Your mother's crimes are against God, and the moral principles society lives by. Hers was an unholy marriage, a sacrilege! A marriage that was an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. And, as if that wasn't enough, they had to have children—four of them! Children spawned from the Devil! Evil from the moment of conception!"

My eyes bulged at the sight of those pitiful welts on the creamy tender flesh that our father had handled with so much love and gentleness. I floundered in a maelstrom of uncertainty, aching inside, not knowing who or what I was, if I

had the right to be living on an earth the Lord reserved for those born with his blessings and permission. We had lost our father, our home, our friends and our possessions. That night I no longer believed that God was the perfect judge. So, in a way, I lost God too.

I wanted a whip in my hands to strike back at that old woman who had ruthlessly ripped so much from us. I stared at the ladder of bloody welts on Momma's back, and never had I felt such hate before, or such anger. I hated not only for what she had done to our mother, but for the ugly words that gushed forth from that mean mouth.

She looked at me then, that detestable old woman, as if sensing all that I felt. I glared back defiantly, hoping that she *could* see how I denied her blood relationship from that moment on—not only her, but that old man downstairs as well. Never again would I pity him.

Perhaps my eyes were only glass to reveal all the spinning wheels of revenge I harbored, and vowed to let loose one day. Maybe she did see something vengeful on those white worms of brains, for she directed her next words solely at me, though she used the noun “children.”

“So you see, children, this house can be hard and relentless in dealing with those who disobey and break our rules. We will dole out food, drink, and shelter, but never kindness, sympathy or love. It's impossible to feel anything but revulsion for what is not wholesome. Keep to my rules, and you won't feel the bite of my whip, nor will you be deprived of necessities. Dare to disobey me, and you will soon learn all I can do to you, and all I can keep from you.” She stared in turn at each of us.

Yes, she wanted to make us undone that night, when we were young, innocent, trusting, having known only the sweetest part of living. She wanted to wither our souls and shrivel us small and dry, perhaps never to feel pride again.

But she didn't know us.

Nobody was ever going to make me hate my father or my mother! Nobody was going to have the power of life and death over me—not while I was alive and could still fight back!

I shot Chris a quick glance. He was staring at her, too. His eyes swept up and down her height, considering what damage he could inflict if he attacked. But he was only fourteen. He would have to grow into a man before he could overcome the likes of her. Still, his hands clenched into fists, which he forced to keep tight at his sides. The restraint pressed his lips into a line as thin and hard as the lips of the grandmother. Only his eyes were cold, hard as blue ice.

Of us all, he loved our mother best. He had her high on a pedestal of perfection, considering her the dearest, sweetest, most understanding woman alive. He'd already told me when he grew up, he'd marry a woman who was like our mother. Yet he could only glare fiercely. He was too young to do anything.

Our grandmother bestowed on us one last, long, contemptuous look. Then she shoved the door key into Momma's hand and left the room.

One question loomed sky-high, above all others.

Why? *Why* had we been brought to *this* house?

This was no safe harbor, no refuge, no sanctuary. Certainly Momma must have known how it would be, and yet, she'd led us here in the dead of night. Why?

Momma's Story



After the grandmother's departure, we did not know what to do, or what to say, or how to feel, except unhappy and miserable. My heart was fluttering madly as I watched Momma slip up her blouse, button it, and tuck it into the waistband of her skirt before she turned to give us all a tremulous smile that sought to reassure. Pitiful that I could find a straw to grasp in such a smile as that one. Chris lowered his eyes to the floor; his restless torment was expressed by his shoe diligently following the intricate scrollwork of the Oriental rug.

"Now look," said Momma with forced cheerfulness, "it was just a willow switching, and it didn't hurt too much. My pride suffered more than my flesh. It's humiliating to be whipped like a slave, or an animal, and by your own parents. But don't worry that such a whipping will occur again, for it never will. Only this one time. I would suffer a hundred times over what whip weals I bear to live again those fifteen years of happiness I had with your father, and with you. Though it cringes my soul, she made me show what they did... ." She sat on a bed and held out her arms so we could cluster close about and be comforted, though I was careful not to embrace her again and cause more pain. She lifted the twins to her lap and patted the bed to indicate we should crowd up against her. Then she began to talk. What she said was obviously hard to say, and equally difficult for us to hear.

"I want you to listen very carefully, and remember all your lives every word I say tonight." She paused, hesitating as she scanned the room and stared at the cream-flocked walls as if they were transparent, and through them she could see into all the rooms of this gigantic house. "This is a strange house, and the people who reside here are even stranger—not the servants, but my parents. I should have warned you that your

grandparents are fanatically religious. To believe in God is a good thing, a right thing. But when you reinforce your belief with words you take from the Old Testament that you seek out, and interpret in the ways that suit your needs best, that is hypocrisy, and that is exactly what my parents do.

“My father is dying, yes, but every Sunday he is carried into church either in his wheelchair, if he is feeling that well, or lying on a stretcher if he is feeling worse, and he gives his tithe—a tenth share of his yearly income, which is considerable. So naturally, he is very welcomed. He paid to have the church built, he bought all the stained-glass windows, he controls the minister and his sermons, for he is paving his way to heaven with gold, and if St. Peter can be bribed, my father will surely gain entrance. In that church he is treated like a god himself, or a living saint. And then he comes home, feeling completely justified in doing anything he wants, because he has done his duty, and paid his way, and therefore he is safe from hell.

“When I was growing up, with my two older brothers, we were literally forced to go to church. Even if we were sick enough to stay in bed, we still had to go. Religion was rammed down our throats. Be good, be good, be good—that’s all we ever heard. Everyday, normal pleasures that were right for other people were made sinful for us. My brothers and I were not allowed to go swimming, for that meant wearing bathing suits and exposing most of our bodies. We were forbidden card games, or any sort of game that implied gambling. We weren’t allowed to go to dances, for that meant your body might be pressed close to that of the other sex. We were ordered to control our thoughts, to keep them off lusting, sinful subjects for they said the thought was as evil as the deed. Oh, I could go on and on about all we were forbidden to do—it seemed everything that was fun and exciting was sinful to them. And there is something in the young that rebels when life is made too strict, making us want to do most of all the very things denied to us. Our parents, in seeking to make their three children into living angels or saints, only succeeded in making us worse than we would have been otherwise.”

My eyes widened. I sat spellbound, all of us did, even the twins.

“Then one day,” Momma went on, “into all this, a beautiful young man came to live. His father had been my grandfather, a man who died when this young man was only three. His mother was named Alicia, and she was only sixteen when she married my grandfather who was fifty-five years old. So, when she gave birth to a boy, she should have lived to see him a man. Unfortunately, Alicia died very young. My grandfather’s name was Garland Christopher Foxworth, and when he died, half of his estate should have gone to his youngest son, who was three. But Malcolm, my father, gained control of his father’s estate by having himself appointed administrator, for, of course, a three-year-old boy had no voice in the matter, nor was Alicia given a vote. Once my father had everything under his thumb, he kicked out Alicia and her young son. They fled back to Richmond, to Alicia’s parents, and there she lived until she married a second time. She had a few years of happiness with a young man she’d loved since her childhood, and then he, too, died. Twice married, twice widowed, left with a young son, and now her parents were dead as well. And then one day she found a lump in her breast, and a few years later she died of cancer. That was when her son, Garland Christopher Foxworth the Fourth, came to live here. We never called him anything but Chris.” She hesitated, tightened her arms about Chris and me. “Do you know who I’m talking about? Have you guessed who this young man was?”

I shivered. The mysterious half-uncle. And I whispered, “Daddy . . . you’re talking about Daddy.”

“Yes,” she said, then sighed heavily.

I leaned forward to glance at my older brother. He sat so still, with the queerest expression on his face, and his eyes were glassy.

Momma continued: “Your father was my half-uncle, but he was only three years older than I. I remember the first time I saw him. I knew he was coming, this young half-uncle I’d never seen or heard much about, and I wanted to make a good impression, so all day I prepared myself, curling my hair,

bathing and I put on what I thought were my prettiest and most becoming clothes. I was fourteen years old—and that is an age when a girl just begins to feel her power over men. And I knew I was what most boys and men considered beautiful, and I guess, in a way, I was ripe for falling in love.

“Your father was seventeen. It was late spring, and he was standing in the middle of the hall with two suitcases near his shabby shoes—his clothes were very worn looking, and he’d outgrown them. My mother and father were with him, but he was turning around, staring at everything, dazzled by the display of wealth. I myself had never paid much attention to what was around me. It was there, I accepted it as part of my heritage, and until I was married, and began to live a life without wealth, I hardly realized that I’d been raised in an exceptional home.

“You see, my father is a ‘collector.’ He buys everything that is considered a unique work of art—not because he appreciates art, but he likes to own things. He would like to own *everything*, if possible, especially beautiful things. I used to think I was part of his collection of *objets d’art* ... and he meant to keep me for himself, not to enjoy, but to keep others from enjoying what was his.”

My mother continued, her face flushed, her eyes staring off into space, apparently looking backward to that exceptional day when a young half-uncle came into her life to make such a difference.

“Your father came to us so innocent, so trusting, so sweet, and vulnerable, having known only honest affection, and genuine love, and a great deal of poverty. He came from a four-room cottage into this huge, grand house that widened his eyes and dazzled his hopes, and he thought that he had stumbled onto good luck, into heaven on earth. He was looking at my mother and father with all of that gratefulness plain in his eyes. Hah! The pity of him coming here and being grateful still hurts. For half of what he was looking at, by all rights, should have been his. My parents did all they could to make him feel like a poor relation.

“I saw him there, standing in the sunlight, beaming down through the windows, and paused halfway down the staircase. His golden hair was haloed by an aura of silver light. He was so beautiful, not just handsome, but beautiful—there’s a difference, you know. Real beauty radiates from the inside out, and he had that.

“I made some slight noise that made him lift his head, and his blue eyes lit up—and oh, I can remember how they lit up—and then when we were introduced, the light went out. I was his half-niece, and forbidden, and he was disappointed, just as I was. For on that very day, with me on the staircase and him down there on the floor, a spark was lit between us, a little red glow that was to grow larger and larger until we could deny it no longer.

“I won’t embarrass you with the telling of our romance,” she said uneasily when I shifted, and Chris moved to hide his face. “Let it suffice to say that it was love at first sight with us, for it happens that way sometimes. Perhaps he was ready to fall in love, as was I, or perhaps it was because we were both needing someone to give us warmth and affection. My older brothers were both dead by this time, killed by accidents; I had only a few friends, for no one was ‘good enough’ for the daughter of Malcolm Foxworth. I was his prize, his joy; if ever a man took me from him, it would be for a dear, dear price. So, your father and I would meet furtively in the gardens and just sit and talk for hours and hours, and sometimes he’d push me in a swing, or I’d push him, and sometimes we’d stand on the swing and work it with our legs, and just look at each other as we flew higher and higher. He told me all his secrets and I told him all of mine. And soon enough it had to come out, we had to confess that we were deeply in love, and right or wrong, we had to marry. And we had to escape this house, and the rule of my parents, before they had a chance to make us into duplicates of themselves—for that was their purpose, you know, to take your father and change him, make him pay for the evil his mother had done in marrying a man so much older. They gave him everything, I will admit that. They treated him as their own son, for he was to replace the two sons they had lost. They sent him to Yale, and he was brilliant. You get your

intelligence from him, Christopher. He graduated in three years—but he could never use the master’s degree he earned, for it had his rightful name on it, and we had to hide who we were from the world. It was hard for us in the first years of our marriage because he had to deny his college education.”

She paused. She glanced reflectively at Chris, then at me. She hugged the twins and kissed the top of their fair heads, and a troubled frown came to worry her face and pucker her brow. “Cathy, Christopher, you are the ones I am expecting to understand. The twins are too young. You are trying to understand how it was with us?”

Yes, yes, both Chris and I nodded.

She was talking my language, the language of music and ballet, romance, and love, beautiful faces in lovely places. Fairy tales can come true!

Love at first sight. Oh, that was going to happen to me, I just knew it would and he’d be as beautiful as Daddy had been, radiating beauty, touching my heart. You had to have love or you withered away and died.

“Listen attentively, now,” she said in a low voice, and this gave her words greater impact. “I am here to do what I can to make my father like me again, and forgive me for marrying his half-brother. You see, as soon as I reached my eighteenth birthday, your father and I eloped, and two weeks later we came back and told my parents. My father nearly threw a fit. He raged, he stormed, he ordered us both out of his house, and told us never to come back, never! And that is why I was disinherited, and your father too—for I think my father did plan to leave him a little, not much, but some. The main portion was to be mine, for my mother has money in her own right. Why, to hear tell it, the money she inherited from her parents is the main reason why my father married her, though in her youth she was what is called a *handsome* woman, not a great beauty, but she had a regal, powerful kind of noble good looks.”

No, I thought bitterly to myself ... that old woman was born ugly!

“I am here to do what I can to make my father like me again, and forgive me for marrying my half-uncle. And in order to do this, I am going to have to play the role of the dutiful, humbled, thoroughly chastised daughter. And sometimes, when you begin to play a role you assume that character, so I want to say now, while I am still fully myself, all you have to hear. That’s why I’m telling you all of this, and being as honest as I can. I confess, I am not strong-willed, nor am I a self-starter. I was strong only when I had your father to back me up, and now I don’t have him. And downstairs, on the first floor, in a small room beyond a giant library, is a man the likes of whom you have never encountered. You have met my mother, and know a little of what she is like, but you have not met my father. And I don’t want you to meet him until he forgives me and accepts the fact that I have four children fathered by his much younger half-brother. This is going to be very difficult for him to take. But I don’t think it is going to be *too* difficult for him to forgive me, since your father *is* dead, and it is difficult to hold grudges against the dead and buried.”

I don’t know why I felt so scared.

“In order to have my father write me into his will again, I am going to be forced to do anything he wants.”

“What could he want from you but obedience and a show of respect?” asked Chris in the most somber, adult way, as if he understood what this was all about.

Momma gave him the longest look, full of sweet compassion as her hand lifted to caress his boyish cheek. He was a younger smaller edition of the husband she’d so recently buried. No wonder tears came into her eyes.

“I don’t know what he’ll want, darling, but whatever I have to do, I will do. Somehow he must include me in his will. But let’s forget all of that now. I saw your faces when I was talking. I don’t want you to feel what my mother said is true. What your father and I did was *not* immoral. We were properly married in church, just as any other young couple in love. There was nothing ‘unholy’ about it. And you are not the Devil’s spawn, or evil—your father would call that hogwash. My mother would have you think yourselves unworthy as

another way to punish me, and you. People make the rules of society, not God. In some parts of the world closer relatives marry and produce children, and it is considered perfectly all right, though I'm not going to try and justify what we did, for we do have to abide by the laws of our own society. That society believes closely related men and women should not marry, for if they do, they can produce children who are mentally or physically less than perfect. But who is perfect?"

Then she was laughing, half-crying, and hugging us all close. "Your grandfather predicted our children would be born with horns, humped backs, forked tails, hooves for feet—he was like a crazy man, trying to curse us, and make our children deformed, because he wanted us cursed! Did any of his dire predictions come true?" she cried, seemingly half-wild herself. "No!" She answered her own question. "Your father and I did worry some when I was pregnant the first time. He paced the hospital corridors all night, until nearly dawn, when a nurse came up and told him he had a son, perfect in every way. Then he had to run to the nursery to see for himself. You should have been there to see the joy on his face when he entered my room, bearing in his arms two dozen red roses, and tears were in his eyes when he kissed me. He was so proud of you, Christopher, so proud. He gave away six boxes of cigars, and went right out and bought you a plastic baseball bat, and a catcher's mitt, and a football, too. When you were teething, you'd chew on the bat, and beat on the crib and the wall to let us know you wanted out.

"Next came Cathy, and you, darling, were just as beautiful, and just as perfect as your brother. And you know how your father loved you, his beautiful dancing Cathy, who would make the world sit up and take notice when she came on stage. Recall your first ballet performance, when you were four? You wore your first pink tutu, and made a few mistakes, and everybody in the audience laughed, and you clapped your hands like you were proud, even so. And your father sent you a dozen roses—remember? He never saw any mistakes you made. In his eyes you were perfect. And seven years after you came to bless us, our twins were born. Now we had two boys, and two girls, and had tempted fate four times—and had won!

Four perfect children. So if God had wanted to punish us, he had four chances to give us deformed or mentally retarded children. Instead, he gave us the very best. So never let your grandmother or anyone else convince you that you are less than competent, less than worthy, or less than wholly pleasing in God's eyes. If there was a sin committed, it was the sin of your parents, not yours. You are the same four children all our friends in Gladstone envied and called the Dresden dolls. Keep remembering what you had in Gladstone—hold on to that. Keep believing in yourselves, and in me, and in your father. Even if he is dead, keep on loving and respecting him. He deserves that. He tried so hard to be a good parent. I don't think there are many men who care as much as he did." She smiled brightly through glistening tears. "Now, tell me who you are."

"The Dresden dolls!" Chris and I cried out.

"Now, will you ever believe what your grandmother says about being the Devil's spawn?"

No! *Never, never!*

Yet, yet, half of what I'd heard from both women I would have to ponder over later, and ponder deeply too. I wanted to believe God was pleased with us, and in who and what we were. I had to believe, needed to believe. Nod, I told myself, say yes, just as Chris did. Don't be like the twins who only stared at Momma, not comprehending anything. Don't be so suspicious—don't!

Chris chimed up in the firmest of convincing voices, "Yes, Momma, I do believe what you say, for if God had disapproved of your marriage to our father, then he *would* have punished you and Daddy through your children. I believe God is not narrow-minded and bigoted—not as our grandparents are. How can that old woman speak so ugly, when she does have eyes, and she can see we are not ugly, and not deformed, and certainly we are not retarded?"

Relief, like a river dammed and released, caused tears to stream down Momma's beautiful face. She drew Chris close against her breast, kissing the top of his head. Then she cupped

his face between her palms, stared deep into his eyes, ignoring the rest of us. “Thank you, my son, for understanding,” she said in a husky whisper. “Thank you again for not condemning your parents for what they did.”

“I love you, Momma. No matter what you did, or do, I’ll always understand.”

“Yes,” she murmured, “you will, I know *You* will.” Uneasily she glanced at me who stood back, taking all of this in, weighing it, and her. “Love doesn’t always come when you want it to. Sometimes it just happens, despite your will.” She bowed her head, reaching for my brother’s hands, and clinging to them. “My father adored me when I was young. He wanted to keep me always for himself. He never wanted me to marry anyone. I recall when I was only twelve, he said he’d leave me his entire estate if I stayed with him until he died of old age.”

Suddenly, she jerked up her head and looked at me. Did she see something doubting, something questioning? Her eyes shadowed, grew deep, dark. “Join hands,” she ordered forcefully, bracing her shoulders, releasing one of Chris’s hands. “I want you to repeat after me: We are perfect children. Mentally, physically, emotionally, we are wholesome, and godly in every way possible. We have as much right to live, love, and enjoy life as any other children on this earth.”

She smiled at me, and reached for my hand to hold in her free one, and asked that Carrie and Cory join the family chain. “Up here, you are going to need small rituals to get you through the days, little stepping stones. Let me lay down a few for you to use when I’m gone. Cathy, when I look at you, I see myself at your age. Love me, Cathy, trust me, please.”

Haltingly, we did as she directed, and repeated the litany that was ours to say whenever we felt in doubt. And when we had finished, she smiled at us with approval and reassurance.

“There!” she said with a happier look. “Now don’t think I have lived through this day without the four of you constantly on my mind. I have thought and I have thought of our future, and I’ve decided we cannot continue to live here, where all of us are ruled over by my mother and father. My mother is a

cruel, heartless woman who just happened to give birth to me, but who's never given me an ounce of love—she gave all of that to her sons. It was my foolish belief, when her letter came, that she would treat you differently from the way she treated me. I thought by now she would have mellowed with age, and once she saw you, and knew you, she would be like all grandmothers and welcome you with open arms, and be charmed and delighted to have children to love again. I so hoped once she got a look at your faces . . .” She choked up, near tears again, as if no one with good sense could help but love her children. “I can understand her dislike for Christopher”—and here she hugged him tightly, and kissed his cheek—“for he looks so much like his father. And I know she can look at you, Cathy, and see me, and she never liked me—I don't know why, except, perhaps, my father liked me too much, and that made her jealous. But never did it cross my mind that she could be cruel to any of you, or my little twins. I made myself believe people change with age, and they realize their mistakes, but now I know how wrong I was.” She wiped away her tears.

“So, that is why tomorrow morning, early, I am driving away from here, and in the nearest big city, I will enroll in a business school that will teach me how to be a secretary. I'll learn to type, take shorthand, do bookkeeping and how to file—and everything a good secretary has to know, I'll learn. When I know how to do all of these things, I'll be able to find a good job that will pay an adequate salary. And then I'll have enough money to take you all out of this room. We'll find an apartment somewhere nearby, so I can still visit my father. Soon, we'll all be living under the same roof, our roof, and we'll be a real family again.”

“Oh, Momma!” Chris cried happily, “I knew you would find a way! I knew you wouldn't keep us locked up in this room.” He leaned forward to give me a look of smug satisfaction, as if he'd known all along *his* beloved mother would solve all problems, no matter how complicated.

“Trust me,” said Momma, smiling and confident now. Again she had kisses for Chris.

I wished somehow I could be like my brother Chris, and take everything she said as a sacred vow. But my treacherous thoughts were dwelling overlong on her words of not being strong-willed or a self-starter, without Daddy nearby to give her support. Dejectedly, I put in my question. “Just how long does it take to learn how to be a good secretary?”

Quickly—I thought too quickly—she answered. “Only a little while, Cathy. Perhaps a month. But if it takes a bit longer, you have to be patient and realize I’m not too smart about things like that. It’s not really my fault,” she went on hastily, as if she could see I was blaming her for being inadequate.

“When you’re born rich, and you’re educated in boarding schools only for the daughters of the extremely rich and powerful, and then you’re sent to a girls’ finishing school, you are taught polite rules of social etiquette, academic subjects, but most of all, you’re made ready for the whirl of romance, debutante parties, and how to entertain and be the perfect hostess. I wasn’t taught anything practical. I didn’t think I’d ever need any business skills. I thought I’d always have a husband to take care of me, and if not a husband, then my father would—and besides, all the time I was in love with your father. I knew the day I turned eighteen we’d be married.”

She was at that very minute teaching me well. Never would I become so dependent on a man I couldn’t make my way in the world, no matter what cruel blow life delivered! But most of all I felt mean, mad, ashamed, guilty—feeling she was to blame for everything, and how could she have know what lay ahead?

“I’m going now,” she said as she stood to leave. The twins burst into tears.

“Momma, don’t go! Don’t leave us!” They both wrapped their small arms around her legs.

“I’ll be back early tomorrow morning, before I leave for that school. Really, Cathy,” she said, looking straight at me, “I promise to do the best I can. I want you out of this place just as much as you want to be out.”

At the door she said it was a good thing we'd seen her back, for now we knew how heartless her mother could be. "For God's sake, keep to her rules. Be modest in the bathroom. Realize she can be inhuman not only to me, but to those who are mine." She held out her arms to all of us, and we ran into them, forgetting her whip-lashed back. "I love all of you so much," she sobbed. "Hold on to that. I'll apply myself as never before, I swear. I feel as much a prisoner as you do, just as trapped by circumstances as you are, in a way. Go to bed tonight with happy thoughts, know that no matter how bad it may seem, seldom is anything *that* bad. I am likable, you know that, and my father did love me extremely well once. So that will make it easy for him to love me again, won't it?"

Yes, yes, it would. To love anything once extremely well made you vulnerable to another loving attack. I knew; I'd already been in love six times.

"And while you're in your beds, and in the dimness of this room, remember that tomorrow after I enroll in that school, I'll go shopping for new toys and games to keep your hours up here busy and happy. And it's not going to be a long time until I have my father loving me again, and forgiving me for everything."

"Momma," I said, "do you have enough money to buy us things?"

"Yes, yes," she said hurriedly, "I have enough, and my mother and father are proud people. They would not have me seen by their friends and neighbors looking shabby, or ill-groomed. They will provide for me and they'll provide for you, as well. You'll see. And every spare minute I have, and every spare dollar I don't use, I'll put away, and I'll plan for the day when we can all be free to live in our own home, as we used to, and be a family again."

Those were her parting words before she blew us kisses, and then she closed and locked the door.

Our second night behind a locked door.

Now we knew so much more ... maybe too much.

After Momma had left, both Chris and I settled into bed. He grinned over at me as he curled his body against Cory's back, and already his eyes were sleepy, too. He closed his eyes and murmured, "Good night, Cathy. Don't let the bedbugs bite."

As Christopher had done, I curled around Carrie's small warm body, and she was cupped spoon-like in my arms, and my face lowered into her sweet, soft hair.

I was restless, and soon enough I was supine, staring upward, and sensing the great silence of this huge house as it settled down, and went to sleep. I heard not a whisper of movement in the huge house; not the faint shrills of a telephone ringing; not a kitchen appliance could be heard switching on and off; not even a dog barked outside; nor did a car pass to throw light that might, hopefully, penetrate through the heavy draperies.

Snide thoughts came and told me we were unwanted, locked up ... Devil's spawn. Those thoughts wanted to lounge around in my head and make me miserable. I had to find a way to drive them out. Momma, she loved us, she wanted us, she'd try hard to be a good secretary to some lucky man. She would. I knew she would. She would resist the ways the grandparents sought to turn her away from us. She would, she would.

God, I prayed, please help Momma learn quickly!

It was horribly hot and stuffy in that room. Outside, I could hear the wind rustling the leaves, but not enough of it came in to cool us off, only enough to hint that it was cool out there, and would be in here if only we could open the windows wide. Wistfully, I sighed, longing for fresh air. Hadn't Momma told us mountain nights, even in the summertime, were always cool? And this was summertime and it wasn't cool with the windows down.

In the rosy darkness, Chris whispered my name. "What are you thinking?"

"About the wind. It sounds like a wolf."

"I knew you'd be thinking something cheery like that. Gosh, if you aren't the one to take the cake for depressing

thoughts.”

“I’ve got another goodie—whispering winds like dead souls trying to tell us something.”

He groaned. “Now you listen to me, Catherine Doll (the stage name I planned to use one day), I order you *not* to lie there and think your kind of scary thoughts. We will take each hour as it comes, and never pause to think ahead to the next one, and by using this method, it will be much easier than thinking in terms of days and weeks. Think about music, about dancing, singing. Haven’t I heard you say you never feel sad when music is dancing in your head?”

“What will you think about?”

“If I were less sleepy, I would pour out ten volumes of thoughts, but as it is, I’m too tired to answer. And you know my goal, anyway. As for now, I’ll just think of the games we’ll have time to play.” He yawned, stretched, and smiled over at me. “What did you think of all that talk about half-uncles marrying half-nieces, and creating children with hooves, tails, and horns?”

“As a seeker of all knowledge, and a future doctor, is it medically, scientifically possible?”

“Nope!” he answered, as if well-educated on the subject. “If so, the world would abound in freaks resembling devils and to tell you the truth, I would like to see a devil, just once.”

“I see them all the time, in my dreams.”

“Hah!” he scoffed. “You and your crazy dreams. Weren’t the twins something, though? I was really rather proud of them when they faced up to that giant grandmother so defiantly. Gosh, they got spunk. But then I was afraid she’d really do something awful.”

“What she did wasn’t awful? She picked Carrie up by her hair. That must have hurt. And she slapped Cory and sent him reeling, and that must have hurt. What more did you want?”

“She could have done worse.”

“I think she’s crazy herself.”

“You may be right,” he mumbled sleepily.

“The twins are only babies. Cory was only protecting Carrie—you know how he is about her, and she is about him.” I hesitated. “Chris, did our mother and father do right by falling in love? Couldn’t they have done something to stop it?”

“I don’t know. Let’s not talk about that; it makes me feel uneasy.”

“Me, too. But I guess that explains why we all have blue eyes and blond hair.”

“Yeah,” he yawned, “the Dresden dolls; that’s us.”

“You’re right. I’ve always wanted to play games all day long. And just think, when our mother does bring us that new deluxe Monopoly game, we will at last have time to finish a game.” For we had never finished a game. “And Chris, the silver ballerina slippers are to be mine.”

“Right,” he murmured, “and I’ll take the top hat, or the racing car.”

“The top hat, please.”

“Right. Sorry, I forgot. And we can teach the twins to be bankers and count out the money.”

“First we’ll have to teach them to count.”

“That will be no trick at all, for Foxworths know all about money.”

“We are *not* Foxworths!”

“Then what are we?”

“Dollangangers! That’s who!”

“Okay, have it your way.” And again he said good night.

Once more I knelt by the side of the bed and put my hands in prayer position under my chin. Silently I began: *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep . . .* But somehow I just couldn’t say those words about taking my soul if I should die before I wake. Again I had to skip that part, and

again I asked blessings for Momma, for Chris, and the twins, and for Daddy, too, wherever he was in heaven.

Then, when I was back in bed again, I had to go and think of the cake or cookies, and the ice cream the grandmother had half-promised last night—if we were good.

And we had been good.

At least until Carrie started cutting up—and still the grandmother hadn't come into the room with desserts.

How could she have known that later on we would be so undeserving?

“What are you thinking now?” asked Chris in a sleepy monotone. I thought he was already asleep, and certainly not watching me.

“Nuthin’ much. Just little thoughts of the ice cream, and cake or cookies the grandmother said she’d bring if we were good.”

“Tomorrow’s another day, so don’t give up on treats. And maybe tomorrow the twins will forget about outdoors. They don’t have very long memories.”

No, they didn’t. Already they’d forgotten Daddy, and he’d been killed only last April. How easily Cory and Carrie let go of a father who had loved them very much. And I couldn’t let him go; I was never going to let him go, even if I couldn’t see him so clearly now ... I could feel him.

Minutes Like Hours



All the days dragged by. Monotonously.

What did you do with time when you had it in superabundance? Where did you put your eyes when you had already seen everything? What direction should your thoughts take, when daydreams could lead you into so much trouble? I could imagine how it would be to run outside, wild and free in the woods, with dry leaves crackling under my feet. I could picture swimming in the nearby lake, or wading in a cool mountain stream. But daydreams were merely cobwebs, easily torn into shreds, and I'd quickly be dropped back into reality. And where was happiness? In the yesterdays? In the tomorrows? Not in this hour, this minute, this second. We had one thing, and one thing only, to give us a spark of joy. Hope.

Chris said it was a deadly crime to waste time. Time was valuable. No one ever had time enough, or lived long enough to learn enough. All about us the world was on the way to the fire, crying, "Hurry, hurry, hurry!" And look at us: we had time to spare, hours to fill, a million books to read, time to let our imaginations take wing. The creative genius begins in the idle moment, dreaming up the impossible, and later making it come true.

Momma came to see us, as she promised, bearing new games and toys to occupy our time. Chris and I adored Monopoly, Scrabble, Chinese checkers, plain checkers, and when Momma brought us a double deck of bridge cards, and a book on how to play card games, boy, did we become the card sharks!

It was harder with the twins, who weren't old enough to play games with rules. Nothing held their interest for long, not the many tiny cars Momma bought, nor the dump trucks, nor the electric tram that Chris hooked together so the tracks ran

under our beds, under the dressing table, over to the dresser, and under the highboy. No matter where we turned something was underfoot. One thing for sure, they did hate the attic—everything about it seemed scary to them.

Every day we got up early. We didn't have an alarm clock, only our wristwatches. But some automatic timing-system in my body took over and wouldn't let me sleep late, even when I wanted to.

As soon as we were out of bed, on alternate days, the boys would use the bathroom first, and then Carrie and I would go in. We had to be fully dressed before the grandmother entered—or else.

Into our grim, dim room the grandmother would stalk, while we stood at attention, waiting for her to put down the picnic basket and depart. Seldom did she speak to us, and when she did, it was only to ask if we had said grace before every meal, said prayers before retiring and had read a page from the Bible yesterday.

“No,” said Chris one morning, “we don't read a page—we read chapters. If you consider reading the Bible a form of punishment, then forget it. We find it fascinating reading. It's bloodier and lustier than any movie we ever saw, and talks more about sin than any book we ever read.”

“Shut up, boy!” she barked at him. “I was asking your sister, *not you!*”

Next she was asking me to repeat some quote I'd learned, and in this way we often had our little jokes, at her expense, for when you looked hard and long enough, you found words in the Bible to suit any occasion. I answered on this particular morning, “Wherefore have you rewarded evil for good? Genesis 44:4.”

She scowled and pivoted about and left us. It was another few days before she snapped at Chris, without looking his way, and keeping her back turned, “Repeat to me a quote from the Book of Job. And do not try to fool me into believing you read the Bible when you do not!”

Chris seemed well prepared and confident “Job, 28:12.—But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Job 28:28,—Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding. Job, 31:35—My desire is that the Almighty would answer me, and that mine adversity had written a book. Job, 32:9—Great men are not always wise.” And he would have gone on and on endlessly, but anger colored the grandmother’s face. Never again did she ask Chris to quote from the Bible. She eventually stopped asking me also, for I, too, could always come up with some stinging quote.

Around six o’clock each evening Momma would show up, breathless, always in a great hurry. She came loaded down with gifts, new things for us to do, new books to read, more games to play. Then she’d dash off to bathe and dress in her suite of rooms for a formal dinner downstairs, where a butler and a maid waited on the table, and it seemed, from what she breathlessly explained, that often guests dined with them. “A great deal of business is done over lunch and dinner tables,” we were informed.

The best times were when she sneaked up fancy little canapés, and tasty hors d’oeuvres, but she never brought us candy to rot our teeth.

Only on Saturdays and Sundays could she spend more than a few moments with us, and sit down at our small table to eat lunch. Once she patted her stomach. “Look how fat I’m becoming, eating lunch with my father, then saying I want to nap, so I can come up and eat again with my children.”

Meals with Momma were wonderful, because it reminded me of the old days when we were living with Daddy.

One Sunday Momma came in, smelling fresh from outside, bringing a quart of vanilla ice cream and a chocolate cake from a bakery. The ice cream had melted almost to soup, but still we ate it. We begged her to stay all night, to sleep between Carrie and me, so we could wake up in the morning and we could see her there. But she took a long look around the cluttered bedroom, and shook her head. “I’m sorry, I can’t, I

really can't. You see, the maids would wonder why my bed wasn't used. And three in a bed would be too crowded."

"Momma," I asked, "how much longer? We've been here two weeks—it seems like two years. Hasn't the grandfather forgiven you yet for marrying Daddy? Have you told him about us yet?"

"My father has given me one of his cars to drive," she said with what I considered evasiveness. "And I believe he is going to forgive me, or else he wouldn't be letting me use his car, or sleep under his roof, or eat his food. But no, I haven't had the nerve to tell him yet that I have four children hidden away. I have to time this very carefully, and you have to have patience."

"What would he do if he knew about us?" I asked, ignoring Chris, who kept frowning at me. Already he'd told me if I kept asking so many questions, Momma would stop coming to see us everyday. Then what would we do?

"God knows what he'd do," she whispered fearfully. "Cathy, promise me you will not try to make the servants hear! He is a cruel, heartless man, and one who wields a great deal of power. Let me time carefully the moment I believe he's *ready* to hear."

She went away about seven, and soon after we retired. We went to bed early, because we got up early. And the longer you could stay asleep, the shorter were the days. We would drag our twins into the attic as soon as the hour of ten passed. Exploring the giant attic was one of the best ways to occupy our time. There were two pianos up there, uprights. Cory climbed on a round seat that twirled higher or lower, and round and round he spun. He banged on the yellow piano keys, cocked his head and listened attentively. It was out of tune, and the noise he made was so discordant it made your head ache. "Don't sound right," he said. "Why don't it sound right?"

"It needs tuning," said Chris, who tried to tune it, but when he did, the wires broke. That was the end of trying to make music on two old pianos. There were five Victrolas, each with

a small, white dog that cocked its head charmingly, as if enchanted to hear the music—but only one of these machines worked well. We'd wind up this one, put on a warped old record, and listen to the weirdest music we'd ever heard!

There were stacks and stacks of Enrico Caruso records, but, unfortunately, they were not well cared for, just stacked on the floor, not even put in cardboard cartons. We sat in a semicircle to listen to him sing. Christopher and I knew he was the greatest of all male singers, and now was our chance to hear him. His voice was so high-pitched it sounded false, and we wondered what had been so great about him. But for some crazy reason, Cory loved it.

Then, slowly, slowly, the machine would wind down, and would spin Caruso's voice into only a whine, and that's when one of us would race like mad to crank the handle so tight he'd sing fast and funny so he sounded like Donald Duck talking jibberty-junk—and the twins would break up in laughter. Naturally. It was their kind of talk, their secret language.

Cory would spend all of his days in the attic, playing the records. But Carrie was a restless prowler, ever discontented, an incessant seeker of something better to do.

"I don't like this *big bad place!*" she wailed for the zillionth time. "Take me out of this *baa-aad place! Take me out now! This minute! You take me out or I'm gonna kick down the walls! I will! I can! I can, too!*"

She ran to the walls to attack with small feet and flailing little fists that she managed to bruise severely before she gave up.

I felt sorry for her, and for Cory. All of us would have liked to kick down the walls and escape. With Carrie, though, it was more likely the walls would tumble down just from the crescendo trumpet of her powerful voice, like the walls of Jericho tumbling down.

Indeed, it was a relief when Carrie braved the dangers of the attic and found her own way to the stairway, and to the bedroom below, where she could play with her dolls, and her

tea-cups, and her tiny stove, and her little ironing board with the iron that didn't heat up.

For the first time, Cory and Carrie could spend a few hours separated from each other, and Chris said that was a good thing. Up in the attic was the music which charmed Cory, while Carrie would chatter on to her "things."

Taking many baths was another way to use up excess time, and shampooing hair made it last longer—oh, we were the cleanest children alive. We napped after lunch, which lasted as long as we could stretch it. Chris and I made a contest of peeling apples so the skin came off in one long, long spiraling cord. We peeled oranges and took off every bit of white string that the twins detested. We had little boxes of cheese crackers that we counted out to divide equally into four portions.

Our most dangerous and amusing game was to mimic the grandmother—ever fearful she'd walk in and catch us draped with some filthy gray sheet from the attic, to represent her gray taffeta uniforms. Chris and I were the best at this. The twins were too afraid of her to even lift their eyes when she was in the room.

"Children!" snapped Chris while he stood by the door, holding an invisible picnic basket. "Have you been decent, honorable, proper? This room looks a terrible mess! Girl—you over there—smooth out that rumpiled pillow before I crush your head in with the mere glare of my eyes!"

"Mercy, Grandmother!" I cried, falling down on my knees and crawling to her with my hands folded under my chin. "I was dead tired from scrubbing down all the walls in the attic. I had to rest."

"*Rest!*" snapped the grandmother at the door, her dress about to fall off. "There is no *rest* for the evil, the corrupt, the unholy and the unworthy—there is only work until you are dead, and hung forever over hell's eternal roasting fires!" Then he lifted his arms beneath the sheet in some horrible gestures that made the twins shriek from fright, and in a witch's way, the grandmother disappeared, and only Chris was left, grinning at us.

The first weeks were like seconds turned into hours despite all we did to entertain ourselves, and we managed to do quite a lot. It was the doubts and the fears, the hopes and expectations that kept us so in suspense, waiting, waiting—and we were no closer to being let out and taken downstairs.

Now the twins ran to me with their small cuts and bruises, and the splinters garnered from the rotten wood in the attic. I carefully plucked them out with tweezers, Chris would apply the antiseptic, and the adhesive plaster they both loved. An injured small finger was enough reason to demand cuddly-baby things, and lullabies sung as I tucked them into bed, and kissed their faces, and tickled where laughter had to be freed. Their thin little arms wrapped tightly about my neck. I was loved, very loved . . . and needed.

Our twins were more like three-year-olds than children of five. Not in the way they talked, but in the way they rubbed their eyes with small fists, and pouted when they were denied anything, and the way they had of holding their breath until they turned magenta and forced you to give them what they wanted. I was much more susceptible to this kind of ploy than Chris, who reasoned it was impossible for anyone to suffocate themselves in such a way. Still, to see them purple was a terrifying sight.

“Next time they behave like that,” he told me in private, “I want you to ignore them, even if you have to go into the bathroom and lock the door. And, believe me, they won’t die.”

That was exactly what they forced me to do—and they didn’t die. That was the last time they pulled that stunt as a way to keep from eating food they didn’t like—and they didn’t like anything, or hardly anything.

Carrie had the swayback posture of all little girls, protruding in front in a strong arc, and she adored skipping around the room, holding out her skirts so her ruffled panties showed. (Lace ruffled panties were the only kind she would wear.) And if they had little roses made of ribbons, or embroidered somewhere in front, you had to see them at least a dozen times a day, and comment on how charming she looked in her panties.

Of course, Cory wore briefs like Chris, and he was very proud of this. Somewhere, lurking in his memory, were the diapers not too long ago discarded. If he had a temperamental bladder. Carrie was the one who got diarrhea if she ate one teensy bit of any fruit but citrus. I actually hated the days when peaches and grapes were brought up to us—for dear Carrie adored green grapes without seeds, and peaches, and apples ... and all three had the same effect. Believe me, when fruit came in the door, I blanched, knowing who would have to wash the ruffled, lacy panties unless I moved fast as lightening, running with Carrie under my arm, and plopping her down in the nick of time. Chris's laughter would ring out when I didn't make it—or Carrie *did* make it. He kept that blue vase handy, for when Cory had to go, he had to let loose immediately, and woe if a girl was in the bathroom with the door locked. More than once he had wet his short pants, and then he'd bury his face in my lap, so ashamed. (Carrie was never ashamed—my fault for being slow.)

“Cathy, when do we get to go outside?” he whispered after one accident.

“As soon as Momma says we can.”

“Why doesn't Momma say we can?”

“There is an old man downstairs who doesn't know we're up here. And we have to wait until he likes Momma again, enough to accept us too.”

“Who is the old man?”

“Our grandfather.”

“Is he like the grandmother?”

“Yeah, I'm afraid he is.”

“Why don't he like us?”

“He doesn't like us because ... because, well, because he hasn't got good sense. I think he's sick in the head, as well as in the heart.”

“Does Momma still like us?”

Now, that was a question to keep me awake at night.

* * *

More than weeks had passed when a Sunday came where Momma didn't show up during the day. It hurt not having her with us, when we knew she had the day off from school, and we knew she was somewhere in this very house.

I lay flat on my stomach on the floor where it was cooler, reading *Jude the Obscure*. Chris was up in the attic searching for new reading material, and the twins were crawling around pushing tiny cars and trucks.

The day dragged on into evening before finally the door opened and Momma came gliding into our room, wearing tennis shoes, white shorts and a white top with a sailor collar trimmed in red and blue braid, and an anchor design. Her face was rosy tan from being outdoors. She looked so vibrantly healthy, so unbelievably happy, while we wilted and felt half-sick from the oppressive heat of this room.

Sailing clothes—oh I knew them—that's what she'd been doing. I stared at her resentfully, longing for my skin to be tanned by the sun, with my legs as healthily colored as hers. Her hair was windblown, and it flattered her well, making her seem almost ten times more beautiful, earthy, sexy. And she was almost old, almost forty.

Very obviously, this afternoon had given her more pleasure than any day since our father died. And it was almost five o'clock. Dinner was served at seven downstairs. That meant she would have very little time to spend with us before she had to leave for her own rooms, where she could bathe, then change into something more suitable for the meal.

I laid aside my book and turned over to sit up. I was hurting, and I wanted to hurt her, too: "Where have you been?" I demanded in an ugly tone. What right did she have to be enjoying herself when we were locked away, and kept from doing the youthful things that were our right? I would never have a summer when I was twelve again, nor would Chris enjoy this fourteenth summer, or the twins their fifth.

The ugly, accusing tone of my voice paled her radiance. She blanched and her lips quivered, and perhaps she regretted

bringing us a big wall calendar so we could know when it was Saturday or Sunday. The calendar was filled with our big red X's to mark off our imprisoned days, our hot, lonely, suspenseful, hurting days.

She fell into a chair and crossed her lovely legs, picking up a magazine to fan herself. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," she said, with a loving smile in my direction. "I wanted to stop by and visit this morning, but my father demanded all of my attention, and I'd made plans for this afternoon, though I did cut them short so I could spend some time with my children before dinner." Though she didn't look sweaty, she raised a sleeveless arm and fanned her armpit as though this room was more than she could bear. "I've been sailing, Cathy," she said. "My brothers taught me how to sail when I was nine, and then when your father came here to live, I taught him how. We used to spend a lot of time on the lake. Sailing is almost like flying ... wonderful fun," she ended lamely, realizing her fun had stolen *our* fun.

"Sailing?" I just about screamed. "Why weren't you downstairs telling the grandfather about us? How long do you intend to keep us locked up here? Forever?"

Her blue eyes skipped nervously about the room; she appeared on the verge of getting up from the chair we seldom used, for we saved it especially for her—her throne. Maybe she would have gone then and there if Chris hadn't come down from the attic with his arms loaded down with encyclopedias so old they didn't include television or jet planes.

"Cathy, don't shout at our mother," he scolded. "Hi, Mom. Boy, do you look great! I love that sailing outfit you've got on." He put down his load of books on the dressing table he used for a desk, then strolled over to put his arms around her. I felt betrayed, not only by Momma, but by my brother. The summer was almost over, and we hadn't done anything, been on a picnic or had a swim, or walked in the woods, even seen a boat or put on a bathing suit to wade in a backyard pool.

"Momma!" I cried out, jumping to my feet, and ready to do battle for our freedom. "I think it's time you told your father

about us! I'm sick of living in this one room, and playing in the attic! I want our twins out in the fresh air and sunshine, and I want out, too! *I* want to go sailing! If the grandfather has forgiven you for marrying Daddy, then why can't he accept us? Are we so ugly, so terrible, so stupid he'd be ashamed to claim us as his blood kin?"

She shoved Chris away from her, then sank weakly down into the chair she'd just abandoned, leaned forward, and bowed her face down into her hands. Intuitively, I guessed she was going to reveal some truth she'd previously held back. I called to Cory and Carrie and told them to sit close at my sides so I could put my arm about each. And Chris, though I thought he would stay close by Momma's side, came over to sit on the bed next to Cory. We were again, as we'd been before, small fledgling birds sitting on a clothesline waiting for a strong gust of wind to blow us asunder.

"Cathy, Christopher," she began, her head still bowed, though her hands were in her lap nervously working, "I haven't been completely honest with you."

As if I hadn't guessed that already.

"Will you be staying for dinner with us tonight?" I asked, for some reason wanting to put off the full truth.

"Thank you for asking me. I'd like to stay, but I've made other plans for this evening."

And this was our day, our time to be with her until dark. And yesterday she'd spent only half an hour with us.

"The letter," she murmured, and her head lifted and shadows darkened the blue of her eyes into green, "the letter my mother wrote when we were still in Gladstone. That letter invited us to live here. I didn't tell you that my father wrote a short note on the bottom."

"Yes, Momma, go on," I urged. "Whatever you have to tell us, we can take it."

Our mother was a poised woman, cool and self-possessed. But there was one thing she could never control, and that was her hands. Always they betrayed her emotions. One willful,

capricious hand rose to flutter near her throat, fingering there, seeking some string of pearls to twist and untwist, and since she wore no jewelry, her fingers just endlessly sought. The fingers on the hand she kept in her lap restlessly rasped together, as if to cleanse themselves.

“Your grandmother, she wrote the letter, signed it, but at the end, my father added his note.” She hesitated, closing her eyes, waited a second or two, and then opened them to glance at us again. “Your grandfather wrote he was glad your father was dead. He wrote the evil and corrupt always get what they deserve. He wrote the only good thing about my marriage was it hadn’t created any Devil’s issue.”

Once I would have asked: What was that? Now I knew. Devil’s issue was the same as Devil’s spawn—something evil, rotten, born to be bad.

I sat on the bed with my arms about the twins, and I looked at Chris, who must be much like Daddy had been at his age, and a vision flashed of my father in his white tennis clothes, standing tall, proud, golden-haired, and bronze-skinned. Evil was dark, crooked, crouched and small—it didn’t stand straight and smile at you with clear sky-blue eyes that never lied.

“My mother made the plans for your concealment on a page of the letter my father didn’t read,” she concluded lamely, her face flushed.

“Was our father considered evil and corrupt only because he married his half-niece?” asked Chris, in the same controlled, cool voice our mother had used. “Is that the only thing he ever did wrong?”

“Yes!” she cried, happy that he, her beloved, understood. “Your father in all his life committed one single, unforgivable sin—and that was to fall in love with me. The law forbids marriage between an uncle and niece, even those who are only half-related. Please don’t condemn us. I explained how it was with us. Of us all, your father was the best ...” She faltered, on the verge of tears, and pleaded with her eyes, and I knew, I knew what was coming next.

“What is evil, and what is corrupt, is in the eyes of the beholder,” she rushed on, eager to make us see it her way. “Your grandfather could find these faults in an angel. He is the kind of man who expects perfection from everyone in his family, and he is far from perfect. But just try and tell him that, and he would smack you down.” She swallowed nervously then, appearing near sick with what she had to say. “Christopher, I thought once we were here, and I could tell him about you, how you were the most brilliant boy in your class, and always have been a straight-A student, and I thought when he saw Cathy, and knew of her great talent for dancing—I thought surely those two things alone would win him over without him even seeing the twins, how beautiful they are and how sweet—and who knows what talent they have waiting to be developed? I thought, foolishly, hopefully, that he would easily yield and say he’d made a mistake in believing our marriage was so wrong.”

“Momma,” I said weakly, almost crying myself, “you make it sound as if you’re never going to tell him. He’s never going to like us, no matter how pretty the twins are, or how smart Chris is, or how good I can dance. None of it’s gonna make any difference to him. He’ll still hate us, and think of us as Devil’s issue, won’t he?”

She got up and came to us, and she fell down on her knees again and tried to wrap us all in her embrace. “Haven’t I told you before he hasn’t got long to live? He gasps for breath every time he exerts himself in the least way? And if he doesn’t die soon, I’ll find a way to tell him about you. I swear I will. Just have patience. Be understanding. What fun you lose now, I’ll make up for later on, a thousandfold!”

Her teary eyes were beseeching. “Please, please, for me, because you love me, and I love you, keep on having patience. It won’t be long, it can’t be long, and I’ll do what I can to make your lives as enjoyable as possible. And think of the riches we’ll have one day soon!”

“It’s all right, Momma,” said Chris, drawing her into his embrace just as our father would. “What you ask isn’t too much, not when we have so much to gain.”

“Yes,” Momma said eagerly, “just a short while more to sacrifice, and a little more patience, and all that is sweet and good in life will be yours.”

What was there left for me to say? How could I protest? Already we’d sacrificed over three weeks—what was a few more days, or weeks, or even another month?

At the end of the rainbow waited the pot of gold. But rainbows were made of faint and fragile gossamer—and gold weighed a ton—and since the world began, gold was the reason to do most anything.

To Make a Garden Grow



Now we knew the full truth.

We would be in this room until the day our grandfather died. And it came to me in the night, when I was low and dreary, that perhaps she had known from the very beginning that her father was not the kind to forgive anyone anything.

“But,” said my cheerful optimist Christopher, “any day could see him gone. That is the way of heart disease. A clot could break free and find its way to his heart or lung and snuff him out like a candle.”

Chris and I said cruel and irreverent things between ourselves, but in our hearts we ached, knowing it was wrong, and we were disrespectful as a way to salve the pain of our bleeding self-esteem.

“Now look,” he said, “since we are going to be up here a while longer, we should set about with more determination to placate the twins, and ourselves, with more entertaining things to do. And when we really apply ourselves, gosh knows, we might just dream up some pretty wild and fantastic things.”

When you have an attic full of junk, and great armoires full of rotting, stinking, but nevertheless very fancy costumes, you are inspired to put on plays, naturally. And since one day I was going to be on stage, I would be the producer, the director, the choreographer, as well as the female star. Chris, of course, would have to play all the male lead roles, and the twins could participate and play minor parts.

But they didn’t want to participate! They wanted to be the audience, and sit and watch and applaud.

It wasn’t such a bad idea, for what was a play without an audience! It was a great pity they didn’t have any money to buy tickets.

“We’ll call this dress rehearsal,” said Chris, “and since you seem to be everything else, and know everything about theatrical productions, you write the script.”

Hah! As if I needed to write the script. This was my chance to play Scarlett O’Hara. We had the hoops to wear under the flouncy ruffled skirts, and the stays to squeeze you tight, and just the clothes for Chris to wear, and fancy parasols with a few holes. The trunks and the armoires offered a great deal to select from, and I had to have the best costume, hauled from one of the armoires, and the underwear and petticoats came from one of the trunks. I’d curled my hair in rags so it hung in long, spiraling curls, and on my head I wore a floppy old Leghorn hat of straw, bedecked with faded silk flowers and banded by green satin ribbon, that was browning about the edges. My ruffled gown worn over wire hoops was of some flimsy stuff that felt like voile. Once, I think, it might have been pink, now it was hard to say just what color it was.

Rhett Butler wore the fancy costume of cream-colored trousers, and a brown velvet jacket with pearl buttons, and a satin vest underneath with fault red roses scattered on it. “Come, Scarlett,” he said to me, “We’ve got to escape Atlanta before Sherman reaches here and sets the town on fire.”

Chris had strung ropes on which we draped blankets to act as stage curtains, and our audience of two were stomping their feet impatiently, eager to see Atlanta burn. I followed Rhett onto the “stage” and was ready to taunt and tease, flirt and bewitch, and put *him* on fire before I rushed off to some pale-haired Ashley Wilkes, when one of my bedraggled ruffles caught beneath my too large, funny-looking old shoe, and down I sprawled in an undignified heap that showed my dirty pantaloons with lace hanging in ragged strings. The audience gave me a standing ovation, thinking this was a pratfall and part of the act. “Play’s over!” I announced, and began to rip off the smelly old clothes.

“Let’s eat!” cried Carrie, who’d say anything to take us down from this despised attic.

Cory pouted his lower lip and looked around. “I wish we had the garden again,” he said so wistfully it hurt. “I don’t like

to swing when the flowers don't sway in the wind." His flaxen hair had grown long enough to touch his shirt collar, and it curled in ringlets, while Carrie's hair hung halfway down her back and rippled like cascading waves. They were wearing blue today, for Monday. We had colors for each day. Yellow was our Sunday color. Red was for Saturday.

The wish spoken by Cory put thoughts into Chris's head, for he turned in a slow circle, giving the huge attic an appraising survey. "Admittedly this attic is a grim and dreary place," he mused, "but why can't we, as a constructive way to use our creative talents, bring about a metamorphosis and turn this ugly caterpillar into a brilliant soaring butterfly?" He smiled at me, at the twins, in such a charming, convincing way that I was immediately won over. It *would* be fun to attempt to pretty up this dismal place, and give the twins a colorful fake garden where they could swing and enjoy looking at beauty. Of course, we'd never finish decorating all of the attic, it was so tremendous—and any day the grandfather could die, and then we'd leave, never to return again.

We couldn't wait for Momma to come that evening, and when she did, Chris and I enthusiastically told her our plans of decorating the attic, and turning it into a cheerful garden the twins wouldn't be afraid of. The strangest expression flickered momentarily in her eyes.

"Well, now," she said brightly, "if you're going to make the attic pretty, first you must make it clean. And I'll do what I can to help."

Momma sneaked up mops, pails, brooms, scrub brushes, and boxes of soap powder. She went down on her knees beside us to scrub in the attic corners, and around the edges, and under the large pieces of furniture. I marveled that our mother knew how to scrub and clean. When we lived in Gladstone, we had a twice weekly maid who came in to do all the hard, dreary things that would redden Momma's hands and break her fingernails. And here she was, on her hands and knees, wearing faded old blue jeans, an old shirt, her hair pinned up in a bun. I really admired her. It was hard, hot, demeaning

work—and she never once complained, only laughed and chatted and acted as if this was great fun.

In a week of hard work, we had most of the attic as clean as possible. Then she brought us insect repellent to kill what bugs had hidden from us while we cleaned. We swept up dead spiders and other crawlers by the bucketfuls. We threw them out of a back window, where they rolled to a lower section of the roof. Later the rain came to wash them down into the gutters. Then the birds found them and had a grisly feast while we four sat on a window ledge and watched. We never saw a rat or a mouse—but we saw droppings. We presumed they were waiting for all the hustle and bustle to calm down before they ventured out of their dark and secret places.

Now that the attic was clean, Momma brought us green plants, plus a spiky amaryllis that was supposed to bloom at Christmastime. I frowned when she said this—for we wouldn't be here then. "We'll take it with us," said Momma, reaching out to stroke my cheek. "We'll take all of our plants when we go, so don't frown and look unhappy. We wouldn't want to leave anything living, and loving of sunshine, in this attic."

We put our plants in the attic schoolroom for that room had windows facing east. Happy and gay, we all tripped down the narrow stairs, and Momma washed up in our bathroom, then fell exhausted into her special chair. The twins climbed up on her lap as I set the table for lunch. That was a good day, for she stayed until dinnertime, then sighed and said she'd have to go. Her father made such demands on her, wanting to know where she went every Saturday, and why she stayed so long.

"Can you sneak back to see us before bedtime?" Chris asked.

"I'm going to the movies tonight," she said evenly, "but before I leave, I'll slip in to see you again. I've got some of those little boxes of raisins that you can snack on between meals. I forgot to bring them with me."

The twins were crazy about raisins, and I was happy for them. "Are you going to the movies alone?" I asked.

“No. There’s a girl I grew up with—she used to be my best friend, and she’s married now. I’m going to the movies with them. She lives only a few houses from here.” She got up and went to the windows, and when Chris had the lights turned out, she parted the draperies and pointed in the direction of the house where her best friend lived. “Elena has two unmarried brothers, one is studying to be a lawyer. He goes to Harvard Law School, and the other is a tennis pro.”

“Momma!” I cried. “Are you dating one of those brothers?”

She laughed and let the draperies fall. “Turn on the lights, Chris. No, Cathy, I am not dating anyone. To tell you the truth, I’d rather go right to bed, I’m that tired. I really don’t care for musicals, anyway. I’d rather stay with my children, but Elena keeps insisting I get out, and when I keep refusing, she keeps asking why. I don’t want people to wonder why I stay home every weekend; that’s why occasionally I do have to go sailing, or to the movies.”

* * *

To make the attic even pretty seemed highly improbable—to make it a beautiful garden soared over the rainbow! It was going to take an enormous amount of hard work and creative ability, but that darned brother of mine was convinced we could do it *in no time at all*. He soon had our mother so sold on the idea that every day she went to secretarial school, she came back to us bearing coloring books from which we could cut out pre-drawn flowers. She brought us watercolor sets, many brushes, boxes of crayons, huge amounts of colored craft paper, fat pots of white paste, and four pairs of blunt-nosed scissors.

“Teach the twins to color and cut out flowers,” she instructed, “and let them participate in all you undertake. I nominate you their kindergarten teachers.”

* * *

She came from that city an hour’s train ride away, glowing with radiant good health, her skin fresh and rosy from outside air, her clothes so beautiful they took my breath away. She had shoes of every color, and bit by bit she was accumulating new

pieces of jewelry which she called “junk” jewelry, but somehow those rhinestones looked more like diamonds to me from the way they sparkled. She fell into “her” chair, exhausted, but happy, and told her of her day. “Oh, how I wish those typewriters had letters on the keys. I can’t seem to remember but one row. I have to look up at the wall chart everytime and that slows me down, and I’m not very good at remembering the bottom row, either. But I do know where all the vowels are. You use those keys more than any others, you know. So far my typing speed is twenty words per minute, and that’s not too good. Plus I make about four mistakes in those twenty words. And those shorthand squiggles ...” She sighed, as if they, too, had her baffled. “Well, I guess I’ll learn eventually; after all, other women do, and if they can, then I can.”

“Do you like your teachers, Momma?” asked Chris.

She giggled girlishly before she answered. “First, let me tell you about my typing teacher. Her name is Mrs. Helena Brady. She’s shaped very much like your grandmother—huge. Only her bosom is much larger! Really, hers is the most remarkable bosom I’ve ever seen! And her bra straps keep slipping off her shoulders, and if it isn’t her bra straps, then it’s her slip straps, and she’s always reaching into the neckline of her dress to haul them back into place, and the men in the class always snicker.”

“Do men take typing classes?” asked I, very surprised.

“Yes, there are a few young men there. Some are journalists, writers, or have some good reason for wanting to know how to type. And Mrs. Brady is divorced, and has a keen eye for one of those young men. She flirts with him, while he tries to ignore her. She’s about ten years older than he is, at least, and he keeps looking at me. Now don’t get any ideas, Cathy. He’s much too short for me. I couldn’t marry a man who couldn’t pick me up and carry me over the threshold. I could pick *him* up—he’s only five feet two.”

We all had a good laugh, for Daddy had been a full foot taller, and he had easily picked our mother up. We’d seen him do that many times—especially on those Friday nights when he came home, and they’d look at each other so funny.

“Momma, you’re not thinking of getting married again, are you?” Chris asked in the tightest of voices. Swiftly her arms went around him. “No darling, of course not. I loved your father dearly. It would take a very special man to fill his shoes, and so far I haven’t met one who measures up to even his outgrown socks.”

* * *

To play kindergarten teachers was great fun, or could have been, if our student body had been the least bit willing. But as soon as we had breakfast finished, our dishes washed and put away, our food stashed in the coldest place, and the hour of ten had come and gone with servants from the second floor, Chris and I each dragged a wailing twin up into the attic schoolroom. There we could sit at the student desks and make a grand mess cutting flower forms from the colored craft paper, using the crayons to glorify the colors with stripes and polka-dots. Chris and I made the best flowers—what the twins made looked like colored blobs.

“Modern art,” Chris named the flowers they made.

On the dull and gray slat walls we pasted up our goliath flowers. Chris ascended the old ladder with the missing rungs again so he could dangle down long strings tied to the attic rafters, and to these strings we fastened colorful blossoms that constantly moved in the attic drafts.

Our mother came up to view our efforts, and she gave us all a pleased smile. “Yes, you’re doing marvelously well. You *are* making it pretty up here.” And thoughtfully she moved closer to the daisies, as if considering something else she could bring us. The next day she came with a huge flat box containing colored glass beads and sequins, so we could add sparkle and glamor to our garden. Oh, we did slave over making those flowers, for whatever occupation we pursued, we pursued it with diligent, fervid zeal. The twins caught some of our enthusiasm, and they stopped howling and fighting and biting when we mentioned the word attic. For after all, the attic was slowly, but surely, turning into a cheerful garden. And the more it changed, the more determined we became to cover over every last wall in that endless attic!

Each day, of course, when Momma was home from that secretarial school, she had to view the day's accomplishments. "Momma," gushed Carrie in her breathless bird twitter, "that's all we do all day, make flowers, and sometimes Cathy, she don't want us to go downstairs and eat lunch!"

"Cathy, you mustn't become so preoccupied with decorating the attic that you forget to eat your meals."

"But, Momma, we're doing it for them, so they won't be so scared up there."

She laughed and hugged me. "My, you are the persistent one, you and your older brother both. You must have inherited that from your father, certainly not from me. I give up so easily."

"Momma!" I cried, made uneasy. "Are you still going to school? You are getting better at typing, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course I am." She smiled again, and then settled back in her chair, holding up her hand and seeming to admire the bracelet she wore. I started to ask why she needed so much jewelry to attend secretarial school, but she spoke instead. "What you need to make now is animals for your garden."

"But, Momma, if roses are impossible to make, how can we even *draw* animals?"

She gave me a wry little smile as she traced a cool finger over my nose "Oh, Cathy, what a doubting Thomas you are. You question everything, doubt everything, when you should know by now, you can do anything you want to, if you want to badly enough. And I'm going to tell you a secret I've known about for some time—in this world, where everything is complicated, there is also a book to teach you how simple everything can be."

That I was to find out.

Momma brought us art instruction books by the dozens. The first of these books taught us to reduce all complicated designs into basic spheres, cylinders, cones, rectangles and cubes. A chair was just a cube—I hadn't known that before. A Christmas tree was just an inverted ice-cream cone—I hadn't

known that before, either. People were just combinations of all those basic forms: spheres for heads; arms, necks, legs, torso, upper and lower, were only rectangular cubes or cylinders, and triangles made for feet. And believe it or not, using this basic method, with just a few simple additions, we soon had rabbits, squirrels, birds, and other small friendly creatures—all made by our very own hands.

True, they were peculiar looking. I thought their oddities made them all the sweeter. Chris colored all his animals realistically. I decorated mine with polka-dots, gingham checks, plaids, and put lace-edged pockets on the laying hens. Because our mother had shopped in a sewing notions store, we had lace, cords of all colors, buttons, sequins, felt, pebbles and other decorative materials. The possibilities were endless. When she put that box into my hands, I know my eyes must have shown all the love I felt for her then. For this did prove she thought of us when she was out in the world. She wasn't just thinking of new clothes for herself, and new jewelry and cosmetics. She *was* trying to make our confined lives as pleasant as possible.

One rainy afternoon Cory came running to me with an orange paper snail he'd laborously worked on the entire morning, and half of the afternoon. He'd eaten but a little of his favorite lunch, peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, he was that anxious to get back to his "work" and put on the "things that stick out of the head."

Proudly, he stood back, small legs spread wide, as he watched each flicker of expression on my face. What he'd made resembled nothing more than a lopsided beachball with trembling feelers.

"Do you think it's a good snail?" he asked, frowning up and looking worried when I couldn't find words to say.

"Yes," I said quickly, "it's a wonderful, beautiful snail."

"You don't think it looks like an orange?"

"No, of course not—oranges don't have swirls, like this snail does—or crooked feelers."

Chris stepped closer to view the pitiful creature I held in my hands. “You don’t call those things feelers,” he corrected. “A snail is a member of the mollusc family, which have soft bodies without any backbones—and those little things are called antennae, which are connected to its brain; it has tubular intestines that end with its mouth, and it moves by a gear-edged foot.”

“Christopher,” I said coolly, “when Cory and I want to know about a snail’s tubular intestines, we’ll send you a telegram, and please go sit on a tack and wait for it.”

“Do you want to be ignorant all your life?”

“Yes!” I flared back, “When it comes to snails, I prefer knowing nothing!”

Cory tagged behind me as we went to watch Carrie pasting pieces of purple paper together. Her working method was slapdash, unlike Cory’s careful plodding. Carrie used her pair of scissors to ruthlessly stab a hole into her purple ... thing. Behind the hole she pasted a bit of red paper. When she had this ... thing ... put together, she named it a worm. It undulated like a giant boa constrictor, flashing a single mean red eye with black spider-leg lashes. “Its name is Charlie,” she said, handing over her four feet of “worm” to me. (When things came to us without a name of their own, we made their names begin with a C to make them one of us.)

On the attic walls, in our beautiful garden of paper flowers, we pasted up the epileptic snail beside the fierce and menacing worm. Oh, they did make a pair. Chris sat down and lettered a big sign in red: ALL ANIMALS BEWARE OF EARTH-WORM!!!

I lettered my own sign, feeling Cory’s small snail was the one in jeopardy, IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE? (Cory named this snail Cindy Lou.)

Momma viewed this day’s accomplishments with laughter, all smiles, because we were having fun. “Yes, of course there is a doctor in the house,” she said, and leaned to kiss Chris’s cheek. “This son of mine has always known what to do for a sick animal. And Cory, I adore your snail—she looks ... so ... so sensitive.”

“Do you like my Charlie?” asked Carrie anxiously. “I made him good. I used all the purple to make him big. Now we don’t have no more purple.”

“It’s a beautiful worm, really a gorgeous worm,” said Momma, taking the twins onto her lap and giving them the hugs and kisses she sometimes forgot. “I especially like the black lashes you put around that red eye—very effective.”

It was a cozy, homey scene, the three of them in her chair, with Chris perched on the arm, his face close to his mother’s. Then I had to go and spoil it all, as was my hateful way.

“How many words can you type per minute now, Momma?”

“I’m getting better.”

“How much better?”

“I’m doing the best I can, really, Cathy—I told you the keyboard doesn’t have any letters.”

“What about shorthand—how fast can you take dictation?”

“I’m trying. You’ve got to have patience. You don’t learn things like that overnight.”

Patience. I colored patience gray, hung over with black clouds. I colored hope yellow, just like that sun we could see for a few short morning hours. Too soon the sun rose high in the sky and disappeared from view, leaving us bereft, and staring at blue.

* * *

When you grow up, and have a million adult things to do, you forget how long a day can be for a child. It seemed we lived through four years in the course of seven weeks. Then came another dreaded Friday when we had to get up at dawn and scurry around like mad to rid the bedroom, and the bathroom, of all evidence that we existed. I stripped off the sheets from the bed and rolled them into a ball along with the pillowcases and blankets, and I put the bedspreads directly over the mattress covers—the way the grandmother had ordered me to do. The night before, Chris had taken apart the train tracks.

Like crazy we worked to make the room neat, spotless, plus the bathroom, and then the grandmother came in with the picnic basket and ordered us to take it into the attic, and we could eat breakfast there. I had most carefully wiped away all our fingerprints, and the mahogany furniture shone. She scowled heavily when she saw this, and darn if she didn't use dust from a vacuum cleaner bag to make all the furniture tops dull again.

At seven we were in the attic schoolroom, eating our cold cereal with raisins and milk. Down below we could faintly hear the maids moving around in our room. On tippy-toes we moved to the stairwell, and huddled there on the top step listening to what went on below, though we were scared every minute of being discovered.

Hearing the maids move about, laughing and chatting, while the grandmother hovered near the closet door directing them to clean the mirrors, use the lemon wax, air the mattresses—it all gave me the queerest feeling. Why didn't those maids notice something different? Didn't we leave any odor behind to let them know Cory often wet his bed? It was as if we really *didn't* exist, and weren't alive, and the only scents we had were imaginary. We wrapped our arms about each other and held onto each other tightly, tightly.

The maids didn't enter the closet; they didn't open the tall, narrow door. They didn't see us, or hear us, nor did they seem to think it odd the grandmother never left the room for a second while they were in there scrubbing the tub, cleaning the toilet bowl, scrubbing the tile floor.

That Friday did something strange to all of us. I believe we shriveled in our own estimations of ourselves, for afterwards we couldn't find words to say. We didn't enjoy our games, or our books, and so silently we cut out tulips and daisies and waited for Momma to come and bring hope with her again.

Still, we were young, and hope has strong roots in the young, right down to their toes, and when we entered the attic and saw our growing garden, we could laugh, and pretend. After all, we were making our mark in the world. We were

making something beautiful out of what had been drab and ugly.

Now the twins took off like butterflies, fluttering through the mobile flowers. We pushed them high on the swings and created windstorms to shake the flowers madly. We hid behind cardboard trees no taller than Chris, and sat on mushrooms made of papier-mâché, with colorful foam cushions on top, which were, honestly, better than the real thing—unless you had an appetite for eating mushrooms.

“It’s pretty!” cried Carrie, spinning around and around, holding to her short pleated skirt so we just had to see the new lace ruffled panties Momma had given her yesterday. All new clothes and shoes had to spend their first night with Carrie and Cory in their beds. (It’s terrible to wake up at night with your cheek resting on the sole of a sneaker.) “I’m going to be a ballerina, too,” she said happily, spinning and spinning until she eventually fell, and Cory went rushing to see if she had hurt herself. She screamed to see the blood ooze from a cut on her knee. “Oh—I don’t want to be a ballerina if it hurts!”

I didn’t dare let her know it hurt—oh, boy, did it hurt!

* * *

Yesterdays ago, I’d ambled through real gardens, real forests—and always I felt their mystical aura—as if something magic and marvelous was waiting just around the bend. To make our attic garden enchanted, too, Chris and I crawled around and drew white-chalk daisies on the floor, joining them in a ring. Inside that fairy ring of white flowers, all that was evil was banished. There we could sit cross-legged on the floor, and by the light of a single candle burning, Chris and I would spin long, involved tales of good fairies who took care of small children, and wicked witches who always went down in defeat.

Then Cory spoke up. As always, he was the one to ask the most difficult questions to answer. “Where has all the grass gone?”

“God took the grass to heaven.” And thusly, Carrie saved me from answering.

“Why?”

“For Daddy. Daddy likes to mow the lawn.”

Chris’s eyes met with mine—and we’d thought they’d forgotten Daddy.

Cory puckered up his faint brows, staring at the little cardboard trees Chris had made. “Where are all the big trees?”

“Same place,” said Carrie. “Daddy likes big trees.” This time my eyes took wild flight. How I hated lying to them—telling them this was only a game, an endless game they seemed to endure with more patience than Chris or me. And they never once asked why we had to play such a game.

Never once did the grandmother come up to the attic to ask what we were doing, though very often she opened the bedroom door as silently as possible, hoping we wouldn’t notice the noise of the key turning in the lock. She’d peer in the crack, trying to catch us doing something “unholy” or “wicked.”

In the attic we were free to do anything we wanted without fear of retaliation, unless God wielded a whip. Not one time did the grandmother leave our room without reminding us that God was up above to see, even when she was not. Because she never went even into the closet to open the door of the attic stairwell, my curiosity was aroused. I reminded myself to ask of Momma as soon as she came in, so I wouldn’t forget again. “Why doesn’t the grandmother go into the attic herself and check to see what we do? Why does she just ask, and think we’ll tell the truth?”

Tired and dejected looking, Momma wilted in her special chair. Her new green wool suit looked very expensive. She had been to a hairdresser, and the style was changed. She answered my question in an offhand manner, as if her thoughts were dwelling on something more appealing, “Oh, haven’t I told you before? Your grandmother suffers from claustrophobia. That’s an emotional affliction that makes it difficult for her to breathe in any small, confined area. You see, when she was a child, her parents used to lock her in a closet for punishment.”

Wow! How difficult to think that large old woman had once been young, and small enough to punish. I could almost feel sorry for the child she'd been, but I knew she was happy to see *us* locked up. Every time she glanced our way, it showed in her eyes—her smug satisfaction to have us so neatly captured. Still, it was a peculiar thing that fate would give her such a fear, and thus give Chris and me reason enough to kiss the dear, sweet, close walls of that narrow passageway. Often Chris and I speculated on how all the massive furniture had been taken up into the attic. Certainly it couldn't have been maneuvered up through the small closet and then up the stairway, which was barely more than a foot wide. And though we searched diligently to find another larger doorway into the attic, we never found one. Maybe one was hidden behind one of the giant armoires too heavy for us to move. Chris thought the largest furniture could have been hauled up to the roof, then passed through one of the big windows.

Every day the witch-grandmother came into our room, to stab with her flintstone eyes, to snarl with her thin, crooked lips. Every day she asked the same old questions: “What have you been up to? What do you do in the attic? Did you say grace before today's meals? Did you go down on your knees last night and ask God to forgive your parents for the sin they committed? Are you teaching the youngest two the words of the Lord? Do you use the bathroom together, boys and girls?” Boy, did her eyes flash mean then! “Are you modest, always? Do you keep the private parts of your bodies from the eyes of others? Do you touch your bodies when it's not necessary for cleanliness?”

God! How dirty she made skin seem. Chris laughed when she was gone. “I think she must glue on her underwear,” he joked.

“No! She nails it on!” I topped.

“Have you noticed how much she likes the color gray?”

Noticed? Who wouldn't notice? Always gray. Sometimes the gray had fine pinstripes of red or blue, or a dainty plaid design, very faint, or jacquard—but always the fabric was taffeta with the diamond brooch at the throat of a high and

severe neckline, softened a bit by hand-crocheted collars. Momma had already told us a widow-lady in the nearest village custom made these uniforms that looked like armor. “This lady is a dear friend of my mother’s. And she wears gray because it is cheaper to buy material by the bolt than by the yard—and your grandfather owns a mill that makes fine fabrics down in Georgia somewhere.”

Good golly, even the rich had to be stingy.

One September afternoon I raced down the attic stairs in a terrible hurry to reach the bathroom—and I collided smack into the grandmother! She seized hold of my shoulders, and glared down into my face. “Watch where you’re going, girl!” she snapped. “Why are you in such a hurry?”

Her fingers felt like steel through the thin fabric of my blue blouse. She had spoken first, so I could answer. “Chris is painting the most beautiful landscape,” I breathlessly explained, “and I’ve got to get right back with fresh water before his large wash dries. It’s important to keep the colors clean.”

“Why doesn’t he come for his own water? Why do you wait on him?”

“He’s painting, and he asked if I’d mind fetching him fresh water, and I wasn’t doing anything but watching, and the twins would spill the water.”

“Fool! Never wait on a man! Make him wait on himself. Now, spill out the truth—what are you *really* doing up there?”

“Honest, I’m telling the truth. We’re working hard to make the attic pretty so the twins won’t be afraid up there, and Chris is a wonderful artist.”

She sneered and asked with contempt, “How would *you* know?”

“He is gifted artistically, Grandmother—all his teachers said so.”

“Has he asked you to pose for him—without clothes?”

I was shocked. “No. Of course not!”

“Then why are you trembling?”

“I’m ... I’m scared of ... of you,” I stammered. “Every day you come in and ask what sinful, unholy thing we’re doing, and truly, I don’t know what it is you think we’re doing. If you don’t tell us exactly, how can we avoid doing something bad, not knowing it *is* bad?”

She looked me over, down to my bare feet, and smiled sarcastically. “Ask your older brother—he’ll know what I mean. The male of the species is born knowing everything evil.”

Boy, did I blink! Chris wasn’t evil, or bad. There were times when he was tormenting, but not unholy. I tried to tell her this, but she didn’t want to hear.

Later on in the day she came into our room bearing a clay pot of yellow chrysanthemums. Striding directly to me, she put that pot in my hands. “Here are real flowers for your fake garden,” she said without warmth. It was such an unwitch-like thing for her to do, it took my breath away. Was she going to change, see us differently? Could she learn to like us? I thanked her effusively for the flowers, perhaps too much, for she spun around and stalked out, as if embarrassed.

Carrie came running to put her small face into the mass of yellow petals. “Pretty,” she said. “Cathy, can I have them?” Of course she could have them. With reverence that pot of flowers was placed on the eastern windowsills in the attic to receive the morning sunshine. There was nothing to see but hills and far off mountains and the trees in between, and above everything hovered a blue mist. The real flowers spent the nights with us, so the twins could wake up in the morning and see something beautiful and alive growing near them.

* * *

Whenever I think of being young, I see again those blue-misted mountains and hills, and the trees that paraded stiffly up and down the slopes. And I smell again the dry and dusty air that was ours to breathe daily. I see again the shadows in the attic that blended so well with the shadows in my mind,

and I hear again the unspoken, unanswered questions of Why? When? How much longer?

Love ... I put so much faith in it.

Truth ... I kept believing it falls always from the lips of the one you love and trust the most.

Faith ... it's all bound up to love and trust. Where does one end and the other start, and how do you tell when love is the blindest of all?

More than two months had passed, and still the grandfather lived on.

We stood, we sat, we lay on the wide ledges of the attic dormer windows. We wistfully watched as the treetops of summer's old dark green turned overnight into the brilliant scarlets, golds, oranges, and browns of autumn. It moved me; I think it moved all of us, even the twins, to see the summer go away, and see the fall begin. And we could only watch, but never participate.

My thoughts took frantic flight, wanting to escape this prison, and seek out the wind so it could fan my hair and sting my skin, and make me feel alive again. I yearned for all those children out there who were running wild and free on the browning grass, and scuffling their feet in the dry, crackling leaves, just as I used to do.

Why was it I never realized when I was able to run wild and free that I was experiencing happiness? Why did I think back then, that happiness was always just ahead in the future, when I would be an adult, able to make my own decisions, go my own way, be my own person? Why had it seemed that being a child was never enough? Why had I thought that happiness reserved itself for those grown to full size?

"You're looking sad," said Chris, who was crowded close beside me, with Cory on the other side of him, and Carrie on the other side of me. Nowadays Carrie was my little shadow to follow where I led, and mimic what I did, and imitate the way she thought I felt—just as Chris had his small mimicking shadow too, in Cory. If there were ever four siblings closer

than we were, they would have had to have been Siamese quadruplets.

“Aren’t you going to answer me?” asked Chris. “Why are you looking so sad? The trees look beautiful, don’t they? When it’s summer, I like summer best; yet when fall comes, I like fall best, and when winter comes, then that’s my favorite season, and then comes spring, and I think spring is best.”

Yes, that was my Christopher Doll. He could make do with the here and now, and always think it best, no matter what the circumstances.

“I was thinking back to old Mrs. Bertram and her boring talk of the Boston Tea Party. She made history seem so dull, and the people so unreal. Yet, I’d like to be bored like that again.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, “I know what you mean. I thought school a bore, too, and history a dull subject, particularly American history—all but the Indians, and the old West. But at least when we were in school, we were doing what other kids our ages did. Now we’re just wasting time, doing nothing. Cathy, let’s not waste one minute! Let’s prepare ourselves for the day we get out. If you don’t set your goals firmly in mind, and strive always to reach them, then you never do. I’ll convince myself if I can’t be a doctor, then I won’t want to be anything else, or want anything more that money can buy!”

He said that so intensely. I wanted to be a prima ballerina, though I would settle for something else. Chris scowled as if reading my mind. He turned his summer-blue eyes on me and scolded because I hadn’t practiced my ballet exercises once since I’d come upstairs to exist. “Cathy, tomorrow I’m attaching a barre in the portion of the attic we’ve finished decorating—and five or six hours each day, you are going to practice, just like in ballet class!”

“I am not! Nobody is going to tell me I have to do anything! Besides, you can’t do ballet positions unless you are properly dressed for it!”

“What a stupid thing to say!”

“That’s because I *am* stupid! *You*, Christopher, have *all* the brains!” With that I burst into tears and fled from the attic, racing past all the paper flora and fauna. Run, run, run for the stairs. Fly, fly, fly down the steep and narrow wooden steps, daring fate to make you fall. Break a leg, a neck, put you in a coffin dead. Make everybody sorry then; make them cry for the dancer I should have been.

I threw myself down on my bed and sobbed into the pillow. There was nothing here but dreams, hopes—nothing real. I’d grow old, ugly, never see lots of people again. That old man downstairs could live to be a hundred and ten! All those doctors would keep him living forever—and I would miss out on Halloween—no tricking, no treating, no parties, no candy. Oh, I felt sorry for myself, and I vowed somebody was going to pay, pay, pay for all of this, somebody was, somebody was!

Wearing their dirty white sneakers, they came to me, my two brothers, my small sister, and each sought to give me comfort with small gifts of cherished possessions: Carrie’s red and purple crayons, Cory’s *Peter Rabbit* story book; but Chris, he just sat and looked at me. I never felt so small.

One evening quite late, Momma came in with a large box that she put in my hands to open. There amidst sheets of white tissue were ballet costumes, one a bright pink, the other azure-blue, with leotards and toe shoes to match the tulle tutus. “From Christopher,” was written on the enclosed small card. And there were records of ballet music. I started to cry as I flung my arms around my mother, then around my brother. This time they weren’t tears of frustration, or despair. Now I had something to work toward.

“I wanted most of all to buy you a white costume,” said Momma, still hugging me. “They had a beauty in a size too large to fit you, and with it comes a tight cap of white feathers that curl over your ears—for *Swan Lake*—and I ordered it for you, Cathy. Three costumes should be enough to give you inspiration, shouldn’t they?”

Oh, yes! When Chris had the barre nailed securely to an attic wall, I practiced for hours on end while the music played. There wasn’t a large mirror behind the barre, like there had

been in the classes I had attended, but there was a huge mirror in my mind, and I saw myself as Pavlova, performing before ten thousand enraptured people, and encore after encore I took, bowing and accepting dozens of bouquets, every one red roses. In time, Momma brought me every one of Tchaikovsky's ballets to play on the record player, which had been hooked up to a dozen extension cords, which went down the stairs and plugged into a socket in our bedroom.

Dancing to beautiful music took me out of myself, and made me forget momentarily that life was passing us by. What did it matter when I was dancing? Better to pirouette and pretend I had a partner to support me when I did the most difficult positions. I'd fall, get up, then dance on again until I was out of breath and ached in every muscle, and my leotards were glued to me with sweat, and my hair was wet. I'd fall down flat on the floor to rest, and pant, then up again at the barre to do pliés. Sometimes I would be the Princess Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty* and sometimes I'd dance the part of the prince, as well, and leap high into the air and beat my feet together.

Once I looked up from my concluding dying swan spasms, and I saw Chris standing in the attic shadows, watching with the oddest expression on his face. Soon he'd be having a birthday, his fifteenth. How had it come about that already he seemed a man and not a boy? Was it only that vague look in his eyes that said he was moving quickly from childhood?

On full pointe I performed a sequence of those very small, even steps which are supposed to give the impression the dancer is gliding across the stage and creating what is poetically called "a string of pearls." In such a way I flutter-glided over to Chris and held out my arms. "Come, Chris, be my *danseur*; let me teach you the way."

He smiled, seeming bemused, but he shook his head and said that was impossible. "Ballet dancing is not for me. But I'd like to learn to waltz—if the music is Strauss."

He made me laugh. At that time the only waltz music we had (except ballet) were old Strauss records. I hurried over to

the record player to take off the *Swan Lake* records, and I put on *The Blue Danube*.

Chris was clumsy. He held me awkwardly, as if embarrassed. He stepped on my pink pointe shoes. But it was touching how hard he tried to get simple steps right, and I couldn't tell him all his talents must reside in his brain, and in the skill of his artistic hands, for certainly none of it drifted down to his legs and feet. And yet, and yet, there was something sweet and endearing about a Strauss waltz, easy to do, and romantic, and so unlike those athletic ballet waltzes that put you in a sweat, and left you panting for breath.

When Momma finally came through the door with that smashing white outfit for dancing *Swan Lake*, a beautifully feathered brief bodice, tight cap, white slippers, and white leotards so sheer the pink of my skin showed through, I gasped!

Oh, it seemed that love, hope, and happiness *could be* brought upstairs in one single giant-sized slippery-satin white box with a violet ribbon and given to me by someone who really cared when another who really cared, put this idea in her head.

“Dance, Ballerina, dance, and do your pirouette
In rhythm with your aching heart,
Dance, Ballerina, dance, you mustn't once forget
A dancer has to dance the part,
Once you said his love must wait its turn,
You wanted fame instead, I guess that's your concern,
We live and learn . . . and love is gone, Ballerina, gone . . .”

Eventually, Chris could do the waltz and the foxtrot. When I tried to teach him the Charleston, he refused: “I don't need to learn every kind of dance, like you do. I'm not going to be on stage; all I want to learn is how to get out on the dance floor with a girl in my arms, and not make a jackass of myself.”

I'd always been dancing. There wasn't any kind of dance I couldn't do, and didn't want to do.

“Chris, there’s one thing you’ve got to know: you cannot waltz your whole life through, or do the foxtrot. Every year brings about changes, like in clothes. You’ve got to keep up with the times, and adapt. Come on, let’s jazz it up a bit, so you can limber up your creaky joints that must be going stiff from so much sitting and reading.”

I stopped waltzing and ran to put on another record: “You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog.”

I raised my arms, and began to gyrate my hips.

“Rock ’n’ roll, Chris, you’ve got to learn how. Listen to the beat, let go, and learn to swivel your hips like Elvis. Come on, half-close your eyes, look sleepy, sexy, and pout your lips, for if you don’t, no girl is ever going to love you.”

“Then no girl is ever gonna love me.”

That’s the way he said it, dead flat, and dead serious. He would never let anyone force him to do anything that didn’t fit his image of himself, and in a way I liked him for being what he was, strong, resolute, determined to be his own person, even if his kind of person had long ago gone out of style. My Sir Christopher, the knight gallant.

* * *

God-like, we changed the seasons in the attic. We took down the flowers and hung up autumn leaves of brown, russet, scarlet and gold. If we were still here when winter’s snowflakes fell, we’d then substitute lacy white designs that we were all four cutting out in preparation, just in case. We made wild ducks and geese from white, gray, and black craft paper, and aimed our mobile birds in wide-arrowed skeins, heading them south. Birds were easy to make: just elongated ovals with spheres for heads, teardrops with wings.

When Chris wasn’t sitting with his head stuck in a book, he was painting watercolor scenes of snow-covered hills with lakes where ice skaters skimmed. He put small houses of yellow and pink deeply buried in snow, and smoke curled from the chimneys, and in the distance rose a misty church steeple. And when he was done, he painted all around this a dark

window-frame. When this was hung on the wall, we had a room with a view!

Once Chris had been a tease I could never please. An older brother... . But, we changed up there, he and I, just as much as we altered our attic world. We lay side by side on an old mattress, stained and smelly, for hours on end, and talked and talked, making plans for the kind of lives we'd live once we were free and rich as Midas. We'd travel around the world. He would meet and fall in love with the most beautiful, sexy woman who was brilliant, understanding, charming, witty and enormous fun to be with; she'd be the perfect housekeeper, the most faithful of devoted wives, the best of mothers, and she'd never nag, or complain, or cry, or doubt his judgment, or be disappointed or discouraged if he made stupid mistakes on the stock market and lost all of their money. She'd understand he'd done his best, and soon he'd make a fortune again with his wits and clever brains.

Boy, did he leave me feeling low. How in the world was I ever going to fill the needs of a man like Chris? Somehow or other, I knew he was setting the standard from which I'd judge all my future suitors.

“Chris, this intelligent, charming, witty, gorgeous woman, can't she have even one little flaw?”

“Why should she have flaws?”

“Take our mother, for instance, you think she is all of those things, except, perhaps, brilliant.”

“Momma's not stupid!” he defended vehemently. “She's just grown up in the wrong kind of environment! She was put down as a child, and made to feel inferior because she was a girl.”

As for me, after I'd been a prima ballerina for a number of years and was ready to marry and settle down, I didn't know what kind of man I wanted if he didn't measure up to Chris, or my father. I wanted him handsome, I knew that, for I wanted beautiful children. And I wanted him brilliant, or I might not respect him. Before I accepted his diamond engagement ring, I'd sit him down to play games, and if I won time and again,

I'd smile, shake my head, and tell him to take his ring back to the store.

And as we made our plans for the future, our pots of philodendron drooped limp; our ivy leaves turned yellow before they died. We bustled about, giving our plants tender loving care, talking to them, pleading with them, asking them to please stop looking sick, and perk up and straighten up their necks. After all, they were getting the healthiest of all sunlight—that eastern morning light.

* * *

In a few more weeks Cory and Carrie stopped pleading to go outside. No longer did Carrie beat her small fists against the oak door, and Cory stopped trying to kick it down with his ineffectual small feet, wearing only soft sneakers that didn't keep his small toes from bruising.

They now docilely accepted what before they'd denied—the attic “garden” was the only “outside” available to them. And in time, pitiful as it was, they soon forgot there was a world other than the one we were locked up in.

Chris and I had dragged several old mattresses close to the eastern windows, so we could open the windows wide and sunbathe in the beneficial rays that didn't have to pass through dirty window glass first. Children needed sunlight in order to grow. All we had to do was look at our dying plants, and register what the attic air was doing to our greenery.

Unabashedly, we stripped off all our clothes and sun-bathed in the short time the sun visited our windows. We saw each other's differences, and thought little about them, and frankly told Momma what we did, so we, too, wouldn't die from lack of sunlight. She glanced from Chris to me and weakly smiled. “It's all right, but don't let your grandmother know. She wouldn't approve, as you well know.”

I know now that she looked at Chris, and then at me for signs to indicate our innocence, or our awakening sexuality. And what she saw must have given her some assurance we were still only children, though she should have known better.

The twins loved to be naked and play as babies. They laughed and giggled when they used terms such as “do-do” and “twiddle-dee” and, enjoyed looking at the places where do-do came from, and wondered why Cory’s twiddle-dee maker was so different from Carrie’s.

“Why, Chris?” asked Carrie, pointing at what he had, and Cory had, and she and I didn’t have.

I went right on reading *Wuthering Heights* and tried to ignore such silly talk.

But Chris tried to give an answer that was correct as well as truthful: “All male creatures have their sexual organs on the outside, and females have theirs tucked away inside.”

“*Neatly* inside,” I said.

“Yes, Cathy, I know you approve of your *neat* body and I approve of my *un-neat* body, so let all of us rejoice that we have what we do. Our parents accepted our bare skins just as they did our eyes and hair, and so shall we. And I forgot, male birds have their organs ‘neatly’ tucked away inside, too, like females.”

Intrigued, I asked, “How do you know?”

“I just know.”

“You read it in a book?”

“What else—do you think I caught a bird and examined it?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.”

“At least I read to improve my brain, not just to entertain it.”

“You are going to make a very dull man, I’m warning—and if a male bird has tucked away sexual organs, doesn’t that make him a her?”

“*No!*”

“But, Christopher, I don’t understand: Why are birds different?”

“They have to be streamlined in order to fly.”

It was another of those puzzlements, and he had the answers. I just knew the brain of brains had the answers.

“All right, but why are male birds made the way they are? And leave out the streamlined part.”

He floundered, his face turned deeply red, and he sought a way to say something delicately. “Male birds can be aroused, and that makes what is in, come out.”

“How are they aroused?”

“Shut up and read your book—and let me read mine!”

* * *

Some days were too chilly for sunbathing. Then it grew frigid, so even wearing our heaviest and warmest clothes, we still shivered unless we ran. Too soon the morning sun stole away from the east, leaving us desolate and wishing there were windows on the southern side. But the windows were shuttered over and locked.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Momma, “the morning sun is the healthiest.”

Words that didn’t cheer us, since our plants were dying one by one while living in the healthiest sunlight of all.

As November began, the attic began to turn Arctic cold. Our teeth chattered, our noses ran, we sneezed often and complained to Momma that we needed a stove with a chimney, since the two stoves in the schoolroom had been disconnected. Momma spoke of bringing up an electric or gas heater. But she feared an electric stove might start a fire if connected to many extension cords. And a chimney was also needed for a gas heater.

She brought us long heavy underwear, and thick ski jackets with attached hoods, and bright ski pants with wool fleece lining. Wearing these clothes, we went daily into the attic where we could run free and escape the grandmother’s ever observant eyes.

* * *

In our cluttered bedroom we barely had room to walk without colliding into something to bruise our shins. In the attic we went frantic, screaming as we chased one another: hiding, finding, putting on small plays with frenzied activity. We fought sometimes, argued, cried, then went back to fierce play. We had a passion for hide and seek. Chris and I enjoyed making this game terribly threatening but only mildly so for the twins, who were already terrified enough of the many “bad things” that lingered in the dark attic shadows. Carrie earnestly said she saw monsters hiding behind the shrouded furniture.

One day, we were up in the attic polar zone, and searching to find Cory. “I’m going downstairs,” said Carrie, her small face resentful, her lips pouted. No good to try and make her stay and exercise—she was too stubborn. She sashayed off in her little red ski outfit, leaving me and Chris to hunt around to find Cory. Customarily, he was just too easy to find. His way was to choose the last place Chris had hidden. So it was our belief we could go straight to the third massive armoire and there would be Cory, crouched down on the floor, hiding under the old clothes, and grinning up at us. We indulged him, avoiding this particular wardrobe for a specific length of time. Then we decided to “find” him. And lo, when we looked—he wasn’t there!

“Well, I’ll be damned!” exclaimed Chris. “He’s finally going to be innovative and find an original place to hide.”

That’s what came of reading so many books. Big words stuck to his brains. I swiped at my leaky nose, and then took another look around. If truly innovative, there were a million good hiding places in this multi-winged attic. Why, it might take us hours and hours to find Cory. And I was cold, tired and irritable, sick of playing this game Chris insisted on daily to keep us active.

“Cory!” I yelled. “Come out from wherever you are! It’s time to eat lunch!” Now, that should bring him. Meals were a cozy and homey thing to do, and they broke up our long days into separate portions.

Still, he didn’t answer. I flashed angry eyes at Chris. “Peanut-butter-and-grape-jelly sandwiches,” I added. Cory’s

favorite meal, which should bring him running. Still, not a sound, not a cry, nothing.

Suddenly I was scared. I couldn't believe Cory had overcome his fear of the immense, shadowy attic, and was at last taking the game seriously—but just suppose he was trying to imitate Chris or me? Oh, God! “Chris!” I cried. “We've got to find Cory, and fast!”

He caught my panic, and whirled about to run, crying out Cory's name, ordering him to come out, stop hiding! Both of us ran and hunted, calling Cory repeatedly. Hide-and-seek-time was over—lunchtime now! No answer, and I was nearly freezing, despite all my clothes. Even my hands looked blue.

“Oh, my God,” murmured Chris, pulling up short, “just suppose he hid in one of the trunks, and the lid came down and accidentally latched?”

Cory would suffocate. He'd die!

Like crazy we ran and looked, throwing open the lids of every old trunk. We tossed out pantaloons, shifts, camisoles, petticoats, stays, suits, all with insane, distressed terror. And while I ran and searched, I prayed over and over again for God not to let Cory die.

“Cathy, I've found him!” shouted Chris. I spun around to see Chris lifting Cory's small, inert form from a trunk that had latched and kept him inside. Weak with relief, I stumbled over and kissed Cory's small, pale face, turned a funny color from lack of oxygen. His slitted eyes were unfocused. He was very nearly unconscious. “Momma,” he whispered, “I want my momma.”

But Momma was miles away, learning how to type and take shorthand. There was only a pitiless grandmother we didn't know how to reach in an emergency.

“Run quick and fill the bathtub with hot water,” said Chris, “but not too hot. We don't want to scald him.” Then he was racing with Cory in his arms toward the stairwell.

I reached the bedroom first, then sped on toward the bath. I glanced backward to see Chris lay Cory down on his bed.

Then he bent above, held Cory's nostrils, and then Chris lowered his head until his mouth covered Cory's blue lips, which were spread apart. My heart jumped! Was he dead? Had he stopped breathing?

Carrie took one glance at what was going on—her small twin blue and not moving—and she began to scream.

In the bathroom I turned on both faucets as far as they would go; full blast they gushed. Cory was going to die! Always I was dreaming of death and dying ... and most of the times my dreams came true! And as always, just when I thought God had turned his back on us and didn't care, I whirled to grab hold of my faith, and prayed, demanding Him not to let Cory die ... *please God, please God, please, please, please . . .*"

Maybe my desperate prayers did as much to help Cory back to life as the artificial resuscitation Chris performed.

"He's breathing again," said Chris, pale-faced and trembling as he carried Cory to the tub. "Now all we have to do is warm him up."

In no time at all we had Cory undressed and in the tub of warm water.

"Momma," whispered Cory as he came to, "I want Momma." Over and over again he kept saying it, and I could have pounded my fists through the walls it was so damned unfair! He should have his mother, and not just a pretend mother who didn't know what to do. I wanted out of this, even if I had to beg in the streets!

But I said in a calm way that made Chris lift his head and smile at me with approval, "Why can't you pretend *I'm* Momma? I'll do everything for you that she would. I'll hold you on my lap, and rock you to sleep while I sing you a lullaby, just as soon as you eat a little lunch, and drink some milk."

Both Chris and I were kneeling as I said this. He was massaging Cory's small feet, while I rubbed his cold hands and made them warm again. When his flesh was colored

normally again, we dried Cory off, put on his warmest pajamas, wrapped him in a blanket, and, in the old rocker Chris had brought down from the attic, I sat down and cuddled my small brother on my lap. I covered his wan face with kisses, and whispered sweet nothings in his ear that made him giggle.

If he could laugh, he could eat, and I fed him tiny bits of sandwich, and gave him sips of lukewarm soup, and long drinks of milk. And as I did this, I grew older. Ten years I aged in ten minutes. I glanced over at Chris as he sat down to eat his lunch, and saw that he, too, had changed. Now we knew there was real danger in the attic beyond that of slow withering from lack of sunlight and fresh air. We all faced threats much worse than the mice and spiders that insisted on living, despite all we did to kill every last one.

All alone Chris stalked up the narrow, steep stairs to the attic, his face grim as he entered the closet. I rocked on and on, holding both Carrie and Cory on my lap, and singing “Rock-a-bye, Baby.” Suddenly there was a fierce hammering coming from above, a terrible clamor the servants might hear.

“Cathy,” said Cory in a small whisper while Carrie nodded off into sleep, “I don’t like not having a momma anymore.”

“You do have a momma—you have me.”

“Are you as good as a real momma?”

“Yes, I think I am. I love you very much, Cory, and that’s what makes a real mother.”

Cory stared up at me with wide blue eyes, to see if I was sincere, or if I were only mocking his need. Then his small arms crept up around my neck, and he cuddled his head on my shoulder. “I’m so sleepy, Momma, but don’t stop singing.”

I was still rocking, still singing softly, when Chris came back wearing a satisfied expression. “Never again will a trunk lock inadvertently,” he said, “for I smashed every last lock and the wardrobes, now they won’t lock, either!”

I nodded.

He sat on the nearest bed and watched the slow rhythm of the rocking chair, listening to the childish tune I kept right on singing. A slow flush heated his face so he seemed embarrassed. “I feel so left out, Cathy. Would it be all right if I sat in the rocker first, and then the three of you piled on?”

Daddy used to do that. He’d hold all of us on his lap, even Momma. His arms had been long enough, and strong enough, to embrace us all, and give us the nicest, warmest feeling of security and love. I wondered if Chris could do the same.

As we sat in the rocker with Chris underneath, I caught a glimpse of us in the dresser mirror across the way. An eerie feeling stole over me, making all of this seem so unreal. He and I looked like doll parents, younger editions of Momma and Daddy.

“The Bible says there is a time for everything,” whispered Chris so as not to awaken the twins, “a time to be born, a time to plant, a time to harvest, a time to die, and so on, and this is our time to sacrifice. Later on will come our time to live and enjoy.”

I turned my head and nestled it down on his boyish shoulder, grateful he was always so optimistic, always so cheerful. It felt good to have his strong young arms about me—almost as protective and good as Daddy’s arms had been.

Chris was right, too. Our happy time would come the day we left this room and went downstairs to attend a funeral.

Holidays



On the tall stalk of the amaryllis a single bud appeared—a living calendar to remind us that Thanksgiving and Christmas were drawing nigh. It was our only plant alive now, and it was, by far, our most cherished possession. We carried it down from the attic to spend warm nights with us in the bedroom. Up first every morning, Cory rushed to see the bud, wanting to know if it had survived the night. Then Carrie would shortly follow him, to stand close at his side and admire a hardy plant, valiant, victorious, where others had failed. They checked the wall calendar to see if a day was encircled with green, indicating the plant needed to be fertilized. They felt the dirt to see if it needed water. They never trusted their own judgment, but would come to me and ask, “Should we give Amaryllis water? Do you think she’s thirsty?”

We never owned anything, inanimate or alive, that we didn’t name, and Amaryllis was determined to live. Neither Cory nor Carrie would trust their frail strength to carry the heavy pot up to the attic windows, where the sunshine lingered but shortly. I was allowed to carry Amaryllis up, but Chris had to bring her down at night. And each night we took turns marking off a day with a big red X. We now had crossed off one hundred days.

* * *

The cold rains came, the fierce winds blew—sometimes heavy fog shut out the morning sunlight. The dry branches of the trees scraped the house at night and woke me up, making me suck in my breath, waiting, waiting, waiting for some horror to come in and eat me up.

On a day when it was pouring rain that might later turn into snow, Momma came breathless into our bedroom, bringing with her a box of pretty party decorations to put on our

Thanksgiving Day table and make it festive. She had included a bright yellow tablecloth and orange linen napkins with fringe.

“We’re having guests tomorrow for a midday dinner,” she explained, dumping her box on the bed nearest the door, and already turning to leave. “And two turkeys are being roasted: one for us, one for the servants. But they won’t be ready early enough for your grandmother to put in the picnic basket. Now don’t worry, I’m not allowing my children to live through a Thanksgiving Day without the feast to fit the occasion. Somehow I’ll find a way to slip up some hot food, a little bit of everything we have. I think I’ll make a big to-do about wanting to serve my father myself, and while I’m preparing his tray, I can put food on another tray to bring up to you. Expect to see me about one tomorrow.”

Like the wind through the door, she blew in, blew out, leaving us with happy anticipations of a huge, hot, Thanksgiving Day meal.

Carrie asked, “What’s Thanksgiving?”

Cory answered, “Same as saying grace before meals.”

In a way he was right, I think. And since he’d said something voluntarily, darned if I was going to squelch him by any criticism.

* * *

While Chris cuddled the twins on his lap, sitting in one of the big lounge chairs, and told them of the first Thanksgiving Day so long ago, I bustled about like any hausfrau, very happy to set a festive holiday table. Our place cards were four small turkeys with tails that fanned out to make orange and yellow honeycombed paper plumage. We had two big pumpkin candles to burn, two Pilgrim men, two Pilgrim women, and two Indian candles, but darned if I could light such pretty candles and see them melt down into puddles. I put plain candles on the table to light, and saved the costly candles for other Thanksgiving Day meals when we were out of this place. On our little turkeys, I carefully lettered our names then fanned them open and placed one of them before each plate.

Our dining table had a small shelf underneath, and that's where we kept our dishes and silverware. After each meal I washed them in the bathroom in a pink plastic basin. Chris dried, then stacked the dishes in a rubber rack under the table to await the next meal.

I laid out the silverware most carefully, forks to the left, the knives to the right, blades facing the plates, and next to the knives, the spoons. Our china was Lenox with a wide blue rim, and edged in twenty-four-karat gold—all that was written on the back. Momma had already told me this was old dinnerware that the servants wouldn't miss. Our crystal today was footed, and I couldn't help but stand back to admire my own artistry. The only thing missing was flowers. Momma should have remembered to bring flowers.

One o'clock came and went. Carrie complained loudly. "Let's eat our lunch now, Cathy!"

"Be patient. Momma is bringing us special hot food, turkey and all the fixings—and this will be dinner, not lunch." My housewifely chores done for a while, I curled up happily on the bed to read more of *Lorna Doone*.

"Cathy, my stomach don't have patience," said Cory now, bringing me back from the mid-seventeenth century. Chris was deep into some Sherlock Holmes mystery that would be solved fast on the last page. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the twins could calm their stomachs, capacity about two ounces, by reading as Chris and I did?

"Eat a couple of raisins, Cory."

"Don't have no more."

"The correct way to say that is: I don't have anymore, or there aren't anymore."

"Don't have no more, honest."

"Eat a peanut."

"Peanuts are all gone—did I say that right?"

"Yes," I sighed. "Eat a cracker."

"Carrie ate the last cracker."

“Carrie, why didn’t you share those crackers with your brother?”

“He didn’t want none then.”

Two o’clock. Now all of us were starving. We had trained our stomachs to eat at twelve o’clock sharp. Whatever was keeping Momma? Was she going to eat first herself, and then bring us our food? She hadn’t told it that way.

A little after three o’clock, Momma rushed in, bearing a huge silver tray laden with covered dishes. She wore a dress of periwinkle-blue wool jersey, and her hair was waved back from her face and caught low at the nape of her neck with a silver barrette. Boy, did she look pretty!

“I know you’re starving,” she immediately began to apologize, “but my father changed his mind and decided at the last minute to use his wheelchair and eat with the rest of us.” She threw us a harried smile. “Your table-setting is lovely, Cathy. You did everything just right. I’m sorry I forgot the flowers. I shouldn’t have forgotten. We have nine guests, all busy talking to me, and asking a thousand questions about where I was for so long, and you just don’t know the trouble I had slipping into the butler’s pantry when John wasn’t looking—that man has eyes in back of his head. And you never saw anyone hop up and down as much as I did; the guests must have thought I was very impolite, or just plain foolish—but I did manage to fill your dishes, and hide them away, then back to the dining table I’d dash, and smile, and eat a bite before I had to get up again to blow my nose in another room. I answered three telephone calls that I made to myself from the private line in my bedroom. I had to disguise my voice so no one would guess, and I really did want to bring you slices of pumpkin pie, but John had it sliced and already put on the dessert plates, so what could I do? He’d have noticed four missing pieces.”

She blew us a kiss, bestowed a dazzling, but hurried smile, and disappeared out the door.

Good-golly day! We sure did complicate her life, all right!

We rushed to the table to eat.

Chris bowed his head to say a hasty grace that couldn't have impressed God very much on this day, of all days, when His ears must ring with more eloquent phrasing: "Thank you, Lord, for this belated Thanksgiving Day meal. Amen."

Inwardly I smiled, for it was so like Chris to get directly to the point, and that was to play host, and dish up the food onto the plates we handed him one by one. He gave "Finicky" and "Picky" one slice of white turkey meat apiece, and tiny portions of the vegetables, and to each a salad that had been shaped in a pretty mold. The medium-sized portions were mine, and, of course, he served himself last—huge amounts for the one who needed it most, the brain.

Chris appeared ravenous. He forked into his mouth huge gobs of mashed potatoes that were almost cold. Everything was on the verge of being cold, the gelatin salad was beginning to soften, and the lettuce beneath it was wilted.

"We-ee don't like cold food!" Carrie wailed as she stared down at her pretty plate with such dainty portions placed neatly in a circle. One thing you could say for Chris, he was precise.

You would have thought Miss Picky was looking at snakes and worms from the way she scowled at that plate, and Mr. Finicky duplicated his twin's sour expression of distaste.

Honestly, I felt kind of sorry for Momma, who had tried so hard to bring us up a really good hot meal, and messed up her own meal in the process, making herself look silly in front of the guests, too. And now those two weren't going to eat anything! After three hours of complaining, and telling us how hungry they were! Kids!

The egghead across the way closed his eyes to savor the delight of having something different: deliciously prepared food, and not the hasty picnic junk thrown together in a hurry before six o'clock in the morning. Although to be fair to the grandmother, she didn't ever forget us. She must have had to get up in the dark to beat the chef and the maids into the kitchen.

Chris then did something that really shocked me. He knew better than to stab into a huge slice of white turkey meat and shove the whole slice into his mouth! What was the matter with him?

“Don’t eat like that, Chris. It sets a bad example for you-know-who.”

“They aren’t watching me,” he said with a mouthful, “and I’m starving. I’ve never been so hungry before in my whole life, and everything tastes so good.”

Daintily, I cut my turkey into small bits, and put some in my mouth to show the hog across the way how it was properly done. I swallowed first, then said, “I pity the wife you’ll have. She’ll divorce you within a year.”

He went on eating, deaf and dumb to everything but enjoyment.

“Cathy,” said Carrie, “don’t be mean to Chris, ’cause we don’t like cold food, anyway, so we don’t want to eat.”

“My wife will adore me so much, she’ll be charmed to pick up my dirty socks. And Carrie, you and Cory like cold cereal with raisins, so *eat!*”

“We don’t like cold turkey ... and that brown stuff on the potatoes looks funny.”

“That brown stuff is called gravy, and it tastes delicious. And Eskimos *love* cold food.”

“Cathy, do Eskimos like cold food?”

“I don’t know, Carrie. I suppose they’d better like it, or starve to death.” For the life of me, I couldn’t understand what Eskimos had to do with Thanksgiving. “Chris, couldn’t you have said something better? Why bring up Eskimos?”

“Eskimos are Indians. Indians are part of the Thanksgiving Day tradition.”

“Oh.”

“You know, of course, the North American continent used to be connected with Asia,” he said between mouthfuls.

“Indians trekked over from Asia, and some liked ice and snow so much, they just stayed on, while others had better sense, and moved on down.”

“Cathy, what’s this lumpy and bumpy stuff that looks like Jell-O?”

“It’s cranberry salad. The lumps are whole cranberries; the bumps are pecan nuts; and the white stuff is sour cream.” And, boy, was it good! It had bits of pineapple, too.

“We don’t like lumpy-bumpy stuff.”

“Carrie,” said Chris, “I get tired of what you like and don’t like—*eat!*”

“Your brother is right, Carrie. Cranberries are delicious, and so are nuts. Birds love to eat berries, and you like birds, don’t you?”

“Birds don’t eat berries. They eat dead spiders and other bugs. We saw them, we did. They picked them out of the gutters, and ate them without chewing! We can’t eat what birds eat.”

“Shut up and eat,” said Chris, with a mouthful.

Here we were with the best food (even if it was almost cold) since we’d come upstairs to live in this hateful house, and all the twins could do was stare down at their plates, and so far hadn’t eaten a single bite!

And Chris—he was demolishing everything in sight like the prize-winning hog at the county fair!

The twins tasted the mashed potatoes with the mushroom gravy. The potatoes were “grainy” and the gravy was “funny.” They tasted the absolutely divine stuffing, and declared that “lumpy, grainy, and funny.”

“Eat the sweet potatoes, then!” I almost yelled. “Look at how pretty they are. They’re smooth because they’ve been whipped, and marshmallows have been added, and you love marshmallows, and it’s flavored with orange and lemon juice.” And pray to God they didn’t notice the “lumpy” pecans.

* * *

I guess between the two of them, sitting across from one another, fussily stirring the food into mishmash, they managed to put away three or four ounces of food.

While Chris was longing for dessert, pumpkin pie, or mincemeat pie, I began to clear away the table. Then, for some reason extraordinaire, Chris began to help! I couldn't believe it. He smiled at me disarmingly, and even kissed my cheeks. And, boy, if good food could do that for a man, I was all for learning gourmet cooking. He even picked up his socks before he came to help me wash and dry the dishes, glasses, and silverware.

Ten minutes after Chris and I had everything neatly stored away under the table and covered over with the clean towel, the twins simultaneously announced, "We're hungry! Our stomachs hurt!"

Chris read on at his desk. I got up from the bed after laying aside *Lorna Doone*, and without saying one word, I gave to each of the twins a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich from the picnic basket.

As they ate, taking tiny bites, I threw myself down on the bed and watched them with real puzzlement. Why did they enjoy that junk? Being a parent wasn't as easy as I used to presume, nor was it such a delight.

"Don't sit on the floor, Cory. It's colder down there than in a chair."

"Don't like chairs," said Cory. Then he sneezed.

* * *

The very next day, Cory came down with a severe cold. His small face was red and hot. He complained that he ached all over and his bones hurt. "Cathy, where is my momma, my real momma?" Oh, how he wanted his mother. Finally, she did show up.

Immediately she became anxious as she viewed Cory's flushed face, and she rushed away to fetch a thermometer. Unhappily, she returned, trailed by the detested grandmother.

With the slim stem of glass in his mouth, Cory stared up at his mother as if at a golden angel come to save him in his time of distress. And I, his pretend mother, was forgotten.

“Sweetheart, darling baby,” she crooned. And she picked him up from the bed and carried him to the rocker, where she sat down to put kisses on his brow. “I’m here, darling. I love you. I’ll take care of you and make the pains go away. Just eat your meals, and drink your orange juice like a good little boy, and soon you’ll be well.”

She put him to bed again, and hovered over him before she popped an aspirin into his mouth and gave him water to swallow it down. Her blue eyes were misted over with troubled tears, and her slim white hands worked nervously.

I narrowed my eyes as I watched her eyes close, and her lips move as if in silent prayer.

Two days later Carrie was in the bed beside Cory, sneezing and coughing, too, and her temperature raged upward with terrifying swiftness, enough to panic me. Chris looked scared, too. Listless and pale, the two of them lay side by side in the big bed, with little fingers clutching the covers high under their rounded chins.

They seemed made of porcelain, they were so waxy white, and their blue eyes grew larger and larger as they sank deeper and deeper into their skulls. Dark shadows came under their eyes, to make them seem haunted children. When our mother wasn’t there, those two sets of eyes pleaded mutely with Chris and me to do something, anything, to make the misery go away.

Momma took a week off from the secretarial school so she could be with her twins as much as possible. I hated it that the grandmother felt it so necessary to trail after her every time she showed up. Always putting her nose in where it didn’t belong, and her advice, when we didn’t want her advice. Already she’d told us we didn’t exist, and had no right to be alive on God’s earth, save for those saintly and pure—like herself. Did she come merely to distress us more, and take from us the comfort of having our mother to ourselves?

The whisper of her menacing gray dresses, the sound of her voice, the tread of her heavy feet, the sight of her huge pale hands, soft and puffy, flashing with diamond rings, and spotted brown with dying pigment ... oh, yes, just to see her was to loathe her.

Then there was our mother, rushing to us often, doing what she could to help the twins back to health. Shadows were under her eyes, too, as she gave the twins aspirins and water, and later on orange juice, and hot chicken soup.

One morning Momma rushed in carrying a big thermos of orange juice she had just squeezed. "It's better than the frozen or canned kind," she explained, "full of vitamins C and A, and that's good for colds." Next she listed what she wanted Chris and me to do, saying that Chris and I were to give orange juice often. We stored the thermos on the attic steps—as good as any refrigerator in the wintertime.

One glance at the thermometer from Carrie's lips, and a frenzied panic blew away all of Momma's cool. "Oh, God!" she cried out in distress. "One hundred three-point-six. I have to take them to a doctor, a hospital!"

I was before the heavy dresser holding to it lightly with one hand and exercising my legs, as I did each day, now that the attic was too cold to limber up in. I threw my grandmother a quick glance, trying to read her reactions to this.

The grandmother had no patience for those who lost control and made waves. "Don't be ridiculous, Corrine. All children run high fevers when they are sick. Doesn't mean a thing. You should know that by now. A cold is just a cold."

Chris jerked his head up from the book he was pursuing. He believed the twins had the flu, though how they had caught the virus he couldn't guess.

The grandmother continued: "Doctors, what do they know about curing a cold? We know just as much. There are only three things to do: stay in bed, drink lots of liquids, and take aspirins—what else? And aren't we doing all of those things?" She flashed me a mean look. "Stop swinging your legs, girl. You make me nervous." Again she directed her eyes, and her

words, at our mother. “Now, *my* mother had a saying, colds take three days coming, three days staying, and three days leaving.”

“What if they have the flu?” asked Chris. The grandmother turned her back and ignored his question. She didn’t like his face; he resembled our father too much. “I hate it when people who should know better question those who are older and far wiser. Everyone knows the rule for colds: six days to start and stay, and three days to leave. That’s the way it is—they’ll recover.”

As the grandmother predicted, the twins recovered. Not in nine days . . . in nineteen days. Only bed rest, aspirins, and fluids did the trick—no prescriptions from a doctor to help them back to health more quickly. By day the twins stayed in the same bed; by night Carrie slept with me, and Cory with his brother. I don’t know why Chris and I didn’t come down with the same thing.

All night long we jumped up and down, to run for water, for orange juice kept cold on the attic stairs. They cried for cookies, for Momma, for something to unstop their nostrils. They tossed and fretted, weak and uneasy, worried by bothersome things they couldn’t express except by large fearful eyes that tore at my heart. They asked questions while they were sick that they didn’t ask while they were well . . . and wasn’t that odd?

“Why do we stay upstairs all the time?”

“Has downstairs gone away?”

“Did it go where the sun hides?”

“Don’t Momma like us no more?”

“Anymore,” I corrected.

“Why are the walls fuzzy?”

“Are they fuzzy?” I asked in return.

“Chris, he looks fuzzy, too.”

“Chris is tired.”

“Are you tired, Chris?”

“Kinda. I’d like for you both to go to sleep and stop asking so many questions. And Cathy is tired, too. We’d both like to go to sleep, and know the two of you are sleeping soundly, too.”

“We don’t *sound* when we sleep.”

Chris sighed, picked up Cory, and carried him over to the rocker, and soon Carrie and I were seated on his lap. There we rocked back and forth, back and forth, telling stories at three o’clock in the morning. We read stories on other nights till four in the morning. If they cried and wanted Momma, as they incessantly did, Chris and I acted as mother and father and did what we could to soothe them with soft lullabies. We rocked so much the floorboards started to creak, and surely below someone could have heard.

And all the while we heard the wind blowing through the hills. It scraped the skeleton tree branches, and squeaked the house, and whispered of death and dying, and in the cracks and crevices it howled, moaned, sobbed, and sought in all ways to make us aware we weren’t safe.

We read so much aloud, sang so much, both Chris and I grew hoarse and half-sick ourselves from fatigue. We prayed every night, down on our knees, asking God to make our twins well again. “Please, God, give them back to us the way they were.”

A day came when the coughing eased, and sleepless eyelids drooped, and eventually closed in peaceful sleep. The cold, bony hands of death had reached for our little ones, and was reluctant to let go, for so tortuously, slowly, the twins drifted back to health. When they were “well” they were not the same robust, lively pair. Cory, who had said little before, now said even less. Carrie, who had adored the sound of her own constant chatter, now became almost as truculent as Cory. And now that I had the quiet I so often longed for, I wanted back the bird-like chitchat that rattled on incessantly to dolls, trucks, trains, boats, pillows, plants, shoes, dresses, underpants, toys, puzzles, and games.

I checked her tongue, and it seemed pale, and white. Fearfully, I straightened to gaze down on two small faces side by side on one pillow. Why had I wanted them to grow up and act their proper ages? This long illness had brought about instant age. It put dark circles under their large blue eyes, and stole their healthy color. The high temperatures and the coughing had left them with a wise look, a sometimes sly look of the old, the tired, the ones who just lay and didn't care if the sun came up, or if it went down, and stayed down. They scared me; their haunted faces took me into dreams of death.

And all the while the wind kept blowing.

Eventually they left their beds and walked about slowly. Legs once so plump and rosy and able to hop, jump, and skip were now as weak as thin straws. Now they were inclined to only creep instead of fly, and smile instead of laugh.

Wearily, I fell face down on my bed and thought and thought and thought—what could Chris and I do to restore their babyish charm?

There was nothing either he or I could do, though we would have given our health to restore theirs.

“Vitamins!” proclaimed Momma when Chris and I took pains to point out the unhealthy differences in our twins. “Vitamins are exactly what they need, and what you two need, as well—from now on, each one of you must take a daily vitamin capsule.” Even as she said this, her slim and elegant hand rose to fluff the glory of her beautifully coiffed, shining hair.

“Does fresh air and sunshine come in capsules?” I asked, perching on a nearby bed, and glaring hard at a mother who refused to see what was wrong. “When each of us has swallowed a vitamin capsule a day, will that give to us the radiant good health we had when we lived normal lives, and spent most of our days outside?”

Momma was wearing pink—she did look lovely in pink. It put roses in her cheeks, and her hair glowed with rosy warmth.

“Cathy,” she said, tossing me a patronizing glance while she moved to hide her hands, “why do you incessantly persist in making everything so hard for me? I do the best I can. Really I do. And, yes, if you want the truth, in vitamins you *can* swallow the good health the outdoors bestows—that is exactly the reason so many vitamins are made.”

Her indifference put more pain in my heart. My eyes flashed over to Chris, who had bowed his head low, taking all this in, but saying nothing. “How long is our imprisonment going to last, Momma?”

“A short while, Cathy, only a short while longer—believe that.”

“Another month?”

“Possibly.”

“Could you manage, somehow, to sneak up here and take the twins outside, say, for a ride in your car? You could plan it so the servants wouldn’t see. I think it would make an immense amount of difference. Chris and I don’t have to go.”

She spun around and glanced at my older brother to see if he were in this plot with me, but surprise was a dead giveaway on his face. “No! Of course not! I can’t take a risk like that! Eight servants work in this house, and though their quarters are quite cut off from the main house, there is always someone looking out a window, and they would hear me start up the car. Being curious, they’d look to see which direction I took.”

My voice turned cold. “Then would you please see if you can manage to bring up fresh fruit, especially bananas. You know how the twins love bananas, and they haven’t had one since we came.”

“Tomorrow I’ll bring bananas. Your grandfather doesn’t like them.”

“What has *he* got to do with it?”

“It’s the reason bananas are not purchased.”

“You drive back and forth to secretarial school every weekday—stop yourself and buy the bananas—and more

peanuts, and raisins. And why can't they have a box of popcorn once in a while? Certainly that won't rot their teeth!"

Pleasantly she nodded, and verbally agreed. "And what would you like for yourself?" she asked.

"Freedom! I want to be let out. I'm tired of being in a locked room. I want the twins out; I want Chris out. I want you to rent a house, buy a house, steal a house—but get us out of *this* house!"

"Cathy," she began to plead, "I'm doing the best I can. Don't I bring you gifts every time I come through the door? What is it you lack besides bananas? Name it!"

"You promised we'd stay up here but a short while—and it's been months."

She spread her hands in a supplicating gesture. "Do you expect me to kill my father?"

Numbly I shook my head.

"You leave her alone!" Chris exploded the moment the door closed behind his goddess. "She does try to do the best she can by us! Stop picking on her! It's a wonder she comes to see us at all, what with you riding her back, with your everlasting questions, like you don't trust her. How do you know how much she suffers? Do you believe she's happy knowing her four children are locked in one room, and left to play in an attic?"

It was hard to tell about someone like our mother, just what she was thinking, and what she was feeling. Her expression was always calm, unruffled, though she often appeared tired. If her clothes were new, and expensive, and we seldom saw her wear the same thing twice, she brought us many new and expensive clothes, too. Not that it mattered what we wore. Nobody saw us but the the grandmother, and we could have worn rags, which, indeed, might have put a smile of pleasure on her face.

We didn't go up to the attic when it rained, or when it snowed. Even on clear days, there was that wind to snarl

fiercely as it blew, screaming and tearing through the cracks of the old house.

One night Cory woke up and called to me, “Make the wind go away, Cathy.”

I left my bed and Carrie, who was fast asleep on her side, crawled under the covers beside Cory, and tightly I held him in my arms. Poor little thin body, wanting to be loved so much by his real mother ... and he had only me. He felt too small, so fragile, as if that rampaging wind could blow him away. I lowered my face into his clean, sweet-smelling curly blond hair and kissed him there, as I had when he was a baby, and I had replaced my dolls with living babies. “I can’t make the wind go away, Cory. Only God can do that.”

“Then tell God I don’t like the wind,” he said sleepily. “Tell God the wind wants to come in and get me.”

I gathered him closer, held him tighter ... *never going to let the wind take Cory away, never!* But I knew what he meant

“Tell me a story, Cathy, so I can forget the wind.”

There was a favorite story I had concocted to please Cory, all about a fantasy world where little children lived in a small cozy home, with a mother and father who were much, much bigger, and powerful enough to scare away frightening things. A family of six, with a garden out in back, where giant trees held swings, and where real flowers grew—the kind that knew how to die in the fall, and how to come up again in the spring. There was a pet dog named Clover, and a cat named Calico, and a yellow bird sang in a golden cage, all day long, and everybody loved everybody, and nobody was ever whipped, spanked, yelled at, nor were any of the doors locked, nor the draperies closed.

“Sing me a song, Cathy. I like it when you sing me to sleep.”

I held him snugly in my arms and began to sing lyrics I had written myself to music I had heard Cory hum over and over again . . . his own mind-music. It was a song meant to take

away from his fear of the wind, and perhaps take from me my fears too. It was my very first attempt to rhyme.

I hear the wind when it sweeps down from the hill,
It speaks to me, when the night is still,
It whispers in my ear,
The words I never hear,
Even when he's near.
I feel the breeze when it blows in from the sea,
It lifts my hair, it caresses me,
It never takes my hand,
To show it understands,
It never touches me, ten-der-ly.
Someday I know I'm gonna climb this hill,
I'll find another day,
Some other voice to say the words I've gotta hear,
If I'm to live, another year

And my little one was asleep in my arms, breathing evenly, feeling safe. Beyond his head Chris lay with his eyes wide open, fixed upward on the ceiling. When my song was over, he turned his head and met my eyes. His fifteenth birthday had come and gone, with a bakery cake, and ice cream to mark the occasion as special. Gifts—they came every day, almost. Now he had a polaroid camera, a new and better watch. Great. Wonderful. How could he be so easily pleased?

Didn't he see our mother wasn't the same anymore? Didn't he notice she no longer came every day? Was he so gullible he believed everything she said, every excuse she made?

* * *

Christmas Eve. We had been five months at Foxworth Hall. Not once had we been down into the lower sections of this enormous house, much less to the outside. We kept to the rules: we said grace before every meal; we knelt and said

prayers beside our beds every night; we were modest in the bathroom; we kept our thoughts clean, pure, innocent ... and yet, it seemed to me, day by day our meals grew poorer and poorer in quality.

I convinced myself it didn't really matter if we missed out on one Christmas shopping spree. There would be other Christmases when we were rich, rich, rich, when we could go into a store and buy anything we wanted. How beautiful we'd be in our magnificent clothes, with our stylish manners, and soft, eloquent voices that told the world we were somebodies ... somebodies who were special ... loved, wanted, needed somebodies.

Of course Chris and I knew there wasn't a real Santa Claus. But we very much wanted the twins to believe in Santa Claus, and not miss out on all that glorious enchantment of a fat jolly man who whizzed about the world to deliver to all children exactly what they wanted—even when they didn't know what they wanted until they had it.

What would childhood be like without believing in Santa Claus? Not the kind of childhood I wanted for our twins!

Even for those locked away, Christmas was a busy time, even for one beginning to despair, and doubt, and distrust. Secretly, Chris and I had been making gifts for Momma (who really didn't need anything), and gifts for the twins—plushy stuffed animals that we tediously backstitched by hand, and then filled with cotton. I did all the embroidery work on the faces when they were still flat. I was, in private in the bathroom, knitting Chris a cap of scarlet wool—it grew and it grew and it grew; I think Momma must have forgotten to tell me something about gauge.

Then Chris came up with an absolutely idiotic and horrific suggestion. “Let's make the grandmother a gift, too. It's really not right to leave her out. She does bring up our food and milk, and who knows, a token like this may be just the thing needed to win over her affection. And think how much more enjoyable our lives would be if she could tolerate us.”

I was dopey enough to think it might work, and for hours and hours we slaved on a gift for an old witch who hated us. In all this time she had never even once said our names.

We bonded tan linen to a stretcher frame, glued on different colored stones, then carefully applied gold and brown cording. If we made a mistake, ever so painstakingly we'd do it over and make it right so *she* wouldn't notice. She was bound to be a perfectionist who'd see the slightest flaw and frown. And never, truly, would we give *her* anything less than our best efforts could produce.

"You see," said Chris again, "I really do believe we have a chance in winning her over to our side. After all, she is our grandmother, and people *do* change. No one is static. While Momma works to charm her father, we must work to charm her mother. And even if she refuses to look at me, she does look at you."

She didn't look at me, not really, she only saw my hair—for some reason she was fascinated by my hair.

"Remember, Cathy, she did give us yellow chrysanthemums." He was right—that alone was a strong straw to grasp.

In the late afternoon, toward dusk, Momma came to our room bearing a live Christmas tree in a small wooden tub. A balsam tree—what could smell more like Christmas? Momma's wool dress was of bright red jersey; it clung and showed off all the curves I hoped to have one day. She was laughing and gay, making us happy, too, as she stayed to help us trim the tree with the miniature ornaments and lights she'd brought along. She gave us four stockings to drape on the bedposts for Santa to find and fill.

"Next year this time we'll be living in our own house," she said brightly, and I believed.

"Yes," said Momma, smiling, filling all of us with cheer, "next year this time life will be so wonderful for all of us. We'll have plenty of money to buy a grand home of our own, and everything you want will be yours. In no time at all, you'll forget this room, the attic. And all the days you have all

endured so bravely will be forgotten, just like it never happened.”

She kissed us, and said she loved us. We watched her leave and didn't feel bereft, as before. She filled all our eyes, all our hopes and dreams.

* * *

Momma came in the night while we slept. In the morning I woke up to see the stockings filled to the brim. And gifts galore were stacked under the small table where the tree was, and in every empty, available space in that room were all the toys for the twins that were too large and awkward to wrap.

My eyes met with Chris's. He winked, grinned, then bounded from his bed. He grabbed for the silver bells attached to red plastic reins, and he shook them vigorously above his head. “Merry Christmas!” he boomed. “Wake up, everybody! Cory, Carrie, you sleepyheads—open your eyes, get up, and behold! Look and see what Santa Claus brought!”

They came so slowly out of dreams, rubbing at sticky eyes, staring in disbelief at the many toys, at the beautifully wrapped packages with name tags, at the striped stockings stuffed with cookies, nuts, candy, fruit, chewing gum, peppermint sticks, chocolate Santas.

Real candy—at last! Hard candy, that colorful kind that churches and schools gave out at their parties, the best kind of candy for making black holes in your teeth. Oh, but it looked and tasted so Christmasy!

Cory sat on his bed, bedazzled, and again his small fists lifted to rub at his eyes, and he appeared too bewildered for speech.

But Carrie could always find words. “How did Santa Claus find us?”

“Oh, Santa has magic eyes,” explained Chris, who lifted Carrie up and swung her to his shoulder, and then he reached to do this to Cory, too. He was doing as Daddy would have done, and tears came to my eyes.

“Santa would never overlook children deliberately,” he said, “and besides, he knew you were here. I made sure he knew, for I sat down and wrote him one very long letter, and gave him our address, and I made out a list of things we wanted that was three feet long.”

How funny, I thought. For the list of what all four of us wanted was so short and simple. We wanted outside. We wanted our freedom.

I sat up in bed and looked around, and felt a sour-sweet lump in my throat. Momma had tried, oh, yes. She’d tried, done her best from the way it looked. She did love us, she did care. Why, it must have taken her months to buy all of this.

I was ashamed and full of contrition for everything mean and ugly I’d thought. That’s what came from wanting everything, and at once, and having no patience, and no faith.

Chris turned to look at me questioningly. “Aren’t you ever gonna get up? Gonna sit there the whole day through—you don’t like gifts anymore?”

While Cory and Carrie tore off gift wrappings, Chris came over to me and stretched out his hand. “Come, Cathy, enjoy the only Christmas you’ll have in your twelfth year. Make this a unique Christmas, different from any we will experience in the future.” His blue eyes pleaded.

He was wearing rumpled red pajamas piped in white, and his gold hair fluffed out wildly. I was wearing a red nightgown made of fleece, and my long hair was far more disheveled than his. Into his warm hand I put my own, and I laughed. Christmas was Christmas, no matter where you were, and whatever the circumstances, it was still a day to enjoy. We opened everything wrapped, and we tried on our new clothes while stuffing candy into our mouths before breakfast. And “Santa” had left a note telling us to hide the candy from a certain “you-know-who.” After all, candy still caused cavities. Even on Christmas Day.

I sat on the floor wearing a stunning new robe of green velvet. Chris had a new robe of red flannel to match his pajamas. I dressed the twins in their new robes of bright blue. I

don't think there could have been four happier children than we were early that morning. Chocolate bars were devilishly divine and made even sweeter because they were forbidden. It was pure heaven to hold that chocolate in my mouth and slowly, slowly let it melt while I squeezed my eyelids tight to better savor the taste. And when I looked, Chris had his eyes closed too. Funny how the twins ate their chocolate, with wide open eyes, so full of surprise. Had they forgotten about candy? It seemed so, for they appeared to be holding paradise in their mouths. When we heard the doorknob rattle, we quickly hid the candy under the nearest bed.

It was the grandmother. She came in quietly, with the picnic basket. She put the basket on the gaming table. She didn't greet us with "Merry Christmas," nor did she say good morning, nor even smile, or show in any way that this was a special day. And we were not to speak to her unless she spoke to us first.

It was with reluctance and fear, and also with great hope, that I picked up the long package wrapped in red foil that had come from one of Momma's gifts to us. Beneath that beautiful paper was our collage painting on which all four of us had worked to create a child's version of the perfect garden. The old trunks in the attic had provided us with fine materials, such as the gossamer silk to make the pastel butterflies that hovered over bright yarn flowers. How Carrie had wanted to make purple butterflies with red spots—she loved purple combined with red! If ever a more glorious butterfly existed—it wouldn't be a live one—it would be Cory's made of yellow, with green and black splotches, and tiny little red stone eyes. Our trees were made of brown cording, combined with tiny tan pebbles to look like bark, and the branches gracefully entwined so brightly colored birds could perch or fly between the leaves. Chris and I had taken chicken feathers from old pillows and dipped them in watercolors, and dried them, and used an old toothbrush to comb the matted hairs, and make them lovely again.

It may be conceited to say that our picture showed signs of true artistry, and a great deal of creative ingenuity. Our composition was balanced, yet it had rhythm, style ... and a

charm that had brought tears to our mother's eyes when we showed it to her. She had to turn her back so we, too, wouldn't cry. Oh, yes, by far this collage was the very best piece of artwork we had as yet turned out.

Trembling, apprehensive, I waited to time my approach so her hands would be empty. Since the grandmother never looked at Chris, and the twins were so terrified of her they shriveled in her presence, it was up to me to give her the gift ... and darned if I could make my feet move. Sharply, Chris nudged me with his elbow. "Go on," he whispered, "she'll go out the door in a minute."

My feet seemed nailed to the floor. I held the long red package across both my arms. From the very positioning it seemed a sacrificial offering, for it wasn't easy to give her anything, when she had given us nothing but hostility, and was waiting her chance to give us pain.

That Christmas morning, she succeeded very well in giving us pain, even without a whip or a word.

I wanted to greet her in the proper way and say, "Merry Christmas Day, Grandmother. We wanted to give you a little something. Really, don't thank us; it was no trouble at all. Just a little something to show how much we appreciate the food you bring to us each day, and the shelter you have given us." No, no, she would think me sarcastic if I put it that way. Much better to say something like this: "Merry Christmas, we hope you like this gift. We all worked on it, even Cory and Carrie, and you can keep it so when we're gone, you'll know we did try, we did."

Just to see me near with the gift held before me took her by surprise.

Slowly, with my eyes lifting to bravely meet hers, I held out our Christmas offering. I didn't want to plead with my eyes. I wanted her to take it, and like it, and say thank you, even if she said it coldly. I wanted her to go to bed this night and think about us, that maybe we weren't so bad, after all. I wanted her to digest and savor all the work we'd put into her gift, and I

wanted her to question the right and wrong of how she treated us.

In the most withering way, her cold and scornful eyes lowered to the long box we'd wrapped in red. On the top was a sprig of artificial holly and a huge silver bow. A card was tied to the bow, and read: "To Grandmother, from Chris, Cathy, Cory, and Carrie."

Her gray-stone eyes lingered on the card long enough to read it. Then she lifted her gaze to stare directly into my hopeful eyes, pleading, begging, wanting so much to be assured we weren't—as I sometimes feared—evil. Back to the box her eyes skipped, then deliberately she turned her back. Without a word she stalked out of the door, slammed it hard, then locked it from the other side. I was left in the middle of the room, holding the end product of many long hours of striving for perfection and beauty.

Fools!—that's what we'd been! Damned fools!

We'd never win her over! She'd always consider us Devil's spawn! As far as she was concerned, we really *didn't* exist.

And it hurt, oh, you bet, it did hurt. Right down to my bare feet I ached, and my heart became a hollow ball shooting pains through my chest. Behind me, I could hear Chris raspily breathing in and out, and the twins began to whimper.

This was my time to be adult, and keep the poise that Momma used so well and so effectively. I patterned my movements, and my expressions, after those of my mother. I used my hands the way she used hers. I smiled as she did, slow and beguiling.

And what did I do to demonstrate my maturity?

I hurled the package to the floor! I swore, using words I'd never said aloud before! I raised my foot and stomped down on it, and heard the cardboard box crunch. I screamed! Wild with fury, I jumped with both feet onto the gift, and I wildly stomped and jumped until I heard the cracking of the beautiful old frame we'd found in the attic, and reglued, and refinished and made it look almost like new again. I hated Chris for

persuading me that we could win over a woman made of stone! I hated Momma for putting us in this position! She should have known her mother better; she should have sold shoes in a department store; certainly there was something she could have done but what she did.

Beneath the assault of someone wild and frenzied, the dry frame shattered into splinters; all our labor was gone, gone.

“Stop!” cried Chris. “We can keep it for ourselves!”

Though he ran fast to prevent total destruction, the fragile painting was ruined. Forever gone. I was in tears.

Then I was bending down, crying, and picking up the silk butterflies Cory and Carrie had made so painstakingly, with so much effort wasted to color the wings gloriously. Pastel butterflies I was to keep all my life long.

Chris held me fast in his arms while I sobbed as he tried to comfort me with fatherly words: “It’s all right. It doesn’t matter what she does. We were right, and she was wrong. We tried. She never tries.”

We sat on the floor silent now amidst our gifts. The twins were quiet, their big eyes full of doubts, wanting to play with their toys, and undecided because they were our mirrors, and they would reflect our emotions—whatever they were. Oh, the pity of seeing them so made me ache again. I was twelve. I should learn at some time in my life how to act my age, and hold onto my poise, and not be a stick of dynamite always ready to explode.

* * *

Into our room Momma came, smiling and calling out her Christmas greetings. She came bearing more gifts, including a huge dollhouse that once had been hers ... and her hateful mother’s. “This gift is *not* from Santa Claus,” she said, putting down the house on the floor with great care, and now, I swear, there wasn’t one inch of uncluttered space left. “This is my present to Cory and Carrie.” She hugged them both, and kissed their cheeks, and told them now they could “pretend house”

and “pretend parents” and “pretend host and hostess,” just as she used to do when she was a child of five.

If she noticed none of us was really excited by that grand dollhouse, she didn’t comment. With laughter, and gay charm, she knelt on the floor and sat back on her heels, and told us of how very much she used to love this dollhouse.

“It is very valuable, too,” she gushed. “On the right market, a dollhouse like this would bring a fabulous fortune. Just the miniature porcelain dolls with the moveable joints alone are priceless, their faces all hand-painted. The dolls are made in scale to the house, as is the furniture, the paintings—everything, in fact. The house was handcrafted by an artist who lived in England. Each chair, table, bed, lamp, chandelier—all are genuine reproductions of antiques. I understand it took the craftsman twelve years to complete this.

“Look at how the little doors open and close, perfectly hung—which is more than you can say for the house you’re living in,” she went on. “And all the drawers slide in and out. There’s a tiny little key to lock the desk, and look how some of the doors slide into the walls—pocket doors, they are called. I wish this house had doors like that; I don’t know why they went out of fashion. And see the hand-carved moldings near the ceiling, and the wainscoting in the dining room and library—and the teensy books on the shelves. Believe it or not, if you have a microscope, you can read the text!”

She demonstrated with knowing, careful fingers all the fascinations of a dollhouse only children of the extremely wealthy could ever hope to own.

Chris, of course, had to pull out a tiny book and hold it close to his squinting eyes, to see for himself print so small you needed a microscope. (There was a very special type of microscope he hoped to own someday . . . and I hoped to be the one to give it to him.)

I couldn’t help but admire the skill and patience it would take to make such small furniture. There was a grand piano in the front parlor of the Elizabethan house. The piano was covered with a silken paisley shawl, with fringes of gold. Little-

bitty silk flowers were centered on the dining room table. Bitsy fruit made of wax was in a silver bowl on the buffet. Two crystal chandeliers hung down, and real candles were fitted into sockets. Servants were in the kitchen, wearing aprons while they prepared dinner. A butler wore livery white while he stood near the front door to greet the arriving guests, while in the front parlor the beautifully gowned ladies stood stiffly near poker-faced men.

Upstairs in the nursery were three children, and a baby was in the crib, arms outstretched and ready to be lifted up. A side building was attached, somewhat to the rear, and in there was such a coach! And two horses were in the stables! Golly day! Who would ever dream people could make things so small! My eyes jumped to the windows, drinking in the dainty white curtains and heavy drapes, and dishes were on the dining table, and silverware, and pots and pans were in the kitchen cupboards—all so tiny they were no bigger than large green peas.

“Cathy,” said Momma, putting her arm around me, “look at this little rug. It is a genuine Persian, made of pure silk. The rug in the dining room is an Oriental.” And on and on she extolled the virtues of this remarkable plaything.

“How can it look so new, yet be so old?” I asked.

A dark cloud passed over Momma and shadowed her face. “When it belonged to my mother, it was kept in a huge glass box. She was allowed to look at it, but she could never touch it. When it was given to me, my father took a hammer and broke the glass box, and he allowed me to play with everything—on the condition that I would swear, with my hand on the Bible, not to break anything.”

“Did you swear and did you break anything?” questioned Chris.

“Yes, I swore, and yes, I did break something.” Her head bowed low so we couldn’t watch her eyes. “There was another doll, a very handsome young man, and his arm came off when I tried to take off his coat. I was whipped, not only for

breaking the doll, but for wanting to see what was underneath the clothes.”

Chris and I sat silent, but Carrie perked up and showed great interest in the funny little dolls in their fancy, colorful costumes. She particularly favored the baby in the crib. Because she was so interested, Cory moved so he, too, could investigate the many treasures of the dollhouse.

That was when Momma turned her attention on me. “Cathy, why were you looking so solemn when I came in? Didn’t you like your gifts?”

Because I couldn’t answer, Chris answered for me. “She’s unhappy because the grandmother refused the gift we made for her.” Momma patted my shoulder but she avoided my eyes. Chris continued, “And thank you for everything—there’s nothing you didn’t remind Santa Claus to bring. Thank you most of all for the dollhouse. I think our twins are going to have more fun with that than anything else.”

I fixed my gaze on the two tricycles for the twins to ride in the attic and strengthen their thin, weak legs while they pedaled. There were roller skates for Chris and me to use in the attic schoolroom only. That room was insulated with plastered walls, and hardwood flooring, making it more soundproof than the rest of the attic.

Momma got up from her knees, smiling mysteriously before she left. Just outside the door she said she’d be back in a second or two, and that is when she really gave us the best gift of all—a small, portable TV set! “My father gave this to me to use in my bedroom. And immediately I knew just who would enjoy it the most. Now you have a real window through which you can view the world.”

Just the right words to send my hopes flying high into the sky! “Momma!” I cried out. “Your father gave you an expensive gift? Does that mean he likes you now? Has he forgiven you for marrying Daddy? Can we go downstairs now?”

Her blue eyes went dark and troubled again, and there was no joy when she told us that yes, her father was friendlier—he

had forgiven her for committing a sin against God, and society. Then she said something that jumped my heart right up against my throat.

“Next week, my father is having his lawyer write me into his will. He is going to leave me everything; even this house will be mine after my mother dies. He isn’t planning on leaving her money, because she has wealth she inherited from *her* father and mother.”

Money—I didn’t care anything about it. All I wanted was out! And suddenly I was very happy—so happy I flung my arms around Momma, kissed her cheek, and hugged her tight. Golly-lolly, this was the best day since we’d come to this house . . . and then I remembered, Momma hadn’t said we could go downstairs yet. *But*, we were one step on our way to freedom.

Our mother sat on the bed and smiled with her lips, though not her eyes. She laughed at some silly things Chris and I said, and it was laughter brittle and hard, not at all her kind of laugh. “Yes, Cathy, I have become the dutiful, obedient daughter your grandfather always wanted. He speaks, I obey. He orders, I jump. I have at last managed to please him.” She stopped abruptly and looked toward the double windows and the pale light beyond. “As a matter of fact, I have pleased him so well he is giving me a party tonight to reintroduce me to my old friends, and the local society. It is to be a grand affair, for my parents do everything in a big way when they entertain. They don’t imbibe themselves, but they don’t mind serving liquor to those who don’t fear hell. So, of course, it will be catered, and there will also be a small orchestra for dancing.” A party! A Christmas party! With an orchestra for dancing! And catered! And Momma was being written into the new will. Was there ever such a happy wonderful day?

“Can we watch?” Chris and I cried out almost simultaneously.

“We’ll be very quiet.”

“We’ll hide so no one can see us.”

“Please, Momma, please, it’s been so long since we saw other people, and we’ve never been to a Christmas Day party.”

We pleaded and pleaded until at last she could resist no longer. She drew Chris and me aside, to a far corner where the twins couldn’t overhear, and she whispered, “There is one place where the two of you can hide and still be able to watch, but I cannot risk the twins. They’re too young to be trusted and you know they can’t sit still for longer than two seconds, and Carrie would probably scream out in delight, and rivet everyone’s attention. So, swear on your word of honor you will not tell them.”

We promised. No, of course we wouldn’t tell them, even without a vow to keep our silence. We loved our little twins, and we wouldn’t hurt their feelings by letting them know they were missing out.

We sang Christmas carols after Momma had gone, and the day passed cheerfully enough, though there was nothing special in the picnic basket for us to eat: ham sandwiches, which the twins didn’t like, and cold slices of turkey that were still icy, as if they had been taken from the freezer. Leftovers from Thanksgiving Day.

As evening came on so early, I sat for the longest time gazing over at the dollhouse, where Carrie and Cory played happily with the tiny porcelain people and the priceless miniatures.

Funny how much you can learn from inanimate objects that a little girl had once owned, and been allowed to look at, but never touch. And then another little girl came along, and the dollhouse was given to her, and the glass box smashed just so she *could* touch the objects inside so she could be punished—when she broke something.

A shivering thought came: I wondered just what Carrie or Cory would break, and what their punishment would be.

I shoved a bit of chocolate into my mouth, and sweetened the sourness of my roving, wicked thoughts.

The Christmas Party



True to her word, not long after the twins were sound asleep, Momma slipped into our room. She looked so beautiful my heart swelled with pride and admiration, and with some envy too. Her long formal gown had a skirt of flowing green chiffon; the bodice was of a deeper green velvet, cut low to show off a lot of cleavage. Underneath the streaming panels of lighter green chiffon were shoestring straps that glittered. Diamond-and-emerald earrings dangled long and sparkling. Her scent reminded me of a musky, perfumed garden on a moonlit night somewhere in the Orient. No wonder Chris stared at her as if dazzled. Wistfully I sighed. *Oh God, please let me look like that one day ... let me have all those swelling curves that men so admire.*

And when she moved, the panels of chiffon floated as wings, leading us out of our sequestered dim place for the first time. Down all the dark and wide halls of the northern wing we followed close at Momma's silver heels. She whispered, "There's a place where I used to hide when I was a child, to watch the adult parties without my parents knowing. It's going to be cramped for the two of you, but it's the only place where you can hide and still see. Now promise again to be quiet, and if you get sleepy, slip unseen back to your room—remember how to get there." She told us not to watch longer than an hour, for the twins would be frightened to wake up and find themselves alone. Then, possibly, they'd wander out into the hall, looking for us—and God alone knew what could happen if they did.

We were secreted inside a massive oblong dark table, with cabinet doors underneath. It was uncomfortable, and very stuffy, but we could see well enough through the fine, mesh-like screen on the back side.

Silently, Momma stole away.

Far below us was a mammoth room brilliantly lit with candles fitted in the five tiers of three gigantic crystal and gold chandeliers suspended from a ceiling so high above, we couldn't see it. I never saw so many candles burning all at once! The scent of them, the way flickering lights glowed and caught in the sparkling prisms, to scatter and refract beams of iridescence from all the jewelry the women wore, made it a scene from a dream—no, better, more like a movie, sharp, clear, a ballroom where Cinderella and Prince Charming might dance!

Hundreds of richly dressed people milled about, laughing, talking. And over in the corner towered a Christmas tree that was beyond belief! It must have been more than twenty feet high, and it sparkled all over with thousands of golden lights to shine on the colorful ornaments and bedazzle your eyes!

Dozens of servants in black-and-red uniforms flowed in and out of the ballroom, bearing silver trays laden with dainty party food, and they set them on long tables where a giant crystal fountain sprayed pale amber fluid into a silver receiving bowl. Many men and women came to hold stemmed goblets and catch the sparkling liquid. There were two other punchbowls of silver, with small matching cups—both bowls large enough for a child to bathe in. It was beautiful, glamorous, exciting, exhilarating, . . . and so good to know that happy living was still going on outside our locked door.

“Cathy,” whispered Chris into my ear, “I'd sell my soul to the Devil to have just one single sip from that crystal-and-silver fountain!”

My very same thought!

Never had I felt so hungry, so thirsty, so deprived. Yet we both were charmed, enchanted, and bedazzled by all the splendor of what great wealth could buy and display. The floor where couples danced was laid out in mosaic patterns, and was waxed so it gleamed like reflecting glass. Huge gold-framed mirrors were on the walls, reflecting back the dancers so you could hardly tell the images from the reality. The frames of the

many chairs and sofas lining the walls were gold-colored, and the padded seats and backs were of red velvet, or white brocade. French chairs, of course—they just had to be Louis XIV or XV. Fancy, good-golly day!

Chris and I stared at the couples, who were the most beautiful and young. We commented on their clothing, their hairstyles, and speculated on what relationships they had going for them. But most of all we watched our mother, who was the center of attention. Most often she danced with a tall, handsome man with dark hair and a big moustache. He was the one who brought her stemmed goblets, and a plate of food, and they sat on a velvet couch to eat canapes and hors d'oeuvres. I thought they sat too close. Quickly I took my eyes from them, to take a look at the three chefs behind the long tables, still cooking what looked like pancakes to me, and little sausages to be stuffed with fillings. The aroma of all that drifted up to us, making our salivary glands overwork.

Our meals were monotonous, boring things: sandwiches, soups, and that everlasting fried chicken and eternal potato salad. Down there was a gourmet feast of everything delicious. Food was hot down there. Ours was seldom even warm. We kept our milk on the attic stairs so it wouldn't sour—and sometimes we found ice on the top. If we kept our picnic basket of food on the attic stairs, the mice stole down to nibble on everything.

From time to time, Momma disappeared with that man. Where did they go, and what did they do? Did they kiss? Was she falling in love? Even from my high and remote place in the cabinet, I could tell that man was fascinated by Momma. He couldn't take his eyes from her face, or keep his hands from touching her. And when they danced to music that was slow, he held her so his cheek pressed to hers. When they stopped dancing, he kept his arm around her shoulders, or her waist—and once he dared to even touch her breast!

I thought that now she would slap his good-looking face—for I would! But she only turned and laughed, and pushed him away, saying something that must have been a warning not to do that in public. And he smiled and took her hand and raised

it to his lips while their eyes locked long and meaningfully—or so I thought.

“Chris, do you see Momma with that man?”

“Sure I see them. He’s just as tall as Daddy was.”

“Did you see what he just did?”

“They’re eating and drinking, and laughing and talking, and dancing, just like everybody else. Cathy, just think, when Momma inherits all that money, we can have parties like this on Christmas, and on our birthdays. Why, in the future, we might even have some of the very same guests we see now. Let’s send invitations to our friends back in Gladstone. Boy, won’t they be surprised to see what we inherit!”

Just then, Momma and that man got up from the couch and left. So we fastened our charmed eyes on the second most attractive woman in the group below and watched her, and pitied her, for how could she compete with our mother?

Then into the ballroom strode our grandmother looking neither left nor right, nor smiling at anyone. Her dress wasn’t gray—and that alone was enough to astonish us. Her long formal gown was of ruby-red velvet, tight in the front and flowing in the back, and her hair was piled high on her head, and curled elaborately, and ruby and diamond jewelry sparkled on her neck, ears, arms and fingers. Who would ever think that impressive, regal-looking woman down there was the menacing grandmother who visited us each day?

Reluctantly, we had to admit in whispers back and forth: “She does look magnificent.”

“Yes, very impressive. Like an Amazon, too big.”

“A mean Amazon.”

“Yeah, a warrior Amazon, ready to do battle with the glare of her eyes alone. She doesn’t really need any other weapon.”

That’s when we saw him! Our unknown grandfather!

It stole my breath away to look down and see a man so very much like our father, if he had lived long enough to become old and feeble. He sat in a shiny wheelchair, dressed in a

tuxedo, and his formal shirt was white with black trim. His thinning blond hair was almost white, and it shone silver under the lights. His skin was unlined, at least viewed from our far and high and hidden place. Appalled, as well as fascinated, neither Chris nor I could move our eyes anywhere else once we spied him.

He was fragile looking, but still unnaturally handsome for a man of his great age of sixty-seven, and a man who was near dead. Suddenly, frighteningly, he raised his head and he gazed upward, directly at our hiding place! For one awful, terrifying moment, it seemed he knew we were there, hidden behind the wire screen! A small smile played on his lips. Oh, dear God, what did that smile mean?

Still, he didn't look nearly as heartless as the grandmother. Could he truly be the cruel and arbitrary tyrant we presumed him to be? From the gentle, kindly smiles he bestowed on all those who came up to greet him, and shake his hand, and pat his shoulder, he seemed benign enough. Just an old man in a wheel chair, who really didn't look very sick. Yet, he was the one who had ordered our mother to be stripped and whipped from her neck down to her heels, and he had watched. So, how could we ever forgive him for that?

"I didn't know he would look like Daddy," I whispered to Chris.

"Why not? Daddy was his much younger half-brother. Grandfather was a grown man before our father was born, and married, too, with two sons of his own, before he had a half-brother."

That was Malcolm Neal Foxworth down there, the one who had kicked out his younger step-mother and her little son.

Poor Momma. How could we blame her for falling in love with a half-uncle when he was as young, and as handsome and charming as our father had been? With such parents as she'd described, she *did* have to have someone to love, and she *did* need to be loved in return—she did . . . he did.

Love, it came unbidden.

You couldn't help whom you fell in love with—cupid's arrows were ill aimed. Such ran the whispered comments between Chris and me.

Then, we were suddenly hushed by the footfalls and voices of two people approaching our hiding place.

“Corrine hasn't changed at all,” said a man unseen by us, “only to grow more beautiful, and even more mysterious. She's a very intriguing woman.”

“Hah! That's because you always did have a yen for her, Al,” responded his female companion. “Too bad she didn't have eyes for you instead of Christopher Foxworth. Now there was a man who was really something else. But I marvel that those two narrow-minded bigots down there would allow themselves to forgive Corrine for marrying her half-uncle.”

“They have to forgive her. When you have only one child left out of three, you are forced to take that one back into the fold.”

“Isn't it peculiar how things work out?” asked the woman, her voice thick and guttural from too much liquor. “Three children ... and only the despised, regretted one is left to inherit all of this.”

The half-drunken man chortled. “Corrine wasn't always so despised. Remember how the old man adored her? She could do no wrong in his eyes until she eloped with Christopher. But that harridan mother of hers never had any patience with her daughter. Jealous, maybe. But what a luscious, rich plum to fall into the hands of Bartholomew Winslow. Wish it were mine!” said the unseen Al, wistfully.

“I'll bet you do!” sarcastically scoffed the woman, who set something down on our table that sounded like a glass with ice inside. “A beautiful, young, and rich woman is indeed a plum for any man. Much too heady for a slob like you, Albert Donne. Corrine Foxworth would never look at you, not now, not even when you were young. Besides, you're stuck with me.”

The bickering pair drifted out of earshot. Other voices came and went as the long hours passed. My brother and I were tired now of watching, and we were both very much needing the bathroom. Plus we were worried about the twins, left alone in the bedroom. What if one of the guests wandered into the forbidden room and saw the sleeping twins? Then all the world—and our grandfather—would know that our mother had four children.

A crowd gathered around our hiding place to laugh, talk, and drink. It took them forever to move away and give us the opportunity to open the cabinet door with extreme caution. Seeing no one, we scampered out, then dashed pell-mell in the direction from which we'd come. Breathless and panting, our bladders full enough to pop, we reached our quiet, cloistered place unseen, unheard.

And just as we'd left them, our twins lay deeply asleep in separate beds. They seemed identical, weak-looking pale dolls ... like children used to look a long time ago in the pictures in history books. They weren't today's kind of children at all—but once they'd been. And they would be again, I vowed!

Next thing, Chris and I were arguing over who got to use the bathroom first—and this was easily settled. He just pushed me down on a bed and took took off, slamming the bathroom door behind him and locking it. I fumed that it seemed to take him forever to empty his bladder. Good golly, how could he hold so much?

Nature's calls eased, bickering over, we huddled together to discuss what we'd just witnessed and overheard.

“Do you think Momma plans to marry Bartholomew Winslow?” I asked, twisting my ever-present anxieties into a knot

“How do I know?” answered Chris in an offhand manner. “Though it certainly seems everybody else thinks she will, and, of course, they know more about that side of her than we do.”

What an odd thing to say. Didn't we, her children, know our mother better than anyone else?

“Chris, why did you say that?”

“What?”

“What you did—about others knowing her better than we do.”

“People are multi-faceted, Cathy. To us, our mother is only our mother. To others, she is a beautiful, sexy young widow who is likely to inherit a fortune. No wonder the moths all come swarming to encircle the kind of bright flame she is.”

Wow! And he was taking all of this so casually, just as if it didn't matter to him one whit—when I knew it did. I thought I knew my brother very well. He must be suffering inside, just as I was, for I knew he didn't want our mother to marry again. I turned my most intuitive eyes upon him ... ah, he wasn't nearly as detached as he seemed, and that pleased me.

I sighed, though, for I would so much like to be the eternal optimist, like him. Deep down I thought life was sure to always put me between Scylla and Charibdis, and give to me always Hobson's Choice. I had to make myself over, make myself better, and become like Chris—eternally cheerful. When I suffered, I had to learn to hide it, as he did. I had to learn to smile and never frown, and not be the genuine clairvoyant I was.

Already we had discussed between us the possibility that our mother might marry again, and neither one of us wanted that to happen. We thought of her as still belonging to our father; we wanted her to be faithful to his memory, ever constant to his first love. And if she remarried, just where would the four of us fit in? Would that Winslow man, with his handsome face and big moustache want four children who weren't his?

“Cathy,” mused Chris aloud. “Do you realize this is the perfect time to explore this house? Our door is unlocked, the grandparents are downstairs. Momma is occupied—the perfect chance to find out all we can about this house.”

“No!” I cried, frightened. “Suppose the grandmother found out? She'd whip the skin off all of us!”

“Then you stay with the twins,” he said with surprising firmness. “If I’m caught, which I won’t be, I’ll suffer the whipping and take all the blame. Think of it this way, someday we may need to know how to escape this house.” An amused smile curved his lips before he went on. “I’m going to disguise myself, anyway, just in case I’m seen.”

Disguise? How?

But I’d forgotten the treasure trove of old clothes in the attic. He was up there only a few minutes before he came down, wearing an old-fashioned dark suit that wasn’t much too large. Chris was big for his age. Over his blond head he’d fitted a ratty, dark wig he’d found in a trunk. Just possibly he *might* be mistaken for a small man if the lights were dim enough—a ridiculously funny-looking man!

Jauntily, he paraded back and forth in front of me. Then he leaned forward and stalked around Groucho Marx-style, holding an invisible cigar. He stopped directly in front of me, grinning self-consciously as he bowed deeply and doffed an invisible top hat in a wide and gentlemanly gesture of respect. I had to laugh, and he laughed too, and not just with his eyes, then he straightened up to say, “Now, tell me truthfully, who could recognize this dark and sinister small man as belonging to the giant Foxworth clan?”

No one! For who had ever seen a Foxworth such as he? An awkward, lean and gangling one, with clear-cut features, and dark birdnest hair, plus a smudgy pencil moustache? Not a photograph in the attic resembled what swaggered about, showing off.

“Okay, Chris, cut the act. Go on, find out what you can, but don’t stay away too long, either. I don’t like it here without you.”

He came closer to whisper in a sly and conspiratorial stage whisper, “I’ll be back soon, my fair beauty, and when I’m back, I shall bring with me all the dark and mysterious secrets of this huge, huge, old, old house.” And suddenly, he caught me by surprise, and swooped to plant a kiss on my cheek.

Secrets? And he said *I* was given to exaggerations! What was the matter with him? Didn't he know that *we* were the secrets?

I was already bathed and shampooed and dressed for bed, and, of course, on Christmas night, I couldn't go to bed in a nightgown I'd worn before—not when I had several new ones “Santa” had brought. It was a lovely gown I wore, white, with full long sleeves that ruffled at the wrists, and was beaded through with blue satin ribbon, and everything was lace-edged, with smocking across the front and back of the bodice, and dainty pink roses with a tracery of delicately embroidered green leaves. It was one lovely nightgown, exquisitely made, and it made me feel beautiful and exquisite just to have it on.

Chris swept his eyes from my hair down to my bare toes that just barely peeked from beneath my long gown, and his eyes told me something they'd never said quite as eloquently before. He stared at my face, at my hair that cascaded down past my waist, and I knew it gleamed from all the brushing I gave it every day. He seemed impressed and dazzled, just as he had when he'd gazed so long at Momma's swelling bosom above the green velvet bodice.

And no wonder he had kissed me voluntarily—I was so princess-like.

He stood in the doorway, hesitating, still looking at me in my new nightgown, and I guess he was very happy to be playing the knight gallant, protective of his lady fair, of small children, and everyone who relied upon his audacity.

“Take care until you see me again,” he whispered.

“Christopher,” I whispered back, “all you need is a white horse and a shield.”

“No,” he whispered again, “a unicorn, and a lance with a green dragon's head upon its point, and back I'll gallop in my shining white armor while the blizzard blows in the month of August and the sun is mid-sky, and when I dismount you'll be looking up at someone who stands twelve feet high, so speak respectfully when you speak to me, my lady Cath-er-ine.”

“Yes, my lord. Go forth and slay yonder dragon—but take not overlong, for I could be undone by all that menaces me and mine in this stone-cold castle, where all the drawbridges are up, and the portcullises are down.”

“Farewell,” he whispered. “Have no fear. Soon I’ll be back to care for thee and thine.”

I giggled as I climbed into bed to lie down beside Carrie. Sleep was an elusive stranger that night as I thought about my mother and that man, about Chris, about all boys, about men, about romance—and love. As I slipped softly into dreams, with music playing down below, my hand lifted to touch the small ring with the garnet heart-stone that my father had put on my finger when I was only seven years old. A ring I’d outgrown so long ago. My touchstone. My talisman, worn now on a very fine gold chain.

Merry Christmas, Daddy.

Christopher's Exploration and Its Repercussions



Suddenly rough hands seized me by the shoulders and shook me awake! Jolted, startled, I stared with frightened eyes at a woman I hardly recognized as my mother. She glared at me and demanded in an angry voice, “Where is your brother?”

Taken aback that she could speak and look as she did, so out of control, I cringed from her attack, then rolled my head to look at the bed three feet from the one I was in. Empty. Oh, he had stayed too long.

Should I lie? Protect him, and say he was in the attic? No, this was our mother who loved us; she'd understand. “Chris went to look over the rooms on this floor.”

Honesty was the best policy, wasn't it? And we never lied to our mother, or to each other. Only to the grandmother, and then only when necessary.

“Damn, damn, damn!” she swore, reddened by a new flood of temper that was now directed at me. Most certainly her precious older son, whom she favored above all, would never betray her without my devilish influence. She shook me until I felt like a rag doll, and my eyes were loose and rolling.

“Just for this, I will never, for any reason, or any special occasion, allow you and Christopher out of this room again! You both gave me your word—and you broke it! How can I trust either one of you now? And I thought I could. I thought you loved me, that you would never betray me!”

My eyes widened more. Had we betrayed her? I was shocked too that she could act the way she was—it seemed to me she was betraying *us*.

“Momma, we haven’t done anything bad. We were very quiet in the chest. People came and went all around us, but nobody knew we were there. We *were* quiet. No one knows we’re here. And you can’t say you won’t let us out again. You’ve got to let us out of here! You can’t keep us locked up and hidden away forever.”

She stared at me in an odd, harassed way, without answering. I thought she might slap me, but no, she released her hold on my shoulders and spun around to leave. The flaring chiffon panels of her couturier gown seemed like wild fluttering wings, wafting sweet, flowery perfume that went ill with her fierce demeanor.

Just as she was about to leave the room, apparently going to hunt up Chris herself, the door opened, and my brother stole quietly inside. He eased to the door, then turned and looked in my direction. His lips parted to speak. That’s when he saw our mother and the strangest expression came over his face.

For some reason, his eyes didn’t light up as they customarily did when he saw our mother.

Moving swiftly and with strong purpose, Momma reached his side. Her hand lifted and she delivered a hard, stinging slap against his cheek! Then, before he could recover from the shock of that, her left hand lifted, and the opposite cheek felt the strength of her anger!

Now Chris’s pale and stunned face wore two large red splotches.

“If you ever do anything like this again, Christopher Foxworth, I will myself whip not only you, but Cathy, as well.”

What color Chris had left in his unnaturally pale face drained away, leaving those red slap marks on his wan cheeks like smeary handprints of blood.

I felt my own blood drain down into my feet; a stinging sensation began behind my ears as my strength grew small, and I stared at that woman who seemed a stranger now, like some woman we didn’t know, and one I didn’t care to know.

Was that our mother who usually spoke to us only with kindness and love? Was that the mother who was so understanding of our misery from such a long, long confinement? Was the house already doing “things” to her—making her different? It came then in a rush . . . yes, all the little things totaled up . . . she *was* changing. She didn’t come as often as she used to, not every day, most certainly not twice a day as she had in the beginning. And, oh, I was scared, like everything trusted and dependable was torn from beneath our feet—and only toys, games, and other gifts were left.

She must have seen something in Chris’s stunned expression, something that made her hot anger disappear. She drew him into her open arms and covered his wan, splotched, moustached face with quick little kisses that sought to take away the harm she’d done. Kiss, kiss, kiss, finger his hair, stroke his cheek, draw his head against her soft, swelling breasts, and let him drown in the sensuality of being cuddled close to that creamy flesh that must excite even a youth of his tender years.

“I’m sorry, darling,” she whispered, tears in her eyes and in her voice, “forgive me, please forgive me. Don’t look so frightened. How can you be afraid of me? I didn’t mean it about the whippings. I love you. You know that. I would never whip you or Cathy. Have I ever? I’m not myself, because I have everything going my way now—our way. You just can’t do anything to spoil it for all of us. And that’s the only reason I slapped you.”

She cupped his face between her palms and kissed him full on lips that were puckered from the tight squeeze of her hands. And those diamonds, those emeralds kept flashing, flashing . . . signal lights, meaning something. And I sat and watched, and wondered, and felt . . . felt, oh, I didn’t know how I felt, except confused and bewildered, and very, very young. And the world all about us was wise, and old, so old.

Of course he forgave her, just as I did. And of course we had to know what was going her way, and our way.

“Please, Momma, tell us what it is—please.”

“Another time,” she said, in a terrible hurry to get back to the party before she was missed. More kisses for the both of us. And it came to me then, I had never felt my cheek against the softness of her breast.

“Another time, perhaps tomorrow, and I’ll tell you everything,” she said, hurriedly giving us more kisses, and saying more soothing words to take away our anxieties. She leaned over me to kiss Carrie, and then went over to Cory to kiss his cheek too.

“You have forgiven me, Christopher?”

“Yes, Momma. I understand, Momma. We should have stayed in this room. I should never have gone exploring.”

She smiled and said “Merry Christmas, and I’ll be seeing you soon.” And then out the door she went, closing and locking it behind her.

Our first Christmas Day upstairs was over. The clock down the hall had struck one. We had a room full of gifts, a TV set, the chess game we’d asked for, one red and one blue tricycle, new clothes that were heavy and warm, plus many sweet things to eat, and Chris and I had been to a magnificent party—in a way. Yet, something new had come into our lives, a facet of our mother’s character we had never experienced before. For just a brief moment or two, Momma seemed exactly like our grandmother!

In the dark, on one bed, with Carrie on one side of me, and Chris on the other, he and I lay holding each other. He smelled different than I did. My head was on his boyish chest and he was losing weight. I could hear his heart throbbing along with the faint music still drifting to our ears. He had his hand in my hair, curling a tendril over and over around his fingers.

“Chris, being grown up is awfully complicated, isn’t it?”

“Guess so.”

“I always thought when you were an adult you knew how to handle any situation. You were never in doubt as to what is wrong, and what is right. I never guessed adults floundered around, too, just like us.”

“If you’re thinking of Momma, she didn’t mean what she said and did. I believe, though I’m not sure, once you are an adult, and come back to the home of your parents to live, for some odd reason, you’re reduced to being a child again, and dependent. Her parents tug her one way—and we pull her another way—and now she’s got that man with the moustache. He must be tugging her his way, too.”

“I hope she never marries again! We need her more than that man does!”

Chris didn’t say anything.

“And that TV set she brought us—she waited for her father to give her one, when she could have bought us one herself months ago, instead of buying herself so many clothes. And the jewelry! She’s always wearing new rings, and new bracelets, earrings and necklaces.”

Very slowly he expressed a careful explanation of our mother’s motives. “Look at it this way, Cathy. If she had given us a TV the first day we came, we would have sat down in front of it and stared all day long. Then we wouldn’t have created a garden in the attic where the twins can play happily. We wouldn’t have done anything but sit and watch. And look how much we’ve learned during our long, long days, like how to make flowers and animals. I paint better now than when I came, and look at the books we’ve read to improve our minds. And you, Cathy, you’ve changed too.”

“How? How have I changed? Name it.”

He rolled his head from side to side on the pillow, expressing a sort of embarrassed helplessness.

“All right. You don’t have to say anything nice to me. But before you leave this bed and get into your own, tell me all you found out—everything. Don’t leave out a thing, not even your thoughts. I want you to make me feel I was there with you, at your side, seeing and feeling what you did.”

He turned his head so our eyes locked and he said in the weirdest voice, “You *were* there beside me. I felt you there,

holding onto my hand, whispering in my ear, and I looked all the harder, just so you could see what I did.”

This giant house, ruled by the sick ogre beneath, had intimidated him; I could tell that by his voice. “It’s an awfully big house, Cathy, like a hotel. There are rooms and rooms, all furnished with beautiful expensive things, but you can tell they are never used. I counted fourteen rooms on this floor alone, and I think I missed a few small ones.”

“Chris!” I cried out, disappointed. “Don’t tell it to me that way! Make me feel I was there beside you. Start over, and tell me how it went from the second you were out of my sight.”

“Well,” he said, sighing, like he’d rather not, “I stole along the dark corridor of this wing, and I ran to where this hall joins that large center rotunda where we hid in the chest near the balcony. I didn’t bother looking in any of the northern-wing rooms. As soon as I was where people might see me, I had to be careful. The party was nearing its peak. The revelry down there was even louder, everybody sounded drunk. In fact, one man was singing in a foolish way something about wanting his missing two front teeth. It was so funny sounding, I stole over to the balustrade and looked down on all the people. They looked odd, foreshortened, and I thought, I’ll have to remember that, so when I draw people from an above the eye-level viewpoint, they’ll look natural. Perspective makes all the difference in a painting.”

It made all the difference in everything, if you asked me.

“Of course it was Momma I searched for,” he continued after I urged him on, “and the only people I recognized down there were our grandparents. Our grandfather was beginning to look tired, and even as I watched, a nurse came and pushed him out of sight. And I watched, for it gave me the general direction to his room in back of the library.”

“Was she wearing a white uniform?”

“Of course. How else would I know she was a nurse?”

“Okay, go on. Don’t leave out a thing.”

“Well, no sooner did the grandfather leave than the grandmother left, too, and then I heard voices coming up one of the stairways! You never saw anyone move quicker than I did! I couldn’t hide in the chest without revealing myself, so I ducked into a corner where a suit of armor stood on a pedestal. You know that armor must have been worn by a fully grown man, and yet I’ll bet you a hundred it wouldn’t fit me, though I would have liked to try it on. And as for who was coming up the stairs, it was Momma, and with her she had the same dark-haired man with the moustache.”

“What did they do? Why were they upstairs?”

“They didn’t see me hiding in the shadows, I guess, because they were so preoccupied with each other. That man wanted to see some bed Momma has in her room.”

“Her bed—he wanted to see her bed? Why?”

“It’s a special kind of bed, Cathy. He said to her, ‘C’mon, you’ve held out long enough.’ His voice sounded teasing. Then he added, ‘It’s time you showed me that fabulous swan bed I’ve heard so much about.’ Apparently Momma was worried that we might still be hidden in the chest. She glanced that way, looking uneasy. But she agreed and said, ‘All right, Bart—however, we can linger but a moment, for you know what everyone will suspect if we stay away too long.’ And he chuckled and teased back, ‘No, I can’t guess what everyone would think. Tell me what they will suspect.’ To me, this sounded like a challenge to let everyone think what they would. It made me angry, him saying that.” And at this point Chris paused, and his breathing got heavier and faster.

“You’re holding something back,” I said, knowing him like a book I’d read a hundred times over. “You’re protecting her! You saw something you don’t want to tell me! Now that’s not fair! You know we agreed the first day we came here to always be honest and fully truthful with each other—now you tell me what you saw!”

“Good gosh,” he said, squirming and turning his head and refusing to look me straight in the eyes, “what difference does a few kisses make?”

“*A FEW kisses?*” I stormed. “You saw him kiss Momma more than once? What kind of kisses? Hand kisses—or real mouth-to-mouth kisses?”

A blush heated up his chest, on which my cheek was resting. It burned right through his pajamas. “They were passionate kisses, weren’t they?” I threw out, convinced even without his say-so. “He kissed her, and she let him, and maybe he even touched her breasts, and stroked her buttocks, like I once saw Daddy do when he didn’t know I was in the room and watching! Is that what you saw, Christopher?”

“What difference does it make?” he answered, a choke in his voice. “Whatever he did, she didn’t seem to mind, though it made me feel sick.”

It made me feel sick, too. Momma was only a widow of eight months then. But, sometimes eight months can feel more like eight years, and, after all, of what value was the past when the present was so thrilling, and pleasing ... for, you bet, I could guess a lot went on that Chris wasn’t ever going to tell me.

“Now, Cathy, I don’t know what you’re thinking, but Momma did command him to stop, and if he didn’t, she wouldn’t show him her bedroom.”

“Oh boy, I bet he was doing something gross!”

“Kisses,” said Chris, staring over at the Christmas tree, “only kisses, and a few caresses, but they did make her eyes glow, and then that Bart, he was asking her if the swan bed had once belonged to a French courtesan.”

“For heaven’s sake, what is a French courtesan?”

Chris cleared his throat. “It’s a noun I looked up in the dictionary, and it means a woman who saves her favors for men of the aristocracy, or royalty.”

“Favors—what kind of favors?”

“The kind rich men pay for,” he said quickly, and went on, putting his hand over my mouth to shut me up. “And, of course, Momma denied such a bed would be in this house. She said a bed with a sinful reputation, no matter how beautiful,

would be burned at night, while prayers were said for its redemption, and the swan bed was her grandmother's bed, and when she was a girl, she wanted her grandmother's bedroom suite more than she wanted anything else. But her parents wouldn't let her have those rooms, fearful she'd be contaminated by the ghost of her grandmother who wasn't exactly a saint, and not exactly a courtesan either. And then Momma laughed, kind of hard and bitterly, and told Bart her parents believed she was now so corrupted that nothing could, or would make her worse than she already was. And you know, that made me feel so bad. Momma isn't corrupted—Daddy loved her ... they were married ... and what married people do in private is no one else's business.”

My breath caught and held. Chris always knew everything—absolutely everything!

“Well, Momma said, ‘One quick look, Bart, and then back to the party.’ They disappeared down a wing softly lit and inviting, and of course that gave me the general directions of her room. I cautiously peered in all directions first, before I came from out of hiding, and dashed away from the suit of armor, and into the first closed door that I saw. I rushed in, thinking that since it was dark, and the door was closed, it would be unoccupied. I closed the door behind me very softly, and then stood perfectly still, just to absorb the scent and feel of the place, the way you say you do. I had my flashlight, and I could have beamed that around right away, but I wanted to learn how you can be so intuitive, and so wary and suspicious, when everything seems perfectly normal to me. And darned if you aren't right. If the lights had been on, and I'd used the flashlight, maybe I wouldn't have noticed the strangest unnatural odor that filled the room. An odor that made me feel uneasy and kind of scared. Then, by golly, I nearly dropped my skin!”

“What—what?” I said, pushing his hand that tried to hush me. “What did you see—a monster?”

“Monster? Oh, you bet I saw *monsters!* *Dozens* of monsters! At least I saw their heads mounted and hung on the walls. All about me eyes were glistening—amber, green,

topaz, and lemon eyes. Boy, was it scary! The light coming through the windows was colored bluish because of the snow, and it caught on the shiny teeth, and on the fangs of the lion which had its mouth wide open and was silently roaring. It had a tawny ruff of mane that made its head seem huge—it had a mute expression of anguish, or anger. And for some reason, I felt sorry for it, decapitated, mounted, stuffed—made just a thing to decorate when it should have lived out its life stalking free on the veld.”

Oh, yes, I knew what he meant. My anguish was always like a mountain of rage.

“It was a trophy room, Cathy, a huge room with many animal heads. There was a tiger, and an elephant with its trunk uplifted. All the animals from Asia and Africa were displayed on one side of the huge room, and the big game from America was on the opposite wall: a grizzly bear, a brown-and-black bear, an antelope, a mountain lion, and so on. Not a fish or bird was represented, as if they didn’t present enough of a challenge to the hunter who had killed to decorate that room. It was a creepy room, and yet I wanted so much for you to see it. You’ve just got to see it!”

Oh, heck—what did I care about the trophy room? I wanted to know about people—their secrets—that’s what I wanted.

“There was a stone fireplace at least twenty feet long on the wall with the windows on either side, and above it hung a life-size oil portrait of a young man who was so much like our father it made me want to cry out. But it wasn’t Daddy’s portrait. As I neared, I saw a man much like our father, except in the eyes. He wore a khaki hunting outfit, with a blue shirt. The hunter rested on his rifle and he had one leg up on a log that lay on the ground. I know a little about art, enough to know that painting is a masterpiece. The artist really captured the soul of the hunter. You never saw such hard, cold, cruel and pitiless blue eyes. That alone told me it couldn’t be our father even before I read the small metal plate fastened to the bottom of the goldleaf frame. It was a painting of Malcolm Neal Foxworth, our grandfather. The date showed Daddy had been five years old when that portrait was painted. And as you

know, when Daddy was three, he and his mother, Alicia, had been driven away from Foxworth Hall, and he and his mother were living in Richmond then.”

“Go on.”

“Well, I was very fortunate nobody saw me stealing around, for I really did poke into every room. And finally I found Momma’s suite of rooms. It has double doors over two steps up, and, boy, when I took a look inside, I thought I was looking into a palace! The other rooms made me anticipate something splendid, but her rooms are just beyond belief! And they had to be our mother’s rooms, for Daddy’s photograph was on her nightstand, and the rooms smelled of her perfume. In the center of the room, on a dais, was the fabulous swan bed! Oh! What a bed! You’ve never seen anything like it! It has a sleek ivory head, turned in profile, and appears ready to plunge its head under the ruffled underside of a lifted wing. It has one sleepy red eye. The wings curve gently to cup the head of an almost oval bed—I don’t know how they fit sheets on it, unless they are custom-made. The designers arranged for the wingtip feathers to act as fingers, and they hold back the delicate, transparent draperies that are in all shades of pink and rose, and violet, and purple. It is really some bed ... and those bed curtains ... why, she must feel like a princess sleeping there. The pale mauve carpet is so thick you sink up to your ankles, and there’s a large rug of white fur near the bed. There are lamps four feet high of cut-crystal, decorated with gold and silver, and two of them have black shades. There’s an ivory chaise lounge upholstered in rose-colored velvet—something like you’d see in a Roman orgy. And at the foot of that big swan bed—and hold your breath, for you’re not going to believe this—there was an infant swan bed! Imagine that! Placed at the foot, and crossways. I just had to stand and wonder why anyone would need a big wide bed, and then a little narrow bed across the bottom. There must be a good reason, beside that of taking a nap and not mussing the larger bed. Cathy, you’ve just got to see that bed to believe it!”

I knew he’d seen a whole lot more that he didn’t mention. More that I was to see later for myself. So much I did see that

I knew why he came back and made so much of the bed without telling me everything.

“Is this house prettier than our house in Gladstone?” I asked, for, to me, our ranch house—eight rooms and two and a half baths—had been the best possible.

He hesitated. It took him some time to find the right words to say, for he was not one to speak hastily. He weighed his words carefully that night, and that alone told much. “This is not a pretty house. It’s grand, it’s big, it’s beautiful, but I wouldn’t call it pretty.”

I thought I knew what he meant. Prettiness was more akin to coziness than grand, rich, and beautiful, plus huge.

And now there was nothing left to say but good night—and don’t let the bedbugs bite. I put a kiss on his cheek and pushed him off the bed. This time he didn’t complain that kisses were only for babies and sissies—and girls. Soon he was snuggled down beside Cory, only three feet away.

In the dark, the little live Christmas tree, two feet tall, sparkled with tiny colored lights, like the tears I saw glistening in my brother’s eyes.

The Long Winter, and Spring, and Summer



Never had our mother spoken truer words when she said now we had a real window to look into the lives of others. That winter, the TV set took over our lives. Like others—invalids, sick people, old people—we ate, bathed, and dressed, so we could sit down to watch other people living fake lives.

During January, February, and most of March the attic was much too cold to enter. A frigid vapor hung in the air up there, eerily misting everything over, and it was scary, you bet. And miserable; even Chris had to admit that.

All of this made us very content to stay in the warmer bedroom, cuddled close together as we stared and stared and stared. The twins adored the TV so they never wanted to turn it off; even at night while we slept they wanted it on, knowing it would then wake them up in the mornings. Even the scramble of dots after the late-late shows was better to them than nothing at all. Cory, in particular, liked to wake up and see the little people behind the desks giving the news, talking about the weather; for certainly their voices welcomed him more cheerfully into another day than did the covered, dim windows.

The TV shaped us, molded us, taught us how to spell and pronounce difficult words. We learned how important it was to be clean, odorless, and never let wax accumulate on your kitchen floor; never let the wind muss your hair, and God forbid if you had dandruff! Then the entire world would hold you in scorn. In April I'd be thirteen, approaching the age of acne! Each day I examined my skin to see what horrors might pop up any moment. Really, we took commercials literally, believing in their value as a book of rules to see us safely through the dangers life held.

Each day that passed brought about changes in Chris and in me. Peculiar things were happening to our bodies. We grew hair where we hadn't had hair before—funny looking, crispy, amber-colored hair, darker than what was on our heads. I didn't like them, and I took the tweezers and plucked them out whenever they appeared, but they were like weeds: the more you plucked, the more came back. Chris found me one day with my arm upraised, seeking diligently to grasp one single, crinkly amber hair and ruthlessly yank it out.

“What the heck are you doing?” he shot out.

“I don't want to have to shave under my arms and I don't want to use that depilatory cream that Momma uses—it stinks!”

“You mean you've been pulling hairs from your body wherever they appear?”

“Sure I do. I like my body nice and neat—even if you don't.”

“You're fighting a losing battle,” he said with a wicked grin. “That hair is supposed to grow where it does—so leave it alone and stop thinking about looking childishly neat, and begin to think of that hair as sexy.”

Sexy? Big bosoms were sexy, not crinkly, wiry hair. But I didn't say this, for little hard apples were beginning to poke out my chest, and I just hoped Chris hadn't noticed. I was very pleased I was beginning to swell out in front—when I was alone, in a private place—but I didn't want anyone else to notice. I had to abandon that forlorn hope, for I saw Chris glance quite often at my chest, and no matter how loosely my sweaters or blouses fitted, I believe those little hills betrayed my modesty.

I was coming alive, feeling things I hadn't felt before. Strange aching, longings. Wanting something, and not knowing what it was that woke me up at night, pulsating, throbbing, excited, and knowing a man was there with me, doing something I wanted him to complete, and he never did ... he never did ... always I woke up too soon, before I

reached those climactic heights I knew he would take me to—if only I wouldn't wake up and spoil it all.

Then there was another puzzling thing. It was me who made up the beds every morning, as soon as we were up and dressed, and before the witch came in with the picnic basket. I kept seeing stains on the sheets, and they weren't large enough to be another of Cory's dreams of going to the bathroom. They were on Chris's side of the bed. "For heaven's sakes, Chris. I sure hope *you* don't take to dreaming of being in the bathroom while you're still asleep in bed." I just couldn't believe his fantastic tale of something he called "nocturnal emissions!"

"Chris, I think you should tell Momma, so she can take you to a doctor. Whatever you have might be contagious, something Cory could catch, and he's messy enough already in the bed without adding more."

He threw me a look of contempt while red color heated his face. "I don't need to see a doctor," he said in the stiffest way. "I've heard older boys talk in the school restrooms, and what is happening to me is perfectly normal."

"It cannot be normal—it is much too messy to be normal."

"Hah!" he scoffed, flashing his eyes with hidden laughter sparkling them. "Your time to mess up your sheets is coming."

"What do you mean?"

"Ask Momma. It's about time she told you. I've already noticed you're beginning to develop—and that's a sure sign."

I hated that he always knew more about everything than I did! Where did he learn so much—from nasty, idle talk in the boy's room? I'd heard some nasty, idle talk in the girls' room too, but darned if I was gonna believe one word of it. It was all just too gross!

The twins seldom used a chair, and they couldn't loll about on the beds, for that would make them rumped, and the grandmother insisted that we keep everything "shipshape." And though they liked the soaps, they still kept on playing as they occasionally glanced up to see the most spellbinding scenes. Carrie had that dollhouse, with all its little people and

its many small fascinations, to keep her constantly chattering in a singsong, lilting way that could grate on your nerves. Many an annoyed glance I'd throw her way, hoping she'd shut up for two seconds, and let me hear and enjoy without all the chitchat—but I never said anything to her, for that would bring about howls worse than the low murmur of her back-and-forth conversations.

While Carrie moved the dolls about, and conversed for male and female, Cory would fiddle with his many boxes of Tinker-toys. He refused to use the directions that Chris tried to teach him how to follow. Cory would design whatever suited his needs most, and what he constructed was always something he could beat upon to make musical notes. With the television to make noise and give a constantly changing variety of scenes, the dollhouse with its many charms to please Carrie, and the Tinkertoys which happily away the hours for Cory, the twins managed to make the best of their confined lives. The young are very adaptable; I know that from watching them. Sure, they complained some, about two things the most. Why didn't momma come as often as she used to? That hurt, really hurt, for what could I tell them? And then there was the food; they never liked the food. They wanted icecream cones that they saw on TV, and the hot dogs TV children were always eating. In fact, they wanted everything that was aimed at a child's appetite for sweet things, or toy things. The toys they got. The sweets they didn't.

And while the twins crawled about on the floor, or sat crosslegged making their particular kind of annoying racket, Chris and I tried to keep our minds concentrated on the complicated situations that unfolded daily before our eyes. We watched unfaithful husbands deceive loving wives, or nagging wives or wives too concerned with their children to give the husbands the attentions they deemed so necessary. It was vice-versa, too. Wives could be just as unfaithful to husbands good, or husbands bad. We learned love was just like a soap bubble, so shining and bright one day, and the next day it popped. Then came the tears, the woebegone expressions, the anguish over endless cups of coffee while seated at the kitchen table with a best friend who had her own troubles, or his own

troubles. But, no sooner was one love over and done with, then along came another love to start that shining soap bubble soaring again. Oh, how very hard those beautiful people sought to find the perfect love and lock it away, keep it safe; and they never could.

One afternoon in late March Momma came into the room with a large box tucked under her arm. We were accustomed to seeing her enter our room with many gifts, not just one, and the strangest thing was she nodded at Chris, who seemed to understand for he got up from where he sat to study, caught hold of the small hands of our twins, and he took them up into the attic. I didn't understand in the least. It was still cold up there. Was this some secret? Was she bringing a gift just for me?

We sat side by side on the bed Carrie and I shared and before I could have a look at the "gift" meant especially for me, Momma said we had to have a "woman-to-woman" talk.

Now, I'd heard about man-to-man talks from watching old Andy Hardy movies, and I knew these particular kinds of discussions had something to do with growing up and sex, so I grew thoughtful and tried not to show too much interest, which would be unladylike—though I was dying to know at last.

And did she tell me what I'd waited to hear for many a year? No! While I sat solemnly and awaited the disclosing of all the evil, unholy things boys knew from the moment they were born, according to one particular witch-grandmother, I sat stunned and disbelieving while she did the explaining of how likely any day I would start to bleed!

Not from a wound, an injury, but from God's plan of how a woman's body should function. And, to add to my amazement, not only was I going to bleed once every month from now on until I was an old woman of fifty, this bloody thing was going to last five days!

"Until I'm fifty?" I asked in a voice weak and small, afraid, oh so afraid she wasn't joking.

She gave me a sweet and tender smile. "Sometimes it stops before you're fifty, and sometimes it goes on for a few years

more—there’s no set rule. But somewhere around that age bracket you can expect to go into ‘the change of life.’ And that is called menopause.”

“Is it going to hurt?” was the most important thing I needed to know at that moment.

“Your monthly periods? There may be a little crampy pain, but it’s not so bad, and I can tell you this from my own experience, and that from other women I know, the more you dread it, the more it pains.”

I knew it! Never did I see blood that I didn’t feel pain—unless it was the blood of someone else. And all this mess, this pain, these cramps, just so my uterus could ready itself to receive a “fertilized egg” that would grow into a baby. Then she gave me the box which contained everything I would need for “that time of month.”

“Hold up, Momma!” I cried, having found a way to avoid all of this. “You’ve forgotten I plan to be a ballerina, and dancers are never supposed to have babies. Miss Danielle was always telling us it was better never to have a child. And I don’t want any, not ever. So you can take all this stuff back to the store, and get back your money, for I’m calling off this monthly period mess!”

She chuckled, then hugged me closer and put on my cheek a kiss. “I guess I must have overlooked telling you something—for there isn’t anything you can do to prevent menstruation. You have to accept all of nature’s ways of changing your body from that of a child, into that of a woman. Certainly you don’t want to remain a child all your life, do you?”

I floundered, wanting very much to be a grown woman, with all the curves she had, and yet I wasn’t prepared for the shock of such messiness—and once each month!

“And, Cathy, please don’t be ashamed, or embarrassed, or dread a little discomfort, and the trouble—having babies is very rewarding. Someday you’ll fall in love and marry, and you’ll want to give your husband children—if you love him enough.”

“Momma, there’s something you’re not telling me. If girls go through this sort of thing to become a woman, what must Chris endure to become a man?”

She giggled girlishly and pressed her cheek to mine. “They have changes, too, though none that make them bleed. Chris will soon have to be shaving—and every day too. And there are certain other things he will have to learn to accomplish, and control, that you don’t have to worry about.”

“What?” asked I, eager to have the male gender share some of the miseries of maturing. When she didn’t answer, I asked, “Chris, he sent you to me with instructions to tell me, didn’t he?” She nodded and said yes, though she had meant to tell me long ago, but downstairs there was a hassle every day to keep her from doing what she should.

“Chris—what does he have to endure that’s painful?”

She laughed, seemingly amused. “Another day, Cathy. Now put your things away, and use them when you have the need. Don’t panic if it starts in the night, or while you’re dancing. I was twelve the day mine started, and out riding a bicycle, and you know I rode home at least six times and changed my panties before my mother finally noticed, and took the time to explain to me what it was all about. I was furious because she hadn’t warned me in advance. She never told me anything. Believe it or not, you’ll soon get used to it, and it won’t make one bit of difference in your lifestyle.”

Despite the boxes of hateful things I wished I would never need—for I wasn’t going to have a baby, that was a very good warm talk that my mother and I shared.

And yet, when she called Chris and the twins down from the attic, and she kissed Chris and ruffled his blond curls, and played with him in teasing ways, and almost ignored the twins, the closeness shared but a moment ago began to fade. Carrie and Cory seemed ill at ease in her presence now. They came running to me and climbed up on my lap, and with my arms hugging them close, they watched as Chris was fondled, kissed, and fawned over. It bothered me so much the way she treated the twins, as if she didn’t like to look at them. As Chris

and I moved on into puberty, and toward adulthood, the twins stagnated, went nowhere.

* * *

The long cold winter passed into spring. Gradually the attic grew warmer. We went, all four, up there to take down the paper snowflakes, and we made it bloom again with our brilliant spring flowers.

My birthday came in April, and Momma didn't fail to come with presents, and the treats of ice cream and bakery cake. She sat down to spend the Sunday afternoon, and taught me how to do crewel embroidery, and a few needlepoint stitches. Thus, with the kits she gave me, I had another way to fill my time.

My birthday was followed by the twins' day—their sixth birthday. Again, Momma bought the cake, the ice cream, and the many gifts, including musical instruments that made Cory's blue eyes light up. He took one long, charmed look at that toy accordion, gave it a squeeze or two while punching the keys, cocking his head to listen attentively to the sounds he made. And darned, if he wasn't soon playing a tune on that thing! None of us could believe it. Then again we were dumbfounded, for he turned to Carrie's toy piano and did the same thing. "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Carrie, happy birthday to you and me."

"Cory has an ear for music," said Momma, looking sad and yearning as she at last turned her gaze upon her youngest son. "Both my brothers were musicians. The pity of it was my father had no patience for the arts, or the type of men who were artists—not only those who were musicians, but painters, poets, and so forth. He thought them weak and effeminate. He forced this older brother to work in a bank he owned, not caring if his son detested the job that didn't suit him at all. He was named after my father, but we called him Mal. He was a very goodlooking young man, and on weekends, Mal would escape the life he hated by riding up into the mountains on his motorcycle. In his own private retreat, a log cabin he had built himself, he composed music. One day he took a curve too fast in the rain. He careened off the road and crashed down

hundreds of feet into a chasm. He was twenty-two years old and dead.

“My younger brother was named Joel, and he ran away the day of his brother’s funeral. He and Mal had been very close, and I guess he just couldn’t bear the thought that now he would have to take Mal’s place, and be the heir to his father’s business dynasty. We received one single postcard from Paris, in which Joel told us he had a job with an orchestra touring Europe. Next thing we heard, perhaps three weeks later, Joel had been killed in a skiing accident in Switzerland. He was nineteen when he died. He had fallen into some deep ravine filled with snow, and to this day, they never found his body.”

Oh, golly! I was greatly disturbed, kind of numb-feeling inside. So many accidents. Two brothers dead, and Daddy, too, all from accidents. My bleak look met with Chris’s. He wasn’t smiling. As soon as our mother was gone, we escaped to the attic and our books.

“We’ve read every damned thing!” said Chris in deep disgust, flashing me an annoyed look. Wasn’t my fault he could read a book in a few hours!

“We could read through those Shakespeare books again,” I suggested.

“I don’t like to read plays!”

Gosh-golly, I loved reading Shakespeare and Eugene O’Neill, and anything that was dramatic, fanciful, and fraught with tempestuous emotions.

“Let’s teach the twins to read and write,” I suggested, I was that frantic to do something different. And in this way we could give *them* another way to entertain themselves. “And Chris, we’ll save their brains from turning into mush from looking at that tube so much, and keep them from going blind, too.”

Down the stairs we determinedly stalked, and right up to the twins who had their eyes glued to Bugs Bunny, who was signing off.

“We are going to teach the two of you to read and write,” said Chris.

With loud wails they protested. “*No!*” howled Carrie. “*We don’t want to learn to read and write! We don’t write letters! We want to watch ‘I Love Lucy’!*”

Chris grabbed her, and I seized hold of Cory, and quite literally we had to drag them both into the attic. It was like trying to handle slippery snakes. One of them could bellow like a mad bull charging!

Cory didn’t speak, nor did he scream, nor did he beat at me with small fists to inflict some damage; he just clung fiercely to whatever came within reach of his hands, and he used his legs to wrap around things, too.

Never did two amateur teachers have a more unwilling student body. But finally, through tricks and threats and fairy tales, we began to interest them. Maybe it was pity for *us* that soon had them carefully toiling over books, and tediously memorizing and reciting letters. We gave them a McGuffey’s first grade primer to copy words from.

Not acquainted with other children the same age as our twins, Chris and I thought our six-year-olds did remarkably well. And though Momma didn’t come every day now as she had in the beginning, or every other day, she did show up once or twice a week. How anxiously we waited to give her the short note Cory and Carrie had printed, making sure each had the same amount of words to print.

They printed in letters at least two inches high, and very crooked:

Dear Momma,

We love you,
And candy, too.

Good-bye,
Carrie and Cory

Such sweating diligence they used to concoct their own message, not coached by either Chris or me—a message which they hoped our mother would get. Which she didn’t.

Tooth cavities, of course.

* * *

Then summer was upon us. And again it was hot and sweltering, so horribly stuffy, though, strangely, not as unbearable as it had been the previous summer. Chris reasoned our blood was thinner now, so we could tolerate the heat better.

Our summer was filled with books. Apparently Momma just reached in and took books from the shelves downstairs without bothering to read the titles, or wondering if they would be of interest to us, or suitable reading for young minds so easily impressed. It didn't really matter. Chris and I would read anything.

One of our favorite books that summer was a historical novel that made history better than that taught in school. We were surprised to read that in the old days women didn't go to the hospitals to have babies. They had them at home on a small, narrow cot, so the doctor could reach them more easily than on a large, wide bed. And sometimes only "midwives" were in attendance.

"A baby swan bed, to give birth to an infant child," mused Chris aloud, lifting his head to stare off into space.

I rolled over on my back and smiled at him wickedly. We were in the attic, both lying on the old stained mattress near the open windows that let in soft warm breezes. "And kings and queens who held court in their bedroom—or bedchambers, as they called them—and having the nerve to sit up in bed entirely naked. Do you think everything that's written in books can be entirely true?"

"Of course not! But much of it is. After all, people didn't used to wear nightgowns, or pajamas to bed. They only wore nightcaps to keep their skulls warm, and the heck with the rest."

We laughed, both of us, picturing kings and queens who weren't embarrassed to be naked in front of their nobles and foreign dignitaries.

“Naked skin wasn’t sinful then, was it? Way back in medieval days?”

“Guess not,” he answered.

“It’s what you do when you’re naked that’s sinful, isn’t it?”

“Guess so.”

For the second time now, I was coping with that curse nature sent to make me a woman, and it did hurt so much the first time that I stayed in bed all day, and made a big to-do about feeling crampy.

“You don’t think it’s disgusting, what is happening to me—do you?” I asked Chris.

His face lowered into my hair. “Cathy, I don’t think anything about the human body and the way it functions is disgusting or revolting. I guess this is the doctor in me coming out. I think like this about your particular situation ... if it takes a few days a month to make you into a woman like our mother, then I’m all for it. And if it pains, and you don’t like it, then think about dancing, for that hurts, too, you’ve told me so. And yet, you think the price you pay is worth the rewards.” My arms closed tighter about him when he paused. “And I pay a price too in becoming a man. I don’t have a man to talk to, as you have Momma. I’m all alone in a sticky situation, full of frustrations, and sometimes I don’t know which way to turn, and how to get away from temptations, and I’m so damned scared I’ll never get to be a doctor.”

“Chris,” I began, then stumbled on quicksand, I knew, “don’t you ever have any doubts about her?”

I saw his frown, and spoke again before he could fire back some angry retort, “Doesn’t it strike you as ... as *odd*, that she keeps us locked up for so long? She’s got lots of money, Chris, I know she has. Those rings and bracelets, they’re not fake like she tells us. I know they’re not!”

He had drawn away when first I brought up “her.” He adored his goddess of all female perfection, but then he was embracing me again, and his cheek was on my hair, his voice tight with thick emotion, “Sometimes I am not the eternal

cockeyed optimist you call me. Sometimes I am just as doubting of what she does as you are. But I think back to the time before we came here, and I feel I have to trust her, and believe in her, and be like Daddy was. Remember how he used to say, 'For everything that seems strange, there is a good reason? And everything always works out for the best.' That's what I make myself believe—she has good reasons for keeping us here, and not sneaking us out to some boarding school. She knows what she's doing, and Cathy, I love her so much. I just can't help it. No matter what she does, I feel I will go right on loving her."

He loved her more than me, I thought bitterly.

* * *

Our mother now came and went with no regularity. Once, a whole week passed with no visit. When she finally arrived she told us her father was very ill. I was overjoyed to hear the news.

"Is he getting worse?" I asked, feeling a little pang of guilt. I knew it was wrong to wish him dead, but his death meant our salvation.

"Yes," she said solemnly, "much worse. Any day now, Cathy, any day. You wouldn't believe his pallor, his pain; soon as he goes, you'll be free."

Oh, good-golly, to think I was so evil as to want that old man to die this very second! God forgive me. But it wasn't right for us to be shut up all the time; we needed to be outside, in the warm sunlight, and we did get so lonesome, seeing no new people.

"It could be any hour," said Momma, and got up to leave.

"Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for t' carry me home ..." was the tune I hummed as I made the beds, and waited for the news to come that our grandfather was on his way to heaven if his gold counted, and to hell if the Devil couldn't be bribed.

"If you get there before I do . . ."

And Momma was at the door, tired looking as she poked only her face in. "He's passed the crisis ... he's going to

recover—this time.” The door closed, and we were alone, with dashed hopes.

I tucked the twins into bed that night for seldom did Momma show up to do this. I was the one who kissed their cheeks and heard their prayers. And Chris did his share, too. They loved us, it was easy to read in their big, shadowed blue eyes. After they fell asleep, we went to the calendar to make an “X” through another day. August had come again. We had now lived in this prison a full year.

PART TWO



*Until the day break,
and the shadows flee away.*

The Song of Solomon 2:17

Growing Up, Growing Wiser



Another year passed, much as the first did. Mother came less and less frequently, but always with the promises that kept us hoping, kept us believing our deliverance was only a few weeks away. The last thing we did each night was to mark off that day with a big red X.

We now had three calendars with big red X's. The first one was only half-bloodied with red, the second one X'd all the way through, and now a third over half filled with X's. And the dying grandfather, now sixty-eight, always about to breathe his last breath, lived on, and on, and on while we waited in limbo. It seemed he'd live to be sixty-nine.

On Thursdays, the servants of Foxworth Hall went into town, and that was when Chris and I stole out onto the black roof, to lie on a steep slope, soaking up the sunlight, and airing under the moon and stars. Though it was high and dangerous, it was the real outdoors, where we could feel fresh air on our thirsting skins.

In a place where two wings met and formed a corner, we could brace our feet against a sturdy chimney and feel quite safe. Our positioning on the roof hid us from anyone who might be on the ground.

Because the grandmother's wrath had not yet materialized, Chris and I had grown careless. We were not always modest in the bedroom, nor were we always fully dressed. It was difficult to live, day in, day out, and always keep the intimate places of our bodies secret from the other sex.

And to be perfectly honest, none of us cared very much who saw what.

We should have cared.

We should have been careful.

We should have kept the memory of Momma's bloody welts back sharply before us, and never, never have forgotten. But the day she'd been whipped seemed so long, long ago. An eternity ago.

Here I was a teen-ager, and I'd never seen myself naked all over, for the mirror on the medicine cabinet door was placed too high for good viewing. I'd never seen a naked woman, or even a picture of one, and paintings and marble statues didn't show details. So I awaited a time when I had the bedroom to myself, and before the dresser mirror I stripped off everything, and then I stared, preened, and admired. Incredible the changes hormones brought about! Certainly I was much prettier than when I came here, even my face, my hair, my legs—much less that curvy body. From side to side I twisted, keeping my eyes glued to my reflection as I performed ballet positions.

A rippling sensation on the back of my neck gave me the awareness that someone was near, and watching. I whirled about suddenly to catch Chris standing in the deep shadows of the closet. Silently he'd come from the attic. How long had he been there? Had he seen all the silly, immodest things I'd done? Oh, God, I hoped not!

He stood as one frozen. A queer look glazed his blue eyes, as if he'd never seen me before without my clothes on—and he had, many a time. Perhaps when the twins were there, sunbathing with us, he kept his thoughts brotherly and pure, and didn't really stare.

His eyes lowered from my flushed face down to my breasts, then lower, and lower, and down to my feet before they traveled upward ever so slowly.

I stood trembling, uncertain, wondering what to do that wouldn't make me seem a foolish prude in the judgment of a brother who knew well how to mock me when he chose. He seemed a stranger, older, like someone I had never met before. He also seemed weak, dazed, perplexed, and if I moved to cover myself, I'd steal from him something he'd been starving to see.

Time seemed to stand still as he lingered in the closet, and I hesitated before the dresser which revealed to him the rear view, too, for I saw his eyes flick to the mirror to take in what that reflected.

“Chris, please go away.”

He didn’t seem to hear.

He only stared.

I blushed all over and felt perspiration under my arms, and a funny pounding began in my pulse. I felt like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar, guilty of some petty crime, and terribly afraid of being severely punished for almost nothing. But his look, his eyes, made me come alive, and my heart began a fierce, mad throbbing, full of fright. Why should I be afraid? It was only Chris.

For the first time I felt embarrassed, ashamed of what I had now, and quickly I reached to pick up the dress I’d just taken off. Behind that I would shield myself, and I’d tell him to go away.

“Don’t,” he said when I had the dress in my hands.

“You shouldn’t ...” I stammered, trembling more.

“I know I shouldn’t be, but you look so beautiful. It’s like I never saw you before. How did you grow so lovely, when I was here all the time?”

How to answer a question like that? Except to look at him, and plead with my eyes.

Just then, behind me, a key turned in the door lock. Swiftly I tried to put the dress over my head and pull it down before she came in. Oh, God! I couldn’t find the sleeves. My head was all covered by the dress, while the rest of me was bare, and *she* was there—the grandmother! I couldn’t see her, but I *felt* her!

Finally I found the armholes, and quickly I yanked the dress down. But she had seen me in my naked glory, it was in those glittering gray stone eyes. She turned those eyes away

from me and nailed Chris with a stabbing glare. He was still in the daze that put him nowhere.

“So!” she spat. “I have at last caught you! I knew I would sooner or later!”

She had spoken to us first. This was just like one of my nightmares . . . without clothes in front of the grandmother and God.

Chris snapped out of the fog and stepped forward to fire back, “You have caught us? What have you caught? Nothing!”

Nothing . . .

Nothing . . .

Nothing . . .

One word that reverberated. In her eyes, she had caught us doing everything!

“Sinners!” she hissed as she once again turned those cruel eyes on me. They held no mercy. “You think you look pretty? You think those new young curves are attractive? You like that long, golden hair that you brush and brush and curl?” She smiled then—the most frightening smile I ever saw.

My knees were clicking nervously together; my hands were working too. How vulnerable I felt without underwear and with a wide open zipper in back. I darted a glance to Chris. He advanced slowly, his eyes flicking around to search out some weapon.

“How many times have you allowed your brother to use your body?” shot out the grandmother. I just stood there, unable to speak, not comprehending what she meant.

“Use? What do you mean?”

Her eyes narrowed to mere slits that sharply turned to catch an embarrassed blush on Chris’s face, clearly revealing even to me that he knew what she meant, even if I didn’t.

“What I mean is,” he said, turning redder, “we haven’t really done anything bad.” He had a man’s voice now, deep and strong. “Go on, look at me with your hateful, suspicious

eyes. Believe what you will, but Cathy and I have never done one single, wicked, sinful or unholy thing!”

“Your sister was naked—she has allowed you to look on her body—so, you have done wrong.” She whipped her eyes to me and flared them with hate before she pivoted around and stalked from the room. She left me quivering. Chris was furious with me.

“Cathy, why the hell did you have to undress in this room! You know she spies on us, just hoping to catch us doing something!” A wild, distraught look came upon him, making him seem older and terribly violent. “She’s going to punish us. Just because she left without doing anything, doesn’t mean she won’t come back.”

I knew that ... I knew it. She was coming back—with the whip!

Sleepy and irritable, the twins drifted down from the attic. Carrie settled in front of the dollhouse. Cory squatted down on his heels to watch TV. He picked up his expensive, professional guitar and began to play. Chris sat on his bed and faced the door. I hedged, ready to run when she came back. I’d run into the bath, lock the door ... I’d ...

The key turned in the door. The doorknob twisted.

I jumped to my feet, as did Chris. He said, “Get in the bathroom, Cathy, and stay there.”

Our grandmother walked into the room, towering like a tree; and she bore not a whip, but a huge pair of scissors, the kind women use when cutting fabric to make clothes. They were chrome-colored, shiny, long, and looked very sharp.

“Sit down, girl!” she snapped. “I am going to cut off your hair to the scalp—and then maybe you won’t feel pride when you look in the mirror.”

Scornfully, cruelly, she smiled when she saw my surprise—the first time I’d seen her smile.

My worst fear! I’d rather be whipped! My skin would heal, but it would take years and years to grow back the beautiful, long hair I’d cherished since Daddy first said it was pretty, and

he liked long hair on little girls. Oh, dear God, how could she know that almost every night I dreamed she stole into this room while I slept and sheared me as one does a sheep? And sometimes I dreamed not only did I wake up in the mornings bald and ugly, but she cut off my breasts, too!

Whenever she looked at me, it was at some particular place. She didn't see me as a whole person, but in sections that seemed to arouse her anger ... and she would destroy whatever made her angry!

I tried to dash into the bathroom, and lock the door behind me. But for some reason my dancer's legs, trained so well, refused to move. I was paralyzed by the very threat of those long, shiny scissors and above them—the grandmother's chrome-colored eyes were sparked with hate, scorn, contempt.

That's when Chris spoke up in a strong man's voice. "You are not going to cut off one strand of Cathy's hair, Grandmother! Take just one step in her direction, and I will pound you over the head with this chair!"

He held one of the chairs we used for dining, ready to carry out his threat. His blue eyes snapped fire as hers shot hate.

She flicked him a scathing glance, as if what he threatened were of no consequence, as if his puny strength could never overcome the mountain of steel she appeared. "All right. Have it your way. I will give you your choice, girl—the loss of your hair, or no food or milk for an entire week."

"The twins have done nothing wrong," I implored. "Chris has done nothing. He didn't know I was unclothed when he came down from the attic—it was all my fault. I can go without food and milk for a week. I won't starve, and besides, Momma won't let you do this to me. She'll bring us food."

I didn't say that with any confidence, though. Momma had been gone so long. She didn't come very often; I'd grow very hungry.

"Your hair—or no food for a week," she repeated, untouched and unflinching.

“You are wrong to do this, old woman,” said Chris, coming closer with his lifted chair. “I caught Cathy by surprise. We did nothing sinful. We never have. You judge us by circumstantial evidence.”

“Your hair, or *none* of you will eat for a week,” she said to me, ignoring Chris, as she always did. “And if you lock yourself in the bathroom, or hide yourself in the attic, then not one of you will eat for two weeks! Or when you come down with a bald head!” Next, she riveted her cold and calculating eyes on Chris for a long, excruciating moment. “I think *you* will be the one to shear off your sister’s long, cherished hair,” she said with a secret smile. On the dresser top she laid the shiny scissors. “When I come back, and see your sister without hair, then the four of you will eat.”

She left us, locked us in, left us in a quandary, with Chris staring at me, and me staring back at him.

Chris smiled. “Come now, Cathy, she’s all bluff! Momma will come any hour. We’ll tell her ... no problem. I’ll never cut off your hair.” He came to put his arm around me. “Isn’t it fortunate we’ve hidden a box of crackers and a pound of cheddar cheese in the attic? And we still have today’s food—the old witch forgot that.”

We seldom ate very much. We ate even less that day, just in case Momma didn’t show up. We saved half our milk, and the oranges. The day ended without a visit from Momma. All night I tossed and turned, fretting in and out of sleep. When I slept I had horrible nightmares. I dreamed Chris and I were in a deep dark woods, running lost, looking for Carrie and Cory. We called their names in the silent voices of dreams. The twins never answered. We panicked and ran in utter blackness.

Then suddenly, out of the dark loomed up a cottage made of gingerbread! Made of cheese, too, with a roof of Oreo cookies, and hard Christmas candy made a colorful winding path to the Hershey bar door. The picket fence was of peppermint sticks, the shrubbery of ice-cream cones, seven flavors. I flashed a thought over to Chris. *No!* This is a trick! We can’t go in!

He messaged back: We have to go in! We have to save the twins!

Quietly we stole inside and saw the hot-roll cushions, dripping with golden butter, and the sofa was of freshly baked bread, buttered, too.

In the kitchen was the witch to end all witches! Beak-nosed, jutting jaw, sunken, toothless mouth, and her head was a mop of strings colored gray and pointing wildly in all directions.

She held up our twins by their long golden hair. They were about to be thrust into her hot oven! Already they were frosted pink and blue, and their flesh, without cooking, was beginning to turn into gingerbread, and their blue eyes into black raisins!

I screamed! Over and over again I screamed!

The witch whirled to glare at me with her gray flintstone eyes, and her sunken mouth, thin as a red knife slash, opened wide to laugh! Hysterically, she laughed on and on as Chris and I cringed in shock. She threw back her head, her wide open mouth exposing fang-like tonsils—and startlingly, frighteningly, she began to change from the grandmother. From a caterpillar into a butterfly she emerged as we stood frozen, and could only watch . . . and there from the horror came our mother!

Momma! Her blond hair flowed as silken, streaming ribbons, writhing forward on the floor to snare us both like snakes! Slithering coils of her hair twined up and around our legs, to creep nearer our throats . . . trying to strangle us into silence . . . no threat to her inheritance then!

I love you, I love you, I love you, she whispered without words.

I woke up, but Chris slept on and on, just as the twins did.

I grew desperate as sleep wanted to come and take me again. I tried to fight it off, the terrible drowsiness of drowning, drowning, and then again I was sunken deep in dreams, in nightmarish dreams. I ran wild into the dark, and into a pool of blood I fell. Blood sticky as tar, smelling of tar,

and diamond-spangled fish with swan heads and red eyes came and nibbled on my arms and legs so they went numb and unfeeling, and the fish with the swan heads laughed, laughed, laughed, glad to see me done in, and made bloody all over. See! See! They shouted in whiny voices that echoed and re-echoed. *You can't get away!*

The morning came pale behind the heavy drawn draperies that shut out the yellow light of hope.

Carrie turned over in her sleep and cuddled up closer to me, "Momma," she murmured, "I don't like this house." Her silky hair on my arm felt like goose-down, as slowly, slowly, feeling began to return to my hands and arms, feet and legs.

I lay still on the bed as Carrie squirmed restlessly, wanting my arms about her, and I felt so drugged I couldn't move my arms. What was wrong with me? My head so heavy, as if it were stuffed full of rocks so my skull was pressured from the inside and the pain was so great my skull was likely to split wide open! My toes and fingers still tingled. My body was leaden. The walls advanced, then retreated, and nothing had straight vertical lines.

I tried to see my reflection in the shimmering mirror across the way, yet when I tried to turn my swollen head, it refused to budge. And always before I went to sleep, I spread my hair on my pillow so I could turn my head, and nestle my cheek in the sweet-smelling silkiness of very pampered, well-cared-for, healthy, strong hair. It was one of the sensual things I enjoyed, the feel of my hair against my cheek to take me into sweet dreams of love.

And yet, today, there was no hair on my pillow. Where was my hair?

The scissors, they still lay on the dresser top. I could vaguely see them. Swallowing repeatedly to clear the way, I forced out a small cry, uttering Chris's name, not Momma's. I prayed to God to make Him let my brother hear. "Chris," I finally managed to whisper in the strangest, gritty voice, "something is the matter with me."

My whispered, weak words roused Chris, though I don't know how he heard. He sat up and sleepily rubbed his eyes. "What yuh want, Cathy?" he asked.

I mumbled something that took him from his bed, and in his rumpled blue pajamas, his hair a golden mop, he ambled over to my bed. He jerked up short. He drew in his breath and made small gasping sounds of horror and shock.

"Cathy, oh my God!"

His cry sent shivers of fear down my spine.

"Cathy . . . oh, Cathy," he moaned.

As he stared, and as I wondered what he was seeing that made his eyes bulge, I tried to lift my leaden arms and feel my swollen, heavy head. Somehow I managed to get my hands up there—and that's when I found a loud voice to scream! Really scream! Over and over again I howled like someone demented until Chris ran to gather me in his arms.

"Stop, please stop," he sobbed. "Remember the twins . . . don't scare them more . . . please don't scream again, Cathy. They've been through so much, and I know you don't want to scar them permanently, and you will, if you don't calm down. It's all right, I'll get rid of it. I swear on my life, that today, somehow, I'll get the tar from your hair."

He found a small red prick on my arm where the grandmother had plunged in a hypodermic needle to keep me asleep with some drug. And while I slept, she had poured hot tar on my hair. She must have gathered it all into a neat bunch before she used the tar, for not a strand was left free of the gook.

Chris tried to keep me from looking into the mirror, but I shoved him away, and had to stare with my mouth agape at the horrible black blob that was my head now. Like a huge wad of black bubble gum, chewed and left in an unsightly mess, it even ran down my face and streaked my cheeks with black tears!

I looked, and I knew that he'd never get the tar out. Never!

Cory woke up first, ready to run to the windows and draw aside the closed draperies and peek outside to see the sun that kept hiding from him. He was out of bed and ready to dash to the windows when he saw me.

His eyes widened. His lips parted. His small fluttering hands reached upward to rub at his eyes with fists, and then he was staring at me again with so much disbelief. “Cathy,” he managed finally, “is that you?”

“I guess it is.”

“Why is your hair black?”

Before I could reply to that question, Carrie was awake. “*Oooh!*” she howled. “Cathy—your head looks funny!” Big tears came to glisten her eyes and slide down her cheeks. “I don’t like your head now!” she wailed, then began to sob as if the tar were on *her hair*.

“Calm down, Carrie,” said Chris, in the most ordinary, everyday tone of voice. “It’s only tar on Cathy’s hair—and when she takes a bath, and shampoos her hair, it will be the same as yesterday. While she does that, I want the two of you to eat the oranges for breakfast, and look at TV. Later on we’ll all eat a real breakfast, when Cathy’s hair is clean.” He didn’t mention our grandmother for fear of instilling in them even more terror of our situation. So they sat on the floor close as bookends, supporting only each other, and peeled and ate orange sections, losing themselves in the sweet nothingness of cartoons and other Saturday morning violence and foolishness.

Chris ordered me into a tub full of hot water. In that almost scalding water I dunked my head over and over again while Chris used shampoo to soften the tar. The tar did soften, but it didn’t come out and leave my hair clean. His fingers moved in a sodden mass of sticky goo. I heard myself making small whimpering sounds. He did try, oh, he did try to take out the tar without taking out all my hair. And all I could think of was the scissors—the shiny scissors the grandmother had laid on the dresser top.

On his knees by the tub, Chris finally managed to work his fingers through the mass, but when he withdrew them, they

were clogged with sticky black hair. “You’ll have to use the scissors!” I cried out, tired of the whole thing after two hours. But no, the scissors were the last resort. He reasoned there must be some chemical solution that would dissolve the tar, without dissolving my hair. He had a very professional chemistry set Momma had given him. On the lid was a stern warning: “This is not a toy. This box contains dangerous chemicals and is for professional use only.”

“Cathy,” he said, sitting back on his bare heels, “I’m going up to the attic schoolroom and mix some compound to take the tar from your hair.” He grinned at me shyly then. The light from the ceiling caught on the soft downy fuzz that covered his upper lip, and I knew he had stronger, darker hair on the lower part of his body, the same as I did. “I’ve got to use the John, Cathy. I’ve never done that in front of you, and I’m kind of embarrassed. You can turn your back, and put your fingers in your ears, and maybe if you go in the water too, the ammonia might unglue your hair.”

I couldn’t help but stare at him in amazement. The day had taken on nightmarish proportions. To sit in boiling water and use it for a toilet and then wash my hair in that? Could it be real that I would do this as Chris streamed urine into the commode behind my back? I said to myself, no, this wasn’t real, just a dream. Carrie and Cory wouldn’t use the bathroom, too, while I was in the tub, dunking my hair in foul water.

It was real enough. Hand in hand, Cory and Carrie came to the tub and stared at me, wanting to know why I was taking so long.

“Cathy, what is that stuff on your head?”

“Tar.”

“Why did you put tar in your hair?”

“I must have done it in my sleep.”

“Where did you find the tar?”

“In the attic.”

“Why did you want to put tar in your hair?”

I hated lying! I wanted to tell her who put the tar in my hair, but I couldn't let her know. Already she and Cory were scared enough of that old woman. "Go back and look at TV, Carrie," I ordered, testy and irritable from all the questions she asked, and hating to look at her thin, hollowed-out cheeks, her sunken eyes.

"Cathy, don't you like me no more?"

"Anymore . . ."

"Don't you?"

"Of course I like you, Cory. I love you both, but I put the tar on my hair by mistake, and now I'm mad at myself."

Carrie wandered off to sit once more near Cory. They whispered back and forth in that strange language that only they could understand. Sometimes, I think they were far wiser than Chris and I suspected.

For hours I was in the tub, while Chris concocted a dozen different compounds to test on a bit of my hair. He tried everything, making me change the water often, always making it hotter. I shriveled into a puckered prune as bit by bit he cleared the gooey mess from my hair. The tar came out, eventually, along with a great loss of hair. But I had a lot, and could afford to lose much without making a noticeable difference. And when it was over, the day was gone, and neither Chris nor I had eaten a bite. He had given cheese and crackers to the twins, but he himself hadn't wasted time to eat. Wrapped in a towel, I sat on the bed and dried my much thinned hair. What was left was fragile. It broke easily, and the color was almost platinum.

"You might as well have saved yourself the effort," I said to Chris, who was hungrily eating two crackers with cheese. "She hasn't brought up any food—and she won't bring any up until you cut it all off."

He came to me, bearing a plate with cheese and crackers, and holding a glass of water. "Eat and drink. We will outsmart her. If by tomorrow she doesn't bring up some food, or if Momma doesn't show up, I'll cut off just your front hair, over

your forehead. Then you can wrap your head with a scarf, like you're ashamed to be seen bald-headed, and soon enough that hair will grow back in."

Sparingly, I ate the cheese and crackers, not answering. I washed down my one meal of the day with water from the bathroom tap. Then Chris brushed that pale, pale weak hair that had endured so much. Peculiar how fate works things out: my hair had never gleamed more, or felt so much like gossamer silk, and I was grateful to have any left at all. I lay back on the bed, worn out, enervated by emotion torn asunder, and watched Chris sitting on the bed just looking at me. When I fell asleep, he was still there, watching me, and in his hand he held a long coil of my spiderweb, silken hair.

That night I fretted in and out of sleep, restless, tormented. I felt helpless, angry, frustrated.

And then I saw Chris.

He was still in the clothes he'd worn all day. He'd moved the heaviest chair in the room so that it was against the door, and in that chair he sat and dozed, while in his hand he held the pair of long and sharp scissors. He had barred the way, so the grandmother couldn't sneak in again and use the scissors. He was, even in his sleep, guarding me from her.

As I stared over at him, his eyes opened, jolted, as if he hadn't meant to doze off and leave me unprotected. In the dimness of that locked room, always rosy at night, he caught my gaze, and our eyes locked, and ever so slowly he smiled. "Hi."

"Chris," I sobbed, "go to bed. You can't keep her out forever."

"I can while you sleep."

"Then let me be the sentry. We'll take turns."

"Who's the man here, you or me? Besides, I eat more than you do."

"What's that got to do with it?"

“You’re too thin now, and staying awake all night would make you thinner, whereas I can afford to lose weight.”

He was underweight, too. We all were, and his slight weight wouldn’t keep that grandmother out if she really wanted to shove the door open. I got up and went to sit with him in the chair, though he gallantly protested.

“Ssh,” I whispered. “The two of us together can keep her out better, and we can both sleep.” Embraced in each other’s arms, we fell asleep.

And the morning came . . . without the grandmother . . . without food.

* * *

The hungry days passed by endlessly, miserably.

Only too soon the cheese and crackers were gone, though we ate most sparingly of what we had. And that was when we really began to suffer. Chris and I drank only water, and saved what milk there was for the twins.

Chris came to me with the shears in his hand, and reluctantly, with tears, he cut off the front top hair close to my scalp. I wouldn’t look in a mirror when it was done. The long part that was left, I wrapped about my head, and over that I formed a scarf into a turban.

Then came the irony, the bitter irony of the grandmother not coming to check!

She didn’t bring us food, or milk, or clean linens, or towels, or even the soap and toothpaste we had run out of. Not even toilet paper. Now I regretted throwing out all the tissue our expensive clothes came in. There was nothing left to do but tear pages from the oldest books in the attic and use that.

Then the toilet bowl stopped up, and overflowed, and Cory began to scream as filth flooded over and filled the bathroom. We didn’t have a plunger. Frantically, Chris and I wondered what to do. As he ran for a coat hanger made of wire to straighten out and push down whatever clogged the drain, I ran to the attic to fetch old clothes to mop up the flooding mess. Somehow Chris managed to use the wire coat hanger, and the

commode worked normally again. Then, without a word, he got down on his knees beside me, and we both mopped up the floor with the old clothes from the attic trunks.

Now we had filthy, smelly rags to fill up a trunk, and add to the secrets of the attic.

We escaped the full horror of our situation by not talking about it much. We just got up in the mornings, splashed water on our faces, cleaned our teeth with plain water, drank a little water, moved about a little, then lay down to watch TV, or to read, and the devil to pay if she came in and caught us rumpling a bedspread. What did we care now?

To hear the twins cry for food put scars on my soul that I would bear for the rest of my life. And I hated, oh, how I hated that old woman—and Momma—for doing this to us!

And when mealtimes rolled by with no food, we slept. For hours on end we slept. Asleep you don't feel pain or hunger, or loneliness, or bitterness. In sleep you can drown in false euphoria, and when you awaken, you just don't care about anything.

There was one hazy, unreal day when we lay listless, all four of us, with the only life going on confined to the small box over in the corner. Dazed and tired, I turned my head for no reason at all just to look at Chris and Cory, and I lay without much feeling at all as I watched Chris take his pocket knife and slash his wrist. He put his bleeding arm to Cory's mouth, and made him drink his blood, though Cory protested. Then it was Carrie's turn. The two of them, who wouldn't eat anything lumpy, bumpy, grainy, too tough, too stringy, or just plain "funny looking," drank of their older brother's blood and stared up at him with dull, wide, accepting eyes.

I turned my head away, sickened by what he had to do, and full of admiration that he *could* do it. He could always solve a difficult problem.

Chris came to my side of the bed and perched on the edge, and looked at me for the longest moment, then his eyes lowered to the cut on his wrist that wasn't bleeding as freely now. He lifted his pocket-knife and prepared to make a second

slash so I too could be nourished by his blood. I stopped him, and seized hold of his jack-knife and hurled it away. He ran fast to get it, and again he cleaned it with alcohol, despite my vow never to taste his blood, and drain from him more of his strength.

“What will we do, Chris, if she never comes back?” I asked dully. “She will let us starve to death.” Meaning the grandmother, of course, whom we hadn’t seen in two weeks. And Chris had exaggerated when he said we had a full pound of cheddar cheese stashed away. We baited our mousetraps with cheese, and had been forced to take back the bits of cheese to eat ourselves, when everything else was gone. Now we’d been without one bit of food in our stomachs for three whole days and four days with only a little cheese and crackers. And the milk we saved for the twins to drink—gone ten days ago, too.

“She won’t let us starve to death,” said Chris as he lay down beside me and took me into his weak embrace. “We’d be idiots, and spineless, to allow her to do that to us. Tomorrow, if she doesn’t show up with food, and our mother doesn’t show up, we’ll use our sheet-ladder to reach the ground.”

My head was on his chest and I could hear his heart thumping. “How do you know what she’d do? She hates us. She wants us dead—hasn’t she told us that time and time again we should never have been born?”

“Cathy, the old witch is not dumb. She’ll bring food soon, before Momma comes back from wherever she’s been.”

I moved to bandage his slashed wrist. Two weeks ago Chris and I should have tried to escape, when both of us had the strength to make the perilous descent. Now, if we tried to make it, surely we’d fall to our deaths, what with the twins tied to our backs to make it even more difficult.

But when morning came, and there was still no food brought up to us, Chris forced us into the attic. He and I carried the twins who were too weak to walk. It was a torrid zone up there. Sleepily, the twins sagged in the corner of the schoolroom where we put them down. Chris set about

fashioning slings so we could attach the twins securely to our backs. Neither of us mentioned the possibility that we could be committing suicide, and murder, too, if we fell.

“We’ll do it another way,” said Chris, reconsidering. “I’ll go first. When I reach the ground, you’ll put Cory into a sling, tie him in fast so he can’t kick free, and then you’ll lower him down to me. Next, you can do that for Carrie. And you can come down last. And for God’s sake, put forth your very best efforts! Call upon God to give you the strength—don’t be apathetic! Feel anger, wrath, think of revenge! I’ve heard great anger gives you super-human strength in an emergency!”

“Let me go first. You’re stronger.” I said weakly.

“No! I want to be down there to catch in case anyone comes down too fast, and your arms don’t have the strength mine do. I’ll brace the rope about a chimney so all the weight won’t be on you—and Cathy, this is really an emergency!”

God, I couldn’t believe what he expected me to do next!

With horror I stared at the four dead mice in our traps. “We’ve got to eat these mice to gain some strength,” he said to me grimly, “and what we have to do, we *can* do!”

Raw meat? Raw mice? “No,” I whispered, revolted by the sight of those tiny stiff and dead things.

He grew forceful, angry, telling me I could do anything that was necessary to keep the twins alive, and myself alive. “Look, Cathy, I’ll eat my two first, after I’ve run downstairs for salt and pepper. And I need that coat hanger to tighten up the knots—leverage, you know. My hands, they’re not working too good now.”

Of course they weren’t. We were all so weak we could barely move.

He shot me a quick appraising glance. “Really, with salt and pepper, I think the mice might be tasty.”

Tasty.

He sliced off the heads, then skinned and gutted them next. I watched him slice open the small bellies and withdraw long,

slimy intestines, little bitty hearts, and other miniature “innards.”

I could have vomited if there had been anything in my stomach.

And he didn't run for the salt and pepper, or the coat hanger. He only walked, and slowly at that—telling me in this way he wasn't too eager to partake of raw mice, either.

While he was gone, my eyes stayed glued to the skinned mice that were to be our next meal. I closed my eyes and tried to will myself into taking the first bite. I was hungry but not hungry enough to enjoy the prospects.

I thought then of the twins, who sagged in the corner with their eyes closed, holding each other, their foreheads pressed together, and I thought they must have embraced like that when they were inside Momma's womb, waiting to be born, so they could be put away behind a locked door, and starved. Our poor little buttercups who once had known a father and mother who loved them well.

Yet, there was the hope the mice would give Chris and me enough strength and we could take them safely to the ground, and some kind neighbor who was at home would give them food, give all of us food—if we lived through the next hour.

I heard the slow returning steps of Chris. He hesitated in the doorway, half-smiling, his blue eyes meeting with mine ... and shining. In both of his hands he carried the huge picnic basket we knew so well. It was so filled with food the wooden lids that folded backwards couldn't lie flat.

He lifted out two thermos jugs: one with vegetable soup, the other with cold milk, and I felt so numb, confused, hopeful. Had Momma come back and sent this up to us? Then why hadn't she called for us to come down? Or why didn't she come looking for us?

Chris took Carrie and I took Cory on our laps, and we spooned soup into their mouths. They accepted the soup as they had accepted his blood—as just another event in their

extraordinary lives. We fed them bits of sandwich. We ate most sparingly, as Chris cautioned, lest we throw it all up.

I wanted to stuff the food into Cory's mouth, so I could get around to ramming food into my own ravenous stomach. He ate so darned slow! A thousand questions ran through my brain: Why today? Why bring food today and not yesterday, or the day before? What was her reasoning? When finally I could eat, I was too apathetic to be overjoyed, and too suspicious to be relieved.

Chris, after slowly eating some soup, and half a sandwich, unwrapped a foil package. Four powdered-sugar doughnuts were disclosed. We, who were never given sweets, were given a dessert—from the grandmother—for the first time. Was this her way of asking our forgiveness? We took it that way, whatever her purpose.

During our week of near starvation, something peculiar had happened between Chris and me. Perhaps it became enhanced that day when I sat in the hot tub of concealing bubble bath, and he toiled so valiantly to rid my hair of the tar. Before that horrible day, we'd been only brother and sister, play-acting the roles of parents to the twins. Now our relationship had changed. We weren't play-acting anymore. We were the genuine parents of Carrie and Cory. They were our responsibility, our obligation, and we committed ourselves to them totally, and to each other.

It was obviously drawn now. Our mother didn't care anymore what happened to us.

Chris didn't need to speak and say how he felt to recognize her indifference. His bleak eyes told me. His listless movements said more. He'd kept her picture near his bed, and now he put that away. He'd always believed in her more than I, so naturally he was hurt the most. And if he ached more than I was aching, then he was in agony.

Tenderly he took my hand, indicating that now we could go back to the bedroom. Down the stairs we drifted as pale sleepy ghosts, in subnormal states of shock, all of us feeling sick and weak, especially the twins. I doubted they weighed thirty

pounds each. I could see how they looked, and how Chris looked, but I couldn't see myself. I glanced toward the tall, wide mirror over the dresser, expecting to see a circus freak, short-cropped hair on top, long, lank pale hair in back. And lo, when I looked, there was no mirror there!

Quickly I ran to the bathroom to find the medicine cabinet mirror smashed! Back I raced to the bedroom, to lift the lid of the dressing table that Chris often used as a desk ... and that mirror, too, was broken!

We could gaze in shattered glass and see distorted reflections of ourselves. Yes, we could view our faces in faceted broken pieces as a fly would, one side of the nose riding up higher than the other. It wasn't pleasant viewing. Turning away from the dressing table, I put the basket of food down on the floor where it was coldest, then went to lie down. I didn't question the reason for the broken mirrors, and the one taken away. I knew why she'd done what she did. Pride was sinful. And in her eyes Chris and I were sinners of the worst kind. To punish us, the twins would suffer, as well, but why she brought us food again, I couldn't guess.

Other mornings came, with baskets of food carried up to us. The grandmother refused to look our way. She kept her eyes averted and swiftly retreated out the door. I wore a turban made of a pink towel around my head which revealed the front portion over my brow, but if she noticed, she didn't comment. We watched her come and go, not asking where Momma was, or when she was coming back. Those so easily punished learn their lesson well, and don't speak unless spoken to first. Both Chris and I stared at her, filling our eyes with hostility, with anger and hate, hoping she'd turn and see how we felt. But she didn't meet a pair of our eyes. And then I would cry out and make her see, and make her look at the twins, and see for herself how thin they were, how shadowed their large eyes were. But she wouldn't see.

Lying on the bed beside Carrie, I looked deep into myself and realized how I was making all of this worse than it ought to be. Now Chris, once the cheerful optimist, was turning into

a gloomy imitation of me. I wanted him back the way he used to be—smiling and bright, making the best out of the worst.

He sat at the dressing table with the lid down, with open medical books before him, his shoulders sagging. He wasn't reading, just sitting there.

“Chris,” I said, sitting up to brush my hair, “in your opinion, what percentage of teen-aged girls in the world have gone to bed with clean, shining hair and awakened a tar baby?”

Swiveling around, he shot me a glance full of surprise that I would mention that horrible day. “Well,” he drawled, “in my opinion, I suspect you might well be the one and only ... unique.”

“Oh, I don't know about that. Remember when they were putting down asphalt on our street? Mary Lou Baker and I turned over a huge tub of that stuff, and we made little tar babies, and put black beds in black houses, and the man in charge of the street-repair gang came along and bawled us out.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I remember you came home looking filthy-dirty, and you had a wad of tar in your mouth, chewing to make your teeth whiter. Gosh, Cathy, all you did was pull out a filling.”

“One good thing about this room, we don't have to visit dentists twice a year.” He gave me a funny look. “And another nice thing is to have so much time! We'll complete our Monopoly tournament. The champion player has to wash everyone's underwear in the bathtub.”

Boy, he was all for that. He hated bending over the tub, kneeling on the hard tile, doing his wash and Cory's.

We set up the game, and counted out the money, and looked around for the twins. Both had disappeared! Where was there to go but up in the attic? They'd never go there without us, and the bathroom was empty. Then we heard some small twittering noises behind the TV set.

There they were, crouched in the corner in back of the set, sitting and waiting for the tiny people inside to come out. “We thought maybe Momma was in there,” explained Carrie.

“I think I’ll go up in the attic and dance,” I said, getting up from the bed and moving toward the closet.

“Cathy! What about our tournament Monopoly game?”

Pausing, I half-turned. “Oh, you’d only win. Forget the tournament.”

“Coward!” he taunted now, the same as he used to. “Come on, let’s play.” He looked long and hard at the twins, who always acted as our bankers. “And no cheating this time,” he warned sternly, “if I catch one of you slipping Cathy money when you think I’m not looking—then I’ll eat every one of those four doughnuts myself!”

I’ll be darned if he would! The doughnuts were the best part of our meals, and saved for nighttime dessert. I threw myself down on the floor, crossed my legs, and busied my brain with clever ways in which I could get to buy the best property first, and the railroads, and the utilities, and I’d get my red houses up first, then the hotels. He’d see who was good at doing something better than him.

For hours and hours we played, stopping only to eat meals or go to the bathroom. When the twins grew tired of playing bankers, we counted out the money ourselves, closely watching each other to see if any cheating was going on. And Chris kept landing up in jail, and had to miss out on passing Go and collecting two hundred dollars, and the Community Chest made him give, and he had to pay inheritance tax ... and *still* he won!

* * *

Late in August Chris came to me one night and whispered in my ear, “The twins are sound asleep. And it’s so hot in here. Wouldn’t it be just great if we could go for a swim?”

“Go away—leave me alone—you know we can’t go swimming.” I was, of course, still sulky from always losing at Monopoly.

Swimming, what an idiotic idea. Even if we could, I didn't want to do anything in which he excelled, like swimming. "And just where are we going to swim? In the bathtub?"

"In the lake Momma told us about. It's not far from here," he whispered. "We ought to practice reaching the ground with that rope we made, anyway, just in case there's a fire. We're stronger now. We can reach the ground easily, and we won't be gone long." On and on he pleaded, as if his very existence depended on escaping this house just once—just to prove that we could.

"The twins might wake up and find us gone."

"We'll leave a note on the bathroom door, telling them we're up in the attic. And besides, they never wake up until morning, not even to go to the bathroom."

He argued, and pleaded until I was won over. Up into the attic we went, and out onto the roof where he fastened the sheet-ladder securely to the chimney closest to the back side of the house. There were eight chimneys on the roof.

Testing the knots one by one, Chris gave me instructions: "Use the large knots as a ladder rung. Keep your hands just above the higher knot. Go down slowly, feeling with your feet for the next knot—and be sure to keep the rope twisted between your legs, so you can't slip and fall."

Smiling with confidence, he held to the rope and inched his way to the very edge of the roof. We were going down to the ground for the first time in more than two years.

A Taste of Heaven



Slowly, carefully, hand under hand, and foot under foot, Chris descended to the ground while I lay flat on my stomach near the roof's edge watching his descent. The moon was out and shining brightly as he lifted his hand and waved: his signal to send me on my way. I had watched the way he handled himself, so I could duplicate his method. I told myself it was no different from swinging on the ropes tied to the attic rafters. The knots were big and strong, and we had judiciously made them about four and a half feet apart. He had told me not to look down once I left the roof, just to concentrate on notching one foot securely on a lower knot before I reached with my other foot to find an even lower knot. In less than ten minutes, I was standing on the ground next to Chris.

“Wow!” he whispered, hugging me close. “You did that better than me!”

We were in the back gardens of Foxworth Hall, where all the rooms were dark, though in the servants' quarters over the huge garage every window was brightly yellow. “Lead on, MacDuff, to the swimming hole,” I said in a low voice, “if you know the way.”

Sure, he knew the way. Momma had told us how she and her brothers used to steal away and go swimming with their friends.

He caught my hand as we tiptoed away from the huge house. It felt so strange to be outside, on the ground, on a warm summer night. Leaving our small brother and sister alone in a locked room. When we crossed over a small footbridge, and knew we were now outside the realm of Foxworth property, we felt happy, almost free. Still we had to be cautious and not let anyone see us. We ran toward the woods, and the lake Momma had told us about.

It was ten o'clock when we went out on the roof; it was ten-thirty when we found the small body of water surrounded by trees. We were fearful others would be there to spoil it for us, and send us back unsatisfied, but the lake water was smooth, unruffled by winds, or bathers, or sailboats.

In the moonlight, under a bright and starry sky, I looked on that lake and thought I'd never beheld such beautiful water, or felt a night that filled me with such rapture.

"Are we going to skinny-dip?" asked Chris, looking at me in a peculiar way.

"No. We are going to swim in our underwear."

The trouble was, I didn't own a single bra. But now that we were here, silly prudery wasn't going to stop me from enjoying that moonlit water. "Last one in is a rotten egg!" I called. And I took off, on the run toward a short dock. But when I reached the end of the dock, I somehow sensed the water might be icy cold, and most gingerly I cautiously stuck a toe in first—and it was ice cold! I glanced back at Chris, who had taken off his watch and flung it aside, and now he was coming at me fast. So darned fast, before I could brave myself to dive into the water, he was behind me, and shoved me! Splash—flat down in the water I was, soaked from head to toe, and not inch by inch, as I would have had it!

I shivered as I came to the surface and paddled around, looking for Chris. Then I spied him crawling up a pile of rocks, and for a moment he was silhouetted. He lifted his arms and gracefully made a swan dive into the middle of the lake. I gasped! What if the water wasn't deep enough? What if he hit the bottom and broke his neck or back?

And then, and then . . . he didn't surface! Oh God, . . . he was dead . . . drowned!

"Chris," I called, sobbing, and began to swim toward the spot where he had disappeared beneath the cold water.

Suddenly I was seized by the legs! I screamed and went under, pulled down by Chris, who kicked his legs strongly and

took us both up to the surface, where we laughed, and I splashed water into his face for playing such a dirty trick.

“Isn’t this better than being shut up in that damned hot room?” he asked, frolicking around like someone demented, delirious, wild, and crazy! It was as if this bit of freedom had gone to his head like strong wine, and he was drunk! He swam in circles around me, and tried again to catch my legs and drag me under. But I was wise to him now. He kicked to the surface and backstroked, he also did the breaststroke, the crawl, side-stroked, and named what he did as he performed. “This is the back crawl,” he said as he demonstrated, showing off techniques I’d never seen before.

He surfaced from a dive under, and treaded water as he began to sing, “Dance, ballerina, dance,”—and in my face he threw water, as I splashed it back at him—“and do your pirouette in rhythm with your aching heart... .” And then he had me in his embrace, and laughing and screaming, we fought, gone crazy just to be children again. Oh, he was wonderful in the water, like a dancer. Suddenly I was tired, extremely tired, so tired I felt weak as a wet dishcloth. Chris put his arm about me and assisted me up onto shore.

Both of us fell on a grassy bank to lie back and talk.

“One more swim, and then back to the twins,” he said, lying supine on the gentle slope beside me. Both of us stared up at a sky full of glittering, twinkling stars, and there was a quartermoon out, colored silvery-gold, and it ducked and hid, and played hide and seek with the strung-out long, dark clouds.

“Suppose we can’t make it back up to the roof?”

“We’ll make it, because we have to make it.”

That was my Christopher Doll, the eternal optimist, sprawled beside me, all wet and glistening, with his fair hair pasted to his forehead. His nose was the same as Daddy’s as it aimed at the heavens, his full lips so beautifully shaped he didn’t need to pout to make them sensual, his chin square, strong, clefted, and his chest was beginning to broaden ... and there was that hillock of his growing maleness before his

strong thighs, beginning to swell. There was something about a man's strong, well-shaped thighs that excited me. I turned away my head, unable to feast my eyes on his beauty without feeling guilty and ashamed.

Birds were nested overhead in the tree branches. They made sleepy little twittery noises that for some reason made me think of the twins, and that made me sad and put tears in my eyes.

Fireflies bobbed up every so often and flashed their lemon-colored tail-lights off and on, signaling male to female, or vice-versa. "Chris, is it the male firefly that lights up, or the female?"

"I'm really not sure," he said as if he didn't care. "I think they both light up, but the female stays on the ground signaling, while the male flies around looking for her."

"You mean you aren't positive about everything—you, the all-knowing?"

"Cathy, let's not quibble. I don't know everything—a long way from it." He turned his head and met my eyes; our gazes locked and neither of us seemed capable of looking elsewhere.

Soft southern breezes came and played in my hair and dried the wisps about my face. I felt them tickling like small kisses, and again I wanted to cry, for no reason at all, except the night was so sweet, so lovely, and I was at the age for high romantic yearning. And the breeze whispered loving words in my ears ... words I was so afraid no one was ever going to say. Still, the night was so lovely under the trees, near the shimmering moonlit water, and I sighed. I felt that I'd been here before, on this grass near the lake. Oh, the strange thoughts I had as the night-fliers hummed and whirred, and the mosquitoes buzzed and somewhere far off an owl hooted, taking me quickly back to the night when first we came to live as fugitives, hidden from a world that didn't want us.

"Chris, you're almost seventeen, the same age Daddy was when he first met Momma."

“And you’re fourteen, the same age she was,” he said in a hoarse voice.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?”

He hesitated, mulling that over ... his way, not mine. “I’m not an authority on that subject. I know when I was in school, I’d see a pretty girl and right away feel in love with her. Then when we’d talk, and she was kind of stupid, then I didn’t feel anything at all about her. But if her beauty had been matched by other assets, I think I could fall in love at first sight, though I’ve read that kind of love is only physical attraction.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?”

He grinned and reached out to touch my hair. “Gosh, no. And I hope you don’t think you are, because you’re not. Your trouble is, Cathy, you have too many talents; you want to be everything, and that’s not possible.”

“How do you know I’d like to be a singer and an actress, too?”

He laughed soft and low. “Silly girl, you’re acting ninety percent of the time, and singing to yourself when you feel contented; unfortunately, that’s not very often.”

“Are *you* contented often?”

“No.”

So we lay, silent, from time to time staring at something that drew our attention, like the fireflies that met on the grass and mated, and the whispering leaves, and the floating clouds, and the play of the moonlight on the water. The night seemed enchanted and set me to thinking again of nature, and all its strange ways. Though I didn’t understand fully many of its ways, why I dreamed as I did at night now, why I woke up throbbing and yearning for some fulfillment that I could never reach.

I was glad Chris had persuaded me into coming. It was wonderful to be lying on grass again, feeling cool and refreshed, and most of all, feeling fully alive again.

“Chris,” I began tentatively, afraid to spoil the soft beauty of this star-filled moonlit night, “where do you think our mother is?”

He kept right on staring at Polaris, the north star.

“I have no idea where she is,” he answered finally.

“Don’t you have any suspicions?”

“Sure. Of course I do.”

“What are they?”

“She could be sick.”

“She’s not sick; Momma’s never sick.”

“She could be away on a business trip for her father.”

“Then why didn’t she come and tell us she was going, and when to expect her back?”

“I don’t know!” he said irritably, like I was spoiling the evening for him, and of course he couldn’t know, any more than I could.

“Chris, do you love and trust her as much as you used to?”

“Don’t ask me questions like that! She’s my mother. She’s all we’ve got, and if you expect me to lie here and say mean things about her, I’m not going to do it! Wherever she is tonight, she’s thinking of us, and she’s coming back. She’ll have a perfectly good reason for going away and staying so long, you can count on that.”

I couldn’t say to him what I was really thinking, that she could have found time to come in and tell us of her plans—for he knew that as well as I did.

There was a husky tone to his voice that came about only when he was feeling pain—and not the physical kind. I wanted to take away the hurt I’d inflicted with my questions. “Chris, on TV, girls my age, and boys your age—they start to date. Would you know how to act on a date?”

“Sure, I’ve watched a lot on TV.”

“But watching isn’t the same as doing.”

“Still it gives you the general idea of what to do, and what to say. And besides, you’re still too young to date guys.”

“Now let me tell you something, Mr. Big Brain, a girl of my age is actually one year older than a boy of your age.”

“You’re crazy!”

“Crazy? I read that fact in a magazine article, written by an authority on the subject—a doctor of psychology,” I said, thinking he was sure to be impressed. “He said girls mature emotionally much quicker than boys do.”

“The author of that article was judging all mankind by *his own* immaturity.”

“Chris, you think you know everything—and nobody knows everything!”

He turned his head and met my eyes and scowled, like he used to do so often. “You’re right,” he agreed pleasantly. “I know only what I read, and what I’m feeling inside has me as mystified as any first-grader. I’m mad as hell at Momma because of what she’s done, and I’m feeling so many different things, and I don’t have a man to talk them over with.” He rose on an elbow to stare down in my face. “I wish it wasn’t taking your hair so long to grow back. I wish now I hadn’t used the scissors . . . didn’t do any good, anyway.”

It was better when he didn’t say anything to make me think of Foxworth Hall. I just wanted to look up at the sky and feel the fresh night air on my wet skin. My pajamas were of thin white batiste, scattered all over with rosebuds, and edged with lace. They clung to me like a second skin, just as Chris’s white jockey shorts clung to him.

“Let’s go now, Chris.”

Reluctantly, he got up and stretched out a hand. “Another swim?”

“No. Let’s go back.”

Silently, we headed away from the lake, walking slowly through the woods, drinking in the sensation of being outside, on the ground.

We headed back to our responsibilities. For the longest time we stood by the rope we'd made, fastened to a chimney far above. I wasn't thinking of how we'd make the ascent, only wondering what we'd gained by this brief little escape from a prison we had to enter again.

"Chris, do you feel different?"

"Yes. We didn't do very much but walk and run on the ground, and swim for a short while, but I feel more alive and more hopeful."

"We could get away if we wanted to—tonight—and not wait for Momma to come back. We could go up, make slings to carry the twins, and while they sleep we could carry them down. We could run away! We'd be *free!*"

He didn't answer, but began the ascent to the roof, hand over hand, with the sheet-ladder caught fast between his legs as he worked his way up. As soon as he was on the roof, I began, for we didn't trust the rope to hold the weight of two people. It was much harder going up than coming down. My legs seemed so much stronger than my arms. I reached above for the next knot, and lifted my right leg. Suddenly my left foot slipped from where I'd notched it and I was swinging free—held only by weak hands!

A short scream tore from my lips! I was more than twenty feet from the ground!

"Hold on!" called Chris from above. "The rope is directly between both your legs. All you have to do is squeeze them together quick!"

I couldn't see what I was doing. All I could do was follow his directions. I grasped the rope between my thighs, quivering all over. Fear made me weaker. The longer I stayed in one place, the more fearful I became. I began to gasp, to tremble. And then came the tears . . . stupid girlish tears!

"You are almost within reach of my hands," called Chris. "Just a few more feet up, and I can reach you. Cathy, don't panic. Think of how much the twins need you! Try . . . try hard!"

I had to talk myself into letting go with one hand, to reach higher for another knot. I said over and over again to myself, I *can* do it. I can. My feet were slippery from the grass—but then, Chris’s feet had been slippery, too, and he had managed. And if he could do it, then I could too.

Bit by terrifying bit I climbed up that rope to where Chris could reach down and grasp my wrists. Once his strong hands had me, a surge of relief tingled my blood down to my fingertips and to my toes. In a few seconds he hauled me up, and I was seized in a tight embrace while we both laughed and then almost cried. Then we crawled up the steep slope, keeping fast hold of the rope until we reached the chimney. That’s when we fell down in our accustomed place and shivered all over.

Oh, the irony of it—that we would be glad to be back!

* * *

Chris lay on his bed and stared over at me. “Cathy, for just a second or two, when we were lying on the bank of the lake, it seemed a bit like heaven. Then when you faltered on the rope, I thought I might die too, if you did. We can’t do that again. You don’t have the strength in your arms that I do. I’m sorry I forgot about that.”

The night lamp was burning with a rosy glow over in the corner. Our eyes met in the dimness. “I’m not sorry we went. I’m glad. It’s been so long since I felt real.”

“Did you feel like that?” he asked. “So did I ... just like we had left a bad dream that was lasting too long.”

I dared again, had to. “Chris, where *do* you think Momma is? She’s drifting away from us gradually, and she never really looks at the twins, like they scare her now. But she’s never stayed away this long before. She’s been gone over a month.”

I heard his heavy, sad sigh. “Honestly, Cathy, I just don’t know. She hasn’t told me anymore than she’s told you—but you can bet she’s got a good reason.”

“But what kind of reason could she have to leave without an explanation? Isn’t that the least she could do?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“If I had children, I would never leave them the way she does. I’d never stick my four children away in a locked room and then forget them.”

“You’re not going to have any children, remember?”

“Chris, someday I’m going to dance in the arms of a husband who loves me, and if he really wants a baby, then I might agree to have one.”

“Sure, I knew all along you’d change your mind once you grew up.”

“You really think I’m pretty enough for a man to love?”

“You’re *more* than pretty enough.” He sounded embarrassed.

“Chris, remember when Momma told us that it was money that made the world go around and not love? Well, I think she’s wrong.”

“Yeah? Give that a bit more thought. Why can’t you have both?”

I gave it thought. Plenty of thought. I lay and stared up at the ceiling that was my dancing floor, and I mulled life and love over and over. And from every book I’d ever read, I took one wise bead of philosophy and strung them all into a rosary to believe in for the rest of my life.

Love, when it came and knocked on my door, was going to be enough.

And that unknown author who’d written that if you had fame, it was not enough, and if you had wealth as well, it was still not enough, and if you had fame, wealth, and also love ... still it was not enough—boy, did I feel sorry for him.

One Rainy Afternoon



Chris was at the windows, both hands holding open the heavy tapestry draperies. The sky was leaden, the rain came down in a solid sheet. Every lamp in our room was lit, and the TV was on, as usual. Chris was waiting to see the train that would pass by around four. You could hear its mournful whistle before dawn, around four, and then later if you were awake. You could just barely catch a glimpse of the train that appeared to be a toy, it was so far away.

He was in his world, I was in mine. Sitting cross-legged on the bed Carrie and I shared, I cut pictures from decorating magazines Momma had brought up for my entertainment before she went away to stay so long. I cut each photograph out carefully and pasted them into a large scrapbook. I was planning my dream house, where I would live happily ever after, with a tall, strong, dark-haired husband who loved only me and not a thousand others on the side.

I had my life mapped out: my career first, a husband and children when I was ready to retire and give someone else a chance. And when I had my dream home, I'd have an emerald-glass tub situated on a dais where I could soak in beauty oil all day long if I wanted to—and nobody would be outside the door, banging and telling me to hurry up! (I never had the chance to sit in the tub long enough.) From that emerald tub I'd step, smelling sweet of flowered perfume, and my skin soft as satin, and my pores would be forever cleansed of the rotten stench of dry old wood and attic dust permeated with all the miseries of antiquity ... so that we, who were young, smelled as old as this house.

“Chris,” I said, turning to stare at his back, “why should we stay on and on, and wait for Momma to come back, much less

wait for that old man to die? Now that we are strong, why don't we find a way to escape?"

He didn't say a word. But I saw his hands clutch the fabric of the draperies harder.

"Chris . . ."

"I don't want to talk about it!" he flared.

"Why are you standing there waiting for the train to pass, if you aren't thinking about getting away?"

"I'm not waiting for the train! I'm just looking out, that's all!"

His forehead was pressed against the glass, daring a close neighbor to look out and see him.

"Chris, come away from the window. Someone might see you."

"I don't give a damn who sees me!"

My first impulse was to run to him, to put my arms around him, and lavish a million kisses on his face to make up for those he was missing from Momma. I'd draw his head down against my breast and cuddle it there as she used to do, and he'd go back to being the cheerful, sunny optimist who never had a sullen angry day like I used to. Even if I did all that Momma did once, I was wise enough to know it wouldn't be the same. It was *her* he wanted. He had all his hopes, dreams, and faith wrapped up in one single woman—Momma.

She'd been gone more than two months! Didn't she realize one day up here was longer than a month of normal living? Didn't she worry about us, and wonder how we were faring? Did she believe that Chris would always be her staunchest supporter when she left us without an excuse, a reason, an explanation? Did she really believe that love, once gained, couldn't be torn asunder by doubts and fears, and could never, never be put back together again?

"Cathy," said Chris suddenly, "Where would you go if you had your choice of anywhere?"

“South,” I said, “down to some warm, sunny beach, where the waves wash in gentle and low ... don’t want high surf with white caps ... don’t want the gray sea chafing against big rocks ... I want to go where the wind never blows, I just want soft warm breezes to whisper in my hair and on my cheeks, while I lie on pure white sand, and drink up the sunlight.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, sounding wistful, “sounds nice the way you say it. Only I wouldn’t mind a strong surf; I’d like to ride the crest of a wave on one of those surfboards. It would sort of be like skiing.”

I put my scissors down, my magazines, my pot of rubber cement, and laid aside the magazines and scrapbook to fully concentrate on Chris. He was missing out on so many sports he loved, shut up here in one room, made old and sad beyond his years. Oh, how I wanted to comfort him, and I didn’t know how.

“Come away from the windows, Chris, please.”

“Leave me alone! I get so damned sick and tired of this place! Don’t do this, don’t do that! Don’t speak until spoken to—eat those damned meals every day, none of it hot enough, or seasoned right—I think *she* does it deliberately, just so we’ll never have anything to enjoy, even food. Then I think about all that money—half of it should be Momma’s, and ours. And I tell myself, no matter what, it is worth it! That old man can’t live forever!”

“All the money in the world isn’t worth the days of living we’ve lost!” I flared back.

He spun around, his face red. “The hell it isn’t! Maybe you can get by with your talent, but I’ve got years and years of education ahead of me! You know Daddy expected me to be a doctor, so come hell or high water, I’m getting my M.D.! And if we run away, I’ll never be a doctor—you know that! Name what I can do to earn a living for us—quick, list the jobs I can get other than a dishwasher, a fruit-picker, a short-order cook—will any of those put me through college, and then through med school? And I’ll have you and the twins to support, as well as myself—a ready-made family at age sixteen!”

Fiery anger filled me. He didn't give me credit for being able to contribute anything! "I can work, too!" I snapped back. "Between us we can manage. Chris, when we were starving, you brought me four dead mice, and you said God gives people extra strength and abilities in the time of great stress. Well, I believe He does. When we leave here and are on our own, somehow or other we will make our way, and you will be a doctor! I'll do anything to see that you get that damned M.D. behind your name!"

"What can *you* do?" he asked in a hateful, sneering way. Before I could reply, the door behind us opened and the grandmother was there! She paused without stepping into the room and fixed her glare on Chris. And he, stubborn and unwilling to cooperate as before, refused to be intimidated. He didn't move from the window, but he turned to stare out at the rain again.

"Boy!" she lashed out. "*Move away from that window—this instant!*"

"My name is not '*boy*.' My name is Christopher. You can address me by my given name, or don't address me at all—but never call me '*boy*' again!"

She spat at his back: "I hate that particular name! It was your father's; out of the kindness of my heart, I pleaded his cause when his mother died, and he didn't have a home. My husband didn't want him here, but I felt pity for a young boy without parents, or means, and robbed of so much. So I kept nagging my husband to let his younger half-brother live under our roof. So your father came . . . brilliant, handsome, and he took advantage of our generosity. Deceived us! We sent him to the best of schools, bought him the best of everything, and he stole our daughter, his own half-niece! She was all we had left then . . . the only one left . . . and they eloped in the night, and came back two weeks later, smiling, happy, asking us to forgive them for falling in love. That night, my husband had his first heart attack. Has your mother told you that—that she and that man were the cause of her father's heart disease? He ordered her out—told her never to come back—and then he fell down on the floor."

She stopped, gasping for breath, putting a large, strong hand flashing with diamonds to her throat. Chris turned away from the window and stared at her, as did I. This was more than she had said to us since we came up the stairs to live, an eternity ago.

“We are not to blame for what our parents did,” Chris said flatly.

“You are to blame for what you and your sister have done!”

“What have we done so sinful?” he asked. “Do you think we can live in one room, year after year, and not see each other? You helped put us here. You have locked this wing so the servants cannot enter. You *want* to catch us doing something you consider evil. You want Cathy and me to prove your judgment of our mother’s marriage is right! Look at you, standing there in your iron-gray dress, feeling pious and self-righteous while you starve small children!”

“Stop!” I cried, terrified by what I saw on the grandmother’s face. “Chris, don’t say anything else!”

But he had already said too much. She slammed out of the room as my heart came up in my throat. “We’ll go up in the attic,” said Chris calmly. “The coward is afraid of the stairwell. We’ll be safe enough, and if she starves us, we’ll use the sheet-ladder and reach the ground.”

Again the door opened. The grandmother came in, striding forward with a green willow switch in her hand, and grim determination in her eyes. She must have stashed the switch somewhere nearby, to have fetched it so quickly. “Run into the attic and hide,” she lashed out, reaching to seize Chris by his upper arm, “and none of you will eat for another week! And not only will I whip you, but your sister, as well, if you resist, and the twins.”

It was October. In November, Chris would be seventeen. He was still only a boy compared to her huge size. He was considering resistance, but glanced at me, then at the twins, who whimpered and clung to each other, and he allowed that old woman to drag him into the bathroom. She closed and

locked the door. She ordered him to strip, and to lean over the bathtub.

The twins came running to me, burying their faces in my lap. “Make her stop!” pleaded Carrie. “Don’t let her whip Chris!”

He didn’t make a sound as that whip slashed down on his bare skin. I heard the sickening thuds of green willow biting into flesh. And I felt every painful blow! Chris and I had become as one in the past year; he was like the other side of me, the way I’d like to be, strong and forceful, and able to stand that whip without crying out. I hated her. I sat on that bed, and gathered the twins in my arms, and felt hate so large looming up inside of me that I didn’t know how to release it except by screaming. He felt the whip, and I let loose his cries of pain. I hoped God heard! I hoped the servants heard! I hoped that dying grandfather heard!

Out of the bathroom she came, with her whip in her hand. Behind her, Chris trailed, a towel swathed around his hips. He was dead-white. I couldn’t stop screaming.

“Shut up!” she ordered, snapping the whip before my eyes. “Silence this second, unless you want more of the same!”

I couldn’t stop screaming, not even when she dragged me off to the bed and threw the twins aside when they tried to protect me. Cory went for her leg with his teeth. She sent him reeling with one blow. I went then, my hysteria quelled, into the bathroom, where I, too, was ordered to strip. I stood there looking at her diamond brooch, the one she always wore, counting the stones, seventeen tiny ones. Her gray taffeta was patterned with fine red lines, and the white collar was hand-crocheted. She fixed her eyes on the short stubble of hair the scarf about my head revealed with an expression of gloating satisfaction.

“Undress, or I will rip off your clothes.”

I began to undress, slowly working on the buttons of my blouse. I didn’t wear a bra then, though I needed one. I saw her eyeing my breasts, my flat stomach, before she turned her eyes away, apparently offended. “I’m going to get even one day, old

woman,” I said. “There’s going to come a day when you are going to be the helpless one, and I’m going to hold the whip in my hands. And there’s going to be food in the kitchen that you are never going to eat, for, as you incessantly say, God sees everything, and he has his way of working justice, an eye for an eye is his way, Grandmother!”

“Never speak to me again!” she snapped. She smiled then, confident there would never come that day when I was in control of her fate. Foolishly, I had spoken, using the worst possible timing, and she let me have it. While the whip bit down on my tender flesh, in the bedroom the twins screamed, “Chris, make her stop! Don’t let Cathy be hurt!”

I fell down on my knees near the tub, crouching in a tight ball to protect my face, my breasts, my most vulnerable areas. Like a wild woman out of control, she lashed at me until the willow switch broke. The pain was like fire. When the switch broke, I thought it was over, but she picked up a long-handled brush and with that she beat me about the head and shoulders. Try as I would to keep from screaming, like the brave silence Chris had kept, I had to let it out. I yelled, “You’re not a woman! You’re a monster! Something unhuman and inhumane!” My reward for this was a belting whack against the right side of my skull. Everything went black.

I drifted into reality, hurting all over, my head splitting with pain. Up in the attic a record was playing the “Rose Adiago” from the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty*. If I live to be a hundred I will never forget that music, and the way I felt when I opened my eyes to see Chris bending over me, applying antiseptic, taping on adhesive plasters, tears in his eyes dropping down on me. He’d ordered the twins up into the attic to play, to study, to color, to do anything to keep their minds off of what was going on down here. When he had done for me all that he could with his inadequate medical supplies, I took care of his welted, bloody back. Neither of us wore clothes. Clothes would adhere to our oozing cuts. I had the most bruises from the brush she’d wielded so cruelly. On my head was a dark lump that Chris feared might be a concussion.

Doctoring over, we turned on our sides, facing one another under the sheet. Our eyes locked and melded as one set. He touched my cheek, the softest, most loving caress. “Don’t we have fun, my brother ... don’t we have fun?” I sang in a parody of that song about Bill Bailey. “We’ll hurt the livelong da-ay . . . you’ll do the doctoring and I’ll pay the rent . . .”

“Stop!” he cried out, looking hurt and defenseless. “I know it was my fault! I stood at the window. She didn’t have to hurt you, too!”

“It doesn’t matter, sooner or later she would do it. From the very first day, she planned to punish us for some trifling reason. I just marvel that she held back for so long in using that whip.”

“When she was lashing me, I heard you screaming—and I didn’t have to. You did it for me, Cathy, and it helped; I didn’t feel any pain but yours.”

We held each other carefully. Our bare bodies pressed together; my breasts flattened out against his chest. Then he was murmuring my name, and tugging off the wrapping from my head, letting loose my spill of long hair before he cupped my head in his hands to gently ease it closer to his lips. It felt odd to be kissed while lying naked in his arms ... and not right. “Stop,” I whispered fearfully, feeling that male part of him grow hard against me. “This is just what she thought we did.”

Bitterly, he laughed before he drew away, telling me I didn’t know anything. There was more to making love than just kissing, and we hadn’t done more than kiss, ever.

“And never will,” I said, but weakly.

That night I went to sleep after thinking of his kiss, and not the whipping or the blows from the brush. Swelling up in both of us was a turmoil of whirling emotions. Something sleeping deep inside of me had awakened, quickened, just as Aurora slept until the Prince came to put on her quiet lips a long lover’s kiss.

That was the way of all fairy tales—ending with the kiss, and the happy ever after. There had to be some other prince for me to bring about a happy ending.

To Find a Friend



Somebody was screaming on the attic stairs! I bolted awake and looked around to see who was missing. Cory!

Oh, God—what had happened now?

I bounded from bed and raced toward the closet, and I heard Carrie wake up and add her yowls to Cory's, not even knowing what he was yelling about. Chris cried out, "What the hell is going on now?"

I sped through the closet, raced up six steps, and then stopped dead and just stared. There was Cory in his white pajamas, yelling his head off—and darned if I could see why.

"Do something! Do something!" he screamed at me, and finally he pointed to the object of his distress.

Ohhh . . . on the step was a mousetrap, the same place we left one every night, set with cheese. But this time the mouse wasn't dead. It had tried to be clever, and steal the cheese with a forepaw instead of his teeth, and it was a tiny foot caught beneath the strong wire spring. Savagely, that little gray mouse was chewing on that trapped foot to free itself, despite the pain it must have felt.

"Cathy, do something quick!" cried Cory, throwing himself into my arms. "Save his life! Don't let him bite off his foot! I want him alive! I want a friend! I've never had a pet; you know I always wanted a pet. Why do you and Chris always have to kill all the mice?"

Carrie came up behind me to beat on my back with her tiny fists. "You're *mean*, Cathy! *Mean! Mean! You won't let Cory have nothin'!*"

As far as I knew, Cory had just about everything money could buy except a pet, his freedom and the great outdoors.

And truly, Carrie might have slaughtered me on the stairs if Chris hadn't rushed to my defense and unhinged the jaws clenched on my leg, which was fortunately well covered over with a very full nightgown that reached my ankles.

"Stop all this racket!" he ordered firmly. And he bent over to use the wash cloth he must have gone for just to pick up a savage mouse, and save his hand from being bitten.

"Make him well, Chris," pleaded Cory. "Please don't let him die!"

"Since you seem to want this mouse so badly, Cory, I'll do what I can to save his foot and leg, though it's pretty mangled."

Oh, what a hustle and bustle to save the life of one mouse, when we had killed hundreds. First Chris had to carefully lift the wire spring, and when he did, that uncomprehending wild thing almost hissed as Cory turned his back and sobbed, and Carrie screamed. Then the mouse seemed to half-faint, from relief, I suppose.

We raced down to the bathroom, where Chris and I scrubbed up and Cory held his near-dead mouse well wrapped in the pale blue washcloth, as Chris warned not to squeeze too tight.

On the countertop I spread all the medication we had on a clean towel.

"He's dead!" yelled Carrie, and she struck Chris. "You killed Cory's only pet!"

"This mouse is not dead," said Chris calmly. "Now please, all of you, be quiet, and don't move. Cathy, hold him still. I've got to do what I can to repair the torn flesh, and then I'll have to splint up that leg."

First he used antiseptic to clean the wound, while the mouse lay as if dead, only its eyes were open and staring up at me in a pitiful way. Next he used gauze that had to be split lengthwise to fit such a tiny foot and leg, and then over that he wrapped cotton and for a splint he used a toothpick, broke it in half and taped that in place with adhesive.

“I’m going to call him Mickey,” said Cory—a thousand candles behind his eyes because one small mouse would live to become his pet.

“It may be a girl,” said Chris, who flicked his eyes to check.

“No! Don’t want no girl mouse—want a Mickey mouse!”

“It’s a boy all right,” said Chris. “Mickey will live and survive to eat all of our cheese,” said the doctor, having completed his first surgery, and made his first cast, and looking, I must admit, rather proud of himself.

He washed the blood from his hands, and Cory and Carrie were lit up like something marvelous had finally come into their lives.

“Let me hold Mickey now!” cried Cory.

“No, Cory, let Cathy hold him for a while longer. You see, he’s in shock and her hands are larger and will give Mickey more warmth than yours. And you might, just accidentally, squeeze too much.”

I sat in the bedroom rocker and nursed a gray mouse that seemed on the verge of having a heart attack—its heart beat so fiercely. It gasped and fluttered its eyelids. As I held it, I felt its small, warm body struggling to live on, I wanted it to live and be Cory’s pet.

The door opened and the grandmother came in.

None of us was fully clothed; in fact, we still wore only our nightclothes, without robes to conceal what might be revealed. Our feet were bare, our hair was tousled, and our faces weren’t washed. One rule broken.

Cory cringed close at my side as the grandmother swept her discerning gaze over the disorganized, (well, truthfully,) really messy room. The beds weren’t made, our clothes were draped on chairs, and socks were everywhere.

Two rules broken.

And Chris was in the bathroom washing Carrie’s face, and helping her put on her clothes, and fasten the buttons of her

pink coveralls.

Three rules broken. The two of them came out, with Carrie's hair up in a neat ponytail, tied with a pink ribbon.

Immediately, when she saw the grandmother, Carrie froze. Her blue eyes went wide and scared. She turned and clung to Chris for protection. He picked her up and carried her over to me and put her down in my lap. Then he went on to where the picnic basket was on the table and began to take out what she had brought up.

As Chris neared, the grandmother backed away. He ignored her, as he swiftly emptied the basket.

"Cory," he said, heading toward the closet, "I'll go up and find a suitable birdcage and while I'm gone, see if you can't put on all of your clothes, without Cathy's help, and wash your face and hands."

The grandmother remained silent. I sat in the rocker and nursed the ailing mouse, as my little children crowded in the seat with me, and all three of us fixed our eyes on her, until Carrie could bear it no longer and turned to hide her face against my shoulder. Her small body quivered all over.

It troubled me that she didn't reprimand us and speak of the unmade beds, the cluttered, messy room that I tried to keep neat and tidy—and why hadn't she scolded Chris for dressing Carrie? Why was she looking, and seeing, but saying nothing?

Chris came down from the attic with a birdcage and some wire screening he said would make the cage more secure.

Those were words to snap the grandmother's head in his direction. Then her stone eyes fixed on me, and the pale blue washcloth I held. "What do you hold in your hands, girl?" she fired in a glacial tone.

"An injured mouse," I answered, my voice as icy as hers.

"Do you intend to keep that mouse as a pet, and put it in that cage?"

"Yes, we do." I stared at her defiantly and dared her to do something about it. "Cory has never owned a pet, and it is time

that he did.”

She pursed her thin lips and her stone-cold eyes swept to Cory, who trembled on the verge of tears. “Go on,” she said, “keep the mouse. A pet like that suits you.” With that she slammed out the door.

Chris began to fiddle with the birdcage, and the screening, and spoke as he worked. “The wires are much too far apart to keep Mickey inside, Cory, so we’ll have to wrap the cage with this screen, and then your little pet can’t escape.”

Cory smiled. He peeked to see if Mickey still lived. “It’s hungry. I can tell, its nose is twitching.”

The winning over of Mickey the attic mouse was quite a feat. First of all, he didn’t trust us, though we’d set his foot free from the trap. He hated the confinement of the cage. He wobbled about in circles on the awkward thing we’d put on his foot and leg, seeking a way out. Cory dropped cheese and bread crumbs through the bars to entice him into eating and gaining strength. He ignored the cheese, the bread, and in the end, walked as far away as he could get, his tiny bead-black eyes wary with fear, his body atremble as Cory opened the rusty cage door, to put in a miniature soup tureen filled with water.

Then he put his hand in the cage and pushed a bit of cheese closer. “Good cheese,” he said invitingly. He moved a bit of bread nearer to the trembling mouse whose whiskers twitched, “Good bread. It will make you strong and well.”

It took two weeks before Cory had a mouse that adored him and would come when he whistled. Cory hid tidbits in his shirt pockets to tempt Mickey into them. When Cory wore a shirt with two breast pockets, and the right one held a bit of cheese, and the left a bit of peanut-butter-and-grape-jelly sandwich, Mickey would hesitate indecisively on Cory’s shoulders, his nose twitching, his whiskers jerking. And only too plainly could you see we had not a gourmet mouse, but a gourmand who wanted what was in both pockets at the same time.

Then, when finally he could make up his mind as to which he would go for first, down he’d scamper into the peanut-

butter pocket, and eat upside down, and in a squiggle he'd race back up to Cory's shoulder, around his neck, and down into the pocket with the cheese. It was laughable the way he never went directly over Cory's chest to the other pocket, but always up and around his neck, and then down, tickling every funnybone Cory had.

The little leg and foot healed, but the mouse never walked perfectly, nor could he run very fast. I think the mouse was clever enough to save the cheese for last, for that he could pick up and hold as he daintily nibbled, whereas the bit of sandwich was a messy meal.

And believe me, never was there a mouse better at smelling out food, no matter where it was hidden. Willingly, Mickey abandoned his mice friends to take up with humans who fed him so well, and petted him, and rocked him to sleep, though oddly enough, Carrie had no patience with Mickey at all. It could be just because that mouse was as charmed by her dollhouse as she was. The little stairways and halls fitted his size perfectly, and once on the loose, he headed directly for the dollhouse! In through a window he clambered, and tumbled down on the floor; and porcelain people, so delicately balanced, fell right and left, and the dining-room table turned over when he wanted a taste.

Carrie screamed at Cory, "Your Mickey is eating all the party food! Take him away! Take him out of my living room!"

Cory captured his lame mouse, which couldn't move too quickly, and he cuddled Mickey against his chest. "You must learn to behave, Mickey. Bad things happen in big houses. The lady who owns that house over there, she hits you for anything."

He made me giggle, for it was the first time I'd ever heard him make even the slightest disparaging remark about his twin sister.

It was a good thing Cory had a little, sweet gray mouse to delve deep into his pockets for the goodies his master hid there. It was a good thing all of us had something to do to occupy our time, and our minds, while we waited and waited

for our mother to show up, when it was beginning to seem like she never would come to us again.

At Last, Momma

Chris and I never discussed what had happened between us on the bed the day of the whippings. Often I caught him staring at me, but just as soon as my eyes turned to meet his, his would shift away. When he turned suddenly to catch me watching him, mine were the eyes to flee.

We were growing more day by day, he and I. My breasts filled out fuller, my hips widened, my waist diminished, and the short hair above my forehead grew out longer and curled becomingly. Why hadn't I known before that it would curl without so much weight to pull the curls into waves only? As for Chris, his shoulders broadened, his chest became more manly, and his arms too. I caught him once in the attic staring down at that part of him he seemed so taken with—and measuring it too! “Why?” I asked, quite astonished to learn that the length mattered. He turned away before he told me once he'd seen Daddy naked, and what he had seemed so inadequate in size. Even the back of his neck was red as he explained this. Oh, golly—just like I wondered what size bra Momma wore! “Don't do it again,” I whispered. Cory had such a small male organ, and what if he had seen and felt as Chris did, that *his* was inadequate?

Suddenly I stopped polishing the school desks, and stood very still, thinking of Cory. I turned to stare at him and Carrie. Oh, God, how too much closeness dims your perspective! Two years, and four months we had been locked away—and the twins were very much as they had been the night they came! Certainly their heads were larger and that should have diminished the size of their eyes. Yet their eyes appeared extraordinarily large. They sat listless on that stained and smelly old mattress we'd pulled close to the windows.

Butterflies danced nervously in my stomach to view them objectively. Their bodies seemed frail flower stems too weak to support the blossoms of their heads.

I waited until they fell asleep in the weak sunlight, then said in an undertone to Chris, “Look at the buttercups, they don’t grow. Only their heads are larger.”

He sighed heavily, narrowed his eyes, and neared the twins, hovering above them, and bending to touch their transparent skins. “If only they would go outside on the roof with us to benefit from the sun and fresh air like we do. Cathy, no matter how much they fight and scream, we’ve got to force them outside!”

Foolishly, we thought if we carried them out on the roof while they were asleep, they would awaken in the sunlight, held safe in our arms, and they’d feel secure enough. Cautiously, Chris lifted up Cory, while I leaned to heft Carrie’s slight weight. Stealthily, we approached an open attic window. It was Thursday, our day to enjoy outdoors on the roof, while the servants spent their day off in town. It was safe enough to use the back part of the roof.

Barely had Chris cleared the window ledge with Cory when the warm Indian summer air brought Cory suddenly out of sleep. He took one look around, seeing me with Carrie in my arms, obviously planning to take her out on the roof too, when he let out a howl! Carrie bolted out of sleep. She saw Chris with Cory on the steep roof, she saw me and where I was taking her, and she let out a scream that must have been heard a mile away!

Chris called to me through the racket, “Come on! For their own good, we have to do this!”

Not only did they scream, they kicked and beat at us with small fists! Carrie clamped her teeth down on my arm, so I screamed, too. Little as they were, they had the strength of those in extreme danger. Carrie was battering her fists into my face so I could hardly see, plus screaming in my ear! Hastily, I turned around and headed back toward the schoolroom window. Trembling and weak, I stood Carrie on her feet beside

the teacher's desk. I leaned against that desk, gasping and panting, and thanking God for letting me get her safely back inside. Chris returned Cory to his sister. It was no use. To force them out on the roof endangered the lives of all four of us.

Now they were angry. Resentfully they struggled when we pulled them toward the markings on the wall, where we'd measured their height the first day in the schoolroom. Chris held them both in place, while I backed up to read the inches they'd grown.

I stared and I stared, shocked and disbelieving it was possible. In all this time to grow only two inches? Two inches, when Chris and I had gained many, many inches between the ages of five and seven, though they had been exceptionally small at birth, Cory weighing only five pounds and Carrie five pounds and one ounce.

Oh. I had to put my hands up to cover my face so they couldn't see my stunned and horrified expression. Then that wasn't enough. I spun around so they saw only my back as I choked on the sobs stuck in my throat.

"You can let them go now," I finally managed. I turned to catch a glimpse of them scurrying away like two small flaxen-haired mice, racing for the stairwell, heading toward the beloved television and the escape it offered, and the little mouse which was real and waiting for them to come and pleasure *his* imprisoned life.

Directly behind me Chris stood and waited. "Well," he asked when I just wilted, speechless, "how much have they grown?"

Quickly I brushed away the tears before I turned, so I could see his eyes when I told him. "Two inches," I said in a flat way, but the pain was in my eyes, and that was what he saw.

He stepped closer and put his arms about me, then held my head so it was against his chest, and I cried, really bawled. I hated Momma for doing this! Really hated her! She knew children were like plants—they had to have sunshine if they were to grow. I trembled in the embrace of my brother, trying to convince myself that as soon as we were freed, they'd be

beautiful again. They would, of course they would; they'd catch up, make up the lost years, and as soon as the sunshine was upon them again, they'd shoot up like weeds—they would, yes, they would! It was only all the long days hidden indoors that made their cheeks so hollow, and their eyes so sunken. And all of that could be undone, couldn't it?

“Well,” I began in my hoarse, choked voice, while clinging to the only one who seemed to care anymore, “does money make the world go around, or is it love? Enough love bestowed on the twins, and I would have read six or seven or maybe eight inches gain in height, not only two.”

* * *

Chris and I headed for our dim sequestered prison to eat lunch, and as always I sent the twins into the bathroom to wash their hands, for they certainly didn't need mouse germs to imperil their health more.

As we sat quietly at the dining table, eating our sandwiches, and sipping our lukewarm soup and milk, and watching TV lovers meet and kiss and make plans to run away and leave their respective spouses, the door to our room opened. I hated to look away, and miss what would happen next, yet I did.

Gaily into our room strode our mother. She wore a beautiful, lightweight suit, with soft gray fur at the cuffs and around the neck of the jacket.

“Darlings!” she cried in enthusiastic greeting, then hesitated uncertainly when not one of us jumped up to welcome her back. “Here I am! Aren't you glad to see me? Oh, you just don't know how very glad I am to see all of you. I've missed you so much, and thought about you, and dreamed of you, and I've brought you all so many beautiful presents that I chose with such care. Just wait until you see them! And I had to be so sneaky—for how could I explain buying things for children? I wanted to make up for being away for so long. I did want to tell you why I was leaving, really I did, but it was so complicated. And I didn't know exactly how long I'd be gone, and though you missed me, you were cared for, weren't you? You didn't suffer, did you?”

Had we suffered? Had we only missed her? Who was she, anyway? Idiot thoughts while I stared at her and listened to how difficult four hidden children made the lives of others. And though I wanted to deny her, keep her from ever really being close again, I faltered, filling with hope, wanting so much to love her again, and trust her again.

Chris got up and spoke first, in a voice that had finally resolved from one that was high and squeaky at times into reliable, deep and masculine tones. “Momma, of course we’re glad you’re back! And yes, we missed you! But you were wrong to go away, and stay away for so long, no matter what complicated reasons you had.”

“Christopher,” she said, her eyes widening in surprise, “you don’t sound like yourself.” Her eyes flicked from him to me, then to the twins. Her vivaciousness simmered down. “Christopher, did anything go wrong?”

“Wrong?” he repeated. “Momma, what can be right about living in one room? You said I don’t sound like myself—look me over good. Am I a little boy now? Look at Cathy—is she still a child? Look longest at the twins; notice in particular how tall they’ve grown. Then turn your eyes back on me, and tell me that Cathy and I are still children to be treated with condescension, and are incapable of understanding adult subjects. We haven’t remained idle, twiddling our thumbs while you were off having a good time. Through books Cathy and I have lived a zillion lives . . . our vicarious way to feel alive.”

Momma wanted to interrupt, but Chris overrode her small voice which faltered. He threw her many gifts a scornful glance. “So, you have come back bearing peace offerings, like you always do when you know you have done wrong. Why do you keep thinking your stupid gifts can make up for what we’ve lost, and what we are constantly losing? Sure, once we *were* delighted with the games and toys and clothes you brought up to our prison room, but we’re older now, and gifts are just not enough!”

“Christopher, please,” she begged, and looked uneasily at the twins again, and so quickly she averted her eyes. “Please

don't speak as if you've stopped loving me. I couldn't bear that."

"I love you," was his reply. "I *make* myself keep on loving you, despite what you do. I've *got* to love you. We all have to love you, and believe in you, and think you are looking out for our best interests. But look at us, Momma, and really see us. Cathy feels, and I feel, that you close your eyes to what you are doing to us. You come to us smiling, and dangle before our eyes and our ears bright hopes for the future, but nothing ever materializes. Long ago, when you first told us about this house and your parents, you said we'd only be shut up in this room for *one* night, and then you changed it to a *few* days. And then it was another few weeks, and then another few months . . . and over two years have passed while we wait for an old man to die, who may never die from the skilled way his doctors keep pulling him back from the grave. This room is not improving *our* health. Can't you see that?" he almost shouted, his boyish face suffused with red as his limit of self-control was reached at last. I thought I would never live to see the day when he would attack our mother—*his* beloved mother.

The sound of his loud voice must have startled him, for he lowered his tone and spoke more calmly, and yet his words had the impact of bullets: "Momma, whether or not you inherit your father's immense fortune, we want out of this room! Not next week, or tomorrow—but today! Now! This minute! You turn that key over to me, and we'll go away, far away. And you can send us money, if you care to, or send nothing, if that's what you want, and you need never see us again, if that is your choice, and that will solve all your problems, we'll be gone from your life, and your father need never know we existed, and you can have what he leaves you, all to yourself."

Momma went pale from shock.

I sat in my chair, with my lunch half-eaten. I felt sorry for her, and I felt betrayed by my own compassion. I closed the door, slammed it hard, just by thinking of those two weeks when we were starved . . . four days of eating nothing else but crackers and cheese, and three days without any food at all, and nothing but water to drink. And then the whippings, the tar

in my hair, and, most of all, the way Chris had to slash his wrist to feed the twins his nourishing blood.

And Chris, what he was saying to her, and the hard determined way he said it, was mostly my doing.

I think she guessed this, for she shot me a stabbing glance, full of resentment.

“Say no more to me, Christopher—it’s clear to see you are not yourself.”

Jumping to my feet, I stepped over to his side. “Look at us, Momma! Observe our radiant, healthy complexions, just like yours. Look especially long on your two youngest. They don’t look frail, do they? Their full cheeks don’t look gaunt, do they? Their hair isn’t dull, is it? Their eyes—they’re not dark and hollowed out, are they? When you look, and register, do you see how much they’ve grown, how healthily they thrive? If you can’t have pity for Christopher and me, have pity for them.”

“Stop!” she yelled, jumping up from the bed where she’d sat to have us crowd cozily around, in our former way. She spun on her heel so she wouldn’t have to see us. Choking sobs were in her voice that cried, “You have no right to talk to your mother in this manner. But for me you would all be starving in the streets.” Her voice broke. She turned sideways, throwing Chris an appealing, woebegone look. “Haven’t I done the best I could by you? Where did I go wrong? What do you lack? You knew how it would be until your grandfather died. You agreed to stay here until he did. And I’ve kept my word. You live in a warm, safe room. I bring to you the best of everything—books, toys, games, the best clothes that money can buy. You have good food to eat, a TV set.” Fully she faced us now, spreading wide her hands in a supplicating gesture, appearing ready to fall down on her knees, pleading with her eyes at me now. “Listen to this—your grandfather is so ill now he is confined to bed all day long. He isn’t even allowed to sit in the wheelchair. His doctors say he can’t last long, a few days or the maximum of a few weeks. The day he dies, I’ll come up and unlock your door and lead you down the stairs. I’ll have money enough then to send all four of you to college, and

Chris to medical school, and you, Cathy, can continue on with your ballet lessons. I'll find for Cory the best of musical teachers, and for Carrie, I'll do anything she wants. Are you going to throw away all the years you've suffered and endured without waiting for rewards—just when you're on the verge of reaching your goal! Remember how you used to laugh and talk of what you'd do when you were blessed with more money than you knew how to spend? Recall all the plans we made . . . our house where we could all live together again. Don't throw everything away by becoming impatient just when we're due to win! Tell me I've had pleasure while you've suffered, and I'll agree that I have. But I'll make up for that by tenfold!"

Oh, I admit I was touched, and wanted so much to step away from disbelief. I hovered near, trusting her again, and quivered with the suspicious fear that she was lying. Hadn't she told us from the very beginning that our grandfather was taking his last breath . . . years and years of his breathing his last breath? Should I yell out, *Momma, we just don't believe you anymore?* I wanted to wound her, make her bleed as we had bled with our tears, isolation, and loneliness—to say nothing of the punishments.

But Chris looked at me forbiddingly, making me ashamed. Could I be as chivalrous as he was? Would that I could open my mouth, ignore him, and shout all the grandmother had done to punish us for nothing. For some strange reason I stayed quiet. Maybe I was protecting the twins from knowing too much. Maybe I was waiting for Chris to tell her first.

He stood and gazed at her with soft compassion, forgetting the tar in my hair, and the weeks without food, and the dead mice he would make tasty with salt and pepper—and then the whippings. He was beside me, his arm brushing mine. He trembled with indecision, and in his eyes were tormented visions of hopes and despair as he watched our mother begin to cry.

The twins crept closer to cling to my skirt as Momma crumpled down on the nearest bed to sob and beat her fists into the pillow, just like a child.

“Oh, but you are heartless and ungrateful children,” she wailed pitifully, “that you should do this to me, your own mother, the only person in this world who loves you! The only one who cares about you! I came so joyfully to you, so happy to be with you again, wanting to tell you my good news so you could rejoice with me. And what do you do? You attack me viciously, unjustly! Making me feel so guilty, and so ashamed, when all along I have done the best I could, and yet you won’t believe!”

She was on our level now, crying, face down on the bed in the same way I would have done years ago, and Carrie would do this day.

Immediately, spontaneously, Chris and I were stricken contrite and sorry. Everything she said was only too true. She *was* the only person who loved us, who cared, and in her only lay our salvation, our lives, our futures, and our dreams. We ran to her, Chris and I, and threw our arms around her as best we could, pleading for forgiveness. The twins said nothing, only watched.

“Momma, please stop crying! We didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. We’re sorry, we really are. We’ll stay. We believe you. The grandfather is almost dead—he has to die sometime, doesn’t he?”

On and on she wept, inconsolable.

“Talk to us, Momma, please! Tell us your good news. We want to know, we want to be glad and rejoice with you. We said those things only because we were hurt when you left us and didn’t tell us why. Momma, please, please, Momma.”

Our pleas, our tears, our anguish finally reached her. She somehow managed to sit up, and she dabbed at her eyes with a white linen handkerchief with five inches of fine lace all around, and monogrammed with a big white C.

She shoved Chris and me aside, then brushed off our hands as if they burned, and she got to her feet. Now she refused to meet our eyes which begged, pleaded, cajoled.

“Open your gifts that I selected with such care,” she said in a cold voice filled with choked sobs, “and then tell me whether or not you are thought about and loved. Tell me then that I didn’t think of your needs, and think of your best interests, and try to cater to your every whim. Tell me then I am selfish and that I don’t care.”

Dark mascara streaked her cheeks. Her bright red lipstick was smeared. Her hair, customarily worn on her head like a perfect hat, was mussed and displaced. She had strolled into our room a vision of perfection and now she appeared a broken mannequin.

And why did I have to go and think she was like an actress, playing her part for all she was worth?

She looked at Chris, and ignored me. And the twins—they could have been in Timbuktu for all the concern she showed for their welfare, and their sensitivities.

“I have ordered a new set of encyclopedias for your upcoming birthday, Christopher,” she choked out, still dabbing at her face and trying to take off the mascara smudges. “The very set you always wanted—the best that is published, bound in genuine red leather, tooled in twenty-four-karat gold around all four sides, and hubbed-spined a full half-inch outward. I went directly to the publishing house, to order them for you especially. They’ll bear your name, and the date, but they won’t be mailed directly here, lest someone should see them.” She swallowed heavily and put away her fancy handkerchief. “I thought and thought about a gift to please you the most, just like I have always given you the very best to educate yourself.”

Chris appeared dumbfounded. The play of mixed emotions upon his face made his eyes look confused, bewildered, dazed, and sort of helpless. God, how he must have loved her, even after all she’d done.

My emotions were straightforward, with no indecision. I smoldered with rage. Now she was bringing up genuine, leather-bound, hubbed-spined, twenty-four-karat gold-tooled encyclopedias! Books like that must cost more than a thousand

dollars—maybe two or three thousand! Why wasn't she putting that money into our escape fund? I wanted to yell out like Carrie and protest, but something broken in Chris's blue eyes kept my mouth shut. He'd always wanted a set of genuine red-leather-bound encyclopedias, and she'd already ordered them, and money was nothing to her now, and maybe, just maybe, the grandfather really would die today or tomorrow, and she wouldn't *need* to rent an apartment, or buy a house.

She sensed my doubts.

Momma raised her head regally high and turned toward the door. We had not opened our gifts, and she wasn't staying to watch our reactions. Why was I crying inside when I hated her? I didn't love her now . . . I didn't.

She said when she reached the door and had it open, "When you have thought about the pain you have given me today, and when you can treat me with love and respect again, then I will come back. Not before."

So she came.

So she went.

So she had come and gone and left Carrie and Cory untouched, unknissed, unspoken to, and hardly glanced at. And I knew why. She couldn't bear to look and see what gaining a fortune was costing the twins.

They jumped up from the table and came running to me, to cling to my skirts, and stare up into my face. Their small faces were fraught with anxieties, with fears, studying my expression to see if I were happy, so they, too, could feel happy. I knelt to lavish them with all the kisses and caresses she had overlooked—or just couldn't give to those she'd harmed so.

"Do we look funny?" asked Carrie worriedly, her small hands plucking at mine.

"No, of course not. You and Cory just look pale, because you stay inside too much."

"Did we grow much?"

“Yes, yes, of course you have.” And I smiled, even as I lied. And with a pretense of joy, and keeping that false smile like a mask to wear, I sat down on the floor with the twins and Chris, and we all four began to open our gifts like it was Christmas Day. They were all beautifully wrapped in expensive paper, or gold or silver foil, and sporting huge satin bows of assorted colors.

Tear off the paper, toss away the ribbons, the bows, rip off the lids of boxes, pull out the inside tissue ... see all the pretty clothes for each of us. Glance at the new books, hooray! See the new toys, the games, the puzzles, hurrah! My, oh, my, what a big, big box of maple sugar candy shaped like identical leaves!

Here before us was the display of her concern. She knew us well, I admit, our tastes, our hobbies—all but our sizes. With gifts she paid us for all those long empty months when we were left in the care of the witch grandmother who would quite willingly see us dead and buried.

And she knew what kind of mother she had—she knew!

With games and toys and puzzles, she sought to buy us off, and beg our forgiveness for doing what she knew in her heart was wrong.

With sweet maple sugar candy she hoped to take the sour gall of loneliness from our mouths, hearts, and minds. To her way of thinking, it was very obvious, we WERE still only children, though Chris needed to shave, and I needed to wear a bra ... still children ... and children she would keep us forever as the titles of the books she brought plainly indicated. *Little Men*. I'd read that years ago. Fairy tales by the brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen—we knew them by heart. And *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* again? Didn't she keep a list of what we'd already read? What we had?

I managed to smile though as I pulled over Carrie's head a new red dress, and in her hair I tied a purple ribbon. Now she was dressed as she'd always wanted to be, in her favorite colors. I put purple socks on her feet and new white sneakers.

“You look beautiful, Carrie.” And in a way she did, she was so happy to own bright, grown-up, royally colored clothes.

Next I helped Cory on with his bright red short pants, and a white shirt monogrammed on the pocket in red, and his tie had to be knotted by Chris, the way Daddy had shown him how a long time ago.

“Shall I dress you now, Christopher?” I asked sarcastically.

“If that is your heart’s desire,” he said wickedly, “you can dress me from skin out.”

“Don’t be vulgar!”

Cory had another new instrument to play—a shining banjo! Oh, golly day, he’d always wanted a banjo! She’d remembered. His eyes lit up. *Oh, Susannah, don’t you cry for me, for I’m going to Louisiana with a banjo on my knee*

He played the tune, and Carrie sang the lyrics. It was one of his favorite happy songs, and one he could play on the guitar, though it never sounded right. On the banjo it sounded right, as it should. God blessed Cory with magic fingers.

God blessed me with mean thoughts to take the joy from everything. What good were pretty clothes when no one ever saw them? I wanted things that didn’t come wrapped in fancy paper, and tied around with satin ribbons, and put in a box from an expensive store. I wanted all the things money couldn’t buy. Had she noticed my hair cut so short on top? Had she seen how thin we were? Did she think we looked healthy with our pale, thin skins?

Bitter, ugly thoughts as I pushed a maple sugar leaf into Carrie’s eager mouth, and then a leaf into Cory’s, and next one into my own mouth. I glared at the beautiful clothes meant for me. A blue velvet dress, such as should be worn to a party. A pink and blue nightgown and peignoir set, with slippers to match. I sat there with the candy melting on my tongue, and it had the acrid taste of the iron lump in my throat. Encyclopedias! Were we going to be here forever?

Yet candy made from maple sugar was my topmost favorite, always had been. She brought this box of candy for

me, *for me*, and I could only swallow one piece, and that with great difficulty.

They sat on the floor with the candy box centered between them, Cory, Carrie, and Chris. They stuffed the candy in, piece after piece, laughing and pleased. “You should make that candy last,” I told them with sour hatefulness. “That may well be the last box of candy you see for a long, long time.”

Chris threw me a look, his blue eyes happy and shining. Easy enough to see all *his* faith and trust was restored by just one short visit from Momma. Why couldn’t he see that gifts were just a way of hiding the fact that she no longer cared about us? Why didn’t he know, as I did, that we weren’t as real to her now as once we’d been? We were another of those unpleasant subjects that people don’t like to talk about, like mice in the attic.

“Sit there and act dumb,” said Chris, sparkling his happiness on me. “Deny yourself the candy, while we three satisfy our sweet tooth all at once before the mice come down and eat it for us. Cory, Carrie, and I will scrub our teeth clean, while you sit and cry, and feel sorry for yourself, and pretend by self-sacrifice you can change our circumstances. Go on, Cathy! Cry! Play the martyr. Suffer! Pound your head on the wall! Scream! And we’ll still be here until the grandfather dies, and all the candy will be gone, gone, gone.”

I hated him for making fun of me! I jumped to my feet, ran to the far side of the room, turned my back, and tried on my new clothes. Three beautiful dresses I yanked down over my head one by one. Easily they zipped up to the waist, and fitted there loosely. But try as I would, the zipper wouldn’t close in back when it reached my bust. I tore off the last dress, looking for the darts in the bodice. None there! She was buying me little-girl dresses—silly, sweet little-girl garments that screamed out she *didn’t* see! I threw those three dresses down on the floor and stomped on them, crushing the blue velvet so it could never be returned to the store.

And there sat Chris on the floor with the twins, looking devilish, and laughing with a raffishly wicked and boyish charm that would win me over to laughter, too—if I would let

it. “Make out a shopping list,” he joked. “It’s time you started wearing bras and stopped bobbing up and down. And while you’re at it, write down a girdle, too.”

I could have slapped his grinning face! My abdomen was a hollowed out cave. And if my buttocks were rounded and firm, it was from exercise—not from fat! “Shut up!” I yelled. “Why should I have to write out a list and tell Momma anything? She’d know what clothes I have, and what I should be wearing, if she really looked at me! How do I know what size bra to order? And I don’t need a girdle! What you need is a jock strap—and some sense in your head that doesn’t come from a book!” I glared at him, happy to see his stunned expression.

“Christopher,” I screamed, unable to control myself. “Sometimes I hate Momma! And not only that, sometimes I hate you, too! Sometimes I hate everybody—most of all myself! Sometimes I wish I were dead, because I think we would all be better off dead than buried alive up here! Just like rotting, walking, talking vegetables!”

My secret thoughts had been thrown out, spewed forth like garbage to make both my brothers wince and go paler. And my small sister shrank even smaller as she began to tremble. Immediately after the cruel words were out of my mouth, I wanted them back in. I was drowning in shame, but unable to apologize and take it all back. I whirled about and ran for the closet, running for the tall, slender door that would take me up the stairs and into the attic. When I hurt, and I hurt often, I raced for the music, the costumes, the ballet shoes on which I could spin and twirl and dance away my troubles. And somewhere in that crimson-colored never-never land where I pirouetted madly, in a wild and crazy effort to exhaust myself into insensibility, I saw that man, shadowy and distant, half-hidden behind towering white columns that rose clear up to a purple sky. In a passionate *pas de deux* he danced with me, forever apart, no matter how hard I sought to draw nearer and leap into his arms, where I could feel them protective about me, supporting me . . . and with him I’d find, at last, a safe place to live and love.

Then, suddenly, the music was over. I was back in the dry and dusty attic, on the floor, with my right leg twisted beneath me. I had fallen! When I struggled to my feet, I could barely walk. My knee hurt so much, tears of another kind came to my eyes. I limped through the attic and on into the schoolroom, not caring if I ruined my knee forever. I opened up a window wider and stepped out onto the black roof. Painfully I eased my way down the steep incline, stopping only when I was at the very edge with the leaf-clogged gutters. Far below was the ground. With tears of self-pity and pain streaking my face and blurring my vision, I closed my eyes and let myself sway off balance. In a minute it would all be over. I'd be sprawled down there on top of the thorny rose bushes.

The grandmother and Momma could claim it was some idiot strange girl who climbed up on their roof and fell off accidentally, and Momma would cry when she saw me dead and broken and lying in a coffin, dressed in blue leotards and tulle tutu. Then she'd realize what she'd done, she'd want me back, she'd unlock the door to free Chris and the twins, and let them live real lives again.

And that was the golden side of my suicide coin.

But I had to turn it over, and see the tarnish. What if I didn't die? Suppose I just fell, and the rose bushes cushioned my fall, and I only ended up crippled and scarred for the rest of my life?

Then, again, suppose I really did die, and Momma didn't cry, or feel sorry, or any regret, and was only glad to be rid of a pest like me? Just how would Chris and the twins survive without me to take care of them? Who would mother the twins, and lavish them with the affection that was sometimes embarrassing for Chris to give as easily as I did? As for Chris—maybe he thought he didn't really need me, that books and red-leather, gold-tooled, hubbed-spined new encyclopedias were enough to take my place. When he got that M.D. behind his name, that would be enough to satisfy him all his life through. But when he was a doctor, I knew it still wouldn't be enough, never enough, if I wasn't there, too. And I was saved from death by my own ability to see both sides of the coin.

I stumbled away from the edge of the roof, feeling silly, childish, but still crying. My knee hurt so badly I ascended the roof by crawling to the special place near the back chimney, where two roofs met and made a safe corner. I lay on my back and stared up at that unseeing, uncaring sky. I doubted God lived up there; I doubted heaven was up there, too.

God and heaven were down there on the ground, in the gardens, in the forests, in the parks, on the seashores, on the lakes, and riding the highways, going somewhere!

Hell was right here, where I was, shadowing me persistently, trying to do me in, and make me into what the grandmother thought I was—the Devil's issue.

I lay on that hard, cold slate roof until darkness came on, and the moon came out, and the stars flashed angrily at me, as if knowing me for what I was. I wore only a ballet costume, leotards, and one of those silly frilly tutus.

Goosebumps came and chicken-skinned my arms, and still I stayed to plan all my revenge, my vengeance against those who had turned me from good to evil, and made of me what I was going to be from this day forward. I convinced myself there would come a day when both my mother and my grandmother would be under my thumb ... and I'd snap the whip, and handle the tar, and control the food supply.

I tried to think of exactly what I would do to them. What was the right punishment? Should I lock them both up and throw away the key? Starve them, as we had been starved?

A soft noise interrupted the dark and twisted flow of my thoughts. In the gloom of early evening Chris spoke my name hesitatingly. No more, just my name. I didn't answer, I didn't need him—I didn't need anybody. He had let me down by not understanding, and I didn't need him, not now.

Nevertheless, he came and lay close by my side. He'd brought a warm woolen jacket with him that he spread over me without saying a word. He stared as I did up at the cold and forbidding sky. The longest, most fearful silence grew between us. There was nothing I really hated about Chris, or even disliked, and I wanted so much to turn on my side and say this

to him, and thank him for bringing me the warm jacket, but I couldn't say a word. I wanted to let him know I was sorry that I struck out at him, and the twins, when God knows none of us needed another enemy. My arms, shivering under the warmth of the jacket, longed to slide around him, and comfort him as he so often comforted me when I woke up from another nightmare. But all I could do was lie there, and hope he understood that I was all tied up in knots.

Always he could raise the white flag first, and for that I'm forever grateful. In a stranger's husky, strained voice that seemed to span across a great distance, he told me he and the twins had already eaten dinner, but my share had been saved.

"And we only pretended to eat all of the candy, Cathy. There's plenty left for you."

Candy. He spoke of candy. Was he still in the child's world where candy stood for something sweet enough to hold back tears? I had grown older, and had lost enthusiasm for childish delights. I wanted what every teen-ager wants—freedom to develop into a woman, freedom to have full control over my life! Though I tried to tell him this, my voice had dried up along with my tears.

"Cathy ... what you said ... don't ever say ugly, hopeless things like that again."

"Why not?" I choked out. "Every word I said is true. I only expressed what I feel inside—I let out what *you* keep hidden deep. Well, keep on hiding from yourself, and you'll find all those truths turn into acid to eat up your insides!"

"Not once have I ever wished myself dead!" he cried out in the hoarse voice of one with an everlasting cold. "Don't you ever say such a thing again—or think about death! Sure I've got doubts and suspicions hidden away in me, but I smile and I laugh, and make myself believe because I want to survive. If you died by your own hand, you would take me down with you, and soon the twins would follow, for who would be their mother then?"

It made me laugh. Hard, brittle ugly laughter—duplicating my mother's way of laughing when *she* felt bitter. "Why,

Christopher Doll, remember we have a dear, sweet, loving mother who thinks first of our needs, and she will be left to care for the twins.”

Chris turned toward me then, reaching out to seize my shoulders. “I hate it when you talk that way, like she talks sometimes. Do you think I don’t know that you are more a mother to Cory and Carrie than *she* is? Do you think I failed to see the twins only stared at their mother, like she was a stranger? Cathy, I’m not blind or stupid. I know Momma takes care of herself first, and us next.” That old moon was out to sparkle the tears frozen in his eyes. His voice in my ear had been gritty, hushed and deep.

All of this he said without bitterness, only regret—just the flat, emotionless way a doctor tells his patient he has a terminal illness.

That’s when it came over me in a cataclysmic flood—I loved Chris—and he was my brother. He made me whole, he gave me what I lacked, a stability when I would run off wild and frantic—and what a perfect way to strike back at Momma and the grandparents. God wouldn’t see. He’d closed his eyes to everything the day Jesus was put on the cross. But Daddy was up there, looking down, and I cringed in shame.

“Look at me, Cathy, please look at me.”

“I didn’t mean any of it, Chris, really I didn’t. You know how melodramatic I am—I want to live as much as anyone does, but I’m so afraid something terrible is going to happen to us, shut up all the time. So I say awful things just to shake you up, make you see. Oh, Chris, I just ache to be with lots of people. I want to see new faces, new rooms. I’m scared to death for the twins. I want to go shopping, and ride horses, and do all the things we can’t do in here.”

In the dark, on the roof, in the cold, we reached for each other intuitively. We clung as one, our hearts throbbing loud against each other. Not crying, not laughing. Hadn’t we already cried an ocean of tears? And they hadn’t helped. Hadn’t we already said a zillion prayers and waited for deliverance that never came? And if tears didn’t work, and

prayers weren't heard, how were we to reach God and make him do something?

“Chris, I've said it before, and I'm saying it again. We've got to take the initiative. Didn't Daddy always say God helps those who help themselves?”

His cheek was tight against mine while he reflected for so darned long. “I'll give it some thought, though, as Momma said, we could come any day into that fortune.”

Our Mother's Surprise



Each day of the ten that passed before Momma visited us again, Chris and I speculated for hours on end just why she had gone away to Europe and stayed so long, and most of all—what was the big news she had to tell us?

We thought of those ten days as just another form of punishment. For punishment was what it was, and it hurt to know she was in this same house, and yet she could ignore us and shut us out, as if we *were* only mice in the attic.

So, when she showed up, at long last, we were thoroughly chastised, and most fearful she would never come back if Chris and I showed more hostility or repeated our demands to be let out. We were quiet, timid and accepting of our fate. For what would we do if she never returned? We couldn't escape by using the ladder made of torn-up sheets—not when the twins went hysterical just to be on the roof.

So we smiled at Momma, and uttered not one word of complaint. We didn't ask why she had punished us again by staying away ten days, when already she'd been gone for months. We accepted what she was willing to give us. We were, as she had told us she had learned to be with her father, her dutiful, obedient, and passive children. And, what's more, she liked us this way. We were again, her sweet, her loving, her private "darlings."

Since we were so good, so sweet, so approving of her now, and so very respectful, and apparently trusting, this was the time she chose to drop her bombshell.

"Darlings, rejoice for me! I am so happy!" She laughed and spun around in a circle, hugging her arms over her chest, loving her own body, or so it seemed to me. "Guess what happened—go on, guess!"

Chris and I glanced at each other. “Our grandfather has died,” he said cautiously, while my heart was doing pirouettes, preparing to really leap and bound if she gave us the glad tidings.

“No!” she said sharply, as if her happiness had dimmed some.

“He’s been taken to the hospital,” said I, guessing second best.

“No. I really don’t hate him now, so I wouldn’t come to you and say I was rejoicing over his death.”

“Why don’t you just tell us your good news, then,” I said dully. “We’ll never be able to guess; we don’t know much about your life anymore.”

She ignored what I implied and rhapsodized on: “The reason I was gone for so long, and what I found so difficult to explain—I’ve married a wonderful man, an attorney named Bart Winslow. You’re going to like him. He’s going to love all of you. He’s dark-haired and so handsome, and tall and athletic. And he loves to ski, like you do, Christopher, and he plays tennis, and he’s brilliant, like you are, darling,” and she was looking at Chris, of course. “He’s charming and everybody likes him, even my father. And we went to Europe on our honeymoon, and the gifts I brought to you all came from England, France, Spain or Italy.” And on and on she raved about her new husband, while Chris and I sat silent.

Since the night of the Christmas party, Chris and I had voiced our suspicions many times. For as young as we had been back then, we were wise enough to know that a beautiful young woman who was as needing of a man as our mother, was not likely to remain a widow for long. But still, almost two years passed without a wedding, and that had given us reason enough to believe that the handsome, dark-haired man with the big moustache was of no real importance to Momma—just a passing fancy—one suitor amongst many. And deep down in our foolish hearts, we had convinced ourselves that she was going to be ever-faithful, ever-devoted to our dead father—our blond and blue-eyed Grecian god father whom she

had to love beyond reason to have done what she did—marry a man so closely related.

I closed my eyes to try and shut out her hateful voice, telling us of another man who was taking our father's place. Now she was another man's wife, a totally different kind of man, and he'd been in her bed and sleeping with her now, and we'd see even less of her than we had. Oh, dear God, how long, how long?

Her news and her voice gave birth to a little gray bird of panic that fluttered wild in the cage of my ribs ... wanting out, out, out!

"Please," Momma begged, her smiles and laughter, joy and happiness all struggling to survive in the bleak, sterile air of our reception to her news. "Try and understand, and be happy for me. I loved your father, you know that, but he's gone, and been gone for so long, and I need someone else to love, and someone to love me."

I saw Chris open his mouth to say he loved her, that we all loved her, but then he tightened his lips, realizing, as I did, that love from her children wasn't the kind of love she was speaking about. And *I* didn't love her anymore. I wasn't even sure I liked her now, but I could smile and pretend, and say the words just so the twins would not be frightened by my expression. "Yes, Momma, I'm glad for you. It's nice you found someone to love you again."

"He's been in love with me for a long time, Cathy," she rushed on, encouraged and smiling with confidence again, "though he did have his mind set on being a bachelor. It wasn't easy to convince him he needed a wife. And your grandfather never wanted me to marry a second time, just as another punishment for the evil I did when I married your father. But he likes Bart, and when I kept on begging and begging, he finally relented, and said yes, that I could marry Bart and still inherit." She paused to chew on her lower lip. Then she swallowed nervously. Her beringed fingers fluttered to her throat, to nervously work the string of genuine pearls she wore, and thus betrayed all the ways of a woman in distress,

who could smile, even so. “Of course, I don’t love Bart as much as I did your father.”

Hah! How weakly she said this. Her glowing eyes and radiant complexion betrayed a love that loomed larger than any she’d known before. And I sighed. Poor Daddy.

“The gifts you brought us, Momma ... they weren’t all from Europe, or the British Isles. That box of maple sugar candy came from Vermont—did you go to Vermont, too? Is that where he’s from?”

Her laughter came with lilting joy, uninhibited and even a little sensual, as if Vermont had given her much. “No, he isn’t from Vermont, Cathy. But he has a sister living there and we visited her for a weekend after we came from Europe, and that’s where I bought the box of candy, for I know how much you love maple sugar candy. He has two other sisters living down South. He’s from some little town in South Carolina—Greenglenna, Grenglenna, or something like that. But he stayed so long in New England, where he graduated from Harvard Law School, that he sounds more like a Yankee than a Southerner. And oh, it is so beautiful in Vermont in the autumn; it absolutely took my breath away. Of course, when you’re on your honeymoon, you don’t want to be with other people, so we visited his sister and her family only a short while, and then spent some time on the seashore.” She flicked her eyes uneasily at the twins, and again her pearls were twisted so likely they’d break any second. Apparently, genuine pearls are more strongly strung than the simulated kind.

“Did you like the little boats I brought you, Cory?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered, very politely, staring at her with his large, shadowed eyes, just as if she were a stranger.

“Carrie, sweetheart ... the little dolls, I picked those up for you in England, to add to your collection. I hoped to find you another cradle, but they don’t seem even to make dollhouse cradles anymore.”

“It’s all right, Momma,” answered Carrie, her eyes on the floor. “Chris and Cathy made me a cradle out of cardboard, and I like it fine.”

Oh, God, didn't she see?

They didn't know her now. They felt uncomfortable with her now.

"Does your new husband know about us?" I asked, dead serious. Chris glowered at me for asking, telling me mutely that of course our mother wouldn't be deceitful and not tell the man she'd married that she had four hidden children—that some considered the Devil's issue.

Shadows came to darken and pain Momma's happiness. Again I had asked a wrong question. "Not yet, Cathy, but just as soon as Daddy dies, I'll tell him about you four. I'll explain in minute detail. He'll understand; he's kind and gentle. You're going to like him."

She had already said that more than once. And here was another thing that had to wait until an old man died.

"Cathy, stop looking at me like that! I couldn't tell Bart before our marriage! He's your grandfather's attorney. I couldn't let him know about my children, not yet, not until the will is read, and I have the money in my name."

Words were on the tip of my tongue to say a man should know when his wife had four children by her first husband. Oh, how I wanted to say this! But Chris was glaring meanly at me, and the twins were huddled over, crouching small, with their large eyes fixed on the TV set. And I didn't know if I should speak, or stay silent. At least when you were silent, you didn't make any new enemies. Maybe she was right, too. *God, let her be right. Let my faith be renewed. Let me believe in her again. Let me believe that she is not just beautiful on the surface, but all the way through.*

God didn't reach down and lay a warm, reassuring hand on my shoulder. I sat there, realizing my suspicions were stretching the cord between her and me, very, very fine.

* * *

Love. How often that word came up in books. Over and over again. If you had wealth and health, and beauty and talent ... you had nothing if you didn't have love. Love changed all that

was ordinary into something giddy, powerful, drunken, enchanted.

Thus ran the course of my thoughts on a day early in winter, when rain pelted on the roof, and the twins sat on the floor in the bedroom, before the TV. Chris and I were in the attic, lying side by side on the old mattress, near the window in the schoolroom, reading together one of the antique books Momma had brought up from the big library downstairs. Soon the attic would again turn arctic winter, so we spent as much time up there as possible now, while we still could. Chris liked to scan a page, and then quickly leap to another. I liked to dawdle over the beautiful lines, going back to read through them twice, sometimes three times. We argued incessantly about this. "Read faster, Cathy! You try to absorb the words."

Today he was patient. He turned his back and stared up at the ceiling while I took my time, pursuing each beautifully written line, and soaking up the feel of Victorian times, when people wore such fancy clothes, and spoke in such elegant ways, and felt so deeply about love. From paragraph one, the story had captivated both of us with its mystical, romantic charm. Each slow page spinning out an involved tale of star-crossed lovers named Lily and Raymond, who had to overcome monumental obstacles to find and stand upon the magic place of purple grass, where all dreams are fulfilled. God, how I wanted them to find that place! Then I discovered the tragedy of their lives. All along they had stood on the purple grass ... can you imagine? On that special grass all the time, and they never looked down even once to see it. I hated unhappy endings! I slammed that hateful book shut and hurled it against the nearest wall. "If that isn't the most stupid, silly, ridiculous story!" I raged at Chris, as if he had written the book. "No matter whom I love, I'll learn to forgive and forget!" I continued to rail along with the storm outside, the weather and me beating out the same crescendo. "Now why couldn't it have been written differently? How is it possible for two intelligent people to float along with their heads in the clouds, not realizing happenstance can always bring about bad luck? Never, never am I going to be like Lily, or Raymond,

either! Idealistic fools who don't know enough to look down at the ground on occasion!"

My brother seemed amused that I took a story so seriously, but then he reconsidered, and stared thoughtfully at the driving rain. "Perhaps lovers aren't supposed to look down at the ground. That kind of story is told in symbols—and earth represents reality, and reality represents frustrations, chance illnesses, death, murder, and all kinds of other tragedies. Lovers are meant to look up at the sky, for up there no beautiful illusions can be trampled upon."

Frowning, sulky, I gazed moodily at him. "And when I fall in love," I began, "I will build a mountain to touch the sky. Then, my lover and I will have the best of both worlds, reality firmly under our feet, while we have our heads in the clouds with all our illusions still intact. And the purple grass will grow all around, high enough to reach our eyes."

He laughed, he hugged me, he kissed me lightly, tenderly, and his eyes were so gentle and soft in the murky, cold gloom of the attic. "Oh, yes, my Cathy could do that. Keep all her fanciful illusions, dancing eye-high in purple grass, wearing clouds for gossamer clothes. She'd leap, she'd bound and pirouette until her clumsy-footed, awkward lover was dancing, too, just as gracefully."

Put on quicksand, I quickly jumped to where I was surefooted. "It was a beautiful story though, in its own peculiar way. I feel so sorry that Lily and Raymond had to take their own lives, when it should have worked out differently. When Lily told Raymond the full truth, how she was virtually raped by that awful man, Raymond shouldn't have accused her of seducing him! Nobody in their right mind would want to seduce a man with eight children."

"Oh, Cathy, sometimes, really, you are just too much."

His voice sounded deeper than usual when he said that. His soft look traveled slowly over my face, lingering on my lips, then down to my bosom, to my legs, sheathed in white leotards. Over the leotards I wore a short wool skirt and a wool cardigan sweater. Then his eyes moved upward again, coming

to lock with my surprised look. He flushed as I kept on staring at him, and turned aside his face for the second time today. I was close enough to hear his heart drumming fast, faster, racing, and all of a sudden my own heart caught the rhythm of his, in the only tempo hearts can have—thumpity-bump, thumpity-bump. He shot me a quick glance. Our eyes melded and held. He laughed nervously, trying to hide and pretend none of this could possibly be serious.

“You were right the first time, Cathy. It was a stupid, silly story. Ridiculous! Only insane people would die for the sake of love. I’ll bet you a hundred to one a woman wrote that junky romantic trash!”

Just a minute ago I’d despised that author for bringing about such a miserable ending, then there I went, rushing to the defense. “T. M. Ellis could very well have been a man! Though I doubt any woman writer in the nineteenth century had much chance of being published, unless she used her initials, or a man’s name. And why is it all men think everything a woman writes is trivial or trashy—or just plain silly drivel? Don’t men have romantic notions? Don’t men dream of finding the perfect love? And it seems to me, that Raymond was far more mushy-minded than Lily!”

“Don’t ask me what men are like!” he stormed with such bitterness he didn’t seem himself at all. He raged on: “Up here, living as we do, how am I ever going to know how it feels to be a man? Up here, I’m not allowed to have any romantic notions. It’s don’t do this, and don’t do that, and keep your eyes averted, and don’t see what’s before your very eyes gliding about, showing off, pretending I’m just a brother, without feelings, without any emotions but childish ones. It seems some stupid girls think a gonna-be doctor is without sexuality!”

My eyes widened. Such a vehement outburst from one seldom upset took me completely by surprise. In all our lives he’d never spoken so fervently to me, and with such anger. No, I was the sour lemon, the bad apple in the barrel of good. I’d contaminated him. He was acting now like he had when Momma went away and stayed so long. Oh, it was wicked of

me to make him the troublesome thing *I* was. He should stay always what *he* was, the happy-go-lucky cheerful optimist. Had I robbed him of his greatest asset, besides his good looks and charm?

I put out my hand to touch his forearm. “Chris,” I whispered, near tears. “I think I know exactly what you need to feel manly.”

“Yeah,” he bit out. “What can *you* do?”

Now he wouldn't even look at me. Instead, he fixed his gaze on the ceiling above. I ached for him. I knew what had him down; he was letting go of his dream, for my benefit, so he could be like me, and not care whether or not we inherited a fortune. And to be like me, he had to be sour, bitter, hating everyone, and suspicious of their hidden motives.

Tentatively, I reached out to touch his hair. “A haircut, that's what you need. Your hair is much too long and pretty. To feel a man, you must have shorter hair. Right now, your hair looks like mine.”

“And who has ever said your hair is pretty?” he asked in the tightest of voices. “Maybe once you had pretty hair, before the tarring.”

Really? It seemed I could recall many times his eyes had told me my hair was more than just pretty. And I could recall the way he looked when he picked up the shiny shears to cut off that front hair, so delicate and brittle. He snipped with such reluctance it seemed he was cutting off fingers and not just hair that didn't feel pain. Then one day I caught him sitting in the attic sunshine, holding the long lengths of cut-off hair in his hands. He'd sniffed it, then put it to his cheek, and then to his lips, and then he hid it away in a box to keep under his pillow.

Not easily could I force laughter to deceive him and not let him know I'd seen. “Oh, Christopher Doll, you have the most expressive blue eyes. When we are free of this place, and out in the world, I pity all the girls who are going to fall for you. Most especially I'll feel sorry for your wife, with such a handsome husband to charm all his beautiful patients into

wanting affairs. And if I were your wife I'd kill you if you even had one extramarital affair! I'd love you so much, I'd be so jealous . . . I might even make you retire from medicine at age thirty-five."

"I never told you even once your hair was pretty," he said sharply, ignoring everything I'd said.

Ever so lightly I stroked his cheek, feeling the whiskers that needed shaving off.

"Sit right where you are. I'll run for the scissors. You know, I haven't given you a haircut for the longest time." Why should I bother cutting his hair and Cory's when the way our hair looked didn't seem important to our life-style? Not since we came had Carrie and I had our hair trimmed. Only the top of mine had been snipped off to signify our submission to a mean old woman made of steel.

And while I raced for the scissors, I thought how odd it was that none of our green plants would grow, yet each of us grew lots of hair. It seemed in all the fairy tales I'd read, the damsels in distress always had long, long blond hair. Had any brunette ever been locked away in a turret—if an attic could be considered a turret?

Chris sat on the floor, I knelt behind him, and though his hair hung below his shoulders, he didn't want much taken off. "Now go easy with those shears," he ordered nervously. "Don't cut off too much all at once. Feeling manly too suddenly, on a rainy afternoon in the attic, just might be dangerous," he teased, and grinned, and then he was laughing with a brilliant show of even, white teeth. I had charmed him back to how he should be.

Oh, I did love him as I crawled around and earnestly snipped and trimmed. Constantly I had to move backward for perspective, to check and see if his hair hung evenly, for most certainly, I wouldn't want to make his head lopsided.

I held his hair with a comb, as I'd seen barbers do, and I carefully snipped beneath that comb, not daring to take off more than a quarter of an inch a clip. I had a mental vision of

how I wanted him to look—like someone I admired very much.

And when I'd finished, I brushed the bright hair snippings from his shoulders, and leaned back to see that I hadn't done a bad job at all.

"There!" I said in triumph, pleased with my unexpected mastery of what seemed to be a difficult art. "Not only do you look exceptionally handsome, but extremely manly, as well! Though, of course, you have been manly all along, it's a pity you didn't know it."

I thrust the silver-backed mirror with my initials into his hands. This mirror represented one-third of the sterling-silver set Momma had given me on my last birthday. Brush, comb, mirror: all three to be hidden away so the grandmother wouldn't know I had expensive items of vanity and pride.

Chris stared and stared into that mirror, and my heart faltered as he looked, for a moment, displeased and undecided. Then, slowly, a wide grin lit up his face.

"My God! You've made me look like a blond Prince Valiant! At first I didn't like it, but now I see you changed his style just a bit, so it isn't squared off. You've curved it, and layered it to flatter my face like a loving cup. Thank you, Catherine Doll. I had no idea you were so skilled at cutting hair."

"I have many skills you don't know about."

"I am beginning to suspect that."

"And Prince Valiant should be so lucky as to look like my handsome, manly, blond brother," I teased, and couldn't help but admire my own artistry. Oh, golly-gee, what a heartbreaker he'd be one day.

He still had the mirror, and casually he laid it aside, and before I knew what he was about, like a cat he pounced! He wrestled with me, bearing me back to the floor, and reached for the scissors at the same time! He yanked them from my hand, and then grabbed a handful of my hair!

“Now, my lovely, let’s see if I can’t do the same thing for you!”

Terrified, I yelped!

I thrust him away so he fell backward, and I jumped to my feet. No one was going to shear off one-eighth of an inch of my hair! Maybe it was too fine and too thin now, and maybe it wasn’t as sensational as it used to be, but it was all the hair I had, and prettier even now than what most girls had. I took off on the run from the schoolroom. I raced through the doorway and into the immense attic, dodging behind posts, circling old trunks, leaping over low tables, and bounding over sheet-shrouded sofas and chairs. The paper flowers fanned frantically as I ran, and he chased. The flames of the low fat candles that we kept burning during the day just to cheer up and warm up a dreary, vast and cold place, bent low in our wakes, and almost guttered.

And no matter how swiftly I ran, or how cleverly I dodged, I couldn’t shake off my pursuer! I threw a glance over my shoulder, and I couldn’t even recognize his face—and that scared me even more. Lunging forward, he made an effort to seize hold of my long hair which bannered out behind me, and seemed so very intent on cutting it off!

Did he hate me now? Why had he spent one entire day so devotedly trying to save my hair, only to cut off my crowning glory for the sheer fun of it?

I fled back toward the schoolroom, planning on reaching there first. Then I’d slam the door, and lock it, and he’d come to his senses and realize the absurdity of it all.

Perhaps he sensed my purpose, and put some extra speed into his longer legs—he bounded forward, and caught hold of my long, streaming locks, causing me to scream as I tripped and fell forward!

Not only did I fall, but he fell too—straight on top of me! A sharp pain pierced my side! I screamed again—not in terror this time, but in shock.

He was over me, supported by his hands on the floor, staring down into my face, his face deadly white and frightened. “Are you hurt? Oh, God, Cathy, are you all right?”

Was I all right, was I? Lifting my head, I stared down at the heavy flow of blood quickly staining my sweater. Chris saw it, too. His blue eyes went stark, bleak, wild, distraught. With trembling fingers he began to unbutton my sweater, so he could spread it open and take a look at my wound.

“Oh, Lord ...” he breathed, then expelled a low whistle of relief. “Wow! Thank God. I was so scared it would be a puncture. A deep puncture would be serious, but it’s only a long cut, Cathy. Nasty, and you’re losing a lot of blood. Now don’t move a muscle! Stay right where you are, and I’ll dash down to the bath and fetch medicine and bandages.”

He kissed me first on the cheek, then was up and in a terrible hurry, racing madly toward the stairwell, whereas I thought I could have gone with him and saved time. Yet the twins were down there, and they’d see the blood. And all they had to do was see blood and they’d go to pieces and scream.

In a few minutes Chris came speeding back with our medical emergency kit. He fell down on his knees beside me, his hands still glistening with water from a fast scrub-up. He was in too much of a hurry to dry them well.

I was fascinated to see he knew so precisely what to do. First he folded a heavy towel, and used that to press down hard on the long cut. Looking very serious and intent, he bore down on the pad, checking every few seconds to see if the bleeding had stopped. When it did, he busied himself with antiseptic that stung like fire, and hurt worse than the injury itself.

“I know it stings, Cathy ... can’t help that ... have to put it on to avoid infection. Wish I had sutures, but maybe it won’t make a permanent scar; and I pray it doesn’t. It would be so nice if people could go through all of their life without ever cutting into the perfect envelope they’re born with. And here I am, the first one to really scar your skin. If you had died because of me—and you could have if the shears had been slanted differently—then I would want to die, too.”

He had finished playing doctor, and was now winding the remaining gauze up in a neat roll before replacing it in the blue wrapping paper, and into a box. He stashed away the adhesive, closed the kit.

Leaning above me, his face hovered over mine, his serious eyes so delving, worried, and intense. His blue eyes were like the eyes we all had. Yet on this rainy day they were catching colors from the paper flowers, making them limpid dark pools of iridescence. A lump came in my throat as I wondered where the boy was I used to know. Where was that brother—and who was this young man with the blond whiskers, staring so long into my eyes? Just that look of his held me in thrall. And greater than any pain, or ache, or hurt I ever felt before, or since, was the pain caused me by the suffering I saw in the shifting kaleidoscopic, rainbowed colors of his tortured eyes.

“Chris,” I murmured, feeling unreal, “don’t look like that. It wasn’t your fault.” I cupped his face in my palms first, then drew his head down to my breast as I’d seen Momma do in the past. “It’s only a scratch, doesn’t hurt a bit (though it hurt dreadfully), and I know you didn’t do it deliberately.”

Hoarsely he choked, “Why did you run? Because you ran, I had to chase. And I was only teasing. I wouldn’t cut one strand from your head; it was just something to do, to have fun. And you were wrong when you said I thought your hair was pretty. It’s more than just pretty. I think you may grow on your head the most glorious hair in the world.”

A little knife twisted in my heart as he lifted his head long enough to spread my hair fanlike and cover my bare breast. I could hear him breathing deeply my scent. We lay there quietly listening to the winter rain drumming on the slate roof not so far above. Deep silence all around. Always silence. Nature’s voices were the only ones to reach us in the attic, and so seldom did nature speak in friendly, soft tones.

The rain on the roof pitter-pattered down into only drops, and the sun came out and shone down on us to shimmer his hair and mine like long glimmering strands of silken diamonds. “Look,” I said to Chris, “one of the slats from a western window shutter has fallen out.”

“Nice,” he said, sounding sleepy and content, “Now we’ll have sun where once there was none. See, I’ve made a rhyme.” And then in a sleepy whisper, he said, “I’m thinking of Raymond and Lily and their quest for the purple grass where all dreams are fulfilled.”

“Were you? In a way, I was kinda thinking the same thing,” I answered, whispery, too. Over and over again I twirled a strand of his hair around my thumb, pretending not to notice one of his hands was ever so cautiously stroking my breast, the one his face didn’t cover. Because I didn’t object, he dared to kiss the nipple. I jumped, startled, wondering why that should feel so strange, and so extraordinarily thrilling. What was a nipple but a tannish-pink little peak? “I can picture Raymond kissing Lily, just where you kissed,” I went on breathlessly, wanting him to stop, and wanting him to go on, “but I can’t imagine them doing what comes next.”

Words to make his head pop up. Just the right words to make him look at me intensely again, with strange lights flickering in his eyes which wouldn’t stay only one color. “Cathy, do you know what comes next?”

A blush heated my face. “Yes, I know, sort of. Do *you* know?”

He laughed, one of those dry chuckles you read about in novels. “Sure I know. My very first day in school, I was told in the boy’s restroom; that’s all the older boys could talk about. They had four-letter words on the walls that I didn’t understand. But they were soon explained, in detail. Girls, baseball, girls, football, girls, girls, girls were all they could talk about, and all the ways they were different from us. It’s a fascinating subject for most boys, and, I suppose, men.”

“But not fascinating for you?”

“Me? I don’t think about girls, or sex, though I wish to God you weren’t so damned pretty! And it would help if you weren’t always so near, and so available.”

“Then you do think about me? You do think I’m pretty?”

A smothered groan escaped his lips—more like a moan. He bolted up to sit straight, staring down at what my open sweater revealed, for the fan of my hair was displaced. If I hadn't cut off the top of my leotards, he wouldn't be seeing so much. But I had had to cut off the too-small bodice.

With trembling, clumsy fingers he fastened the buttons of my sweater, keeping his eyes averted from mine. "Get this straight in your head, Cathy. Of course you are pretty, but brothers don't think about sisters as girls—nor do they feel any sort of emotion for them other than tolerance and brotherly affection—and sometimes, hate."

"I hope God strikes me dead this second if you hate me, Christopher."

His hands lifted to cover his face, hiding, and when he came out from behind the shield, he was smiling, cheerful, clearing his throat. "Come on, it's time we went down to the twins before they burn their eyes into black holes from staring at the boob-tube for so long."

It hurt to rise, though he assisted me up. In his arms I was held close while my cheek was pressed against his heart. And though he would put me from him quickly, I clung tighter. "Chris—what we did just now—was it sinful?"

Again, he cleared his throat. "If you think it so, then it was."

What kind of an answer was that? If thoughts of sin stayed out of it, those moments lying on the floor when he touched me so tenderly with magical tingling fingers and lips were the sweetest moments since we'd come to live in this abominable house. I looked up to see what he was thinking and saw that strange look in his eyes. Paradoxically he seemed happier, sadder, older, younger, wiser . . . or was it he was feeling like a man now? And if he was, then I was glad, sinful or not.

We walked hand in hand down the steps to the twins, where Cory was plucking a tune on the banjo, while keeping his eyes glued to the TV. He picked up the guitar and began his own composition, as Carrie chanted simple lyrics he'd composed.

The banjo was for happy tunes to move your feet. This melody was like rain on the roof, long, dreary, monotonous.

Gonna see the sun,
Gonna find my home,
Gonna feel the wind,
See the sun ag'in.

I sat on the floor near Cory, and took the guitar from his hands, for I could play a bit, too. He had taught me how—taught us all how. And I sang to him that special, wistful song that belonged to Dorothy in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*—a movie that the twins adored everytime they saw it. And when I had finished singing of bluebirds that flew over the rainbow, Cory asked, “Don’t you like my song, Cathy?”

“You bet I like your song—but it’s so sad. How about writing a few happy lyrics, with a little hope?”

The little mouse was in his pocket, just his tail poking out as he fingered down there for bread crumbs. Mickey made a twisting movement, and then his head was out of the shirt pocket, and in his forefeet he held a bit of bread and daintily began to nibble. The look on Cory’s face as he stared down at his first pet touched me so deeply I had to turn away to keep from crying.

“Cathy, you know Momma, she never said nothing about my pet.”

“She hasn’t noticed him, Cory.”

“Why don’t she notice?”

I sighed, not really knowing who and what my mother was anymore, except a stranger we used to love. Death wasn’t the only thing that took away someone you loved and needed; I knew that now.

“Momma’s got a new husband,” said Chris brightly, “and when you’re in love, you don’t see anyone’s happiness but your own. Soon enough she’ll notice you’ve got a friend.”

Carrie was staring at my sweater. “Cathy, what’s that stuff on your sweater?”

“Paint,” said I without the slightest hesitation. “Chris was trying to teach me how to paint, and he got mad when my picture was better than anything he’s ever done, so he picked up the little pan with red, and he threw it at me.”

My older brother sat there with the darnedest look on his face.

“Chris, can Cathy paint better than you can?”

“If she says she can, then she must.”

“Where is her painting?”

“In the attic.”

“I want to see it.”

“Then you go up and get it. I’m tired. I want to look at TV while Cathy prepares dinner.” He shot me a swift look. “My dear sister, would you mind, for the sake of propriety, putting on a clean sweater before we sit down to eat dinner? There’s something about that red paint that makes me feel guilty.”

“It looks like blood,” said Cory. “It’s stiff like blood when you don’t wash it off.”

“Poster colors,” said Chris, as I left to go into the bath to change into a sweater many sizes too large. “Poster colors stiffen up.”

Satisfied, Cory began to tell Chris of how he’d missed seeing dinosaurs. “Chris, they were bigger than this house! They came up out of the water, and swallowed the boat, and two men! I knew you’d be sorry to miss seeing that!”

“Yeah,” said Chris dreamily, “I sure would have liked to have seen that.”

That night I felt strangely ill at ease, and restless, and my thoughts kept returning to the way Chris had looked at me in the attic.

I knew then what the secret was I’d been searching so long to find—that secret button that switched on love ... physical,

sexual desire. It wasn't just the viewing of naked bodies, for many a time I'd bathed Cory, and seen Chris naked, and I'd never felt any particular arousal because what he and Cory had was different from what Carrie and I had. It wasn't being naked at all.

It was the eyes. The secret of love was in the eyes, the way one person looked at another, the way eyes communicated and spoke when the lips never moved. Chris's eyes had said more than ten thousand words.

And it wasn't just the way he touched me, caressingly, tenderly; it was the way he touched, when he looked as he did, and that's why the grandmother made it a rule that we shouldn't look at the other sex. Oh, to think that old witch knew the secret of love. She couldn't have ever loved, no, not her, the iron-hearted, the steel-spined ... never could her eyes have been soft.

And then, as I delved deeper into the subject, it was more than the eyes—it was what was behind the eyes, in the brain, wanting to please you, make you happy, give you joy, and take away the loneliness of never having anyone understand as you want to be understood.

Sin had nothing at all to do with love, real love. I turned my head and saw that Chris was awake, too, curled up on his side, staring over at me. He smiled the sweetest smile, and I could have cried for him, for me.

Our mother didn't visit us that day, nor had she visited us the day before, but we'd found a way to cheer ourselves by playing Cory's instruments and singing along. Despite the absence of a mother grown very negligent, we all went to bed more hopefully that night. Singing happy songs for several hours had convinced us all that sun, love, home and happiness were just around the bend, and our long days of traveling through a deep dark forest were almost over.

* * *

Into my bright dreams crept something dark and terrifying. Every day forms took on monstrous proportions. With my eyes closed, I saw the grandmother steal into the bedroom, and

thinking me asleep, she shaved off all my hair! I screamed but she didn't hear me—nobody heard me. She took a long and shiny knife and sliced off my breasts and fed them into Chris's mouth. And there was more. I tossed, writhed, and made small whimpering sounds that awakened Chris as the twins slept on as children dead and buried. Sleepily, Chris stumbled over to sit on my bed, and asked as he fumbled to find my hand, "Another nightmare?"

Nooo! This was no ordinary nightmare! This was precognition, and psychic in nature. I felt it in my bone marrow, something dreadful was about to happen. Weak and trembling I told Chris what the grandmother had done. "And that wasn't all. It was Momma who came in and cut out my heart, and she was sparkled all over with diamonds!"

"Cathy, dreams don't mean anything."

"Yes, they do!"

Other dreams and other nightmares I'd willingly told my brother and he'd listened, and smiled, and expressed his belief that it must be wonderful to have nights like being in a movie theater, but it wasn't that way at all. In a movie, you sit and watch a big screen, and you know you are only watching a story that someone wrote. I participated in my dreams. I was in the dreams, feeling, hurting, suffering, and I'm sorry to say, very seldom did I really enjoy them.

Since he was so accustomed to me and my strange ways, why did Chris sit as still as a marble statue, as if this dream affected him more than any other? Had he been dreaming, too?

"Cathy, on my word of honor, we are going to escape this house! All four of us will run away! You've convinced me. Your dreams must mean something, or else you wouldn't keep having them. Women are more intuitive than men; it's been proven. The subconscious is at work at night. We won't wait any longer for Momma to inherit the fortune from a grandfather who lives on and on and never dies. Together, you and I, we'll find a way. From this second on, I vow on my life, we depend only on ourselves . . . and your dreams."

From the intense way he said this, I knew he wasn't joking, making fun—he meant what he said! I could have shouted, I felt so relieved. We were going to get away. This house wasn't going to do us in after all!

In the gloom and chill of that big shadowed and cluttered room, he stared down into my eyes. Maybe he was seeing me, as I saw him, looking larger than life, and softer than dreams. Slowly his head inclined toward mine, and he kissed me full on the lips as a way to seal his promise in a strong and meaningful way. Such a peculiar long kiss, to give me the sensation that I was falling down, down, down, when I was already lying down.

* * *

What we needed most was a key to our bedroom door. We knew it was the master key to every room in this house. We couldn't use the sheet-ladder because of the twins, and we didn't anticipate, either Chris or I, that our grandmother would be so thoughtlessly careless as to lay aside the key negligently. That just wasn't her way. Her way was to open the door, and immediately stash the key in her pocket. Always her hateful gray dresses had pockets.

Our mother's way was to be careless, forgetful, indifferent. And she didn't like pockets in her clothes to add extra bulk to her svelte figure. We counted on her.

And what did she have to fear from us—the passive, the meek, the quiet? Her private little captive “darlings,” who were never going to grow up and be a threat. She was happy, in love; it lit up her eyes and made her laugh often. She was so damned unobservant you wanted to scream and make her see—make her see the twins so quiet and sick looking! She never mentioned the mouse—why wasn't she seeing the mouse? He was on Cory's shoulder, nibbling on Cory's ear, and she never said a word, not even when tears streamed down Cory's face because she wouldn't congratulate him on winning the affections of a very stubborn mouse that would have gone his way, if allowed.

She came a generous two or three times a month, and each time she bore with her the gifts that gave *her* solace if they gave us none. She came in gracefully to sit a while, wearing her beautiful, expensive clothes trimmed with furs, and decorated with jewels.

On her throne she sat as a queen and doled out the painting sets to Chris, the ballet slippers to me, and to each of us she brought sensational-looking clothes, well suited for attic wearing, for up here it didn't matter if they seldom fit, being too large, or too small, and our sneakers were sometimes comfortable, sometimes not, and I was still waiting for the bra she kept promising but always forgot.

"I'll bring you a dozen or so," she said with a benevolent cheerful smile, "all sizes, all colors, and you can try them on and see which you like best, and fit best, and I can give the ones you don't want to the maids." And on and on she chatted vivaciously, always true to her false facade, pretending we still mattered in her life.

I sat, I fixed my eyes on her, and I waited for her to ask me how the twins were. Had she forgotten that Cory had hay fever which kept his nose running all the time, and sometimes his nostrils stuffed up so he couldn't breathe except through his mouth? She knew he was supposed to be receiving allergy shots once a month, and years had passed since the last one. Didn't it hurt her to see Cory and Carrie clinging to me as if I were the one who had given them birth? Did one single thing reach out and tell her something was wrong?

If it did, in no way did she indicate that she saw us as less than perfectly normal, though I took pains to name our small illnesses: the way we threw up so often now, and how our heads ached from time to time, and we had stomach cramps, and sometimes very little energy.

"Keep your food in the attic, where it's cold," she said without flinching.

She had the nerve to speak to us of parties, of concerts, of the theater, of movies, and going to balls and on trips with her "Bart." "Bart and I are going on a shopping spree in New

York,” she said. “Tell me what you want me to bring you. Make out a list.”

“Momma, after you Christmas-shop in New York, where will you go then?” I asked, careful not to turn my eyes on that key she had so casually tossed on the dresser top. She laughed, liking my question, and clasped her slender white hands together, and began to list her plans for the long dull days after the holidays. “A trip south, perhaps a cruise, or a month or so in Florida. And your grandmother will be here to take good care of you.”

While she chatted on and on, Chris stole stealthily near to slip the key into his pants pocket. On into the bathroom he sauntered, excusing himself. He needn't have bothered; she didn't notice he was gone. She was doing her duty, visiting her children—and thank God she had chosen the right chair to sit in. In the bathroom I knew Chris was pressing the key into a bar of soap we kept ready for just this way to make a clear impression. Just one of the many things watching endless hours of television had taught us.

* * *

Once our mother had gone, Chris pulled out the piece of wood he had and began immediately to carve a rough wooden key. Though we had metal from the old trunk locks, we had nothing strong enough to cut and shape it. For hours and hours Chris slaved meticulously, carving that key, fitting and refitting it into the hardened soap impression. Purposefully, he had chosen very hard wood, fearing soft wood might break in the lock and give away our escape plan. It took three days of work before he had a key that worked.

Jubilance was ours! We threw our arms about each other and danced around the room, laughing, kissing, almost crying. The twins watched us, amazed we were so happy with a little key.

We had a key. We could open our prison door. Yet, strangely, we hadn't planned our future beyond the opening of the door.

“Money. We must have money,” reasoned Chris, stopping in the middle of our wild dance of triumph. “With lots of money, all doors are open, and all roads are ours to travel.”

“But where can we get money?” I asked, frowning and unhappy now. He had found another reason for stalling.

“There is no way but to steal it from Momma, her husband, and the grandmother.”

He said this so pronounced, exactly as if thieving were an old and honored profession. And in dire need, perhaps it was, and still is.

“If we’re caught, it will mean the whip for all of us, even the twins,” I said, casting my eyes on their fearful expressions. “And when Momma goes on a trip with her husband, *she* could starve us again, and God alone knows what else *she* would do to us.”

Chris fell down on the small chair before the dressing table. He propped his chin in his hand, thoughtful and considering for minutes. “One thing for sure, I don’t want to see you or the twins punished. So I will be the one to steal out of here, and I alone will stand guilty if caught. But I’m not going to be caught; it *is* too risky to take from that old woman—she’s too observant. No doubt she knows to a penny exactly the amount of money in her purse. Momma never counts money. Remember how Daddy used to complain about that?” He grinned at me reassuringly. “I will be just like Robin Hood, stealing from the rich to give to the needy poor—us! And only on the nights Momma and her husband tell us they are going out.”

“You mean *when* she tells us,” I corrected. “And we can always watch from the window, on those days she doesn’t come.” When we dared, we had a fine view of the curved drive to watch the comings and goings.

Soon enough Momma told us she was going to a party. “Bart doesn’t care much for the social life; he’d rather stay home. But I hate this house. He asks then why we don’t move into our own home, and what can I say?”

What could she say? *Darling, I have a secret to tell you: upstairs, hidden away in the far northern wing, I have four children.*

* * *

It was easy enough for Chris to find money in his mother's grand, splendid bedroom. She was careless about money. Even he was shocked at how casually she left tens and twenties scattered over the dresser. It made him frown and put suspicions in his head. Wasn't she supposed to be saving up for that day when she could take us all out of our prison ... even if she did have a husband now? More bills were in her many pocketbooks. Chris found change in her husband's trousers pockets. No, he was not as careless with *his* money. However, when Chris searched under the chair cushions, a dozen or more coins were there. He felt like a thief, an unwanted intruder in his mother's room. He saw her beautiful clothes, her satin mules, her negligees trimmed with fur, or marabou feathers, making his trust shrink even smaller.

Time after time that winter, he visited that bedroom, growing ever more careless since it was all so easy to steal. He came back to me, looking jubilant, looking sad. Day by day our hidden cache was increasing—why did he look sad? “Come with me next time,” he said in way of reply. “See for yourself.”

I could go with a clear conscience now, knowing the twins wouldn't awaken and find us gone. They slept so soundly, so deeply, that even in the mornings they woke up blurry-eyed, slow, reluctantly coming into reality. It scared me sometimes to look at them asleep. Two small dolls, never growing, so sunken into oblivion it seemed more a small death than normal nighttime rest.

Go away, run away, spring was approaching, we had to leave soon, before it was too late. A voice inside, intuitive, kept drumming out this tune. Chris laughed when I told him. “Cathy, you and your notions! We need money. At least five hundred. What is the terrible hurry? We have food now, and we aren't being whipped; even when *she* catches us half-undressed, she doesn't say a word.”

Why didn't the grandmother punish us now? We had not told Momma of her other punishments, her sins against us, for to me, they were sins, and not justified in any way. Yet, that old woman stayed her hand. Daily she brought up the picnic basket, filled to the brim with sandwiches, with lukewarm soups in thermos bottles, with milk, and always four powdered-sugar doughnuts. Why couldn't she vary our menus and bring brownies, cookies, slices of pie or cake?

"C'mon," urged Chris, dragging me along the corridors so dark and sinister. "Lingering in one place is dangerous. We'll take a quick look in the trophy room, then rush on into Momma's bedroom suite."

All I needed was one glance in that trophy room. I hated—actually detested that oil portrait over the stone fireplace—so much like our father—and yet so very different. A man as cruel and heartless as Malcolm Foxworth had no right to be handsome, even when he was young. Those cold blue eyes should have corrupted the rest of him with sores, boils. I saw all those heads of dead animals, and the tiger and bear skins on the floor, and I thought, how like him to want a room like this.

If Chris would let me, I would look into every room. But he insisted we pass by the closed doors, allowing me to peek in only a few. "Nosy!" he whispered. "There's nothing of interest in any of them." He was right. Right in so many things. I learned that night what Chris meant when he said this house was only grand and beautiful, not pretty or cozy. Nevertheless, I couldn't help being impressed. Our home in Gladstone shrank in the comparison.

When we had quietly traversed many a long and stingily lit dim hall, we came at last upon our mother's grand suite of rooms. Sure, Chris had told me in detail of the swan bed, and the infant bed at the foot—but hearing wasn't seeing! My breath pulled in. My dreams took off on wings of fancy! Oh, glory be to heaven! This wasn't a room, but a chamber fit for a queen or a princess! I couldn't believe the posh splendor, the opulence! Overwhelmed, I flitted from here to there, awed to touch the walls, covered with silk damask, colored a delicious strawberry pink, richer than the pale mauve of the two-inch-

thick carpet I fingered the soft, furry coverlet and I threw myself upon it and rolled about. I touched the filmy bed curtains, and heavier drapes of purple velvet. I jumped up from the bed, to stand at the foot, and gazed in admiration at that marvelous swan that kept his observant, but sleepy red eye riveted on me.

Then I backed off, not liking a bed where Momma slept with a man not our father. I walked into her huge walk-in closet, drifting about in a dream of riches that could never be mine, *except* in dreams. She had more clothes than a department store. Plus shoes, hats, handbags. Four full-length fur coats, three fur stoles, a white mink cape, and a dark sable one, plus fur hats of a dozen different styles and made of different animal pelts, plus a leopard coat with green wool in between the fur trim. Then there were negligees, nightgowns, peignoir sets, flounced, beruffled, beribboned, feathered, furred, made of velvet, satin, chiffon, combinations—good glory be! She'd have to live a thousand years to wear all she owned just once!

What caught my eye most, I took from the closet and carried into the golden dressing room Chris showed me. I glanced in her bath, with the mirrors all around, live green plants, real flowers growing, two commodes—one didn't have a lid. (I know now one was a bidet.) A separate shower stall, too. "All this is new," explained Chris. "When I first came, you know, the night of the Christmas party, it wasn't so . . . well, so opulent as it is now."

I spun about to glare at him, guessing it had been all along, but he hadn't told me. He had been deliberately shielding her, not wanting me to know about all those clothes, the furs, plus the fabulous amount of jewelry she kept hidden in a secret compartment of her long dressing table. No, he hadn't lied—just omitted. It showed in his betraying, shifting eyes, his flushed face, and the quick way he hurried to escape more of my embarrassing questions—no wonder she didn't want to sleep in *our* room!

I was in the dressing room trying on the clothes from Momma's big closet. For the first time in my life I slipped on

nylon hose, and, oh, did my legs look heavenly—divine! No wonder women liked these things! Next, I put on a bra for the first time, one that was much too large, to my dismay. I stuffed the cups full of tissues until they bulged way out. Next came the silver slippers, again, too large. And then I topped off the splendor of me with a black dress cut very low in front to show off what I didn't have much of.

Now came the fun part—what I used to do when I was little whenever I had the chance. I sat down at Momma's dressing table and began to apply her makeup with a lavish hand. She had ten carloads. On my face I slathered the whole works: foundation, rouge, powder, mascara, eyeshadow, lipstick. And then I swept my hair up in a way I considered sexy and stylish, stuck in hairpins and began to put on jewelry. And, last of all, perfume—lots of it.

Tottering awkwardly on the high heels, I teetered over to Chris. "How do I look?" I asked, flirtatiously smiling, and fluttering my sooty lashes. Truly, I was prepared for compliments. Hadn't the mirrors already told me I looked sensational?

He was carefully going through a drawer, putting everything back exactly as he had found it, but he turned to take a glance. Astonishment widened his eyes, and then he heavily scowled, while I rocked back and forth and sideways, seeking my balance on four-inch heels, and kept on batting my eyelids—maybe I didn't know how to put on false eyelashes right. I felt I was looking through spider legs.

"How do you look?" he began in a sarcastic way. "Let me tell you precisely. You look like a streetwalker—that's how!" He turned away in disgust, as if unable to bear the sight of me. "An adolescent whore—that's what! Now go wash your face, and put back all that stuff where you found it, and clean up the dressing table!"

I tottered over to the nearest full-length mirror. It had right and left wings so she could adjust them, and see herself from every angle, and in those three very revealing mirrors I took a fresh perspective—and what a fascinating mirror; it closed like

a three-page book, and then there was a beautiful French pastoral scene to view.

Twisting and turning, I checked over my appearance. This wasn't the way my mother looked in the same dress—what had I done wrong? True, she didn't ladder so many bracelets up her arms. And she didn't wear three necklaces at once, while long, dangling diamond earrings brushed her shoulders, plus a tiara; nor did she ever wear two or three rings on each finger—including her thumbs.

Oh, but I did dazzle the eyes all right. And my jutting bosom was absolutely magnificent! Truthfully, I had to admit I'd overdone it.

I took off seventeen bracelets, twenty-six rings, the necklaces, the tiara, and the black chiffon formal gown that didn't look as elegant on me as when Momma wore it to a dinner party with only pearls at the throat. Oh, but the furs—nobody could help but feel beautiful in furs!

“Hurry up, Cathy. Leave that stuff alone and come help me search.”

“Chris, I'd love to take a bath in her black marble tub.”

“God Almighty! We don't have time for you to do that!”

I took off her clothes, her black lace bra, the nylon hose, and the silver slippers, and put on my own things. But on second thought, I sneaked a plain white bra from her drawer of many, and tucked it down inside my blouse. Chris didn't need my help. He'd been here so often, he could find money without my assistance. I wanted to see what was in every drawer, but I'd have to move fast. I pulled open a small drawer of her nightstand, expecting to find cold cream, tissues, but nothing of value for servants to steal. And there was night cream in the drawer, and tissues, plus two paperback books to read when sleep was evasive. (Were there nights when she tossed and turned and thought uneasily about us?) Underneath those paperbacks was a very large and thick book with a colorful dustjacket. *How to Create Your Own Needlework Designs*. Now, that was a title to really intrigue me. Momma had taught me to do some needlepoint stitches, and also

crewelwork on my first birthday in that locked room. And how to create your own designs would indeed be inspiring.

Casually I lifted out the book and flipped through the pages at random. Behind me Chris was making soft noises as he opened and closed drawers, and moved on sneakered feet from here to there. I had expected to see flower designs—anything but what I actually saw. Silent, wide-eyed, full of stunned fascination, I stared down at the photographs in full color. Unbelievable pictures of naked men and women doing ... did people really do such things as that? Was this lovemaking?

Chris wasn't the only one who'd heard whispered tales accompanied by much snickering from older children clustered in groups in the bathroom at school. Why, I had believed it was a sacred, reverent thing to do in complete privacy, behind locked doors. This book depicted many couples all in one room, all naked, and all into each other in one way or another. Against my will, or so I wanted to think, my hand stole out to slowly turn each page, growing ever more incredulous! So many ways to do it! So many positions! My God, was *this* what lovesick Raymond and Lily had in mind from page one of that Victorian novel? I lifted my head and stared blankly into space. From the beginning of life, were we all headed toward this?

Chris spoke my name, informing me he had found enough money. Couldn't steal too much all at once, or it might be noticed. He was taking only a few fives, and many ones, and all the change under chair cushions. "Cathy, what's the matter, are you deaf? Come on."

I couldn't move, couldn't leave, couldn't close that book without pursuing it from cover to cover. Because I stood so enthralled, unable to respond, he came up behind me to look over my shoulder at what held me so mesmerized. I heard his breath pull in sharply. After an eternal time, he exhaled a low whistle. He didn't say a single word until I reached the end and closed the book. Then he took over and began at the beginning, looking at each page he had missed as I stood beside him and looked again, too. There was small printed text

opposite the full-page pictures. But the photographs didn't need explanations—not to my mind.

Chris closed the book. I glanced at his face quickly. He appeared stunned. I returned the book to the drawer, placing the paperbacks on top, just as I had found it. He took my hand and pulled me toward the door. Down all the long and dark halls we went silently back to the northern wing. Now I knew only too well why the witch-grandmother had wanted Chris and me put in separate beds, when that compelling call to human flesh was so strong, so demanding, and so thrilling it could make people act more like demons than saints. I leaned above Carrie, staring down in her sleeping face, which, in her sleep, regained the innocence and childishness that evaded her during her waking hours. She seemed a small cherub lying there on her side, curled up tight, her face rosy and flushed, her hair damp and curling on the nape of her neck and on her rounded forehead. I kissed her, and her cheek felt hot, and then I went over to Cory to touch his soft curls and kiss his flushed cheek. Children like the twins were made from a little of what I had just viewed in that erotic picture book, so it couldn't all be totally wicked, or else God wouldn't have made men and women the way He did. And yet I was so troubled, and so uncertain, and deep down really stunned and shocked, and still . . .

I closed my eyes and silently prayed: *God, keep the twins safe and healthy until we're out of here ... let them live until we reach a bright and sunny place where doors are never locked . . . please.*

“You can use the bath first,” said Chris, sitting on his side of the bed with his back toward me. His head was bowed down, and this was his night to take his bath first.

Under a kind of spell I drifted into the bath and did what I had to, then came out wearing my thickest, warmest, and most concealing granny-gown. My face was scrubbed clean of all makeup. My hair was shampooed and still a little damp as I sat down on the side of my bed to brush it into shining waves.

Chris rose silently and entered the bath without looking my way, and when he came out much later, and I was still sitting

and brushing my hair, he didn't meet my eyes. Nor did I want him to look at me.

It was one of the grandmother's rules that we were to kneel down by our beds each night and say prayers. Yet, that night, neither of us knelt to say prayers. Often, I was on my knees by the bed, with my palms together under my chin, and I didn't know what to pray, since already I'd prayed so much, and none of it helped. I'd just kneel there, empty-minded, bleak-hearted, but my body and its nerve endings felt everything and screamed out what I couldn't bring myself to think, much less say.

I stretched out beside Carrie on my back, feeling soiled and changed by that big book that I wished to see again and would if I could, read every word of the text. Maybe it would have been the ladylike thing to just put the book back when I'd found out its subject—and most certainly I should have slammed it shut when Chris came to look over my shoulder. Already I knew I wasn't a saint, or an angel, or a puritan prude, and I felt in my bones that someday in the near future I was going to need to know all there was to know about how bodies were used in ways of love.

Slowly, slowly, I turned my head to peer through the rosy dimness and see what Chris was doing.

He was on his side, under the covers, gazing over at me. His eyes glimmered in some faint meandering light that filtered through the heavy draperies, for what light was in his eyes wasn't rosy-colored.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes, I'm surviving.” And then I said good night in a voice that didn't even sound like me.

“Good night, Cathy,” he said, using someone else's voice, too.

My Stepfather



That spring, Chris got sick. He looked greenish around his mouth and threw up every few minutes, staggering back from the bathroom to fall weakly on the bed. He wanted to study *Gray's Anatomy*, but threw it aside, irritated with himself. "Must have been something I ate," he grouched.

"Chris, I don't want to leave you alone," I said at the door, preparing to fit the wooden key into the lock.

"Look here, Cathy!" he yelled. "It's time you learned to stand on your own two feet! You don't need me at your side every livelong minute of the day! That was Momma's trouble. She thought she'd always have a man to lean on. Lean on yourself, Cathy, always."

Terror jumped into my heart, flooded up in my eyes. He saw, and he spoke more gently. "I'm all right, really. I can take care of myself. We need the money, Cathy, so go on alone. We might not have another chance."

I ran back to his bed, falling down on my knees, and pressing my face down on his pajamaed chest. Tenderly he caressed my hair. "Really, Cathy, I'll survive. It's not so bad you have to cry about it. But you've got to understand, no matter what happens to either one of us, the one left has to get the twins out."

"Don't say things like that!" I cried out. Just to think of him dying made me sick inside. And as I knelt there, staring at him, it fleetingly crossed my mind, how often one or the other of us was sick.

"Cathy, I want you to leave now. Stand up. Force yourself. And when you get there, take only ones and fives. Nothing larger. But take all the coins our stepfather lets fall from his

pockets. And in the back of his closet, he keeps a big tin box full of change. Take a handful of the quarters.”

He looked pale and weak, thinner, too. Quickly I kissed his cheek, loath to leave when he felt so unwell. Glancing at the sleeping twins, I backed off toward the door, clutching the wooden key in my hand. “I love you, Christopher Doll,” I said in a joking way before opening the door.

“I love you too, Catherine Doll,” he said. “Good hunting.”

I threw him a kiss, then closed and locked the door behind me. It was safe enough to go stealing in Momma’s room. Only this afternoon she had told us she and her husband were attending another party, at a friend’s who lived down the road. And I thought to myself, as I stole quietly along the corridors clinging to the walls, keeping to the shadows, I *was* going to take at least one twenty, and one ten. I was going to risk somebody noticing. Maybe I’d even steal a few pieces of Momma’s jewelry. Jewelry could be pawned, just as good as money, maybe better.

All business, all determination, I didn’t waste time looking in the trophy room. Straight on to Momma’s bedroom I crept, not expecting to see the grandmother, who retired very early, at nine. And the hour was ten.

With all brave determined confidence, I stole through the double doors to her rooms, and silently closed them behind me. One dim light was burning. Often she left lights burning in her rooms—sometimes every last one, according to Chris. For what was money to our mother now?

Hesitating uncertainly, I stood just inside the doors and looked around. Then I froze in terror.

There, in a chair, with his long legs stretched before him and crossed at the ankles, sprawled Momma’s new husband! I was directly in front of him, wearing a transparent blue nightie that was very short, though little matching panties were underneath. My heart beat out a mad tune of panic as I waited for him to bellow out and demand to know who I was, and what the hell was I doing coming uninvited into his bedroom?

But he didn't speak.

He wore a black tuxedo, and his formal shirt was pink with black-edged ruffles down the front. He didn't bellow, he didn't question, because he was dozing. I almost turned about and left, I was so terrified he'd awaken and see me.

However, curiosity overcame my trepidations. On my toes I stole closer to peer down at him. I dared to go so close, up to his very chair, that I could reach out and touch him, if I chose. Close enough to put my hand in his pocket and rob him if I chose, which I didn't.

Robbery was the last thing I had in mind as I gazed down into his handsome sleeping face. I was amazed to see what was revealed now that I was so very close to my mother's dearly beloved Bart. I had viewed him from a distance a number of times: first, the night of the Christmas party, and another time when he was down there near the stairs, holding a coat for Momma to slip her arms in. He'd kissed the back of her neck, and behind her ear, and whispered something that made her smile, and so tenderly he'd drawn her against his chest before they both went out the door.

Yes, yes, I had seen him, and heard much about him, and knew where his sisters lived, and where he was born, and where he'd gone to school, but nothing had prepared me for what was so clearly revealed now.

Momma—how could you? You should be ashamed! This man is younger than you—years younger! She hadn't told us that.

A secret. How well she could keep such an important secret! And no wonder she adored him, worshipped him—he was the kind of man any woman would want. Just to look at him so casually, elegantly sprawled, I guessed he was both tender and passionate when he made love to her.

I wanted to hate that man dozing in the chair, but somehow I just couldn't. Even asleep, he appealed to me, and made my heart beat faster.

Bartholomew Winslow, smiling in his sleep, innocently, unknowingly responding to my admiration. A lawyer, one of those men who knew everything—like doctors—like Chris. Certainly he must be seeing and experiencing something exceptionally pleasing. What was going on behind his eyeballs? I wondered, too, if his eyes were blue or brown. His head was long and lean, his body slim, and hard and muscular. A deep cleft was near his lips, looking like a stretched vertical dimple to play games of hide and seek as it came and went with his vague sleepy smiles.

He wore a wide sculptured gold wedding band, and of course I recognized it as the twin to the slimmer one my mother wore. On the index finger of his right hand he wore a large square-cut diamond ring that sparkled even without much light. On a small finger he wore a fraternity ring. His long fingers had square nails buffed so they shone as much as mine. I remembered when Momma used to buff Daddy's nails, while they played teasing games with their eyes.

He was tall I already knew that. And of everything he had that pleased me well, it was his full and sensual lips beneath the moustache that intrigued me most. Such a beautifully shaped mouth—sensual lips that must kiss my mother . . . everywhere. That book of sexual pleasures had educated me well along that line of how adults gave and took when they were bare.

It came over me all of a sudden—the impulse to kiss him—just to see if the dark moustache tickled. Just to know also, what a kiss was like from a stranger who was no blood relation at all.

Not forbidden, this one. Not sinful to tentatively reach out and very lightly stroke his closely shaven cheek, so softly challenging him to wake up.

But he slept on.

I leaned above him and pressed my lips down on his ever so lightly, then drew away fast, my heart pounding in a paralyzing kind of fear. I was almost wishing that he would waken, but I was still fearful and afraid. I was too young and

unsure of what I had to believe he would come rushing to my defense, when he had a woman like my mother madly in love with him. Would he, if I took his arm and shook him awake, sit and listen calmly to my story about four children sequestered in a lonely, isolated room year after year, waiting impatiently for their grandfather to die? Would he understand and sympathize with us, and would he force Momma to set us free, and give up hopes of inheriting that immense fortune?

My hands fluttered nervously to my throat, the way Momma's did when she was caught in a dilemma, not knowing which way to turn. My instinct was shouting loud: *Wake him up!* My suspicions whispered slyly, keep quiet, don't let him know; he won't want you, not four children he didn't father. He'll hate you for preventing his wife from inheriting all the riches and pleasures that money can buy. Look at him, so young, so handsome. And though our mother was exceptionally beautiful, and on the way to being one of the wealthiest women in the world, he could have had somebody younger. A fresh virgin who'd never loved anyone else, nor slept with another man.

And then my indecision was over. The answer was so simple. What were four unwanted children when compared to unbelievable riches?

They were nothing. Already Momma had taught me that. And a virgin would bore him.

Oh, it was unfair! Foul! Our mother had everything! Freedom to come and go as she wished; freedom to spend lavishly and buy out the world's best stores, if she chose. She even had the money to buy a much younger man to love, and sleep with—and what did Chris and I have but broken dreams, shattered promises, and unending frustrations?

And what did the twins have, but a dollhouse and a mouse and ever-declining health?

* * *

Back to that forlorn, locked room I went with tears in my eyes and a helpless, hopeless feeling heavy as stone in my chest. I found Chris sleeping with *Gray's Anatomy* lying face down

and open on his chest. Carefully I marked his place, closed the book, and put it aside.

Then I lay beside him, and clung to him, and silent tears came to streak my cheeks and wet his pajama jacket.

“Cathy,” he said, waking up, and coming sleepily into focus. “What’s the matter? Why are you crying? Did someone see you?”

I couldn’t meet his concerned look squarely, and for some inexplicable reason, I couldn’t tell him what happened. I couldn’t speak the words to say I’d found mother’s new husband dozing in her room. Much less could I tell him I’d been so childishly romantic as to kiss him while he slept.

“And you didn’t even find a single penny?” he asked with so much disbelief.

“Not even a penny,” I whispered in return, and I tried to hide my face from his. But he cupped my chin and forced me to turn my head so he could delve deep into my eyes. Oh, why did we have to know each other so well? He stared at me, while I tried to keep my eyes blank, but it was no use. All I could do was close my eyes and snuggle closer in his arms. He bowed his face into my hair while his hands soothingly stroked my back. “It’s all right. Don’t cry. You don’t know where to look like I do.”

I had to get away, run away, and when I ran away, I would take all of this with me, no matter where I went, or who I ended up with.

“You can get in your own bed now,” said Chris in his hoarse voice. “The grandmother could open the door and catch us, you know.”

“Chris, you didn’t throw up again after I left, did you?”

“No. I’m better. Just go away, Cathy. Go away.”

“You really feel better now? You’re not just saying that?”

“Didn’t I just say I was better?”

“Goodnight, Christopher Doll,” I said, then put a kiss on his cheek before I left his bed and climbed into my own bed to

snuggle up with Carrie.

“Good night, Catherine. You make a pretty good sister, and mother to the twins ... but you’re one helluva liar, and one damned no-good thief!”

* * *

Each of Chris’s forays into Momma’s room enriched our hidden cache. It was taking so long to reach our goal of five hundred dollars. And now summer was upon us again. Now I was fifteen, the twins recently turned eight. Soon August would mark the third year of our imprisonment. Before another winter set in, we had to escape. I looked at Cory, who was listlessly picking at black-eyed peas because they were “good luck” peas. First time on New Year’s Day, he wouldn’t eat them: didn’t want any little brown eyes looking at his insides. Now he’d eat them because each pea gave one full day of happiness—so we’d told him. Chris and I had to make up tales like this or else he’d eat nothing but the doughnuts. As soon as that meal was over, he crouched down on the floor, picked up his banjo, and fixed his eyes on a silly cartoon. Carrie glued in beside him, as close as possible, watching her twin’s face and not the TV. “Cathy,” she said to me in her bird twitter. “Cory, he don’t feel so good.”

“How do you know?”

“Jus’ know.”

“Has he told you he feels sick?”

“He don’t have to.”

“And how do *you* feel?”

“Like always.”

“And how is that?”

“Don’t know.”

Oh yes! We had to get out, and fast!

Later on I tucked the twins in one bed. When they were both asleep, I’d lift out Carrie, and put her in our bed, but for now, it was comforting for Cory to go to sleep with his sister

by his side. “Don’t like this pink sheet,” complained Carrie, scowling at me. “We all like white sheets. Where are our white sheets?”

Oh, rue the day when Chris and I had made white the safest color of all! White chalk daisies drawn on the attic floor kept away evil demons, and monsters, and all the other things the twins feared would get them if white wasn’t somewhere near to hide inside, or under, or behind. Lavender, blue or pink, or flower-strewn sheets and pillowcases were not to be tolerated ... little colored places gave small imps a hole through which to drive a forked tail, or glare a mean eye, or stab with a wicked, tiny spear! Rituals, fetishes, habits, rules—Lord—we had them by the millions! Just to keep us safe.

“Cathy, why does Momma like black dresses so much?” asked Carrie, waiting as I took off the pink sheets and replaced them with plain white ones.

“Momma is blonde and very fair, and black makes her look even more fair, and exceptionally beautiful.”

“She’s not scared of black?”

“No.”

“How old do you get before black doesn’t bite you with long teeth?”

“Old enough to know such a question as that is absolutely silly.”

“But all the black shadows in the attic have shiny, sharp teeth,” said Cory, scooting backward so the pink sheets wouldn’t touch his skin.

“Now look,” I said, seeing Chris’s laughing eyes watching as he anticipated some gem I would certainly deliver. “Black shadows don’t have shiny sharp teeth unless your skin is emerald green, and your eyes are purple, and your hair is red, and you have three ears instead of two. Only then is black a threat.”

Comforted, the twins scurried under the white sheet and white blankets, and were soon fast asleep. Then I had time to bathe, and shampoo my hair, and put on wispy baby-doll

pajamas. I ran up into the attic to open a window wide, hopeful of catching a cool breeze to freshen the attic so I'd feel like dancing and not wilting. Why was it the wind could find its way inside only during a wintery blast? Why not now, when we needed it most?

* * *

Chris and I shared all our thoughts, our aspirations, our doubts, and our fears. If I had small problems, he was my doctor. Fortunately, my problems were never of much consequence, only those monthly cramps, and that womanly time never showed up on schedule, which he, my amateur doctor, said was only to be expected. Since I was of a quixotic nature, all my internal machinery would follow suit.

So I can write now of Chris and what happened one September night when I was in the attic, and he had gone stealing, just as if I were there, for later, when the shock of something totally unexpected had died down a bit, he told me in great detail of this particular trip to Momma's grand suite of luxurious rooms.

He told me it was that book in the nightstand drawer that drew him always; it lured him, beckoned to him, was to shipwreck him later, and me too. As soon as he found his quota of money—enough, but not too much—he drifted over to the bed and that table as if magnetized.

And I thought to myself, even as he told me: Why did he have to keep on looking, when each of those photographs was forever engraved on my brain?

“And there I was, reading the text, a few pages at a time,” he said, “and thinking about right and wrong, and wondering about nature and all its strange exhilarating calls, and thinking about the circumstances of our lives. I thought about you and me, that these should be blossoming years for us, and I had to feel guilty and ashamed to be growing up, and wanting what other boys my age could take from girls who were willing.

“And, as I stood there, leafing through those pages, burning inside with so many frustrations, and wishing in a way you hadn't ever found that damned book that never drew my

attention with its dull title, I heard voices approaching in the hall. You know who it was—it was our mother, and her husband, returning. Quickly I shoved the book back into the drawer and tossed in the two paperbacks which no one was ever going to finish reading, for the bookmarks were always in the same place. Next I dashed into Momma's closet—that big one, you know, the one nearest her bed—and way back near the shoe shelves I crouched down on the floor beneath her long formal gowns. I thought if she came in, she wouldn't see me and I doubt she would have. But no sooner did I feel this security, then I realized I'd forgotten to close the door.

“That's when I heard our mother's voice. ‘Really, Bart,’ she said as she came into the room and switched on a lamp, ‘it's just plain carelessness for you to forget your wallet so often.’

“He answered, ‘I can't help but forget it when it's never in the same place I put it down.’ I heard him moving things about, opening and closing drawers and so forth. Then he explained, ‘I'm certain I left it in this pair of trousers... and damned if I'm going anywhere without my driver's license.’

“ ‘The way you drive, I can't say I blame you,’ said our mother, ‘but this is going to make us late again. No matter how fast you drive, we'll still miss the first act.’

“ ‘Hey!’ exclaimed her husband, and I heard surprise in his voice, and inwardly I groaned, remembering what I'd done. ‘Here's my wallet, on the dresser. Darned if I recall leaving it there. I could swear I put it in these trousers.’

“He really had hidden it in his chest of drawers,” Chris explained, “under his shirts, and when I found it, I took out a few small bills, I just laid it down and went on to look at that book. And Momma, she said, ‘Really, Bart!’ as if she was out of patience with him.

“And then he said, ‘Corrine, let's move out of this place. I believe those maids are stealing from us. You keep missing money, and so do I. For instance, I know I had four fives, and now I have only three.’

“I groaned again. I thought he had so much he never counted. And the fact that Momma knew what cash she carried

in her purse really came as a shock.

“ ‘Just what difference does a five make?’ questioned our mother, and that sounded like her, to be indifferent about money, just as she had been with Daddy. And then she went on to say the servants were underpaid, and she didn’t blame them for taking what they could when it was left so opportunely before them, ‘actually inviting them to steal.’

“And he answered, ‘My dear wife, money may come easily to you, but I’ve always had to work hard to earn a buck, and don’t want ten cents stolen from me. Besides, I can’t say my day starts out right when I have your mother’s grim face across the table from me every morning.’ You know, I’d never given that any thought, how he felt about that old witch ironface.

“Apparently he feels just as we do, and Momma, she grew kind of irritated, and said, ‘Let’s not go through all that again.’ And her voice had a hard edge to it; she didn’t even sound like herself, Cathy. It never occurred to me before that she talked one way to us, and another way to other people. And then she said, ‘You know I can’t leave this house, not yet, so if we’re going, come on, let’s go—we’re late already.’

“And that’s when our stepfather said he didn’t want to go if they’d already missed the first act, for that spoiled the whole show for him, and besides, he thought they could find something more entertaining to do than sit in an audience. And, of course, I guessed he meant they could go to bed and do a little lovemaking, and if you don’t think that didn’t make me feel sick, then you don’t know me very well—darned if I wanted to be there when that was going on.

“However, our mother can be very strong-willed, and that surprised me. She’s changed, Cathy, from the way she was with Daddy. It’s like she is the boss now, and no man is going to tell her what to do. And she said to him then, ‘Like last time? Now, that was really embarrassing, Bart! You came back to get your wallet, swearing to me you’d only be gone a few minutes and what did you do but fall asleep—and there I was at that party without an escort!’

“Now our stepfather sounded somewhat irritated, both by her words, and her tone, if I judged him correctly, and there’s a lot you can read into voices even when you don’t see facial expressions. ‘Oh, how you must have suffered!’ he replied, sounding sarcastic. But that didn’t last long, for he must be basically a jovial fellow. ‘As for me, I had the sweetest dream, and I’d come back every time if I knew that for certain, a lovely young girl with the long, golden hair would steal into the room and kiss me while I dozed. Oh, she was pretty, and she looked at me so longingly, yet, when I opened my eyes she was gone, and I thought she must have been a dream.’

“What he said made me gasp, Cathy—it was you, wasn’t it? How could you be so bold, so indiscreet? I got so damned mad with you I felt ready to explode if just one more little thing happened to set me off. You think you’re the only one wound up, right? You think you’re the only one with frustrations, with doubts, suspicions, and fears. Well, take comfort from knowing I have them too—you’ve seen to that. And, boy, was I mad at you, madder than I’ve ever been before.

“And then Momma said sharply to her husband, ‘God, I am sick of hearing about the girl and her kiss—why, to hear you tell it, you’ve never been kissed before!’ And I thought that then and there they might have an argument. But Momma changed her voice, and sounded sweet and loving, like she used to sound with Daddy. But it proved she was more determined to leave this house than a would-be lover who would use the swan bed then and there, for Momma said, ‘Come along, Bart, we’ll stay overnight in a hotel, and then you won’t have to see my mother’s face in the morning.’ And that solved my concern about how I was going to escape that room before they used that swan bed—for damned if I would stay and listen, or spy.”

This was all happening while I was up in the attic, sitting on a windowsill, waiting for Chris to reappear. I was thinking of the silver music box Daddy had given me, and wishing I had it back. I didn’t know then that the episode in Momma’s room was to have its repercussions.

Something creaked behind me! A soft step on rotting wood! I jumped, startled, scared, and turned, expecting to see—God knows what! Then I sighed, for it was only Chris standing in the gloom, silently staring at me. Why? Did I look prettier than usual? Was it the moonlight, shining through my airy clothes?

All random doubts were cleared when he said in a voice gritty and low, “You look beautiful sitting there like that.” He cleared the frog in his throat. “The moonlight is etching you with silver-blue, and I can see the shape of your body through your clothes.”

Then, bewilderingly, he seized me by the shoulders, digging in his fingers, hard! They hurt. “Damn you, Cathy! You kissed that man! He could have awakened and seen you, and demanded to know who you were! And not thought you only a part of his dream!”

Scary the way he acted, the fright I felt for no reason at all. “How do you know what I did? You weren’t there; you were sick that night.”

He shook me, glaring his eyes, and again I thought he seemed a stranger. “He saw you, Cathy—he wasn’t soundly asleep!”

“He saw me?” I cried, disbelieving. It wasn’t possible ... wasn’t!

“Yes!” he yelled. This was Chris, who was usually in such control of his emotions. “He thought you a part of his dream! But don’t you know that Momma can guess who it was, just by putting two and two together—just as I have? Damn you and your romantic notions! Now they’re on to us! They won’t leave money casually about as they did before. He’s counting, she’s counting, and we don’t have enough—not yet!”

He yanked me down from the window sill! He appeared wild and furious enough to slap my face—and not once in all our lives had he ever struck me, though I’d given him reason to when I was younger. But he shook me until my eyes rolled, until I was dizzy and crying out: “Stop! Momma knows we can’t pass through a locked door!”

This wasn't Chris ... this was someone I'd never seen before . . . primitive, savage.

He yelled out something like, "You're mine, Cathy! Mine! You'll always be mine! No matter who comes into your future, you'll always belong to me! I'll make you mine ... tonight ... now!"

I didn't believe it, not Chris!

And I did not fully understand what he had in mind, nor, if I am to give him credit, do I think he really meant what he said, but passion has a way of taking over.

We fell to the floor, both of us. I tried to fight him off. We wrestled, turning over and over, writhing, silent, a frantic struggle of his strength against mine.

It wasn't much of a battle.

I had the strong dancer's legs; he had the biceps, the greater weight and height . . . and he had much more determination than I to use something hot, swollen and demanding, so much it stole reasoning and sanity from him.

And I loved him. I wanted what he wanted—if he wanted it *that* much, right or wrong.

Somehow we ended up on that old mattress—that filthy, smelly, stained mattress that must have known lovers long before this night. And that is where he took me, and forced in that swollen, rigid male sex part of him that had to be satisfied. It drove into my tight and resisting flesh which tore and bled.

Now we had done what we both swore we'd never do.

Now we were doomed through all eternity, damned to roast forever, hung upside down and naked over the everlasting fires of hell. Sinners, just as the grandmother had forecasted so long ago.

Now I had all the answers.

Now there might be a baby. A baby to make us pay in life and not wait for hell, and everlasting fires reserved for such as us.

We drew apart and stared at each other, our faces numb and pale from shock, and barely could we speak as we drew on our clothes.

He didn't have to say he was sorry ... it was all over him ... the way he quivered, the way his hands trembled and were so clumsy with his buttons.

* * *

Later, we went out on the roof.

Long strings of clouds blew across the face of the full moon, so it would duck and hide, then peek out again. And on the roof, on a night that was made for lovers, we cried in each other's arms. He hadn't meant to do it. And I had meant never to let him. The fear of the baby that might be the result of one single kiss on moustached lips rose high in my throat, and hesitated on my tongue. It was my worst fear. More than hell, or God's wrath, I feared giving birth to a monstrous baby, deformed, a freak, an idiot. But how could I speak of this? Already he was suffering enough. However, his thoughts were more knowledgeable than mine.

"The odds are all against a baby," he said fervently. "Just one time—there won't be a conception. I swear there won't be another time—no matter what! I'll castrate myself before I'll let it happen again!" Then he had pulled me tightly against him so I was crushed so hard it hurt my ribs. "Don't hate me, Cathy, please don't hate me. I didn't mean to rape you, I swear to God. There's been many a time when I've been tempted, and I was able to turn it off. I'd leave the room, go into the bathroom, or into the attic. I'd bury my nose in a book until I felt normal again."

Tight as I could, I wrapped my arms around him. "I don't hate you, Chris," I whispered, pressing my head tightly against his chest. "You didn't rape me. I could have stopped you if I'd really wanted to. All I had to do was bring my knee up hard, where you told me to. It was my fault, too." Oh yes, my fault too. I should have known better than to kiss Momma's handsome young husband. I shouldn't have worn skimpy little see-through garments around a brother who had all a man's

strong physical needs, and a brother who was always so frustrated by everything, and everyone. I had played upon his needs, testing my femininity, having my own burning yearnings for fulfillment.

It was a peculiar kind of night, as if fate had planned this night, long ago, and this night was our destiny, right or wrong. It was darkness lit up by the moon so full and bright, and the stars seemed to flash Morse Code beams to one another ... fate accomplished

The wind in the leaves rustled and made an eerie, melancholy music that was tuneless, yet music just the same. How could anything as human and loving be ugly on such a beautiful night as this one?

Perhaps we stayed too long on the roof.

The slate was cold, hard, rough. It was early September. Already the leaves were beginning to fall, so soon to be touched by the winter's frosty hand. Hot as hell in the attic. On the roof, it was beginning to turn very, very cold.

Closer Chris and I huddled, clinging to each other for safety and warmth. Youthful, sinful lovers of the worst kind. We had dropped ten miles in our own esteem, done in by yearnings stretched too thin by constant closeness. Just once too often we'd tempted fate, and our own sensuous natures ... and I hadn't even known at the time that I was sensuous, much less that he was. I'd thought it was only beautiful music that made my heart ache and my loins crave; I hadn't known it was something far more tangible.

Like one heart shared between us, we drummed out a terrible tune of self-punishment for what we'd done.

A colder breeze lifted a dead leaf to the roof and sent it scuttling merrily on its way to catch in my hair. It crackled dry and brittle when Chris plucked it out and held it, just staring down at a dead maple leaf as if his very life depended on reading its secret for knowing how to blow in the wind. No arms, no legs, no wings . . . but it could fly when dead.

“Cathy,” he began in a crackling, dry voice, “we now have exactly three hundred and ninety-six dollars and forty-four cents. Won’t be long before the snow starts to fall. And we don’t own winter coats or boots that fit, and the twins are already so weakened that they will catch cold easily, and might pass from colds into pneumonia. I wake up in the night, worrying about them, and I’ve seen you lying on your bed staring at Carrie, so you must be worrying, too. I doubt very much we’ll be finding money lying about in Momma’s suite of rooms now. They suspect a maid is stealing from them—or they did. Maybe now Momma suspects that it could be you ... I don’t know ... I hope not.

“Regardless of what either of them thinks, the next time I play thief, I’m forced to steal her jewelry. I’ll make a grand sweep, take it all—and then we’ll run. We’ll take the twins to a doctor as soon as we’re far enough away, and we’ll have enough money to pay their bills.”

Take the jewelry—what I’d begged him to do all along! Finally he would do it, agree to steal the hard-won prizes Momma had struggled so to gain, and in the process, she was going to lose us. But would she care—would she?

That old owl that might be the same one that greeted us at the train depot on the first night we came, hooted in the far distance, sounding ghostly. While we watched, thin, slow, gray mists began to rise up from the damp ground, chilled by the night’s sudden cold. The thick and billowing fog swelling up to the roof ... undulating curling waves, rolling as a misty sea to shroud over us.

And all we could see in the murky-gray and cold, damp clouds was that single great eye of God—shining up there in the moon.

* * *

I awakened before dawn. I stared over to where Cory and Chris slept. Even as my sleepy eyes opened, and my head turned, I sensed that Chris was awake, too, and had been for some time. He was already looking at me, and shiny, glistening tears sparkled the blue of his eyes and smeared the

whites. The tears that rolled to fall on his pillow, I named as they fell: shame, guilt, blame.

“I love you, Christopher Doll. You don’t have to cry. For I can forget, if you can forget, and there’s nothing to forgive.”

He nodded and said nothing. But I knew him well, right down to his bone marrow. I knew his thoughts, his feelings, and all the ways to wound his ego fatally. I knew that through me he had struck back at the one woman who had betrayed him in trust, faith and love. All I had to do was look in my hand mirror with the big C. L. F. on the back, and I could see my own mother’s face, as she must have looked at my age.

And so it had come to pass, just as the grandmother predicted. Devil’s issue. Created by evil seed sown in the wrong soil, shooting up new plants to repeat the sins of the fathers.

And the mothers.

Color All Days Blue, But Save One for *Black*



We were leaving. Any day. As soon as Momma gave the word that she'd be out for the evening, she'd also be out of all her valuable, transportable possessions. We would not go back to Gladstone. There the winter came and lasted until May. We would go to Sarasota, where the circus people lived. They were known for having and showing kindness to those from strange backgrounds. Since Chris and I'd grown accustomed to high places, the roof, the many ropes attached to the rafter beams, I blithely said to Chris, "We'll be trapeze performers." He grinned, thinking it a ridiculous idea—at first—next calling it inspired.

"Golly, Cathy, you'll look great in spangled pink tights." He began to sing: "She flies through the air, with the greatest of ease, the daring young beauty on the flying trapeze"

Cory jerked up his blond head. Blue eyes wide with fear. "No!"

Said Carrie, his more proficient voice, "We don't like your plans. We don't want you to fall."

"We'll never fall," said Chris, "because Cathy and I are an unbeatable team." I stared over at him, recalling the night in the schoolroom, and on the roof afterward when he'd whispered, "I'm never going to love anyone but you, Cathy. I know it . . . I've got that kind of feeling . . . just us, always."

Casually I'd laughed. "Don't be silly, you know you don't really love me in *that* way. And you don't have to feel guilty, or ashamed. It was my fault, too. And we can pretend it never happened, and make sure it never happens again."

"But Cathy . . ."

“If there were others for you and me, never, never would we feel this way for each other.”

“But I *want* to feel this way about you, and it’s too late for me to love or trust anyone else.”

How old I felt, looking at Chris, at the twins, making plans for all of us, speaking so confidently of how we would make our way. A consolation token for the twins, to give them peace, when I knew we would be forced to do anything, and everything to earn a living.

September had passed on into October. Soon the snow would fly.

“Tonight,” said Chris after Momma took off, saying a hasty good-bye, not pausing in the doorway to look back at us. Now she could hardly bear to look at us. We put one pillowcase inside another, to make it strong. In that sack Chris would dump all Momma’s precious jewelry. Already I had our two bags packed and hidden in the attic, where Momma never went now.

As the day wore on toward evening, Cory began to vomit, over and over again. In the medicine cabinet we had non-prescription drugs for abdominal upsets.

Nothing we used would stop the terrible retching that left him pale, trembling, crying. Then his arms encircled my neck and he whispered, “Momma, I don’t feel so good.”

“What can I do to make you feel better, Cory?” I asked, feeling so young and inexperienced.

“Mickey,” he whispered weakly. “I want Mickey to sleep with me.”

“But you might roll over on him and then he’d be dead. You wouldn’t want him to die, would you?”

“No,” he said, looking stricken at the thought, and then that terrible gagging began again, and in my arms he grew so cold. His hair was pasted to his sweaty brow. His blue eyes stared vacantly into my face as over and over again he called for his mother, “Momma, Momma, my bones hurt.”

“It’s all right,” I soothed, picking him up and carrying him back to his bed, where I could change his soiled pajamas. How could he throw up again when there couldn’t be anything left? “Chris is going to help you, don’t worry.” I lay beside him and held his weak and quivering body in my arms.

Chris was at his desk poring over medical reference books, using Cory’s symptoms to name the mysterious illness that struck each one of us from time to time. He was almost eighteen now, but far from being a doctor.

“Don’t go and leave me and Carrie behind,” Cory pleaded. He cried out later, and louder, “Chris, don’t go! Stay here!”

What did he mean? Didn’t he want us to run away? Or did he mean never sneak into Momma’s suite of rooms again to steal? Why was it Chris and I believed the twins seldom paid attention to what we did? Surely he and Carrie knew we’d never go away and leave them behind—we’d die before we did that.

A little shadowy thing wearing all white drifted over to the bed, and stood with big watery blue eyes staring and staring at her twin brother. She was barely three feet high. She was old, and she was young, she was a tender little plant brought up in a dark hothouse, stunted and withered.

“May I”—she began very properly (as we had tried to teach her, and she had consistently refused to use the grammar we tried to teach, but on this night of nights, she did the best she could)—“sleep with Cory? We won’t do anything bad, or evil, or unholy. I just want to be close to him.”

Let the grandmother come and do her worst! We put Carrie to bed with Cory, and then Chris and I perched on opposite sides of the big bed and watched, full of anxiety, as Cory tossed about restlessly, and gasped for breath, and cried out in his delirium. He wanted the mouse, he wanted his mother, his father, he wanted Chris, and he wanted me. Tears were pooling down on the collar of my nightgown, and I looked to see Chris with tears on his cheeks. “Carrie, Carrie ... where is Carrie?” he asked repeatedly, long after she’d gone to sleep. Their wan faces were only inches apart, and he was looking directly at

her, and still he didn't see her. When I took the time to look from him to Carrie, she seemed but a bit better off.

Punishment, I thought. God was punishing us, Chris and me, for what we'd done. The grandmother had warned us ... every day she'd warned us up until the day we were whipped.

All through the night Chris read one medical book after another while I got up from the twins' bed and paced the room.

Finally Chris raised his red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes. "Food poisoning—the milk. It must have been sour."

"It didn't taste sour, or smell sour," I answered in a mumble. I was always careful to sniff and taste everything first before I'd give it to the twins or Chris. For some reason, I thought my tastebuds keener than Chris's, who liked everything, and would eat anything, even rancid butter.

"The hamburger, then. I thought it had a funny taste."

"It tasted all right to me." And it must have tasted fine to him, as well, for he'd eaten half of Carrie's hamburger on a bun, and all of Cory's. Cory hadn't wanted anything to eat all day.

"Cathy, I noticed you hardly ate anything yourself all day. You're almost as thin as the twins. She does bring us enough food, such as it is. You don't have to stint on yourself."

Whenever I was nervous, or frustrated, or worried—and I was all three now—I'd begin the ballet exercises, and holding lightly to the dresser that acted as a barre, I began to warm up by doing pliés.

"Do you have to do that, Cathy? You're already skin and bones. And why didn't you eat today—are you sick, too?"

"But Cory so loves the doughnuts, and that's all I want to eat too. And he needs them more than I do."

The night wore on. Chris returned to reading the medical books. I gave Cory water to drink—and right away he threw it up. I washed his face with cold water a dozen times, and

changed his pajamas three times, and Carrie slept on and on and on.

Dawn.

The sun came up and we were still trying to figure out what made Cory ill, when the grandmother came in, bearing the picnic basket of food for today. Without a word she closed the door, locked it, put the key in her dress pocket, and advanced to the gaming table. From the basket she lifted the huge thermos of milk, the smaller thermos of soup, then the packets wrapped in foil, containing sandwiches, fried chicken, of bowls of potato salad or cole slaw—and, last of all, the packet of four powdered-sugar doughnuts. She turned to leave.

“Grandmother,” I said tentatively. She had not looked Cory’s way. Hadn’t seen.

“I have not spoken to you,” she said coldly. “Wait until I do.”

“I can’t wait,” said I, growing angry, rising up from my place on the side of Cory’s bed, and advancing. “Cory’s sick! He’s been throwing up all night, and all day yesterday. He needs a doctor, and his mother.”

She didn’t look at me, or at Cory. Out of the door she stalked, then clicked the lock behind her. No word of comfort. No word to say she’d tell our mother.

“I’ll unlock the door and go and find Momma,” said Chris, still wearing the clothes he put on yesterday, and hadn’t taken off to go to bed.

“Then they’ll know we have a key.”

“Then they’ll know.”

Just then the door opened and Momma came in, with the grandmother trailing behind her. Together they hovered over Cory, touching his clammy, cold face, their eyes meeting. In a corner they drifted to whisper and connive, glancing from time to time at Cory who lay quiet as one approaching death. Only his chest heaved in spasms. From his throat came gasping, choking noises. I went and wiped the beads of moisture from his brow. Funny how he could feel cool, and still sweat.

Cory rasped in, out, in, out.

And there was Momma—doing nothing. Unable to make a decision! Fearful still of letting someone know there was a child, when there shouldn't be any!

“Why are you standing there whispering?” I shouted out. “What choice do you have but to take Cory to a hospital, and get him the best doctor available?”

They glared at me—both of them. Grim faced, pale, trembling, Momma fixed her blue eyes on me, then anxiously they sidled over to Cory. What she saw on the bed made her lips tremble, made her hands shake and the muscles near her lips twitch. She blinked repeatedly, as if holding back tears.

Narrowly I watched each betraying sign of her calculating thoughts. She was weighing the risks of Cory being discovered, and causing her to lose that inheritance ... for that old man downstairs just had to die one day, didn't he? He couldn't hold on forever!

I screamed out, “What's the matter with you, Momma? Are you just going to stand there and think about yourself, and that money while your youngest son lies there and dies? You *have* to help him! Don't you care what happens to him? Have you forgotten you are his mother? If you haven't, then, damn it, act like his mother! Stop hesitating! He needs attention now, not tomorrow!”

Sanguine color flooded her face. She snapped her eyes back to me. “You!” she spat. “Always it's you!” And with that she raised her heavily ringed hand, and she slapped my face, hard! Then again she slapped me.

The very first time in my life I'd been slapped by her—and for such a reason! Outraged, without thinking, I slapped back—just as hard!

The grandmother stood back and watched. Smug satisfaction twisted her ugly, thin mouth into a crooked line.

Chris hurried to seize hold of my arms when I would strike Momma again. “Cathy, you're not helping Cory by acting like this. Calm down. Momma will do the right thing.”

It was a good thing he held my arms, for I wanted to slap her again, and make her see what she was doing!

My father's face flashed before my eyes. He was frowning, silently telling me I must always have respect for the woman who gave me birth. I knew that's how he would feel. He wouldn't want me to hit her.

“Damn you to hell, Corrine Foxworth,” I shouted at the top of my lungs, “if you don't take your son to a hospital! You think you can do anything you want with us, and no one will find out! Well, you can throw away that security blanket, for I'll find a way for revenge, if it takes me the rest of my life, I'll see that you pay, and dearly pay, if you don't do something right now to save Cory's life. Go on, glare your eyes at me, and cry and plead, and talk to me about money and what it can buy. But it can't buy back a child once he's dead! And if that happens, don't think I won't find a way to get to your husband and tell him you have four children you have kept hidden in a locked room with their only playground an attic ... and you've kept them there for years and years! See if he loves you then! Watch his face and wait to see how much respect and admiration he has for you then!” She winced, but her eyes shot deadly looks at me. “And what's more, I'll go to the grandfather and tell him, too!” I yelled even louder. “And you won't inherit one damned red penny—and I'll be glad, glad, glad!”

From the look on her face she could kill me, but oddly enough, it was that despicable old woman who spoke in a quiet way: “The girl is right, Corrine. The child must go to a hospital.”

* * *

They came back that night. The two of them. After the servants retired to their quarters over the huge garage. Both of them were bundled up in heavy coats, for it had turned suddenly frigid-cold. The evening sky had gone gray, chilled with early winter that threatened snow. The two of them pulled Cory from my arms and wrapped him in a green blanket, and it was Momma who lifted him up. Carrie let out a scream of anguish. “Don't take Cory away!” she howled. “Don't take

him, don't ...” She threw herself into my arms wailing at me to stop them from taking away a twin from whom she'd never been separated.

I stared down in her small pale face, streaked with tears. “It's all right for Cory to go,” I said as I met my mother's glare, “for I am going, too. I'll stay with Cory while he's in the hospital. Then he won't be afraid. When the nurses are too busy to wait on him, I'll be there. That will make him get well quicker, and Carrie will feel good knowing I'm with him.” I spoke the truth. I knew Cory would recover quicker if I was there with him. *I* was his mother now—not her. He didn't love her now, it was me he needed and me he wanted. Children are very wise intuitively; they know who loves them most, and who only pretends.

“Cathy's right, Momma,” Chris spoke up and he looked at her directly in the eye without warmth. “Cory depends on Cathy. Please let her go, for as she says, her presence there will help him get well sooner, and she can describe to his doctor all his symptoms better than you can.”

Momma's glassy, blank stare turned his way, as if struggling to grasp his meaning. I admit she looked distraught, and her eyes jumped from me to Chris, and then to her mother, and then to Carrie, and back to Cory.

“Momma,” said Chris more firmly, “let Cathy go with you. I can do for Carrie, if that's what you're worried about.”

Of course they didn't let me go.

Our mother carried Cory out into the hall. His head was thrown back, his cowlick bobbing up and down as she strode away with her child wrapped in a green blanket, the very color of spring grass.

The grandmother gave me a cruel smile of derisive victory, then closed and locked the door.

They left Carrie bereft, screaming, tears flowing. Her small weak fists beat against me, as if I were to blame. “Cathy, I wanna go, too! Make them let me go! Cory don't wanna go nowhere I don't go . . . and he forgot his guitar.”

Then all her anger dissipated, and she fell into my arms and sobbed, “Why, Cathy, why?”

Why?

That was the biggest question in our lives.

By far it was the worst and longest day of our lives. We had sinned, and how quickly God set about punishing us. He *did* keep his sharpest eye turned on us, as if *He* knew all along sooner or later we would prove ourselves unworthy, just as the grandmother had known.

It was like it had been in the beginning, before the TV set came to take over the better part of our days. All through the day we sat quietly without turning on the television, just waiting to hear how Cory was.

Chris sat in the rocker and held out his arms to Carrie and me. We both sat on his lap as he rocked slowly back and forth, back and forth, creaking the floorboards.

I don't know why Chris's legs didn't grow numb; we sat on him for so long. Then I got up to take care of Mickey's cage, and gave him food to eat and water to drink, and I held him, and petted him, and told him soon his master would be coming back. I believe that mouse knew something was wrong. He didn't play cheerfully in his cage, and even though I left the door open, he didn't come out to scamper all over the room, and head for Carrie's dollhouse that enchanted him the most.

I prepared the pre-cooked meals, which we hardly touched. When the last meal of the day was over, and the dishes were put away, and we were bathed and ready for bed, we all three knelt in a row beside Cory's bed, and said our prayers to God. “Please, please let Cory get well, and come back to us.” If we prayed for anything else, I don't recall what it was.

We slept, or tried to, all three in the same bed, with Carrie between Chris and me. Nothing gross was ever going to happen between us again . . . never, never again.

God, please don't punish Cory as a way to strike back at Chris and me and make us hurt, for already we hurt, and we

didn't mean to do it, we didn't. It just happened, and only once. And it wasn't any pleasure, God, not really, not any.

* * *

A new day dawned, grim, gray, forbidding. Behind the drawn draperies life started up for those who lived on the outside, those unseen by us. We dragged ourselves into focus, and poked about, trying to fill our time, and trying to eat, and make Mickey happy when he seemed so sad without the little boy who laid down trails of bread crumbs for him to follow.

I changed the mattress covers, with the assistance of Chris, for that was a very hard thing to do, to slip a full-size mattress in and out of one of those heavy quilted things, and yet we had to do it often because of Cory's lack of control. Chris and I made the beds up with clean linens, and smoothed on the spreads, and tidied up the room, while Carrie sat alone in the rocker and stared off into space.

Around ten, there was nothing left to do but sit on the bed nearest the door to the hall, with our eyes riveted upon the knob, willing it to turn and admit Momma, who would bring us news.

Shortly thereafter, Momma came in with her eyes rimmed red from crying. Behind her was the steel-eyed grandmother, tall, stern, no tears.

Our mother faltered near the door as if her legs would give way and spill her to the floor. Chris and I jumped to our feet, but Carrie only stared at Momma's empty eyes.

"I drove Cory to a hospital miles away, the nearest one, really," explained our mother in a tight and hoarse voice that choked from time to time, "and I registered him under a false name, saying he was my nephew, my ward."

Lies! Always lies! "Momma—how is he?" I asked impatiently.

Her glazed blue eyes turned our way; void eyes, staring vacantly; lost eyes, seeking something gone forever—I guessed it was her humanity. "Cory had pneumonia," she

intoned. "The doctors did all they could . . . but it was . . . too . . . too late."

Had pneumonia?

All they could?

Too late?

All past tenses!

Cory was dead! We were never going to see him again!

Chris said later the news hit him hard in the groin, like a kick, and I did see him stumble backward and spin around to hide his face as his shoulders sagged and he sobbed.

At first I didn't believe her. I stood and I stared, and I doubted. But the look on her face convinced me, and something big and hollow swelled up inside my chest. I sank down on the bed, numb, almost paralyzed, and didn't even know I was crying until my clothes were wet.

And even as I sat and cried, I still didn't want to believe Cory was gone from our lives. And Carrie, poor Carrie, she lifted up her head, threw it back, and opened up her mouth and screamed!

She screamed and screamed until her voice went, and she could scream no more. She drifted to the corner where Cory kept his guitar and his banjo, and neatly she lined up all his pairs of small worn tennis shoes. And that's where she chose to sit, with the shoes, with the musical instruments, and Mickey's cage nearby, and from that moment on, not a word escaped her lips.

"Will we go to his funeral?" Chris asked in a choked way with his back still turned.

"He's already been buried," said Momma. "I had a false name put on the tombstone." And then, very quickly, she escaped the room and our questions, and the grandmother followed, her lips set in a grim, thin line.

* * *

Right before our horrified eyes, Carrie shriveled more each day. I felt God might as well have taken Carrie, too, and buried her alongside Cory in that faraway grave with the wrong name that didn't even have the comfort of a father buried nearby.

None of us could eat much. We became listless and tired, always tired. Nothing held our interest. Tears—Chris and I cried five oceans of tears. We assumed all the blame. A long time ago we should have escaped. We should have used that wooden key and gone for help. We had *let* Cory die! He'd been our responsibility, our dear quiet little boy of many talents, and we had let him die. Now we had a small sister huddled in a corner, growing weaker each passing day.

Chris said in a low voice so Carrie wouldn't overhear, just in case she was listening, though I doubted she was (she was blind, deaf, mute ... our babbling brook, damned), "We've got to run, Cathy, and quick. Or we are all going to die like Cory. Something is wrong with all of us. We've been locked up too long. We've lived abnormal lives, like being in a vacuum without germs, without the infections children usually come in contact with. We are without resistance to infections."

"I don't understand," I said.

"What I mean is," he whispered as we huddled in the same chair, "like the creatures from Mars in that book *The War of the Worlds* we could all die from a single cold germ."

Horrified, I could only stare at him. He knew so much more than I did. I turned my gaze on Carrie in the corner. Her sweet baby face, with eyes too large and shadowed underneath, stared blankly forward at nothing. I knew she had her vision fixed on eternity, where Cory was. All the love I'd given Cory, I put into Carrie now ... so afraid for her. Such a tiny skeleton body, and her neck was so weak, too small for her head. Was this the way all the Dresden dolls were going to end?

"Chris, if we have to die, it's not going to be like mice in a trap. If germs can kill us, then let it be germs—so when you steal tonight, take everything of value you can find and we can carry! I'll pack a lunch to take along. With Cory's clothes

taken from the suitcases, we'll have more room. Before the morning comes, we'll be gone."

"No," he said quietly. "Only if we know Momma and her husband have gone out—only then can I take all the money and leave, and all the jewelry in one fell swoop. Take only what we absolutely need—no toys, no games. And Cathy, Momma may not go out tonight. Certainly she can't attend parties in her time of mourning."

How could she mourn when she had to keep her husband always in the dark? And no one came but the grandmother to tell us what was going on. She refused to speak to us, or look at us. In my mind we were already on our way, and I looked at her as if she were already part of the past. Now that our time to depart was so near, I felt frightened. It was big out there. We'd be on our own. What would the world think of us now?

We weren't beautiful like we used to be, only pale and sickly attic mice with long flaxen hair, wearing expensive but ill-fitting clothes, and sneakers on our feet.

Chris and I had educated ourselves from reading so many books, and television had taught us much about violence, about greed, about imagination, but it had taught us hardly anything that was practical and useful in preparing us to face reality.

Survival. That's what TV should teach innocent children. How to live in a world that really doesn't give a damn about anyone but their own—and sometimes, not even their own.

Money. If there was one thing we'd learned during the years of our imprisonment, it was that money came first, and everything else came after. How well Momma had said it long ago: "It's not love that makes the world go 'round—it's money."

I took Cory's small clothes from the suitcase, his second-best sneakers, two pair of pajamas, and all the time tears fell and my nose ran. In one of the side pockets of the suitcase, I found sheet music he must have packed himself. Oh, it did hurt to pick up those sheets, and see the lines he had drawn by using a ruler, and his little black notes, and half-notes so

crookedly done. And beneath the musical score (he had taught himself to write down the music from an encyclopedia Chris had found for him) Cory had written words to a half-completed song:

I wish the night would end,
I wish the day'd begin,
I wish it would rain or snow,
Or the wind would blow,
Or the grass would grow,
I wish I had yesterday,
I wish there were games to play

Oh, God! Was there ever such a sad, melancholy song? So these were the lyrics to a tune I'd heard him play over and over. Wishing, always wishing for something he couldn't have. Something all other little boys accepted as a normal, unremarkable part of their lives.

I could have screamed the anguish I felt.

* * *

I went to sleep with Cory on my mind. And, like always, when I was most troubled, I fell into dreams. But this time I was only me. I found myself on a winding, dirt path with wide, flat pastures that grew wildflowers of crimson and pink on the left, and on the right, yellow and white blossoms swayed gently in the soft, warm kind breezes of eternal spring. A small child clung to my hand. I looked down, expecting to see Carrie—but it was Cory!

He was laughing and happy, and he skipped along beside me, his short legs trying to keep pace with mine, and in his hand he held a bouquet of the wildflowers. He smiled up at me and was about to speak when we heard the twitterings of many brightly colored birds in the parasol trees ahead.

A tall, slim man with golden hair, his skin deeply tanned, wearing white tennis clothes, came striding forward from a glorious garden of abundant trees and radiant flowers,

including roses of all colors. He paused a dozen yards away and held his arms out to Cory.

My heart, even in my dream, pounded in excitement and joy! It was Daddy! Daddy had come to meet Cory so he wouldn't have to travel alone the rest of the way. And though I knew I should release Cory's small hot hand, I would hold him forever with me.

Daddy looked at me, not with pity, not with reprimand, but only with pride and admiration. And I let go of Cory's hand and stood to watch him joyfully run into Daddy's arms. He was swept up by powerful arms that once used to hold me and make me feel all the world was a wonderful thing. And I would step down the path, too, and feel those arms about me once again, and allow Daddy to take me where he would.

* * *

"Cathy, wake up!" said Chris, sitting on my bed and shaking me. "You're talking in your sleep, and laughing and crying, and saying hello, and then good-bye. Why is it you dream so much?"

My dream spilled from me so fast my words were garbled. Chris just sat there and stared at me, as did Carrie, who had awakened to hear as well. It had been so long since I last saw my father, his face had faded in my memory, but as I looked at Chris, I grew very confused. He was so very much like Daddy, only younger.

That dream was to haunt me many a day, pleasantly. It gave me peace. It gave me knowledge I hadn't had before. People never really died. They only went on to a better place, to wait a while for their loved ones to join them. And then once more they went back to the world, in the same way they had arrived the first time around.

Escape



November tenth. This was to be our last day in prison. God would not deliver us, we would deliver ourselves.

As soon as the hour passed ten, tonight, Chris would commit his final robbery. Our mother had visited to stay but a few minutes, ill at ease with us now, very obviously so. “Bart and I are going out tonight. I don’t want to, but he insists. You see, he doesn’t understand why I look so sad.”

I bet he didn’t understand. Chris slung over his shoulder the dual pillowcases in which to carry back heavy jewels. He stood in the open doorway and gave Carrie and me one long, long look before he closed the door and used his wooden key to lock us in, for he couldn’t leave the door open, and in this way alert the grandmother, if she came to check. We couldn’t hear Chris steal along the long dark northern corridor, for the walls were too thick, and the hall carpet too plush and sound-proofing.

Side by side Carrie and I lay, my arms protectively around her.

If that dream hadn’t come to tell me Cory was well taken care of, I would have cried not to feel him close still. I couldn’t help but ache for a little boy who had called me Momma whenever he was sure his older brother wouldn’t overhear. Always he’d been so afraid Chris might consider him a sissy if he knew how much he missed and needed his mother, so much so, he had to make do with me. And though I’d told him Chris would never laugh, or jeer, for he had been very needing of a mother too, once upon a time, still Cory would keep it a secret just between him and me—and Carrie. He had to pretend to be manly, and convince himself it didn’t matter if he had neither a mother, nor a father, when all along it did matter, a great deal.

I held Carrie tight, tight against me, vowing that if ever I had a child, or children, they'd never feel a need for me that I didn't sense and respond to. I'd be the best mother alive.

Hours dragged by like years, and still Chris didn't return from his last foray into our mother's grand suite of rooms. Why was it taking so long this time? Wide awake and miserable, I was filled with fears, and envisioned all the calamities that could stay him.

Bart Winslow ... the suspicious husband ... he'd catch Chris! Call the police! Have Chris thrown in jail! Momma would stand calmly by and mildly express shock and faint surprise that someone would dare steal from her. Oh, no, of course she didn't have a son. Everybody knew she was childless, for heaven's sake. Had they ever seen her with a child? She didn't know that blond boy with blue eyes so very much like her own. After all, she did have many cousins scattered about—and a thief was a thief, even if he were blood kin, some fifth or sixth distant relative.

And that grandmother! If she caught him—the worst possible punishment!

Dawn came up quickly, faint, shrilled by a cock's crow.

The sun lingered reluctantly on the horizon. Soon it would be too late to go. The morning train would pass on by the depot, and we needed several hours' head start before the grandmother opened the bedroom door and found us gone. Would she send out a search party? Notify the police? Or would she, more likely, just let us go, glad, at last, to be rid of us?

Despairing, I ascended the stairs to the attic to stare outside. Foggy, cold day. Last week's snow lay in patches here and there. A dull, mysterious day that seemed incapable of bringing us joy or freedom. I heard that rooster cockle-doodle-doo again; it sounded muffled and far away as I silently prayed that, whatever Chris was doing, and wherever he was, he heard it too, and would put some speed in his feet.

* * *

I remember, oh, how I remember that chilly early morning when Chris stole back into our room. Lying beside Carrie, I was tentatively on the edge of fretful sleep, so it was easy for me to bolt widely awake when the locked door to our room opened. I'd lain there, fully dressed, ready to go, waiting, even in the fitful dreams that came and went, for Chris to come back and save us all.

Just inside the door, Chris hesitated, his glazed eyes staring over at me. Then he drifted in my direction, in no great hurry, as he should be. All the while I could only stare at the pillowcases one inside the other—so flat! So empty looking! “Where are the jewels?” I cried. “Why did you stay so long? Look out the windows, the sun is rising! We'll never make it to the train depot on time!” My voice turned hard, accusing, angry. “You turned chivalrous again, didn't you? That's why you've come back without Momma's precious jewelry!”

He had reached the bed by this time, and he just stood there with the flat, empty pillowcases hanging from his hand.

“Gone,” he said dully. “All the jewelry was gone.”

“Gone?” I asked sharply, sure he was lying, covering up, still unwilling to take what his mother so cherished. Then I looked at his eyes. “Gone? Chris, the jewelry is always there. And what's the matter with you, anyway—why do you look so queer?”

He sagged down on his knees beside the bed, gone boneless and limp as his head drooped forward, and his face nestled down on my breast. Then he began to sob! Dear God! What had gone wrong? Why was he crying? It's terrible to hear a man cry, and I thought of him as a man now, not a boy.

My arms held him, my hands caressed and stroked his hair, his cheek, his arms, his back, and then I kissed him, all in an effort to soothe whatever awful thing had happened. I did what I had seen our mother do for him in times of distress, and intuitively I had no fears that his passions would be aroused into wanting more than just what I was willing to give.

Actually, I had to force him to talk, to explain.

He choked off his sobs, and swallowed them. He wiped away the tears and dried his face with the edge of the sheet. Then he turned his head so he could stare at those horrible paintings depicting hell and all its torment. His phrases came broken, disjointed, stopped often by sobs he had to hold back.

This was the way he told it, while on his knees beside my bed, while I held his shaky hands, and his body trembled, and his blue eyes were dark and bleak, warning me I was about to be shocked. Forewarned as I was, I still wasn't prepared for what I heard.

“Well,” he began, breathing hard, “I realized that something was different the second I stepped into her suite of rooms. I beamed my flashlight around without turning on a lamp, and I just couldn't believe it! The irony of it ... the hateful, despicable bitterness of making our move too late! Gone, Cathy—Momma and her husband have gone! Not just to some neighbor's party, but really gone! They had taken with them all those little mementos that made their rooms personal: the trinkets gone from the dresser, the geegaws from that dressing table, the creams, lotions, powders, and perfumes—everything that once was there, gone. Nothing was on her dressing table.

“It made me so mad, I ran about like someone demented, dashing from here to there, pulling open drawers and ransacking them, hoping to find something of value that we could pawn ... and I didn't find anything! Oh, they did a very good job—not even a little porcelain pillbox was left, or one of those heavy Venetian-glass paperweights that cost a fortune. I ran into the dressing room and yanked open all the drawers. Sure, she had left *some* things—junk of no value to us, or anyone: lipsticks, cold creams, and stuff like that. Then I pulled open that special bottom drawer—you know the one she told us about a long time ago, never thinking we'd be the ones to steal from her. I pulled that drawer all the way out, like you have to, and set it aside on the floor. Then I felt in back for the tiny little button you have to push in a certain combination of numbers—her birthday numbers, or else she would herself forget the combination. Remember how she laughed when she told us that? The secret compartment sprang open, and there were the velvet trays where dozens of rings should have been

fitted into small slots, and there wasn't a ring there—not one! And the bracelets, necklaces, and earrings gone, every last thing was gone, Cathy, even that tiara you tried on. Oh, golly, you don't know how I felt! So many times you pleaded with me to take just one little ring, and I wouldn't, because I believed in her.”

“Don't cry again, Chris,” I begged when he choked up, and he put his face down on my chest again. “You didn't know she'd go, not so soon after Cory's death.”

“Yeah, she grieves a lot, doesn't she?” he asked bitterly, and my fingers twined in his hair.

“Really, Cathy,” he went on, “I lost all control. I ran from closet to closet, and threw out the winter clothes, and soon found all the summer clothes were gone, along with two sets of their fine luggage. I emptied shoe boxes, and rifled the closet drawers, and looked for the tin of coins he keeps, but he'd taken that, too, or hidden it away in a better place. I searched everything, and everywhere, feeling frantic. I even considered taking one of the huge lamps, but I hefted one and it weighed a ton. She'd left her mink coats, and I thought about stealing one of those, but you'd tried them on, and all were too large—and someone on the outside would be suspicious if an adolescent girl was wearing a too-large coat of mink. The fur stoles were gone. And if I took one of the full-length fur coats, it would fill all of one suitcase, and then we wouldn't have room for our own things, and the paintings I might be able to sell—and we need what clothes we have. Really, I almost tore out my hair, I was that desperate to find something of value, for how would we ever manage without enough money? You know, at that minute, when I stood in the middle of her room and thought about our situation, and Carrie's poor health, it didn't matter a damn to me then whether or not I became a doctor. All I wanted was to get us out of here!

“Then, just when it seemed I wasn't going to find anything to steal, I looked in the lower drawer of the nightstand. I'd never checked that drawer before. And in it, Cathy, was a silver-framed photograph of Daddy, and their marriage license,

and a small velvet box of green. Cathy, inside that little green velvet box, inside was Momma's wedding band, and her engagement diamond—the ones our father gave her. It hurt to think she would take everything, and leave his photograph as valueless, and the two rings he'd given her. And then the strangest thought fled through my mind. Maybe she knew who was stealing the money from her room, and she left those things there deliberately."

"No!" I scoffed, tossing that gracious consideration away. "She just doesn't care about him anymore—she has her *Bart*."

"Regardless, I was grateful to find something. So the sack isn't as empty as it may appear. We've got Daddy's photograph, and her rings—but it's gonna take an awful, unbearable crisis to make me pawn either of those rings."

I heard the warning in his voice, and it didn't sound the least sincere, like it should have. It was as if he was putting on an act of being the same old trusting Christopher Doll, who saw good in everyone. "Go on. What happened next?" For he'd stayed away so long, what he'd just told me wouldn't have taken all the night.

"I figured if I couldn't rob our mother, then I would go on to the grandmother's room and rob her."

Oh, my God, I thought. He didn't ... he couldn't have. And yet, what perfect revenge!

"You know she has jewels, lots of rings on her fingers, and that damned diamond brooch she wears every day of her life as part of her uniform, plus she has those diamonds and rubies we saw her wear at the Christmas party. And, of course, I figured she had more loot to be taken, as well. So, I stole down all the long dark halls, and I tiptoed right up to the grandmother's closed door."

Oh, the nerve to do that. I would never . . .

"A thin line of yellow light showed underneath, to warn me she was still awake. That made me bitter, for she should have been asleep. And under less driven circumstances, that light would have made me stay my hand, and act less foolhardy

than I did—or maybe you could call it ‘audacious’ now that you’re planning on being a woman of words one day, after you’ve been a woman of action.”

“Chris! Don’t meander from the subject! Go on! Tell me what crazy thing you did! If I had been you, I would have turned around and come straight back here!”

“Well, I am not you, Catherine Doll, I am *me* I used some caution, and very carefully eased open her door just a slot, though I feared every second it would creak or squeak and give me away. But someone keeps the hinges well-oiled, and I put an eye to the crack without fear of her being alerted, and I peered inside.”

“You saw her naked!” I interrupted.

“No!” he answered impatiently, annoyed, “I didn’t see her naked, and I’m glad I didn’t. She was in the bed, under the covers, sitting up and wearing a long-sleeved nightgown of some heavy material, and it had a collar and was buttoned down the front to her waist. But I did catch her naked in a small way. You know that steel-blue hair we hate so much. It *wasn’t* on her head! It was perched crookedly on a dummy head on her night-stand, as if she wanted the reassurance of having it near in case of an emergency during the night.”

“She wears a wig?” I asked in total astonishment, though I should have known. Anybody who persistently took their hair and skinned it back from their face so tightly would sooner or later go bald.

“Yeah, you bet, she wears a wig, and that hair she had on during the Christmas party, that must have been a wig, too. What hair she’s got left on her head is sparse and yellow-white, and there are wide pink places on her scalp with no hair at all, but short baby fuzz. She had rimless glasses perched on the end of that long nose, and you know we’ve never seen her with glasses on. Her thin lips were pursed up in a disapproving line as she moved her eyes slowly from line to line of the large black book she was holding—the Bible, of course. There she sat, reading of harlots and other wicked deeds, enough to put a terrible frown on her face. And as I watched, knowing I

couldn't steal from her now, she laid aside the Bible and marked the place with a postcard, then put the Bible on the nightstand, then left the bed and knelt beside it. She bowed her head, templed her fingers under her chin, just the way we do, and she said silent prayers that lasted and lasted. Then she spoke aloud: 'Forgive me, Lord, for all my sins. I have always done what I thought best, and if I made mistakes, please believe I thought I was doing right. May I forever find grace in thine eyes. Amen.' She crawled back into bed, and then she reached to turn out the lamp. I stood in the hall and wondered what to do. I just couldn't come back to you empty-handed, for I hope we never have to pawn the rings our father gave our mother."

He continued, and now his hands were in my hair, cupping my head. "I went to that main rotunda, where the chest is near the staircase, and found our grandfather's room. I didn't know if I would have the nerve to open *his* door, and face up to that man who lies perpetually dying, year after year.

"But, this was my only chance, and I would make the most of it. Come what may, I raced down the stairs noiselessly like a real thief, carrying my pillowcase sack. I saw the big rich rooms, so grand and fine, and I wondered, just as you have wondered how it would be to grow up in a house like this one. I wondered how it felt to be waited on by many servants, and catered to hand and foot. Oh, Cathy, it is one beautiful house, and the furniture must have been imported from palaces. It looks too fragile to sit on, and too lovely to feel comfortable with, and there are original oil paintings, I know them when I see them, and sculptures and busts, mostly on top of pedestals, and rich Persian rugs and Oriental rugs. And, of course, I knew the way to the library, since you had asked so darned many questions of Momma. And you know what, Cathy? I was darned glad you had asked so many questions or else I may well have gotten lost; there's so many halls that shoot off right and left from the center stem.

"But it was easy enough to get to the library: a long, dark, really immense room, and it was quiet as a graveyard. The ceiling must have been twenty feet high. The shelves went all the way up, and there was a little stairway of iron that curved

to a second level, and a balcony where you could reach books on that level. And on the lower level were two wooden ladders that slid along railings put there for that very purpose. Never have I seen so many books in a private home. No wonder the books Momma brought us had never been missed—though when I looked carefully, I could see the gaping spaces, like teeth, missing in the long rows of leather-bound, gold-tooled, hubbedspined expensive books. A desk was there, dark and massive, must have weighed a ton, and a tall leather swivel chair was behind it, and I could just picture our grandfather sitting there, issuing orders right and left, and using the phones on his desk—there were six telephones, Cathy—six! Though when I checked, thinking I might have use for them, they were all disconnected. To the left of the desk was a row of tall narrow windows that looked out on a private garden—a really spectacular view, even at night. There was a dark mahogany filing system made to look like fine furniture. Two very long, soft, tan-colored sofas were set out from the walls about three feet, giving you plenty of room to move behind them. Chairs were placed near the fireplace, and, of course, there was a batch of tables and chairs and things to stumble against, and an awful lot of bric-a-brac.”

I sighed, for he was telling me so much of what I’d longed to hear, and yet, I kept waiting for that terrible thing that kept me on edge, waiting for the knife to plunge.

“I thought that money could be hidden in that desk. I used my flashlight and set about pulling open each drawer. They were all unlocked. And it was no wonder, because they were all empty—completely empty! This sort of threw me—for why have a desk if you don’t keep it full of junk? Important papers you lock away in a bank vault, or your own private vault; you don’t leave them in locked desk drawers that a clever thief could force open. All those empty drawers without rubber bands, paper clips, pencils, pens, notepads, and other sorts of odds and ends—why have a desk if not for this? You just don’t know the suspicions that jumped into my thoughts. And that’s when I made up my mind. I could look across the long library and see the door to our grandfather’s room. Slowly, I headed that way. I was going to see him at last ...

face to face with the detested grandfather, who was also our half-uncle.

“I pictured our encounter. He’d be on the bed, sick, but hard and still mean and cold as ice. I’d kick open the door, switch on the light, and he’d see me. He’d gasp! He’d recognize me ... he’d have to know who I was, just one look and he’d know. And I’d say, ‘Here I am, Grandfather—the grandson you never wanted to be born. Upstairs in a locked bedroom of the northern wing, I have two sisters. And once I had a younger brother, but he’s dead now—and you helped kill him!’ All that was in my mind, though I doubt I would really have said any of it. Although you no doubt would have screamed it out—just as Carrie would have if she had the words to express herself—which you do. Still maybe I would have said them, just for the joy of watching him wince, or maybe he would have shown sorrow, or grief, or pity ... or, more likely, fierce indignation that we were living at all! I know this, I couldn’t stand another minute of being kept a prisoner, and having Carrie pass away like Cory did.”

I held my breath. Oh, the nerve of him, to face up to the detested grandfather, even if he was still lying on his deathbed, and that solid copper coffin was still waiting for him to fill it. I was waiting breathlessly for what came next.

“I turned the knob very cautiously, planning on taking him by surprise, and then I felt ashamed to be so timid, and I thought I would act boldly—and I lifted my foot and kicked open that door! It was so dark in there I couldn’t see a damned thing. And I didn’t want to use the flashlight. I reached inside the door and felt around for a wall switch, but I couldn’t find one. I beamed the flashlight straight ahead and saw a hospital bed painted white. I stared and stared, for I was seeing something I hadn’t expected to see—the blue-and-white-striped ticking of the mattress that was doubled over on itself. Empty bed, empty room. No dying grandfather there, gasping out his last breaths, and connected up to all kinds of machines to keep him alive—it was like a punch in the stomach, Cathy, not to see him there, when I’d prepared myself to meet him.

“In a corner not too far from the bed, was a walking cane, and not so far from the cane was that shiny wheelchair we’d seen him in. It still looked new—he must not have used it often. There was only one piece of furniture besides two chairs, and that was a single dresser . . . and not one item was on the top. No brush, comb, nothing. The room was as neat as the suite of rooms Momma had left, only this was a simple, plain room with paneled walls. And the grandfather’s sickroom had the feel of not being used for a long, long time. The air was stale, musty. Dust was on the dresser top. I ran about, looking for something of value we could hock later on. Nothing—again nothing! I was so full of angry frustration that I dashed back into the library and sought out that special landscape painting Momma told us covered a wall safe.

“Now you know how many times we’ve watched thieves on TV open wall safes, and it seemed to me perfectly simple when you knew how. All you had to do was put your ear to the combination lock, and turn it slowly, slowly, and listen carefully for the betraying clicks . . . and count them . . . I thought. Then you would know the numbers, and dial them correctly—and next, *viola!* The safe would open.”

I interrupted: “The grandfather—why wasn’t he on the bed?”

He went on as if I hadn’t spoken: “There I was, listening, hearing the clicks. I thought, if I lucked out, and the steel safe did open—it too would be empty. And you know what happened, Cathy? I heard the betraying clicks that told me the combination—hah-hah! I couldn’t count fast enough! Nevertheless, I took the chance of turning the top wheel of the lock, thinking I just might by happenstance come up with the right choice of numbers, in the right sequence. The safe door didn’t open. I heard the clicks, and I didn’t understand. Encyclopedias don’t give you good lessons on how to become a thief—that must come naturally. Then I looked about for something slim and strong to insert into the lock, hoping maybe I could trip a spring that would open the door. Cathy, that was when I heard footsteps!”

“Oh, hell and damnation!” I swore, frustrated for him.

“Right! I quickly ducked behind one of the sofas and fell flat on my stomach—and that’s when I remembered I’d left my flashlight in the grandfather’s small room.”

“Oh, dear God!”

“Right! My goose was cooked, so I thought, but I lay perfectly still and quiet, and into the library strolled a man and a woman. She spoke first and had a sweet-girlish voice.

“ ‘John,’ she said, ‘I swear I’m not just hearin’ things! I did hear noises comin’ from this room.’

“ ‘You’re always hearin’ somethin’,’ complained a heavy, guttural voice. It was John, the butler with the bald head.

“And the bickering pair made a half-hearted search of the library, then the small bedroom beyond, and I held my breath, waiting for them to discover my flashlight, but for some reason they didn’t. I suspect it was because John didn’t want to look at anything but that woman. Just as I was about to get up and make my move to leave the library, they came back, and so help me God, they fell down on the very sofa I was hiding behind! I put my head down on my folded arms and prepared for a nap, guessing you’d be on edge up here, wondering why I didn’t come back. But since you were locked in, I didn’t fear you’d come looking for me. It’s a good thing I didn’t go to sleep.”

“Why?”

“Let me tell it in my own way, Cathy, please. ‘See,’ said John, as they came back to the library and sat on the sofa, ‘didn’t I tell yuh nobody’d be in there or in here?’ He sounded smug, pleased with himself. ‘Really, Livvy,’ he went on, ‘you’re so damned nervous all the time, it takes the pleasure out of this.’

“ ‘But, John,’ she said, ‘I *did* hear something.’

“ ‘Like I said before,’ John answered, ‘yuh hear too much of what ain’t there. Hell’s bells, jus’ this mornin’ you were speakin’ of mice in the attic again, and how noisy they are.’ John chuckled then, a soft and low chuckle, and he must have done something to that pretty girl to send her into peals of silly

giggles, and if she was protesting, she didn't do a good job of it.

“Then that John, he murmured, ‘That old bitch is killin’ all the little mice in the attic. She carries up to them food in a picnic basket . . . enough food to kill a whole German army of mice.’ ”

You know, I heard Chris say that, and I didn't think anything unusual, that's how dumb I was, how innocent and still trusting.

Chris cleared his throat before he continued. “I got a queer feeling in my stomach, and my heart began to make so much noise, I thought that couple on the sofa would surely hear.

“ ‘Yeah,’ said Livvy, ‘she's a mean, hard old woman, and t' tell you the truth, I always took to the old man better—at least he knew how to smile. But her—she don't know how. Time and time ag'in, I come in this room to clean up, and I find her in *his* room . . . she's just standing there staring at his empty bed, and she's got this queer, little tight smile that I take for gloating because he's dead, and she's outlived him, and now she's free, and don't have nobody ridin' her back and tellin' her not to do this, and don't do that, and jump when I speak. God, sometimes I wonder how she stood him, and he stood her. But now that he's dead, she's got his money.’

“ ‘Yeah, sure, she's got some,’ said John. ‘She's got her own money that her family left her. But her daughter, she got all the millions old Malcolm Neal Foxworth left.’

“ ‘Well,’ said Livvy, ‘that old witch, she don't need no more. Don't blame the old man for leavin' his entire estate to his daughter. She put up with a lot of mess from him, makin' her wait on him hand and foot when he had nurses to hand him things. Still he treated her like some slave. But now she's free, too, and married to that handsome young husband, and she's still young and beautiful, and with loads of money. Wonder what it would feel like to be her? Some people, they get all the luck. Me . . . I never had any.’

“ ‘What about me, Livvy, honey? You got me—at least until the next pretty face comes along.’

“And there I was, behind the sofa, hearing all of this, and feeling numb with shock. I felt ready to throw up, but I lay very quiet and listened to that couple on the sofa talk on and on. I wanted to get up and run fast to you and Carrie, and take you out of this place before it was too late.

“But there I was, caught. If I moved they’d see me. And that John, he’s related to our grandmother . . . third cousin, so Momma said . . . not that I think a third cousin matters one way or another, but apparently that John has our grandmother’s confidence, or else she wouldn’t allow him so much freedom to use her cars. You’ve seen him, Cathy, the bald-headed man who wears livery.”

Sure, I knew who he meant, but I could only lie there, feeling my own sort of numb shock that made me speechless.

“So,” Chris went on in that deadly monotone that didn’t show that he was concerned, frightened, surprised, “while I hid behind the sofa, and put my head down on my arms and closed my eyes and tried to make my heart stop beating so damned loud, John and the maid began to get really serious with each other. I heard their little movements as he began to take off her clothes, and she began to work on his clothes.”

“They undressed each other?” I asked. “She actually helped him off with his clothes?”

“It sounded to me that way,” he said flatly.

“She didn’t scream or protest?”

“Heck, no. She was all for it! And by golly, it took them so everlastingly long! Oh, the noises they made, Cathy—you wouldn’t believe it. She moaned and screamed and gasped and panted, and he grunted like a stuck pig, but I guess he must have been pretty good at it, for she shrieked at the end like someone gone crazy. Then, when it was over, they had to lie and smoke cigarettes and gossip about what goes on in this house—and believe me, there’s little they don’t know. And then they made love a second time.”

“Twice in the same night?”

“It’s possible to do.”

“Chris, why do you sound so funny?”

He hesitated, pulled away a bit, and studied my face. “Cathy, weren’t you listening? I went to a great deal of pains to tell you everything just as it happened. Didn’t you hear?”

Hear? Sure, I’d heard, everything.

He’d waited too long to rob Momma of her hoard of hard won jewelry. He should have been taking a little all along, like I’d begged him to do.

So, Momma and her husband were off on another vacation. What kind of news was that? They were always coming and going. They’d do anything to escape this house, and I can’t say I blamed them. Weren’t we prepared to do the same thing?

I screwed up my brows and gave Chris a long questioning look. Obviously he knew something he wasn’t telling me. He was still protecting her; he still loved her.

“Cathy,” he began, his voice jagged and torn.

“It’s all right, Chris. I’m not blaming you. So our dear, sweet, kind, loving mother and her handsome young husband have gone off on another vacation and taken all the jewelry with them. We’ll still get by.” Say good-bye to security in the outside world. But we were still going! We’d work, we’d find a way to support ourselves, and pay doctors to make Carrie well again. Never mind about jewelry; never mind about the callousness of our mother’s act, to leave us without explaining where she was going, and when she was coming back. By now we were accustomed to ugly, harsh, thoughtless indifference. *Why so many tears, Chris—why so many?*

“Cathy!” he raged, turning his tear-streaked face to lock his eyes with mine. “Why aren’t you listening and reacting? Where are your ears? Did you hear what I said? Our grandfather is dead! He’s been dead for almost a year!”

Maybe I hadn’t been truly listening, not carefully enough. Maybe his distress had kept me from hearing everything. Now it hit me fully for the first time. If the grandfather was truly dead—this was stunning good news! Now Momma would

inherit! We'd be rich! She'd unlock the door, she'd set us free. Now we didn't have to run away.

Other thoughts came flooding, a torrent of devastating questions—Momma hadn't told us when her father died. When she knew how long these years had been for us, why had she kept us in the dark, waiting always? Why? Bewildered, confused, I didn't know which emotion to feel: happy, glad, sorry. A strange paralyzing fear settled the indecision.

“Cathy,” whispered Chris, though why he bothered to whisper I don't know. Carrie wouldn't hear. Her world was set apart from ours. Carrie was suspended between life and death, leaning more toward Cory every moment she starved herself and abandoned the will to live on without her other half. “Our mother deceived us deliberately, Cathy. Her father died, and months later his will was read, and all the while she kept quiet and left us here to wait and rot. Nine months ago we would all have been nine months healthier! Cory would be alive today if Momma had let us out the day her father died, or even the day after the will was read.”

Overwhelmed, I fell into the deep well of betrayal Momma had dug to drown us in. I began to cry.

“Save your tears for later,” said Chris, who had just cried himself. “You haven't heard everything. There's more ... much more, and worse.”

“More?” What more could he tell me? Our mother was proven a liar and a cheat, a thief who'd stolen our youth, and killed Cory in the process of acquiring a fortune she didn't want to share with children she no longer wanted, or loved. Oh, how well she explained to us what to expect that night when she gave us our little litany to say when we were unhappy. Did she know, or guess, way back then, that she would become the *thing* the grandfather would make of her? I toppled over into Chris's arms, and lay against his chest. “Don't tell me anymore! I've heard enough ... don't make me hate her more!”

“Hate ... you haven’t begun to know what hate is yet. But before I tell you the rest, keep in mind we are leaving this place, no matter what. We will go on to Florida, just like we planned. We’ll live in the sunshine and make our lives the very best we can. Not for one moment are we going to feel ashamed of what we are, or what we’ve done, for what we’ve shared between us is so small compared to what our mother has done. Even if you die before I do, I’ll remember our lives up here and in the attic. I’ll see us dancing beneath the paper flowers, with you so graceful, and me so clumsy. I’ll smell the dust and the rotting wood, and I’ll remember it as perfume sweet as roses, because without you it would have been so bleak, and so empty. You’ve given me my first taste of what love can be.

“We’re going to change. We’re going to throw out what’s worse in us and keep what’s best. But come hell or high water, we three will stick together, all for one, one for all. We’re going to grow, Cathy, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Not only that, we’re going to reach the goals we’ve set for ourselves. I’ll be the best damned doctor the world’s ever known and you will make Pavlova seem like an awkward country girl.”

I grew weary of hearing talk of love, and what the future held, possibly, when we were still behind a locked door, and death was lying beside me curled up in fetal position, with small hands praying even in sleep.

“All right, Chris, you’ve given me a breather. I’m prepared for anything. And thank you for saying all of that, and for loving me, for you haven’t gone unloved, or unadmired, yourself.” I kissed him quickly on the lips, and told him to go on, to hit me with his knockout blow.

“Really, Chris, I know you must have something perfectly awful to tell me—so out with it. Keep holding me as you tell me, and I can stand anything you have to say.”

How young I was. How unimaginative—and how confidently presuming.

Endings, Beginnings



“Guess what she told them,” Chris continued on. “Name the reason she gave for not wanting this room cleaned on the last Friday of the month.”

How could I guess? I’d need a mind like hers. I shook my head. So long ago the servants had stopped coming to this room, I had forgotten those first horrible weeks.

“Mice, Cathy,” Chris said, his blue eyes cold, hard. “*Mice!* Hundreds of mice in the attic, our grandmother invented ... clever little mice that used the stairs to steal down to the second floor. Devilish little mice that forced her to lock this door, leaving in the room—food covered over with arsenic.”

I listened and thought that an ingenious, marvelous story for keeping the servants away. The attic *was* full of mice. They *did* use the stairs.

“Arsenic is white, Cathy, *white*. When mixed with powdered sugar, you cannot taste its bitterness.”

My brain went spinning! Powdered sugar on the four daily doughnuts! One for each of us. Now only three in the basket!

“But, Chris, your story doesn’t make any sense. Why would the grandmother poison us bit by bit? Why not give us a sufficient amount to kill us immediately and have done with it?”

His long fingers went through my hair to cup my head between his palms. He spoke in a low voice: “Think back to a certain old movie we saw on TV. Remember that pretty woman who would keep house for older gentlemen—rich gentlemen, of course—and when she’d won their trust, and affection, and they had written her into their wills, each day she fed them just a little arsenic? When you digest just a fraction of arsenic each day, it is slowly absorbed by your

entire system, and each day the victim feels a little worse, but not too much so. The small headaches, stomach upsets that can easily be explained away, so that when the victim dies, say in a hospital, he already is thin, anemic, and has a long history of illnesses, hay fever, colds, and so forth. And doctors don't suspect poisoning—not when the victim has all the manifestations of pneumonia, or just plain old age, as was the case in that movie.”

“Cory!” I gasped. “Cory died of arsenic poisoning? Momma said it was pneumonia that killed him!”

“Can't she tell us anything she wants? How do we know when she's telling the truth? Maybe she didn't even take him to a hospital. And if she did, obviously the doctors didn't suspect any unnatural cause of death, or else she'd be in jail by now.”

“But, Chris,” I objected, “Momma wouldn't allow the grandmother to feed us poison! I know she wants that money, and I know she doesn't love us now as she did once—but still she would never kill us!”

Chris turned aside his head. “Okay. We've got to make a test. We're going to feed Cory's pet mouse a bit of powdered-sugar doughnut”

No! Not Mickey, who trusted and loved us—we couldn't do that. Cory had adored the little gray mouse. “Chris, let's catch another mouse—a wild one that doesn't trust us.”

“C'mon, Cathy, Mickey is an old mouse, and lame, too. It's hard to catch a mouse alive, you know that. How many have lived after the cheese was nibbled on? And when we leave, Mickey won't survive when we set him free—he's a pet now, dependent on us.”

But I was planning on taking him with us.

“Look at it this way, Cathy—Cory's dead, and he hadn't even begun to live. If the doughnuts aren't poisonous, Mickey will live, and we can take him with us, if you insist. One thing for certain—we have to know. For Carrie's sake, we've got to

be positive. Look at her. Can't you see she's dying, too? Day by day, she's losing ground—and so are we.”

* * *

On three well legs, he came staggering to us, dragging the lame leg, our sweet little gray mouse that nibbled trustingly on Chris's finger before he bit into the doughnut. He took a small piece and ate it, trustingly, believing in us, his gods, his parents, his friends. It hurt to watch.

He didn't die, not right away. He grew slow, listless, apathetic. Later on he had small fits of pain that made him whimper. In several hours he was on his back, stiff, cold. Pink toes curled up into claws. Small black bead eyes, sunken and dull. So now we knew ... for sure. God hadn't taken Cory.

“We could put the mouse in a paper sack along with two of the doughnuts and take it to the police,” said Chris tentatively, keeping his eyes averted from mine

“They'd put the grandmother in jail.”

“Yeah,” he said, and then turned his back.

“Chris, you're holding something back—what is it?”

“Later ... after we've gone. Right now I've said all I can say without throwing up. We'll leave early tomorrow morning,” he said when I didn't speak. He caught both my hands in his and squeezed them tightly. “As soon as possible, we'll get Carrie to a doctor—and ourselves too.”

* * *

Such a long day to live through. We had everything ready and nothing to do but stare at the TV for the last time. With Carrie in the corner, and the two of us on separate beds, we watched our favorite soap opera. When it was over I said, “Chris, soap people are like us—they seldom go outdoors. And when they do, we only hear about it, never see it. They loll about in living rooms, bedrooms, sit in the kitchens and sip coffee or stand up and drink martinis—but never, never go outside before our eyes. And whenever something good happens, whenever they think they're finally going to be happy, some catastrophe comes along to dash their hopes.”

Somehow I sensed someone else in the room. My breath pulled in! There stood the grandmother. Something in her stance, in her cruel, hard, gray-stone eyes showed her mocking scornful contempt, and informed me she'd been there for some time.

She spoke, her voice cold: "How sophisticated the two of you have grown while locked away from the world. You think you jokingly exaggerated the way life is—but you didn't exaggerate. You forecast it correctly. Nothing ever works out the way you think it will. In the end, you are always disappointed."

Chris and I stared at her, both chilled. The hidden sun took a nose-dive into night. She'd had her say, so she left, locking the door behind her. We sat on our separate beds, with Carrie slouched over near the corner.

"Cathy, don't look so defeated. She was only trying to put us down again. Maybe nothing did work out right for her, but that doesn't mean *we* are doomed. Let's go forth tomorrow with no great expectations of finding perfection. Then, expecting only a small share of happiness, we won't be disappointed."

If a little hill of happiness would satisfy Chris, good for him. But after all these years of striving, hoping, dreaming, longing—I wanted a mountain high! A hill wasn't enough. From this day forward, I vowed to myself, I was in control of my life. Not fate, not God, not even Chris was ever again going to tell me what to do, or dominate me in any way. From this day forward, I was my own person, to take what I would, when I would, and I would answer only to myself. I'd been kept prisoner, held captive by greed. I'd been betrayed, deceived, lied to, used, poisoned . . . but all that was over now.

I had been barely twelve years old when Momma led us through the dense piney woods on a starry, moonlit night, . . . just on the verge of becoming a woman, and in these three years and almost five months, I'd reached maturity. I was older than the mountains outside. The wisdom of the attic was in my bones, etched on my brain, part of my flesh.

The Bible said, as Chris quoted one memorable day, there was a time for everything. I figured my time for happiness was just ahead, waiting for me.

Where was that fragile, golden-fair Dresden doll I used to be? Gone. Gone like porcelain turned into steel—made into someone who would always get what she wanted, no matter who or what stood in her way. I turned my resolved gaze on Carrie, who slumped in the corner, her head so low her long hair covered her face. Only eight and a half years old, but she was so weak she shuffled like someone old; she didn't eat or speak. She didn't play with the sweet little baby who lived in the dollhouse. When I asked if she wanted to take along a few of those dolls, she kept on hanging her head.

Not even Carrie, with her stubborn, defiant ways would defeat me now. There was no one anywhere, much less an eight-year-old, who could resist the strength of my will now.

I strode over and picked her up, and though she fought weakly, her efforts to free herself were fruitless. I sat down at the table and forced food into her mouth, and made her swallow when she would spit it out. I held a glass of milk to her lips, and though she clamped those lips together, I pried them apart and forced her to swallow the milk too. She cried out that I was mean. I carried her into the bathroom, and used tissue when she refused even to do that.

In the tub I shampooed her hair. Then I dressed her in several layers of warm clothing, just as I dressed myself. And when her hair was dry, I brushed it until it shone and looked somewhat like it used to look, only far thinner, and less glorious.

All through the long hours of waiting, I held Carrie in my arms, whispering to her of the plans Chris and I had for our future—the happy lives we'd live in the golden, liquid sunshine of Florida.

Chris was in the rocker, fully clothed, and was strumming idly on Cory's guitar. "Dance, ballerina, dance," he softly chanted, and his singing voice wasn't bad at all. Maybe we

could work as musicians—a trio—if Carrie ever recovered enough to want a voice again.

On my wrist was a fourteen-karat-gold watch, made in Switzerland, that must have cost Momma several hundred dollars, and Chris had his watch, too; we weren't penniless. We had the guitar, the banjo, Chris's Polaroid camera and his many watercolors to sell—and the rings our father had given our mother.

Tomorrow morning held escape for us—but why did I keep thinking I was overlooking something very important?

Then suddenly I realized something! Something both Chris and I had ignored. If the grandmother could open our locked door, and stand quietly for so long before we noticed her . . . had she done this on other occasions? If she had, she might now know of our plans! She might have made her own plans to prevent our escape!

I looked over at Chris, wondering if I should bring this up. He couldn't hesitate *this* time and find a reason to stay . . . so I voiced my suspicion. He kept picking on the guitar, apparently not disturbed in the least. "The minute I saw her there, that thought flashed into my mind," he said. "I know she puts a great deal of trust in that butler, John, and she might very well have him waiting at the bottom of the stairs to prevent us from leaving. Let him try—nothing and no one are going to stop us from leaving early tomorrow morning!"

But the thoughts of the grandmother and her butler waiting at the bottom of the steps wouldn't go away and leave me peace. Leaving Carrie on the bed asleep, leaving Chris in the rocker and strumming the guitar, I wandered up to the attic to say good-bye.

Directly under the dangling lightbulb, I stood and looked around. My thoughts went flashing back to the first day we came up here. . . . I saw us, all four, holding hands, staring around, overwhelmed by the gargantuan attic and its ghostly furniture and clutter of dusty junk. I saw Chris up high, risking his life to hang two swings for Carrie and Cory to use. I ambled into the schoolroom, looking at the old desks where

the twins had sat to learn to read and write. I didn't glance at the stained, smelly mattress to picture us sunbathing there. That mattress put other memories in my head. I stared at the flowers with sparkling centers—and the lopsided snail, the menacing purple worm, the signs Chris and I had lettered and through all the maze of our gardens and jungle, I saw myself dancing alone, always alone, except when Chris stood in the shadows watching, making his ache my ache. For when I waltzed with Chris, I'd made him someone else.

He called up the stairs. "It's time to go, Cathy."

Quickly I raced back to the schoolroom. On the blackboard I wrote very large, using white chalk:

We lived in the attic,
Christopher, Cory, Carrie, and me,
Now there are only three.

I signed my name, and wrote down the date. In my heart I knew that the ghosts of the four of us would override all other ghosts of children shut away in an attic schoolroom. I left an enigma for someone in the future to unwind.

* * *

With Mickey in a paper sack along with two poisoned doughnuts stored in Chris's pocket, he used that wooden key and opened our prison door for the last time. We'd fight to the death if the grandmother and the butler were below. Chris carried the two suitcases filled with our clothes and other possessions, and over his shoulder he slung both Cory's beloved guitar and his banjo. He led the way down all the dim halls, to the back stairs. Carrie was in my arms, partially asleep. She weighed but a bit more than she had the night we'd taken her up these same stairs more than three years ago. Those two suitcases my brother carried were the very same ones Momma had been burdened with on that terrible night so long ago, when we were young, so loving and trusting.

Pinned inside our clothes were two small bags holding bills stolen from Momma's room, divided equally just in case something unforeseen separated Chris from me—then neither

of us would be left penniless. And Carrie was sure to be with one of us, and taken care of. In the two suitcases were the heavy coins, also put into two bags, to weigh them evenly.

Both Chris and I were very much aware of what lay waiting for us on the outside. We hadn't looked at so much TV without learning the worldly and heartless lie in wait for the naïve and innocent. We were young and vulnerable, weak, half-sick, but no longer naïve, or innocent.

My heart stood still as I waited for Chris to unlock the back door, fearful every second someone would stop us. He stepped out, smiling back at me.

It was cold outside. Patches of snow lay melting on the ground. Soon enough the snow would fly again. The gray sky above foreboded that. Still, it was no colder than in the attic. The earth felt mushy beneath our feet. Strange feeling after walking so many years on hard, level wooden floors. I was not yet feeling safe, for John could follow ... take us back, or try to.

I raised my head to sniff the clean, sharp mountain air. It was like sparkling wine to make one drunk. For a short way I kept Carrie in my arms. Then I set her on her feet. She wobbled uncertainly, stared around, disoriented and bedazed looking. She sniffled, swiped at her reddened nose so small and finely shaped. Ohhh . . . was she going to catch cold so soon?

“Cathy,” called back Chris, “you two have to hurry. We don't have much time, and it's a long, long way. Pick up Carrie when she tires.”

I caught her small hand and pulled her along. “Take deep, long breaths, Carrie. Before you know it, the fresh air, good food, and sunshine will have you feeling strong and well again.”

Her small pale face tilted upward to mine—was that hope sparking her eyes at last? “Are we going to meet Cory?”

The first question she'd asked since that tragic day when we learned Cory had died. I gazed down at her, knowing her

deepest yearning was for Cory. I couldn't say no. I just couldn't put out that flicker of hope. "Cory is in a far-far place from here. Didn't you listen when I said I saw Daddy in a beautiful garden? Didn't you hear when I said Daddy took Cory up into his arms, and now Daddy is taking care of him? They're waiting for us, and someday we'll see them again, but not for a long, long time."

"But, Cathy," she complained, puckering her fault brows, "Cory won't like that garden if I'm not there, and if he comes back looking for us, he won't know where we are."

Earnestness like that put tears in my eyes. I picked her up and tried to hold her, but she struggled free to drag her feet and hang back, twisting halfway around so she could stare back at the huge house we were leaving.

"Come, Carrie, walk faster! Cory's watching us—he wants us to escape! He's down on his knees, praying we'll get away before the grandmother sends someone to take us back and lock us up again!"

Down all the winding trails we tagged along behind Chris, who set a very fast pace. And just as I knew he would, he led us unerringly to the same little train depot that was only a tin roof supported by four wooden posts, with a rickety green bench.

The rim of the dawning sun peeked over a mountaintop, chasing away the low morning mists. The sky turned lavender-rose as we drew nearer the depot.

"Hurry, Cathy!" called Chris. "If we miss this train, we'll have to wait until four o'clock!"

Oh, God, we couldn't miss this train! If we did, the grandmother might for sure have time to catch us again!

We saw a mail truck, with a tall, broomstraw man standing near three mailbags on the ground. He took off his cap, displaying a Brillo pad of reddish hair. Genially, he smiled in our direction., "You folks are sure up early," he called to us cheerfully. "On your way to Charlottesville?"

“Yep! On our way to Charlottesville,” answered Chris, as, with relief, he put the two suitcases down.

“Pretty little girl you got there,” said the tall mailman, sweeping his pitying gaze over Carrie, who clung fearfully to my skirt. “But if you don’t mind my sayin’ so, she seems kinda peaked.”

“She’s been sick,” Chris confirmed. “But soon she’ll be better.”

The mailman nodded, seemingly believing this prognosis. “Got tickets?”

“Got money.” Then Chris added sagaciously, practicing for less reliable strangers, “But just enough to pay for the tickets.”

“Well, get it out, son, ’cause here comes the five-forty-five.”

As we rode on that morning train, headed toward Charlottesville, we saw the Foxworth mansion sitting high on the hillside. Chris and I couldn’t take our eyes from it, couldn’t help but stare at our prison from the outside. Especially we fixed our gazes on the attic windows with the closed black shutters.

Then my attention was drawn to the northern wing, riveted on that end room on the second floor. I nudged Chris as the heavy draperies parted, and the shadowy, distant form of a large old woman appeared there, staring out, looking for us ... then vanished.

Of course she could see the train, but we knew she couldn’t see us, just as we’d never been able to see the passengers. Nevertheless, Chris and I slipped down lower on our seat. “Wonder what she’s doing up there so early?” I whispered to Chris. “Usually she doesn’t carry up our food until six-thirty.”

He laughed, sounding bitter. “Oh, just another of her efforts to catch us doing something sinful and forbidden.”

Maybe so, but I wanted to know her thoughts, her feelings when she entered that room and found it empty, and the clothes gone from the closet and the drawers. And no voices, or steps overhead to come running—if she called.

* * *

In Charlottesville we bought bus tickets to Sarasota, and were told we had two hours to wait for the next Greyhound heading south. Two hours in which John could jump into a black limousine and overtake that slow train!

“Don’t think about it,” said Chris. “You don’t know that he knows about us. She’d be a fool to tell him, though he’s probably snoop enough to find out.”

We thought the best way to keep him from finding us, if he was sent to follow, would be to keep on the move. We stored our two suitcases and the guitar and banjo in a rented locker. Hand in hand, Carrie in the middle, we strolled the main streets of that city, where we knew the servants of Foxworth Hall came to visit relatives on their day off, and to shop, go to the movies, or pleasure themselves in other ways. And if this were Thursday, we’d have really been fearful. But it was Sunday.

We must have looked like visitors from another planet in our ill-fitting bulky clothes, our sneakers, our clumsily cut hair, and our pale faces. But no one really stared as I feared they would. We were accepted as just a part of the human race, and no odder than most. It felt good to be back in crowds of people, each face different.

“Wonder where everyone’s going in such a hurry?” asked Chris, just when I was speculating on the same thing.

We stopped on a corner, undecided. Cory was supposed to be buried not far from here. Oh, so much I wanted to go and find his grave and put flowers there. On another day we’d come back with yellow roses, and we’d kneel and say prayers, whether or not it did any good. For now, we had to get far, far away and not endanger Carrie more ... out of Virginia before we took her to a doctor.

It was then that Chris took the paper sack with the dead mouse and the powdered-sugar doughnuts from his jacket pocket. His solemn eyes met mine. Loosely he held that bag in front of me, studying my expression, asking with his eyes: An eye for an eye?

That paper sack represented so much. All our lost years, the lost education, the playmates and friends, and the days we could have known laughter instead of tears. In that bag were all our frustrations, humiliations, tons of loneliness, plus the punishments and disappointments—and, most of all, that bag represented the loss of Cory.

“We can go to the police and tell our story,” said Christopher, while he kept his eyes averted, “and the city will provide for you and Carrie, and you won’t have to run. You two might be put in foster homes, or an orphanage. As for me, I don’t know”

Chris never talked to me while he kept his eyes elsewhere unless he was hiding something—that special something that had to wait until we were outside of Foxworth Hall. “Okay, Chris. We’ve escaped, so out with it. What is it you keep holding back?”

His head bowed down as Carrie moved closer and clung to my skirt, though her eyes were wide with fascination as she watched the heavy flow of traffic, and the many people hurrying by, some who smiled at her.

“It’s Momma,” Chris said in a low voice. “Recall when she said she’d do anything to win back her father’s approval so she could inherit? I don’t know what he made her promise, but I did overhear the servants talking. Cathy, a few days before our grandfather died, he had a codicil added to his will. It states that if our mother is ever proven to have given birth to children by her first husband, she will have to forfeit everything she inherits—and return everything she’s bought with the money, including her clothes, jewels, investments—everything. And that’s not all; he even had it written in, that if she has children by her *second* marriage, she will lose everything too. And Momma thought he had forgiven her. He didn’t forgive, or forget. He would keep on punishing her from his grave.”

My eyes widened with shock as I added up the pieces. “You mean Momma . . . ? It was Momma, and not the grandmother?”

He shrugged, as if indifferent, when I knew he couldn't be. "I heard that old woman praying by her bed. She's evil, but I doubt she would put poison on the doughnuts herself. She would carry them up to us, and know we ate the sweets, when all along she warned us not to eat them."

"But, Chris, it couldn't have been Momma. She was on her honeymoon when the doughnuts started coming daily."

His smile came bitter, wry. "Yeah. But nine months ago the will was read; nine months ago Momma was back. Only Momma benefits from the grandfather's will—not our grandmother—she has her own money. She only brought up the baskets each day."

So many questions I had to ask—but there was Carrie, clinging to me, staring up at me. I didn't want her to know Cory had died from any but natural reasons. It was then Chris put the bag with the evidence in my hands. "It's up to you to decide. You and your intuition were right all along—if I'd have listened, Cory would be alive today."

There is no hate such as that born out of love betrayed—and my brain screamed out for revenge. Yes, I wanted to see Momma and the grandmother locked up in jail, put behind bars, convicted of premeditated murder—four counts, if intentions were counted, too. They'd be only gray mice in cages, shut up like us, only they'd have the benefit of being in the company of drug addicts, prostitutes, and other killers like themselves. Their clothes would be of gray prison cotton. No trips twice a week to the beauty salon for Momma, no makeup, no professional manicures—and a shower once a week. She'd even lose the privacy of her most personal body places. Oh, she'd suffer without furs to wear, and jewelry, and warm cruises in southern waters when the winter rolled around. There wouldn't be a handsome, adoring young husband to romp with in a grand swan bed.

I stared up at the sky where God was supposed to be—could I let Him in His own ways, balance the scales and take the burden of justice from me?

I thought it cruel, unfair, that Chris should put all the burden of decision on my shoulders. Why?

Was it because he would forgive her for anything—even the death of Cory, and her efforts to kill all of us? Would he reason that such parents as hers could pressure her into doing anything—even murder? Was there enough money in the whole world to make *me* kill my four children?

Pictures flashed in my mind, taking me back to the days before my father died. I saw us all in the back garden, laughing and happy. I saw us at the beach, sailing, swimming, or in the mountains skiing. And I saw Momma in the kitchen doing her best to cook meals to please us all.

Yeah, surely her parents would know all the ways to kill her love for us—they'd know. Or was Chris thinking, as I was, that if we went to the police and told our story, our faces would be splashed on the front pages of every newspaper in the country? Would the glare of publicity make up for what we'd lose? Our privacy—our need to stay together? Could we lose each other just to get even?

I glanced up at the sky again.

God, He didn't write the scripts for the puny little players down here. We wrote them ourselves—with each day we lived, each word we spoke, each thought we etched on our brains. And Momma had written her script, too. And a sorry one it was.

Once she'd had four children she considered perfect in every way. Now she had none. Once she had four children who loved her, and considered *her* perfect in every way—now she had none who saw her as perfect. Nor would she ever want to have others. Love for what money could buy would keep her forever faithful to that cruel codicil in her father's will.

Momma would grow old; her husband was years younger. She'd have time to feel lonely and wish she'd done it all differently. If her arms never ached to hold me again, they'd ache for Chris, and maybe Carrie ... and, most certainly, she'd want those babies that would be ours one day.

From this city we'd flee southward on a bus to make of ourselves *somebodies*. When we saw Momma again—and to be certain fate would arrange it that way—we'd look her straight in the eyes, and turn our backs.

Into the nearest green trashcan I dropped the bag, saying good-bye to Mickey, and asking him to please forgive us for what we did.

“C'mon, Cathy,” called Chris, stretching forth his hand. “What's done is done. Say good-bye to the past, and hello to the future. And we're wasting time, when already we've wasted enough. We've got everything ahead, waiting for us.”

Just the right words to make me feel real, *alive, free!* Free enough to forget thoughts of revenge. I laughed and spun about to run back to where I could put my hand in his, stretched ready and waiting. With his free arm, Chris swooped down to pick up Carrie, and he hugged her close and kissed her wan cheek. “Did you hear all of that, Carrie? We are on our way to where the flowers bloom all through the winter—in fact, flowers bloom all year long down there. Does that make you want to smile?”

A tiny smile came and went on pale lips that seemed to have forgotten how to smile. But that was enough—for now.

Epilogue



It is with relief that I end the telling of our foundation years, on which we were to base the rest of our lives.

After we escaped Foxworth Hall, we made our way, and managed, somehow, to always keep striving toward our goals.

Our lives were always to be tempestuous, but it taught both Chris and me that we were survivors. For Carrie, it was far different. She had to be persuaded to want a life without Cory, even when she was surrounded by roses.

But how we managed to survive—that's another story.

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Who remember when ...*

PART ONE



O'er the earth there comes a bloom;
Sunny light for sullen gloom;
Warm perfume for vapor cold—
I smell the rose above the mold!

—Thomas Hood

Free, at Last!



How young we were the day we escaped. How exuberantly alive we should have felt to be freed, at last, from such a grim, lonely and stifling place. How pitifully delighted we should have been to be riding on a bus that rumbled slowly southward. But if we felt joy, we didn't show it. We sat, all three, pale, silent, staring out the windows, very frightened by all we saw.

Free. Was ever a word more wonderful than that one? No, even though the cold and bony hands of death would reach out and drag us back, if God wasn't up there somewhere, or maybe down here on the bus, riding with us and looking out for us. At some time in our life we had to believe in someone.

The hours passed with the miles. Our nerves grew frazzled because the bus stopped often to pick up and let off passengers. It stopped for rest breaks, for breakfast, then to pick up a single huge black lady who stood alone where a dirt road met the concrete interstate. It took her forever to pull herself onto the bus, then lug inside the many bundles she carried with her. Just as she was finally seated, we passed over the state line between Virginia and North Carolina.

Oh! The relief to be gone from that state of our imprisonment! For the first time in years, I began to relax—a little.

We three were the youngest on the bus. Chris was seventeen years old and strikingly handsome with long, waving blond hair that just touched his shoulders, then curled upward. His darkly fringed blue eyes rivaled the color of a summer sky, and he was in personality like a warm sunny day—he put on a brave face despite the bleakness of our situation. His straight and finely shaped nose had just taken on the strength and maturity that promised to make him all that our

father had been—the type of man to make every woman’s heart flutter when he looked her way, or even when he didn’t. His expression was confident; he almost looked happy. If he hadn’t looked at Carrie he might have even *been* happy. But when he saw her sickly, pale face, he frowned and worry darkened his eyes. He began to pluck on the strings of the guitar strapped to his shoulder. Chris played “Oh Susannah,” singing softly in a sweet melancholy voice that touched my heart. We looked at each other and felt sad with the memories the tune brought back. Like one we were, he and I. I couldn’t bear to look at him for too long, for fear I would cry.

Curled up on my lap was my younger sister. She didn’t look older than three, but she was eight years old and small, so pitifully small, and weak. In her large, shadowed blue eyes lingered more dark secrets and sufferings than a child her age should know. Carrie’s eyes were old, very, very old. She expected nothing: no happiness, no love, nothing—for all that had been wonderful in her life had been taken from her. Weakened by apathy, she seemed willing to pass from life into death. It hurt to see her so alone, so terribly alone now that Cory was gone.

I was fifteen. The year was 1960, and it was November. I wanted everything, needed everything, and I was so terribly afraid I’d never in all my life find enough to make up for what I had already lost. I sat tense, ready to scream if one more bad thing happened. Like a coiled fuse attached to a time bomb, I knew that sooner or later I would explode and bring down all those who lived in Foxworth Hall!

Chris laid his hand on mine, as if he could read my mind and knew I was already thinking about how I would bring hell to those who had tried to destroy us.

He said in a low voice, “Don’t look like that, Cathy. It’s going to be all right. We’ll get by.”

He was still the eternal cockeyed optimist, believing, despite everything, that whatever happened was for the best! God, how could he think so when Cory was dead? How could that possibly be for the best?

“Cathy,” he whispered, “we have to make the most of what we have left, and that is each other. We have to accept what’s happened and go on from there. We have to believe in ourselves, our talents, and if we do, we will get what we want. It works that way, Cathy, really it does. It has to!”

He wanted to be a dull, staid doctor who spent his days in small examination rooms, surrounded by human miseries. I wanted something far more fanciful—and a *mountain* of it! I wanted all my star-filled dreams of love and romance to be fulfilled—on the stage, where I’d be the world’s *most* famous prima ballerina; nothing less would do! *That would show Momma!*

Damn you, Momma! I hope Foxworth Hall burns to the ground! I hope you never sleep a comfortable night in that grand swan bed, never again! I hope your young husband finds a mistress younger and more beautiful than you! I hope he gives you the hell you deserve!

Carrie turned to whisper: “Cathy, I don’t feel so good. My stomach, it feels funny... .” I was seized by fear. Her small face seemed unnaturally pale; her hair, once so bright and shining, hung in dull, lank strings. Her voice was merely a weak whisper.

“Darling, darling.” I comforted and then kissed her. “Hang on. We’re taking you to a doctor soon. It won’t be so long before we reach Florida and there we’ll never be locked up.”

Carrie slumped in my arms as I miserably stared out at the dangling Spanish moss that indicated we were now in South Carolina. We still had to pass through Georgia. It would be a long time before we arrived in Sarasota. Violently Carrie jerked upright and began to choke and retch.

I’d judiciously stuffed my pockets with paper napkins during our last rest break, so I was able to clean up Carrie. I handed her over to Chris so I could kneel on the floor to clean up the rest. Chris slid over to the window and tried to force it open to throw out the sodden paper napkins. The window refused to budge no matter how hard he pushed and shoved. Carrie began to cry.

“Put the napkins in the crevice between the seat and the side of the bus,” whispered Chris, but that keen-eyed bus driver must have been watching through his rear-view mirror, for he bellowed out, “You kids back there—get rid of that stinking mess some other way!” What other way but to take everything from the outside pocket of Chris’s Polaroid camera case, which I was using as a purse, and stuff the smelly napkins in there.

“I’m sorry,” sobbed Carrie as she clung desperately to Chris. “I didn’t mean to do it. Will they put us in jail now?”

“No, of course not,” said Chris in his fatherly way. “In less than two hours we’ll be in Florida. Just try to hang on until then. If we get off now we’ll lose the money we’ve paid for our tickets, and we don’t have much money to waste.”

Carrie began to whimper and tremble. I felt her forehead and it was clammy, and now her face wasn’t just pale, but white! Like Cory’s before he had died.

I prayed that just once God would have some mercy on us. Hadn’t we endured enough? Did it have to go on and on? While I hesitated with the squeamish desire to vomit myself, Carrie let go again. I couldn’t believe she had anything left. I sagged against Chris while Carrie went limp in his arms and looked heartbreakingly near unconsciousness. “I think she’s going into shock,” whispered Chris, his face almost as pale as Carrie’s.

This was when a mean, heartless passenger really began to complain, and loudly, so the compassionate ones looked embarrassed and undecided as to what to do to help us. Chris’s eyes met mine. He asked a mute question—what were we to do next?

I was beginning to panic. Then, down the aisle, swaying from side to side as she advanced toward us, came that huge black woman smiling at us reassuringly. She had paper bags with her which she held for me to drop the smelly napkins in. With gestures but no words she patted my shoulder, chucked Carrie under the chin and then handed me a handful of rags taken from one of her bundles. “Thank you,” I whispered, and

smiled weakly as I did a better job of cleaning myself, Carrie and Chris. She took the rags and stuffed them in the bag, then stood back as if to protect us.

Full of gratitude, I smiled at the very, very fat woman who filled the aisle with her brilliantly gowned body. She winked, then smiled back.

“Cathy,” said Chris, his expression more worried than before, “we’ve got to get Carrie to a doctor, and soon!”

“But we’ve paid our way to Sarasota!”

“I know, but this is an emergency.”

Our benefactor smiled reassuringly, then she leaned over to peer into Carrie’s face. She put her large black hand to Carrie’s clammy brow, then put her fingers to her pulse. She made some gestures with her hands which puzzled me, but Chris said, “She must not be able to talk, Cathy. Those are the signs deaf people make.” I shrugged to tell her we didn’t understand her signs. She frowned, then whipped from a dress pocket beneath a heavy red sweater she wore a pad of multicolored sheets of notepaper and very swiftly she wrote a note which she handed to me.

My name Henrietta Beech, she’d written, Can hear, but no talk. Little girl is very, very sick and need good doctor. I read this, then looked at her hoping she’d have more information. “Do you know of a good doctor?” I asked. She nodded vigorously, then quickly dashed off another green note. Your good fortune I be on your bus, and can take you to my own doctor-son, who is very best doctor.

“Good golly,” murmured Chris when I handed him the note, “we sure must be under a lucky star to have someone to direct us to such a doctor.”

“Look here, driver,” yelled the meanest man on the bus. “Get that sick kid to a hospital! Damned if I paid my good money to ride on a stinking bus!”

The other passengers looked at him with disapproval, and I could see in the rear-view mirror that the driver’s face flushed with anger, or perhaps it was humiliation. In the mirror our

eyes met. He lamely called to me. "I'm sorry but I've got a wife and five kids and if I don't keep my schedules, then my wife and kids won't eat, because I'll be out of a job." Mutely I pleaded with my eyes, making him mumble to himself, "Damn Sundays. Let the week days go by just fine, then comes Sunday, damn Sundays."

This was when Henrietta Beech seemed to have heard enough. Again she picked up her pencil and notepad and wrote. This note she showed to me.

Okay, man in driver's seat who hates Sundays. Keep on ignoring little sick girl, and her parents will sue big shot bus owners for two million!

No sooner had Chris had the chance to skim this note than she was waddling up the aisle and she pushed the note into the driver's face. Impatiently he shoved it away, but she thrust it forward again, and this time he made an attempt to read it while keeping one eye on the traffic.

"Oh, God," sighed the driver whose face I could clearly see in the mirror. "The nearest hospital is twenty miles off my route."

Both Chris and I watched, fascinated, as the mammoth black lady made gestures and signals that left the driver as frustrated as we had been. Once again she had to write a note, and whatever she wrote in that one soon had him turning the bus off the wide highway onto a side road that led into a city named Clairmont. Henrietta Beech stayed with the driver, obviously giving him instructions, but she took the time to look back at us and shine on us a brilliant smile, assuring us that everything would be just fine.

Soon we were rolling along quiet, wide streets with trees that arched gracefully overhead. The houses I stared at were large, aristocratic, with verandas and towering cupolas. Though in the mountains of Virginia it had already snowed once or twice, autumn had not yet laid a frosty hand here. The maples, beeches, oaks and magnolias still held most of their summer leaves, and a few flowers still bloomed.

The bus driver didn't think Henrietta Beech was directing him right, and to be honest I didn't think she was either. Really, they didn't put medical buildings on this kind of residential street. But just as I was beginning to get worried, the bus jerked to a sudden halt in front of a big white house perched on a low, gentle hill and surrounded by spacious lawns and flower beds.

"You kids!" the bus driver bellowed back to us, "pack your gear, turn in your tickets for a refund, or use them before the time limit expires!" Then quickly he was out of the bus and opening up the locked underbelly, and from there he pulled out forty or so suitcases before he came to our two. I slung Cory's guitar and banjo over my shoulders, as Chris very gently, and with a great deal of tenderness, lifted Carrie in his arms.

Like a fat mother hen, Henrietta Beech hustled us up the long brick walk to the front veranda and there I hesitated, staring at the house, the double black doors. To the right a small sign read FOR PATIENTS ONLY. This was obviously a doctor who had offices in his own home. Our two suitcases were left back in the shade near the concrete sidewalk while I scanned the veranda to spy a man sleeping in a white wicker chair. Our good Samaritan approached him with a wide smile before she gently touched him on the arm, and when he still slept on she gestured for us to advance and speak for ourselves. Next she pointed to the house, and made signals to indicate she had to get inside and prepare a meal for us to eat.

I wished she'd stayed to introduce us, to explain why we were on his porch on Sunday. Even as Chris and I stole on cautious pussywillow feet toward him, even as I filled with fear I was sniffing the air filled with the scent of roses and feeling that I'd been here before and knew this place. This fresh air perfumed with roses was not the kind of air I'd grown to expect as the kind deemed worthy for such as me. "It's Sunday, damn Sunday," I whispered to Chris, "and that doctor may not appreciate our being here."

"He's a doctor," said Chris, "and he's used to having his spare time robbed ... but *you* can wake him up."

Slowly I approached. He was a large man wearing a pale gray suit with a white carnation in his buttonhole. His long legs were stretched out and lifted to the top of the balustrade. He looked rather elegant, even sprawled out as he was with his hands dangling over the arms of the chair. He appeared so comfortable it seemed a terrible pity to awaken him and put him back on duty.

“Are you Dr. Paul Sheffield?” asked Chris who had read the sign with the doctor’s name. Carrie lay in his arms with her neck arched backwards, her eyes closed and her long golden hair waving in the soft, warm breezes. Reluctantly the doctor came awake. He stared at us long moments, as if disbelieving his eyes. I knew we looked strange in our many layers of clothing. He shook his head as if trying to focus his eyes, and such beautiful hazel eyes they were, bejeweled with flecks of blue, green and gold on soft brown. Those remarkable eyes drank me in, then swallowed me down. He appeared dazzled, slightly drunk, and much too sleepy to put on his customary professional mask that would keep him from darting his eyes from my face to my breasts, then to my legs before he scanned slowly upward. And again he was hypnotized by my face, my hair. It was hair that was far too long, I knew that, and it was clumsily cut on top, and too pale and fragile on the ends.

“You are the doctor, aren’t you?” demanded Chris.

“Yes, of course. I’m Dr. Sheffield,” he finally said, now turning his attention to Chris and Carrie. Surprisingly graceful and quick, he lifted his legs from the railing, rose to his feet to tower above us, ran long fingers through the mop of his dark hair, and then stepped closer to peer down into Carrie’s small, white face. He parted her closed lids with forefinger and thumb and looked for a moment at whatever was revealed in that blue eye. “How long has this child been unconscious?”

“A few minutes,” said Chris. He was almost a doctor himself, he’d studied so much while we were locked away upstairs. “Carrie threw up on the bus three times, then began to tremble and feel clammy. There was a lady on the bus named Henrietta Beech, and she brought us here to you.”

The doctor nodded, then explained that Mrs. Beech was his housekeeper-cook. He then led us to the door for patients only, and into a section of the house with two small examination rooms and an office, all while apologizing for not having his usual nurse available. "Take off all Carrie's clothes but her underpants," he ordered me. While I set about doing this, Chris dashed back to the sidewalk to fetch our suitcases.

Full of a thousand anxieties, Chris and I backed up against a wall and watched as the doctor checked Carrie's blood pressure, her pulse, her temperature and listened to her heart, front and back. By this time Carrie had come around so he could request her to cough. All I could do was wonder why everything bad had happened to us. Why was fate so persistently against us? Were we as evil as the grandmother had said? Did Carrie have to die too?

"Carrie," said Dr. Sheffield pleasantly after I had dressed her again, "we're going to leave you in this room for a while so you can rest." He covered her with a thin blanket. "Now don't be afraid. We'll be right down the hall in my office. I know that table isn't too soft, but do try and sleep while I talk to your brother and sister."

She gazed at him with wide, dull eyes, not really caring if the table was hard or soft.

A few minutes later Dr. Sheffield was seated behind his big impressive desk with his elbows on the blotter pad, and that's when he began to speak earnestly and with some concern. "The two of you look embarrassed and ill-at-ease. Don't be afraid you're depriving me of Sunday fun and games, for I don't do much of that. I'm a widower, and Sunday for me is no different than any other day... ."

Ah, yes. He could say that, but he looked tired, as if he worked too many long hours. I perched uneasily on the soft brown leather sofa, close by Chris. The sunlight filtering through the windows fell directly on our faces while the doctor was in the shadows. My clothes felt damp and miserable, and suddenly I remembered why. Quickly I stood to unzip and remove my filthy outer skirt. I felt quite pleased to see the doctor start in surprise. Since he'd left the room when I

undressed Carrie, he didn't realize that I had two dresses on underneath. When I sat again next to Chris, I wore only one dress of blue, princess styled, and it was flattering and unsoiled.

"Do you always wear more than one outfit on Sundays?" he asked.

"Only on the Sundays I run away," I said. "And we have only two suitcases and need to save room for the valuables we can hock later on when we have to." Chris nudged me sharply, mutely signaling I was revealing too much. But I knew about doctors, from him mostly. That doctor behind the desk could be trusted—it was in his eyes. We could tell him anything, everything.

"Sooo," he drawled, "you three are running away. And just what are you running from? Parents who offended you by denying you some privileges?"

Oh, if he only knew! "It's a long story, Doctor," said Chris, "and right now all we want to hear about is Carrie."

"Yes," he agreed, "you're right. So we'll talk about Carrie." All professional now, he continued, "I don't know who you are, or where you're from, or why you feel you have to run. But that little girl is very, very ill. If this weren't Sunday, I'd admit her to a hospital today for further tests I can't make here. I suggest you contact your parents immediately."

Just the words to make me panic!

"We're orphans," said Chris. "But don't worry about not being paid. We can pay our own way."

"It's good you have money," said the doctor. "You're going to need it." He swept long, observant looks over both of us, sizing us up. "Two weeks in a hospital should be sufficient to discover the factor in your sister's illness I can't quite put my finger on." And while we gasped, stunned that Carrie was *that* sick, he made an approximate guess as to the amount of money it would cost. Again we were stunned. Dear God! Our stolen cache of money wouldn't even pay for one week, much less two.

My eyes clashed with the appalled look in Chris's blue eyes. What would we do now? We couldn't pay that much.

The doctor easily read our situation. "Are you still orphans?" he asked softly.

"Yes, we're *still* orphans," stated Chris defiantly, then glanced hard at me to let me know I was to keep my trap shut. "Once you're an orphan you stay that way. Now, tell us what you suspect is wrong with our sister, and what you can do to make her well again."

"Hold up there young man. First you have to answer a few questions." His was a soft voice, but firm enough to let us know *he* was in command here. "First, what is your last name?"

"I am Christopher Dollanganger, and this is my sister, Catherine Leigh Dollanganger, and Carrie is eight years old, whether or not you believe it!"

"Why shouldn't I believe it?" the doctor asked mildly, when just a few minutes ago in the cubelike examination room, he'd shown shock to hear her age.

"We realize Carrie is very small for her age," said Chris defensively.

"Indeed she is small." He flicked his eyes to me when he said this, then to my brother, and leaned forward on his crossed arms in a friendly, confidential manner that made me tense in preparation. "Now look. Let's stop being suspicious of one another. I'm a doctor, and anything you confide to me will remain in my confidence.

"If you really want to help your sister, you can't sit there and make up lies. You have to give me the truth, or else you're wasting my time and risking Carrie's life."

We both sat silent, holding hands, our shoulders pressed one against one other. I felt Chris shudder, so I shuddered too. We were so scared, so damned scared to speak the full truth—for who would believe? We'd trusted those who were supposedly honorable before so how could we trust again? And yet, that man behind the desk ... he looked so familiar,

like I'd seen him before. "All right," he said, "if it's that difficult, let me ask more questions. Tell me what all three of you ate last."

Chris sighed, relieved. "Our last meal was breakfast very early this morning. We all ate the same thing, hot dogs with everything, french fries dipped in catsup, and then chocolate milkshakes. Carrie ate only a little of her meal. She's very picky about food under the best of circumstances. I'd say she's never really had a healthy appetite."

Frowning, the doctor noted this down. "And all three of you ate exactly the very same things for *breakfast*? And only Carrie was nauseated?"

"Right. Only Carrie."

"Is Carrie often nauseated?"

"Occasionally, not often."

"How occasionally?"

"Well ..." said Chris slowly, "Carrie threw up twice last week, and about five times last month. It's worried me a lot; her attacks seem to be growing more violent as they come more often."

Oh, the evasive way Chris was telling about Carrie made me really furious! He would protect our mother even now, after all she'd done. Maybe it was my expression that betrayed Chris and made the doctor lean my way, as if he knew he'd hear a more complete story from me. "Look, you came to me for help, and I'm willing to do what I can, but you aren't giving me a fair chance if you don't give me all the facts. If Carrie hurts inside, I can't look inside to see where it is—she has to tell me, or you have to tell me. I need information to work with—full information. Already I know Carrie is malnourished, underexercised and underdeveloped for her age. I see that all three of you have enlarged pupils. I see you are all pale, thin and weak looking. Nor can I understand why you hesitate about money when you wear watches that look quite expensive, and someone has chosen your clothes with taste and considerable cost—though why they fit so poorly is

beyond my speculations. You sit there with gold and diamond watches, wearing rich clothes and shoddy sneakers, and tell me half-truths. So now I'm going to tell you a few *full truths!*" His voice grew stronger, more forceful. "I suspect your small sister is dangerously anemic. And because she is anemic she is susceptible to myriad infections. Her blood pressure is dangerously low. And there is some elusive factor I can't put my finger on. So, tomorrow Carrie will be admitted to a hospital, whether or not you call your parents, and you can hock those wristwatches to pay for her life. Now ... if we admit her to the hospital this evening, the tests can begin early tomorrow morning."

"Do what you feel necessary," said Chris dully.

"Wait a minute!" I cried, jumping to my feet and moving swiftly to the doctor's desk. "My brother isn't telling you everything!" I threw Chris a hard glance over my shoulder, while he shot his fierce look to forbid me to reveal the whole truth. I thought bitterly, *don't worry, I'll protect our precious mother as much as I can!*

I think Chris understood, for tears came to his eyes. Oh, how much that woman had done to hurt him, hurt all of us, and he could still cry for her sake. His tears put tears in my heart too, not for her, but for him, who'd loved her so well, and for me who loved *him* so well, and tears for all we'd shared and suffered... .

He nodded, as if saying okay, go ahead, and then I began to tell what must have seemed to the doctor an incredible tale. At first I could tell he thought I was lying, or at least exaggerating. Why was that when every day the newspapers told terrible tales of what loving, caring parents did to their children?

"... And so, after Daddy was in that fatal accident, Momma came and told us she was deeply in debt, and she had no way to earn a living for the five of us. She began writing letters to her parents in Virginia. At first they didn't reply, but then one day a letter came. She told us her parents lived in a fine, rich house in Virginia and were fabulously wealthy, but because she had married her half-uncle she'd been disinherited. Now

we were going to lose everything we owned. We had to leave our bicycles in the garage, and she didn't even give us time to say good-bye to our friends, and that very evening we set off on a train headed for the Blue Ridge Mountains.

“We felt happy to be going to a fine, rich house, but not so happy about meeting a grandfather who sounded cruel. Our mother told us we'd have to hide away until she could win back his affections. Momma said *one* night only, or maybe two or three, then we could go downstairs and meet her father. He was dying of heart disease and never climbed the stairs so we were safe enough up there as long as we didn't make much noise. The grandmother gave us the attic to play in. It was huge—and dirty, and full of spiders, mice and insects. And that's where we played and tried to make the best of it until Momma won back her father's good will and we could go down and begin to enjoy living like rich children. But soon enough we found out that our grandfather was never going to forgive our mother for marrying his half-brother and we were going to remain 'Devil's issue.' We'd have to live up there until he was dead!”

I went on, despite the look of pained incredulity in the doctor's eyes. “And as if that weren't bad enough, being locked up in one room with our playground in the attic, we soon found out our grandmother hated us too! She gave us a long list of what we could do and what we couldn't do. We were never to look out of the front windows, or even open the heavy draperies to let in some light.

“At first the meals the grandmother brought up each morning in a picnic hamper were rather good, but gradually they worsened to only sandwiches, potato salad and fried chicken. Never any desserts, for they would rot our teeth and we couldn't go to a dentist. Of course, when our birthdays came around, Momma would sneak us up ice cream and a bakery cake, and plenty of presents. Oh, you bet she bought us everything to make up for what she was doing to us—as if books and games and toys could ever make up for all we were losing—our health, our belief in ourselves. And, worst of all, we began to lose faith in *her*!

“Another year came, and that summer Momma didn’t even visit us at all! Then, in October she showed up again to tell us she’d married a second time and had spent the summer touring Europe on her honeymoon! I could have killed her! She could have told us, but she’d gone away and not said a word to explain! She brought us expensive gifts, clothes that didn’t fit, and thought that made up for everything, when it didn’t make up for *anything*! Finally I was able to convince Chris we should find a way to escape that house and forget about inheriting a fortune. He didn’t want to go, because he thought that any day the grandfather might die, and he wanted to go to college, then medical school and become a doctor—like you.”

“A doctor like me ...” said Dr. Sheffield with a strange sigh. His eyes were soft with sympathy, and something darker too. “It’s a strange story, Cathy, and hard to believe.”

“Wait a minute!” I cried. “I haven’t finished. I haven’t told you the worst part! The grandfather did die, and he did write our mother into his will so she’d inherit his tremendous fortune—but he added a codicil that said she could never have children. If it were ever proven she’d given birth to children by her first husband, she’d have to forfeit everything she’d inherited and everything she’d bought with the money!”

I paused. I glanced at Chris who sat pale and weak looking, staring at me with hurt and pleading eyes. But he needn’t have worried; I wasn’t going to speak of Cory. I turned again to the doctor. “Now that mysterious, elusive factor you can’t put your finger on—the thing wrong with Carrie that makes her throw up, and us too sometimes. It’s really very simple. You see, once our mother knew she could never claim us and keep the fortune, she decided to get rid of us. The grandmother began to add sugared doughnuts to the basket. We ate them eagerly enough, not knowing that they were coated with arsenic.”

And so I’d said it.

Poisoned doughnuts to sweeten our imprisoned days as we stole from our room by using the wooden key Chris had fashioned. Day by day dying for nine months while we sneaked into our mother’s grand bedroom suite and took all

the one- and five-dollar bills we could find. Almost a year we'd traversed those long, dim corridors, stealing into her room to take what money we could.

"In that one room, Doctor, we lived three years and four months and sixteen days."

When I'd concluded my long tale the doctor sat very quietly staring at me with compassion, shock, and concern. "So you see, Doctor," I said to finish, "you can't force us to go to the police and tell our story! They might throw the grandmother and our mother in jail, but we'd suffer too! Not only from the publicity, but also from being separated. They'd put us in foster homes, or make us wards of the court, and we've sworn to stay together, always!"

Chris was staring at the floor. He spoke without looking up. "Take care of our sister. Do whatever is needed to make her well again, and both Cathy and I will find a way to meet our obligations."

"Hold on, Chris," said the doctor in his slow, patient way. "You and Cathy have been fed arsenic too and will need to undergo many of the same tests I order for Carrie. Look at the two of you. You're thin, pale, weak. You need good food, rest and plenty of fresh air and sunshine. Maybe there is something I can do to help."

"You're a stranger to us, sir," Chris said respectfully, "and we don't expect or need anyone's charity or pity. Cathy and I are not that weak or sick. Carrie's the one most affected."

Full of indignation, I spun about to glare at Chris. We'd be fools to reject help from this kind man just so we could salvage some of our pride that had already gone down in defeat so many times before. What difference did one more time make?

"... Yes," continued the doctor, as if both Chris and I had already agreed to his generous offer to help, "expenses are not as high for an 'out' patient as for an 'in' patient—no room and no board to pay. Now listen, this is only a suggestion which you're free to refuse, and travel on to wherever you have in mind—by the way, where are you going?"

“To Sarasota, Florida,” Chris said weakly. “Cathy and I used to swing from the ropes we tied to the attic rafters, so she thought we could become aerialists, with some practice.” It sounded silly when I heard him say it. I expected the doctor to laugh, but he didn’t. He just looked sadder.

“Honestly, Chris, I would hate to see you and Cathy risk your lives like that, and as a doctor I feel I can’t allow you to go as you are. Everything in my personal ethics and professional ones too refuses to let you go on without medical treatment. Common sense tells me I should keep my distance and not give a damn about what happens to three kids on their own. For all I know that horrendous story may just be a pack of lies to gain my sympathy.” He smiled kindly to take the sting from his words. “Yet, my intuition tells me to believe your story. Your expensive clothes, your watches and the sneakers on your feet, your pale skin and the haunted look in your eyes all testify to the truth.”

Such a voice he had, hypnotizing, soft and melodious, with just a bit of Southern accent. “Come,” he said, charming me, if not Chris, “forget about pride and charity. Come live in my home of twelve lonely rooms. God must have put Henrietta Beech on that bus to lead you to me. Henny is a terrific worker and keeps my house spotless, but she constantly complains that twelve rooms and four baths are just too much for one woman to care for. Out in the back I have four acres of garden. I hire two gardeners to help, for I just can’t devote as much time to the garden as I need to.” At this point he riveted his brilliant eyes directly on Chris. “You can help earn your keep by mowing the lawns, clipping the hedges and preparing the gardens for winter. Cathy can help out in the house.” He shot me a questioning, teasing look with his eyes twinkling. “Can you cook?”

Cook? Was he kidding? We’d been locked upstairs for more than three years, and we’d never even had a toaster to brown our bread in the mornings, and no butter, or even margarine!

“No!” I snapped. “I can’t cook. I’m a dancer. When I’m a famous prima ballerina I’ll hire a woman to do the cooking, like you do. I don’t want to be stuck away in some man’s

kitchen, washing his dishes and fixing his meals and having his babies! That's not for me."

"I see," he said, his expression blank.

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful," I explained. "I will do what I can to help out Mrs. Beech. I'll even learn how to cook for her—and you."

"Good," he said. His eyes were laughing, full of sparkling lights as he templed his fingers beneath his chin and smiled. "You are going to be a prima ballerina, and Chris is going to be a famous doctor, and you are going to achieve all of this by running away to Florida to perform in the circus? Of course I'm of another stodgy generation and I can't fathom your reasoning. Does it really make good sense to you?"

Now that we were out of the locked room and the attic and in the full light of reality, no, it didn't make good sense. It sounded like foolish, childish and unrealistic folly.

"Do you realize what you'd be up against as professional aerialists?" the doctor asked. "You would have to compete against people who've trained from early childhood, people descended from long lines of circus performers. It wouldn't be easy. Still, I'll admit there's something in those blue eyes that tells me you two are very determined young people, and no doubt you'll get what you go after if you really want it badly enough. But what about school? What about Carrie? What's she going to do while the two of you swing from trapezes? Now don't bother to answer," he said quickly when my lips parted. "I'm sure you can come up with something to convince me, but I must dissuade you. First you have to tend to your health and Carrie's. Any day the two of you could come down as swiftly as Carrie and be just as sick. After all, didn't all three of you exist under the same miserable conditions?"

Four of us, not three, was the whisper in my ears, but I didn't speak of Cory.

"If you meant it about taking us in until Carrie is well," said Chris with his eyes shining suspiciously, "we're extremely grateful. We'll work hard, and when we can we'll leave and repay you every cent you spent on us."

“I meant it. And you don’t have to repay me, except by helping out in the house and the yard. So, you see, it isn’t pity, or charity, only a business arrangement to benefit all of us.”

A New Home



That's the way it started. We moved quietly into the doctor's home and into his life. We took him over, I know that now. We made ourselves important to him, as if he hadn't had a life before we came. I know that now too. He made it seem we were doing him a favor by relieving him of a dreary, lonely life by adding our youthful presence. He made us feel that we were being generous to share *his* life, and oh, we did want to believe in someone.

He gave Carrie and me a grand bedroom to share, with twin beds and four tall windows facing south, and two windows facing east. Chris and I looked at each other with a terrible shared hurt. We were to sleep in different rooms for the first time in ever so long. I didn't want to part from him and face the night with only Carrie, who could never protect me as he had. I think our doctor may have sensed something that told him to fade into the background, for he excused himself and drifted toward the end of the hall. Only then did Chris speak. "We've got to be careful, Cathy. We wouldn't want him to suspect... ."

"There is nothing to suspect. It's over," I answered, but I didn't meet his eyes, guessing, even then, that it would never be over. *Oh, Momma, look what you started by putting the four of us in one locked room, and leaving us there to grow up, knowing how it would be! You of all people should have known!*

"Don't," Chris whispered. "Kiss me good night, and there won't be any bedbugs here."

He kissed me, I kissed him, we said good night, and that was all. With tears in my eyes I watched my brother back down the hall, still holding his eyes on me.

In our room Carrie let out a loud howl. “I can’t sleep in no little bed all by myself!” she wailed. “I’ll fall off! Cathy, why is that bed so little?”

It ended up with Chris and the doctor coming back so they could take away the nightstand that separated the twin beds. Then they shoved the narrow beds so close they appeared one wide bed. This pleased Carrie enormously, but, as the nights passed, somehow the crack between our beds grew ever wider until I, the restless sleeper, finally woke up with one leg and one arm in the crack and Carrie being pulled along with me to the floor.

I loved that room Paul gave us. It was so beautiful with its pale blue wallpaper, and matching curtains. The rug was blue; each of us had a chair with lemon-yellow cushions and all the furniture was antique white. It was the kind of room a girl should have. No gloom. No pictures of hell on the wall. All the hell I had was in my mind, put there by thinking back much too often. Momma could have found another solution if she’d really wanted to! “She didn’t have to lock us up! It was greed, avarice, that damned fortune ... and Cory was in the ground because of her weakness!”

“Forget it, Cathy,” said Chris when we were again saying good night.

I was terribly afraid to tell him what I suspected. My head bowed low against his chest. “Chris, it was a sinful thing we did, wasn’t it?”

“It won’t happen again,” he said stiffly, then broke away and almost ran down the hall as if I were chasing. I wanted to lead a good life and hurt no one, especially Chris. Even so, I had to leave my bed around midnight and go to Chris. While he slept I crawled in the bed beside him. He wakened when he heard the bedsprings squeak. “Cathy, what the hell are you doing here?”

“It’s raining outside,” I whispered. “Just let me lie beside you for a moment or so, and then I’ll go away.” Neither of us moved, or even breathed. Then without even knowing how it came about, we were in each other’s arms and he was kissing

me. Kissing with such ardent fervor it made me respond when I didn't want to. It was evil and wrong! Yet I didn't really want him to stop. That sleeping woman inside of me woke up and took over, wanting what he felt he had to have, and I, the thinking, calculating part, pushed him away. "What are you doing? I thought you said this would never happen again."

"You came ..." he said hoarsely.

"Not for this!"

"What do you think I'm made of? Steel? Cathy, don't do this again."

I left him and cried in my own bed, for he was down the hall and not there to waken me if I had a nightmare. No one to comfort me. No one to lend me strength. Then my mother's words came to haunt me with a horrible thought—was I so much like her? Was I going to be the kind of weak, clinging-vine female who always needed a man for protection? No! I was sufficient unto myself!

I believe it was the next day that Dr. Paul brought me four pictures to hang. Ballerinas in four different positions. For Carrie he brought a milk-glass vase filled with delicate plastic violets. Already he'd learned about Carrie's passion for all things purple or red. "Do what you can to make this room yours," he told us. "If you don't like the color scheme, we'll have it changed in the spring." I stared at him. We wouldn't be here, come spring.

Carrie sat holding her vase of fake violets while I forced myself to speak up and say what I had to. "Dr. Paul, we won't be here in the spring, so we can't afford to let ourselves become too attached to the rooms you've given us."

He was in the doorway, ready to depart, but he halted and turned to look back at me. He was tall, six two or more, and his shoulders were so wide they almost filled the doorway.

"I thought you liked it here," he said in a wistful tone, his dark eyes gone bleak.

"I do like it here!" I quickly answered. "We all like it here, but we can't take advantage of your good nature forever." He

nodded without replying and left, and I turned to see Carrie staring at me with a great deal of animosity.

Daily the doctor took Carrie to the hospital with him. At first she'd wail and refuse to go unless I went along too. She made up fantastic stories about what they did to her in the hospital, and complained about all the questions they asked her.

"Carrie, we never tell lies; you know that. The three of us always tell the truth to each other—but we don't go around telling *everybody* about our past lives upstairs—understand?"

She stared up at me with those big, haunted eyes. "I don't tell nobody Cory went away to heaven and left me. I don't tell nobody but Dr. Paul."

"You told *him*?"

"I couldn't help it, Cathy," Carrie buried her head in her pillow and cried.

So now the doctor knew about Cory, and how he was supposed to have died in a hospital from pneumonia. How sad his eyes were that night when he questioned Chris and me, wanting all the details of Cory's illness that ended in his death.

Chris and I were huddled up close on the living room sofa when Paul said, "I'm very happy to report that arsenic has not done any permanent damage to any of Carrie's organs, as we all feared it might have. Now don't look like that. I haven't let out your secret but I had to tell the lab technicians what to look for. I made up a story about how you'd taken the poison accidentally, and your parents were good friends of mine, and I'm considering making you three my legal wards."

"Carrie's going to live?" I whispered, drowning in relief.

"Yes, she'll live—if she doesn't go swinging on trapezes." He smiled again. "I've made appointments for the two of you to be examined tomorrow—by me—unless you have some objections."

Oh, I had objections! I wasn't keen about taking off my clothes and having him go over me, even if a nurse was there. Chris told me I was silly to think a doctor of forty would get

any erotic pleasure from looking at a girl of my age. But when he said it, he was looking the other way, so how could I tell what he was really thinking? Maybe Chris was right, for when I was on that examination table, naked and covered by a paper robe, Dr. Paul didn't seem the same man whose eyes followed me around when we were in the "home" side of his house. He did to me the same things he'd done to Carrie, but asked even more questions. Embarrassing questions.

"You haven't menstruated in more than two months?"

"I've never been regular, really! I started when I was twelve, and twice I skipped from three to six months. I used to worry about it, but Chris read up on the subject in one of the medical books Momma brought him, and he told me too many anxieties and too much stress can make a girl miss. You don't think ... I mean ... there isn't anything wrong with me, is there?"

"Not that I can tell. You seem normal enough. Too thin, too pale, and you're slightly anemic. Chris is too, but because of his sex not as much as you are. I'm going to prescribe special vitamins for all three of you."

I was glad when it was over and I could put on my clothes and escape that office where the women who worked for Dr. Paul looked at me so funny.

I raced back to the kitchen. Mrs. Beech was preparing dinner. Her smile shone big and wide when I came in, lighting up a moon face with skin as slick as oiled rubber. The teeth she displayed were the whitest, most perfect teeth I'd ever seen. "Golly, am I happy that's over!" I said, falling into a chair and picking up a knife to peel potatoes. "I don't like doctors poking me over. I like Dr. Paul better when he's just a man. When he puts on that long white jacket, he also puts a shade over his eyes. Then I can't see what he's thinking. And I'm very good at reading eyes, Mrs. Beech."

She grinned at me with teasing devilry, then whipped out a pink notepad from the huge square pocket of her starched white apron. With the apron tied about her middle she resembled nothing more than a rolled-up goosedown

comforter, waddling about speechless. By now I knew she had a congenital speech defect. Though she was trying to teach Chris, Carrie and me to understand her sign language, as yet none of us had caught on enough to carry on a quick conversation. I think I enjoyed her notes too much—notes she could write lightning-fast in a very abbreviated style. *Doctor says, she'd written, young people need lots of good fresh fruit and vegetables, plenty of lean meat, but go easy on starches and desserts. He wants to put on you muscle not fat.*

Already we'd gained some weight in the two weeks of eating Mrs. Beech's delicious cooking, even Carrie who was so darn finicky. Now she ate with enthusiasm, and for her that was remarkable. So, as I peeled the red potatoes, Mrs. Beech wrote another note when her signals failed to communicate. *Fairy-Child, from now on call me only Henny. No Mrs. Beech.*

She was the first black person I'd known, and though at first I'd felt ill-at-ease with her and a little afraid of her, two weeks of intimacy had taught me much. She was just another human being of another race and color, with the same sensitivities, hopes and fears we all had.

I loved Henny, her broad smiles, her loose, flowing gowns with flowers blooming riotously, and most of all I loved the wisdom that came from her small pastel paper sheets. Eventually, I did learn to understand her sign language, though I was never as good at it as her "doctor-son."

Paul Scott Sheffield was a strange man. So often he looked sad when there was no apparent reason for him to be sad. Then he'd smile and say, "Yes, God favored Henny and me that day he put you three on that bus. I lost one family, and grieved for them, and fate was kind enough to send me another, ready-made family."

"Chris," I said that evening when we had to reluctantly part, "when we lived in the room upstairs, you were the man, the head of the household. . . . Sometimes it feels funny to have Dr. Paul around, watching what we do and listening to what we say."

He blushed. “I know. He’s taking my place. To be honest,” and here he paused and blushed a deeper red, “I don’t like him replacing me in your life, but I’m very grateful for what he’s done for Carrie.”

Somehow all that our doctor did for us made Momma seem a thousandfold worse in comparison. *Ten* thousandfold worse!

The next day was Chris’s eighteenth birthday, and though *I’d* never forget, it surprised me that the doctor had planned a party with many fine gifts that sparkled Chris’s eyes, and then saddened them with the guilt both he and I felt. Already we’d accepted so much. Already we had been making plans to leave soon. We just couldn’t stay on and take advantage of Dr. Paul’s good nature, now that Carrie was well enough to travel on.

After the party Chris and I sat on the back veranda, mulling this over. One look at his face and I could tell he didn’t want to leave the one and only man who could, and would, help him reach his goal of becoming a doctor. “I really don’t like the way he keeps looking at you, Cathy. His eyes follow you about all the time. Here you are, so available, and men his age find girls your age irresistible.”

They did? How fascinating to know. “But doctors have plenty of pretty nurses available to them,” I said lamely, knowing I would do anything short of murder, to see that Chris reached his goal. “Remember that day we first came? He spoke of the kind of competition we’d be up against in the circus. Chris, he’s right. We can’t go work for the circus; that’s only a silly dream.”

He stared off into space with knitted brows. “I know all of that.”

“Chris, he’s just lonely. Maybe he only watches me because there isn’t anything else as interesting to watch as me.” But how fascinating to know that men of forty were susceptible to girls of fifteen. How wonderful to wield over them the power that my mother had.

“Chris, if Dr. Paul says the right thing, I mean, if he really honestly wants us, would you stay on?”

He frowned and studied the hedges he'd so recently clipped. After long consideration he spoke slowly, "Let's give him a test. If we tell him we're leaving, and he doesn't say anything to prevent us, then that will be his polite way to let us know he doesn't really care."

"Is it fair to test him like that?"

"Yes. It's a good way to give him the chance to get rid of us and not feel guilty about it. You know, people like him often do nice things because they feel they should, not because they really want to."

"Oh."

We were not ones to procrastinate. The next evening after dinner, Paul came to join us on the back veranda. *Paul*. I was calling him that in my thoughts—getting familiar, liking him more and more because always he looked so casually elegant, so clean, so nice, sitting in his favorite white wicker rocker, wearing a red cable-knit sweater with gray slacks and slowly, dreamily puffing on a cigarette. We three wore sweaters too, for the evening was chilly. Chris perched beside me on the balustrade while Carrie crouched on the top step. Paul's gardens were fabulous. Shallow marble steps nine feet across took you down a few feet to other steps which took you to a higher level. There was a small Japanese footbridge lacquered red, arching over a small stream. There were nude statues of men and women, placed at random, which lent to his gardens an atmosphere of seduction, of worldly sensuality. They were classic nudes. Graceful, and elegantly posed, and yet, and yet ... I knew that garden for what it was. For I'd been there before in my dreams.

The doctor was telling us, even as the wind turned colder and started to blow dead leaves hither and yon, that he traveled abroad every other year to search out the beautiful marble statues he'd ship home and add to his collection. He'd been so lucky the last time to come across a full-sized copy of Rodin's *The Kiss*.

I sighed with the wind. I didn't want to go. I liked it here with him, with Henny, with the gardens that held me in thrall

and made me feel enchanted, beautiful, desirable.

“So all my roses are old-fashioned roses that haven’t had the heady scent bred from them,” said Dr. Paul. “Why have roses at all if they don’t reek of perfume?”

In the fading, purplish light of the failing day his glimmering eyes met with mine. My pulse quickened and forced another sigh. I wondered what his wife had been like, and how it felt to be loved by someone like him. Guiltily my eyes fled from his long, searching look, afraid he’d see what I was thinking. “You look disturbed, Cathy. Why?” His question teased me, as if he knew already my secrets. Chris turned his head to give me a hard look of warning.

“It’s your red sweater,” I said foolishly. “Did Henny knit it for you?”

He chuckled softly, then glanced down at the handsome sweater he wore. “No, not Henny. My older sister knitted the sweater for my birthday, then mailed it to me parcel post. She lives on the other side of town.”

“Why would your sister mail you a gift and not bring it in person?” I asked. “And why didn’t you tell us you had a birthday? We would have given you gifts too.”

“Well,” he began, settling back comfortably and crossing his legs, “my birthday came and went shortly before you arrived. I’m forty in case Henny hasn’t told you. I’ve been a widower thirteen years, and my sister, Amanda, has not spoken to me since the day my wife and young son died in an accident.” His voice faded away and he stared off into space, moody, solemn, distant.

Dead leaves scuttled on the lawn, chased over the porch and came to nestle near my feet, like brown, dried-up ducklings. All this took me back to a certain forbidden night when Chris and I had so desperately prayed while we huddled on the cold slate roof under a moon that looked like the scowling eye of God. Would there be a price to pay for just one terrible sin committed? Would there? The grandmother would quickly say, *yes! You deserve the worst punishment! Devil’s spawn, I knew it all along!*

And while I sat there floundering Chris spoke up. “Doctor, Cathy and I have been talking this over, and we feel now that Carrie is well we should be leaving. We deeply appreciate everything you’ve done, and we intend to repay you every cent, though it may take us a few years... .” His fingers squeezed tight around mine, warning me not to say anything different.

“Hold on there, Chris,” interrupted the doctor, jerking upright in his chair and planting both his feet solidly on the floor. Clearly he meant business. “Don’t think for one minute I haven’t seen this coming. I’ve dreaded each morning, fearful I’d wake up to find you gone.”

“I’ve been looking into the legal ramifications of making the three of you my wards. And I’ve found out it isn’t as complicated as I thought. It seems most children who run away say they’re orphans, so you’ll have to give me proof your father is really dead. If he’s alive, I would need his consent, as well as your mother’s.”

My breath caught! My mother’s consent? That meant we’d have to see her again! I didn’t want to see her, not ever!

He went on, his eyes soft as they saw my distress. “The court would petition your mother to appear at a hearing. If she lived in this state she’d be forced to comply in three days, but since she’s in Virginia, they’ll give her three weeks. If she doesn’t show up, then instead of having only temporary custody of you, I will be granted permanent custody—but only if you’re willing to say I’ve done a good job as a guardian.”

“You’ve been wonderful!” I cried out. “But she won’t come! She wants to keep us a secret! If the world finds out about us, she’ll lose all that money. Her husband might turn against her too if he knew she’d hidden us away. You can bet your life if you dare to try for permanent custody, you’ll get it—and you might be sorry in the end!”

Chris’s hand tightened more on mine, and Carrie looked up with huge, scared eyes.

“In a few weeks Christmas will be here. Are you going to leave me to spend another lonely holiday by myself? You’ve

been here for almost three weeks, and I've explained to everyone who asked that you were the children of a relative of mine who died recently. I'm not going into this blindly. Henny and I have given this a great deal of thought. She feels, just as I feel, that the three of you are good for us. We both want you to stay on. Having young people in the house makes it more like a home. I feel healthier than I have in years, and happier too. Since the death of my wife and son, I've missed having a family. In all this time I've never gotten used to being a bachelor again." His persuasive tone grew wistful. "I feel fate *wants* me to have custody of you. I feel God *planned* for Henny to be on the bus, just so she could bring you to me. When fate steps in and makes the decisions, who am I to deny it? I accept the fact you three are godsent to help me make up for the mistakes I've made in the past."

Wow! Godsent! I was more than half-won. I knew people could always find the motivation to justify what they wanted; well enough I knew that. Even so, tears filled my eyes as I looked at Chris questioningly. He met my look and shook his head in bewilderment, confused as to what *I* wanted. His hand gripped mine like iron while he spoke, still looking at me, not at Dr. Paul. "We're sorry for the loss of your wife and son, sir. But we can't replace them, and I don't know if we'd be doing right to burden you with the expense of three kids not your own." Then he added, looking the doctor squarely in the eyes. "And you should think about this too. You'll have one hell of a time finding another wife when you assume guardianship of us."

"I don't intend to marry again," he replied in a strange way. Then he went on with an abstract air, "Julia was the name of my wife, and my son was named Scotty. He was only three when he died."

"Oh," I breathed, "how terrible to lose a son so young, and your wife too." His obvious grief and remorse reached out and touched me; I was very in tune with those who grieved. "Did they die in an accident, a car accident like our father?"

"An accident," he said sharply, "but not in a car."

“Our father was only thirty-six when he was killed, and we were having a surprise birthday party, with a cake, presents ... and he never came, only two state policemen... .”

“Yes, Cathy,” he said softly, “you’ve told me. The adolescent years aren’t easy for anyone, and to be young and on your own, without the proper education, with little money, no family, no friends—”

“We’ve got each other!” said Chris staunchly, so as to test him more. “So, we will never truly be alone.”

Paul went on. “If you don’t want me, and what I have to give you isn’t enough, then go on to Florida with my blessings. Throw away all those long hours you studied, Chris, just when you’re almost there. And you, Cathy, can forget your dream of being a prima ballerina. And don’t you think for one moment that’s going to be a healthy, happy life for Carrie. I’m not persuading you to stay, for you’ll do what you want to and have to. So make up your minds—is it to be me and the chance to fulfill your aspirations, or is it to be the hard, unknown world?”

I sat there on the balustrade as close as possible to Chris, with my hand held in his. I wanted to stay. I wanted what the doctor could give to Chris, to say nothing of Carrie and myself.

The southern breezes kept blowing, caressing my cheek and whispering too convincingly that everything would work out right. I could hear Henny in the kitchen making fresh dough for the hot rolls we’d eat in the morning, made golden by dripping butter. Butter was one of the things denied us before, and the luxury Chris had missed most.

Everything here beguiled me, the air, the soft, warm glow in the doctor’s eyes. Even the banging of Henny’s pots and pans began to work magic, and my heart, so heavily burdened for so long, began to feel lighter. Maybe perfection did exist outside of fairy tales. Maybe we were good enough to walk upright and proud beneath God’s blue sky; maybe we were not contaminated shoots grown from the wrong seed planted in the wrong soil.

And more than anything the doctor had said, or anything his sparkling eyes implied, I think it was the roses that still bloomed, though it was winter, that made me feel dizzy from the overwhelming sweetness of their perfume.

But it wasn't Chris and I who decided. It was Carrie. Suddenly she jumped up from the top step and went flying into the doctor's outstretched arms. She flung herself against him and wrapped her thin arms about his neck. "I don't want to go! I love you, Dr. Paul!" she cried out, almost frantic. "I don't want no Florida and no circus! I don't want to go anywhere!" Then she was crying, letting out all her grief for Cory, withheld for so long. He picked her up and held her on his lap, and put kisses on her wet cheeks before he used his handkerchief to mop up the tears.

"I love you too, Carrie. I always wanted a little girl with blond curls and big blue eyes, just like yours." But he wasn't looking at Carrie. He was looking at me. "And I wanna be here for Christmas," sobbed Carrie. "I've never seen Santa Claus, not once." Of course she had, years ago, when our parents took the twins to a department store and Daddy snapped a picture of the two of them on Santa's lap, but maybe she'd forgotten.

How could a stranger come so easily into our lives and give us love, when our own blood kin had sought to give us death?

Life's Second Chance



Carrie decided. We stayed. Even if she hadn't decided, still we would have stayed. How could we not?

We tried to give Dr. Paul what money we had left. He refused. "You keep that money for yourselves. You worked hard to get it, didn't you? And you might as well know I've seen my attorney so he can fill out the petitions that will bring your mother to Clairmont. I know you believe she won't come, but you can never tell. If I'm so lucky as to win permanent custody, I'll give each of you a weekly allowance. No one can feel free and happy without some money in his pocket. Most of my colleagues give their teenage children five dollars a week. Three dollars should be enough for a girl Carrie's age." He planned to buy all our clothes and everything else we needed for school. We could only stare at him, amazed he'd be so generous—again.

A few days before Christmas he drove us to a shopping mall that was carpeted in red; the ceiling was a glass dome; throngs of people swarmed about as pop Christmas music played. It was like fairyland! I glowed; so did Carrie and Chris—and our doctor. His huge hand held Carrie's small one as Chris and I held on to each other. I saw him watching us, enjoying our wide-eyed stares. We were charmed by everything. Awed, impressed, very wanting, fearful too he would see and try to satisfy all our yearnings.

I turned in circles when we reached the department that sold clothes for teenage girls. Dazzled and bewildered by so much, I looked at that, and looked at this, and couldn't decide what I wanted when everything was so pretty and I'd never had the chance to shop for myself before. Chris laughed at my indecision. "Go on," he urged, "now that you have the chance to fit yourself perfectly, try on what you like." I knew what he

was thinking, for it had been my mean way to complain that Momma never brought me anything that fitted right.

With great care I selected parsimoniously the outfits I thought suitable for school that would begin for us in January. And I needed a coat, real shoes, and a raincoat and hat and umbrella. Everything that kind-hearted, generous man allowed me to buy made me feel guilty, as if we were taking advantage of him.

To reward me for my slowness and my reluctance to buy too much, Paul said impatiently, “For heaven’s sake, Cathy, don’t think we’re going shopping like this every week. I want you to buy enough today to last you through the winter. Chris, while we finish up here, you dash on to the young men’s section and begin picking out what you want. While you do that, Cathy and I can outfit Carrie with the clothes she needs.”

I noticed that all the adolescent girls in the store were turning to stare at my brother as he made his way to the young men’s department.

At last we were going to be normal kids. Then, when I felt tentatively secure, Carrie let out a howl to shatter crystal palaces in London! Her cries jolted the salespeople, startled the customers, and a lady bumped her baby-stroller into a dummy who went crashing down. The baby in the stroller added his screams to Carrie’s!

Chris came on the run to see who was murdering his small sister. She stood, feet wide apart, head thrown back, with tears of frustration streaming her cheeks. “Good God, what’s wrong now?” asked Chris as our doctor looked dumbfounded.

Men—what did they know? Obviously Carrie was outraged by the pretty little pastel dresses brought out for her approval. Baby clothes—that’s what. Even so, all were too large, and none were red or purple—absolutely not Carrie’s style at all! “Try the toddler department,” suggested the heartless, haughty blonde with the beehive hair. She smiled graciously at our doctor who appeared embarrassed.

Carrie was *eight!* To even mention “toddler clothes” was insulting! She screwed her face into a puckered prune. “I can’t

wear toddler clothes to school!” she wailed. She pressed her face against my thigh and hugged my legs. “Cathy, don’t make me wear pink and blue *baby* dresses! Everybody will laugh! I know they will! I want purple, red—no baby colors!”

Dr. Paul soothed her. “Darling, I adore blond girls with blue eyes in pastels, so why not wait until you’re older to wear all those brilliant colors?”

Bittersweet milksop like this was something someone as stubborn as Carrie couldn’t swallow. She glared her eyes, balled her fists, prepared her foot for kicking and readied her vocal cords for screaming when a middle-aged, plump woman who must have had someone like Carrie for a granddaughter suggested calmly that she could have her clothes custom made. Carrie hesitated uncertainly, looking from me to the doctor, then to Chris and back to the saleslady.

“A perfect solution!” said Dr. Paul enthusiastically, looking relieved. “I’ll buy a sewing machine and Cathy can make you purple, red, and electric-blue clothes, and you’ll be a knock-out.”

“Don’t wanna be no knock-out—just want bright colors.” Carrie pouted while I was left with my mouth agape. I was a *dancer*, not a seamstress! (Something that didn’t escape Carrie’s knowledge.) “Cathy don’t know how to make good clothes,” she said. “Cathy don’t do nothing but dance.”

That was loyalty. Me, who’d taught her and Cory to read, with a little help from Chris. “What’s the matter with you, Carrie?” snapped Chris. “You’re acting like a baby. Cathy can do anything she sets her mind to—remember that!” The doctor readily agreed. I said nothing as we shopped for an electric sewing machine.

“But in the meantime, let’s buy a few pink, yellow and blue dresses, all right, Carrie?” Dr. Paul grinned mockingly. “And Cathy can save me tons of money by sewing her own clothes too.”

Despite the sewing I’d have to learn, heaven was ours that day. We went home loaded, all of us made beautiful in barber shops and beauty salons; each of us had on new shoes with

hard soles. I had my very first pair of high-heeled pumps—and a dozen pairs of nylons! My first nylons, my first bra—and to top it all off, a shopping bag full of cosmetics. I'd taken forever to select makeup while the doctor stood back and watched me with the queerest expression. Chris had grumbled, saying I didn't need rouge or lipstick, or eyeshadow, liner and mascara. "You don't know anything at all about being a girl," I answered with an air of superiority. This was my first shopping binge, and by heaven I was making the most of it! I had to have everything I'd seen on Momma's fabulous dressing table. Even her kind of wrinkle cream, plus a mud pack for firming.

No sooner were we out of the car and unloaded than Chris, Carrie and I dashed upstairs to try on all our new clothes. Funny how once new clothes had come to us so easily and hadn't made us happy like this. Not when no one would see us wear them. Yet, being what I was, when I slipped on the blue velvet dress with tiny buttons down the front, I thought of Momma. How ironic that I should want to cry for a mother we'd lost, who I was determined to hate forever. I sat on the edge of my twin bed and pondered this. Momma had given us new clothes, toys and games out of guilt for what she was doing, depriving us of a normal childhood. A childhood we'd never have the chance to recover. Lost years, some of the best years, and Cory was in a grave, no new suits for him.

His guitar was in the corner where Carrie could wake up and see it and the banjo. Why was it us who always had to suffer, why not her? Then, suddenly it hit me! Bart Winslow was from South Carolina! I ran down to our doctor's study and purloined his big atlas, then back I raced to the bedroom, and there I found the map of South Carolina. I found Clairmont ... but didn't believe my eyes when I saw it was a twin city to Greenglenna! No, that was too much of a coincidence—or was it? I looked up and stared into space. God had meant for us to come here and live near Momma—if she ever visited her husband's home town. God wanted me to have the chance to inflict a little pain of my own. As soon as I could, I was going to Greenglenna and look up all the information I could about him and his family. I had five dollars a week—to order a

subscription of the community paper that told of all the social activities of the wealthy people who lived near Foxworth Hall.

Yes, I was gone from Foxworth Hall, but I was going to know every move she made, and when she came this way I'd know that too! Sooner or later, Momma was going to hear from me, and know I would never, never forget or forgive. Somehow, in some way, she was going to hurt ten times more than we had!

With this decided, I could join Chris and Carrie in the living room to model all our new clothes for our doctor and Henny. Henny's smile beamed like a dazzling sun. I watched the bejeweled eyes of our benefactor, only to see them shadow over as he frowned reflectively. I saw no admiration or approval. Suddenly, he got up and left the room, offering a weak excuse of needing to do some paperwork.

Soon Henny became my mentor in all things domestic. She taught me to bake biscuits from scratch, and tried to teach me how to make rolls light and fluffy.

Wham! went Henny's hand into the dough. Henny wiped her hands clean of flour and dashed off a note. *Henny got bad eyes for seeing small things like needle eyes. You have good eyes you sew on doctor son's missing shirt buttons—yes?*

"Sure," I agreed without enthusiasm, "I can sew holes, and I can also knit, crochet, needlepoint and do crewel work. My mother taught me how to do all those things as a way to keep busy." Suddenly I couldn't speak. I wanted to cry. I saw my mother's lovely face. I saw Daddy. I saw Chris and me as children hurrying home from school, rushing in with snow on our shoulders to find Momma knitting baby things for the twins. I couldn't help but bow my head into Henny's lap and begin to cry, really bawl. Henny couldn't speak, but her soft hand on my shoulder showed she understood. When I glanced upward, she was crying too. Big, fat tears that slid down to wet her bright red dress. "Don't cry, Henny. I'll be happy to sew on Dr. Paul's missing buttons. He's saved our lives, and there's nothing I wouldn't do for him." She gave me a strange look, then got up to fetch years of mending and perhaps a dozen shirts with missing buttons.

Chris spent every available moment with Dr. Paul who was coaching him so he could enter a special college-prep school in midterm. Carrie was our biggest problem. She could read and write but she was so very small. How would she manage in a public school where children were not always kind?

“It’s a private school I have in mind for Carrie,” explained our doctor. “A very good school for young girls, run by an excellent staff. Since I’m on the board of trustees, I think Carrie will be given special attention, and not subjected to any kind of stress.” He eyed me meaningfully.

That was my worst fear, that Carrie would be ridiculed and made to feel ashamed because of her overlarge head and undersized body. Once Carrie had been so beautifully proportioned, so very perfect. It was all those lost years when the sun was denied us that made her so small. It was, I knew it was!

* * *

I was scared to death Momma would show up on that day she was supposed to appear at the court hearing. But I was certain, almost, that she wouldn’t come. How could she? She had too much to lose and nothing to gain. What were we but burdens to bear? And there was jail too, a murder charge... .

We sat very quietly with Paul, dressed in our best to appear in the judge’s chamber, and waited, and waited, and waited. I was a tight wire inside, stretched so taut I thought I might break and cry. She didn’t want us. Again she told us by not showing up, how little she cared! The judge looked at us with too much pity, making me feel so sorry for all of us—and so angry with her! Oh, damn her to hell! She gave us birth, she claimed to have loved our father! How could she do this to his children—her own children? What kind of mother was she? I didn’t want that judge’s pity, or Paul’s. I held my head high and bit down on my tongue to keep from screaming. I dared to glance at Chris and saw him sitting blank-eyed, though I knew his heart was being shredded, as mine was. Carrie crouched in a tight ball on the doctor’s lap, as his hands soothed her, and he whispered something in her ear. I think he said, “Never

mind, it's all right. You have me for a father and Henny for a mother. You'll never want for anything as long as I live."

* * *

I cried that night. I wet my pillow with tears shed for a mother I'd loved so much it hurt to think back to the days when Daddy was alive and our home life was perfect. I cried for all the good things she had done for us back then, and, most of all, for all the love she'd so generously given us—then. I cried more for Cory who was like my own child. And that's when I stopped crying and turned to bitter, hard thoughts of revenge. When you set out to defeat someone, the best way was to think as they did. What would hurt her most? She wouldn't want to think of us. She'd try to forget we ever existed. Well, she wouldn't forget. I'd see to it that she didn't. This very Christmas I would send her a card, and sign it with this, "From the four Dresden dolls you didn't want," and I had to change that to "The three alive Dresden dolls you didn't want, plus the dead one you carried away and never brought back." I could see her staring at that card, thinking to herself, *I only did what I had to.*

We had let down our shields and allowed ourselves to be vulnerable again. We allowed faith, hope and trust to come and dance like sugarplums in our heads.

Fairy tales could come true.

They were happening to us. The wicked queen was out of our lives, and Snow White would reign one day. She wouldn't be the one to eat the poisoned red apple. But every fairy tale had a dragon to slay, a witch to overcome or some obstacle to make things difficult. I tried to look ahead and figure out who would be the dragon, and what would be the obstacles. All along I knew who was the witch. And that was the saddest part of being me.

I got up and went out on the upper veranda to stare up at the moon. I saw Chris standing near the railing, gazing up at the moon too. From the slump of his shoulders, usually held so proud, I knew he was bleeding inside, just as I was. I tiptoed over to surprise him. But he turned as I neared and held out his

arms. Without thought I went straight into them and put my arms up around his neck. He wore the warm robe Momma had given him last Christmas, though it was much too small. He'd have another from me when he looked under the tree Christmas morning, with his monogram—CFS—for he wanted never to be called Foxworth, but Sheffield.

His blue eyes gazed down into mine. Eyes so much alike. I loved him as I loved the better side of myself, the brighter, happier side.

“Cathy,” he whispered, stroking my back, his eyes bright, “if you feel like crying, go ahead, I’ll understand. Cry enough for me too. I was hoping, praying that Momma would come and somehow give us a reasonable explanation for doing what she did.”

“A reasonable excuse for murder?” I asked bitterly. “How could she dream up one clever enough? She’s not that smart.” He looked so miserable I tightened my arms about his neck. One hand stole into his hair and twined there. My other hand lowered to stroke his cheek. Love, it was such an encompassing word, different from sex and ten times more compelling. I felt full of love for him when he lowered his face into my hair and sobbed. He murmured my name over and over again, as if I were the only person in the world who would ever be real and solid, and dependable.

Somehow his lips found mine and we were kissing, kissing with so much passion he was aroused and tried to draw me into his room. “I just want to hold you, that’s all. Nothing else. When I go away to school, I need to have something more to hold onto—give me just a little more, Cathy, please.” Before I could answer he had me in his arms again, kissing me with such burning lips I became terrified—and excited too.

“Stop! Don’t!” I cried, but he went on, touching my breasts and pushing my gown aside so he could kiss them. “Chris!” I hissed, angry then. “Don’t love me, Chris. When you’re gone, what you feel for me will fade away like it never happened. We’ll force ourselves to love others so we can feel clean. We can’t be our parents in duplicate. We can’t make the same mistake.”

He held me tighter and didn't say a word, yet I knew what he was thinking. There wouldn't be any others. He wouldn't let it come about. One woman had hurt him too deeply, betrayed him too monstrously when he was young and very, very vulnerable. There was only me he could trust.

He stepped back, two tears shining in the corners of his eyes. It was up to me to slice the bond, now, here. And for his own good. Everybody always did everything for someone's good.

* * *

I couldn't go to sleep. I kept hearing him calling me, wanting me. I got up and drifted down the hall and again got in his bed, where he lay waiting. "You'll never be free of me, Cathy, never. As long as you live, it will be me and you."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"No!" But I kissed him, then jumped from his bed and raced back to my room, slamming and locking the door behind me. What was the matter with me? I should never have gone to his room and gotten into his bed. Was I as evil as the grandmother said?

No, I wasn't.

I couldn't be!

PART TWO



Visions of Sugarplums



It was Christmas. The tree touched the twelve-foot ceiling, and spread under it were gifts enough for ten children! Not that Chris and I were children anymore. Carrie was thrilled by everything Santa had brought for her. Chris and I had used the last of our stolen hoard of money to buy Paul a luscious red lounging robe, and a brilliant gown of ruby red velvet for Henny—size fifty-eight! Dazzled and pleased, she held it before her. Then she wrote a thank-you note, *Make good church dress. Make all friends jealous.*

Paul tried on his lavish new lounging robe. He looked divine in that color and it fitted him beautifully.

Next came the biggest surprise of all. Paul strode over to me and hunkered down on his heels. From his wallet he pulled five large yellow tickets. If he had sat down for a year and thought about nothing but a way to please me most, he couldn't have been more successful. There, fanned in his large, finely shaped hand, were tickets to *The Nutcracker*, performed by the Rosencoff School of Ballet.

“It’s a very professional company, I hear,” explained Paul. “I don’t know much about ballet myself, but I’ve asked around, and they say it is one of the best. They also teach beginner, intermediate and advanced lessons. Which level are you?”

“Advanced!” proclaimed Chris while I could only stare at Paul, too happy to speak. “Cathy was a beginner when she went upstairs to live. But something wonderful happened to her in the attic—the ghost of Anna Pavlova came and took over her body. And Cathy taught herself how to go on *pointe*.”

That night all of us, including Henny, sat enthralled in the third row, center section. Those dancers on stage weren’t just good—they were superb! Especially the handsome man named

Julian Marquet who danced the lead. As in a dream I followed Paul backstage during intermission, for I was going to meet the dancers!

He led us toward a couple standing in the wings. “Madame, Georges,” he said to a tiny woman sleek as a seal and a not much larger man by her side, “this is my ward, Catherine Doll, who I was telling you about. This is her brother Christopher, and this younger beauty is Carrie, and you have met Henrietta Beech before... .”

“Yah, of course,” said the lady who looked like a dancer, talked like a dancer, and wore her black hair just like a dancer would, drawn back from her face and pinned up in a huge chignon. Over black leotards she wore a floating chiffon dress of black, and over that a bolero of leopard skins. Her husband, Georges, was a quiet man, sinewy, pale-faced, with startlingly black hair, and lips so red they seemed made of congealed blood. They were a pair, all right, for her lips were scarlet slashed too, and her eyes were charcoaled smudges in pale pastry dough. Two pairs of black eyes scanned me and then Chris. “You too are a dancer?” they asked of my brother. My, did they always speak simultaneously?

“No! I don’t dance,” said Chris, appearing embarrassed.

“Ah, the pity of that,” sighed the madame regretfully. “What a glorious pair the two of you would make on stage. People would flock to stare at beauty such as you and your sister possess.” She glanced down at small Carrie, clinging fearfully to my hand, and casually disregarded her.

“Chris plans to be a doctor,” explained Dr. Paul.

“Ha!” Madame Rosencoff scoffed, as if Chris must have taken leave of his senses. Both she and her husband turned their ebony eyes on me, concentrating with such intensity I began to feel hot, sweaty, self-conscious.

“You have studied the daunce?” (Always she said “daunce,” as if it had a “u.”)

“Yes,” I said in a small voice.

“Your age when you started?”

“I was four years old.”

“And you are now ... ?”

“In April I will be sixteen.”

“Good. Very, very good.” She rubbed the palms of her long, bony hands together. “Eleven years and more of professional training. At what age did you go on *pointe*?”

“Twelve.”

“Wonderful!” she cried. “I never put girls on full *pointe* until they are thirteen, unless they are excellent. Then she frowned suspiciously. “Are you excellent, or only mediocre?”

“I don’t know.”

“You mean no one has ever told you?”

“No.”

“Then you must be only mediocre.” She half-sneered, turned toward her husband and waved her hand arrogantly to dismiss us.

“Now you wait a minute!” flared Chris, looking red and very angry. “There’s not a dancer on that stage tonight who is as good as Cathy! Not one! That girl out there, playing the lead role of Clara—sometimes she is out of time with the music—Cathy is *never* out of time. *Her* timing is perfect; her *ear* is perfect. Even when Cathy dances to the same melody, each time she varies it just a little, so she never duplicates, always improvises to make it better, and more beautiful, and more touching. You’d be lucky to get a dancer like Cathy in your company!”

Those slanted, jet eyes turned to him, savoring the intensity of his report. “*You* are an authority on the subject of ballet?” she asked with some scorn. “*You* know how to separate the gifted dancers from the horde?”

Chris stood as if in a dream, and spoke as if his feet were firmly rooted there, and even his voice had a huskiness to betray his feelings. “I only know what I see, and what emotions Cathy makes me feel when she dances. I know when the music turns on, and she begins to move with it, my heart

stands still, and when her dance is over, I know I am left aching because such beauty has gone. She doesn't just dance a role, she is that character; she makes you believe—because *she* believes—and there's not a girl in your company who reaches out and grabs my heart and squeezes it until it throbs. So go on and turn her away, and let some other dance company benefit from your stupidity.”

The Madame's jet eyes fixed on Chris long and penetratingly, as did our doctor's eyes. Then slowly Madame Rosencoff turned to me, and from head to toe I was assessed, weighed, measured. “Tomorrow, one o'clock sharp. At my studio you will audition for me.” It was not a request, but a command—not to be disobeyed—and for some reason when I should have been happy, I was angry.

“Tomorrow is too soon,” I said. “I have no costumes, no leotards, no *pointes*.” All of those things had been left behind in the attic of Foxworth Hall.

“Trifles,” she dismissed, with an arrogant wave of her shapely hand. “We will supply what you need—just be there—and don't be late, for we demand that our dancers be disciplined in *all* things, including punctuality!” With a queenly gesture we were dismissed, and gracefully she drifted off with her husband in tow, leaving me stunned. Mouth agape, speechless, I caught the strong study of the dancer, Julian Marquet, who must have overheard every word. His dark eyes shone with a glow of interest and admiration. “Feel flattered, Catherine,” he said to me. “Customarily she and Georges won't take anyone unless they've waited months, or sometimes years, for an audition.”

* * *

I cried that night in Chris's embrace. “I'm out of practice,” I sobbed. “I know I'm going to make a fool of myself tomorrow. It isn't fair that she won't let me have more time to prepare! I need to limber up. I'm going to be stiff, clumsy, and they won't want me, I know they won't!”

“Aw, come off it, Cathy,” he said, tightening his arms about me. “I've seen you in here holding to the bedpost, and doing

your *pliés* and *tendus*. You are *not* out of practice, or stiff, or clumsy—you're just scared. You've got a great big case of stage fright, that's all. And you don't need to worry, you're terrific. *I* know it, *you* know it."

He brushed a light good-night kiss on my lips, dropped his arms and backed toward the door. "Tonight I'll go down on my knees and pray for you. I'll ask God to let you wow them tomorrow. And I'll be there to gloat when I see their stunned expressions—for no one is gonna believe the dancing wonder of you."

With that he was gone. And I was left aching and wanting. I crawled under my covers to lie wide awake and full of trepidations.

Tomorrow was my big day, my chance to prove what I was and if I had that special something you had to have if you were to reach the top. I had to be *the* best, nothing else would do. I had to show Momma, the grandmother, Paul, Chris, everybody! I wasn't evil, or corrupt, or the Devil's issue. I was only me—the best ballerina in the world!

I tossed, turned, fretted in and out of nightmares while Carrie slept on peacefully. In my dreams I did everything wrong at the audition, and, what was worse, I did everything wrong throughout my whole lifetime! I ended up a withered old lady begging on the streets of some huge city. In the dark I passed by my mother and begged for alms. She was still young and beautiful, richly gowned, bejeweled and furred, and escorted by forever-young and faithful Bart Winslow.

I awoke. It was still night. What a long night. I stole down the stairs to find the Christmas tree lights burning, and on the floor, Chris was lying and staring up into the tree branches. It was what the two of us used to do when we were children. Though I should have known better, I was irresistibly drawn toward him, and I lay down beside him. I gazed up into the sparkling other-worldliness of the Christmas tree.

"I thought you'd forgotten," Chris murmured without looking my way. "Remember when we were in Foxworth Hall, the tree was so small and it was on a table and we couldn't lie

under it like this—and look what happened. Let’s never forget again. Even if our future trees are only one foot high, we will hang it up high, so we can lie underneath.”

It worried me the way he said that. Slowly I turned my head to stare at his profile. He was so beautiful, lying there with his fair hair changing colors. Each strand seemed to catch a different rainbowed hue, and when he turned his head to meet my eyes his eyes were glowing too. “You look ... so divine,” I said in a tight voice. “I see candy in your eyes and the crown jewels of England too.”

“No—that’s what I am seeing in your eyes, Cathy. You’re so very beautiful in that white nightgown. I love you in white nightgowns with blue satin ribbons. I love the way your hair spreads like a fan, and you turn your cheek so it rests on a satin pillow.” He moved closer, so his head was on my hair too. Even closer he inclined his head until our foreheads met. His warm breath was on my face. I moved so my head tilted backward and my neck arched. I didn’t feel quite real when his warm lips kissed the hollow of my throat and stayed there. My breath caught. For long, long moments I waited for him to move away. I wanted to pull back myself, but somehow I couldn’t. A sweet peace stole over me, quivering my flesh with a tingling sensation. “Don’t kiss me again,” I whispered, clinging harder to him and pressing his head to my throat.

“I love you,” he choked. “There will never be anyone for me but you. When I’m an old, old man, I’ll look back to this night with you under the Christmas tree, and remember how sweet it was of you to let me hold you like this.”

“Chris, do you have to go away and be a doctor? Couldn’t you stay on here and decide on something else?”

He lifted his head to stare down into my eyes. “Cathy—do you have to ask? All my life it’s been the only thing I’ve wanted, but you ...”

Again I sobbed. I didn’t want him to go! I tickled his face with a tress of my hair, until he cried out and kissed my lips. Such a soft kiss, wanting to grow bolder, and afraid I’d turn away if he did. He began to say wild and crazy things when

our kiss was over, about how much I looked like an angel. “Cathy—look at me! Don’t turn your head and pretend you don’t know what I’m doing, what I’m saying! Look and see the torment you’ve put me in! How can I find anyone else, when you’ve been bred into my bones—and are part of my flesh? Your blood runs fast when mine does! Your eyes burn when mine do—don’t deny it!” His trembling hands began to fumble with the tiny, lace-covered buttons that opened my nightgown to the waist. I closed my eyes and was again in the attic, when he’d accidentally stabbed me in the side with the scissors, so now I was hurting, bleeding, and I needed his lips to kiss and take away the pain.

“How beautiful your breasts are,” he said with a low sigh, leaning to nuzzle them. “I remember when you were flat, and then when you began to grow. You were so shy about them, always wanting to wear loose sweaters so I couldn’t see. Why were you ashamed?”

Somewhere above I hovered, watching him tenderly kiss my breasts, and somewhere deep inside me I shivered. Why was I letting him do this? My arms drew his body tighter against me, and when my lips again met his, maybe it was my fingers that had unbuttoned his pajama jacket so his bare chest was against mine. We melded in a hot blend of unsatisfied desire—before I suddenly cried out, “No—it would be sinful!”

“Then let us sin!”

“Then don’t ever leave me! Forget about being a doctor! Stay with me! Don’t go and leave me! I’m afraid of myself without you! Sometimes I do crazy things. Chris, please don’t leave me alone. I’ve never been alone, please stay!”

“I *have* to be a doctor,” he said, then groaned. “Ask me to give up anything else, and I’d say yes. But don’t ask me to give up the only thing that’s held me together. You wouldn’t give up dancing—would you?”

I didn’t know, as I responded to his demanding kisses, the fire between us growing larger, overwhelming us both and taking us to the brinks of hell. “I love you so much sometimes

I don't know how to handle it," he cried. "If only I could have you just once, and there would be no pain for you, only joy."

The unexpected parting of his hot lips, his tongue that forced my lips open, shot through me with a jolt of electricity! "I love you, oh, how I love you! I dream of you, think of you all day." And on and on he went, while his breath came faster, until he was panting and I was overcome by my body ready and willing to be satisfied. While my thoughts wanted to deny him, I wanted him! I gasped with the shame of it!

"Not here," he said between kisses. "Upstairs in my room."

"No! I'm your sister—and your room is too near Paul's. He'd hear us."

"Then we'll use your room. Carrie can sleep through a war."

Before I knew what was happening he had me in his arms and was racing up the back stairs and into my room where he fell with me on my bed. He had my gown off and his pajamas too when he fell down beside me and started again to complete what he had begun. I didn't want this. I didn't want it ever to happen again! "Stop!" I cried, then rolled away from under him. I fell to the floor. In a flash he was on the floor with me, wrestling. Over and over we turned, two naked bodies that suddenly collided with something hard.

That was what stopped him. He stared at the box with Oreo cookies, a loaf of bread, apples, oranges, a pound of cheddar cheese, a stick of butter, several cans of tuna fish, beans and tomato juice. Out spilled a can opener, dishes, glasses and silverware. "Cathy! Why are you stealing Paul's food and hiding it under your bed?"

I shook my head, fuzzy about why I had taken the food and hidden it away. Then I sat up and reached for the gown he'd tugged off, and modestly I held it before me. "Get out! Leave me alone! I don't love you except as a brother, Christopher!"

He came to put his arms about me, and bowed his head on my shoulder. "I'm sorry. Oh, darling, I know why you took the food. You feel you have to keep food handy—you're afraid

someday we will be punished again. Don't you know I'm the only one who will understand? Let me love you just one more time, Cathy, just one more time to last us our whole lives. Let me just once give you the pleasure I didn't before, just once to last us both all our lives through."

I slapped his face! "No!" I spat. "Never again! You promised, and I thought you would keep that promise! If you have to be a doctor, and go away and leave me—then it will always be no!" I stopped short. I didn't mean that. "Chris ... don't look at me like that, please!"

Slowly he drew on his pajamas. He flashed me a hurt look. "There is no life for me if I'm not a doctor, Cathy."

I put both hands over my mouth to keep from screaming. What was wrong with me? I couldn't demand him to abandon his dream. I wasn't like my mother, making everyone else suffer so she could have her way. I sobbed in his arms. In my brother I had already found my everlasting, forever-green, springtime love that could never, never blossom. Later, as I lay alone on my bed with my eyes open, I realized from the hopeless, flat way I felt that even in a valley without mountains the wind could still blow.

The Audition



It was the day after Christmas. At one o'clock I had to be in Greenglenna, the home of Bart Winslow and Rosencoff School of Ballet.

We all crowded into Dr. Paul's car and we arrived with five minutes to spare.

Madame Rosencoff told me to call her Madame Marisha, if I was accepted. If I failed, I need never address her again, by any name. She wore only black leotards, which showed up every hill and valley of her superb body, kept trim and slim though she must be nearing fifty. Her nipples poked through the black knit material hard as metal points. Her husband, Georges, was also wearing black to show off his sinewy body which was just beginning to show age with the small protrusion of his belly. Twenty girls and three boys were to audition.

"What music do you choose?" she asked. (It seemed her husband was never going to speak, though he kept his bright bird eyes on me constantly.)

"*Sleeping Beauty*," I said meekly, believing the role of Princess Aurora the greatest of all testing pieces in the classical repertory—so why choose a less demanding part? "I can dance *The Rose Adagio* all alone," I boasted.

"Wonderful," she said sarcastically. Then added with additional scorn, "I guessed, just by your looks, you would want *The Sleeping Beauty*."

That made me wish I'd chosen something lesser.

"What color leotards do you want?"

"Pink."

"I thought so."

She tossed me a pair of faded pink leotards and then, just as casually, picked at random from a triple row of many dozens *pointe* shoes. She threw me a pair that fitted perfectly, unbelievable as it sounds. When I'd undressed and donned my leotards and slippers, I sat before a long dressing table with a mirror to equal its length and began to bind up my hair. I didn't have to be told Madame would want to see my neck cords, and any *épaulement* I'd perform was sure to displease her. I knew that already.

Hardly had I finished dressing and doing my hair, with a gaggle of giggling girls surrounding me, when Madame Marisha put her head through a partially opened door to see if I was ready. Critically her jet black eyes scanned me. "Not bad. Follow me," she ordered, and off she strode, her strong legs heavily muscled. How had she let that come about? I was never going to be on *pointe* so much my legs would look lumpy like hers—never!

She led me out into a big arena with a polished floor that really wasn't as slick as it appeared. Seats for onlookers were lined against the walls, and I saw Chris, Carrie, Henny and Dr. Paul. Now I wished I hadn't asked them to come. If I failed, they'd witness my humiliation. Eight or ten other people were there too, though I didn't pay much attention to them. The girls and boys of the company gathered in the wings to watch. I was more afraid than I'd thought I'd be. Sure, I'd practiced some since I escaped Foxworth Hall, but not with the same dedication as in the attic. I should have stayed up all night and exercised, and arrived at dawn to warm up more—then maybe I wouldn't feel nervous enough to be sick.

It was my desire to be last, to watch all the others and see the mistakes they made and learn from them, or to see their accomplishments and benefit from those. In this way I could size up what I should do.

Georges himself sat down to play the piano. I swallowed over the lump in my throat; my mouth felt dry, and butterflies panicked in my chest as my eyes raked over the spectators to find the lodestone I needed in the blue of Chris's eyes. And as always, he was there to smile, and telegraph his pride and

confidence and undying admiration. My dear, beloved Christopher Doll, always there when I needed him, always giving to me and making me better than I would have been without him. God, I prayed, let me be good. Let me live up to his expectations!

I couldn't look at Paul. He wanted to be my father, not my touchstone. If I failed and embarrassed him, certainly he'd see me differently. I'd lose what charm I had for him. I'd be nobody special.

A touch on my arm made me jump. Whirling about I confronted Julian Marquet. "Break a leg," he whispered, then smiled to show his very white and perfect teeth. His dark eyes sparkled wickedly. He was taller than most male dancers, almost six feet, and soon I'd learn he was nineteen. His skin was as fair as mine, though in contrast to his dark hair it made him look too pale. His strong chin sported a devil's cleft and another dimple in his right cheek teased in and out at his will. I thanked him for his wish of good luck, very much taken by his astonishing good looks. "Wow!" he said when I smiled, his voice husky. "You're sure a beautiful girl. Too bad you're only a kid."

"I'm not a kid!"

"What are you then, some old lady of eighteen?"

I smiled, very pleased to think I looked *that* old. "Maybe so, maybe not."

He grinned as if he had all the answers. From the way he bragged of being one of the hottest dancers in a New York company, maybe he *did* have all the answers. "I'm only here for the holidays—to do Madame a favor. Soon I'll go back to New York where I belong." He looked around, as if the "provinces" bored him beyond belief, while my heart did a flip-flop. I was hoping he was one of the dancers I'd work with.

We exchanged a few more words and then my musical cue sounded. Suddenly I was alone in the attic, with colored paper flowers dangling on long strings; nobody but me and that secret lover who danced always just ahead, never letting me

get near enough to see his face. I danced out, fearful at first, and did all the right things, the *entrachets*, the arm flutters, the *pirouettes*. I was sure to keep my eyes open and my face always toward the viewers I didn't see. Then the magic came and took me. I didn't have to plan and count, the music told me what to do, and how to do it, for I was its voice and could do no wrong. And as always that man appeared to dance with me—only this time I saw his face! His beautiful pale, pale face, with the dark and, and the blue-black hair and the ruby lips.

Julian!

I saw him as in a dream, stretching out his strong arms as he went down on one knee, and the other leg pointed backward gracefully. With his eyes he signaled I was to run, then leap into his receiving arms.

Enchanted to see him there, a professional, I was halfway to him when a terrible pain seized my abdomen! I doubled over and cried out! At my feet was a huge pool of blood! Blood streamed down my legs; it stained my pink shoes, my leotards. I slipped and fell to the floor, and grew so weak I could only lie there and hear the screams. Not my screams, but Carrie's. I closed my eyes not caring who it was who came to pick me up. From a far distance I heard Paul's voice and Chris's. Chris's concerned face hovered above me, with his love for me too clearly revealed; it both comforted me and frightened me, for I didn't want Paul to see. Chris said something about not being afraid as blackness came and took me to a far, far place where nobody wanted me.

And my dancing career, not yet begun, was over, over.

Out of a dream of witches I emerged to find Chris sitting on the hospital bed, holding my limp hand ... and those blue eyes, oh, God, those eyes ... "Hi," he said softly, squeezing my fingers. "I've been waiting for you to come around."

"Hi yourself."

He smiled and leaned to kiss my cheek. "I'll tell you this, Catherine Doll, you sure know how to end a dance dramatically."

“Yeah, that’s talent. Real talent. I guess I’d better go into acting.”

He shrugged indifferently. “You could, I guess, though I doubt you will.”

“Oh, Chris,” I stormed weakly, “you know I’ve ruined what chance I had! Why did I bleed like that?” I knew my eyes were full of fear. Fear that he saw and knew the cause. He leaned to draw me up into his embrace and held me fast against his chest.

“Life offers more than one chance, Cathy, you know that. You needed a D & C. You’ll be fine and on your feet by tomorrow.”

“What’s a D & C?”

He smiled and stroked my cheek tenderly, always forgetting I wasn’t as medically sophisticated as he was. “It’s short for a procedure in which a woman is dilated, and an instrument called a curette is used to scrape waste material from the lining of the uterus. Those missed periods of yours must have clotted and then broke free.”

Our eyes met. “That’s all it was, Cathy ... *all*, nothing else.”

“Who did the scraping?” I whispered, scared it was Paul.

“A gynecologist named Dr. Jarvis, a friend of our doctor. Paul says he’s the best gyn. around.”

I lay back on the pillows, not knowing what to think. Of all times for something like that to happen—in front of everyone I was trying to impress. My God, why was life so cruel to me?

“Open your eyes, my lady Catherine,” said Chris. “You’re making too much out of this, when it doesn’t matter. Take a look at that dresser over there and see all the pretty flowers, real flowers, not paper ones. I hope you don’t mind if I took a peek at the cards.” Of course I didn’t mind what *he* did, and soon he was back from the dresser and putting a small white envelope in my flaccid hand. I stared at the huge floral bouquet, thinking it was from Paul, and only then did my eyes

flick to the card in my hand. My fingers shook as I extracted from the envelope the small note that read:

Hope you recover soon. I expect to see you next Monday, three o'clock sharp.

Madame Marisha.

Marisha! I was accepted! "Chris, the Rosencoffs want me!"

"Of course they do," he said mildly. "They'd be just plain dumb if they didn't, but that woman scares the hell out of me! I wouldn't want her controlling my life, even if she is little. But, I guess you can handle her fine; you can always bleed on her feet."

I sat up and threw my arms about him. "Is it going to work out for us, Chris? Do you really think it will? Can we be that lucky?"

He nodded, smiled and then pointed to another bouquet, one from Julian Marquet with another short note. *I'll be seeing you when I fly down from New York again, Catherine Doll, so don't forget me.*

And over Chris's shoulder, while his arms held me tight, Paul came into the room and hesitated near the doorway, frowning as he stared at the two of us, then he put on a smile and came forward. Quickly Chris and I drew apart.

School Days Renewed



There came a day in January when we had to part. We'd taken exams to grade our abilities, and, much to Chris's surprise, and mine, we'd all done extremely well. I qualified for the tenth grade, Carrie for the third, and Chris for a college-prep school. But there was no happiness on Carrie's face when she screamed out, "No! No!" Her foot was ready for kicking, her fists balled to do battle with anyone who tried to force her. "Don't want no private ole school for funny lookin' lil girls! I won't go! You can't make me go! I'm gonna tell Dr. Paul, Cathy!" Her face was red with fury and her weeping voice was a siren's wail.

I wasn't overjoyed by the idea of putting Carrie in a private school ten miles outside the city. The day after she left, Chris would be leaving too. I'd be left alone to attend high school—and we'd sworn a solemn vow never, never to part. (I'd forced myself to put back the hidden cache of food—and no one knew about that but Chris.) I lifted Carrie onto my lap to explain to her how Dr. Paul had selected this very special school and had already paid an enormous tuition. She squinched her eyes shut and tried not to hear. "And it is *not* a school for funny little girls, Carrie," I said soothingly and then kissed her forehead. "It's a school for *rich* girls with parents who can afford the best. You should feel proud and very lucky to have Dr. Paul as our legal guardian." Did I convince her? Had I ever convinced her of anything?

"I still don't wanna go," she wailed stubbornly. "Why can't I go to *your* school, Cathy? Why do I have to go off all alone with nobody?"

"Nobody?" I laughed to hide what I was feeling, a reflection of her own fears. "You won't be alone, darling. You'll be with hundreds of other girls near your own age. Your

school is an elementary one; I have to go on to high school.” I rocked her to and fro in my arms, and stroked her long, shining cascade of hair, then tilted her piquant dollface to mine. Oh, she was a pretty little thing. Such a beauty she’d be if only her body would grow in proportion to her large head. “Carrie you have four people who love you very much. Dr. Paul, Henny, Chris and me. We all want what’s best for you, and even though a few miles separate us, you’ll be in our hearts, in our thoughts, and you can come home every weekend. And, believe it or not, school is not such a dreary place, it’s fun, really. You’ll share a lovely room with a girl your own age. You’ll have expert teachers and, best of all, you’ll be with girls who will think you’re the prettiest thing they’ve ever seen. And you must want to be with other children. I know that being with a great many girls is loads of fun. You play games, and have secret societies and parties, and whisper and giggle all through the night. You’ll love it.” Yeah. Sure. She’d love it.

Carrie acquiesced only after she’d shed a waterfall of tears, her pleading eyes telling me she was going only to please me and her big benefactor whom she loved well. She’d sleep on nails to please him. And to her that school for girls was a bed of nails to endure. Just in time to hear, “Am I gonna stay there a long, long time?” Paul and Chris entered the living room. The two of them had been sequestered in Paul’s study for hours, with Paul coaching Chris on some of the chemistry he’d neglected studying while locked away. Paul gave Carrie just one glance, saw her misery, then headed for the hall closet. Shortly, he was back with a big box wrapped in purple paper and tied with red satin ribbon three inches wide. “This is for my favorite blond,” he said kindly.

Carrie’s big, haunted eyes stared up at him before she smiled thinly. “Oh!” she cried in delight to open her gift and see the bright red leather luggage, complete with a cosmetic case outfitted with a gold comb, brush, mirror and little plastic jars and bottles, and a leather stationery case for writing letters home to us. “It’s bea-u-ti-ful!” she exclaimed, won over at once by everything red and so fine. “I never knew they made red suitcases and put gold mirrors and things in them.”

I had to look at Paul, who certainly didn't think a little girl needed makeup.

As if he read my thoughts, he said, "I know it's rather adult, but I wanted to give her something she can use for many, many years. When she sees it years from now, she'll think of me."

"That's the prettiest luggage I ever saw," I said cheerily. "You can put your toothbrushes, your toothpaste, your bath powder and your toilet water in your makeup case."

"I'm not gonna put no nasty toilet water in my suitcases!"

That made all of us laugh. Then I was up and running toward the stairs, hurrying to my room to fetch a small box that I rushed back to Carrie. Gingerly I held that box in my hands, wondering if I should give it to her and awaken old memories. "Inside this box are some old friends of yours, Carrie. When you're in Miss Emily Dean Calhoun's School for Properly Bred Young Ladies and feel a little lonely, just open this box and see what's inside. Don't show the contents to everybody, just to very special friends."

Her eyes grew large when she saw the tiny porcelain people and the baby she'd loved so much, all stolen by me from that huge, fabulous doll house that she'd spent so many hours playing with in the attic. I'd even taken the crib.

"Mr. and Mrs. Parkins," breathed Carrie, tears of happiness shining in her big, blue eyes, "and little baby Clara! Where did they come from, Cathy?"

"You know where they came from."

She looked at me, holding the box full of cotton to cushion the fragile dolls and handmade wooden crib, all priceless heirlooms. "Cathy, where is Momma?"

Oh, God! Just what I didn't want her to ask. "Carrie, you know we are supposed to tell everybody both our parents are dead."

"*Is* Momma dead?"

"No ... but we have to pretend she is."

“Why?”

Once again I had to explain to Carrie why we could never tell anyone who we really were, and that our mother still lived, or else we'd end up back in that dreary northern room. She sat on the floor near her shiny new red luggage, with the box of dolls in her lap, and stared at me with haunted eyes and no comprehension at all.

“I mean this, Carrie! You are *never* to mention any family but Chris and me, and Dr. Paul and Henny. Do you understand?”

She nodded, but she didn't understand. It was in her lips that quivered and in her wishful expression—she still wanted Momma!

Then came the terrible day when we drove Carrie ten miles outside the city limits of Clairmont to enter her in that fancy private school for the daughters of the affluent. The building was large, painted white, with a portico in front and the customary white columns. A brass plaque near the front door read, ESTABLISHED IN 1824.

We were received in a warm and cozy-looking office by a descendant of the school founder, Miss Emily Dean Dewhurst. A stately, handsome woman with startling, white hair and not a wrinkle to betray her age. “She's a lovely child, Dr. Sheffield. Of course we'll do what we can to make her happy and comfortable while she learns.”

I leaned to embrace Carrie who trembled and I whispered, “Cheer up, make an effort to enjoy yourself. Don't feel abandoned. Every weekend we'll come to take you home with us. Now is that so bad?”

She brightened and forced a smile. “Yes, I can do it,” she murmured weakly.

It wasn't easy to drive away and leave Carrie in that beautiful, white, plantation house.

The very next day was Chris's time to depart for the boy's prep-school, and oh, how I hurt to see him pack up his things.

I watched but couldn't speak. Chris and I couldn't even bear to look at one another.

His school was even farther away. Paul drove thirty miles before we reached the campus with buildings of rose-colored bricks and, again, the obligatory white columns. Sensing we needed to be alone, Paul made some flimsy excuse of wanting to inspect the gardens. Chris and I weren't really alone, but in an alcove with big bay windows. Young men were constantly passing by to glance in and stare at us. I wanted to be in his arms, with my cheek against his. I wanted this to be a farewell to love, so complete we'd know it was forever gone, at least forever gone from being wrong. "Chris," I stammered, near tears, "whatever am I going to do without you?"

His blue eyes kept changing colors, jumbling his kaleidoscope emotions. "Cathy, nothing will change," he whispered hoarsely, clinging to my hands. "When next we see each other, we'll still feel the same. I love you. I always will—right or wrong, I can't help it. I'll study so diligently I won't have time to think about you, and miss you, and wonder what's going on in your life."

"And you'll end up the youngest graduate from med school in the history of mankind," I chided, though my voice was as hoarse as his. "Save a little love for me, and store it away in the deepest part of your heart, the same as I'm going to store my love for you. We can't make the same mistake our parents did."

He sighed heavily and hung his head, studying the floor at his feet, or maybe he was studying my feet in the high heels that made my legs look so much prettier. "You'll take care of yourself."

"Of course. You take care of yourself. Don't study too much. Have some fun, and write me at least once a day; I don't think we should run up phone bills."

"Cathy, you're awfully pretty. Maybe too pretty. I look at you and see our mother all over again, the way you move your hands, and the way you tilt your head to the side. Don't enchant our doctor too much. I mean, after all, he's a man. He

has no wife—and you’ll be living in the same house with him.” He looked up, his eyes suddenly sharp. “Don’t rush into anything trying to escape what you feel for me. I mean it, Cathy.”

“I promise to behave myself.” It was such a weak promise when *he’d* awakened that primitive urge in me that should have been held back until I was old enough to handle it. Now all I wanted was to be fulfilled and loved by someone I could feel good about.

“Paul,” Chris said tentatively, “he’s a great guy. I love him. Carrie loves him. What do you feel for him?”

“Love, the same as you and Carrie. Gratitude. That’s not wrong.”

“He hasn’t done anything out of the way?”

“No. He’s honorable, decent.”

“I see him looking at you, Cathy. You’re so young, so beautiful, and so ... needing.” He paused and flushed, looking away guiltily before he went on. “I feel ugly asking you, when he’s done so much to help us, but still, sometimes I think he took us in only because, well, only because of you. Because he wants you!”

“Chris, he’s twenty-five years older than me. How can you think like that?”

Chris looked relieved. “You’re right,” he said. “You are his ward, and much too young. There must be plenty of beauties in those hospitals who’d be happy to be with him. I guess you’re safe enough.”

Smiling now, he pulled me gently into his embrace and lowered his lips to mine. Just a soft, tender kiss of good-bye-for-a-while. “I’m sorry about Christmas night,” he said when our kiss was over.

My heart was an aching ruin as I backed off to leave him. How was I going to live without him nearby? Another thing *she’d* done to us. Made us care too much, when we should never have cared in the way we did. Her fault, always her

fault! Everything gone wrong in our lives could be laid at her door!

“Don’t overwork yourself, Chris, or soon you will be needing to wear glasses.” He grinned, promised, made a reluctant gesture of farewell. Neither of us could manage to speak the word “good-bye.” I spun about to run out, with tears in my eyes as I raced down the long halls, and then out into the bright sunshine. In Paul’s white car I crouched down low and really sobbed, like Carrie when she bawled.

Suddenly Paul showed up from nowhere and silently took his place behind the wheel. He switched on the ignition, backed the car out and turned to head for the highway again. He didn’t mention my reddened eyes or the sodden handkerchief I clutched in my hand to dab at the tears that kept coming. He didn’t ask why I sat so silently when usually I teased, and gibed, and rattled on nonsensically just to keep from hearing silence. *Quiet, silence. Hear the feathers fall, listen to the house squeal. That was the attic gloom.*

Paul’s strong, well-cared-for hands guided the car with an easy, casual skill, while he sat back relaxed. I studied his hands, for, next to a man’s eyes, I noticed his hands. Then I moved my glance to his legs. Strong, well-shaped thighs which his tight, blue knit trousers showed up well, perhaps too well, for all of a sudden I wasn’t sad, or gloomy, but felt an onrush of sensuality.

Giant trees lined the wide, black road, trees gnarled and dark, thick and ancient. “Bull Bay magnolias,” said Paul. “It’s a pity they aren’t in bloom now, but it won’t be too long. Our winters are short. One thing you must remember: never breathe on a magnolia blossom, or touch one; if you do it will wither and die.” He threw me a teasing look so I couldn’t tell whether or not he was speaking the truth.

“I used to dread turning onto my street, before you came with your brother and sister. I was always so alone. Now I drive home happily. It’s good to feel happy again. Thank you, Cathy, for running south instead of north or west.”

As soon as we got home Paul headed for his office and I headed upstairs to try to work off my loneliness by exercising at the barre. Paul didn't come home for dinner, and that made it even worse. He didn't show up after dinner either, so I went to bed early. All alone. I was all alone. Carrie was gone. My steadfast Christopher Doll, gone too. For the first time we were to sleep under separate roofs. I missed Carrie. I felt awful, afraid. I needed someone. The silence of the house and the deep dark of the night were screaming all about me. *Alone, alone, you are alone, and nobody cares, nobody cares.* I thought about food. I'd worried that I hadn't kept a big supply at hand. Then I remembered I needed some warm milk. Warm milk was supposed to help you fall asleep—and sleep was what I needed.

Enchantress ... Me?



Soft firelight glowed in the living room. The gray logs had guttered into ashes in the hearth, and Paul, wrapped in his warm red robe, sat in a wing-backed chair and slowly drew on a pipe.

I gazed at his smoke-haloed head and saw someone warm, needing, wistful and yearning, as I yearned, and I wished. And being the fool I often was, I drifted toward him on bare feet that didn't make a sound. How nice he'd wear our gift so soon. I wore a gift from him—a soft, turquoise peignoir of airy fabric that floated over a gown of the same color.

He started to see me there, so near his chair, in the middle of the night, though he didn't speak to break the spell that was somehow binding us together in a mutual need.

There was a lot I didn't know about myself, nor did I understand what impulse lifted my hand to caress his cheek. His skin felt raspy, as if he needed a shave. He put his head back against the chair and tilted his face to mine.

“Why are you touching me, Catherine?”

His question was asked in a tight, cold voice, and I could have felt rebuked and hurt, but his eyes were soft, limpid pools of desire, and I had seen desire before, only not in the kind of eyes he had. “Don't you like to be touched?”

“Not by a seductive young girl wearing flimsy clothes who is twenty-five years my junior.”

“Twenty-four and seven months your junior,” I corrected, “and my maternal grandmother married a man of fifty-five, when she was only sixteen.”

“She was a fool and so was he.”

“My mother said she made him a good wife,” I added lamely.

“Why aren’t you up in your bed asleep?” he snapped.

“I can’t sleep. I guess I’m too excited about school tomorrow.”

“Then you’d better go to bed so you’ll be at your best.”

I started to go, really I did, for the thought of warm milk was still in my head, but I had other thoughts, too, more seductive. “Dr. Paul ...”

“I hate it when you call me that!” he interrupted. “Use my first name or don’t speak to me at all.”

“I feel I should show you the respect you deserve.”

“A fig for respect! I’m not any different than other men. A doctor isn’t infallible, Catherine.”

“Why are you calling me Catherine?”

“Why shouldn’t I call you Catherine? It’s your name, and it sounds more grown up than Cathy.”

“A moment or so ago, when I touched your cheek, you flared your eyes at me, as if you didn’t want me to be grown up.”

“You’re a witch. In a second you change from a naive girl into a seductive, provocative woman—a woman who seems to know exactly what she’s doing when she lays her hand on my face.”

My eyes fled before the onslaught of his. I felt hot, uneasy, and wished now I’d gone directly to the kitchen. I stared at the fine books on the shelves and the miniature objects d’art he seemed to crave. Everywhere I looked was something to remind me that what he needed most was beauty.

“Catherine, I’m going to ask you something now that is none of my business, but I must ask. Just what is there between you and your brother?”

My knees began to click together nervously. *Oh, dear God, did it show on our faces?* Why did he have to ask? It wasn’t

any of his business. He had no right to ask such a question. Common sense and good judgment should have glued my tongue to the roof of my mouth and kept me from saying what I did in a shamed, lame way. “Would you be shocked to hear that when we were locked up in one room, always together, four of us, and each day was an eternity, that sometimes Chris and I didn’t always think of ourselves as brother and sister? He attached a barre in the attic for me, so I could keep my muscles supple, so I could keep on believing someday I’d be a ballerina. And while I danced on that soft, rotten wood, he’d study in the attic schoolroom, poring for hours over old encyclopedias. He’d hear my dance music and come and stand in the shadows to watch... .”

“Go on,” he urged when I paused. I stood with my head bowed, thinking backward, forgetting him. Then he suddenly leaned forward, seized hold of me and yanked me down onto his lap. “Tell me the rest.”

I didn’t want to tell him, yet his eyes were hot, demanding, making him seem a different person.

Swallowing first, I continued with reluctance, “Music has always done something special for me, even when I was small. It takes me over and lifts me up and makes me dance. And when I’m up there’s no way to come down except by feeling love for someone. If you come down and feel your feet on the floor, and there’s no one there to love, then you feel empty and lost. And I don’t like to feel lost or empty.”

“And so you danced in the attic, and dwelled in your fanciful imagination, and came back to the floor and found the only one there to love was your brother?” he said with icy heat, burning his eyes into mine. “Right? You had another kind of love you reserved for your little twins, didn’t you? You were mother to them. I know that. I see that every time you look at Carrie and speak Cory’s name. But what kind of love do you have for Christopher? Is it *motherly*? Sisterly? Or is it —” He paused, flushed, and shook me. “What did you do with your brother when you were locked up there, when you were alone?”

Seized by panic, I shook my head, and pushed his hands from my shoulders. “Chris and I were decent! We did the best we could!”

““The best you could’?” he fired, looking hard and belligerent, as if the kindly, gentle man I knew had been only a disguise. “What the hell does that tell me?”

“All you need to know!” I flared back and flashed my eyes with temper as hot and red as his. “You accuse me of seducing you. That’s what you’re doing; you sit and you watch every move I make! You undress me with your eyes. You take me to bed with you with your eyes. You talk about ballet classes, and sending my brother to college and medical school, and all the while you imply that sooner or later you are going to demand your payment, and I know what kind of payment you want!” I took my hands and ripped open the peignoir so the skimpy bodice of the aqua nightgown was revealed. “Look at the kind of gift you gave me. Is this the kind of nightgown a girl of fifteen wears? No! It’s the kind of gown a bride wears on her wedding night! And you gave it to me, and you saw Chris frown, and you didn’t even have the decency to blush!”

His laughter mocked me. I smelled the strong red wine he liked to drink before retiring. His breath was hot on my face, his face very close to mine so I could see each strong dark hair that poked from his skin. It was the wine that made him act as he did, I thought. Only the wine. Any woman on his lap would serve—*any woman!* Teasingly he touched the peaks of both my nipples, skipping from one to the other, and then he dared to slip his hand beneath my bodice so he could fondle the young breasts that were fired with heat from his unexpected caresses. Then my nipples rose up hard and I was breathing just as heavily and fast as he was. “Would you undress for me, Catherine?” he whispered in a mocking way. “Would you sit naked on my lap and let me have my way with you? Or would you pick up that Venetian glass ashtray and crash it down on my head?”

He stared at me then, suddenly shocked to find his hand where it was, cupping my left breast, and he yanked his hand away as if my flesh burned him. He pulled the fabric of my

frail peignoir together and hid what his hungry eyes had devoured before. He stared at my lips that were slightly parted and waiting to be kissed, and I think he planned to kiss me just before he gained control and shoved me away. At that moment thunder crashed overhead, and a lightning bolt sizzled jaggedly to crackle with fire as it struck a telephone wire outside. I jumped! Cried out!

As suddenly as he had withdrawn his hand, he snapped out of his fog and into what he was customarily—a detached, lonely man who was determined to keep himself aloof. How wise I was in my innocence to know this even before he snapped, “What the hell are you doing sitting on my lap half naked? Why did you let me do what I did?”

I didn’t say anything. He was ashamed; I could see that now in the glow of the dying fire, and in the intermittent flashes of lightning. He was thinking all sorts of self-condemning thoughts, chastising, berating, whipping himself—I knew it was my fault; as always it was my fault.

“I’m sorry, Catherine. I don’t know what possessed me to do what I did.”

“I forgive you.”

“Why do you forgive me?”

“Because I love you.”

Again he jerked his head into profile, and I couldn’t see his eyes well enough to read them. “You don’t love me,” he said calmly, “you’re only grateful for what I’ve done.”

“I love you—and I’m yours, when, or if, you want me. And you can say you don’t love me, but you’ll be lying, for I see it in your eyes each time you look at me.” I pressed closer against him and turned his face to mine. “When I was put away by Momma, I swore that when I was free, if love came and demanded of me I’d open my door and let it in. The first day I came I found love in your eyes. You don’t have to marry me, just love me, when you need me.”

He held me and we watched the storm. Winter fought with spring and finally conquered. Now it only hailed, and the

thunder and lightning were gone, and I felt so ... so right. We were much alike, he and I. "Why aren't you afraid of me?" he softly asked, as his big, gentle hands stroked my back, my hair. "You know you shouldn't be here, letting me hold you, touch you."

"Paul ..." I began tentatively, "I'm not bad; neither is Chris. When we were locked away, we did do the best we could, honest. But we were locked in one room and growing up. The grandmother had a list of rules that forbade us to even look at each other and now I think I know why. Our eyes used to meet so often and without a word spoken he could comfort me, and he said my eyes did that for him too. That wasn't bad, was it?"

"I shouldn't have asked, and of course you had to look at each other. That's why we have eyes."

"Living like we did for so long, I don't know a lot about other girls my age, but ever since I was only table high, any kind of beauty has made me light up. Just to see the sun falling on the petals of a rose, or the way light shines through tree leaves and shows the veins, and the way rain on the road turns the oil iridescent, all that makes me feel beautiful. More than anything, when music is playing, especially my kind, ballet music, I don't need the sun or flowers or fresh air. I light up inside and wherever I am magically turns into marble palaces, or I am wild and free in the woods. I used to do that in the attic, and always just ahead a dark-haired man danced with me. We never touched, though we tried to. I never saw his face, though I wanted to. I said his name once, but when I woke up I couldn't remember what it was. So, I guess I'm really in love with him, whoever he is. Every time I see a man with dark hair who moves gracefully I suspect he's the one."

He chuckled and twined his long fingers into my unbound hair. "My, what a romantic you are."

"You're making fun of me. You think I'm only a child. You think if you kissed me it wouldn't be exciting."

He grinned, accepted the challenge and slowly, slowly his head inclined until his lips met mine. Oh! So this was what it was like, a kiss from a stranger. Electric tingles sizzled madly

up and down my arms, and all those nerves that a “child” my age wasn’t supposed to have burned with fire! I drew away sharply, afraid. I was wicked, unholy, still the Devil’s spawn!

And Chris would be shocked!

“What the hell are we doing?” he barked, coming out of the spell I’d cast. “What kind of little devil are you to let me handle you intimately and kiss you? You are very beautiful, Catherine, but you are only a child.” Some realization darkened his eyes as he guessed at my motives. “Now get this straight in your pretty head—you don’t owe me, not anything! What I do for you, for your brother and sister, I do willingly, gladly, without expecting any repayment—of any kind—do you understand?”

“But ... but ...” I sputtered. “I’ve always hated it when the rain beats hard and the wind blows at night. This is the first time I’ve felt warm and protected, here, with you, before the fire.”

“Safe?” he teased lightly. “You think you’re safe with me, as you sit on my lap, and kiss me like that? What do you think I’m made of?”

“The same as other men, only better.”

“Catherine,” Paul said, his voice softer and kinder now, “I’ve made so many mistakes in my life, and you three give me an opportunity to redeem myself. If I so much as lay a hand on you again, I want you to scream for help. If no one is here, then run to your room, or pick up something and bash me over the head.”

“Ooh,” I whispered, “and I thought you loved me!” Tears trickled down my cheeks. I felt like a child again, chastised for presuming too much. How foolish to have believed love was already knocking on my door. I sulked as he lifted me away from him. Then he gently lifted me to my feet, but kept his hands on my waist as he looked up into my face.

“My God, but you are beautiful and desirable,” he said with a sigh. “Don’t tempt me too much, Catherine—for your own good.”

“You don’t have to love me.” My head bowed to hide my face and my hair was something to hide behind as I shamelessly said, “Just use me when you need me, and that will be enough.”

He leaned back in the chair and took his hands from my waist. “Catherine, don’t ever let me hear you offer such a thing again. You live in fairyland, not reality. Little girls get hurt when they play grown-up games. You save yourself for the man you marry—but for God’s sake, wait to grow up first. Don’t rush into having sex with the first man who desires you.”

I backed off, scared of him now, while he stood to come within arm’s reach. “Beautiful child, the eyes of Clairmont are fixed upon you and me, wondering, speculating. I don’t have a gilt-edged reputation. So, for the health of my medical practice and the good of my soul and conscience stay away from me. I’m only a man, not a saint.”

Again I backed off, scared. I flew up the stairs as if pursued. For he wasn’t, after all, the kind of man I wanted. Not him, a doctor, perhaps a womanizer—the last kind of man who could fulfill my dreams of faithful, devoted and forever-green-springtime-romantic love!

* * *

The school Paul sent me to was big and modern with an indoor swimming pool. My schoolmates thought I looked good and talked funny, like a Yankee. They laughed at the way I said “water, father, farther” or any word that had an “a” in it. I didn’t like being laughed at. I didn’t like being different. I wanted to be like the others, and though I tried I found out I was different. How could it be otherwise? She had made me different. I knew Chris was feeling lonely in his school because he too was an alien in a world that had gone on without us. I was fearful for Carrie in her school, all alone, made different too. Damn Momma for doing so much to set us apart, so we couldn’t blend into the crowd and talk as they did and believe as they did. I was an outsider, and in every way they could all my schoolmates made me feel it.

Only one place made me feel I belonged. Straight from my high school classes I'd catch a bus and ride to ballet class, toting my bag with leotards, *pointes*, and a small handbag tucked inside. In the dressing room the girls shared all their secrets. They told ridiculous jokes, sexy stories, some of them even lewd. Sex was in the air, all around us, breathing hotly and demandingly down our necks. Girlishly, foolishly, they discussed whether they should save their bodies for their husbands. Should they pet with clothes on or off—or go “all the way”—and how did they stop a guy after they had “innocently” turned him on?

Because I felt so much wiser than the others I didn't contribute anything. If I dared to speak of my past, of those years when I was living “nowhere” and the love that had sprung up from barren soil, I could imagine how their eyes would pop! I couldn't blame them. No, I didn't blame anyone but the one who'd made it all happen! Momma!

One day I ran home from the bus stop and dashed off a long, venomous letter to my mother—and then I didn't know where to send it. I put it aside until I found out the address in Greenglenna. One thing for sure, I didn't want her to know where we lived. Though she had received the petition, it didn't have Paul's name on it, or our address, only the address of the judge. Sooner or later though, she'd hear from me and be sorry she did.

Each day we began bundled up in heavy, woolen, knitted leg-warmers, and at the barre we exercised until our blood flowed fast and hot and we could discard the woolens as we began to sweat. Our hair, screwed up tight as old ladies' who scrubbed floors, soon became wet too, so we showered two or three times a day—when we worked out eight or ten hours on Saturdays. The barre was not meant for holding onto tightly, but was meant only for balance, to help us develop control, grace. We did the *plié's*, the *tendus*, and *glissés*, the *fondus*, the *ronds de jambe a terre*—and none of it was easy. Sometimes the pain of rotating the hips in the turnouts could make me scream. Then came the *frappes* on three-quarter *pointe*, the *ronds de jambe en l'air*, the *petite* and *grande battements*, the *developpes* and all the warm-up exercises to make our muscles

long, strong and supple. Then we left the barre and used the center arena to repeat all of that without the aid of the barre.

And that was the easy part—from there on the work became increasingly difficult, demanding technical skills awesomely painful to do.

To hear I was good, even excellent, lifted me sky-high ... so there had been some benefits gained from dancing in the attic, dancing even when I was dying, so I thought as *pliéd un, deux*, and on and on as Georges pounded on the old upright piano. And then there was Julian.

Something kept drawing him back to Clairmont. I thought his visits were only ego trips so we could sit in a circle on the floor and watch him perform in the center, showing off his superior virtuosity, his spinning turns that were blurrily fast. His incredible, leaping elevations defied gravity, and from these *grand jetés* he'd land goose-down soft. He cornered me to tell me it was "his" kind of dancing that added so much excitement to the performance.

"Really, Cathy, you haven't seen ballet until you see it done in New York." He yawned as if bored and turned his bold, jet eyes on Norma Belle in her skimpy see-through, white leotards. Quickly I asked why, if New York was the best place to be, he kept coming back to Clairmont so often.

"To visit with my mother and father," he said with a certain indifference. "Madame is my mother, you know."

"Oh, I didn't know that."

"Of course not. I don't like to boast about it." He smiled then, devastatingly wicked. "Are you still a virgin?" I told him it was none of his business and that made him laugh again. "You're too good for this hick place, Cathy. You're different. I can't put my finger on it, but you make the other girls look clumsy, dull. What's your secret?"

"What's yours?"

He grinned and put his hand flat on my breast. "I'm great, that's all. The best there is. Soon all the world will know it."

Angry, I slapped his hand away. I stomped down on his foot and backed away. “Stop it!”

Suddenly, as quickly as he’d cornered me, he lost all interest and walked away to leave me staring.

Most days I’d go straight home from class and spend the evening with Paul. He was so much fun to be with when he wasn’t tired. He told me about his patients without naming them, and told tales of his childhood, and how he’d always wanted to be a doctor, just like Chris. Soon after dinner he’d have to leave to make his rounds at three local hospitals, including one in Greenglenna. I’d try and help Henny after dinner while I waited for Paul to come back. Sometimes we watched TV, and sometimes he took me to a movie. “Before you came, I never went to movies.”

“Never?” I asked.

“Well, almost never,” he said. “I did have a few dates before you came, but since you’ve been here my time just seems to disappear. I don’t know what uses it all up.”

“Talking to me,” I told him, teasing with my finger that I trailed along his closely shaven cheek. “I think I know more about you than I know about anyone else in the world, except Chris and Carrie.”

“No,” he said in a tight voice, “I don’t tell you everything.”

“Why not?”

“You don’t need to know all my dark secrets.”

“I’ve told you all my dark secrets, and you haven’t turned away from me.”

“Go to bed, Catherine!”

I jumped up and ran over to him and kissed his cheek, which was very red. Then I dashed for the stairs. When I was at the top, I turned to see him at the newel post, staring upward, as if the sight of my legs under the short, rose, baby-doll nightie fascinated him.

“And don’t run around the house in such things!” he called to me. “You should wear a robe.”

“Doctor, you brought this outfit to me. I didn’t think you’d want me to cover myself. I thought you wanted to see me with it on.”

“You think too much.”

In the mornings I was up early, before six, so I could eat breakfast with him. He liked me to be there, though he didn’t say so. Nevertheless, I could tell. I had him bewitched, charmed. I was learning more and more how to be like Momma.

I think he tried to avoid me, but I didn’t let him. He was the one to teach me what I needed to know.

His room was down the hall from mine, but I never dared to go to him at night as I had to Chris. I longed for Chris and for Carrie. When I woke up, I ached not to see them in the room beside me; I ached more not to see them at the breakfast table, and if Paul hadn’t been there, I think I might have started off each and every day with tears instead of forced smiles.

“Smile for me, my Catherine,” Paul said one morning when I sat staring down at my plate of grits and scrambled eggs and bacon. I looked up, caught by something I heard in his voice, something wistful, as if he needed me.

“Don’t ever say my name like that again,” I said hoarsely. “Chris used to call me his lady Cath-er-ine, and I don’t like to hear anyone else call me his Catherine.”

He didn’t say anything more, just laid aside the newspaper, got up and went out to the garage. From there he’d drive to the hospitals, then back to his home offices, and I wouldn’t see him again until dinner time. I didn’t see enough of him, never enough of anyone I cared about.

Only on the weekends, when Chris and Carrie were home, did he seem really at ease with me. And yet, when Chris and Carrie were back in their schools, something would come between us, some subtle spark that revealed that he was just as attracted to me as I was to him. I wondered if the real reason was the same as my own. Was he trying to escape memories of

his Julia by letting me into his heart? Just as I was trying to escape Chris?

But my shame was worse than his, or so I thought then. I thought I was the only one with a dark, ugly past. I never dreamed anyone as fine and noble as Paul could have ugliness in his life too.

* * *

Only two weeks passed and Julian flew down from New York again. This time he made it very obvious he'd come just to see me. I felt flattered and a little awkward, for he'd already gained success, while I was still only hoping. He had an old ricky-tin car he said had cost him nothing but his time, for all the pieces had come from the junkyard. "Next to dancing, I love to tinker with cars," he explained as he drove me home from dance class. "Someday, when I'm rich, I'm going to have luxury cars, three or four, or maybe seven, one for each day of the week."

I laughed; it sounded so outrageous and ostentatious. "Does dancing pay that much?"

"It will when I hit the big-time money," he answered confidentially. I had to turn my head and stare at his handsome profile. If you took his features apart one by one, you could find fault with them, for his nose could have been better, and his skin needed more color, and perhaps his lips were too full and red, and too sensual. But when he was put all together, he was sensational looking. "Cathy," he began, throwing me a long look as his tinny car chugged and choked along, "you'd love New York. There's so much to do, so much to see and experience. That doctor you live with isn't your real father, you shouldn't stick around just to please him. Think about moving to New York as soon as possible." He put his arm about my shoulders to draw me closer to his side. "What a team we'd make, you and I," he said softly, cajolingly, and painted for me bright pictures of what our life would be like in New York. Clearly he made me understand I'd be under his wing, and in his bed.

“I don’t know you,” I answered, pulling away to sit as far from him as possible. “I don’t know your past, and you don’t know mine. We’re nothing at all alike, and though you flatter me with your attention you also scare me.”

“Why? I won’t rape you.”

I hated him for saying that. It wasn’t rape I was afraid of. In fact I didn’t know what made me afraid of him, unless I was more afraid of myself when I was with him. “Tell me who you are, Julian Marquet. Tell me about your childhood, your parents. Tell me why you think you are God’s gift to the dance world and to every woman you meet.”

Casually he lit up a cigarette, which he wasn’t supposed to do. “Let me take you out tonight and I’ll give you all the answers you want.”

We’d reached the big house on Bellefair Drive. He parked in front, while I stared toward the windows softly lit in the rosy twilight glow. I could barely discern the dark shadow of Henny who peered out to see who was parking in front of her home. I thought of Paul, but more than anyone else I thought of Chris, my better half. Would Chris approve of Julian? I didn’t think he would, and still I said yes, I’d date him that night. And what a night it turned out to be.

My First Date



I was hesitant about bringing up the subject of Julian to Paul. It was Saturday night; Chris and Carrie were home, and, truthfully, I'd just as soon have gone to a movie with them and Paul. It was with great reluctance that I brought up the fact I had a date with Julian Marquet. "Tonight, Paul, you don't mind, do you?"

He flashed me a tired look and a weak smile. "I think it's about time you started dating. He's not too much older, is he?"

"No," I whispered, feeling a little disappointed that he didn't object.

* * *

Julian showed up promptly at eight. He was slicked up in a new suit, with his shoes shined, his unruly hair tamed, his manners so perfect he didn't seem himself. He shook hands with Paul, leaned to kiss Carrie's cheek. Chris glared at him. The two had been bicycling when I'd told Paul about my first date, and even as Julian held my new spring coat I felt Chris's disapproval.

He drove to a very elegant restaurant where colored lights churned and rock music played. With surprising confidence Julian read the wine list, then tasted what the waiter brought and nodded, saying it was fine. This was all so new to me I felt on edge, afraid of making a mistake. Julian handed me a menu. My hands trembled so much I turned it over to him and asked him to select. I couldn't read French, and it seemed he could from the speedy way he chose our meal. When the salad and main course came it was just as good as he'd promised.

I was wearing a new dress, cut low in front and much too old for a girl of my age. I wanted to appear sophisticated, even though I wasn't.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, while I was thinking the same thing about him. My heart felt funny, as if I were betraying someone. “Much too beautiful to be stuck here in Hicktown for years on end while my mother exploits your talents. I’m not a male lead like I told you before, Cathy; I’m second string in the *corps*. I wanted to impress you, but I know if I had you with me, as my partner, both of us could make it big. There’s a certain magic between us I’ve never had with another dancer. Of course you’d have to begin in the *corps*. But soon enough Madame Zolta would see your talent far surpasses your age and experience. She’s an old crow, but no dummy. Cathy, I’ve danced my head off to get where I am—but I could make it easier for you. With me to back you up you’ll make it quicker than I did. Together we’d make a sensational team. Your fairness complements my darkness; it’s the perfect foil.” And on and on he talked, half-convincing me I was great already, when a certain part of me knew deep down I wasn’t that sensational, and not nearly good enough for New York. And there was Chris whom I couldn’t see if I went to New York, and Carrie who needed me on the weekends. And Paul, he fit in my life somewhere, I knew he fit somewhere. The problem was—where?

Julian wine and dined me, then danced me out onto the floor. Soon we were dancing to rock like no one else in the place could. Everyone drew back just to watch, then applaud. I was giddy with the nearness of him and the amount of wine I’d consumed. On the way home Julian drove onto a secluded lane where lovers parked to make out. I’d never made out and wasn’t ready for someone as overwhelming as Julian.

“Cathy, Cathy, Cathy,” he murmured, kissing my neck, behind my ears, while his hand sought to stroke my upper thigh.

“Stop!” I cried. “Don’t! I don’t know you well enough! You go too fast!”

“You’re acting so childish,” he said with annoyance. “I fly all the way from New York just to be with you, and you can’t even let me kiss you.”

“Julian!” I stormed, “take me home!”

“A kid,” he muttered angrily and turned on the ignition. “Just a damned beautiful kid who tantalizes but won’t come through. Wise up, Cathy. I’m not going to hang around forever.”

He was in my world, my dancing, glamorous world, and suddenly I was afraid of losing him. “Why do you call yourself Marquet when your father’s name is Rosencoff?” I asked, reaching to turn off the ignition.

He smiled and leaned back, then turned to me. “Okay, if you want to talk. I think you and I are a lot alike, even if you won’t admit it. Madame and Georges are my mother and father, but they have never seen me as a son, especially my father. My father sees me as an extension of himself. If I become a great dancer, it won’t be to my credit; it will be just because I am *his* son and bear *his* name. So I put an end to that idea by changing my name. I made it up, just like any performer does when he wants to change his name.

“You know how many baseball games I’ve played? None! They wouldn’t let me. Football was out of the question. Besides, they kept me so busy practicing ballet positions, I was too tired for anything else. Georges never let me call him Father when I was little. After a while I wouldn’t call him Father if he got down on his knees and begged. I tried my damndest to please him, and I never could. He’d always find some flaw, some minute mistake I’d made to keep any performance from being perfect. So, when I make it, I’m making it on my own steam, and nobody is going to know he is my father! Or that Marisha is my mother. So don’t go shooting off your mouth to the rest of the class. They don’t know. Isn’t it funny? I throw a tantrum if he even dares to mention he has a son, and I refuse to dance. That kills him, so he let me go on to New York, thinking I wouldn’t make it without his name. But I have made it, and without his help. I think that kills him. Now tell me about you. Why are you living with that doctor and not your own parents?”

“My parents are dead,” I said, annoyed he’d ask. “Dr. Paul was a friend of my father, so he took us in. He felt sorry for us and didn’t want us to go into an orphanage.”

“Lucky you,” he said with a certain sourness. “*I’d* never be so lucky.” Then he leaned over until his forehead was pressed against mine and our lips were only inches apart. I could feel his breath hot on my face. “Cathy, I don’t want to say and do anything wrong with you. I want to make you the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I am thirteenth in a long line of male dancers who have married ballerinas, most of them. How do you think that makes me feel? Not lucky, you can bet. I’ve been in New York since I was eighteen, and last February I turned twenty. That’s two years, and still I’m not a star. With you I could be. I’ve got to prove to Georges I’m the best, and better than he ever was. I’ve never told anyone this before, but I hurt my back when I was a kid, trying to lift an engine that was too heavy. It bothers me all the time, but still I dance on. And it’s not just because you’re small and don’t weigh much. I know other dancers who are smaller and lighter, but something about your proportions seems to balance just right when I lift. Or maybe it’s what you do to your body that adjusts to my hands... . Whatever it is you do, you fit me to a tee. Cathy, come with me to New York, please.”

“You wouldn’t take advantage of me if I did?”

“I’d be your guardian angel.”

“New York is so big... .”

“I know it like the palm of my hand. Soon you’ll know it just as well.”

“There’s my sister and my brother. I don’t want to leave them yet.”

“Eventually you’ll have to. The longer you stay the harder it will be to make the break. Grow up, Cathy, be your own person. You never are when you stay home and let others dominate you.” He looked away, his scowl bitter. I felt sorry for him, and touched too.

“Maybe. Let me think about it more.”

Chris was on the upper veranda outside my bedroom when I went in to undress. When I saw him out there in his pajamas, his slouched shoulders drew me to him.

“How’d it go?” he asked without looking at me.

Nervously my hands fluttered around. “Okay, I guess. We had wine with dinner. Julian got a little drunk, I think. Maybe I did too.”

He turned to stare in my eyes. “I don’t like him, Cathy! I wish he’d stay in New York and leave you alone! From what I hear from all the girls or boys in your dance company, Julian has claimed you so now no other dancer will ask you out. Cathy, he’s from New York. Those guys up there move fast, and you’re only fifteen!” He moved to cradle me in his arms.

“Who are you dating?” I asked with a sob in my throat. “Don’t tell me you’re not seeing any girls.”

His cheek was against mine when he answered slowly, “There’s no girl I’ve met who can compare to you.”

“How are your studies going?” I asked, hoping to take his mind off me.

“Great. When I’m not thinking of all I have to do in the first year of med school—gross anatomy, micro-anatomy and neuroanatomy—I get around to prepping for college.”

“What do you do in your spare time?”

“What spare time? There’s none left when I finish worrying about what’s happening to you! I like school, Cathy. I’d really enjoy it if you weren’t constantly on my mind. I wait for the weekends when I can see you and Carrie again.”

“Oh, Chris ... you’ve got to try to forget me and find someone else.”

But just one long look into his tortured eyes revealed that what had been started so long ago wasn’t going to be easy to stop.

I had to try to find someone else and then he’d know it was over, forever over. My thoughts took wing to Julian who was striving so to prove himself a better dancer than his father. How like me, who had to be better in all ways than my mother.

I was ready the next time Julian flew down. When he asked me for a date, this time I didn’t hedge. It might as well be him;

we did have the same goals. Then, after the movie and a soft drink in a club for me, and beer for him, he again drove to the lover's lane every city seemed to have. I allowed him this time to do a bit more than just kiss me, but too soon he was breathing hot and fast, and touching me with so much expertise that soon I was responding even when I didn't want to. He pushed me back on the seat. Suddenly I realized what he was about to do—and I grabbed up my handbag and began to beat him on his face. “Stop! I told you before, go slower!”

“You asked for it!” he raged. “You can't lead me on, then turn me off. I despise a tease.”

I thought of Chris and began to cry. “Julian, please. I like you, honest I do. But you don't give me a chance to fall in love with you. Please stop coming at me so fast.”

He seized my arm and ruthlessly twisted it behind my back until I cried out from the pain. I thought he meant to break it. But he released it just when I was about to scream.

“Look, Cathy. I'm half in love with you already. But no girl strings me along like I'm some country bumpkin. There are plenty of girls willing to give out—so I don't need you as much as I thought—not for anything!”

Of course he didn't need me. Nobody really needed me but Chris and Carrie, though Chris needed me in the wrong way. Momma had twisted and warped him, and turned him toward me, and now he couldn't turn away. I couldn't forgive her for that. She had to pay for everything wrong she'd caused. If he and I had sinned, *she had made us*.

* * *

I thought and thought that night of how I could make Momma pay, and I came up with the exact price that would hurt most. It wouldn't be money, she had too much of that. It would have to be something she prized more than money. Two things—her honorable reputation which was a bit tarnished from marrying her half-uncle, and her young husband. Both would be gone when I was through with her.

Then I was crying. Crying for Chris, for Carrie who didn't grow and for Cory who was by now, probably, only bones in his grave.

I turned over to grope for Carrie, reaching to draw her into my arms. But Carrie was in a private school for girls, ten miles outside the city limits. Chris was thirty miles away.

It began to rain hard. The staccato beats on the roof overhead were military drums to take me into dreams and back to exactly where I didn't want to go. I was dumped down in a locked room cluttered with toys and games and massive, dark furniture, and pictures of hell on the walls. I sat in an old wooden rocker, half coming apart, and on my lap I held a ghostly, small brother who called me Momma, and on and on we rocked, and the floorboards creaked, and the wind blew, and the rain pelted down, and below us, around us, above us, the enormous house of countless rooms was waiting to eat us up.

I hated the rain so close above my head, like it used to be when we were upstairs. How much worse our lives had been when it rained, and the room was damp and chill, and in the attic there was nothing but miserable gloom and dead faces that lined the wall. Bands like the grandmother's gray iron came to tighten about my head, smothering my thoughts, making me confused and terrified.

Unable to sleep, I left the bed and slipped on a filmy negligee. For some curious reason I stole to Paul's bedroom and cautiously eased open his closed door. The alarm clock on his nightstand read two o'clock—and still he wasn't home! Nobody in the house but Henny who was so far, far away—way at the other end of the house in her room adjacent to the kitchen.

I shook my head and stared again at Paul's smoothly made bed. Oh, Chris was crazy to want to be a doctor! He'd never have a full night's rest. And it was raining. Accidents happened so often on rainy nights. What if Paul should be killed? What would we do then! *Paul, Paul*, I screamed to myself as I raced toward the stairs and flew down them, then sped on to where I could peer out the French windows in the

living room. I hoped to see a white car parked in the drive, or turning into the drive. God, I prayed, don't let him have an accident! Please, please—don't take him like you took Daddy!

“Cathy, why aren't you in bed?”

I whirled about. There was Paul sitting comfortably in his favorite chair, puffing on a cigarette in the dark. There was just enough light to see he wore the red robe we'd given him for Christmas. I was so overwhelmed with relief to see him safe and not spread out dead on a morgue slab. Morbid thoughts. *Daddy, I can barely remember how you looked, or how your voice sounded, and the special smell of you has faded away.*

“Is something wrong, Catherine?”

Wrong? Why did he call me Catherine at night when we were alone, and only Cathy during the day? *Everything* was wrong! The Greenglenna newspapers and the Virginia one I'd subscribed to and had delivered to my ballet school both told stories of how Mrs. Bartholomew Winslow would make her second “winter” home in Greenglenna. Extensive renovation was being done so her husband's home would be as it was when it was new. Only the best for my mother! For some reason I couldn't fathom I lit into Paul like a shrew. “How long have you been home?” I demanded sharply. “I've been upstairs worrying about you so much I can't sleep! And here you were, all the time! You missed your dinner; you missed last night's dinner; you were supposed to take me out to a movie last night and you forgot all about it! I finished my homework early, dressed in my best clothes and sat around waiting for you to show up, and you forgot it! Why do you let your patients make so many demands on your time so you don't have a life of your own?”

For a long time he didn't answer. Then when my lips parted to speak again, he said in a mild tone, “You really do sound upset. I guess the only excuse I can offer is to say I'm a doctor, and a doctor's time is never his own. I'm sorry I forgot about the movie. I apologize for not calling and telling you there was an emergency and I couldn't leave.”

“Forget—how could you forget? Yesterday you forgot to bring the things I had on my list, so after I waited for hours on end for you to come home I sat around thinking you might come home and bring me the shampoo I wanted, but you didn’t!”

“I’m sorry again. Sometimes I have things on my mind other than movies and the cosmetics you need.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“I am trying to control my temper. It would be nice if you could control yours.”

“I’m not mad!” I shouted. He was so like Momma, so much in control, so poised, when I never was! He didn’t care. That’s why he could sit there and look at me like that! He didn’t really care if he made promises and broke them—like her! I ran forward as if to strike him, but he caught my fists and stared up at me in utter surprise. “Would you hit me, Catherine? Does missing a movie mean so much to you that you can’t understand how I could forget? Now say you’re sorry for screaming at me, as I said I was sorry for disappointing you.”

What tortured me was more than mere disappointment! Nowhere was there anyone I could depend on—only Chris who was forbidden to me. Only Chris who would never forget anything I needed or wanted.

I shuddered. Oh, what kind of person was I? Was I so like Momma I had to have what I wanted, when I wanted, no matter what the cost to others? Was I going to make Paul pay for what she’d done? None of it was his fault. “Paul, I am sorry I yelled at you. I do understand.”

“You must be very tired. Perhaps you take your ballet classes too seriously. Maybe you should let up a little.”

How could I tell him I couldn’t let up? I had to be the best, and to be the best at anything meant hours and hours of work. I fully intended to give up all the pastimes other girls my age enjoyed. I didn’t want a boyfriend who wasn’t a dancer. I didn’t want any girlfriends who didn’t dance. I didn’t want

anything to come between me and my goal, and yet, and yet ... sitting there, looking up at me, was a man who said he needed me, and who was hurt by the hateful way I'd acted.

"I read about my mother today," I said lamely, "and a house she's having remodeled and redecorated. She always gets what she wants. I never get anything. So I act ugly to you and forget all that you've done." I backed off a few feet, aching with the shame I felt. "How long have you been home?"

"Since eleven-thirty," he answered. "I ate the salad and the steak Henny left for me in the warming oven. But I don't sleep well when I'm exceptionally tired. And I don't like the sound of the rain on the roof."

"Because the rain shuts you off and makes you feel lonely?"

He half-smiled. "Yeah, something like that. How did you know?"

How he felt was all over his face as dim as it was in that big room. He was thinking of her, his Julia, his dead wife. Always he looked sad when Julia was on his mind. I approached his chair and impulsively reached out to touch his cheek. "Why do you have to smoke? How can you tell your patients to quit the habit and keep on smoking yourself?"

"How do you know what I tell my patients?" he asked in that soft voice, in a way that tingled my spine. Nervously I laughed, telling him he didn't always close his office door tight, and if I happened to be in the back hall, sometimes, despite my will, I couldn't help overhearing a few things. He told me to go to bed and stop hanging around in the back hall where I didn't belong—and he'd smoke if he wanted to smoke.

"Sometimes you act like a wife, asking such questions, getting angry at me for forgetting to stop at the drugstore for you. Are you sure you didn't desperately need that shampoo?"

Now he had me feeling a fool, and again I was angry. "I only asked you to get those things because you pass by a discount store where everything is cheaper! I was just trying to

save money! From now on I'll never ask you to pick up anything I need! When you invite me to dinner in a restaurant, or to a movie, I'll be prepared to be disappointed, and that way I won't be disappointed. I might as well get used to expecting the worst from everyone."

"Catherine! You can hate me if that's what you want make me pay for everything you have suffered, and then, perhaps, you can go to sleep at night and not toss and turn and cry out in your sleep, and call for your mother like a child of three."

Stunned, I stared at him. "I call out for *her*?"

"Yes," he said, "many, many times I've heard you call for your mother." I saw the pity in his eyes. "Don't be ashamed of being human, Catherine. We all expect only the best from our mothers."

I didn't want to talk about her, so I stepped nearer. "Julian is back in town. I went out with him tonight since you stood me up last night. Julian thinks I'm ready for New York. He thinks his dance instructor, Madame Zolta, would develop me quicker than his mother. He thinks together we'd make a brilliant team."

"And what do *you* think?"

"I think I'm not ready for New York yet," I whispered, "but he comes on so strong, sometimes he makes me believe, because he seems so convinced."

"Go slowly, Catherine. Julian is a handsome young man, with arrogance enough for ten men. Use your own good common sense and don't be influenced by someone who might only want to use you."

"I dream every night of being in New York, on stage. I see my mother in the audience staring up at me with disbelieving eyes. She wanted to kill me. I want her to see me dance and realize I have more to give the world than she does."

He winced. "Why do you need revenge so much? I thought if I took you three in and did the best I could for you, you'd find peace and forgiveness. Can't you forgive and forget? If

there's one chance we poor humans have of reaching godliness, it's in learning to forgive and forget."

"*You* and Chris," I said bitterly. "It's easy for you to talk about forgiving and forgetting—because you haven't been a victim, and I have. I've lost my younger brother who was like my own son. I loved Cory, and she stole away his life. *I hate her for that!* I hate her for ten million reasons—so don't talk to me about forgiving and forgetting—when she's got to pay for what she did! She lied to us, betrayed us in the worse possible way! She said nothing to let us know our grandfather had died, and kept right on letting us stay locked up—for nine long, long months—and in those long months we were eating poisoned doughnuts! So don't you dare talk to me of forgiving and forgetting! I don't know how to forgive and forget! All I know how to do is hate! And you don't know what it's like to hate as I do!"

"Don't I?" he asked in a flat voice.

"*No*, you don't know!"

He drew me down on his lap when I sobbed and tears streamed down my face. He comforted me as a father would, with little kisses and kind, stroking hands. "Catherine, I've got a story of my own to tell. Maybe in some ways it equals the horror of yours. Maybe if I tell you you'll be able to use some of what I've learned."

I stared up into his face. His arms held me lightly as I leaned back. "Are you going to tell me about Julia and Scotty?"

"Yes." A hard edge toned his voice. His eyes fixed on the rain-washed windows, and his hand that found mine squeezed tight. "You think only your mother commits crimes against those she loves—well, you're wrong. It's done every day. Sometimes it's done to gain money, but there are other reasons." He paused, sighed, then went on. "I hope when you've heard my story, you can go to bed tonight and forget about vengeance. If you don't you'll hurt yourself more than anyone else."

I didn't believe that because I didn't want to believe that. But I was eager enough to hear the tale of how Julia and Scotty both died on the same day.

When Paul began to speak of Julia, I feared the ending. I squeezed my eyelids closed, wishing now my ears didn't have to hear, for I didn't need more to add to the anguish I already felt for one little dead boy. But he did it for my sake, to save me, as if anything could.

“Julia and I were childhood sweethearts. She never had another boyfriend; I never had another girlfriend. Julia belonged to me, and I let every other boy know it. I never gave myself, or her, the chance to experience what others were like—and that was a terrible mistake. We were foolish enough to believe our love would last forever.

“We went steady, we wrote love letters to each other though she lived only a few blocks away. The older Julia grew, the more beautiful she became. I thought I was the luckiest guy in the world, and she thought I was perfect. We both had each other up on pedestals. She was going to be the perfect doctor's wife, and I was going to be the perfect husband, and we'd have three children. Julia was an only child, and her parents doted on her. She adored her father; she used to say I was like him.” His voice deepened here, as if what he had to say was very painful.

“I put an engagement ring on Julia's finger the day she was eighteen. I was nineteen at the time. When I was in college, I'd think of her back here and wonder what man had his eye on her. I was afraid I'd lose her to someone else if we didn't marry. So at age nineteen she married me. I was twenty.”

His voice turned bitter while his eyes went blank, and his arms tightened about me. “Julia and I had kissed many times, and we always held hands, but she would never let me do anything truly intimate—that had to wait until she had a wedding band on her finger. I'd had a few sexual encounters, not many. She was a virgin and thought I was. I didn't take my marriage vows lightly, and I meant to be exactly the kind of husband who'd make her happy. I loved her very much. So, on our wedding night, she took two hours to undress in the

bathroom. She came out of the bathroom wearing a long white gown, and her face was as white as that gown. I could tell she was terrified. I convinced myself I would be so tender, so loving, she would enjoy being my wife.

“She didn’t enjoy sex, Cathy. I did the best I could to arouse her, while she cringed back with her eyes wide and full of shock, and then she screamed when I tried to take off her nightgown. I stopped and thought I’d try again the next night, after she pleaded for me to give her more time. The next night it was the same thing all over again, only worse. ‘Why, why can’t you just lie here and hold me?’ she asked tearfully. ‘Why does it have to be so ugly?’

“I was just a kid myself, and didn’t know how to handle a situation like that. I loved her, and I wanted her, and in the end I raped her—or so she said time and again. Still I loved her. I’d loved her most of my life and couldn’t believe I’d made the wrong choice. So I began to read every book on lovemaking I could find, and I tried all the techniques to arouse her and make her want me—and she was only repulsed. I took to drinking after I graduated from medical school, and when I felt like it I found some other woman who was glad to have me in her bed. The years passed while she held herself aloof, cleaned my house, washed my clothes, ironed my shirts and sewed on my missing buttons. She was so lovely, so desirable and so near that sometimes I’d force her, even if she cried afterward. Then, she found out she was pregnant. I was delighted, and I think she was too. Never was a child more loved and pampered than my son, and, fortunately, he was the kind of child who couldn’t be spoiled by too much love.”

His voice took on an even deeper register while I huddled closer in his arms, fearing what was to come, for I knew it would be terrible.

“After Scotty’s birth Julia told me flatly she’d done her duty and given me a son, and that from now on I was to leave her alone. Gladly I left her alone, but I was deeply wounded. I talked to her mother about our problem, and her mother hinted at some dark secret in Julia’s past, a cousin of hers who’d done something to Julia when she was only four. I never learned just

what he'd done, but whatever it was, it spoiled sex forever for my wife. I suggested to Julia we should both visit a marriage counselor or a psychologist but she'd have none of that—it would be too embarrassing—why couldn't I leave her alone?

“I did leave her alone after that,” he went on. “There are always women around willing to accommodate a man, and in my office I had a lovely receptionist who let me know she was more than available, anytime anyplace. We had an affair that lasted several years. I thought we were both very discreet, and no one knew. Then one day she came and told me she was pregnant with my child. I couldn't believe her, for she'd told me she was on the pill. I couldn't even believe the child was mine since I knew she had other lovers. So I said no, I couldn't divorce my wife and risk losing Scotty to father a child who might not be mine. She blew up.

“I went home that evening to confront a wife I'd never known before. Julia lashed out at me for being unfaithful, when she'd done the best she could and given me the son I wanted. And now I'd betrayed her, broken my vow and made her the laughing stock of the town! She threatened to kill herself. I pitied her as she screamed out *she'd make me hurt!* She'd threatened suicide before but she'd never done anything.

“I thought this blow-up would clear the air between us. Julia never spoke to me again about my affair. In fact she stopped speaking to me at all except when Scotty was around, for she wanted him to have a normal home with ostensibly happy parents. I had given her a son she loved beyond reason.

“Then came June and Scotty's third birthday. She planned a party for him and invited six small guests, who naturally had to bring along their mothers as well. It was on a Saturday. I was home, and to help calm Scotty, who was very excited about his party, I gave him a sailboat to go with the sailor suit he was going to wear. Julia came down the stairs with him, dressed in blue voile. Her lovely dark hair was bound back with a blue satin ribbon. Scotty clung to his mother's hand, and in his free hand he carried the sailboat. Julia told me she was afraid she hadn't bought enough candy for party, and it was such a beautiful day that she and Scotty would walk to the

nearest drugstore and buy some more. I offered to drive her there. She refused. I offered to walk along with them. She said she didn't want me to. She wanted me to wait and be there in case any of the guests arrived early. I sat down on the front veranda and waited. Inside, the dining table was all set for the party, with balloons suspended from the chandelier, and snappers, hats and other favors, and Henny had made a huge cake.

“The guests began to arrive around two. And still Julia and Scotty didn't return. I began to worry so I got in my car and drove to the drugstore, expecting to see them on the sidewalk leading home. I didn't see them. I asked the druggist if they'd been there; none of the clerks had seen them. That's when I began to feel really frightened. I cruised the streets looking for them, and stopped to ask passers-by if they'd seen a lady dressed in blue with a little boy in a sailor suit. I guess I'd questioned four or five before a boy on a bicycle told me yes, he'd seen such a lady in blue, with a little boy carrying a sailboat, and he pointed out the direction they'd taken.

“They were headed for the river! I drove as far as I could then jumped out of the car and ran down the dirt path, fearing every moment I'd get there too late. I couldn't bring myself to believe she'd really do it. I kept calming myself by thinking Scotty only wanted to float his boat on the water, like I used to do. I ran so fast my heart hurt, and then I reached the grassy river bank. And there they were, the two of them, both in the water floating face upward. Julia had her arms locked around Scotty who'd clearly tried to free himself from her hold, and his little boat was sailing with the tide. The blue ribbon had come unbound from her hair, and it floated too, and all about her hair streamed like dark ribbons to twine in the weeds. The water was only knee-high.”

I made some small sound that choked my throat, feeling his terrible anguish, but he didn't hear. He went on, “In no time at all I had them both in my arms and I carried them to shore. Julia was barely alive, but Scotty seemed dead, so it was him I worked over first in a futile effort to bring him around. I did everything possible to pump the water from his lungs, but he was dead. I then turned to Julia and did the same for her. She

coughed and choked out the water. She didn't open her eyes but at least she was breathing. I put both of them in my car and drove them to the nearest hospital where they slaved to bring Julia back, but they couldn't. No more than I could bring Scotty back to life."

Paul paused and stared deep into my eyes. "That is my story for a girl who thinks she's the only one who has suffered, and the only one who has lost, and the only one who grieves. Oh, I grieve just as much as you do but I also bear the guilt. I should have known how unstable Julia was. We had watched *Medea* on TV only a few nights before Scotty's birthday and she showed unusual interest in it, and she didn't care for television. I was stupid not to know what she was thinking and planning. Yet, even now, I cannot understand how she could kill our son when she loved him so much. She could have divorced me and kept him. I wouldn't have taken him from her. But that wasn't enough revenge for Julia. She had to kill the thing I loved best, my son."

I couldn't speak. What kind of woman had Julia been? Like my own mother? My mother killed to gain a fortune. Julia killed for revenge. Was I going to do the same thing? No, no, of course not. My way would be better, much better, for she'd live to suffer on, and on, and on.

"I'm sorry," I said brokenly, so sorry I had to kiss his cheek. "But you can have other children. You can marry again." I put my arms about him when he shook his head.

"Forget Julia!" I cried, throwing my arms about his neck and snuggling closer in his arms. "Don't you tell me all the time to forgive and forget? Forgive yourself, and forget what happened to Julia. I remember my mother and father; they were always loving and kissing. I've known since I was a little girl that men need to be loved and touched. I used to watch my mother to see how she tamed Daddy down when he was angry. She did it with kisses, with soft looks and small touches." I tilted my head back and smiled at him as I'd seen my mother smile at my father. "Tell me how a wife should be on her wedding night. I wouldn't want to disappoint bridegroom."

"I will tell you no such thing!"

“Then I’ll just pretend you’re my bridegroom, and I have just come from the bathroom after getting un-dressed. Or maybe I should undress in front of you. What do you think?”

He cleared his throat and tried to shove me away, but clung like a burr. “I think you ought to go to bed and forget games of pretending.”

I stayed where I was. Over and over again I kissed him and soon he was responding. I felt his flesh grow warmer but then his lips beneath mine tightened into a thin line as his hands went under my knees and shoulders. He stood with me in his arms and headed toward the stairs. I thought he was going to take me to his room and make love to me and I was frightened, ashamed—and excited and eager too. But he headed straight for my room and there by my narrow bed he hesitated. He held me close against his heart for an excruciatingly long time as the rain pelted down and beat on the window glass. Paul seemed to forget who I was as his raspy cheek rubbed against mine, caressing with his cheek, not his hands this time. And again, as always, I had to speak and spoil it all.

“Paul.” My timid voice drew him out of some deep reverie that might, if I’d stayed silent, have led me sooner toward that forever-withheld ecstasy my body yearned for. “When we were locked away upstairs our grandmother always called us Devil’s spawn. She told us we were evil seed planted in the wrong soil, that nothing good would ever come of us. She made us all unsure of what we were, or whether we had the right to be alive. Was it so terrible what our mother did to marry her half-uncle when he was only three years older than she? No woman with a heart could have resisted him. I know I couldn’t have. He was like you. Our grandparents believed our parents had committed an unholy sin so they despised us, even the twins who were so little and adorable. They called us unwholesome. Were they right? Were they right to try to kill us?”

I’d said exactly the right words to snap him back into focus. Quickly he dropped me. He turned his head sideways so I couldn’t read his eyes. I hated for people to hide their eyes from me so I couldn’t see the truth.

“I think your parents were very much in love and very young,” he said in a strange, tight voice, “so much in love they didn’t pause to consider the future and the consequences.”

“Oh!” I cried, outraged. “You think the grandparents were right—and we are evil!”

He spun about to face me, his full, sensual lips open, his expression furious. “Don’t take what I say and twist it about to suit your need for revenge. There’s no reason, ever, to justify murder, unless it’s a case of self-defense. You’re not evil. Your grandparents were bigoted fools who should have learned to accept what was and make the best of it. And they had much to be proud of in the four grandchildren your parents gave them. And if your parents took a calculated gamble when they decided to have children, I say they won. God and the odds were on your side and gave you too much beauty and appreciation of it, and perhaps too many talents. Most certainly there is one very young girl who smolders with adult emotions too large for her size and age.”

“Paul ... ?”

“Don’t look at me like that, Catherine.”

“I don’t know how I’m looking.”

“Go to sleep, Catherine Sheffield, this instant!”

“What did you call me?” I asked as he backed off toward the door.

He smiled at me. “It wasn’t a Freudian slip, if that’s what you’re thinking. Dollanganger is too long a name. Sheffield would be a much better choice. Legally we can arrange to have your surname changed.”

“Oh.” He made me feel sick with disappointment.

“Look here, Catherine,” he said from the doorway. He was so large he blocked out the light from the hall. “You’re playing a dangerous game. You’re trying to seduce me and you’re very lovely and very hard to resist. But your place in my life is as my daughter—nothing else.”

“Was it raining that day in June when you put Julia and Scotty in the ground?”

“What difference does that make? *Any day* you put someone you love underground it’s raining!” And he was gone from my door, striding quickly down the hall to his room where he slammed the door hard.

So, I’d tried twice and he’d rejected me twice. Now I was free to go on my merry, destructive way to dance and dance until I reached the top. And that would show Momma, who could do nothing but embroider and knit, just who had the most talent and brains. She would see who could make a fortune on her own without selling her body, and without stooping to murder to inherit it!

The whole world was going to know about me! They’d compare me to Anna Pavlova and say I was better. She’d come to a party they threw in my honor, and with her would be her husband. She’d look old, jaded, tired, while I’d be fresh and young, and her darling Bart would come straight to me, his eyes dazzled as he kissed my hand. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” he’d say, “and the most talented.” And with his eyes alone I’d know he loved me, loved me ten times more than he had ever loved her. And then when I had him and she was alone, I’d tell him who I was, and he’d not believe at first. Then he would. And he’d hate her! He’d take all her money from her. Where would it go? I paused, stumped. Where would the money go if it were taken from Momma? Would it go back to the grandmother? It wouldn’t come to us, not Chris, Carrie or me, for we just didn’t exist as Foxworths. Then I smiled to myself, thinking of the four birth certificates I’d found sewn under the lining of one of our old suitcases. I began to laugh. Oh, Momma, what stupid things you do! Imagine, hiding the birth certificates. With those I could prove Cory existed, and without them it would be her word against mine, unless the police went back to Gladstone and found the doctor who had delivered the twins. And then there was our old babysitter, Mrs. Simpson—and Jim Johnston. Oh, I hoped none had moved away and that they could still remember the four Dresden dolls.

I knew I was evil, just like the grandmother said from the beginning, born to be bad. I'd been punished before I'd even done anything evil, so why not let the punishment fit the crime that was to be? There was no reason why I should be haunted and ruined just because once upon a miserable time, I had turned for refuge into the arms of my brother. I'd go to the man who needed me most. If that was evil, to give what his words denied and his eyes pleaded for, then let me be evil!

I began, as I grew sleepy, to plan how it would be. He wouldn't turn away and put me off, for I'd make it impossible. He wouldn't want to hurt me. He'd take me and then he'd think to himself he had to, and then he wouldn't feel guilty, not guilty at all.

The guilt would all be mine. And Chris would hate me and turn, as he had to, to someone else.

Sweeter Than All the Roses



I was sixteen in April of 1961. There I was, at the blossoming, ripe age when all men, young and old, and most of all those past forty, turned to stare at me on the streets. When I waited on the corner for a bus, cars slowed because male drivers couldn't keep from gaping at me.

And if they were enraptured, I was even more so. I preened before the many mirrors in Paul's home and saw, sometimes by surprise, a lovely, even breathtakingly beautiful girl—and then that glorious revelation—that was *me!* I was dazzling and I knew it. Julian flew down often to turn his desiring eyes upon me, telling me he knew what he wanted even if I didn't. I saw Chris only on the weekends and I knew he still wanted me, still loved me more than he'd ever love anyone again.

Chris and Carrie came home for my birthday weekend and we laughed and hugged and talked so fast, as if we'd never have the time to say enough, especially Chris and I. I wanted to tell Chris that Momma would be living in Greenglenna soon but I was afraid he'd try to stop me from doing what I had planned so I never mentioned it. After a while Carrie drew away to sit with big, sad eyes and stare at our kind benefactor. That big, handsome man who ordered me to dress up in my very best. "Why not wear that dress you've been saving for a special occasion? For your birthday I'm treating all of you to a gourmet feast at my favorite restaurant The Plantation House."

Right away I had to rush upstairs and begin dressing. I was going to make the most of my birthday. My face didn't really need makeup, yet I put it on, the whole works, including mascara black as ink, and then I used tongs to curl my lashes. My nails gleamed like lustrous pearls and the gown I wore was Paris pink. Oh, did I feel pretty as I preened and primped before a cheval glass bought for my vanity.

“My lady Catherine,” said Chris from the open doorway. “You do look gorgeous but it is in appallingly bad taste to admire yourself so much you have to kiss your own reflection. Really, Cathy, wait for compliments from others—don’t give them to yourself.”

“I’m afraid no one will tell me,” I said defensively, “so I tell it to myself to give myself more confidence. Do I look beautiful and not just pretty?”

“Yeah,” he said in a funny, tight voice, “I doubt I’ll ever see another girl as beautiful as you look right now.”

“Would you say I’m improving with age?”

“I’m not going to compliment you anymore! It’s no wonder the grandmother broke all the mirrors. I’ve got a good mind to do that myself. Such conceit!”

I frowned, not liking to be reminded of that old woman. “*You* look fantastic, Chris,” I said, giving him a big, warm smile. “I’m not ashamed or embarrassed to hand out compliments when they’re deserved. You’re as handsome as Daddy.”

Every time he came home from his school he looked more mature and more handsome. Though, when I peered closer, wisdom was putting something strange in his eyes, something that made him seem much, much older than I was. He also appeared sadder than me, more vulnerable, and the combination was extremely appealing. “Why aren’t you happy, Chris?” I asked. “Is life disappointing you? Is it less than you thought it would be when we were locked away and we had so many dreams for the future? Are you sorry now that you decided on being a doctor? Are you wishing instead to be a dancer like me?”

I had neared to watch his oh, so revealing eyes, but he lowered them to hide away and his hands tried to span my waist, but my waist wasn’t that small or his hands weren’t that large. Or was he just doing something to touch me? Making a game out of what was serious. Was that it? I ducked to peer into his face and I saw the love I was looking for and then wished I didn’t know.

“Chris, you haven’t answered.”

“What did you ask?”

“Life, medical training, is it living up to your expectations?”

“What does?”

“That sounds cynical. My style, not yours.”

He raised his head and smiled brightly. *Oh, God!* “Yes,” he said, “life on the outside is what I thought it would be. I was realistic, unlike you. I like school and the friends I’ve made. But I still miss you; it’s hard being separated from you, always wondering what you’re up to.” His eyes shifted again and became shadowed as he yearned for the impossible. “Happy birthday, my lady Cath-er-ine,” he softly said, and then brushed my lips with his. Just a feathery little kiss that didn’t dare much. “Let’s go,” he said resolutely, taking hold of my hand. “Everyone is ready but fussy, prissy you.”

We descended the stairs hand in hand. Paul and Carrie were all dressed and waiting, with Henny too.

The house felt strange, so hushed and expectant—so weirdly dark, with all the lights off but in the hall. How funny.

Then, suddenly, out of the dark came, “*Sur-prise! Sur-prise!*” Screamed by a chorus of voices as the lights all came on, and members of my ballet class, thronging about Chris and me.

Henny carried in a birthday cake of three layers, each smaller than the one underneath and proudly said she’d I made it and decorated it herself. *Let me always succeed at what I set out to do*, I wished with my eyes closed when I blew out all the candles. *I’m gaining on you, Momma—getting older and wiser each day, so when the time comes, I’ll be ready—your match.*

I blew so well the melted pink wax smeared the sugary pink roses nestled sweetly on pale green leaves. Across from me was Julian. His ebony eyes riveted as mutely he asked the same question over and over.

Whenever I tried to meet eyes with Chris he had his turned another way or lowered to stare at the floor. Carrie crowded close beside Paul, who sat some distance away from the boisterous revelry and tried not to look stern. As soon as I had all the presents opened Paul got up, picked Carrie up in his arms, and both disappeared up the stairs.

“Good night, Cathy,” called Carrie, her small face happy and flushed with sleepiness, “this is the best birthday party I’ve ever been to.”

I could have cried from the pain of that, for she was almost nine years old and the birthday parties she could remember, except Chris’s last November, had been pitiful attempts to make much out of little.

“Why are you looking sad?” asked Julian who came up and swung me into his embrace. “Rejoice—for now you have me at your feet, ready to set your heart on fire along with your body.”

Truly I hated him when he acted like that. He tried to demonstrate in every way possible that I belonged to him and him alone. His gift had been a leather tote to carry my ballet leotards, shoes, etc. I danced away from him, not wanting to be claimed tonight. All the girls who weren’t already infatuated with Julian immediately fell for Chris, and this in no way enhanced Julian’s liking for my brother. I don’t know what happened to put the match to the grass but suddenly Chris and Julian were in a corner arguing and about to exchange blows. “I don’t give a damn what you think!” stormed Chris in his eye-of-the-hurricane calm way. “My sister is too young for a lover and not ready for New York!”

“You! You—” fired Julian back. “What do you know about the dance? You know nothing! You can’t even manage to move your feet without stepping on yourself!”

“That may be true,” said Chris in an icy voice, “but I have other skills. And we’re talking about my sister and the fact that she is still underaged. I won’t have you persuading her to accompany you to New York when she hasn’t even finished high school yet!”

My head swiveled from one to the other and between the two it was hard to say which was the better looking. I felt sick that they would show everyone their hostility, and sick because I wanted so much for them to like each other. I trembled on the brink of crying out, *stop, don't do this!* But I said nothing.

“Cathy,” called Chris, not moving his eyes for one second from Julian who appeared ready to throw a blow or deliver a kick, “do you honestly believe you are ready to make your debut in New York?”

“No ...” I said in a near whisper.

Julian’s eyes raged my way, for he was at me, demanding of me every second we were together, wanting me to accompany him to New York and be his mistress and dance partner. I knew why he wanted me—my weight, my height, my balance suited his abilities perfectly. It was of utmost importance to find the perfect partner when you wanted to impress in a *pas de deux*.

“May all your birthdays be hell on earth!” Julian said as he headed for the front door, and he slammed it hard behind him. That’s how my party ended, with everyone going home looking embarrassed. Chris stalked up to his room without wishing me good night. With tears in my eyes I began to pick up the trash from the living room carpet. I found a hole burned in the plushy green from a carelessly held cigarette. Someone had broken one of Paul’s prized pieces of hand-blown glass—a transparent rose of shimmering crystal. I held it, thinking about buying glue that would put it back together again, even as I planned a way, for there had to be a way, to cover up the holes in the carpet and take the white rings from the tables.

“Don’t worry about the rose,” Paul’s voice came from behind me, “it’s just a cheap knickknack. I can always buy another.”

I turned to look at him. He was standing so casually in the archway of the foyer, meeting my teary look with his soft, kind eyes. “It was a beautiful rose,” I choked, “and I know it

was expensive. I'll buy you another if I can find a duplicate, and if I can't I'll buy you something better when I can... .”

“Forget it.”

“Thank you again for the beautiful music box.” Nervously my hands fluttered to my daring décolletage and sought to hide the cleavage. “My father gave me a silver music box with a ballerina inside once but I had to leave it... .” My voice trailed off and I could speak no more, for thoughts of my father always left me in childish ruins of bleakness without hope.

“Chris told me about the music box your father gave you and I tried to find one just like it. Did I succeed?”

“Yes,” I said, though it wasn't the same.

“Good. Now go to bed. Forget the mess—Henny will clean up. You look sleepy.”

I was soon up the stairs and into my room, where to my surprise Chris was waiting for me.

“What is going on between you and Julian?” he shot out fiercely.

“Nothing is going on!”

“Don't lie to me, Cathy! He doesn't fly down here so often for *nothing!*”

“Mind your own damned business, Christopher!” I said viciously. “I don't try to tell you what to do and I demand the same from you! You are not a saint and I am not an angel! The trouble is you're just another man who thinks you can do anything *you* want while I have to sit prim and prissy on the sidelines and wait for someone to come along and marry me! Well, I'm not that kind of woman! Nobody is going to push me around and make me do what I don't want to—never again! Not Paul! Not Madame! Not Julian—and not you either!” His face paled as he listened and restrained himself from interrupting. “I want you to stay out of my life, Christopher. I'll do what I have to, anything I have to, to get to the top!”

He glared at me with his heavenly blue eyes shooting devilish electric sparks. “I take it you’ll sleep with just any man if that’s necessary.”

“I’ll do what I have to!” I raged back, though I hadn’t given that any thought.

He seemed on the verge of slapping me, and the control it took to keep his hands at his sides made him clench them into fists. A white line etched about his tightened lips. “Cathy,” he began in a hurt voice, “what’s come over you? I didn’t think you’d ever become another opportunist.”

Bitterly I met his eyes. What did *he* think he was doing? We’d stumbled fortunately upon an unhappy, lonely man and we were using him, and sooner or later there’d be a price to pay. Our grandmother had always told us nobody did anything for nothing. But somehow I couldn’t hurt him more, and I couldn’t speak a word against Paul who’d taken us in and was doing everything he could. Truthfully, I had reason enough for knowing he didn’t expect any reward.

“Cathy,” he pleaded, “I hate every word you just said. How can you talk to me like that when you know how much I love and respect you? There isn’t a day that passes that I don’t long for you. I live for the weekends when I can see you and Carrie. Don’t turn from me, Cathy, I need you. I’ll always need you. It scares the hell out of me to think I’m not nearly that necessary in *your* life.” He had hold of my arms and would have pulled me against his chest, but I yanked away and turned my back. How could I tell what was wrong and what was right when nobody seemed to care anymore?

“Chris,” I began brokenly, “I’m sorry I spoke like that. It matters to me very much what you think. But I’m all torn up inside. I think I have to have everything immediately to help make up for all I’ve lost and suffered. Julian wants me to go with him to New York. I don’t think I’m ready yet and I don’t have the discipline I need—Madame tells me that all the time and she’s right. Julian says he loves me and will take care of me. But I’m not sure what love is, or if he loves me at all or only wants me to help him reach his goal. But his goal is my

goal. So tell me how I can tell if he loves me or if he only wants to use me?”

“Have you let him make love to you?” he asked flatly, his eyes dead looking.

“*No!* Of course not!”

His arms encircled me and held me fast. “Wait at least one more year, Cathy. Trust Madame Marisha, not Julian. She knows more than he does.” He paused and forced me to lift my bowed head. I studied his handsome face and wondered why he hesitated and didn’t go on.

I was an instrument of yearning, filled with a ravenous desire for romantic fulfillment. I was scared too of what was inside me. So scared I was like Momma. When I looked in the mirrors I saw my mother’s face beginning to emerge more definitely. I was exalted that I looked like her, and paradoxically I hated myself for being her reflection. No, no, I wasn’t like her inside, only on the outside. My beauty was not only skin deep.

I kept telling myself this as I made a special trip to Greenglenna downtown. In the city hall there I made some flimsy excuse about looking up my mother’s birth certificate just so I could look up the birth certificate of Bart Winslow. I found out he was eight years younger than my mother and I also discovered exactly where he lived. I walked fifteen blocks until I came to a quiet, elm-lined street where old mansions were in a state of decaying disrepair. All but the home of Bart Winslow! His home had scaffolding all around. Dozens of workmen were putting up storm windows on a freshly painted brick home with white trim around the windows and a white portico.

Another day found me in the Greenglenna library where I read up on the Winslow family. Much to my delight, when I searched back through the old newspapers I found a society editor who seemed to devote most of her column to Bart Winslow and his fabulously wealthy and very beautiful wife with her aristocratic background. “The heiress to one of the country’s greatest fortunes.”

That column I snipped out furtively and sneaked home to Chris. I didn't want him to know Momma would live in Greenglenna. He showed some distress as he scanned the column. "Cathy, where did you find this article?"

I shrugged. "Oh, it was in some Virginia paper they sell in a newsstand."

"She's in Europe again," he said in a queer way. "I wonder why she keeps going to Europe." He turned his blue eyes my way and a dreamy expression softened his features. "Remember the summer she went on her honeymoon?"

Remember? As if I could ever forget. As if I would ever *let* myself forget. Someday, someday when I was rich and famous too, Momma was going to hear from me and when she did, she'd better be well prepared, for bit by bit I was forming my strategy.

Julian didn't come to Greenglenna as much as he had before my sixteenth birthday party. I figured Chris had scared him off. I didn't know if that made me happy or not. When he did visit his parents he ignored me. He began to pay attention to Lorraine DuVal, my best friend. For some reason I felt hurt and resentment, not only against him but also against Lorraine. In the wings I half-hid myself and watched them dance a passionate *pas de deux*. That was when I determined I'd study twice as hard as I had before, for I was going to show Julian too! I was going to show everyone just what I was made of!

Steel, covered over with frilly, silly tulle tutus!

Owl on the Roof



Now I'm going to recount an event in Carrie's life, for this is her story and Chris's as well as mine. When I look back now and reflect on how life turned out for Carrie, I truthfully believe what happened to Carrie in Miss Emily Dean Calhoun's School for Properly Bred Young Ladies had a great deal to do with how she thought of herself in the future.

Ah, dig me a well to cry in before I begin, for I loved her so, and what pain she had to bear I bear, even now.

From the jigsaw pieces that I've gathered from Carrie herself and from Miss Dewhurst, and from several other students at that school, this was Carrie's nightmare to endure, and I will report it as honestly as possible.

Carrie spent her weekends with us but she had retreated into that quiet, little apathetic creature who'd grieved so when her twin died. Everything about Carrie worried me. Though when I asked her questions she insisted everything was all right and refused to say anything against that school or the student body or the faculty. She said one thing, and one thing only, to express her feelings—and what a clue it was. "I like the carpet—it's colored like grass." That was it. She left me wondering, worried, trying to guess what was troubling her. Something was wrong, I knew it, and she wouldn't tell me what it was.

Each Friday at about four Paul would drive to fetch Carrie and Chris and bring them back home. He did his best to make all our weekends memorable. Though Carrie appeared happy enough with us, she seldom laughed. Try as we would, all we could pull from her was a weak smile.

"What's wrong with Carrie?" whispered Chris. I could only shrug. Somewhere along the way I'd lost Carrie's confidence.

Her big, blue eyes fastened on Paul. They mutely pleaded with him. But he was looking at me, not Carrie.

As the time approached for her to be driven back to school Carrie would grow very quiet; her eyes would become blank and resigned. We'd kiss her good-bye and tell her to be good, make friends, "and if you need us, you know how to call."

"Yes," she said weakly, her eyes downcast. I pressed her against me telling her again how much I loved her, and if she was unhappy she had to speak up and say so. "I'm not unhappy," she answered with her eyes fixed sadly on Paul.

It was truly a beautiful school. I'd have loved to attend such a school. Each girl was allowed to decorate her side of a double room as she saw fit. Miss Dewhurst had only one restriction, and that was each girl had to choose "proper, ladylike" appointments. Soft, passive femininity was greatly stressed in the South. Soft, whispering clothes, drifting chiffon, dulcet voices, shy, downcast eyes, weak, fluttery hands to express helplessness, and absolutely no opinions that would conflict with male ones—and never, never let a man know you had a brain that might be better than his. And I'm afraid, after reconsidering, it wouldn't be the proper school for me after all.

Carrie's bed was twin size, covered by a bright purple spread. On it she had decorator pillows of rose, red, purple, violet and green. Beside her bed was a night-stand with the milk-glass vase filled with plastic violets given to her by Paul. Whenever he could he brought her real flowers. Strangely, she adored that little pot of violets more than the real flowers that soon withered and died.

Since Carrie was the smallest girl in the school of one hundred students, she was given as a roommate the next smallest girl, named Sissy Towers. Sissy had brick-red hair, emerald eyes that were long and narrow, thin, paper-white skin, and a spiteful, mean temper which she never displayed to any adult, but saved for the girls she knew how to intimidate. Worst of all, though she was the second smallest, she towered over Carrie by six inches!

Carrie had celebrated her ninth birthday with a party the week before her ordeal began. It was May, and it began on a Thursday.

The school days ended at three. The girls had two hours to play outside before dinner at five-thirty. All the students wore uniforms of colors determined by what grade they were in. Carrie was in the third grade; her uniform was of yellow broadcloth with a dainty- white organdy pinafore to top it off. Carrie had a strong dislike for the color yellow. Yellow represented to her, as it did to Chris and me, the color of all the best things we couldn't have when we'd been locked away and made to feel unwholesome, unwanted and unloved. Yellow was also the color of the sun that was denied us. The sun was what Cory had wanted most to see, and now that all yellow things were so easily accessible, and Cory wasn't, yellow was a hateful thing.

Sissy Towers adored yellow. She envied Carrie's long, golden locks and despised her own head of crinkly rust. Perhaps too she envied the beauty of Carrie's doll-like face, and those big, blue eyes with the long, dark, curling lashes, and her lips ripe as strawberries.

Oh, yes, our Carrie was a doll with an exquisite face, sensational Goldilocks hair and, the pity of it all, this beauty hovered above a body much too thin, too small, and a neck too delicate to support a head that belonged on someone bigger and taller.

Yellow dominated Sissy's side of the room; yellow spread, yellow slip-covered chairs; her dolls were blondes wearing yellow, her books wore yellow jackets, homemade. Sissy even wore yellow sweaters and skirts when she went home. The fact that Sissy looked unbecomingly sallow in yellow did not lessen her determination to annoy Carrie with the color—come what may. And on this day, for some trifling reason that was never explained, she began to taunt Carrie in a mean, spiteful way.

“Carrie is a dwarf ... a dwarf ... a dwarf,” sang Sissy in a sing-song chant.

“Carrie should be in a circus ... a circus ... a circus,” Sissy chanted on and on. Then she jumped up on the top of her desk and in the loud, brassy manner of a barker touting a freak show at a carnival Sissy really began to shout, “*Come one! Come all! Come pay your quarter to see the living sister of Tom Thumb! Come see the world’s smallest woman! Come, pay your money and see the little one with the huge, huge eyes—like an owl’s! Come view the huge, huge head on the little, scrawny neck! Come pay your quarter to see our little freak naked!*”

Dozens of little girls crowded into the room to stare at Carrie who crouched in a corner on the floor, with her head hanging low and her long hair hiding her shamed, terrified face.

Sissy opened up her small purse to receive the quarters the affluent little girls dropped in willingly. “Now take off your clothes, little dwarf-freak,” ordered Sissy. “Give the customers their money’s worth!”

Quivering and beginning to cry, Carrie crouched into a tighter ball and pulled up her knees and prayed that God would somehow open up the floor. But floors never graciously open up and swallow you when they should. It remained hard and unyielding beneath her as the taunting voice of Sissy went on and on.

“Look at her tremble ... look at her shake ... she’s gonna make ... an earthquake!”

All the girls giggled, except one average-sized girl of ten who looked on Carrie with pity and sympathy. “I think she’s cute,” said Lacy St. John. “Leave her alone, Sissy. It’s not nice what you’re doing.”

“Of course it’s not nice!” Sissy said with a laugh. “But it’s such fun! She’s such a timid little mouse! You know, she *never* says anything. I don’t think she *can* talk!” Down from the chair Sissy jumped to run to where Carrie was, and there she prodded Carrie with her foot. “Have you got a tongue, little freak? Come, little big-eyes, tell us how you got to be so

funny-looking. Did the cat steal your tongue? Do you have a tongue? Stick it out!”

Carrie hung her head even lower.

“See, she doesn’t have a tongue!” proclaimed Sissy, jumping up and down. Sissy whirled around and spread her arms wide. “Look at what they gave me for a roomy—an owl without a tongue! What can we do to make her talk?”

Lacy moved protectively closer to Carrie. “Come on, Sissy, enough is enough, leave her alone.”

Pivoting, Sissy stomped down hard on Lacy’s foot. “*Shut up!* This is my room! When you’re in my room, you do as I say! And I’m just as big as you are, Lacy St. John, and my daddy’s got more money too!”

“I think you are a mean, nasty, ugly girl to torment Carrie!” said Lacy.

Sissy raised her fist in the manner of a professional boxer, dancing around to take quick jabs at Lacy. “You wanna fight? C’mon, put up your dukes! Just see if you can get me before I blacken your eyes!” And before Lacy could raise her hands for protection, Sissy shot out a right that caught Lacy squarely on the left eye. Then Sissy’s left hook smashed Lacy’s fine straight nose! Blood spurted everywhere!

This was when Carrie lifted her head, saw the only girl who’d shown her the least bit of kindness being beaten to a pulp, and that was cause enough for Carrie to use her most formidable weapon—her voice. She began to scream. Full blast, using every bit of vocal power she had, Carrie threw back her head and let go!

Down in her study on the first floor, Miss Emily Dean Dewhurst bolted upright and smeared the ink in her ledger. She ran to sound an alarm in the hall to bring each and every female teacher on the run.

It was eight o’clock in the evening. Most of the faculty had retired to their rooms. Clad in bathrobes, negligees, and one in a scarlet evening gown, apparently ready to slip out on the sly, the teachers raced toward the clamor. They burst into the room

Carrie shared with Sissy and found a frightful scene. Twelve girls all doing battle, while others stood back and watched. One girl, like Carrie, only screamed, but the others were yelling, kicking, wrestling on the floor, pulling hair, biting and tearing off clothes—and above all the racket of the fray resounded the blaring trumpet of one small human in terror.

“Where is the man—the man?” cried out Miss Longhurst, the one in the scarlet evening gown with her bosom about to fall out of the lowcut bodice.

“Miss Longhurst, control yourself!” ordered Miss Dewhurst, who promptly assessed the situation and planned her strategy. “There is no man here. *Girls!*” she boomed, “*stop this fracas this very second, or every one of you will be denied liberty this weekend!*” Then she said in a low voice to the sexy Longhurst, “You report to my office when this is under control.”

Every girl in that room about to have her hair pulled or her face scratched jerked abruptly still and quiet. With horrified eyes they looked around and saw the room full of teachers—and worst of all Miss Dewhurst, who was not known for showing mercy once bedlam broke loose, as it often did. All hushed. All but Carrie who kept right on screaming, her eyes squeezed shut, her small, pale hands in tight fists.

“Why is that child screaming?” asked Miss Dewhurst as a guilty-looking Miss Longhurst sneaked away to take off her incriminating evidence—that somewhere a man *was* hiding and waiting.

Naturally, it was Sissy Towers who recovered first. “She’s the one who started it all, Miss Dewhurst. It’s *all* Carrie’s fault. She’s like a baby. You’ve just got to give me a new roomy or I’ll die living so close to a baby.”

“Repeat what you just said, Miss Towers. Tell me again what I *must* do.”

Intimidated, Sissy smiled uneasily. “I mean, I would like to have a new roomy; I don’t feel good living so close to someone so unnaturally small.”

Coldly Miss Dewhurst eyed Sissy. “Miss Towers, *you* are unnaturally cruel. From now on you will room on the first floor in the room next to mine where I can keep an eye on you.” She flashed her sharp gaze around the room. “As for the rest of you, I’m going to notify your parents that your weekend leaves are canceled! Now, each of you report to Miss Littleton so she may mark your records with demerits.” The girls groaned and one by one they drifted out to have their names recorded with minus marks. Only then did Miss Dewhurst advance to where Carrie was on her hands and knees, her voice faded to a whimper, but her head kept moving from side to side in a hysterical way. “Miss Dollanganger, are you calm enough now to tell me what happened?”

Carrie was beyond speech. Terror and the sight of blood had taken her back to the locked room, to a hungry day when she had been forced to drink blood or starve to death. Miss Dewhurst was touched and bewildered. Forty years she’d seen girls come and go, and she knew girls could be just as devastatingly ugly and cruel as boys. “Miss Dollanganger, unless you respond to me, you will not visit your family this weekend. I know you’ve had a hard time of it and I want to be kind to you. Can’t you please explain what happened?”

Fallen flat on the floor now, Carrie looked up. She saw the older woman towering above her, and the blue skirt she wore was almost gray. Gray was the color the grandmother always wore. And the grandmother did terrible things; somehow the grandmother had caused Cory to die—and now she had come to get Carrie too!

“I hate you! I hate you!” screamed Carrie over and over, until finally Miss Dewhurst was driven from the room and the school nurse was sent in to give Carrie a sedative.

That Friday, I answered the telephone when Miss Dewhurst called to say twelve of her girls had broken her rules and disobeyed her orders, and Carrie was one of them. “I’m sorry, really I am. But I can’t give your sister privileges and still punish the others. She was in the room and she refused to quiet when I ordered her to.”

* * *

I waited until evening at the dinner table to discuss it with Paul. "It's a terrible mistake to leave Carrie over the weekend, Paul. You know we promised her, she could come home every weekend. She's too little to be the cause of anything, so it's not fair she should be punished too!"

"Really, Cathy," he said, putting down his fork, "Miss Dewhurst called me right after she talked to you. She does have rules, and if Carrie misbehaved then she has to suffer along with the rest of the girls. And I respect Miss Dewhurst even if you don't."

Chris, home for the weekend, spoke up and agreed with Paul. "Sure, Cathy, you know as well as I do that Carrie can cut up when she wants to. If she did nothing but scream she could drive you batty—and deaf."

That weekend was a flop without Carrie. I couldn't get her off my mind. I stewed, fretted, worried over Carrie. I seemed to hear her calling to me. I closed my eyes and I saw her small, white face with her eyes huge and haunted by fear. She *was* all right! She had to be, didn't she? What could happen to a little girl in an expensive school controlled by such a responsible, respectable woman as Miss Emily Dean Dewhurst?

* * *

When Carrie was hurting and at odds with herself and all the world, and there was no one near who loved her, she retreated to yesterdays and the safe comfort of the tiny porcelain dolls she'd carefully hidden away beneath all of her clothes. Now she was the only girl in the school with a room all to herself. She'd never been alone before. Not once in all her nine years had Carrie I spent a night in a room alone. She was alone now and she knew it. Every girl in the school had turned against her, even pretty Lacy St. John.

From her very secret place Carrie would take her dolls, Mr. and Mrs. Parkins and dear little baby Clara, and she'd talk to them as she used to do when she was locked away in the attic. "And Cathy," she told me later, "I thought maybe Momma was up in God's heaven, in the garden with Cory and Daddy, and I felt so mean at you and Chris because you let Dr. Paul put me

in that place, and you know how much I liked to be with all of you. And I hated you, Cathy! I hated everybody! I hated God for making me so small so people laugh at my big head and little body!”

In the short halls and long corridors of green carpeting Carrie heard the girls whispering. Furtively they shifted their eyes when she looked their way. “I told myself I didn’t care,” whispered Carrie hoarsely to me, “but I did care. I told myself I could be brave like you wanted and Chris wanted and Dr. Paul wanted. I kept on making myself feel brave but I wasn’t really brave. I don’t like dark. And I told myself God was gonna hear my prayers and make me grow taller, ’cause everybody grows taller when they grow older, and so would I.

“It was so dark, Cathy, and the room felt so big and scary. You know I don’t like night and darkness with no lamp burning, with nobody there but me. I even wanted Sissy back, she seemed better than nobody. Something in the shadows moved and I was terrified, and though we’re not supposed to I turned on a lamp. I wanted to take all my little dolls to bed with me so I’d have company. I was gonna be so careful not to toss and turn and break off their heads.

“I always put Mr. and Mrs. Parkins left and right with baby Clara in the middle in the bottom drawer of my dresser. I picked up the cotton wadding that was in the middle first and felt something hard. But when I looked, Cathy, when I looked there was no baby, only a little stick! I unwrapped Mr. and Mrs. Parkins, and they were only sticks too—bigger ones! It hurt so bad not to find them I began to cry. All my little dolls gone all turned to wood, so I knew God was never gonna let me grow tall when he would make my pretty dolls into only sticks.

“Something funny happened to me then, like I turned into wood too. I felt stiff and couldn’t see too good. I went and crouched in a corner and waited for something bad to happen. The grandmother said something terrible would happen if I broke a doll, didn’t she?” Not another word would she say, but I learned from others what happened after that.

In the dark, long after midnight, the twelve little rich girls Miss Dewhurst had denied liberty all stole furtively into Carrie's room. It was Lacy St. John who had the integrity to tell me, but only when Miss Dewhurst was out of hearing.

Twelve girls, all wearing long white cotton nightgowns, the official sleeping garments of the school, filed into Carrie's room, each bearing a single candle held so her face was lit up under her chin. Such lighting made their eyes appear sunken, dark hollows and lent their youthful faces an eerie, ghoulish appearance—enough to terrify a little girl still crouched in the corner, already in a trance of haunted fear.

They came to form a semicircle around Carrie, to stare down at her as each put over her head a pillowcase with holes for eyes. Then came the ritual of weaving the candles intricately in formalized patterns as they chanted in the way of real witches. They sought to drive the smallness out of Carrie. They sought to set her “free” and themselves “free” from whatever evil they were driven to do for self-protection from someone so “unnaturally small and strange.”

One voice shrilled above all the others and Carrie knew it was Sissy Towers. To Carrie, all those shrouded girls in their long nightgowns with white hoods over their heads and the black holes for eyes were devils straight from hell! She began to whimper, to tremble, and oh, she was so scared, as if once more the grandmother were in the room, only this time she had multiplied until there were twelve of her!

“Don't you cry, don't you fear,” soothed the nightmarish voice from a mouthless hood. “If you live through this night, through this initiation, you, Carrie Dollanganger, will become a member of our most private and very exclusive society. If you succeed from this night forward, you will share in our secret rituals, our secret parties, our secret hoards of goodies.”

“Ohhh,” moaned Carrie, “go away, leave me alone, go away, leave me alone.”

“*Quiet!*” ordered the shrill voice of the hidden speaker, “you have no chance to become one of us unless you sacrifice

your *most* beloved and precious possessions. It is either that or suffer our trial.”

Crouched in the corner, Carrie could only stare at the moving shadows behind the white witches who threatened her. The glows from the candles grew larger, larger, turning her world into one of yellow and scarlet fire.

“Give to us what you dearly cherish or you must suffer, suffer, suffer.”

“I have nothing,” whispered Carrie honestly.

“The dolls, the pretty little china dolls, give us those,” intoned the austere voice of the speaker. “Your little clothes won’t fit us; we don’t want those; give us your dolls, your pretty man, woman and child dolls.”

They’re gone,” cried Carrie, fearful they would set fire to her. “They turned to wooden sticks.”

“Ho-ho! A likely story! You lie! So now you must suffer, little owl, to become one of us—or die. Take your choice.”

It was an easy decision. Carrie nodded and tried not to sniffle.

“All right, from this night forward you, Carrie Dollanganger, funny name, funny face, will be one of *us*.”

It hurts to write of how they took Carrie and blindfolded her, then tied her small hands behind her back, then pushed her out into the hall, then up a flight of steep stairs, and suddenly they were outside. Carrie felt the cool night air, the slant of the support beneath her bare feet, and guessed correctly the girls had taken her onto the roof! There was only one thing she feared more than the grandmother and that was the roof—any roof! Anticipating her bellowing screams the girls had gagged Carrie. “Now lie or sit still as a proper owl should,” said the same harsh voice. “Perch here on the roof, near the chimney under the moon, and in the morning you will be one of *us*.”

Struggling and frantic now, Carrie tried to resist the pull of so many who forced her to sit. Then, even worse, they suddenly took away their hands and left her there in the darkness on the roof—all alone. Far away she heard the

whispering titters of their retreat and the slight click of a door latching down.

Cathy, Cathy, she screamed to herself, *Chris, come save me! Dr. Paul, why did you put me here? Don't nobody want me?* Sobbing, making small mewling sounds while blindfolded, gagged and bound, Carrie braved the steep incline of the huge, strange roof and began to move toward where the latching sound had come from. Inch by inch, sitting up and sliding along on her bottom, Carrie moved forward, praying every time she moved an inch not to fall. It seemed from her faltering report that she gave me much, much later that she was not only guided by instinct, but she could hear, above and from behind the oncoming spring thunderstorm, the sweet and distant voice of Cory singing as he strummed his melancholy song of finding his home and the sun again.

“Oh, Cathy, it was so strange way up there high, and the wind started to blow, and the rain began to fall, and the thunder rumbled and the lightning struck so I could see the brightness through the blindfold—and all the time Cory was singing and leading me to the trapdoor that opened when I used my feet to force it upward, and somehow I wiggled through. Then I fell down the stairs! I fell into blackness and I heard a bone break. And the pain, it came like teeth and bit me so I couldn't see or feel anything or even hear the rain anymore. And Cory, he went away.”

* * *

Sunday morning came and Paul, Chris and I were at the breakfast table eating brunch.

Chris had a hot, homemade buttery roll in his hand, his lips parted wide to put at least half inside with one bite, when the telephone in the hall rang. Paul groaned as he put down his fork. I groaned too, for I had made my first cheese soufflé and it had to be eaten right away. “Would you mind getting that, Cathy?” he asked. “I really want to dig into your soufflé. It looks delicious and it smells heavenly.”

“You sit right there and eat,” I said, jumping up and hurrying to answer, “and I'll do what I can to protect you from

the pesky Mrs. Williamson... .”

He softly laughed and flashed me an amused look as he picked his fork up again. “It may not be my lonely widow lady with another of her minor afflictions.” Chris went right on eating.

I picked up the phone and in my most adult and gracious way I said, “Dr. Paul Sheffield’s residence.”

“This is Emily Dean Dewhurst calling,” said the stern voice on the other end. “Please put Dr. Sheffield on the phone immediately!”

“Miss Dewhurst!” I said, already alarmed. “This is Cathy, Carrie’s sister. Is Carrie all right?”

“You and Dr. Sheffield are needed here immediately!”

“Miss Dewhurst—”

But she didn’t let me finish. “It seems that your younger sister has disappeared rather mysteriously. On Sundays those girls who are being punished by weekend liberty denial are required to attend chapel services. I myself called the roll and Carrie did not respond to her name.” My heart beat faster, apprehensive of what I was to hear next, but my finger moved to push a button that would put Miss Dewhurst’s message onto the attached microphone so Chris and Paul would hear even as they ate.

“Where was she?” I asked in a small voice, already terrified.

She spoke calmly. “A strange hush came in the air this morning when your sister’s name was called and when I asked where she was. I sent a teacher to check your sister’s room and she wasn’t there. I then ordered a thorough search of the grounds and the entire school building from basement to attic, and still your sister wasn’t found. I would, if your sister was of a different character, presume she’d run off and was on her way home. But something in the atmosphere warns that at least twelve of the girls here know what has happened to Carrie and they refuse to talk and incriminate themselves.”

My eyes widened. “You mean you still don’t know where Carrie is?”

Paul and Chris had stopped eating. Now both stared at me with mounting concern. “I’m sorry to say I don’t. Carrie hasn’t been seen since nine o’clock last night. Even if she walked all the way home she should have reached there by now. It’s almost noon. If she is not there and she is not here, then she is either injured, lost or some other accident has befallen her... .”

I could have screamed. How could she speak so dispassionately! Why, why every time something terrible came into our lives was it a flat, uncaring voice that told us the bad news?

Paul’s white car sped down Overland Highway toward Carrie’s school. I was sandwiched in the front seat between Paul and Chris. My brother had his bag so he could catch a bus and go on to his school after he found out what had happened to Carrie. He had my hand squeezed tight in his to reassure me that *this* child of ours was going to live! “Stop looking so worried, Cathy,” said Chris as he put an arm about my shoulder and drew my head to his shoulder. “You know how Carrie is. She’s probably hiding and just won’t answer. Remember how she was in the attic? She wouldn’t stay even when Cory wanted to. Carrie’d take off to do her own thing. She hasn’t run away. She’d be too afraid of the dark. She’s hiding somewhere. Somebody did something to hurt her feelings and she’s punishing them by letting them worry. She couldn’t face the world in the dead of night.”

Dead of night! Oh, God! I wished Chris hadn’t mentioned the attic where Cory had almost died in a trunk before he went on to meet Daddy in heaven. Chris kissed my cheek and wiped away my tears. “Come now, don’t cry. I said all of that wrong. She’ll be all right.”

“What do you mean you don’t know where my ward is?” fired Paul in a hard voice as he coldly eyed Miss Dewhurst. “It was my understanding the girls in this school were properly supervised twenty-four hours a day!”

We were in the posh office of Miss Emily Dean Dewhurst. She was not seated behind her impressive, large desk, but restlessly pacing the floor. “Really, Dr. Sheffield, nothing like this has ever happened before. Never have we *lost* a girl. We make a room check every night to see the girls are tucked in bed with lights out, and Carrie *was* in her bed. I myself looked in on her, wanting to comfort her if she’d let me, but she refused to look at me or to speak. Of course it all began with I that fight in your ward’s room and the demerits that resulted in their loss of their weekend liberty. Every member of the faculty has helped me search and we’ve questioned our girls who profess to know nothing about it—which I imagine they do—but if they won’t talk, I don’t know what to do next.”

“Why didn’t you notify me when you first found her missing?” Paul asked. I spoke up then and asked to be taken to Carrie’s room. Miss Dewhurst turned eagerly to me, anxious to escape the doctor’s wrath. As we three followed her up the stairs she spilled forth lengthy excuses so we’d understand how difficult it was to handle so many mischievous girls. When we finally entered Carrie’s room several students trailed behind us, whispering back and forth about how much Chris and I looked like Carrie, only we weren’t “so freakishly small.”

Chris turned to scowl at them. “No wonder she hates it here if you can say things like that!”

“We’ll find her,” assured Chris. “If we have to stay all week and torture each little witch here we’ll make them tell us where she is.”

“Young man,” shot out Miss Dewhurst, “nobody tortures my girls but me!”

I knew Carrie better than anyone and around the grooves of her brain I ambled. Now, if I were Carrie’s age, would I try to escape a school that had unjustly kept me from going home? Yes! *I* would do exactly that. But I was not Carrie; I would not run away in only a nightgown. All her little uniforms were there, custom sewn by Henny, and her small sweaters, skirts and blouses, and pretty dresses, all there. Everything she’d

brought to this school was in its proper place. Only the porcelain dolls were missing.

Still on my knees before Carrie's dresser, I sat back on my heels and looked up at Paul and showed him the box that contained nothing but cotton wadding and sticks of wood. "Her dolls aren't here," I said dully, not comprehending the sticks at all, "and as far as I can tell the only article of her clothing that's missing is one of her nightgowns. Carrie wouldn't go outside wearing only her nightgown. She's got to be here—someplace no one has looked."

"We have looked *everywhere!*" Miss Dewhurst spoke impatiently, as if I had no voice in this matter, only the guardian, the doctor, whose favor she sought even while Paul turned on her another of his stern, hard looks.

For some reason I can't explain I swiveled my head about and caught a cat-who's-eaten-the-canary look on the pale and sickly face of a frizzled, rust-haired, skinny girl whom I detested merely from hearing the little Carrie had told me about her roommate. Maybe it was just her eyes, or the way she kept fingering the big square pocket of her organdy pinafore that narrowed my own eyes as I tried to pierce the depths of hers. She blanched and shifted her green eyes toward the windows, shuffled her feet about uneasily and quickly yanked her hand from her pocket. It was a lined pocket and it bulged suspiciously.

"You," I said, "you're Carrie's roommate, aren't you?"

"I was," she murmured.

"What is that you have in your pocket?"

Her head jerked toward me. Her eyes sparked green fire as the muscles near her lips twitched. "None of your business!"

"Miss Towers!" whiplashed Miss Dewhurst. "Answer Miss Dollanganger's question!"

"It's my purse," said Sissy Towers, glaring at me defiantly.

"It's a very lumpy purse," I said, and suddenly I lunged forward and seized Sissy Towers about the knees. With my free hand, as she struggled and howled, I pulled from her

pocket a blue scarf. From that scarf tumbled Mr. and Mrs. Parkins and baby Clara. I held the three porcelain dolls in my hand and demanded, “What are you doing with my sister’s dolls?”

“They’re my dolls!” said the girl, her gimlet eyes narrowing to slits. The girls gathered around began to snicker and made whispering remarks to one another.

“Your dolls? These dolls belong to my sister.”

“*You* lie!” she fired back. “You are stealing from me and my father can have you thrown in jail!”

“Miss Dewhurst,” ordered the small demon, her hand reaching for the dolls, “you make this person leave me alone! I don’t like her, no more than her *dwarf* sister!”

I got to my feet and towered threateningly above her. Protectively I put the dolls behind my back. She’d have to kill me to get to them!

“Miss Dewhurst!” shrieked the imp as she attacked me. “*My mommy and daddy gave me those dolls for my Christmas!*”

“You lying little devil!” I said, itching to slap her defiant face. “You stole those dolls and the crib from my sister. And because you did Carrie is at this very moment in extreme danger!” I knew it. I felt it. Carrie needed help and fast. “Where is my sister?” I raged.

I stared hard at that red-haired girl named Sissy, knowing she had the answer to where Carrie was but knowing she’d never tell me. It was in her eyes, her mean, spiteful eyes. It was then that Lacy St. John spoke up and told us what they’d done to Carrie the night before.

Oh, God! There was no place in the world more terrifying to Carrie than a roof—any roof! I went reeling back into the past, when Chris and I had tried to take the twins out on the roof of Foxworth Hall so we could hold them in the sunlight and keep them in the fresh air so they’d grow. And like children out of their minds from fright they’d screamed and kicked.

I squeezed my eyelids very tight, concentrating fully on Carrie, where, where, where? And behind my eyes I saw her crouched in a dark corner in what seemed a canyon rising tall on either side of her.

“I want to look in the attic myself,” I said to Miss Dewhurst, and she quickly said they’d already thoroughly searched the attic and called and called Carrie’s name. But they didn’t know Carrie like I did. They didn’t know my small sister could go off to a never-never land where speech didn’t exist, not when she was in shock.

Up the attic stairs all the teachers, Chris, Paul and I climbed. It was so much like it used to be, a huge, dim and dusty place. But not full of old furniture covered with dusty gray sheets or remnants of the past. Up here were only stacks upon stacks of heavy wooden crates.

Carrie was here. I could sense it. I felt her presence as if she reached out and touched me, though when I looked around I saw nothing but the crates. “Carrie!” I called as loudly as possible. “It’s me, Cathy. Don’t hide and keep quiet because you’re afraid! I’ve got your dolls and Dr. Paul is with me and so is Chris. We’ve come to take you home, and never again are we going to send you away to school!” I nudged Paul, “Now you tell her that too.”

He abandoned his soft voice and boomed, “Carrie, if you can hear me, it’s just as your sister says. We want you to come home with us to stay. I’m sorry, Carrie. I thought you’d like it here. Now I know you couldn’t possibly have been happy. Carrie, please come out, we need you.”

Then I thought I heard a soft whimper. I raced in that direction with Chris close at my heels. I knew about attics, how to search, how to find.

Abruptly I drew to a halt and Chris collided with me. Just ahead, in the dim shadows created by the towers of heavy wooden crates, still in her nightgown, all torn, dirty and bloody, gagged and still blindfolded, I spied Carrie. Her spill of blond hair gleamed in the faint light. Beneath her a leg was

twisted in a grotesque way. “Oh, God,” whispered Chris and Paul at the same time, “her leg looks broken.”

“Wait a minute,” Paul cautioned in a low voice, clamping both his hands down on my shoulders when I would heedlessly run forward and rescue Carrie. “Look at those crates, Cathy. Just one careless move on your part and they will all come crashing down on both you and Carrie.”

Somewhere behind me a teacher moaned and began to pray. How Carrie had managed to drag herself down that close passageway while blind and bound was unbelievable. A fully adult person couldn't have done it—but I could do it—I was still small enough.

Even as I spoke I planned the way. “Carrie, do exactly as I say. Don't lean to the right or to the left. Lie flat on your stomach, aim for my voice. I'm going to crawl in to you and take hold of you under your arms. Raise your head high so your face won't be scraped. Dr. Paul will grab hold of my ankles and pull us both out.”

“Tell her it's going to hurt her leg.”

“Did you hear Dr. Paul, Carrie? It's going to hurt your leg so please don't thrash about if you feel pain, everything will be over in a second or two and Dr. Paul will make your leg well again.”

It seemed to take hours for me to inch down that tunnel while the crates teetered and rocked, and when I had her by the shoulders I heard Dr. Paul cry out “Okay, Cathy!” Then he pulled, fast and hard! Down thundered the wooden crates! Dust flew everywhere. In the confusion I was at Carrie's side, removing the gag and blindfold while the doctor untied her bonds.

Then Carrie was clinging to me, blinking because the light hurt, crying from the pain, terrified to see the teachers and her leg so crooked.

In the ambulance that came to take Carrie to the hospital Chris and I rode and shared the same stool, each of us holding one of Carrie's hands. Paul followed in his white car so he'd

be there to supervise the orthopedist who would set Carrie's broken leg. Lying face upward on the pillow near her head with fixed smiles and rigid bodies were Carrie's three dolls. That's when I remembered. Now the crib was missing too, just as the cradle had disappeared years ago.

Carrie's broken leg spoiled the long summer vacation trip our doctor had planned for all of us. Again I raged inwardly at Momma. Her fault; always we were punished for what she'd caused! It wasn't fair that Carrie had to be laid up and we couldn't journey north—while our mother gallivanted from here to there, going to parties, hobnobbing with the jet set and the movie stars as if we didn't exist at all! On the French Riviera now. I cut that item from Greenglenna's society column and pasted it into my huge scrapbook of revenge. That was one article I showed to Chris before I put it into the book. I didn't show him all of them. I didn't want him to know I had subscribed to the Virginia newspaper that reported on everything the Foxworths did.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded, looking up from the clipping he handed back to me.

"The Greenglenna newspaper—it's more concerned with high society than Clairmont's *Daily News*. Our mother is a hot item, didn't you know?"

"I try to forget, unlike you!" he said sharply. "*We* don't have it so bad now, do we? We're lucky to be with Paul, and Carrie's leg will mend and be as good as ever. And other summers will come when we can go to New England."

How did he know that? Nothing ever was offered twice. Maybe in other summers to come we'd be too busy or Paul would. "You realize, being an 'almost' doctor, don't you, that her leg might not grow while she's in that cast?"

He looked strangely ill-at-ease. "If she grew like average kids I guess there might be that risk. But, Cathy, she doesn't grow very much, so there's little chance one leg will be shorter than the other."

"Oh, go bury your nose in *Gray's Anatomy!*" I flared, angry because he'd always make light of anything I said that made

Momma the fault of anything. He knew why Carrie didn't grow as well as I did. Deprived of love, of sunshine and freedom, it was a marvel she'd lived to survive! Arsenic too! Damn Momma to hell!

Busily, day by day, I added to my collection of news clippings and blurry photographs cut from many newspapers. That's where most of my "pin money" went. Though I stared at all the pictures of Momma with hate and loathing, I looked at her husband with admiration. How very handsome, how powerfully built her young husband was with his long, lean, darkly bronzed skin. I stared at the photograph that showed him lifting a champagne glass high as he toasted his wife on their second wedding anniversary.

I decided that night to send Momma a short note. Sent first class, it would be forwarded.

Dear Mrs. Winslow,

How well I remember the summer of your honeymoon. It was a wonderful summer, so refreshingly pleasant in the mountains in a locked room with windows that were never opened.

Congratulations and my very best wishes, Mrs. Winslow, and I do hope all your future summers, winters, springs and falls will be haunted by the memory of the kind of summers, winters, springs and falls your Dresden dolls used to have.

Not yours anymore,
The doctor doll,
The ballerina doll,
The praying-to-grow-taller doll,
And the dead doll.

I ran to post the letter and no sooner had I dropped it in the mailbox on the corner than I was wishing I had it back. Chris would hate me for doing this.

It rained that night and I got up to watch the storm. Tears streaked my face as much as the rain streaked the window glass. Because it was Saturday Chris was home. He was out

there on the veranda, allowing the wind-driven rain to wet his pajamas and glue them to his skin.

He saw me just about the time I saw him, and he stepped into my room without saying a word. We clung together, me crying and him trying hard not to. I wanted him to go, even as I held hard to him and cried on his shoulder. “Why, Cathy, why all the tears?” he asked as I sobbed on and on.

“Chris,” I asked when I could, “you don’t still love *her*, do you?”

He hesitated before he answered. That made anger simmer my blood into a rolling boil. “*You do!*” I cried. “How can you after what she did to Cory and to Carrie? Chris, what’s wrong with you that you can go on loving when you should hate as I do?”

Still he didn’t say anything. And his very silence gave me the answer. He went on loving her because he had to if he were to go on loving me. Every time he looked in my face he saw her and what she’d been like in her early youth. Chris was just like Daddy, who had been just as vulnerable to the kind of beauty I had. But it was only a surface resemblance. I wasn’t weak! I wasn’t without abilities! I could have thought of one thousand ways to earn a living, rather than lock my four children in a miserable room and leave them in care of an evil old woman who wanted to see them suffer for sins that weren’t even theirs!

While I thought my vengeful thoughts and made my plans to ruin her life when I could, Chris was tenderly kissing me. I hadn’t even noticed. “Stop!” I cried when I felt his lips pressing down on mine. “Leave me alone! You don’t love me like I want to be loved, for what I am. You love me because my face is like hers! Sometimes I hate my face!”

He looked terribly wounded as he backed toward the door. “I was only trying to comfort you,” he said in a broken voice. “Don’t turn it into something ugly.”

* * *

My fear that Carrie's leg would come out of the cast shorter than the other proved groundless. In no time at all after her leg was cut free from the plaster she was walking around as good as ever.

As fall neared, Chris, Paul and I conferred and decided that a public school where Carrie could come home every afternoon would be best for her after all. All she'd have to do was board a bus three blocks from home; the same bus would bring her home at three in the afternoon. In Paul's big homey kitchen she'd stay with Henny while I attended ballet class.

Soon September was upon us again, then November had gone by, and still Carrie hadn't made a single friend. She wanted most desperately to belong, but always she was an outsider. She wanted someone as dear as a sister but she found only suspicion, hostility and ridicule. It seemed Carrie would walk the long halls of that elementary school forever before she found a friend.

"Cathy," Carrie would tell me, "nobody likes me."

"They will. Sooner or later they will know how sweet and wonderful you are. And you have all of us who love and admire you so don't let others worry you. Don't care what they think!" She sniffed, for she did care, she did!

* * *

Carrie slept on her twin bed pushed close beside mine, and every night I saw her kneel beside her bed, temple her small hands under her chin, and with lowered head she prayed, "And please, God, let me find my mother again. My real mother. And most of all, Lord God, let me grow just a little bit taller. You don't have to make me as tall as Momma, but almost as tall as Cathy, please God, please, please."

Lying on my bed and hearing this, I stared bleakly up at the ceiling and I hated Momma, really despised and loathed her! How could Carrie still want a mother who'd been so cruel? Had Chris and I done right in sparing her the grim truth of how our own mother had tried to kill us? How she'd caused Carrie to be as small as she was?

Upon her smallness Carrie placed all her unhappiness and loneliness. She knew she had a pretty face and sensational hair, but what did they matter when the face and the hair were on a head much too large for the thin little body? Carrie's beauty did nothing at all to win her friends and admiration, just the opposite. "Doll face, Angel Hair. Hey you, midget, or are you a dwarf? Are you gonna join a circus and be their littlest freak?" And home she'd run, all three blocks from the bus stop, scared and crying, tormented again by children without sensitivity.

"I'm no good, Cathy!" she wailed with her face buried in my lap. "Nobody likes me. They don't like my body 'cause it's too little, and they don't like my head 'cause it's too big, and they don't even like what is pretty 'cause they think it's wasted on somebody too little like me!"

I said what I could to comfort her but I felt so inadequate. I knew she watched my every movement and compared my proportions to hers. She realized I was very much in proportion and how much she was constructed grotesquely.

If I could have given her a part of my height, gladly I would have done so. Instead, I gave her my prayers. Night after night, I too went down on my knees and prayed to God, "Please let Carrie grow! Please, God, she's so young, and it hurts her so much, and she's been through so much. Be kind. Look down, God! See us! Hear us!"

One afternoon Carrie went to the only one who could deliver almost everything—so why not size?

Paul was sitting on his back veranda, sipping wine, nibbling cheese and crackers. I was at ballet class, so I heard only Paul's version of what happened.

"She came to me, Cathy, and asked if I didn't have a stretching machine to pull her out longer."

I sighed when he told me.

"If I had such a machine," I told her—and I knew he'd done it with love, kindness and understanding, not with mockery—"it would be a very painful process. Have

patience, darling, you're taller than you were when you came. Time will make you grow. Why, I've seen the shortest young people suddenly just shoot up overnight after they reach puberty.' She stared at me with those big blue haunted eyes and I saw her disappointment. I had failed her. I could tell from the way she ambled off with her shoulders drooping and her head hung so low. Her hopes must have ridden high when those cruel kids at her school chided her about finding a 'stretching machine.'"

"Isn't there one thing modern medicine can do to help her grow?" I asked Paul.

"I'm looking into it," he said in a tight voice. "I'd give my soul to see Carrie reach the height she wants. I'd give her inches of my height, if only I could."

Momma's Shadow



We had been with our doctor for one year and a half, and what exhilarating and baffling days they were. I was like a mole coming out of darkness only to find the brilliant days weren't at all like I had supposed they would be.

I'd thought once we were free of Foxworth Hall and I was almost an adult life would lead me down a clear and straight path to fame, fortune and happiness. I had the talent; I saw that in the admiring eyes of Madame and Georges. Madame especially harped on every little flaw of technique, of control. Every criticism told me I was worth all her efforts to make me not only an excellent dancer but a sensational one.

During summer vacation Chris obtained a job as a waiter in a café from seven in the mornings to seven in the evenings. In August he would leave again for Duke University where he would begin his second year in college. Carrie fiddled away her time playing on the swing, playing with her little girl toys, though she was ten now and should be outgrowing dolls. I spent five days a week in ballet class, and half of Saturday. My small sister was like a shadow tagging after me when I was at home. When I wasn't she was Henny's shadow. She needed a playmate of her own age but she couldn't find one. She had only the porcelain dolls to confide in now that she felt too old to act the baby with Chris and me, and suddenly she stopped complaining about her size. But her eyes, those sad, sad yearning eyes, told how she longed to be as tall as the girls we saw walking in the shopping malls.

Carrie's loneliness hurt so much that again I thought of Momma and damned her to everlasting hell! I hoped she was hung over the eternal fires by her heels and prodded by imps with spears.

More and more often I was writing Momma short notes to torment her sunny life wherever she was. She never settled down in one place long enough to receive my letters, or if she did she didn't respond. I waited for the letters to come back stamped ADDRESS UNKNOWN but none ever did.

I read the Greenglenna newspaper carefully every evening, trying to find out just what my mother was up to and where she was. Sometimes there was news.

Mrs. Bartholomew Winslow left Paris and flew on to Rome to visit Italy's new chic couturier. I cut out that clipping and added it to my scrapbook. Oh, would do when I met up with her! Sooner or later she'd have to come to Greenglenna and live in that home of Bart Winslow's which was newly repaired, redecorated and refurbished. I cut out that news article too and stared long and hard at a photograph which was not flattering. This was unusual. Customarily she could put on a brilliant smile to show the world how happy and contented she was with her life.

Chris left for college in August, two weeks before I went back to high school. In late January I would graduate. I couldn't wait to be finished with high school so I studied like mad.

* * *

The autumn days flew swiftly by, so much in contrast to other autumns when time had crept monotonously while we grew older and youth was stolen from us. Just keeping track of my mother's activities kept me busy, and then when I really put my nose on the trail of Bart's family history I used up more of my precious time.

In Greenglenna I pored for hours over old books written about the founding families of Greenglenna. His ancestors had arrived just about the same time mine had, back in the eighteenth century, and they too had been from England, settling down in Virginia in the part that was now North Carolina. I looked up and stared into space. Was it just a coincidence that his ancestors and mine had been part of that "Lost Colony"? Some of the husbands had sailed back to

England for more supplies only to return much later and find their colony abandoned, with not one single survivor to tell why. After the Revolution the Winslows had moved to South Carolina. How odd. Now the Foxworths too were in South Carolina.

* * *

Not a day passed as I shopped and traveled on the busy streets of Greenglenna that I didn't expect to see my mother. I stared after every blond I saw. I went into expensive shops looking for her. Snobbish salesladies would come up silently behind me and inquire if they could help. Of course they couldn't help. I was looking for my mother, and she wasn't hanging from a clothes rack. But she was in town! The society column had given me this information. Any day I would see her!

One sunny Saturday I was rushing to do an errand for Madame Marisha when I suddenly spotted on the sidewalk ahead of me a man and a woman so familiar my heart almost stopped beating! It was them! Just to see her strolling so casually at his side, enjoying herself, put me in a state of panic! Sour gall rose in my throat. I dared to draw nearer, so I was very close behind them. If she turned she'd be sure to see me—and what would I do then? Spit in her face? Yes, I would like to do that. I could trip her and make her fall and watch how she lost her dignity. That would be nice. But I didn't do anything but tremble and feel ill as I listened to them talk.

Her voice was so soft and sweet, so cultivated and genteel. I marveled at how svelte she still was, how lovely her pale, gleaming hair that waved softly back from her face. When she turned her head to speak again to the man at her side I saw her profile. I sighed. Oh, God, my mother in that expensive, rose-colored suit. The beautiful mother I had loved so well. My murdering mother who could still take my heart and wring it dry, for once I had loved her so very much and trusted her ... and deep inside of me was that little girl, like Carrie, who still wanted a mother to love. Why, Momma? Why did you have to love money more than you loved your children?

I stifled the sob that she might have heard. My emotions raged out of control. I wanted to run up and scream accusations before her husband, and shock him and terrify her! I also wanted to run up and throw my arms about her, cry out her name and plead that she love me again. But all the tempestuous emotions I felt were submerged in the tidal wave of spite and vengeance I felt. I didn't accost her, for I wasn't ready to face her yet. I wasn't rich or famous. I wasn't anybody special and she was still a great beauty. She was one of the wealthiest women in the area and also one of the luckiest.

I dared much that day but they didn't turn to see me. My mother was not the type to look behind her or stare at passers-by. She was accustomed to being the one who drew all the admiring glances. Like a queen among peasants she strolled as if no one was on the street but her and her young husband.

When I had my fill of viewing her, I looked at her husband and drank up the special kind of virile, pantherlike handsomeness that was his. He no longer sported a huge thick mustache. His dark hair was waved smoothly back and was styled modishly. He reminded me a bit of Julian.

The words my mother and her husband exchanged weren't particularly revealing. They were discussing what restaurant they should dine in, and did he think the furniture they'd shopped for this afternoon could be bettered if they shopped in New York? "I do love the breakfront we chose," she said in a voice that brought back my childhood. "It reminds me so much of the one I bought just before Chris was killed."

Oh, yes. That breakfront had cost two thousand five hundred dollars and was so needed to balance one end of the living room. Then Daddy died on the highway and everything unpaid for was repossessed, including the breakfront.

I followed where they led, daring fate to let them see me. They were here, living in the home of Bart Winslow. As I tagged along, full of vengeful schemes, despising her, admiring him, I planned which way to hurt her most. And what did I do—I chickened out! I did nothing, absolutely nothing! Furious with myself I went home and raged in front

of the mirror, hating my image because it was her all over! Damn her to hell! I picked up a heavy paperweight from the special little French provincial desk Paul had bought me and I hurled it straight at the mirror! *There, Momma! You're broken in pieces now! Gone, gone, gone!* Then I was crying, and later a workman came and replaced the glass in the mirror frame. Fool, that's what I was. Now I'd wasted some of the money I was planning to use for a wonderful gift for Paul's forty-second birthday.

Someday I'd get even, and in a way in which I wouldn't be hurt. It would be more than just a broken mirror. Much, much more.

A Birthday Gift



Medical conventions ruined many a plan of mine, as did patients. On this unique day I skipped ballet class to rush straight home from high school. I found Henny in the kitchen slaving over a gourmet menu I had planned—all Paul’s favorite dishes. A Creole jambalaya with shrimp, crabmeat, rice, green bell peppers, onions, garlic, mushrooms and so many other things I thought I’d never finish measuring out half teaspoons of this and that. Then all the mushrooms and other vegetables had to be sautéed. It was a troublesome dish I wasn’t likely to make again.

No sooner was this in the oven than I began another cake from scratch. The first was sunk in the middle and was soggy. I covered up the hollow with thick frosting and gave it to the neighborhood kids. Henny bustled and bumbled around, shaking her head and throwing me critical glances.

I had the last rose squeezed from the pastry tube when Chris dashed in the back door bearing his gift. “Am I late?” he asked breathlessly. “I can’t stay longer than nine o’clock; I have to be back at Duke before roll call.”

“You’re just in time,” I said, all flustered and in a flurry to get upstairs and bathe and dress. “You set the table while Henny finishes up with the salad.” It was beneath his dignity, of course, to set a table, but for once he obliged without complaint.

I shampooed my hair and set it on large rollers, and polished my nails a glowing, silvery pink, my toenails too. I painted my face with an expertise born of hours of practice and long consultations with Madame Marisha and the beauty assistants in the department stores. When I was done no one would have guessed I was only seventeen. Down the stairs I drifted, borne aloft by the admiration that shone from my

brother's eyes and by the envy from Carrie's and a big grin that split Henny's face from ear to ear.

Fussily I arranged the table again, changing around the noise-makers, the snappers and the colorful, ridiculous paper clown hats. Chris blew up a few balloons and suspended them from the chandelier. And then we all sat down to wait for Paul to come and enjoy his "surprise party."

When he didn't show up and the hours passed, I got up to pace the floor as Momma had done on Daddy's thirty-sixth birthday party when he never came home, not ever.

Finally Chris had to leave. Then Carrie began to yawn and complain. We fed her and let her go to bed. She slept in her own room now, especially decorated in purple and red. Next it was only Henny and me watching TV as the Creole casserole kept warming and drying out, and our salad was wilting, and then Henny yawned and left for bed. Now I was left alone to pace and worry, my party ruined.

At ten I heard Paul's car turn into the drive and through the back door he strode, bearing with him the two suitcases he'd taken to Chicago. He tossed me a casual greeting before he noticed my fancy attire.

"Hey, ..." he said, throwing a suspicious glance into the dining room and seeing the party decorations, "have I somehow managed to spoil something you planned?"

He was so damned casual about being three hours late I could have killed him if I hadn't loved him so much. Like those who always try to hide the truth, I lit into him, "Why did you have to go to that medical convention in the first place? You might have guessed we'd have special plans for your birthday! And then you go and call us up and tell us what time to expect you home, and then you're three hours late—"

"My flight was delayed—" he started to explain.

"I've been slaving to make you a cake that tastes as good as your mother's," I interrupted, "*and then you don't show up!*" I brushed past him and pulled the casserole from the oven.

“I’m ravenous,” said Paul humbly, apologetically. “If you haven’t eaten, we might as well make the most of what looks like it could have been a very festive and happy occasion. Have mercy on me, Cathy. I don’t control the weather.”

I nodded stiffly to indicate I was at least a little understanding. He smiled and lightly brushed the back of his hand over my cheek. “You look absolutely exquisite,” he breathed softly, “so take the frown off your face and get things ready, and I’ll be down in ten minutes.”

In ten minutes he had showered and shaved and changed into fresh clothes. By the light of four candles the two of us sat down at the long dining table with me to his left. I had arranged this meal so I wouldn’t have to hop up and down to serve him. Everything that was needed was put upon a serving cart. The dishes that had to be served hot were on electrical heating units, and the champagne was cooling in a bucket. “The champagne is from Chris,” I explained. “He’s developed a liking for it.”

He lifted the champagne bottle from the ice and glanced at the label. “It’s a good year and must have been expensive; your brother has developed gourmet taste.”

We ate slowly and it seemed whenever I lifted my eyes they met with his. He’d come home looking tired, mussed; now he looked completely refreshed. He’d been gone two long, long weeks. Dead weeks that made me miss his presence in the open doorway of my bedroom as I practiced at the barre, doing my warm-up exercises before breakfast to beautiful music that sent my soul soaring.

When our meal was over I dashed into the kitchen, then glided back bearing a gorgeous coconut cake with miniature green candles fitted into red roses made of icing. Across the top I’d written as skillfully as I could with that pastry tube, *Happy Birthday to Paul*.

“What do you think?” Paul asked after he blew out the candles.

“Think about what?” I questioned back, carefully setting down the cake with twenty-six candles, for that was the age he

appeared to me, and the age I wanted him to be. I felt very much an adolescent, floundering in the world of adult quicksand. My short, formal gown was flame-colored chiffon, with shoestring straps and lots of cleavage showing. But if my attempts to look sophisticated had succeeded, inside I was in a daze as I tried to play the role of seductress.

“My mustache—surely you’ve noticed. You’ve been staring at it for half an hour.”

“It’s nice,” I stammered, blushing as red as my gown. “It becomes you.”

“Now ever since you came you’ve been hinting how much more handsome and appealing I’d be with a mustache. And now that I’ve taken the trouble to grow one you say it’s *nice*. Nice is such a weak word, Catherine.”

“It’s because ... because you do look so handsome,” I stumbled, “that I can find only weak words. I fear that Thelma Murkel has already found all the strong words to flatter you.”

“How the hell do you know about her?” He fired this at me as he narrowed his beautiful eyes.

Gosh, he should know—gossip—and so I told him this: “I went to that hospital where Thelma Murkel is the head nurse on the third floor. And I sat just beyond the nurse’s station and watched her for a couple of hours. In my opinion she’s not quite beautiful, but handsome, and she seemed to me terribly bossy. And she flirts with all the doctors, in case you don’t know that.”

I left him laughing with his eyes lit up. Thelma Murkel was a head nurse in the Clairmont Memorial Hospital and everyone there seemed to know she had her mind set on becoming the second Mrs. Paul Scott Sheffield. But she was only a nurse in a sterile white uniform, miles and miles away, and I was under his nose, with my intoxicating new perfume tickling his senses (as the advertisement had said, a bewitching, beguiling, seductive scent no man could resist). What chance did Thelma Murkel, age twenty-nine, have against the likes of me?

I was giddy from three glasses of Chris's imported champagne and hardly alert at all when Paul began to open the gifts Carrie, Chris and I had saved up to buy for him. I'd embroidered for him a crewel painting of his gingerbread white house with trees showing above the roof and a part of the brick wall to the sides with a little of the flowers showing. Chris had sketched it for me and I'd slaved many hours to make it perfect.

"It's a stunningly beautiful work of art!" he said with impressed awe. I couldn't help but think of the grandmother, and how she'd cruelly rejected our tedious and hopeful gesture to win her friendship. "Thank you very much, Catherine, for thinking so much of me. I'm going to hang it in my office where all my patients can see it."

Tears flooded my eyes, smeared my mascara as I furtively tried to blot them away before he realized it wasn't just the candlelight making me this beautiful, but three hours of preparation. He didn't notice the tears or my handkerchief that came from the cleavage of my low-cut gown. He was still admiring the small stitches I'd so carefully made. He put the gift aside, caught my glance with his own shining eyes and stood to help me up. "It's too beautiful a night to go to bed," he said as he glanced at his watch. "I've got a yearning to walk in the garden by moonlight. Do you ever have yearnings like that?"

Yearnings? I was made of yearnings, half of them adolescent and too fanciful to ever come true. Yet as I strolled by his side through the magic of his Japanese garden and over the little red-lacquered footbridge, and as we ascended marble steps and walked on hand in hand, I felt we'd both entered a magical never-never land. It was the marble statues, of course, life-size marble statues standing in their cold and perfect nudity.

The breezes were blowing the Spanish moss, and Paul had to duck to escape it, while I could stand straight and smile because having height did cause a few problems I could escape. "You're laughing at me, Cath-er-ine," he said, just as

Chris used to tease, and separate my name into slow and distinct syllables. *My lady, Cath-er-ine.*

I ran on ahead and down the marble steps to the center where Rodin's *The Kiss* dominated the garden. Everything seemed silvery bluish and unreal, and the moon was big and bright, full and smiling, with long dark clouds streaking its face and making it seem sinister one moment and gay the next. I sighed, for it was like that strange night that put Chris and me up on the roof of Foxworth Hall, both of us fearful we'd roast over the eternal fires of hell.

"It's a pity you are here with me and not with that beautiful boy you dance with," said Paul, yanking me back from thoughts of yesterday.

"Julian?" I asked in surprise. "He's in New York this week—but I suspect he'll be back again next week."

"Oh," he said. "Then next week will belong to him, and not me."

"That all depends... ."

"On what?"

"Sometimes I want him and sometimes I don't. Sometimes he seems just a boy and I want a man. Then again, sometimes he's very sophisticated and that impresses me. And when I dance with him I fall madly in love with the prince he's supposed to be. He looks so splendid in those costumes."

"Yeah," he said, "I've noticed that myself."

"His hair is jet black, while yours is sort of brownish smoky black."

"I suppose jet black is more romantic than brownish smoky black?" he teased.

"That all depends."

"Catherine, you are female through and through—stop giving me enigmatic answers."

"I'm not enigmatic, I'm just telling you love isn't enough, nor romance. I want skills to see me through life so I'll never

have to lock away my children to inherit a fortune I didn't earn. I want to know how to earn a buck and see us through, even if we don't have a man to lean on and support us."

"Catherine, Catherine," he said softly, taking both my hands in his and holding them tight. "How hurt you've been by your mother. You sound so adult, so hard. Don't let bitter memories deprive you of one of your greatest assets—your soft, loving ways. A man likes to take care of the woman he loves and his children. A man likes to be leaned on, looked up to, respected. An aggressive, domineering woman is one of God's most fearsome creatures."

I yanked free of him and ran on to the swing and threw myself down on the seat. I pushed myself high, higher, fast, faster, flying so high it took me back to the attic and the swings there when the nights were long and stuffy. Now here I was, free, on the outside and swinging crazily to put myself *back* into the attic! It was seeing Momma and her husband again that was making me desperate, making me want what should be put off until I was older.

I flew so high, so wild, so abandoned my skirts fanned up into my face and made me blind. Dizzy, I suddenly fell to the ground! Paul came running to my side, falling down on his knees to lift me up in his arms. "Are you hurt?" he asked, and kissed me before I could answer. No, not hurt. I was a dancer who knew how to fall. He started murmuring the love words I needed to hear between his kisses that came slower and lasted longer, and the look in his eyes made me fill with a drunkenness far headier and far more sparkling than any imported French champagne.

My lips parted beneath his prolonged kiss. I gasped because his tongue touched mine. His kisses came hot, soft, moist on my eyelids, my cheeks, my chin, neck, shoulders, cleavage as his hands endlessly roamed and sought all my most intimate places.

"Catherine," he gasped, pulling away and gazing down at me with his eyes on fire, "you're only a child. We can't let this happen. I swore I'd never let this happen, not with you." Useless words that I snuffed out by encircling his neck with

my arms. My fingers sank into the thickness of his dark hair as I murmured huskily, “I wanted to give you a shiny silver Cadillac for your birthday, but I didn’t have enough money. So I thought I’d give you second best—me.”

He moaned softly. “I can’t let you do this—you *don’t* owe *me*.” I laughed and kissed him, shamelessly kissed him long and deep.

“Paul, it’s *you* who owes me! You’ve given me too many long, desiring looks to tell me you don’t want me now. If you say that you’re lying. You think of me as a child. But I grew up a long time ago. Don’t love me, I don’t care. For I love you and that’s enough. I know you’ll love me the way I want to be loved, because even though you won’t admit it, you do love me and want me.”

The moon lit up his eyes and made them shine. Even as he said, “No, you’re a fool to think it will work,” his eyes were speaking differently.

To my way of thinking, his very restraint proved exactly how very much he *did* love me. If he had loved me less he would have eagerly taken long ago what I wouldn’t have denied. So when he made a move to rise, to leave me and have done with temptation, I took his hand and put it where it would pleasure me most. He groaned. And groaned even louder when I put *my* hand where it would pleasure *him* most. Shameless what I did, I knew it. I shut off my thoughts of what Chris would think, of how the grandmother would consider me a scarlet harlot. Oh, was it fortunate or just the opposite that that book in Momma’s nightstand drawer had shown me well what to do to pleasure a man and how to respond?

I thought he would take me there on the grass under the stars, but he picked me up and carried me back into the house. Up the back stairs he stole quietly. Neither of us spoke though my lips traveled over his neck and face. Far off, in the room to the rear of the kitchen, I could hear Henny’s TV as she listened to a late-night talkshow.

On his bed he laid me down and with his eyes alone he began his lovemaking, and in his eyes I drowned, and things

grew blurry as my emotions swelled higher like a tidal wave engulfing both of us. Skin to skin we pressed, just holding close at first and thrilling in the exaltation of sharing what the other had to give. With each touch of his lips, of his hands I was shot through with electrifying sensations, until at last I was wild to have him enter me, no longer tender, but fervent with his own fierce, demanding need to reach the same heights I was seeking.

“Catherine! Hurry, hurry, *come!*”

What was he talking about? I was there beneath him, doing what I could. Come where? He was slippery and wet with sweat. My legs were raised and clutched about his waist and I could feel the terrible effort of his restraint as he kept telling me to come, come, come! Then he groaned and gave up.

Hot juices spurted forth to warm up my insides pleasantly five or six times, and then it was over, all over, and he was pulling out. And I hadn't reached any mountain high, or heard bells ringing, or felt myself exploding—not as he had. It was all over his face, relaxed and at peace now, vaguely smeared with joy. How easy for men, I thought, while I still wanted more. There I was on the verge of Fourth-of-July fireworks and it was all over. All over but for his sleepy hands that roamed over my body, exploring all hills and crevices before he fell asleep. Now his heavy leg was thrown over mine. I was left staring up at the ceiling with tears in my eyes. *Good-bye, Christopher Doll—now you are set free.*

* * *

Sunlight through the window wakened me early. Paul was propped up on an elbow gazing dreamily down at me. “You are so beautiful, so young, so desirable. You aren't sorry, are you? I hope you don't wish now you had done it differently?”

I snuggled closer against his bare skin. “Explain one thing, please. Why did you keep asking me to come?” He roared with laughter.

“Catherine, my love,” he finally managed. “I nearly killed myself trying to hold back until you could climax. And now you lie there with those big innocent blue eyes and ask what I

meant! I thought those dancing playmates of yours had explained everything to you. Don't tell me there is one subject you haven't read about in a book!"

"Well, there was a book I found in Momma's night table drawer... . But I just looked at the photographs. I never read the text, though Chris did, but then he stole more often to her bedroom suite than I did."

He cleared his throat. "I could tell you what I meant by what I said, but demonstrating would be more fun. Really, you don't have the least idea?"

"Yes," I said defensively, "of course I do. I'm supposed to feel stunned by lightning bolts so I stiffen out and go unconscious and then I'm split wide apart into atoms that float around in space and then gather together and sizzle me with tingles so I can float back to reality with dream-stars in my eyes—like you had."

"Catherine, don't make me love you too much." He sounded serious, as if I'd hurt him if he did.

"I'll try to love you the way you want."

"I'll shave first," he said, throwing back the covers and making ready to get up.

I reached to pull him back. "I like the way you look now, so dark and dangerous."

Eagerly I surrendered to all Paul's desires. We developed delicate ways of keeping our trysts secret from Henny. On Henny's day off I washed the bed linens that were duplicates of the ones soiled that I hid away until they could be washed. Carrie could have been in another world she was so unobservant. But when Chris was home we had to be more discreet and not even look at each other, lest we betray ourselves. I felt strange with Chris now, like I'd betrayed him.

I didn't know how long the rapture between Paul and me would last. I longed for passion undying, for ecstasy everlasting. Yet my suspicious self guessed nothing as glorious as what Paul and I had could go on indefinitely. He would soon tire of me, a child whose mental capacities couldn't

compete with his, and he'd go back to his old ways—maybe with Thelma Murkel. Maybe Thelma Murkel had gone with him to that medical convention, though I was wise enough not to question him ever about what he did when I wasn't with him. I wanted to give him everything Julia had denied, and give gladly with no recriminations when we parted.

But in the moment of our flaming obsession with each other I felt so large, so generous, and I gloated in our selfless abandonment. And I think the grandmother with her talk of evil and sin had made it ten times more exciting because it was so very, very wicked.

And then again I'd flounder, not wanting Chris to think I was wicked. Oh, it mattered so much to me what Chris would think. *Please, God, let Chris know why I'm doing this. And I do love Paul, I do!*

After Thanksgiving Chris still had a few days of vacation, and while we were at the dinner table with Henny hovering nearby, Paul asked all of us what we wanted for Christmas. This would be our third Christmas with Paul. In late January I'd be graduating from high school. I didn't have much time to go, for my next step, I hoped, would be New York.

I spoke up and told Paul what I wanted for Christmas. I wanted to go to Foxworth Hall. Chris's eyes widened and Carrie began to cry. "No!" said Chris firmly. "We will not open healed wounds!"

"My wounds are not healed!" I stated just as firmly. *"They will never be healed until justice is done!"*

Foxworth Hall, from the Outside



The minute the words left my mouth he shouted, “No! Why can’t you let bygones be bygones?”

“Because I am not like you, Christopher! You like to pretend that Cory didn’t die of arsenic poisoning, but of pneumonia, because you feel more comfortable with that! Yet you were the one who convinced me she was the one who did it! So why can’t we go up there and see for ourselves if any hospital has a record of Cory’s death?”

“Cory could have died of pneumonia. He had all the symptoms.” How lamely he said that, knowing full well he was protecting her.

“Now wait a minute,” said Paul who had kept quiet, and spoke only when he saw the fire blazing from my eyes. “If Cathy feels she must do this thing, why not, Chris? Though if your mother admitted Cory to a hospital under a false name it won’t be easy to check up.”

“She had a fake name put on his tombstone too,” said Chris, giving me a long, hateful look. Paul gave that some thought, wondering aloud how we could find a grave when we didn’t know the name. I believed I had all the answers. If she registered Cory in a hospital for treatment under a certain name, then naturally she’d use the same name when he was buried. “And Paul since you’re a doctor you can gain entry to all the hospital records, right?”

“You really want to do this?” he asked. “It’s sure to bring back a lot of unhappy memories and, like Chris just said, open up healed wounds.”

“My wounds are not healed, and will never be healed! I want to put flowers on Cory’s grave. I think it will comfort Carrie to know where he’s buried, then we can visit him from

time to time. Chris, *you don't have to go* if you are so dead set against it!”

What I wanted Paul tried to deliver, despite Chris's opposition. Chris did travel with us to Charlottesville, riding in the back seat with Carrie. Paul went inside several hospitals and charmed the nurses into giving him the records he wanted. He looked and I looked while Carrie and Chris stayed outside. Not one eight-year-old boy had died of pneumonia two years ago in late October! Not only that, the cemeteries didn't have a record of a child his age being buried! Still stubbornly determined, I had to trek through all the cemeteries, feeling Momma might have lied and put Dollanganger on his headstone after all. Carrie cried, for Cory was supposed to be in heaven, not in the ground lightly frosted with a recent snowfall.

Fruitless, time-consuming, unrewarding waste! As far as the world was concerned, no male child of eight years had died in the months of October and November 1960! Chris insisted we go back to Paul's. He tried to persuade me that I didn't really want to see Foxworth Hall.

I whirled to glare at Chris. *“I do want to go there! We do have time! Why come this far and turn back without seeing that house? At least once in the daylight, on the outside—why not?”*

It was Paul who reasoned with Chris by telling him I needed to see the house. “And to be honest, Chris, I'd like to see it myself.”

Brooding sullenly in the back seat beside Carrie, Chris relented. Carrie cried as Paul headed his car toward the climbing mountain roads that Momma and her husband must have traversed thousands of times. Paul stopped at a gas station to ask directions to Foxworth Hall. Easily we could have guided Paul to Foxworth Hall, if we knew where the train tracks were and could find the mail depot that was a stop-off point.

“Beautiful country,” said Paul as he drove. Eventually we did come upon that grand house that sat all alone on a

mountainside. “That’s the one!” I cried, terribly excited. It was huge as a hotel, with double wings that jutted out front and back from the long main stem constructed of pink brick with black shutters at all the windows. The black slate roof was so sharply pitched it looked scary—how had we ever dared to walk up there? I counted the eight chimneys, the four sets of dormer windows in the attic.

“Look over there, Paul,” I directed, pointing out the two windows on the northern wing where we had been held prisoners for so long, waiting endlessly for our grandfather to die.

While Paul stared at those two windows, I looked up at the dormer windows of the attic and saw that the fallen slat from one of the black shutters had been replaced. There wasn’t a scorch mark anywhere or signs of a fire. The house hadn’t burned! God hadn’t sent an errant breeze to blow the candle flame until it caught a dangling paper flower on fire. God wasn’t going to punish our mother or the grandmother, not for anything!

All of a sudden Carrie let out a loud howl. “I want Momma!” she screamed. “Cathy, Chris, that’s where we used to live with Cory! Let’s go inside! I want Momma, please let me see my real momma!”

It was frightful the way she cried and pleaded. How could she remember the house? It had been dark the night we arrived, with the twins so sleepy they couldn’t have seen anything. The morning we stole away it was before dawn and we’d left by the back door. What was it that told Carrie this was our prison of yesteryears? Then I knew. It was the houses lower down the street. We were at the end of the cul-de-sac and up much higher. We’d often peeked out the windows of our locked room and gazed down on all the fine houses. Forbidden to look out of the windows—and yet we dared, on occasion.

* * *

What had been accomplished by our long journey? Nothing, nothing at all except more proof that our mother was

a liar beyond belief. I mulled it over, day after day, even when I was perched on one of the built-in shower seats as Paul lathered my hair and carefully began to wash it. The long length couldn't be piled on top and screwed around or I'd never get out the tangles. He did it the way I'd taught him, working the soapy lather from scalp to ends, and when it was over, he'd dry it, brush it free of tangles and all around me it would fall like a silken shawl to cover my nakedness, like Eve must have covered hers.

"Paul," I asked, my eyes downcast, "it's not sinful what we're doing, is it? I keep thinking of the grandmother and all her talk of evil. Tell me that love makes this all right."

"Open your eyes, Cathy," he said softly, using a washcloth to wipe away the suds before I did. "Look at what you see—a naked man, the way God planned him to be." When I'd looked, he tilted my face upwards and then lifted me so he could hold me close. Holding me in his tight embrace, he began to talk, and every word he said told me our love was beautiful and right.

I couldn't speak. Silently I cried inside, for so easily I could have ended up the prude the grandmother wanted to make of me.

Like a young child I allowed him to dry me off and brush my hair, and do what he would with his kisses and caresses, until the embers always ready between us caught fire and he picked me up and carried me to his bed.

When our passion was sated, I lay in the circle of his arms and thought of all I could do. Things that would have shocked me as a child. Things that once I would have considered terribly gross, ugly, for I had thought then only of the acts and not of the feelings of giving. How strange that people were born so sensual and had to be stifled for so many years. I recalled the first time his tongue had touched me *there* and the electrifying jolt I'd felt.

Oh, I could kiss Paul everywhere and feel no shame, for loving him was better than smelling roses on a sunny summer

day, better than dancing to beautiful music with the best of all partners.

That was what loving Paul was like for me when I was seventeen and he was forty-two.

He had restored me and made me whole, and deeper down I shoved the remorse I felt for Cory.

There was hope for Chris, he was alive.

There was hope for Carrie, that she could grow and find love too.

And maybe, if things turned out right—there was hope for me too.

Toward the Top



Julian didn't fly down as often as he used to, and his mother and father complained about this. When he did come, he danced better than ever, but not once did I see him glance my way. I had the suspicion though, he did plenty of looking when he knew I couldn't see him. I was getting better, more disciplined, more controlled ... and I worked. Oh, how I worked!

From the very first I'd been included in the professional group of the Rosencoff Ballet Company, but only as a member of the *corps de ballet*. This Christmas we were to alternate performances of *The Nutcracker* and *Cinderella*.

Long after the others had gone home I had the dance studio all to myself on a Friday afternoon, and I was lost in the world of the Sugarplum Fairy, intent upon giving this role something different, when suddenly Julian was dancing with me. He was like my shadow, doing what I did, even pirouetting, making a mockery of what I did.

He frowned, then grabbed up a towel to dry his face and hair. I wiggled my toes and started toward the dressing room. I was going out to dinner with Paul that evening.

"Cathy, hold up!" he called. "I know you don't like me—"

"I don't."

He grinned wickedly, leaning forward to stare into my eyes. His lips brushed my cheek as I cringed away, then he had me pinioned in his arms, with his palms flat against the wall to prevent my running away. "You know what, I think you should be the one to dance Clara, or Cinderella." He tickled under my chin, then kissed near my ear. "If you're nice to me I could see to it that you dance both lead roles."

I ducked and ran. “Come off it, Julian!” I flared. “Your favors would demand a price ... and you don’t interest me.”

Ten minutes later I had showered and dressed and was ready to leave the building when Julian showed up in his street clothes. “Cathy, seriously, I think you’re ready for New York now. Marisha thinks so too.” His smile was wry, as if his mother’s opinion wasn’t as worthy as his own. “No strings attached. Not unless someday you decide you want strings.”

Now I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing. I did get chosen for both the roles for the Rosencoff performances. I thought the other girls would be jealous and resentful, but instead they applauded when it was announced. We all worked well together, making it one merry, hectic time. Then came my debut as Cinderella!

Julian didn’t even knock before he entered the girl’s dressing room to survey me in my costume of rags and tatters. “Stop being so damned nervous. They’re only people out there. You don’t think I’d come back here to dance with a girl who wasn’t sensational, do you?”

As we stood in the wings his arm stayed about my shoulders, lending me confidence as we both counted toward my cue to go on. His part didn’t come until much later. I couldn’t see Paul, Chris, Carrie or Henny out in the darkened audience. I trembled more as the footlights dimmed and the overture was played, and then the curtain rose. My mounting anxiety disappeared and took all my insecurity along with it, as some astonishing kinesthetic memory took over and I allowed the music to control and direct me. I wasn’t Cathy, or Catherine, or anybody but Cinderella! I swept ashes from the hearth and enviously watched two hateful stepsisters prepare for the ball, feeling love and romance would never come into my life.

If I made mistakes, if my technique wasn’t perfect, I didn’t know it. I was in love with the dance, with performing before a large audience, with being young and pretty, and most of all I was in love with life and all it had to offer outside of Foxworth Hall.

Red, yellow and pink roses came to fill my arms. I thrilled when the audience rose to give us a standing ovation. Three times I handed Julian a rose of a different color; each time our eyes met and clung. See, his were saying to me mutely, we *do* create magic together! We *are* the perfect dancing partners!

He cornered me again during the buffet party. “Now you’ve had a taste of what it’s like,” he said softly and persuasively, his dark eyes pleading. “Can you give up the applause? Can you keep on staying here, in a hick town, when New York is waiting for you? Cathy, as a team we’ll be sensational! We look so right together. I dance with you better than I dance with any other ballerina. Oh, Cathy, you and I could reach the top so much sooner together. I swear to take good care of you. I’ll look out for you and never let you feel lonely.”

“I don’t know,” I said miserably, though I was lit up inside. “I have to finish high school first—but do you really think I’m good enough? Up there they expect the best.”

“You *are* the best! Trust me, believe in me. Madame Zolta’s company isn’t the largest, or top rank, but she’s got what it takes to make our company rate as high as the larger and older ones—once she has a couple of fantastic dancers like us!”

I asked what Madame Zolta was like. Somehow that made him confident I’d already agreed and, laughing first, he managed to plant a kiss on my lips. “You’re going to adore Madame Zolta! She’s Russian and the sweetest, kindest, most gentle little old lady you ever met. She’ll be like your mother. [Good God!] She knows everything there is about dance. She’s our doctor sometimes, our psychologist; whatever we need, she’s it. Life in New York is like living on Mars compared to here, another world, a better world. In no time at all you’ll love it. I’ll take you to famous restaurants where you’ll eat food such as you’ve never tasted before. I’ll introduce you to movie stars, TV celebrities, actors, actresses, authors.”

I tried to resist him by fastening my eyes on Chris, Carrie and Paul, but Julian moved so he blocked out my view. All I could see was him. “It’s the kind of life you were born for, Cathy,” and this time he sounded sincere and deeply earnest. “Why have you studied and put yourself through so much

torture, if not for success? Can you achieve the kind of fame you want here?"

No. I couldn't.

But Paul was here. Chris and Carrie were here. How could I leave them?

"Cathy, come with me to where you belong, behind the footlights, on stage, with roses in your arms. Come with me, Cathy, and make my dreams come true too."

Oh, he was winning that night, and I was heady with my first success, and even when I wanted to say no, I nodded and said, "Yes ... I'll go, but only if you come down here and fly with me. I've never been on a plane, and I wouldn't know where to go once I landed."

He took me in his arms then, tenderly, and held me as his lips brushed my hair. Over his shoulder, I could see both Chris and Paul staring our way, both of them looking astonished and more than a little hurt.

In January of 1963 I graduated from high school. I wasn't particularly brilliant, like Chris, but I'd made it through.

Chris was so smart it was more than likely he'd finish college in three years rather than four. Already he'd won several scholarships to help take the financial burden of his education from Paul's shoulders, though he never mentioned a word about any of us paying him back—for anything. It was understood, though, that Chris would become an associate with Paul when he had his M.D. I marveled that Paul could keep spending on us and never complain, and when I asked, he explained. "I enjoy knowing I'm helping to contribute to the world the wonderful doctor Chris will make—and the super ballerina you will be one day." He looked so sad when he said that, so terribly sad. "As for Carrie, I hope she decides to stay home with me and marry a local boy, so I can see her often."

"When I'm gone it will be Thelma Murkel for you again, won't it?" I asked with some bitterness, for I wanted him to stay faithful, no matter how many miles I put between us.

"Maybe," he said.

“You won’t love anyone else as much as you love me, say you won’t.”

He smiled. “No. How could I love anyone as much as I love you? No other could dance into my heart the way you did, could she?”

“Paul, don’t mock me. Say the word and I won’t go. I’ll stay.”

“How can I say the words to make you stay when you have to fulfill your destiny? You were born to dance, not to be the wife of a stodgy, small-town doctor.”

Marriage! He’d said wife! He’d never mentioned marriage before.

It was more than awful to tell Carrie I was leaving. Her screams were deafening and pitiful. “*You cannot go!*” she bellowed, tears streaming. “*You promised we would all stay together, and now you and Chris both go away and leave me! Take me too! Take me!*” She beat at me with small fists, kicked at my legs, determined to inflict some pain for what Chris and I were giving her—and already I felt pain enough for the world in leaving her. “Please try and understand, Carrie, I will be coming back, and Chris will too—you won’t be forgotten.”

“I hate you!” she screamed. “I hate both you and Chris! I hope you die in New York! I hope you both fall down and die!” It was Paul who came to save me.

“You’ve still got me every day, and Henny,” he said, hefting Carrie’s slight weight up in his arms. “We’re not going anywhere. And you’ll be the only daughter we have when Cathy is gone. Come, dry your tears, put a smile on your face and be happy for your sister. Remember this is what she’d been striving for all those long years when you were locked up.”

I ached inside as I wondered if I really wanted a dance career as much as I had always thought. Chris threw me a long, sad look then bent to pick up my new blue suitcases. He hurried out the front door trying not to let me see the tears in his eyes. When we all went out, he stood near Paul’s white car,

his shoulders squared off, his face set, determined not to show any emotion.

Henny had to pile in with the rest of us; she didn't want to be left home to cry alone. Her so eloquent brown eyes spoke to me, wishing me good luck as her hands were kept busy wiping the tears from Carrie's face.

At the airport Julian paced back and forth, constantly glancing at his watch. He was afraid I'd back out and wouldn't show up. He looked very handsome in his new suit as his eyes lit up when he saw me approach. "Thank God, I was thinking I flew down here for nothing—and I wouldn't do this twice."

The evening before, I'd already said a private good-bye to Paul. His words rang in my ears to haunt me even as I boarded the plane. "We both knew it couldn't last, Catherine. From the beginning I warned you, April just can't marry with September."

Chris and Paul followed us up the ramp to help with the many pieces of hand luggage I wouldn't trust to the baggage compartment, and once more I had to hug Paul close. "Thank you, Catherine," he whispered so neither Chris nor Julian could overhear, "for everything. Don't look back with any regrets. Forget about me. Forget all the past. Concentrate on your dancing and wait before you fall in love with anyone—and let it be someone near your own age."

Choking, I asked, "And what about you?"

He forced a smile and then a chuckle. "Don't worry about me. I've got my memories of a beautiful ballerina and that's enough."

I burst into tears! Memories! What were they? Just something to torture yourself with, that's all! Blindly I turned to find myself locked in Chris's arms. My Christopher Doll who was six feet tall now, my knight so gallant, chivalrous and sensitive. Finally I could pull away and then he took my hands, both of them, as our gazes met and locked. We too had shared a great deal, even more than Paul and I. *Good-bye my walking, talking, cheerful, chiding, and living set of encyclopedias, my fellow prisoner of hope... . You don't need*

to cry for me... . Cry for yourself ... or don't cry at all. It's over. Accept it, Chris, like I have, like you have to. You're only my brother. I'm only a sister, and the world is full of beautiful women who'd love you better than I can, or could.

Every word I didn't speak I knew he heard, and still he kept on looking at me with his heart in his eyes, making me hurt all over.

"Cathy," he said hoarsely, loud enough for Julian to hear, "it's not that I'm afraid you won't make it, I'm sure you will if you don't get so damned impulsive! Please don't do anything reckless that you'll regret later on. Promise to think of all the ramifications first before you jump in with both feet. Go easy on sex and love. Wait until you're old enough to know what you want in a man before you choose one."

I'm sure my smile was crooked, for already I'd chosen Paul. I flicked my eyes from Paul who looked serious, to Julian who was frowning and glaring at Chris, then at Paul. "You go easy on sex and love too," I said jokingly to Chris, making sure my tone was light. I hugged him tight once more, hurting to let him go. "And write to me often, and come to New York with Paul, Carrie and Henny whenever you can—or come alone, but come—promise?"

Solemnly he promised. Our lips met briefly, and then I turned to take my seat near the window. Since this was my first plane trip, Julian graciously gave up that privilege. I waved like mad to my family who I couldn't even see from the plane window.

Julian, so adroit and adept on stage, was at a loss when it came to handling a girl who sobbed on his shoulder, trembling, already homesick, wishing she wasn't going even before the plane was five thousand feet up. "You've got me," he said smoothly. "Didn't I swear to take care of you? And I will, honest to God. I'll do everything possible to make you happy." He grinned at me and kissed me lightly. "And, my love, I'm afraid I exaggerated the charms of Madame Zolta just a wee, wee bit, as you'll soon find out."

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

He cleared his throat and without the slightest embarrassment he told me about his first meeting with the once-famous Russian dancer. “I don’t want to spoil the surprise in store when you meet up with this great beauty, so I’ll save that and let you see for yourself. But I’ll warn you about this, Madame Z. is a toucher. She likes to feel you, your muscles, how hard and firm they are. Would you believe she put her hand directly on my fly to find out the size of what was underneath?”

“No! I don’t believe that!”

He laughed merrily and threw his arm about me. “Oh, Cathy, what a life we’re going to live, you and I! What heaven will be ours when you find out you’ve got sole property rights to the handsomest and most gifted and graceful *danseur* ever born.” He drew me even closer and whispered in my ear, “And I haven’t said a word about the talented lover I am.”

I laughed too—and shoved him away. “If you aren’t the most conceited, arrogant person I’ve ever met. And I suspect you can be quite ruthless too when it comes to getting what you want.”

“Right on!” he said with a following laugh. “I’m all of that and more too, as you’ll soon find out. After all, wasn’t I ruthlessly determined to get you where I want you?”

New York, New York



It was snowing hell-bent when our plane landed in New York. The cold in my nostrils stunned me. I'd forgotten bitter winters like this. The wind howling down those narrow canyonways seemed to want to rip the skin from my face. Ice seemed to enter my lungs and shrivel them with constricting pain. I gasped, laughed, turned to glance at Julian who was paying the cab driver, and then I pulled from my coat pocket a red knitted scarf Henny had made for me. Julian took it and helped me swath it about my head and neck so it half-covered my face. Then I shocked him by pulling from the other pocket a red scarf I had knitted for him.

“Gosh, thanks. I never thought you cared.” He seemed very pleased as he wrapped his neck and ears.

On this day of days the cold had made his cheeks as red as his lips, and with that blue-black hair that curled just above his coat collar and those sparkling dark eyes the sheer beauty of him was enough to steal anyone's breath. “Okay,” he said, “pull yourself together, and prepare to meet ballet personified—my sweet, delicate, delicious dance instructor whom you will positively adore.”

Just to be here had me on edge, so I clung as close as possible to Julian, staring at all the people who dared to brave such ferocious weather.

The luggage we'd brought was left in a waiting room of the huge building, and in the flurry of scurrying after Julian I didn't notice much of anything until we were in the office of our ballet mistress, Madame Zolta Korovenskov. Her stance, her arrogance immediately reminded me of Madame Marisha. But this woman was much older, if all those wrinkles could be counted as tree-rings to indicate her age.

Queenly stiff she rose from behind a desk that was impressively wide. Coolly, all business, she stalked over to us and looked us over with bead-black eyes as small as those of a mouse. What hair she had was skinned back from her dry brittle face like fine white floss. She wasn't five feet tall, but radiated six feet of authority. Her half-moon glasses perched precariously on the end of an astonishingly long thin nose. Above those half-disks she peered at us, squinting, so her minute eyes almost disappeared in the crow's feet. Julian was so unlucky as to gain her scrutiny first.

Her puckered little prune mouth drew up like a drawstring purse. I watched and waited for a smile to come and break her parchment skin. I expected her voice to crackle, cackle, witchlike.

"So!" she spat at Julian. "You take off *when* you want, and come back *when* you want and you expect me to say I'm glad to see you! Bah! Do that one more time and out you go! Who is this girl with you?"

Julian gave the old hag a charming smile, and quickly put his arm about her. "Madame Zolta Korovenskov, may I introduce you to Miss Catherine Doll, the wonderful dancer I've been telling you about for months and months—and she is the reason why I left without your permission."

She looked me over with very interested gimlet eyes. "You come from some nowhere too?" she whiplashed. "You've got the look of another place, like my black devil here does. He's a very good dancer, but not as good as he thinks. Can I believe him about you?"

"I guess, Madame, you'll just have to watch me dance and judge for yourself."

"Can you dance?"

"As I said before, Madame, wait and judge for yourself."

"See, Madame," Julian said eagerly, "Cathy's got spirit, fire! You should see her whip her leg doing *fouettés*. She's so fast she's a blur!"

“Ha!” she snorted, then came to encircle me and next she gave my face such a close scrutiny I was blushing. She felt my arms, my chest, even my breasts, then put her bony hands on my neck and felt the cords. Those audacious hands roamed down the length of my body while I wanted to scream out I wasn’t a slave to be sold in the marketplace. I was grateful she didn’t put her hand on my crotch as she’d done to Julian. I stood still and endured the inspection and felt all the while a deep, hot blush. She looked up to see it and smiled sarcastically.

When she’d done and I’d been physically appraised and evaluated, she delved the depths of my eyes to drink up my essence. I felt she was trying to absorb my youth with her eyes and drain it from me. Then she was touching my hair. “When do you plan to marry?” she shot out.

“Sometime when I’m near thirty, maybe, or maybe never.” I answered uneasily. “But most certainly I’m going to wait until after I’m rich and famous, and the world’s best prima ballerina.”

“Hah! You have many illusions about yourself. Beautiful faces don’t usually go with great dancers. Beauty thinks it needs no talent and can feed on itself, so it soon dies. Look at me. Once I was young and a great beauty. What do you see now?”

She was hideous! And she couldn’t have ever been beautiful, or there’d be some evidence.

As if sensing my doubt to her claim, she gestured arrogantly to all the photographs on the walls, on her desk, on the tables, bookshelves. All showed the same lovely young ballerina. “Me,” she proudly informed. I couldn’t believe it. They were old photos, brownish in color, the costumes outdated, and yet she had been lovely. She gave me a wide, amused smile, patted my shoulder and said, “Good. Age comes to everyone and makes everyone equal.

“Who did you study with before Marisha Rosencoff?”

“Miss Denise Danielle.” I hesitated, fearful of telling her about all the years I’d danced alone and been my own

instructor.

“Ah,” she sighed, looking very sad, “I saw Denise Danielle dance many times, such a brilliant performer but she made the old mistake and fell in luv. End of promising career. Now, all she do is teach.” Her voice rose and fell, quivering, gaining strength, then losing it. She pronounced “luv” with a long “u,” making the word sound foreign and silly. “Big-head Julian says you are a great dancer, but I have to see you dance before I believe, and then I will decide if beauty is its own excuse for being.” Once more she sighed. “You drink?”

“No.”

“Why is your skin so pale? Do you never go in sun?”

“Too much sun burns me.”

“Ah ... you and your lover boy—afraid of the sun.”

“Julian is *not* my lover!” I said between clenched teeth, shooting him a fierce look, for he must have told her we were.

Not an element of our expressions missed the keen observation of those ebony-bead eyes. “Julian, did you or did you not tell me you were in luv with this girl?”

He flushed and lowered his eyes, and had the decency to look embarrassed for once. “Madame, the love is all on my side, I’m ashamed to admit. Cathy feels nothing for me ... but she will, sooner or later.”

“Fine,” the old witch said with a birdlike nod. “You have a big passion for her, she has none for you—that makes for sizzling, sensational dancing on your part. Our box office will overflow. *I see it coming!*”

* * *

That was, of course, the reason she took me on, knowing Julian had his unsatisfied lust and knowing I had a smoldering desire to find someone else offstage. Onstage, he was everything beautiful, romantic and sensual—my dream lover. If we could have danced through all our days and nights, we could have set the world on fire. As it was, when he was only himself, with his glib and often smutty tongue, I ran from him.

I went to bed each night thinking of Paul prowling his lonely gardens, and refused to let myself dream of Chris.

I was soon ensconced in a small apartment twelve blocks from the dance studio. Two other dancers shared the three small rooms and one tiny bath with me. Two floors above, Julian shared an apartment with two male dancers in rooms no bigger than those we three girls had. His roommates were Alexis Tarrell and Michael Michelle, both in their early twenties, and both just as determined as Julian to become the best male *danseur* of their generation. I was astonished to find out Madame Zolta considered Alexis the best, and Michael next, and Julian third. I soon found out why she held him back—he had no respect for her authority. He wanted to do everything in his own way, and because of this she punished him.

My roommates were as different as night and day. Yolanda Lange was half British, half Arab, and the strange combination made for one of the most exotic, dark-haired, sloe-eyed beauties I'd ever seen. She was tall for a dancer, five eight, the same height as my mother. Her breasts, when I saw them, were small hard lumps, all large dark nipples, but she wasn't ashamed of their size. She delighted in walking about naked, showing off, and soon I found out her breasts mirrored her personality—small, hard and mean. Yolanda wanted what she wanted when she wanted it and she'd do anything to get it. She asked me a thousand questions in less than an hour, and in that same hour told me her life story. Her father was a British diplomat who'd married a belly dancer. She'd lived everywhere, done everything. I immediately disliked Yolanda Lange.

April Summers was from Kansas City, Missouri. She had soft brown hair, blue-green eyes; we were both the same height, five feet four and a half inches. She was shy and seldom did she raise her voice above a whisper. When loud, raucous Yolanda was around, April seemed to have no voice at all. Yolanda liked noise; at all times the record player or the television had to be turned on. April spoke of her family with love, respect and pride, while Yolanda professed hatred for

parents who'd pushed her into boarding schools and left her alone on holidays.

April and I became fast friends before our first day together was over. She was eighteen and pretty enough to please any man, but for some strange reason the boys of the academy didn't pay April one whit of attention. It was Yolanda who made them hot and panting, and soon enough I learned why—she was the one who gave out.

As for me, the boys saw me, they asked for dates, but Julian made it clear I wasn't available—I was *his*. He told everyone we were lovers. Though I persistently denied this, he would tell them in private I was old-fashioned and ashamed to admit we were “living in sin.” He chidingly explained in my very presence, “It's that old southern-belle tradition. Gals down south like guys to think they're sweet, shy, demure, but underneath that cool magnolia exterior—sexpots—every one!” Of course they believed him and not me. Why should they believe the truth when a lie was so much more exciting?

I was happy enough though. I adapted to New York as one native born, rushing about as every New Yorker had to—get there fast, don't waste a second, there was so much to prove before someone else with a pretty face and more talent showed up to knock you off the board. But while I was ahead in the game, it was wild and heady stuff, exhausting and demanding. How grateful I was that Paul kept sending me a weekly check, for what I earned at the dance company, wouldn't have paid for my cosmetics.

The three of us who shared rooms 416 required at least ten hours of sleep. We got up at dawn to limber up at our home barre before breakfast. Breakfast had to be very light, as was lunch. Only during the last meal of the day, after a performance, could we really satisfy our ravenous appetites. It seemed I was always hungry, that I never had enough to eat. In just one performance in the *corps de ballet* I lost five or six pounds.

Julian was with me constantly, shadowing me too closely, keeping me from dating anyone else. Depending on my mood

or state of exhaustion, I was resentful of this, and other times happy to have someone around who wasn't a stranger.

Madame Zolta said one day in June, "Your name is silly! Change it! Catherine Doll—what kind of name for dancer? An inane, unexciting name—it doesn't suit you at all!"

"Now you wait a minute, Madame!" I snapped back, abandoning my attitude position. "I chose that name when I was seven and my father liked it. *He* thought it suited me fine, so I'm going to use it, stupid or not!" I longed to tell her Madame Naverena Zolta Korovenskov wasn't exactly what I'd call a lyrical name either.

"Don't argue with me, girl, change it!" She used her ivory walking cane to pound on the floor. But, if I changed my name, how would my mother know when I reached the top? She had to know! Still that wretched little witch in her outdated, silly costume could narrow her fierce dark eyes and lift that cane and brandish it so I was forced to yield, or else! Julian slouched nearby and grinned.

I agreed I would change the spelling of my last name from Doll to Dahl. "That is better," she said sourly, "somewhat."

Madame Z. rode my back. She nagged. She criticized. She complained if I was innovative and complained when I wasn't. She didn't like the way I wore my hair and said I had too much. "Cut it off!" she ordered but I refused to snip off even an inch, for I believed my long hair a great asset for the role of Sleeping Beauty. She snorted when I said this. (Snorting was one of her favorite means of expression.) If she hadn't been a wonderfully gifted instructor we'd have all hated her. Her very dour nature forced the best from us, for we so wanted to see her smile. She was also a choreographer, but we had another too who came and went and supervised when he wasn't in Hollywood, in Europe, or off in some remote spot dreaming up new dancing scores.

One afternoon after class, when we dancers were playing about foolishly, I jumped up to dance wildly to a popular song. Madame came in and caught me, then exploded, "We dance *classical* here! No modern dance here!" Her dry, wrinkled face

screwed into a dried headhunter's belt ornament. "You, Dahl, explain the difference between classical and modern."

Julian winked at me, then fell backward to rest on his elbows and cross an elegant ankle over a knee, as he delighted in my discomfort. "Succinctly, Madame," I began with my mother's poise, "the modern form of ballet consists mostly of groveling about on the floor and posturing, while classical stands up on its toes, whirls, spins, and is never too seductive or awkward. And it tells a story."

"How right you are," she said icily. "Now get you home to bed and posture and grovel there if you feel the need to express yourself in such a manner. Never let me catch you doing such before my eyes again!"

Modern and classical could be blended and made beautiful. The tightness of that small shrew enraged me, and I screamed back, "I hate you, Madame! I despise your ratty old gray costumes that should have been thrown away thirty years ago! I hate your face, your voice, your walk and your talk! Find yourself another dancer. *I'm going home!*" I flounced off toward the dressing room, leaving all the dancers standing in shock staring after me.

I ripped off my practice clothes and yanked on underwear. Into the dressing room stalked the grim-faced witch, her eyes mean, her lips pressed tightly together. "If you go home *you never come back!*"

"I don't want to come back!"

"You will wither away and die!"

"You're a fool if you think that!" I snapped without regard to her age or respect for her talent. "I can live my life without dancing, and happily too—*so go to hell, Madame Zolta!*"

As if a spell had been broken that old hag smiled at me, and sweetly too. "Ah ... you have spirit. I was wondering if you did. Tell me to go to hell, it is nice to hear. Hell is better than heaven anyway. Now, seriously, Catherine," she said in a kind tone, kinder than I'd ever heard from her, "you are a wonderfully gifted dancer, the best I have, but you are so

impulsive you abandon the classical and toss in whatever comes to your mind. I only try to teach you. Invent all you want, but keep it classical, elegant, beautiful.” Tears glistened her eyes. “You are my delight, did you know? I think you are the daughter I never had; you take me back to when I was young and thought all life was one big romantic adventure. I’m so afraid life will steal your look of enchantment, your childish wonderment. If you can hang onto that expression, you’ll soon have the world at your feet.”

It was my attic face she was speaking of. That enchanted expression that used to so enthrall Chris. “I’m sorry, Madame,” I said humbly. “I was rude. I was wrong to scream, but you pick on me all the time, and I’m tired, homesick too.”

“I know, I know,” she crooned as she came to embrace me, then rocked with me back and forth. “To be young and in a strange city is hard on the nerves and confidence. But remember, I only needed to know what you are made of. A dancer without fire is no dancer at all.”

* * *

I’d been living in New York seven months, working even on the weekends until I fell into bed dead tired, before Madame Zolta thought I should be given a chance to dance a lead role with Julian to partner me. It was Madame’s rule to alternate lead roles, so that there would be no stars in her company, and though she’d hinted many times she wanted me for Clara in *The Nutcracker*, I thought she just used that to dangle before me, like a rich plum I’d never be allowed to eat. Then it became a reality. Our company was in competition with much larger and better-known companies, so it was an absolute stroke of genius that she was able to sell a television producer on the notion that people who couldn’t afford to buy ballet tickets could be reached by television.

I called Paul long distance to tell him my great news. “Paul, I’m going to appear on TV in *The Nutcracker*, I’ll be Clara!” He laughed and congratulated me. “I guess that means you won’t be coming home this summer,” he said rather sadly. “Carrie misses you an awful lot, Cathy. You’ve only paid us one short visit since you went away.”

“I’m sorry, I want to come but I need this chance to star, Paul. Please explain to Carrie so her feelings won’t be hurt. Is she there?”

“No, she’s finally made a friend and is ‘sleeping-over.’ But call again tomorrow night and reverse the charges, and tell her yourself.”

“And Chris, how is he?” I asked.

“Fine, fine. He gets nothing but A’s, and if he can manage to keep that up, he’ll be accepted for an accelerated program and can finish out his fourth year of college while starting his first year in medical school.”

“Simultaneously?” I asked, marveling that anyone, even Chris, could be that smart and accomplish so much.

“Sure, it can be done.”

“Paul, what about you? Are you well? Are you working too much, too many long hours?”

“I’m healthy and yes, I do work long hours, as every doctor does. And since you can’t come to visit us, I think it would be nice for Carrie if we came to visit you.”

Oh, that was the best idea I’d heard in months and months. “And bring Chris,” I said. “He’ll love to meet all the pretty ballerinas I can introduce him to. But you, Paul, you’d better not look at anyone but me.”

He made a strange sound in his throat before he chuckled. “Don’t worry, Catherine, there’s not a day that passes that I don’t see your face before me.”

In early August the television production of *The Nutcracker* was taped for Christmastime release. Julian and I sat close together and watched the rushes, and when it was over he turned to take me in his arms, and for the first time he told me with the kind of sincerity I could believe, “I love you, Cathy. Please stop taking me so lightly!”

Hardly had we rested up from *The Nutcracker* when Yolly fell and sprained her ankle, and April was visiting her parents, so I had the chance to be Sleeping Beauty! Since Julian had

played two roles in the TV production, both Alexis and Michael thought it should be their turn to partner me. Madame Zolta frowned and looked at Julian, then at me. “Alexis, Michael, I promise you the very next lead roles, but let Julian dance with Catherine. They have a rare magic between them that is spellbinding. I want to see how they do in a really lavish production like *The Sleeping Beauty*.”

Oh, the thoughts I had on stage as I lay so still on the purple velvet couch, waiting for my lover to come and put on my lips an arousing, come-alive kiss. The glorious music made me feel more real on that couch than when I was just me with no royal blood at all. I felt enchanted, surrounded by an aura of beauty as I quietly, gracefully lay with my arms folded on my breasts and my heart pulsed in rhythm with the glorious music. Out in the dark audience, Paul, Chris and Carrie and Henny were watching for the first time a New York performance. Truly, I felt in my bones I was that mystical medieval princess.

I saw him dreamily from beneath almost closed eyes, my prince. He danced about me, then down on one knee he knelt to tenderly gaze upon my face before he dared to put a hesitant kiss upon my closed lips. I awakened, shy, disoriented, fluttering my eyelids. I feigned love on sight, but was so frightened, so maidenly virtuous, he had to woo me with more dancing and coax me to dance too, and in the most passionate *pas de deux* I soon succumbed to his charms and in conquest he lifted me high and up on the flat of his palm that knew well the exact spot to balance my weight just right, and I was carried offstage.

The last act ended; the applause thundered and resounded as time and again the curtain rose and came down. Julian and I took eight curtain calls of our very own! Red roses were thrust again and again into my arms, and flowers were tossed onto the stage. I looked down to see one single yellow buttercup weighted down by a folded slip of paper. I bent to pick it up and knew it was from Chris even before I had the chance to read his note. Daddy’s four yellow buttercups—and here was one put in a freezer to keep it fresh until it could be thrown to me as a tribute to what we used to be.

Blindly I stared out into an audience of blurred faces, searching to see those I loved. All I could see was the attic, the gloomy, awesomely huge attic with its paper flowers, and over there, near the stairwell, was Chris standing in the shadows, near the shrouded sofa and the big trunk and his yearning desire was on his face as he watched me dance on and on.

I was crying, and the audience loved it. They gave me a standing ovation. I turned to hand a red rose to Julian, and again they thundered their applause. And he kissed me! Right in front of thousands—he dared to kiss me—and it wasn't respectful, it was possessive. "Damn you for doing that!" I hissed, feeling humiliated.

"Damn you for not wanting me!" he hissed back.

"I'm not yours!"

"You will be!"

* * *

My family came backstage to lavish me with praise. Chris had grown taller but Carrie was very much the same—maybe a bit taller, not much. I kissed Henny's firm, round cheek. Only then could I look at Paul. Our eyes locked and held. Did he still love me, want me, need me? He hadn't answered my last letter. Easily hurt, I'd written only to Carrie to tell her of the upcoming performances, and only then did Paul call to say he was bringing my family to New York.

After the performance came the buffet party given for us by the rich patrons Madame Z. cultivated. "Wear the costumes you have on," she instructed. "The aficionados get a big thrill seeing dancers up close in costumes—but take off the stage makeup, use what you wear every day to look stunning. Never for one second give the public the idea you are less than glamorous!"

Music was playing and Chris took me into his arms for a waltz, the dance I had taught him so many years ago. "This is still the way you dance?" I chided.

He grinned in a self-effacing way. "Can't help it if you got all the dancing talent and I got all the brains."

“Remarks like that could easily make me think you have no brains.”

He laughed again and I was drawn closer. “Besides, I don’t have to dance and posture to win over the girls. Just take a look at your friend Yolanda. She’s quite a beauty, and she’s been giving me the eye all evening.”

“She gives every good-looking guy the eye, so don’t feel so flattered. She’ll sleep with you tonight if you want that, and tomorrow night with someone else.”

“Are you like her too?” he shot back, narrowing his eyes.

I smiled at him wickedly, thinking, no, I was like Momma, sweet and cool and able to handle men—at least, I was learning. To prove this I winked at Paul, seeing if he’d come over and cut in. Swiftly Paul was on his feet, moving gracefully across the dance floor to take me from Chris. My brother’s lips tightened, then he strolled straight from me to Yolanda. In a minute or two they disappeared.

“I guess you think I’m all hands and clumsy feet, after dancing with Julian,” said Paul, who could dance better than Chris. Even when the music changed into a faster rhythm with a jungle beat he followed along, surprising me that he could let go of his dignity and jiggle around almost as abandoned as a college kid. “Paul, you’re wonderful!” He laughed and said I made him feel young again. It was so much fun to see him like this, relaxed, that I went a bit wild with my dancing.

Carrie and Henny looked tired and ill-at-ease. “I’m sleepy,” complained Carrie, rubbing her eyes. “Can’t we go to bed now?” It was twelve o’clock when we dropped Henny and Carrie off at their hotel, then Paul and I sat in a quiet Italian café and looked at one another. He still wore the mustache—not a neat, dandy one, but a thick brush above his sensual lips. He’d gained a few pounds, but it didn’t detract from his looks or his appeal. He reached across the table to gather both my hands in his, then lifted them to his face so he could rub his cheek against them. And all the while he did this, his eyes asked a burning question, forcing a question from me. “Paul, have you found someone else?”

“Have you?”

“I asked first.”

“I’m not looking for anyone else.”

It was an answer to make my heartbeats quicken, for it had been so long and I loved him too much. I watched him pay the check, pick up my coat and hold it, and then his own for me to hold. Our eyes met—and then we almost ran from the restaurant to the nearest hotel where he registered us as Mr. and Mrs. Paul Sheffield. In a room painted dark red, he took off my clothes with such seductive slowness I was ready even before he went down on his knees to kiss me everywhere. Then he held me close, caressed and cherished me, kissed and pleased until we were again made one.

After we were spent, he traced his finger along my lips, looking at me so tenderly. “Catherine, what I wrote on that hotel register I meant,” he said, kissing me softly.

I stared at him, disbelieving. “Paul, don’t tease me.”

“I’m not teasing, Catherine. I’ve missed you so much since you’ve been away. I realized what a fool I’ve been to deny you and myself the chance to find happiness. Life is too short to have so many doubts. Now you’re finding success in New York; I want to share it with you. I don’t want us to have to sneak around behind Chris’s back, I don’t want to have to worry about the small-town gossips. I want to be with you, I want you forever, I want you to be my wife.”

“Oh Paul,” I cried, throwing my arms about his neck, “I’ll love you forever, I promise!” My eyes filled with tears, I was so relieved he’d asked me to marry him at last. “I’ll make you the best wife any man has ever known.” I meant it too.

We didn’t sleep that night. We stayed awake, planning how it would be when we were married. I would stay with the company, somehow we’d work it out. The only shadow that darkened our joy was Chris. How would we tell Chris? We decided to wait until Christmas, when I would be in Clairmont. Until then I had to keep my happiness a secret, hide

it from the world, so no one would guess I was about to become Mrs. Paul Scott Sheffield.

A Fighting Chance



That was the autumn of my happiness, of my burgeoning success, of my love for Paul. I thought I had fate fully under my control; I dared it to stop me, for I was free and running true on my course. Almost on top now. I had nothing to fear now, nothing at all. I couldn't wait to tell the world about my engagement to Paul. But stealthily I protected my secret. I told no one, not Julian, nor Madame Zolta, for there was much at stake, and I had to bide my time, to make sure everything would continue to go my way. Right now I still needed Julian to partner me, just as much as he needed me. And I needed Madame Zolta to have complete confidence in me. If she knew I was going to be married, something she did not highly approve of, she might not give me all the lead roles, she might think I was a lost cause and not worth her time. And I still had to be famous. I still had to show Momma how much better I was than she.

Now that Julian and I were achieving a little recognition, Madame Zolta began to pay us more money. Julian came running to me one Saturday morning, terribly excited as he grabbed me up and swung me off my feet in a circle. "Guess what? The old witch said I could buy her Cadillac on a time payment plan! It's only two and a half years old, Cathy." He looked wistful. "Of course, I always hoped my first Cadillac would be a brand new one, but when a certain ballet mistress is scared to death a certain sensational *danseur* might join another ballet company and take along with him her best ballerina—how can that certain someone refuse to almost give away her Cadillac?"

"Blackmail!" I cried. He laughed and grabbed my hand, and we dashed to look at his new car parked outside our apartment building. My breath pulled in, it looked so new! "Oh, Julian, I love it! You couldn't blackmail her if she didn't

want you to have one of her pets—she knows you will pamper it—and don't ever, ever sell it.”

“Oh, Cathy,” his eyes shone brilliantly with unused tears. “Can't you see why I love you so? We're alike—why can't you love me, just a little?” Proudly he swung open the door to give me the rare privilege of being the first girl to ride in his first Cadillac.

We had a wild and crazy kind of day from there on. We drove through Central Park and all the way up through Harlem, to the George Washington Bridge and back. It was raining but I didn't mind. It was warm and cozy in the car.

Then Julian started in again. “Cathy ... you're never going to love me, are you?” It was a question he put to me at least once or twice a day, in one form or another. I longed to tell him of my engagement to Paul, to put an end to his questions once and for all. But I steadfastly kept my secret.

“It's because you're still a virgin, isn't it? I'll be so gentle, so tender, Cathy ... give me a chance, please.”

“Good God, Julian, is that all you ever have on your mind?”

“Yeah!” he snarled. “You're damned right it is! And I'm sick and tired of the game you play with me!” He guided the car out into a heavy stream of traffic. “You're a cockteaser. You lead me on while we dance, then kick me in the groin when we're not!”

“Take me home, Julian! I find that kind of talk disgusting!”

“Right! You bet I'll take you home!” he spat at me as I crouched near the passenger door he had locked. He shot me a fierce, distraught look then bore down hard on the gas pedal! We sped down all those rain-slick streets, and every so often he'd glance my way to see how I was enjoying the terrifying ride! He laughed, wild and crazy, then braked so fast I was flung forward so my forehead struck the windshield! Blood trickled from the cut. Next he snatched the purse from my lap, leaned to unlock my door, then he shoved me out into the pouring rain!

“To hell with you, Catherine Dahl!” he shouted as I stood there in the rain, refusing to beg. My coat pockets were empty. No money. “You’ve had your first and your last ride in my car. I hope you know your way around!” He saluted me with an evil smile. “Get home the best way you can, puritan saint,” he spat out, “if you can!”

He drove off leaving me on the street corner in the downpour, in Brooklyn where I’d never been before. I didn’t have even a nickel. I couldn’t make a phone call, or use a subway, and the rain came down strong. My lightweight coat was soaked through. I knew I was in an unsavory district where anything could happen ... and he’d left me here, when he’d sworn to take care of me!

I began to walk, not knowing north from south, east from west, and then I saw a cab cruising by and hailed it. Nervously I leaned forward to watch the meter click away the miles—and the dollars. *Damn you again, Julian, for taking me so far!* Finally we reached my apartment building—at the cost of fifteen dollars!

“What do you mean you ain’t got it on yuh?” the cab driver flared. “I’ll drive ya straight to the police precinct!”

We bickered back and forth, with me trying to explain he couldn’t be paid unless he let me out to go for money, and all the while the meter was running. Finally he agreed. “But you’d better be back, chicky, in five minutes—or else!”

An English fox chased by a hundred hounds couldn’t have run faster than I did. The elevator crawled upward, creaking all the way. Never did I step in that thing when I wasn’t afraid it would stop between floors and I’d be trapped. Finally, the door opened, and I raced down the hall to bang on the door, praying April or Yolanda would be there to let me in. Crazy Julian had my hand bag and my key!

“Take it easy!” bellowed Yolanda. “I’m comin’. Who is it anyway?”

“Cathy! Let me in quick! I’ve got a taxi driver waiting with his meter running!”

“If you think you’re going to put the bite on me, forget it!” she said, swinging open the door. She wore only nylon briefs, and her freshly shampooed head was wrapped with a red towel. “You look like something the sea coughed up,” she said invitingly. I wasn’t one to pay much attention to Yolanda. I shoved her aside, ran to where I hid my secret cache of emergency money—then I went slack. The small key to my locked treasure chest was in the bag Julian had—if he hadn’t thrown it away. “Please, Yolly, loan me fifteen and a buck for a tip.”

Shrewdly she looked me over while she removed the towel and began to comb her long dark hair. “What yah got to trade for small favors like that?”

“I’ll give you anything you want. Just give me the money.”

“Okay—you just keep your promise to repay.” Slowly she took a twenty from her fat billfold. “Give the driver a fiver; that will cool him down—and anything I want—right?” I agreed and raced off.

No sooner did the driver grab the twenty, than he was smiling, friendly as he tipped his cap. “See you around, chicky.” I hoped he’d drop dead!

I was so chilled the first thing I did was to run a tub of hot water, but only after I’d scrubbed off the dirty ring Yolly had left.

My hair was still wet as I pulled on clothes, planning to go to Julian and demand my purse back, when Yolly blocked my way. “Come on, Cathy ... I want you to keep your bargain—anything I want, right?”

“Right,” I said, disgusted. “What do you want?”

She smiled and leaned provocatively against a wall.

“Your brother ... I want you to invite him up next weekend.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Chris is in college. He can’t come up here any time he wants.”

“You get him up here any way you have to. Say you’re sick, say you desperately need him, but get him up here! And then you can keep the twenty.”

I turned to stare at her with hostility. “No! I’ve got the money to pay you back... . I’m not going to let Chris get involved with the likes of you!”

Still wearing only the briefs, she smeared on scarlet lipstick without looking in a mirror. “Cathy, love, your dear, precious brother is already involved with the likes of me.”

“I don’t believe you! You’re not his type!”

“Nooo,” she purred, her eyes narrowing as she watched me finish dressing, “let me tell you something, dollface, there isn’t a guy alive who doesn’t go for *my* type. Including your dear brother and your lover-boy Julian!”

“You lie!” I cried. “Chris wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole—and as for Julian, I don’t give a damn if he sleeps with ten whores like you!”

Suddenly her face flamed red, she stiffened and came at me with her hands raised and her fingers curled into claws with long red fingernails! “Bitch!” she snarled. “Don’t you dare call me a whore! I don’t take pay for what I want to give out—and your brother likes what I give out—go and ask him how many times he’s—”

“Shut up!” I yelled, not letting her finish. “I don’t believe anything you say! He’s too smart to do anything but use you for physical needs... . Beyond that, you couldn’t mean more than dirt to him!”

She grabbed me and I belted her back, hard. Hard enough so she fell to the floor. “You’re nothing but a shallow, mean tramp, Yolanda Lange!” I screamed with fury. “Not nearly good enough for my brother to wipe his feet on! You’ve slept with every dancer in the company. I don’t care what you do ... just leave *me*, and leave *my brother* alone!”

Her nose was bleeding... . Oh, I didn’t know I’d hit that hard, and her nose was also beginning to swell. Quickly she jumped to her feet, but for some reason she backed off from

me. “Nobody talks to me like that and gets away with it... . You’re gonna regret this day, Catherine Dahl! I’ll get your brother. And what’s more, I’ll take Julian from you too! And when he’s mine, you’ll find out that without him you’re nothing! Nothing but a hick dancer Madame Z. would throw out if Julian didn’t insist on keeping you on because he’s got the hots for a virgin.”

What she screamed out could be so true. Maybe she was right, that without Julian I wouldn’t be anything special. I felt sick and I hated her—hated her for soiling Chris and my image of him. I began to throw my clothes in my suitcases, determined I’d go back to Clairmont before I’d live another hour near Yolanda!

“Go on!” she hissed between her clenched teeth. “Run away, little prude—what a fool you are. I’m not a whore! It’s just I’m not the tease you are—and between the two, I choose my kind!”

Heedless of what she said, I finished packing, then strapped the handles of my three bags together so I could drag them out into the hall, and under my arm I carried a soft leather satchel stuffed full. I turned at the door to look back at Yolanda who had sprawled on the bed like a sleek cat. “You really do terrify me, Yolanda. I’m so scared I could laugh. I’ve faced up to bigger and better than you, and still I’m alive ... so don’t you come near me again, or it will be *you* who lives to regret this day!”

Shortly after I slammed the door I was on Julian’s floor. Dragging along my tied-together luggage, I banged on the door to Julian’s apartment with both fists! “Julian!” I cried, “if you’re in there, open this door and give me back my purse. Open this door or you’ll never have me for a dance partner again!”

He opened the door quickly enough, wearing nothing but a bath towel wrapped about his narrow hips. Before I knew what was happening he dragged me into the room and threw me down on the bed. I looked around frantically, hoping to see Alexis or Michael, but it was my bad luck he had the

apartment to himself. “Sure,” he barked, “you can have your damned purse back—after you answer a few questions!”

I jumped up from the bed—and he shoved me down again, then knelt so he straddled my body, and in no way could I escape! “You let me go, you beast!” I yelled. “I walked six blocks in the rain and was freezing cold—now let me up and give me my purse!”

“Why can’t you love me?” he shot out, holding me down with both hands as I struggled to free myself. “Is it because you’re in love with someone else? Who is it? It’s that big doctor who took you in, isn’t it?”

I shook my head, terribly afraid of him. I couldn’t tell him the truth. He looked almost insane with jealousy. His hair was so wet from his recent shower he dripped water on me. “Cathy, I’ve had about all I can take from you! It’s been about three years since we met, and I’m not getting anywhere. It can’t be me that’s wrong—so it must be you! Who is it?”

“Nobody!” I lied. “And you are all wrong for me! The only thing I like about you, Julian Marquet, is the way you dance!”

Blood flooded his face. “You think I’m blind and stupid, don’t you?” he asked, so furious he could likely explode. “But I’m not blind, I’m not stupid and I’ve seen the way you look at that doctor—and so help me God if I haven’t seen you look at your own brother in the same way! So don’t go getting up on your high horse of morals, Catherine Dahl, for I’ve never seen a brother and sister so fascinated with each other before!”

I slapped him then! He slapped back, twice as hard! I tried to fight him off, but he was like an eel as he wrestled me down to the floor where I feared he’d soon rip off my clothes and rape me—but he didn’t do that. He only held me beneath him and breathed heavily until he had some control of his raging emotions, and only then did he speak. “You’re mine, Cathy, whether you know it or not ... you belong to me. And if any man comes between us, I’ll kill him—and you too. So remember that before you turn your eyes on anyone but me.”

He gave me my purse then, and told me to count my money to see if he’d stolen any. I had forty-two dollars and sixty-two

cents, it was all there.

Shakily I gained my feet, when he allowed me to, and I trembled as I backed to the door, opened it, and stepped out into the hall clutching my purse tight. Only then did I dare to speak what I thought.

“There are institutions for madmen like you, Julian. You can’t tell me whom to love, and you can’t force me to love you. If you had deliberately set out to make yourself repugnant to me, you couldn’t have done a better job of it. Now I can’t even like you—and as for dancing together again, forget it!” I slammed the door in his face, then hurried away.

But as I reached the elevator, he had the door open again, and he cursed something so terrible I can’t repeat it, except it ended with, “Damn you to hell, Cathy... . I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again ... and you’ll wish to God you were in hell before I’m done with you!”

* * *

After that terrible scene with Yolanda, then Julian, I sought out Madame Zolta and told her I just couldn’t live any longer in an apartment with a girl determined to ruin my career.

“She afraid of you, Catherine, that’s all. Yolanda was the superstar in my small company until you came along. Now she feels threatened. Make up with her... . Be a good girl, and go and say you’re sorry for whatever it was.”

“No, Madame. I don’t like her, and I refuse to live in the same apartment with her. So if you don’t give me more money, I’ll have to go to another company and see if they will, and if they won’t then I’ll go back to Clairmont.”

She groaned, bowed her skeleton head into her bony hands and moaned some more. Oh, how grand Russians were at expressing emotions! “Okay ... you blackmail me, and I give in. I’ll give you a small raise, and tell you where to find cheap apartment—but it won’t be so nice as one you left.”

Hah! That had been nice? But she was right. The only apartment I could find would fit in Paul’s smallest bedroom, all two rooms of it. But it was my own ... the very first place

I'd had all to myself, and for a few days I exalted in fixing it up as best I could. Then I really began to sleep restlessly, waking up every few minutes to listen to all the squeaks and squeals the old building made. I longed for Paul. I longed for Chris. I heard the wind blow, and there was no one in another bed three feet from mine to comfort me with soft words and sparkling blue eyes.

Chris's eyes were in front of me as I got up and sat at my kitchen table to write a note to "Mrs. Winslow." I sent her my first rave review, one with a sensational photo of Julian and me in *The Sleeping Beauty*. And I wrote at the bottom of my letter,

It won't be long now, Mrs. Winslow. Think about that every night before you fall asleep. Remember somewhere I'm still alive, and I'm thinking of you, and planning.

I even mailed off that letter in the middle of the night before I had the chance to reconsider and tear it up. I raced home, threw myself on my bed and sobbed. Oh God, I was never going to be set free! Never! And despite all my tears I woke up again, thinking of how I could hurt her so she'd never be the same. *Be happy now, Momma, for it won't be long!*

* * *

I bought six copies of all papers that had anything to say about me. Unfortunately, most often my name was coupled with Julian's. Paul and Chris were also favored with my reviews; the others I kept for myself—or Momma. I pictured how she'd look when she opened the envelope, though it was my fear she'd just pitch it in the trashcan after she'd torn up the envelope with its contents unread. Not once did I call her Mother or Momma, but kept my salutations always formal and cold. There would come a day when she would see me face to face and I would call her Mother and I would watch her pale, then shudder.

* * *

One morning I was awakened by someone banging on my door. "Cathy, let me in! I have terrific news!" It was Julian's

voice.

“Go way!” I said sleepily, getting up and pulling on a robe before I stumbled over to make him stop pounding on the door. “Stop that!” I yelled. “I haven’t forgiven you—I never will—so stay out of my life!”

“Let me in or I’ll kick the door down!” he bellowed. I unlocked the deadbolts, and swung the door open a crack. Julian barged in to sweep me up in his arms and plant on my lips a long, hot kiss while I was half yawning. “Madame Zolta ... yesterday after you left, she broke the news! We’re going on tour in London! Two weeks there! I’ve never been to London, Cathy, and Madame is so delighted they’ve taken official notice of us over there!”

“Really?” I asked, catching his excitement. Then I staggered off toward my minute kitchen... . Coffee, had to have coffee before I could think straight.

“God, are you always so disoriented in the mornings?” he asked, following me into the kitchen where he straddled a chair backwards and leaned on his elbows to watch my every move. “Wake up, Cathy! Forgive me, kiss me, be my friend again. Hate me all you want tomorrow, but love me this day—for I was born for this day, you too—Cathy, we’re going to make it! I know we are! Madame Zolta’s company was never noticed before we became a team! It isn’t her success—it’s ours!”

His modesty deserved a medal. “You’ve eaten breakfast?” I asked, and hoped. I had only two slices of bacon and wanted both for myself.

“Sure I have; I grabbed a bite before I came over, but I can eat again.”

Naturally he could eat again! He could always eat ... and that’s when it hit me ... London! Our company going to London! I spun around, crying, “Julian, what you said, you’re not kidding? We’re going over there—all of us?”

He jumped up. “Yes, all of us! It’s a big break, our chance to make it big! We’ll make the world sit up and take notice!

And you and I, we'll be the stars! Because together we're the best, and you know it as well as I do."

I shared my meal and listened to him rhapsodize on the long and fantastic career we had just ahead. We'd be rich, and when we grew older, we'd settle down and have a couple of kids, and then teach ballet, I'd like that, wouldn't I? I hated to spoil his plans, but I had to say it. "Julian, I don't love you, so we can never be married. We'll go to London and dance together, and I'll do my best—but I plan to marry someone else. I'm already engaged. I have been for a long time now."

His long, glaring look of disbelief and pure hatred delivered and redelivered a series of visual slaps on my face. "You're lying!" he screamed. I shook my head to deny it. "Goddamn you to hell for leading me on!" he raged, then hurled himself out of my apartment. I'd never led him on, except when we were dancing, and that was my role to play... . That was all, all there was between us.

Winter Dreams



I was going home for Christmas. The unpleasantness with Julian was forgotten in my happy anticipation of seeing Paul, and bringing with me such good news. Thank God I had Paul to escape to. And I wasn't going to let Julian take the joy from this Christmas. For this was the time Paul and I had agreed to announce our engagement, and the only person who could ruin my happiness now was Chris.

At two o'clock in the morning Chris and Paul met me at the airport. It was bitterly cold even in South Carolina. It was Chris who reached me first to catch me up in his strong arms, and he tried to put a kiss on my lips but I turned my face so his kiss landed on my cheek. "Hail to the conquering ballerina!" he cried, hugging me tight and looking at me with so much pride. "Oh, Cathy, you are so beautiful! Each time I see you, you make my heart hurt."

He made my heart hurt too, to see him more handsome than even Daddy had been. Quickly I looked in another direction. I tore away from my brother's embrace and ran toward Paul who stood and watched. He stretched out his hands to take mine in them. *Careful, careful*, warned his long look, mustn't let *our news escape too soon*.

That was our best Christmas ever, from beginning to end—or almost to the end. Carrie had grown half an inch, and to see her sitting on the floor on Christmas morning with her big blue eyes happy and glowing as she exclaimed over the red velvet dress I'd bought her, found after hours and hours of searching almost every shop in New York. She looked like a radiant, small princess when she tried the dress on. I tried to picture Cory seated cross-legged on the floor looking at his gifts too. It was impossible for me to leave the memory of him out of any happy occasion. Oh, many a time I'd glimpsed a small boy

with blond curls and blue eyes on the streets of New York, and I'd run to chase after, hoping by some miracle it would be him—and it never was, never was.

Chris put a small box into my hands. Inside was a tiny gold heart-locket and in the center of the lid was a genuine diamond, a small one, but a diamond nevertheless. "Paid for by my own hard-earned cash," he said as he fastened the chain about my neck. "Waiting on tables pays well when you give good service with a smile." Then, furtively, he slipped a folded note in my hand. An hour later, when I had the chance, I read a note that made me cry:

To my lady Catherine,

I give you gold with a diamond you can barely see,

But the gem would be castle-sized if it expressed all I
feel for thee.

I give you gold because it endures, and love like the
eternal sea.

Only your brother, Christopher.

I hadn't read that note when Paul gave me his gift wrapped in gold foil and topped by a huge red satin bow. My hands trembled as I fumbled with the many layers of tissue, all while he watched expectantly. A *grey fox* coat! "The kind of coat you really need for New York winters," he said, his eyes shining with all the warmth and love he felt.

"It's too much," I choked, "but I love it, absolutely love it!"

He smiled, made happy so easily. "Every time you wear it, it's essential you think of me, and it should keep you warm on those cold, foggy days in London too."

I told him it was the most beautiful coat I'd ever seen, though I felt uneasy. It brought back thoughts of Momma and her closet full of many furs, gained only because she had the heartless cruelty to lock us away, and thus gain a fortune, and furs, and jewelry, and everything else money could buy.

Chris jerked his head around to catch something on my face that must have betrayed my love for Paul. His brows drew

together in a scowl before he shot a glance at Paul. Then he got up and left the room. Somewhere upstairs a door slammed violently. Paul pretended not to notice. “Look over in the corner, Catherine—that’s a gift for all of us to enjoy.”

I stared at the huge cabinet TV set that Carrie jumped up and ran to turn on. “He bought it just so we could watch you dance in *The Nutcracker* in color, Cathy. Now he won’t let me touch it.”

“It’s only because it is the devil to tune in correctly,” Paul apologized.

Throughout the rest of Christmas Day I saw very little of Chris, except at mealtimes. He wore the bright blue sweater I’d knitted for him—and it did fit—and under it the shirt and tie I’d given him as well. But none of my gifts to him could equal that gold and diamond locket with the small poem that left my heart bleeding. I hated it that he kept caring so much, and yet—when I thought about it later—I would hate it more if he didn’t.

That evening we all settled down comfortably before the new color TV. I curled up on the floor near Paul’s leg as he sat in a chair, with Carrie close at my side. Chris sat far away, deep in a mood that took him even farther away than the actual feet that separated us. So I didn’t feel as happy as I should have as I watched the credits roll by on the colorful screen. A tape which had been made in August and only now was to be seen in hundreds of cities across the country. How beautiful the sets looked in color; they hadn’t appeared nearly so ethereal in reality. I gazed at myself as Clara—did I really look like that? I forgot myself and leaned unconsciously against Paul’s thigh, and I felt his fingers twine into my hair—and then I didn’t know where I was, except on stage, with Julian now transformed by magic from the ugly nutcracker into the handsome prince.

When it was over I came back to myself and the first thing I thought of was my mother. *God, let her be home this night, and let her have seen me. Let her know what she tried to kill! Let her hurt, cry, grieve ... please, please!*

“What can I say, Cathy,” said Paul in an awed way. “No dancer could have performed that role better than you did. And Julian was superb too.”

“Yeah,” said Chris coldly, getting to his feet and coming to lift Carrie up in his arms. “You both were sensational—but it sure wasn’t the kiddy performance I remember seeing when *I* was a child. The two of you made it seem a romance. Really, Cathy, turn that guy off, and quickly!” With those words he strode from the room and up the stairs to tuck Carrie into bed.

“I think your brother is suspicious,” said Paul mildly, “not only of Julian, but also of me. All day he has treated me as a rival. He’s not going to be happy when he hears our news.”

Because like others I wanted to put off what was unpleasant, I suggested we not tell him until the next day. Then, when I was curled up on Paul’s lap and we had our arms wrapped about each other, we exchanged the kind of passionate kisses held back until now. I was aching for him. After we’d turned off all the lights we stole up the back stairs and with the zeal born of starvation made love on his bed. Later on we slept, then woke up to make love again. At dawn I kissed him once more, then slipped on a robe to sneak down the hall to my own room. To my utter dismay, just as I stepped from Paul’s room into the hall, Chris opened his door and came out! Abruptly he jerked to a stop and stared at me with astonished, hurt eyes. I cringed backward, so ashamed I could cry! Neither of us said a word. His eyes were the first to break from the frozen stare that also stilled our limbs. He ran for the stairs, but halfway there he turned to throw me a look of outraged disgust. I wanted to die! I went in to look at Carrie who was sound asleep with her red velvet dress clutched in her arms. And on my bed I lay trying to think of what to say to Chris to make it right between us again. Why did I feel in my heart that I was betraying him?

* * *

The day after Christmas was for returning the gifts you hated, didn’t want, or those that didn’t fit. I forced myself to approach Chris who was in the garden, fiercely snipping at the

rose bushes with hedge clippers. “Chris, I need to talk to you and explain a few things.”

He exploded. “Paul had no right to give you a fur coat! A gift like that makes you seem a kept woman! Cathy, give him back that coat! And, most of all, stop what you are doing with him!”

First I took the clippers from his hands before he ruined Paul’s beloved roses. “Chris, it isn’t as bad as you believe. You see ... Paul and I ... well, we are planning to marry in the spring. We love each other, so it isn’t wrong what we do together. It’s not an affair to be forgotten tomorrow; he needs me and I need him.” I stepped closer when he turned his back to hide his expression. “It’s better this way for me and for you too,” I said softly. I encircled his waist and twisted about to stare up in his face. He seemed stunned, like a healthy man who learns suddenly he has a terminal illness—and all hope had fled from him.

“He’s too old for you!”

“I love him.”

“So, you love him. What about your career? Are you throwing away all those years of dreaming, of working? Are you going to break your word? You know we swore to each other to go after our goals and not let those lost years make a difference.”

“Paul and I have discussed that. He understands. He thinks we can work it out... .”

“*He* thinks? What does a doctor know about the dancer’s life? You’ll never be with him. He’ll be here; you’ll be God knows where, with men your own age. You don’t owe him anything, Cathy, you don’t! We’ll pay him back every cent he’s spent on us. We’ll give him the respect he deserves, and the love—but you don’t owe him your life.”

“Don’t I?” I asked in a whisper, aching inside for Chris. “I think I do owe him my life. You know how I felt when I came here. I thought no one could be trusted or depended on. I expected the worst to happen to us, and it would have too

without him. And I don't love him just for what he's done. I love him because of who and what he is. Chris, you don't see him as I do."

He whirled about, seizing the shears from my hands. "And what about Julian? You are going to be married to Paul and dance with Julian? You know Julian is mad for you. It's all over him, the way he looks at you, the way he touches you."

I backed off, stricken. Chris wasn't talking *just* of Julian. "I'm sorry if this has ruined your holiday," I said, "but you'll find someone too. You love Paul, I know you do. And when you've thought about this, you'll know we are right for each other, despite our age difference, despite everything." I went off, leaving Chris in the garden with the hedge clippers.

Paul drove me to Greenglenna while Carrie stayed home to enjoy the new color TV set and all her new clothes and games. Paul chatted happily of the party he planned for all of us tonight at his favorite restaurant. "I wish I could be selfish and leave Chris and Carrie at home. But I want them there when I put the ring on your finger." I fixed my eyes on the winter landscape rolling by, the trees bare, the grass brown, the pretty houses with decorations and outdoor lights turned on after dark. Now I was part of the show, no longer just a spectator locked away—and yet I felt so torn, so miserable.

"Cathy, you are seated beside the happiest man in the world!"

And back in his garden, I'd left a man just as miserable as I felt.

* * *

In my purse I had a ring I'd bought for Carrie in New York. A tiny ruby for a very small finger, and even so, it was too large for anything but her thumb. As I stood there, in the better jewelry department of the best store in town, discussing just how the ring could be reduced in size without ruining the setting, I suddenly heard a very familiar voice! A sweet, husky, dulcet-toned voice. As in slow motion, I cautiously turned my head.

Momma! Standing right next to me! If she'd been alone, perhaps she would have seen me, but she was absorbed in chatting to her female companion who was dressed just as elegantly as she was. I'd changed considerably since she saw me last—still if she looked, she would have to know who I was. The two of them were discussing the party they had attended last night. “Really, Corrine, Elsie does carry the festive theme through to an outrageous extreme—all that red!”

Parties! Was that all she did, go to parties! My heart went pounding in fox-trot time. My spirits went limp, sagged out by disappointment. A party—I should have known! She never stayed at home and watched TV! She hadn't seen me! Oh, but I was angry! I turned to *make* her see me! A small standing mirror on the glass jewelry showcase reflected her profile, and showed me how lovely she was still. A bit older looking, but striking nonetheless. Her flaxen hair was drawn back to emphasize the perfection of her small gem of a nose, her pouting red lips, her long and naturally dark lashes that were made thicker by mascara. Her ears glittered with gold and diamonds, the real things—and she was speaking.

“Can't you show me something just right for a lovely young girl?” she asked the saleslady. “Something in good taste, not gaudy, or too large, but something a young girl can keep all her life and be proud of.”

Who? What girl did she have to give gifts to? I felt jealous and watched her select a lovely gold locket very much like the one Chris had given me! Three hundred dollars! Now our dear mother was spending money on a girl not her own, forgetting about us. Didn't she think of us, wonder how we were faring? How could she sleep at night when the world could be so cold, ugly and cruel to children on their own?

As far as I could tell, she was completely without guilt or regrets. Maybe that was what millions could do—nail a satisfied smirk to one's face—despite what it covered. I wanted to speak and see her poise collapse! I wanted her smiles to peel off like bark from a tree and she'd be revealed before her friend for what she was—a monster without a heart! A killer! A fraud! But I said nothing.

“Cathy,” said Paul, coming up behind me and putting his hands on my shoulders, “I’ve returned everything—how about you? Ready to go now?”

I wanted desperately for my mother to see me with Paul, a man every bit as handsome as her darling “Bart.” I wanted to shout it out. *See, I too can attract intelligent, kind, educated and handsome men!* So quickly I glanced to see if Momma had heard Paul speak my name, hoping to delight in her stunned surprise, her guilt, her shame. But she’d moved on farther down the counter, and if she heard the name, Cathy, it didn’t cause her to turn her head.

For some reason I didn’t understand, I sobbed.

“Are you all right, darling?” asked Paul. He saw something on my face that puzzled him and put concern in his eyes. “You’re not having second thoughts about us, are you?”

“No, of course not!” I denied. But I was having second thoughts about *me*. Why hadn’t I done something? Why hadn’t I put out my foot this time and tripped her? Then I could have seen her sprawled on the floor, her poise vanished—maybe. It would be like her to fall gracefully and have all the men in the store hurry to assist her up—even Paul.

* * *

I was dressing for the big affair at The Plantation House when Chris came into my bedroom and sent Carrie away. “Go watch TV,” he said with more sharpness than I’d ever heard him use with her. “I want to speak to your sister.” Carrie threw him, then me, an odd look before she skipped out of the room.

No sooner had Carrie closed the door behind her, than Chris was at my side and seizing my shoulders. He shook me violently. “Are you going through with this farce? You don’t love him! You still love me! I know you do! Cathy, please, don’t do this to me! I know you’re trying to set me free by marrying Paul, but that’s not a good reason for marrying a man.” He hung his head, released my shoulders, and looked terribly ashamed. His voice came so low I had to keen my ears to hear his words. “I know it’s wrong what I feel for you. I know I should try and find someone else, like you try to do ...

but I can't stop loving you and wanting you. I think about you all during my days, every day. I dream about you at night. I want to wake up and see you in the room with me. I want to go to bed and know you're there, very close, where I can see you, touch you." A sob tore from his throat before he could go on. "I can't bear to think of you with another man! Damn it, Cathy, I want you! You don't plan to have children anyway, so *why can't it be me?*"

I'd drawn away when he released my shoulders. When his words stopped I ran to fling my arms about him, as he clutched at me, as if I were the one and only woman who could save him from drowning. And we'd both drown if I did as he wanted. "Oh, Chris, what can I say? Momma and Daddy made their mistake in marrying each other—and we were the ones to pay the price. We can't risk repeating their mistake!"

"Yes we can!" he fervently cried. "We don't have to have a sexual relationship! We can just live together, be together, just brother and sister, with Carrie too. Please, please, *I beg you not to marry Paul!*"

"*Shut up!*" I screamed. "*Leave me alone!*" I struck at him then, wanting to hurt him, as every word he said hurt me. "You make me feel so guilty, so ashamed! Chris, I did the best I could for you when we were prisoners. Maybe we did turn to each other, but only because we had no others! If there had been, you would never have wanted me, and I would never have given you a second glance! You are only a *brother* to me, Chris, and I want to keep you where you should be ... which isn't in my bed!"

Then he had me in his arms, and I couldn't help but cling to him with my cheek pressed against his thudding heart. He was having a hard time controlling his tears. I wanted him to forget ... but every second he held me hard against him raised his hopes, and he was aroused! And he was the one who thought we could live platonically together! "Let me go, Chris. If you love me for the rest of your life, keep it to yourself; I never want to hear about it again! I love Paul, and nothing you say will keep me from marrying him!"

“You’re lying to yourself,” he choked, holding me tighter. “I see you watching me before you turn your eyes his way. You want me, and you want him. You want everyone, and everything! Don’t ruin Paul’s life when already he’s suffered enough! He’s too old for you—and age *does* count! He’ll be old and dried up sexually when you’re at your peak! Why even Julian would be better!”

“You are one big fool if you believe that!”

“Then I’m a fool! I’ve always been a fool, haven’t I? When I put my love and trust in you that was the biggest mistake of my life, wasn’t it? You are just as heartless, in your own way, as our mother! You want every man who appeals to you, regardless of the consequences ... but I would let you have whomever you wanted, as long as you always came back to me.”

“Christopher, you’re jealous because I found someone to love before you did! And don’t stand there and glare your icy blue eyes at me—for you’ve had plenty of affairs! I know you’ve slept with Yolanda Lange, and God knows how many others. And what did you tell them? You told them you loved them too! Well I don’t love you now! I love Paul, and there’s not one thing you can do to stop us from marrying each other!”

He stood there, pale faced and quivering all over, and then he said in a hoarse whisper, “Yes there is. I could tell him about us ... he wouldn’t want you then.”

“You wouldn’t tell him that. You’re much too honorable, and besides, he already knows.”

For long, long moments we glared at each other ... and then he ran from the room, slamming the door so hard behind him it put a long crack in the ceiling plaster.

* * *

Only Carrie accompanied Paul and me to The Plantation House. “It’s too bad Chris doesn’t feel well. I hope he doesn’t have the flu... . Everyone else does.”

I didn't say anything, just sat and listened to Carrie chatter on and on about how much she loved Christmas and the way it made everything ordinary look so pretty.

Paul slipped a two-carat diamond ring on my finger while a huge fire crackled the Yule log, and soft music played. I did my best to make it a joyous occasion, laughing, smiling, exchanging long, romantic looks while we sipped champagne and toasted each other and our long and happy future together. I danced with him under the giant crystal chandeliers and kept my eyes closed, picturing Chris home alone, sulking in his room and hating me.

"We're going to be so happy, Paul," I whispered, standing on the toes of my high-heeled silver slippers. Yes, this was the way our life together would be. Easy. Sweet. Effortless. Just like the lilting, old-fashioned waltz we danced to. Because when you truly loved there were no problems that love couldn't overcome.

Me ... and my ideas.

April's Fool



Drive. Dedication. Desire. Determination. The four D's of the ballet world we had to live by. If Madame Z. had been tough on us before Christmas, now she clamped down on us such a heavy schedule of practice all we did was work. She lectured on how perfect The Royal Ballet was, strictly classical—but we were to do everything in our own unique American way, classical ... but more beautiful and innovative.

Julian was absolutely ruthless, even demonic. I began to really despise him! We were both wet with sweat and our hair hung in strings. My leotard was glued to my skin. Julian wore only a loin cloth. He yelled as if I were deaf, “Do it right this time, damn it! I don't want to be here all night!”

“Stop yelling at me, Julian! I can hear perfectly well!”

“Then *do it right!* First take three steps and then you kick, then jump for me to catch, and for God's sake this time lay back immediately! Don't stay upright and stiff, the moment I catch you fall backwards and go limp—if you can manage to do anything right or graceful today.”

That was my trouble. I didn't trust him now. I was afraid he was going to try to hurt me. “Julian, you yell at me as if I'm deliberately doing everything wrong!”

“It seems to me you are! If you really wanted to do it right you could. All you have to do is take three steps, kick, then jump, and I lift and you fall back. Now see if you can get it right at least one time out of fifty tries!”

“Do you think I like this? Look at my armpits,” I said as I lifted my arms to show him. “See how raw they are, how you've rubbed the skin off? And tomorrow I'll be black and blue all over from the bruises you make with your hard grasps!”

“Then *do it right!*” He raged not only with his voice, but with his jet eyes, and I was terribly afraid he was just waiting for the opportunity to let me fall—on purpose—for revenge. But I got up, and we did it again. And again I failed to fall back and fully trust him. This time he threw me to the floor where I lay panting, gasping, and wondering why the hell I kept this up.

“You’re gasping for breath?” he asked sarcastically, towering above me, his bare feet wide apart and straddling my legs. His bare chest glistened with perspiration that dripped down to fall on me. “I do all the hard work, and you lie there sprawled out and exhausted looking. What happened to you down there? Did you use all your energy making it with your doctor?”

“Shut up! I’m tired from twelve hours of continuous practice, that’s all!”

“If you’re tired, I’m ten times more so—so get up, and let’s do it again—and get it right this time, goddamn you!”

“Don’t you swear at me! Get yourself another partner! You tripped me up and made me fall so my knee hurt for three days afterward—so how can I run and jump into your arms—you’re mean enough to cripple me permanently!”

“Even if I hated you, I wouldn’t let you fall. And, Cathy, I don’t hate you. *Not yet.*”

After practicing over and over again to the piano music, counting, timing, repeating the same series of steps, at last I got it right, and even Julian could smile and congratulate me. Then came the final dress rehearsal and the performance of *Romeo and Juliet*.

It was the stunning sets and dazzling costumes that brought out the best in all of us when combined with a full orchestra. Now I could give to the role of Juliet all the little nuances that would make her real, and not some wooden stick that Yolanda appeared tonight, as she did her *pliés* while her eyes seemed glassy, unfocused. Madame Z. came up to peer closely into her face, and then she sniffed Yolly’s breath. “By God . . . you been smoking grass! No dancer of mine goes spaced out onto the

stage and cheats my audience—get home and to bed. Catherine, get ready to play Juliet!”

Yolanda staggered past me, then tried to give me a savage kick as she hissed, “Why did you have to come back? Why didn’t you stay down there where you belong?”

I didn’t think of Yolanda and her threats as I stood on the flimsy balcony and gazed dreamily down into Julian’s pale face that tilted upward to mine. He appeared so beautiful under the bluish lights, wearing white tights, with his dark hair gleaming, his jet eyes glittering along with the fake jewels on his medieval costume. He seemed to be my attic lover who would ever bound away from me, and never let me near enough to see the features of his face.

The applause thundered as the curtain lowered. And behind it, out of breath Julian sprang up to hug me close. “You were sensational tonight! How do you manage to frustrate me right up until the moment of performance?” The curtain rose for our bows—then he kissed me full on the lips. “Bravo,” they cried, for this was the sort of drama and passion all balletomanes craved.

It was our night, the best yet, and drunk with success I dashed past photographers, and autograph hounds toward my dressing room, for there was a big bash afterward, a celebration before our company took off for London. Quickly I lathered on cold cream to take off the makeup, then I changed from my last act costume into a short formal of periwinkle blue. Madame Zolta rapped on my door and called out, “Catherine, a lady here says she has flown all the way from your home town to watch you dance. Come, open your door and we will hold up the party until you arrive.”

A tall attractive woman entered. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, her clothes were expensive and flattering to her figure. For some strange reason, it seemed I’d met her before, or she reminded me of someone. She looked me over from head to toe, and only then did she turn to stare around the small dressing room filled with plastic bags jammed with all the costumes I was taking with me to England, each labeled with my name and the name of the ballet the costumes were

designed for. I waited impatiently for her to have her say, then go, so I could get on to putting on my coat.

“I don’t think I know you,” I said to hurry her up.

She smiled crookedly, then sat down uninvited to cross her nicely shaped legs. Rhythmically she swung one foot in a high-heeled black pump back and forth.

“Of course you don’t know me, my dear child ... but I know a great deal about you.”

There was something in her sweet and too-smooth tongue to warn me, and I stiffened, prepared for whatever she’d come to deliver—and it would be bad. I could tell from the mean look that hid beneath the false sweet one.

“You’re very pretty, maybe even beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“You dance exceptionally well—that surprised me. Though of course you would have to dance well to be with this company which I’ve heard is fast becoming an important one.”

“Thank you again,” I said, thinking she’d never come to the point.

She took a long time before she spoke again, keeping me in suspense, on edge. I picked up my coat, trying to signal to her that I was trying to leave.

“Nice fur coat,” she commented. “I suppose my brother gave you that. I’ve heard he’s throwing away his money like a drunken sailor. Giving all he’s saved to three nobodies who came on a bus and took over his life.” She laughed low and sarcastically, the way women of culture know how to laugh. “Now I know why, seeing you; though I’ve heard from others you were pretty enough to make any man foolish. Still, I had no idea a child such as you could look so voluptuous, so sensual and skinny all at the same time. You’re a peculiar blend, Miss Dahl. All innocence and sophistication too. Such a brew must be heady intoxication for a man of my brother’s type.” She chortled. “There’s nothing like the combination of youth, long blond hair, a beautiful face and full breasts to bring out the beast even in the best of men.” She sighed, as if

pitying me. “Yes, that’s the trouble with being too young and beautiful. Men are made their worst selves. Paul’s made an ass of himself before, you know. You’re not his first little playmate; though he’s never given one a fur coat before, and a diamond ring. Just as *if* he could possibly marry you.”

So this was Paul’s sister, Amanda—the queer sister who knitted him sweaters and mailed them off Parcel Post, but refused to speak to him on the streets.

Amanda got up and prowled around me. A cat on the stalk, ready to spring. Her perfume was Oriental, musky, heavy, as she moved in on what she must think a timid prey. “Such flawless skin you have,” she said, reaching to stroke my cheek, “so firm, like porcelain. You won’t keep that skin, or all that hair once you’re thirty-five or so, and long before then he’ll have tired of you. He likes his women young, very young. He likes them pretty, intelligent and talented. I have to acknowledge he has good taste, if not good sense. You see,” she smiled again that hateful smile, “I really don’t give a damn what he does as long as it stays within the limits of decency and doesn’t reflect on *my* life.”

“Get out of here,” I managed to say. “You don’t know your brother at all. He’s an honorable, generous man and in no way could he harm *your* life.” Pityingly she smiled.

“My dear child, don’t you realize you are ruining his career? Are you fool enough to think this affair has gone unnoticed? In a town the size of Clairmont everybody knows everything. Though Henny can’t talk, the neighbors do have eyes and ears. Gossip, that’s all I hear, gossip—throwing away his money on juvenile delinquents who take advantage of his good nature, and soon enough he’ll be broke, and he won’t have a medical practice left!” She was heating up now, and I feared any moment she’d rake my face with her long red nails.

“Get out of here!” I ordered hotly. “I know all about you, Amanda, for gossip has reached my ears too! Your trouble is you think your brother owes you the rest of his life because you worked to help put him through college and medical school. But I used to keep his books, and he’s paid you back, plus ten percent interest—so he doesn’t owe you anything!

You're a liar to try and make him seem small in my eyes—for you can't do that! I love him, and he loves me, and nothing you say can stop our marriage!"

She laughed again, hard and mirthless, then her face turned hard, determined. "Don't order *me* to do anything! When I'm ready to go, I'll leave—and that's when I've had my say! I flew up here just to see his newest little paramour, his dancing doll ... and believe me you won't be his last. Why Julia used to tell me he—"

I hotly interrupted, "*Get out! Don't you dare say one word more about him!* I know about Julia. He's told me. If she drove him to others, I don't blame him; she wasn't a real wife; she was a housekeeper, a cook—not a wife!"

Merrily she laughed—God how she liked to laugh! She was enjoying this, someone competitive enough to fight back, someone she could claw. "Fool girl! That's the same old line every married man passes on to his newest conquest. Julia was one of the dearest, sweetest, kindest and most wonderful women who ever lived. She did everything she could to please him. Her one fault lay in the fact she couldn't give him all the sex he wanted, or the kind of sex he demanded, so yes, in a way, he did have to turn to others—like you. I'll admit most married men fool around, but they still don't do what he did!"

I hated the spiteful witch now, really detested her. "What's he done that was so terrible? Julia drowned his three-year-old son—there's nothing on earth that would make *me* take the life of my child! I don't need revenge that much!"

"I agree," she said, back to mild tone now. "That was an insane thing for Julia to do. Scotty was such a handsome, lovely boy—but Paul drove her to do what she did. I understand her reasoning. Scotty was the thing Paul loved most. When you seek to destroy someone emotionally, you kill what he loves best."

Oh! The horror of her!

"He wears a hair shirt, doesn't he?" she asked in a gloating way, her dark, pretty eyes glowing with satisfaction. "He tortures himself, blames himself, longs for his son, and then

you came along, and he put a baby in you. Don't think the whole town doesn't know about your abortion! We know! We know everything!"

"You lie!" I shrieked. "It wasn't an abortion! I had a D & C because my periods weren't regular!"

"It's on the hospital records," she said to me smugly. "You miscarried a two-headed embryo with three legs—twins who didn't separate properly. You poor thing, don't you know a D & C is an abortion procedure?"

Drowning, drowning, I was going under, black swirls of water all around ... two headed? Three legs? Oh, God—the monster baby I so dreaded! But Paul hadn't touched me then, not Paul. "Don't cry," she soothed, and I yanked from the touch of her large hand that flashed with diamonds, "all men are beasts, and I guess he didn't tell you. But don't you see, you can't marry him. I'm doing this for your own good. You're beautiful, young, gifted, and to live in sin with a married man is a pure waste. Save yourself while you can."

Tears blurred my vision. I rubbed at my eyes as a child would, feeling a child in a crazy adult world as I stared dully at her bland, smooth face. "Paul's not a married man. Paul's a widower. Julia's dead. She killed herself the day she drowned Scotty."

Like a mother she patted my shoulder. "No, child, Julia is *not* dead. Julia lives in an institution where my brother put her after she drowned Scotty. She's still his legal wife, insane or not."

She thrust into my slack hand several snapshots, pictures of a thin, pitiful-looking woman lying on a hospital bed, her face in profile in both. A woman ravaged by suffering. Her eyes wide open and staring blankly into space, and her dark hair lay like strings on the pillows. Yet I'd seen too many pictures of Julia not to recognize her, even as changed as she was.

"By the way," said Paul's sister, leaving me with the snapshots, "I enjoyed the performance. You're a marvelous dancer. And that young man—he's spectacular. Take *him*. He's obviously in love with you." She left then. Left me in a daze of

broken dreams and floundering in despair. How was I ever going to learn to swim in an ocean of deceit?

* * *

Julian took me to the big bash which was being thrown in our honor. Hordes of people surrounded us, congratulated us, said so many flattering words. They meant nothing to me. All I could think was Paul had lied to me, lied to me, took me when he knew he was married—*lies*, I hated lies!

Never had Julian been sweeter or more considerate. He held me close in one of those slow, old-fashioned dances, so close I could feel every hard muscle of his lean body, and the maleness of him pressed hard, hard. “I love you, Cathy,” he whispered. “I want you so much I can’t sleep at night. I want to hold you, make love to you. If you don’t let me soon, I’ll go mad.” He buried his face in my piled up hair. “I’ve never had anyone brand new, like you. Cathy, please, please love me, love me.”

His face swam before me. He seemed dream-godlike, perfect, and yet, and yet ... “Julian, what if I told you I wasn’t *brand new*?”

“But you are! I know you are!”

“How can you tell?” I giggled drunkenly. “Is there something written on my face that says I am still a virgin?”

“Yes,” he said firmly. “Your eyes. Your eyes tell me you don’t know what it’s like to be loved.”

“Julian, I fear *you* don’t know much.”

“You underestimate me, Cathy. You treat me like a little boy one minute, and the next like some hungry wolf who will eat you up. Let me make love to you, then you’ll know no man has ever touched you before.”

I laughed. “All right—but one night only.”

“If you have me for one night, you will never, never want me to go,” he warned, and his eyes glowed and sparkled, black as coal.

“Julian ... I don’t love you.”

“But you will—after tonight.”

“Oh, Julian,” I said with a long yawn, “I’m tired, and partially drunk—go away, leave me alone.”

“Not on your life, kiddo. You said yes, and I’m holding you to it. It’s me tonight ... and every night for the rest of your life—or mine.”

* * *

On a rainy Saturday morning, with all our luggage already piled into the taxies that would take our company to the airport, Julian and I stood in the city hall with our best friends to support us, and a judge said the words that would bind us together until “death do you part.” When it came my turn to speak my vows, I hesitated, wanting to run away and fly to Paul. He would be crushed when he found out. Then there was Chris. But Chris would rather see me marry Julian than Paul; that’s what he’d told me.

Julian held tight to me, his dark eyes soft and shining with love and pride. I couldn’t run. I could only say what I was supposed to, and then I was married to the one man I’d sworn I would never allow to touch me intimately. Not only Julian was happy and proud, but also Madame Zolta who beamed at us and gave us her blessings, kissed our cheeks and shed motherly tears. “You’ve done the right thing, Catherine. You will be so happy together, such a beautiful couple ... but remember not to make any babies!”

“Darling, sweetheart, love,” Julian whispered when we were on the plane flying over the Atlantic, “don’t look so sad. This is our day for rejoicing! I swear you will never be sorry. I’ll make you a fantastic husband. I’ll never love anyone but you.”

My head bowed down on his shoulder, then I bawled! Crying for everything that should have been mine on my wedding day. Where were my birdsongs, the bells that should chime? Where was the green grass, and the love that was mine? And where was my mother who was the cause of everything gone wrong? *Where?* Did she cry when she thought of us? Or did she, more likely, just take my notes with the

news-clippings and tear them up? Yes, that would be like her, never to face up to what she'd done. How easily she tripped away on her second honeymoon and left us in the care of a merciless grandmother, and back she came, all smiling and happy, telling us of what a wonderful time she had. While we, locked up, had been brutalized and starved, and she'd never even looked at Cory and Carrie who didn't grow. Never noticed how shadowed their hollow eyes, how thin their weak legs and arms. Never noticed anything she didn't want to see.

The rain kept coming down, down, forecasting what was ahead. That cold blasting torrent of freezing water put ice on the wings of the plane that was carrying me farther and farther from all those I loved. That ice was in my heart too. And tonight I had to sleep with a man I didn't even like when he wasn't on stage, and dressed in costume, and playing the role of a prince.

But to give Julian his due, he was all he boasted of being in bed. I forgot who he was, and pretended he was someone else as his kisses played over my body, and not one inch went unexplored, un-kissed or un-caressed. Before he finished, I wanted him. I was more than willing to have him take me ... and try to erase the persistent thought that I had just made the worst mistake of my life.

And I had made many mistakes.

Labyrinth of Lies



Before our bodies had adjusted to jet lag, we went into rehearsals with The Royal Ballet looking on, comparing our style to theirs. Already Madame Z. had told us their way was strictly classical, but we were to do everything in our own way, and were not to be intimidated. “Stick to your guns, keep it pure, but make each dance your very own. Julian, Catherine, as newlyweds, all eyes will be upon you two—so make every scene as romantic as you can. The two of you together touch my heart and make it cry ... and if you keep it up, what you’re doing, you may make ballet history.”

She smiled, and tears filled the deep furrows about her tiny eyes. “Let us all prove that America too can produce the very best!” She broke then and turned her back, so we couldn’t see her face crumple. “I luv all of you so much,” she sobbed. “Now go away ... leave me be ... and make me proud of you.”

We were determined to do our very damndest to make Madame Zolta’s name famous once more, not as a dancer, but as a teacher. We practiced until we fell exhausted into our beds.

The Royal Opera House, Covent Gardens shared its space with the ballet company, and when I first saw it I sucked in my breath and held fast to Julian’s hand. The red and gold auditorium seated more than two thousand people. Its sparkling swirl of balconies that rose up to a high dome with a sunburst design in the middle stunned me with its old-fashioned splendor. Soon we were to find out that backstage was far less opulent, with no charm in its crowded dressing rooms and a rabbit warren of tiny offices and workrooms; worst of all, no rehearsal studios at all! Try as I would to find something admirable about British plumbing and heating facilities, I failed utterly. I was forever cold, except under the

duress of dancing. I hated the stingy supply of hot water in the bathrooms, forcing me to take the quickest bath possible before I froze to death.

And all the time Julian stayed glued to my side. Privacy was something he'd never heard of and had no respect for. Even when I was in the bathroom he had to be there, so I'd race to lock the door and leave him pounding. "Let me in! I know what you're doing, why all the secrecy?"

Not only that, he wanted to crawl into my mind and know all my past, all my thoughts, everything I'd done. "And so your mother and father were killed in an auto crash, what happened next?" he asked, holding me in an iron embrace. Why did he have to hear it again? I swallowed. By now I had concocted a believable story about the law wanting to put us in an orphanage, so Chris, Carrie and I had to run away. "We had a little money saved up, you know, from birthdays, Christmas, and such. We caught a bus that would take us to Florida, but Carrie was sick and threw up, and this huge fat black lady came and took us to her 'doctor son.' I guess he felt sorry for us; he took us in ... and that's all there is to it."

"All there is to it," he repeated slowly. "There's a hell of a lot you're not telling me! Though I can guess the rest. He saw a rich plum in a young beautiful girl, and that's why he was so damned generous. Cathy—just how intimate were you with him?"

"I loved him, and I planned to marry him."

"Then why didn't you?" he shot out. "Why did you finally say yes to me?"

Tact and subtlety were never among my virtues. I grew angry because he was making me explain, when I didn't want to explain. "You were at me all the time!" I stormed. "You made me believe I could learn to love you—but I don't think I can! We've made a mistake, Julian! A horrible mistake!"

"Don't you say anything like that again, you hear!" Julian sobbed as if I'd wounded him terribly, and I was reminded of Chris. I couldn't go through my life damaging everyone I met, so my rage vanished as I allowed him to take me in his arms.

His dark head lowered so he could kiss my neck. “Cathy, I love you so much. More than I ever wanted to love any woman. I’ve never had anyone love me for myself. Thank you for trying to love me, even though you say you don’t.”

It hurt to hear the quiver in his voice. He seemed a small boy who was pleading for the impossible to happen, and perhaps I was doing him an injustice. I turned and wrapped my arms around his neck. “I do want to love you, Jule. I did marry you, and I am committed, so I’ll try and make you the best wife I can. But don’t push at me! Don’t make demands—just let love come as I learn more about you. You’re almost a stranger to me, even though we’ve known each other for three years.”

He winced, as if I ever really knew him, then love would be, indeed, impossible. He doubted himself so much. Oh, God, what had I done? What kind of person was I, that I could turn from an honest, sincere, honorable man and rush headlong into the arms of someone I suspected was a brute?

Momma had a way of acting impulsively, and being sorry when it was too late. I *wasn’t* like her underneath; I couldn’t be! I had too many talents to be like someone who had none ... none but for making every man fall in love with her, and that wasn’t intelligence. No, I wanted to be like Chris ... and then I floundered again, caught, as always, in the quicksand of *her* making. All of it was her fault, even my marriage to Julian!

“Cathy, you’re going to have to learn to overlook a lot of flaws,” said Julian. “Don’t put me up on a pedestal, don’t expect perfection. I have feet of clay, as you already know, and if you try to make me into the Prince Charming I think you want ... you are going to fail. You have that doctor of yours on a pedestal too; I think you might be the kind to put all the men you love up so high they are bound to come tumbling down. Just love me and try not to see what doesn’t please you.”

I wasn’t good at overlooking faults. I’d always seen Momma’s when Chris never had. I always flipped over the brightest coin and looked for the tarnish. Funny. Paul’s tarnish had seemed all Julia’s fault until Amanda came with her horror

story. Another reason to hate Momma, making me doubt my instinct!

Long after Julian returned to bed I sat by the windows and contemplated myself, my eyes fixed on the long shiverlets of ice striking the glass. The weather was only telling me what lay ahead. Spring was back there in the garden with Paul ... and I'd done it myself. I didn't have to believe Amanda. God help me if I turned out to be like Momma inside, as well as out!

Our weeks in London were busy, exciting and exhausting—but I dreaded the time when we returned to New York. How long could I keep putting off telling Paul? Not forever. Sooner or later he had to know.

Shortly before the first day of spring, we flew back to Clairmont, and we taxied to Paul's house. It was the place of our deliverance, and it seemed nothing there had changed. Only I had, for I was coming to devastate a man who didn't need to be hurt again.

I stared at the boxwoods neatly clipped into cones and spheres, and the wisteria trees that were blooming; azaleas rioted colorfully everywhere, and the big magnolias were ripe and soon to flower, and over everything emerald draped the dangling gray Spanish moss, misting and fogging, to create shreds of living lace. I sighed. If at twilight there was anything more beautiful and somehow romantically, sadly mystical than a live oak dripping with Spanish moss that would in the end kill its host, I'd yet to see it. Love that clung and killed.

I thought I could take Julian inside, then tell Paul our news—but I couldn't. "Would you mind waiting on the veranda until I tell Paul?" I asked. For some reason he only nodded. I'd expected an argument. Agreeably, for a change, he sat in a white wicker rocker, the same one Paul had been in when first we found him dozing on that Sunday afternoon, after the bus put us off. He'd been forty then. He was now forty-three.

Quivering a little, I went on alone to open the front door with my own key. I could have telephoned or sent a cable. But I had to see his face and watch his eyes, and try to read his

thoughts. I needed to know if I'd really injured his heart, or only wounded his pride and ego.

No one heard me open the door. No one heard my footsteps on the hard parquet of the foyer. Paul was sprawled in his favorite chair before the color television and the fireplace, dozing. His long legs were stretched to rest on the matching ottoman, his ankles crossed and his shoes off. Carrie was sitting cross-legged on the floor near his chair, as needing as always to be near someone who loved her. She was deeply engrossed in her play with the small porcelain dolls. She wore a white sweater banded at the neck and wrists with purple, and over this her red corduroy jumper. She looked like a pretty little doll.

My eyes went again to Paul. In his light dozing sleep he had the expression of someone anxiously waiting. Even his feet moved often to cross and uncross, while his fingers flexed into fists, then unflexed. His head was thrown back to rest on the high back of his chair, but that too kept moving from side to side ... dreaming, I thought, maybe of me. Then his face turned in my direction. Did he sense my presence even in his sleep?

Ever so slowly his eyelids fluttered open. He yawned and lifted a hand to cover his mouth ... then stared at me fuzzily. As if I were merely an apparition. "Catherine," he murmured, "is that you?"

Carrie heard his question, jumped up and came flying to me, crying out my name as I caught her and swung her high. I lavished on her small face a dozen or so kisses, and hugged her so tight she cried out, "Ouch, that hurts!" She looked so pretty, so fresh and well fed. "Oh, Cathy, why did you stay away *so long*? We wait every day for you to come home, and you never do. We make plans for your wedding, but when you don't write, Dr. Paul says we should wait. Why did you send only postcards? Didn't you have time to write long letters? Chris said you must be awfully busy." She had pulled out of my arms and was back on the floor near Paul's chair, and staring at me reproachfully. "Cathy ... you forgot all about us,

didn't you? All you care about is dancing. You don't need no family when you dance."

"Yes, I do need a family, Carrie," I said absently, with my eyes fixed on Paul, trying to read what he was thinking.

Paul got up and came toward me, his eyes locked with mine. We embraced and Carrie sat quietly on the floor and watched, as if studying the way a woman should act with the man she loved. His lips only brushed over mine. Yet his touch shivered me as Julian's never did. "You look different," he said to me in his slow, soft way. "You've lost weight. You look tired too. Why didn't you telephone or telegraph to let me know you were on the way? I would have met you at the airport."

"You look thinner too," I said in a hoarse whisper. His weight loss was far more becoming than mine. His mustache seemed darker, thicker. I touched it tentatively, longingly, knowing it wasn't mine to feel now—and he had grown it just to please me.

"It hurt when you stopped writing to me every day. Did you stop when your schedule became too crowded?"

"Something like that. It's tiring to dance every day, and try to see as much as possible at the same time... . I got so busy, I never had enough time."

"I subscribe to *Variety* now."

"Oh ..." was all I could say, praying they didn't write about my marriage to Julian. "I've nominated myself as your clipping service, though Chris is keeping a scrapbook too. Whenever he's home, we compare clippings; if one of us has something the other doesn't, we have it photocopied." He paused as if puzzled by my expression, my demeanor, something. "They are all rave reviews, Catherine, why do you look so ... so ... emotionless?"

"Tired, like you said." I hung my head not knowing what to say, or how to meet his eyes. "And how've you been?"

"Catherine, is something the matter? You act strange." Carrie was staring at me ... as if Paul had expressed her

thoughts too. I gazed around the big room filled with the beauty of all that Paul had collected. Sunlight through the ivory sheers shone on the miniatures in his tall étagère with the glass shelves, the black, gold-veined mirror behind them, and lit from the top and bottom. How easy to hide away in looking around, pretending everything was all right, when everything was all wrong.

“Catherine, speak to me!” Paul cried. “There is something wrong!”

I sat down, knees weak, my throat tight. Why couldn't I ever do anything right? How could he have lied to me, deceived me, when he knew I'd had enough of lying and deceit? And how could he look so trustworthy still?

“When will Chris be home?”

“Friday, for Easter vacation.” His long look was reflective, as if he thought it strange when usually Chris and I kept in constant communication. Then there was Henny to greet and hug and kiss ... and I could put it off no longer ... though I found a way. “Paul, I brought Julian home with me... . He's out on the veranda waiting. Is that all right?”

He gave me the strangest look, and then nodded. “Of course. Ask him in.” Then he turned to Henny. “Set two more places, Henny.”

Julian came in, and, as I'd cautioned him, he didn't say a word to let anyone know we were married. Both of us had taken off our wedding rings and had them in our pockets. It was the strangest of quiet meals, and even when Julian and I handed out the gifts the stiffness grew, and Carrie only glanced at her bracelet of rubies and amethysts, though Henny beamed a broad smile when she put on her solid gold bracelet.

“Thank you for the lovely figurine of yourself, Cathy,” said Paul, putting it carefully aside on the closest table. “Julian, would you please excuse Cathy and me for a while? I'd like to have a private talk with her.” He said this as a doctor requesting a private interview with the responsible family member of a critically ill patient. Julian nodded and smiled at Carrie. She glared back at him.

“I’m going to bed,” stated Carrie defiantly. “Good night, Mr. Marquet. I don’t know why you had to help Cathy buy me that bracelet, but thank you anyway.”

Julian was left in the living room to stare at the TV as Paul and I took off for a stroll in his magnificent gardens. Already his fruit trees were in bloom, and climbing red, pink and white roses made a brilliant display on the white trellises.

“What’s wrong, Catherine?” Paul asked. “You come home to me and bring along another man, so maybe you don’t have to explain at all. I can guess.”

Quickly I put out my hand to seize hold of his. “Stop! Don’t say anything!” Falteringly and very slowly I began to tell him about his sister’s visit. I told him I knew now that Julia was still alive, and though I could understand his motivation, he *should* have told me the truth. “Why did you lead me to believe she was dead, Paul? Did you think me such a child I couldn’t bear to hear it? I could have understood if you had told me. I loved you, don’t you ever doubt that I did! I didn’t give to you because I thought I owed you anything. I gave because I wanted to give, because I desperately needed you. I knew better than to expect marriage, and I was happy enough in the relationship we had. I would have been your mistress forever—but you should have told me about Julia! You should have known me well enough to realize I’m impulsive, I act without thought when I’m hurt—and it hurt terribly that night Amanda came and told me your wife was still alive!

“Lies!” I cried. “Oh, how I hate liars! *You* of all people to lie to me! Besides Chris, there was no one I trusted more than you.”

He’d stopped strolling, as I had. The nude marble statues were all around, mocking us. Laughing at love gone awry. For now we were like them, frozen and cold.

“Amanda,” he said, rolling her name on his tongue as something bitter and fit to be spit out. “Amanda and her half-truths. You ask why—why didn’t you ask *why* before you flew

to London? Why didn't you give me the chance to defend myself?"

"How can you defend lies!" I bit back meanly, wanting him to hurt as I'd hurt that night when Amanda slammed out of the theater.

He walked away to lean against the oldest oak, and from his pocket he drew a pack of cigarettes.

"Paul, I'm sorry. Tell me now what your defense would have been."

Slowly he puffed on the cigarette, and exhaled smoke. That smoke came my way and weaved around my head, neck, body—and chased off the scent of roses. "Remember when you came," he began, taking his time, "you were so bitter from your loss of Cory, to say nothing of how you felt about your mother. How could I tell you my own sordid story when already you'd known too much pain? How was I to know you and I would become lovers? You seemed to me only a beautiful, haunted child—though you've touched me deeply—always you've touched me. You touch me now, standing there with your accusing eyes. Though you are right. I *should* have told you." He sighed heavily.

"I told you about the day Scotty was three, and how Julia took him down to the river and held him under the water until he was dead. But what I didn't tell you was she lived on... . A whole team of doctors worked on her for hours on end trying to bring her out of the coma, but she never came out."

"Coma," I whispered. "She's alive now, and still in the same coma?"

He smiled so bitterly, and then looked up at the moon that was smiling too, sarcastically, I thought. He turned his head and allowed his eyes to meet with mine. "Yes, Julia lived on, with her heart beating, and before you came along with your brother and sister I drove every day to visit her in a private institution. I'd sit beside her bed, hold her hand, and force myself to look at her gaunt face and skeleton body... . It was the best way I had to torment myself and try to wash away the guilt I felt. I watched her hair become thinner each day—the

pillows, covers, everything covered by her hair as she withered away before my very eyes. She was connected to tubes that helped her to breathe, and a tube was in her arm through which she was fed. Her brain waves were flat, but her heart kept on beating. Mentally she was dead, physically she was alive. If she ever came out of the coma, she'd never speak, move, or even be able to think. She'd have been a living dead woman at the age of twenty-six. That's how old she was when she took my son down to the river to hold him under the shallow water. It was hard for me to believe a woman who loved her child so much could drown him and feel his struggles to live ... and yet she did it just to get back at me." He paused, flicked the ash from his cigarette and turned his shadowed eyes to me. "Julia reminds me of your mother... . Both could do anything when they felt justified."

I sighed, he sighed, and the wind and flowers sighed too. I think those marble statues sighed along as well, in their lack of understanding the human condition. "Paul, when did you see Julia last? Doesn't she have any chance at all for a full recovery?" I began to cry.

He gathered me in his arms and kissed the top of my head. "Don't cry for her, my beautiful Catherine. It's all over for Julia now; she is finally at peace. The year we became lovers, she died less than a month after we started. Quietly she just slipped away. I remember at the time you looked at me as if you sensed something was wrong. It wasn't that I felt less for you that made me stand back and look at myself. It was a blend of painful guilt and sorrow that someone as sweet and lovely as Julia, my childhood sweetheart, had to leave life without once experiencing all the wonderful, beautiful things it had to give." He cupped my face between his palms, and tenderly kissed away my tears. "Now smile and say the words I see in your eyes, say you love me. When you brought Julian home with you, I thought it was over between us, but now I can tell it will never be over. You've given me the best you have within you, and I'll know that even when you're off thousands of miles, dancing with younger and handsomer men ... you'll be faithful to me, as I'll be faithful to you. We'll

make it work, because two people who are sincerely in love can always overcome obstacles no matter what they are.”

Oh ... how could I tell him now? “Julia’s dead?” I asked, quivering, deep in shock, hating myself and Amanda! “Amanda lied to me... . She knew Julia was dead, and yet she flew to New York to tell me a lie? Paul, what kind of woman is she?”

He held me so tight I felt my ribs ache, but I clung just as fast to him, knowing this was the last time I could. I kissed him wild and passionately, knowing I’d never feel his lips again on mine. He laughed jubilantly, sensing all the love and passion I had for him, and in a happy, lighter voice he said, “Yes, my sister knew when Julia died; she was at her funeral. Though she didn’t speak to me. Now please stop crying. Let me dry your tears.” He used his handkerchief to touch to my cheeks and the corners of my eyes, then held it so I could blow my nose.

I’d acted the child, the impulsive, impatient child Chris had warned me not to be—and I had betrayed Paul who trusted me. “I still don’t understand Amanda,” I said in a mournful wail, still putting off that moment of truth I didn’t know if I could face. He held me and stroked my back, my hair, as I clung with my arms about his waist, staring up into his face.

“Sweetheart, Catherine, why do you look and act so strange?” he said in his voice that had gone back to normal. “Nothing my sister said should rob us of taking what joy we can from life. Amanda wants to drive me out of Clairmont. She wants to take over this house so she can leave it to her son, so she does her best to ruin my reputation. She’s very active socially and fills the ears of her friends with lies about me. And if there were women before Julia drowned my son, that was lesson enough for me to change my ways. There was no other woman until *you!* I’ve even heard it rumored that Amanda has spread it about that I made you pregnant and your D & C was actually an abortion. You see what a spiteful woman can do—anything!”

Now it was too late, too late. He asked me again to stop crying. “Amanda,” I said stiffly, my control about to break.

“She said that D & C was the same as an abortion. She said you kept the embryo, one with two heads. I’ve seen that thing in your office in a bottle. Paul, how could you keep it? Why didn’t you have it buried? A monster baby! It isn’t fair—it isn’t—why, why?”

He groaned and wiped his hand over his eyes, to quickly deny everything. “I could kill her for telling you that! A lie, Catherine, all a lie!”

“Was it a lie? It could have been mine, you know that. For God’s sake, Chris doesn’t know—he didn’t lie to me too, did he?”

He sounded frantic as he denied everything, and sought once more to embrace me, but I jumped backward, and thrust forth both arms to ward him off. “There *is* a bottle in your office with a baby like that inside! I saw it! Paul, how could you? *You*, of all people, to save something like *that!*”

“No!” he flared immediately. “That thing was given to me years ago when I was in med school—a joke, really—med students play all sorts of jokes you’d find gruesome, and I’m telling you the truth, Catherine, you *didn’t* abort.” Then he stopped abruptly, just as I did, with my thoughts reeling. I’d betrayed myself!

I began to cry. *Chris, Chris, there was a baby, there was a monster just like we feared.*

“No,” said Paul again and again, “it’s not yours, and even if it were, it wouldn’t make any difference to me. I know you and Chris love each other in a special way. I’ve always known it, and I do understand.”

“Once,” I whispered through my sobs, “only once on one terrible night.”

“I’m sorry it was terrible.”

I stared up at him then, marveling that he could look at me with so much softness and so much respect, even knowing the full truth. “Paul,” I asked tremulously, timidly, “was it an unforgivable sin?”

“No ... an understandable act of love, I’d call it.”

He held me, he kissed me, he stroked my back and began telling me his plans for our wedding. "... and Chris will give you away, and Carrie will be your bridesmaid. Chris was very hesitant and wouldn't meet my eyes when I discussed this with him. He said he thought you weren't mature enough to handle a complicated marriage like ours will be. I know it's not going to be easy for you, or for me. You'll be touring the world, dancing with young, handsome men. However, I'm looking forward to accompanying you on a few of those tours. To be the husband of a prima ballerina will be inspiring, exciting. Why, I could even be your company doctor. Surely dancers need doctors on occasion?"

I went dead inside. "Paul," I began dully, "I can't marry you." Then, quite out of context, I went on, "You know, wasn't it stupid of Momma to hide our birth certificates inside the linings of our two suitcases? She didn't do too good a job and the linings ripped and I found them. Without my birth certificate I couldn't have applied for a passport, and I also needed that certificate to prove I was of age to apply for a marriage license. You see, several days before our company flew to London Julian and I had blood tests and our marriage ceremony was just a simple one, with Madame Zolta and the company dancers there, and even as I said my marriage vows, and swore fidelity to Julian ... I was thinking of you, and Chris, and hating myself, and knowing I was doing the wrong thing."

Paul didn't say anything. He reeled backward, then staggered over to fall upon a marble bench. For moments he just sat, and then his head drooped into his hands and hid his face.

I stood. He sat. He lost himself somewhere, while I waited for him to come back and rail at me. But his voice when it came was as soft as a whisper, "Come, sit beside me for a while. Hold my hand. Give me time to realize it's all over between us." I did as he said and held his hand, while both of us stared up at the sky full of diamonds and dark clouds.

"I'll never hear your kind of music again without thinking of you... ."

“Paul, I’m sorry! I wish to God I’d have listened to my instinct that told me Amanda was lying. But the music was playing where I was too and you were far away, and Julian was there, pleading with me, telling me he loved and needed me, and I believed him, and convinced myself you didn’t really love me. I can’t bear to be without someone who loves me.”

“I’m very happy he loves you,” he said, then got up quickly and started for the house, his strides so long and fast I’d never catch up even if I ran. “Don’t say another word! Leave me alone, Catherine! Don’t follow me! You did the right thing—don’t doubt that! I was an old fool, playing with a young one, and you don’t have to tell me I should have known better—I already know that!”

Too Many Loves To Lose



Gone as deaf and stony as one of Paul's marble statues, I sat on the veranda and stared up at the night sky that was turning stormy and black with clouds. Julian came out to sit beside me and in his embrace I began to softly cry. "Why?" he asked. "You do love me a little, don't you? Your doctor can't be really hurt; he was very kind to me, and told me to come out and comfort you."

It was then that Henny came out to signal with her lightning-fast signs that her doctor-son was packing for a trip and I was to stay here. "What's she saying to you?" asked Julian with annoyance. "Damn, it's like hearing someone talk in a foreign tongue. I feel so left out."

"Stay here and wait!" I ordered, then jumped up to race into the house and fly up the back stairs, then on into Paul's room where he was flinging his clothes into an open suitcase on his bed. "Look," I cried in distress, "there's no reason why you have to leave! This is your home. *I'll* go. I'll take Carrie with me, so you need never see my face again!" He turned to give me a long and bitter look as he went on putting shirts in his bag.

"Cathy, you've taken the wife I expected to have, and now you want to take away my daughter. Carrie is like my own flesh and blood, and she wouldn't fit into your kind of life. Let her stay with me and Henny. Let me have something to call my own. I'll be back before you go ... and you should know that Julian's father is very, very ill."

"Georges is ill?"

"Yes. Perhaps you don't know that he's had kidney disease for several years, and has been on a dialysis machine for months. I don't think he'll live much longer. He's not my patient, but I stop in to visit him as often as I can, more or less

to hear about you and Julian. Now will you please get out, Cathy, and not force me to say things I'd regret."

I cried face down on my bed until Henny came into my room.

Strong, motherly, dark hands patted my back. Henny's misting, liquid brown eyes spoke when her tongue couldn't. She talked to me with her gestures, and then took from her apron pocket a clipping from the local newspaper. An announcement of my marriage to Julian! "Henny," I wailed, "what am I going to do? I'm married to Julian, and I can't demand a divorce; he depends on me, believes in me!"

Henny shrugged her broad shoulders, expressing that people were as complex to her as they were to me. Then quickly she signaled, "Big sister always been big trouble maker. One man already hurt, no good hurting two. Doctor good man, strong man, will survive disappointment, but young dancing man might not. Wipe away tears, cry no more, put on big smile and go downstairs and take hand of new husband. For everything work out for the best. You see."

I did as Henny directed, and joined Julian in the living room, and there I told him about his father being in the hospital, and not expected to live. His pale face went even whiter. Nervously he chewed on his lower lip. "It's really that serious?"

It had been my opinion that Julian didn't care much for his father, so I was surprised to see his reaction. At that moment Paul came into the living room with his suitcase and offered to drive us to the hospital. "And remember, my house has plenty of rooms, and there is no reason at all why the two of you should even consider a hotel. Stay as long as you like. I'll be back in a few days."

He backed his car out of the garage so Julian and I could join him on the front seat. Hardly a word was said until he let us out in front of the hospital, and sadly I hesitated before the steps, watching Paul drive away into the night.

* * *

They had Georges in a private room, and with him was Madame Marisha. When I saw Georges in the bed, I drew in my breath! Oh! To be like that! He was so thin he seemed already dead. His face had a grayish pallor, and every bone he had jutted forward to make jagged peaks beneath the thin skin. Madame M. was crouched at his side, staring down into his gaunt face pleading with her eyes, commanding him to hold on and live! “My love, my love, my love,” she crooned as to a baby, “do not go, do not leave me alone. We have so much to do yet, to experience yet... . Our son has to reach fame before you die... . Hold on, my love, hold on.”

Only then did Madame Marisha glance up to see us there, and with her same old authority she snapped, “*Well, Julian. You did finally come! And after all the cables I sent you! What did you do, tear them up and dance on, as if nothing matters?*”

I blanched, very surprised, and looked from him to Madame. “My dear mother,” he said coldly, “we were on tour, you know that. We had engagements and contracts, so my wife and I kept our commitments.”

“You heartless brute!” she snarled, then gestured for him to come closer. “Now you say something kind and loving to that man on the bed,” she hissed in a whisper, “or so help me *God I’ll make you wish you were never born!*”

Julian had a great deal of trouble making the effort to approach the bed, so much so I had to give him a shove, while his mother sobbed into a handful of pink tissues. “Hello, Father,” was all he could manage, along with, “I’m sorry you are so ill.” Quickly he came back to me, and held me hard against him. I felt his whole body trembling.

“See, my love, my sweetheart, my darling,” crooned Madame Marisha again, once more bending above her husband and smoothing back his damp, dark hair. “Open your dear eyes and see who has flown thousands of miles to be at your side. Your own Julian and his wife. All the way from London they flew the moment they knew you were so sick. Open your eyes, my heart, see him again, see them together, such a beautiful pair of newlyweds—please open your eyes, please look.”

On the bed the pale, thin wraith of a man slitted his dark eyes and they moved slowly, trying to focus on Julian and me. We were at the foot of his bed, but he didn't seem to see us. Madame got up to push us closer, and then held Julian there so he couldn't back off. Georges opened his eyes a bit wider and thinly smiled. "Ah, Julian," he sighed. "Thank you for coming. I have so much to say to you—things I should have said before... ." He faltered, stammered, "I should have—" and then he broke off. I waited for him to continue—and I waited. I saw his wide open eyes glaze and go blank and his head stayed so still. Madame screamed! A doctor and nurse came on the run, and shooed us out as they began to work over Georges.

We formed a pitiful group in the hall outside his room, and in only a short while the gray-haired doctor came out to say he was sorry, all had been done that could be done. It was over. "It is better so," he added. "Death can be a good friend to those in extreme pain. I wondered how he held on so long... ."

I stared and stared at Julian, for we could have come back sooner. But Julian made his eyes blank and refused to speak. "He was your father!" screamed Madame as tears streaked her cheeks. "For two weeks he suffered, waiting to see you before he could let himself die and escape the hell of living on!"

Julian whirled, his pale skin flamed with bright red fury, as he lashed out at his mother, "Madame Mother, just what *did* my father give me? All I was to him was an extension of himself! All he was to me was a dance instructor! Work, dance, that's all he ever said! He never discussed what I wanted besides the dance; he didn't give a damn what else I wanted, or what else I needed! I wanted him to love me for myself; I wanted him to see me as his son, not just as a dancer. I loved him; I wanted him to see I loved him, and say he loved me in return ... but he never did! And try as I would to dance perfectly, he never gave me a compliment—for I didn't do anything nearly as well as he could have done it when he was my age! So, that is what I was to him, somebody to step into his shoes and carry on his name! But, damn him, and you, I've got my own legal name ... Julian Marquet, not Georges

Rosencoff, and his name will not live on and steal from me what fame I achieve!”

I held Julian in my arms that night, understanding him as I hadn't before. When he broke and cried, I cried along with him, for a father he'd professed to despise, when underneath he loved him. And I thought of Georges, and how sad it was that he tried, too late, to say what he should have years and years ago.

So we'd come from a honeymoon where we had achieved a certain amount of fame and publicity, and given many, many hours of hard work, only to attend the funeral of a father who wouldn't live to know about his son's accomplishments. All the glory of London now seemed shrouded in funeral mists.

Madame Marisha held out her arms to me when the graveside ceremony was over. She held me in her thin arms, as she might have once held Julian, and in a sort of hypnotic trance we rocked back and forth, both of us crying. “Be good to my son, Catherine,” she sobbed and sniffled. “Have patience with him when he acts wild. His has not been an easy life, for much of what he says is true. Always he felt himself in competition with his father, and never could he surpass his father's abilities. Now I will tell you something. My Julian has a love for you that is almost holy. He thinks you are the best thing that has ever happened in his life, and to him you are without flaw. If you have flaws, hide them. He won't understand. A hundred times he's been in then out of love, all within the space of a few months. For years you frustrated him. So now that he's your husband, give to him generously all the love that's been denied, for I am not a demonstrative woman. I have always wanted to be, but somehow I could never humble myself to touch first. Touch him often, Catherine. Take his hand when he would pull from you and go off and sulk alone. Understand why he's moody, and love him three times as much. That way you will bring out the best in him, for he does have admirable qualities. He has to, for he is Georges's son.”

She kissed me, and said good-bye for a while, and made me swear to come with Julian often on visits. “Fit me in the

corners of your life,” she said with sadness making her face long and hollow eyed. But when I promised, and turned to look, Julian was glaring hard at the both of us.

* * *

Chris came home for his Easter vacation, and less than eagerly he greeted Julian. I noticed Julian glaring at him with narrowed, suspicious eyes.

No sooner were Chris and I alone when he bellowed, “You married *him*? Why couldn’t you wait? How could you be so intuitive when we were locked away and so damned dumb now that we’re out! I was wrong not wanting you to marry Paul only because he is so much older. And I admit it, I was jealous, and didn’t want you to marry anyone. I had a dream of you and me ... someday. Well ... you know what I dreamed. But if it had to be a choice between Paul and Julian, then it should have been Paul! He’s the one who took us in, and fed and clothed us, and gave us the best of everything. I don’t like Julian. He’ll destroy you.”

He hesitated, turning his back so I couldn’t see his face. He was twenty-one and beginning to take on the virile strength of a man. In him I could see so much of our father—and our mother. And when I wanted to, I could take things and twist them to suit my purpose, and so I thought he was more like Momma in some ways than like Daddy. I started to say this, and then I too floundered, for I couldn’t. He wasn’t anything at all like our mother!

Chris was strong ... she was weak. He was noble, she was without any honor at all. “Chris ... don’t make it harder for me. Let’s be friends again. Julian is hot-headed and arrogant and a lot of things that irritate on the surface, but underneath he’s a little boy.”

“But you don’t love him,” he said without meeting my eyes.

In a few hours Julian and I would be leaving. I asked Carrie if she would like to come and live in New York with us, but I had lost her trust; I had betrayed her too many times already and she let me know it. “You go on back to New York, Cathy,

where it snows all the time, and muggers get you in the park, and killers get you in the subway—*but you leave me here!* I used to want to be with you, *now I don't care!* You went and married that ole Julian with the black eyes when you could have been Dr. Paul's wife, and my real mother. *I'll marry him!* You think he won't want me 'cause I'm too little—but he will. You think he's too old for me, but I won't be able to get anybody else, so he'll feel sorry and marry me, and we'll have six children—*you just wait and see!*”

“Carrie—”

“Shut up! I don't like you now! *Go away! Stay away! Dance until you die! Chris and me don't want you! Nobody here wants you!*”

Those screamed words hurt! My Carrie, yelling at me to go away, when I'd been like a mother to her most of her life. Then I looked over to where Chris was standing before the pink sweetheart roses, his shoulders sagging, and in his eyes, oh, those blue, blue eyes ... that look would always follow me. Never, never was his love going to set me free to love anyone without reservations as long as he kept loving me.

* * *

Just an hour before we had to leave for the airport Paul's car turned into the drive. He smiled at me as he always smiled, as if nothing between us had changed. He had some tale to tell Julian of a medical convention that had kept him away, and he was terribly sad and sorry to hear his father had died. He shook hands with Chris, then slapped him heartily on the back, the way men so commonly showed affection to one another. He greeted Henny, kissed Carrie and gave her a little box of candy, and only then did he look at me.

“Hello, Cathy.”

That told me so much. I was no longer Catherine, a woman he could love as an equal, I had been moved back to only a daughter. “And, Cathy, you can't take Carrie with you to New York. She belongs with me and Henny so she can see her brother from time to time, and I'd hate for her to change schools too.”

“I wouldn’t leave you for nothing,” said Carrie staunchly. Julian went upstairs to finish packing his things, and I dared to follow Paul out into the garden, despite the forbidding look Chris gave me. He was down on his knees, still wearing a good suit, pulling up a few weeds someone had overlooked. He got up quickly when he heard my steps and brushed the grass from his trousers, then he stared off into space as if the last thing he wanted to do was to look at me.

“Paul ... this would have been our wedding day.”

“Would it? I’d forgotten.”

“You haven’t forgotten,” I said, drawing closer, “ ‘The first day of spring, a fresh start’ you said. I’m so sorry I spoiled everything. I was a fool to have believed Amanda. I was a double fool not to have waited to talk to you first before I married Julian.”

“Let’s not talk about it anymore,” he said with a heavy sigh. “It’s all over now, and finished.” Voluntarily he stepped close enough to draw me into his arms. “Cathy, I went away to be alone. I needed that time to think. When you lost faith in me, you turned impulsively, but truthfully, to the man who has loved you for a number of years. Any fool with eyes could see that. And if you can be honest with yourself, you have been in love with Julian almost as long as he’s loved you. I believe you put your love for him on a shelf because you thought you owed me... .”

“Stop saying that! I love you, not him. I’ll always love you!”

“You’re all mixed up, Cathy... . You want me, you want him, you want security, you want adventure. You think you can have everything, and you can’t. I told you a long time ago April wasn’t meant for September. We did and said a lot of things to convince ourselves that the years between us didn’t matter, but they do matter. And it isn’t only the years, it’s the space that would separate us. You’d be somewhere dancing and I’d be here, rooted and tied down but for a few weeks a year. I’m a doctor first and a husband second—sooner or later you’d find that out and you’d turn to Julian eventually

anyway.” He smiled, and tenderly kissed away the tears I always had to shed, and he told me fate always dealt out the right cards. “And we’ll still see each other—it isn’t as if we’re forever lost to one another—and I have my memories of how wonderfully sweet and exciting it was between us.”

“You don’t love me!” I cried accusingly. “You never loved me, or you wouldn’t be taking this so agreeably!”

Softly he chuckled and cuddled me close again, as a father would. “Dear Catherine, my hot-blooded, feisty dancer, what man wouldn’t love you? How did you learn so much about loving locked away in a cold, dim, northern room?”

“From books,” I said, but the lessons taught were not all from books.

His hands were in my hair and his lips were near mine. “I’ll never forget the best birthday gift I ever had.” His breath was warm on my cheeks. “Now here’s the way it’s going to be from now on,” he said firmly. “You and Julian will go back to New York, and you will make him the best wife you are capable of being. The two of you will do your damndest to set the world on fire with your dancing, and you’ve got to determine never to look back with regrets, and forget about me.”

“And you—what about you?”

He lifted his hand and fingered his mustache. “You’d be surprised what this mustache has done for my sex appeal. I might never shave it off.”

We both laughed, real laughter, not faked. I took then the two-carat diamond ring he’d given me and tried to return it to him. “No! I want you to keep that ring. Save it to hock, when or if you ever need a bit of extra cash.”

* * *

Julian and I flew back to New York and hunted for weeks before we found just the right cozy apartment. He wanted something much more elegant, but between us we didn’t earn enough for the penthouse apartment he thought was our due.

“Sooner or later though, I’ll see we live in that kind of place, near Central Park, in rooms filled with real flowers.”

“We don’t have time to baby along real plants and flowers,” I said, having experienced all the time and trouble it took to keep flowers and plants alive and healthy. “And when we go to visit Carrie, we can always enjoy Paul’s gardens.”

“I don’t like that doctor of yours.”

“He’s not *my* doctor!” I felt fluttery inside, afraid for no reason at all. “Why don’t you like Paul? Everybody else likes him well enough.”

“Yeah, I know,” he answered shortly, pausing with his fork held midway between his plate and his mouth. He gave me a heavy, solemn look. “That’s the trouble, my darling wife, I think you like him *too* much, even now. And what’s more, I’m not crazy about your brother, either. Your sister is okay. You can ask her up for visits once in a while—but don’t you ever forget, not for one second, that I come first in your life now. Not Chris, not Carrie, and, most of all, not that doctor you were engaged to. I’m not blind or stupid, Cathy. I’ve seen him look at you, and though I don’t know how far you went with him before you’d better let it be dead now!”

My head bowed with the panic I felt. My brother and sister were like extensions of myself! I needed them in my life, not just on the fringes. What had I done? I had the blinding precognition that he was going to be my loving keeper, my jailor, and I’d be as imprisoned with him as I’d been in the locked room in Foxworth Hall! Only this time I’d be as free to come and go as far as his invisible chain would allow. “I love you like crazy,” he said, polishing off the last of his meal. “You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I want you at my side all the time, *never* out of sight. I need you to keep me straight. I drink too much sometimes, and then I get mean, real mean, Cathy. I want you to make me over into what you think I am on stage; I don’t want to hurt you.”

He touched me then, for I knew he’d been terribly hurt, as I’d been hurt, and he’d been so disappointed in his father, as my mother had disappointed me. And he needed me. Maybe

Paul was right. Fate had used Amanda to deal out the right cards so Julian and I would be winners, not losers. Youth did call to its own age, and he was young, handsome, a talented dancer—and charming when he wanted to be. He had a cruel, dark side, I knew that. I'd experienced some of that ... but I could tame him. I wouldn't let him be my ruler and my judge, my superior or my master. We'd make it fifty-fifty, share and be equals, and eventually, one bright and sunny morning, I'd wake up and see his darkly stubbled face and know I loved him. Know I loved him better than anyone I'd loved before—anyone.

PART THREE



Dreams Come True



While Julian and I worked slavishly to reach the top of the ballet world, Chris whizzed his way through college, and in his fourth year he entered an accelerated program for medical students, completing his fourth year of college while simultaneously beginning his first year of medical school.

He flew to New York and explained it to me while we strolled hand in hand in Central Park. It was spring and the birds were chirping and merrily collecting the trash they needed to build nests.

“Chris, Julian doesn’t know you’re here, and I’d rather he didn’t find out. He’s terribly jealous of you, and Paul too. Would you feel insulted if I didn’t ask you over for dinner?”

“Yes,” he said stubbornly. “I came up to visit my sister, and visit my sister I will. Not furtively either. You can tell him I came to visit Yolanda. Besides, I only intend to stay for the weekend.”

Julian was obsessively possessive of me. He was like an only child who needed constant pampering, and I didn’t mind, except when he tried to keep me from my family. “Okay. He’s rehearsing now, and he thinks I’m home doing housework before I join him this afternoon. But stay away from Yolanda, Chris. She’s nothing but trouble. Whatever she does with any man is news for the class the next day.”

He gave me a strange look. “Cathy, I don’t give a damn about Yolanda. She was just my excuse to see you; I know your husband hates me.”

“I wouldn’t call it hate ... not exactly.”

“All right, call it jealousy, but whatever it is, he’s not keeping me from you.” His tone and his look grew serious. “Cathy, always you and Julian seem just on the verge of

making it big, and then something happens, and you never become the stars you should be. What is it?"

I shrugged. I didn't know what it was. I thought Julian and I were as dedicated to the dance as any others, and even more so, and still Chris was right ... we'd put on a spectacular performance and draw rave reviews, and then we'd slide backwards. Perhaps Madame Zolta didn't want us to become superstars, lest we leave her company and join another.

"How is Paul?" I asked as we sat on a bench dappled with sunlight and shade.

Chris had my hand in his and tightly he held it. "Paul's Paul ... he never changes. Carrie adores him; he adores her. He treats me like a younger brother he's very proud of. And really, Cathy, I don't think I would have made it as well without all the tutoring he gave me."

"He hasn't found anyone else to love?" I asked in a tight voice. I didn't fully believe Paul's letters that said there weren't any women he cared for.

"Cathy," said Chris, putting his fingers tenderly under my chin to tilt my face upward to his, "how can Paul find anyone to equal you?" I could have cried from the expression in his eyes. Would the past never set me free?

* * *

No sooner did Julian see Chris than the two of them were at it. "I don't want you sleeping under my roof!" stormed Julian. "I don't like you and I never have and never will—so get the hell out and forget you've got a sister!" Chris left to stay at a hotel, and on the sly we met once or twice before he went back to his school. Dully I went back to attend class with Julian, then the afternoon rehearsal and the evening performance. Sometimes we had the lead roles, sometimes only minor ones, and sometimes, as punishment for some sarcastic remark Julian would make to Madame Zolta, we both had to dance in the *corps*. Chris didn't visit New York again for three years.

* * *

When Carrie was fifteen she came to spend her first summer with us in New York. Hesitating and frightened-looking from the long flight she'd made all alone, she ambled slowly through the bustling, noisy crowds at the airport terminal. Julian spotted her first and he cried out, then bounded forward to sweep her up in his arms. "Hi there, gorgeous sister-in-law!" he greeted, planting a hearty kiss on her cheek. "My, how much you've grown to look like Cathy—first thing you know I won't even know the difference—so watch out! Are you positively sure the dancing life isn't for you?"

She was made happy and secure by his pleasure to see her again, and quickly she responded by throwing her arms about his neck. In the three years Julian and I had been married, she'd learned to love him for what he appeared to be. "Don't you dare call me Tinkerbell!" she said, laughing. It was our standing joke, for Julian thought Carrie just the right size to play a fairy—and kept telling her it still wasn't too late for her to become a dancer. If someone else had even suggested such a thing, she would have been deeply insulted, but for Julian, someone she deeply admired, she would be a fairy only by flitting around and fluttering her arms. She knew he meant "fairy" as a compliment, and not a criticism of her small size.

Then it was my turn to have Carrie in my arms. I loved her so much I was overwhelmed by the force that swept over me and made me feel I was holding a child born of my own flesh. Though there was never a time I could look at Carrie and not long for Cory who should be at her side. I wondered too, if he had lived, would he too stand only four feet six inches tall? Carrie and I laughed and cried, exchanged news and then she whispered so Julian wouldn't overhear. "I don't wear a training bra anymore. I've got on a *real* one."

"I know," I whispered back. "The first thing I noticed was your bosom."

"Really?" She appeared delighted. "You can see them? I didn't think they showed that much."

"Well of course they show," said Julian, who shouldn't have sneaked so close to eavesdrop on this sisterly confidence.

“That’s the first thing my eyes go for once they get past a fabulous face. Carrie, do you realize you have a fabulous face? I just might kick out my wife and marry you.”

It was a remark that didn’t sit well with me. Many an argument we’d have because he cared too much for very young girls. However I was determined to let nothing spoil Carrie’s vacation in New York, the first time she’d come alone, and Julian and I had mapped out a schedule so we could show her everything. At least there was one member of my family Julian would accept.

* * *

The months flew swiftly by, and then the spring we’d waited for so long was upon us.

Julian and I were in Barcelona, enjoying our first real vacation since we’d married. Five years and three months of married life, and still there were times when Julian seemed a stranger. Madame Zolta had suggested the vacation, thinking it a good idea if we visited Spain so we could study the Flamenco style of dancing. In a hired car we drove from one town to another, loving the beautiful countryside. We liked the late evening meals, the sleepy siesta afternoons lying on the rocky shores of the Côte d’Azur—but, most of all, we loved Spanish music and dancing.

Madame Z. had mapped our tour throughout Spain, listing all the villas that charged nominal rates. She was thrifty and taught all her dancers her tricks. If one occupied one of the small cottages near a hotel, and cooked their own meals, the fee was even less. So this was where Julian and I were on the day Chris’s graduation invitation arrived. It had followed us all over Spain, to catch up with us here.

My heart jumped when I spied the thick creamy envelope, knowing it contained the graduation announcement of Chris’s achievement—his medical degree—at long last! It was almost as if I myself had completed college, then medical school all within seven years.

Very carefully I used a letter opener so I could put this souvenir in my scrapbook of dreams, some of which were

coming true. Inside was not only the formal announcement, but also a note on which Chris had written modestly:

I am embarrassed to tell you this, but I am the top grad in a class of two hundred. Don't you dare find an excuse to keep away. You have to be there to bask in the glow of my excitement, as I bask in the radiance of your admiration. I cannot possibly accept my M.D. if you aren't there to see. And you can tell Julian this when he tries to prevent your coming.

The bothersome thing about this was Julian and I had signed a contract some time ago to tape a TV production of *Giselle*. It was set for June, but now in May they wanted us both. We were sure the television exposure would make us the stars we'd strived so long to be.

It seemed a perfect time to approach Julian with the news. We had returned to our cottage after touring old castles. As soon as our evening meal was over we sat out on the terrace sipping glasses of a red wine he was nuts about, but that gave me a headache. Only then did I dare to timidly approach going back to the States in time for Chris's May graduation. "Really, we do have the time to fly there, and be back in plenty of time to go into rehearsals for *Giselle*."

"Oh, come off it, Cathy!" he said impatiently. "It's a difficult role for you, and you'll be tired, and you'll need to rest up."

I objected. Two weeks was plenty of time ... and a TV taping didn't take too long. "Please, darling, let's go. I'd be sick not to see my brother become a doctor, just as you'd be if your brother was reaching the goal he'd strived for year after year."

"Hell, no!" he flared, narrowing his dark eyes and shooting sparks my way. "I get so damned sick and tired of hearing Chris this, and Chris that, and if it isn't his name you drum in my ears, then it's Paul this and that! *You are not going!*"

I pleaded with him to be reasonable. "He's my only brother, his graduation day is as important to me as it is to him. You can't understand how much this means not only to him, but to

me as well! You think he and I lived lives of luxury compared to yours, but you can rest assured, it was no picnic!”

“Your past is something you don’t talk about to me,” he snapped. “It’s exactly as if you were born the day you found your precious Dr. Paul! Cathy, you are my wife now, and your place is with me. Your Paul has Carrie, and they’ll be there, so your brother won’t lack applause when he gets that damned M.D.!”

“You can’t tell me what I can do and what I can’t do! I’m your wife, not your slave!”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” he said, standing and seizing hold of my arm. “C’mon, let’s hit the sack. I’m tired.” Without speaking I allowed him to tug me into the bedroom where I began to undress. But he came over to help, and in this way I was informed it was to be a night of love, or rather sex. I shoved his hands away. Scowling, he put them back on my shoulders and leaned to nibble on my neck; he fondled my breasts before he reached to unhook my bra. I slapped his hands away, screamed *no!* But he persisted in taking off my bra. Easy as a mask to take off, he threw away his anger and put on his dreamy-eyed romantic look.

There had been a time when Julian had appeared to me the epitome of everything sophisticated, worldly, elegant, but compared to the way he was now, since his father’s death, he’d been only a country-bumpkin. There were times I actually detested him. This was such a time. “*I am going, Julian. You may come with me, or you may meet me in New York after I fly back from the graduation ceremony. Or you can stay on here and sulk. Whatever—I am going. I want you to come with me and share in the family celebration, for you never share in anything—you hold me back, so I don’t share either—but this time you can’t stop me!* It’s too important!”

Quietly he listened and he smiled in a way that sent chills down my spine. Oh, how wicked he could look. “Hear this, beloved wife, when you married me, I became your ruler, and by my side you will stay until I kick you out. And I’m not yet ready to do that. You are not leaving me alone in Spain when I

don't speak Spanish. Maybe you can learn from records, but I can't."

"Don't threaten me, Julian." I said coolly, though I backed off and felt a terrible pounding of panic. "Without me you don't have anyone who cares, except your mother, and since you don't care for her, who have you got left?"

Lightly he reached out to slap both my cheeks. I closed my eyes, resigned to accept anything he did, as long as I could go to Chris. I allowed him to undress me and do what he would, even though he clutched my buttocks so hard they hurt. I could, when I chose, withdraw until I was outside of myself, looking on, and what he did to me that was appalling didn't really matter—for I wasn't truthfully there—unless the pain was great—as sometimes it was.

"Don't try and sneak away," he warned, his words muffled because he was kissing everywhere, teasing me as a cat who plays with a mouse when it's not hungry. "Swear on your word of honor that you will stay and miss your dearly beloved brother's graduation—stay with the husband who needs you, who adores you, who can't live without you."

He was mocking me, though his need for me was that of a child needing his mother. That was what I had become—his mother, in everything but sex. I had to choose his suits, his socks and shirts, his costumes, his practice outfits, though he consistently refused to let me handle the household accounts.

"I will not swear to anything so unfair. Chris has come to see you perform and you have gloried in showing off to him. Now let him have his turn. He's worked hard for it." I pulled free from him then, and strolled to pick up a black lace nightgown he liked me to wear. I hated black nightgowns and underwear; they reminded me of whores and call girls—and my own mother who'd had a fancy for black lingerie. "Get up off your knees, Julian. You look ludicrous. You can't do anything to me if I choose to go. A bruise would show, and besides, you've grown so accustomed to my weight and balance you can't even lift another dancer properly."

He came at me angrily. “You’re mad because we haven’t made it to the top, aren’t you? You’re blaming me because our booking was canceled. And now Madame Z. has given us a leave so I can sober up and come back refreshed, made wholesome by playing games with my wife. Cathy, I don’t know how to entertain myself except by dancing; I’m not interested in books or museums like you are, and there are ways of hurting and humiliating you that won’t leave any bruises—except on your ego—and you should know that by now.”

Foolishly I smiled, when I should have known better than to challenge him when he was feeling less than confident. “What’s the matter, Jule? Didn’t your sex break satisfy your lust for perversion? Why don’t you go out and find a schoolgirl, for I’m not going to cooperate.”

I’d never before thrown in his face that I knew about his debaucheries with very young girls. It had hurt at first when I found out, but now I knew he used those girls like he used paper napkins, to casually toss away when soiled, and back he’d come to me, to say he loved me, needed me, and I was the *only* one.

Slowly he advanced, using his pantherlike stalk that told me he would be ruthless, but I held my head high, knowing I could escape by shutting off my mind, and he couldn’t afford to hit me. He paused one foot away. I heard the clock on the nightstand ticking.

“Cathy, you will do as I say if you know what’s good for you.”

He was cruel that night, evil and spiteful; he forced upon me what should only be given in love. He dared me to bite. And this time I wouldn’t have just one black eye, but two, and maybe worse. “And I’ll tell everybody you are sick. Your period has you so badly cramped you can’t dance—and you won’t skip out on me, or make any phone calls, for I’ll bind you to the bed and hide your passport.” He grinned and slapped my face lightly. “Now, honey-chile, whatcha gonna do this time?”

* * *

Smiling and himself again, Julian sauntered naked to the breakfast table, flung himself down, sprawled out his long, beautifully shaped legs and asked casually, "What's for breakfast?" He held out his arms so I could come and kiss his lips, which I did. I smiled, brushed the lock of dangling hair from his forehead, poured his coffee, and then said, "Good morning, darling. Same old breakfast for you. Fried eggs and fried ham. I'm having a cheese omelet."

"I'm sorry, Cathy," he murmured. "Why do you try to bring out the worst in me? I only use those girls to spare you."

"If they don't mind, then I don't mind ... but don't ever force me to do what I did last night. I'm very good at hating, Julian. Just as good as you are at forcing. And at harboring revenge I'm an expert!"

I slid onto his plate two fried eggs and two slices of ham. No toast and no butter. Both of us ate in silence. He sat across the checkered red and white tablecloth, closely shaven, clean and smelling of soap and shaving lotion. In his own dark and light exotic way he was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

"Cathy ... you haven't said you love me today."

"I love you, Julian."

An hour after breakfast I was madly searching every room to find my passport, while Julian slept on the bed, where I'd dragged him from the kitchen after he fell asleep from all the sedatives I'd dumped in his coffee.

He wasn't nearly as good at hiding as I was at finding. Under the bed, and under the blue rug, I found my passport. Quickly I threw clothes into my suitcases. When I was packed, dressed and ready to go, I leaned above him and kissed him good-bye. He was breathing deep and regularly, and smiling slightly; perhaps the drugs were giving him pleasant dreams. Though I'd drugged him, I hesitated, wondering if I'd done the right thing. Shrugging off my indecision, I headed toward the garage. Yes, I did what I had to do. If he were awake now, he'd be burred to my side all through the day, with my

passport in his pocket. I'd left a note telling him where I was going.

* * *

Paul and Carrie met me at the airport in North Carolina. I hadn't seen Paul in three years. Down the ramp I went, my eyes locked with his. His face tilted up to mine, the sun in his eyes so he had to squint. "I'm glad you could come," he said, "though I'm sorry Julian couldn't make it."

"He's sorry too," I said, looking up into his face. He was the type of man who improved with age. The mustache I'd persuaded him to grow was still there, and when he smiled dimples showed in both his cheeks.

"Are you searching to find gray hair?" he teased when I stared too long and perhaps with too much admiration. "If you see any let me know and I'll have my barber touch them up. I'm not ready for gray hair yet. I like your new hair style; it makes you even more beautiful. But you're much too thin. What you need is lots of Henny's home cooking. She's here, you know, in a motel's small kitchen, whipping up homemade rolls your brother so loves. It's her gift to him for becoming another doctor-son."

"Did Chris get my telegram? He does know I'm coming?"

"Oh, indeed yes! He was fretting through every moment, afraid Julian would refuse to let you leave him, and knowing Julian wouldn't come. Honestly, Cathy, if you hadn't shown up, I don't think Chris *would* accept his degree."

To sit beside Paul, with Henny on his far side and Carrie next to me, and watch my Christopher stride down the aisle and up the steps to accept his diploma, and then stand behind the podium and make the valedictory speech, put tears in my eyes and a swelling happiness in my heart. He did it so beautifully I cried. Paul, Henny and Carrie also had tears to shed. Even my success on stage couldn't compare to the pride I felt now. And Julian, he should be here too, making himself a part of my family and not stubbornly resisting all the time.

I thought of our mother too, who should be here to witness this. I knew she was in London, for I was still following her movements about the world. Waiting, always waiting to see her again. What would I do when I did? Would I chicken out and let her get away again? I knew one thing, she'd learn that her eldest son was now a doctor—for I'd be sure she knew—just as I kept her informed about what Julian and I were doing.

Of course I knew by now why my mother kept always on the move—she was afraid, so afraid I'd catch up with her! She'd been in Spain when Julian and I arrived. The news had been published in several papers, and not long after that I picked up a Spanish paper to see the lovely face of Mrs. Bartholomew Winslow, flying to London as fast as she could.

Tearing my thoughts from her, I glanced around at the thousands of relatives crowded into the huge auditorium. When I looked back at the stage I saw Chris up there, ready to step behind the podium. I don't know how he managed to find me, but somehow he did. Our gazes met and locked, and across all the heads of those who sat between us, we met in silent communication and shared an overwhelming jubilation! We'd done it! Both of us! Reached our goals; become what we'd set out to be when we were children. It wouldn't have mattered at all about those years and months we'd lost—if Cory hadn't died, if our mother hadn't betrayed us, if Carrie had gained the height that should have been hers, and would have been if Momma had found another solution. Maybe I wasn't a prima ballerina yet—but I would be one day, and Chris would be the finest doctor alive.

Watching Chris, I believed we shared the same thoughts. I saw him swinging a bat when he was ten to smash a ball over the fence, and then he'd run like mad to touch all bases in the quickest possible time, when he could have walked and made his home run. But that wasn't his way, to make it look too easy. I saw him racing on his bike yards ahead of me, then slowing down deliberately so I could catch up and we'd both reach home at the same time. I saw him in the locked room, in his bed three feet from mine, smiling encouragingly. I saw him again in the attic shadows, almost hidden in the immense space, looking so lost and bewildered as he turned away from

the mother he loved ... to me. Vicariously we'd shared so many romances while lying on a dirty old mattress in the attic while the rain pelted down and separated us from all humanity. Was that what did it? Was that why he couldn't see any girl but me? How sad for him, for me.

The university planned a huge luncheon celebration, and at our table Carrie babbled away, but Chris and I could only stare at each other, each of us trying to find the right words to say.

"Dr. Paul has moved into a new office building, Cathy," gushed Carrie breathlessly. "I'd hate him being so far away, but I am going to be his secretary! I am going to have a brand new electric typewriter colored red! Dr. Paul thought a custom-painted typewriter of purple might look a little garish, but I didn't think it would, so I settled for second best. And nobody ever is gonna have a better secretary than I'll be! I'll answer his phone, make his appointments, keep his filing system, do his bookkeeping, and every day he and I will eat lunch together!" She beamed on Paul a bright smile. It seemed he'd given her the security to regain the exuberant self-confidence that she'd lost. But I was to find out later, sadly, this was Carrie's false facade, one for Paul, Chris and me to see, and when she was alone, it was far different.

Then Chris frowned and asked why Julian hadn't come. "He wanted to come, Chris, really he did," I lied. "But he has obligations that keep him so busy he couldn't spare the time. He asked me to give you his congratulations. We do have very tight schedules. Actually, I can only stay two days. We're going to do a TV production of *Giselle* next month."

Later we celebrated again in a fine hotel restaurant. This was our chance to give Chris the gifts each of us had for him. It had been our childish habit to always shake a present before it was opened, but the big box Paul gave Chris was too heavy to shake. "Books!" said Chris rightly. Six huge, fat medical reference volumes to represent an entire set that must have cost Paul a fortune. "I couldn't carry more than six," he explained. "The remainder of the set will be waiting for you at home." I stared at him, realizing his home was the only real home we had.

Deliberately Chris saved my gift for last, anticipating this would be the best and in that way, just as we used to, we could stretch out the enjoyment. It was too large and much too heavy to shake and besides I cautioned him it was fragile, but he laughed, for we used to always try and trick the other, “No, it’s more books—nothing else could be as heavy.” He gave me a funny, wistful smile that made him seem a boy again.

“I give you one guess, my Christopher Doll, and one hint. Inside that box is the one thing you said you wanted more than anything else—and our father said he would give it to you the day you got your black doctor’s bag.” Why had I used that kind of soft voice, to make Paul turn his eyes and narrow them, and see the blood that rose to stain my brother’s cheeks? *Were we never to forget, and change? Were we forever going to feel too much?* Chris fiddled with the ribbons, careful not to tear the fancy paper. When he stripped off the paper, tears of remembrance welled in his eyes. His hands trembled as he carefully lifted from the cushioned box a French mahogany case with a gleaming brass lock, key and carrying handle. He gave me a tortured look even as his lips quivered, seeming incredulous that after all these years I’d remembered.

“Oh, damn it, Cathy,” he said all choked up with emotion, “I never really hoped to own one of these. You shouldn’t have spent so much ... it must have cost a fortune ... and you shouldn’t have!”

“But I wanted to, and it’s not an original, Chris, only a replica of a John Cuff Side Pillar Microscope. But the man in the shop said it was an exact duplicate of the original and a collector’s item nevertheless. And it works too.” He shook his head as he handled the solid brass and ivory accessory instruments, and the optical lens, the tweezers, and the leather-bound book titled *Antique Microscopes, 1675-1840*.

I said faintly, “In case you decide to play around in your spare time, you can do your own research on germs and viruses.”

“Some toy you give,” he said, gritty-voiced, and now the two tears in the corners of his eyes began to slide down his

cheeks. “You remembered the day Daddy said he would give me this when I became a doctor.”

“How could I forget? That little catalog was the one thing you took of yours that wasn’t clothes, when we went to Foxworth Hall. And every time he swatted a fly, or killed a spider, Paul, Chris would long to have a John Cuff microscope. And once he said he wanted to be the Mouseman of the Attic, and discover for himself why mice die so young.”

“Do mice die young?” asked Paul seriously. “How did you know they were young? Did you capture baby ones, and mark them in some way?”

Chris and I met eyes. Yeah, we’d lived in another world back when we were young and imprisoned, so that we could look at the mice who came to steal and nibble on our food, especially the one named Mickey.

* * *

Now I had to go back to New York and face Julian’s wrath. But first I had to have a little time alone with my brother. Paul took Henny and Carrie to a movie while Chris and I strolled the campus of his university. “And you see that window up there on the second floor, the fifth from the end there—that was my room I shared with Hank. We had a study group of eight guys, and all through college and med school we stuck together, and studied together, and when we dated, we dated together.”

“Oh,” I sighed. “Did you date a lot?”

“Only on the weekends. The study schedule was too heavy for socializing during the week. None of it was easy, Cathy. There’s so much to know, physics, biology, anatomy, chemistry, and I could go on and on.”

“You’re not telling me what I want to hear. Who did you date? Was there, or is there, someone special?”

He caught my hand and drew me closer to his side. “Well, should I begin to list them one by one, and by name? If I did it would take several hours. If there had been someone special, all I would do is name one—and I can’t do that. I liked them

all ... but I didn't like any well enough to love, if that's what you want to know."

Yes, that was exactly what I wanted to know. "I'm sure you didn't live a celibate life, even though you didn't fall in love ... ?"

"That's none of your business," he said lightly.

"I think it is. It would give me peace to know you had a girl you loved."

"I do have a girl I love," he answered. "I've known her all my life. When I go to sleep at night, I dream of her, dancing overhead, calling my name, kissing my cheek, screaming when she has nightmares, and I wake up to take the tar from her hair. There are times when I wake up to ache all over, as she aches all over, and I dream I kiss the marks the whip made ... and I dream of a certain night when she and I went out on the cold slate roof and stared up at the sky, and she said the moon was the eye of God looking down and condemning us for what we were. So there, Cathy, is the girl who haunts me and rules me, and fills me with frustrations, and darkens all the hours I spend with other girls who just can't live up to the standards she set. And I hope to God you're satisfied."

I turned to move as in a dream, and in that dream I put my arms about him and stared up into his face, his beautiful face that haunted me too. "Don't love me, Chris. Forget about me. Do as I do, take whomever knocks first on your door, and let her in."

He smiled ironically and put me quickly from him. "I did exactly what you did, Catherine Doll, the first who knocked on my door *was* let in—and now I can't drive her out. But that's my problem—not yours."

"I don't deserve to be there. I'm not an angel, not a saint ... you should know that."

"Angel, saint, Devil's spawn, good or evil, you've got me pinned to the wall and labeled as yours until the day I die. And if you die first, then it won't be long before I follow."

Gathering Shadows



Both Chris and Paul, to say nothing of Carrie, persuaded me to go back to Clairmont and spend a few days with my family. When I was there, surrounded by all the cozy comforts, the charm of the house and the gardens had their chance to beguile me again. I told myself this was the way it would have been if I'd married Paul. No problems. A sweet, easy life. Then, when I let myself wonder how Julian was faring, I thought of all the mean and spiteful ways he had of annoying me by opening my mail from Paul or Chris, as if he were looking for incriminating evidence. No doubt when he flew back from Spain, he'd deliberately let my house plants die as a way to punish me.

There must be something weird about me, I was thinking as I stood on the balcony overlooking Paul's magnificent gardens. I wasn't that beautiful, or that unforgettable, or that indispensable, to any man. I stayed there and let Chris come up behind me and put his arm about my shoulders. I leaned my head against him and sighed, staring up at the moon. The same old moon that had known our shame before, still there to witness more. I didn't do anything; I swear I didn't, just let his arm stay about me. Maybe I moved a little to contour myself against him when he had me in a tight embrace. "Cathy, Cathy," he groaned, pressing his lips down into my hair, "sometimes life just doesn't have any meaning without you. I'd throw away my M.D. and set out for the South Pacific if you'd go with me... ."

"And leave Carrie?"

"We could take her with us." I thought he was playing a game of wishing, like we had when children. "I'd buy a sail boat and take out tourists, and if they cut themselves I'd have all the training to bandage their cuts." He kissed me then with

the fervor of a man gone wild from denial. I didn't want to respond, yet I did, making him gasp as he tried to coax me into his room.

"Stop!" I cried. "I don't want you except as a brother! Leave me alone! Go find someone else!"

Dazed and hurt-looking, he backed off. "What kind of woman are you anyway, Cathy? You returned my kisses—you responded in every way you could—and now you draw away and pull the virtuous act!"

"Hate me then!"

"Cathy, I could never hate you." He smiled at me bitterly. "There are times when I want to hate you, times when I think you are just the same as our mother, but I don't ever stop loving once I start!" He entered his room and slammed the door, leaving me speechless, staring after him.

No! I wasn't like Momma, I wasn't! I'd responded only because I was still seeking my lost identity. Julian stole my reflection and made it his. Julian wanted to steal my strength and call it his own; he wanted me to make all the decisions, so he couldn't be blamed when a mistake was made. I was still trying to prove my worth, so in the end I could disprove the grandmother's condemnation. *See, Grandmother, I am not bad or evil. Or else everyone wouldn't love me so much.* I was still that selfish, ravenous, demanding attic mouse who had to have it proven time and time again that I was worthy enough to live in the sunlight.

I was thinking about this one day when I was on the back veranda, and Carrie was planting pansies she'd grown from seed, and beside her were little pots with tiny petunia settings. Chris came out from the house and tossed me the evening newspaper. "There's an article in there that might be of some interest to you," he said in an off-hand way. "I thought about not showing it to you, but then I decided I should."

The husband and wife ballet team of Julian Marquet and Catherine Dahl, our own local celebrities, seems to have parted company. For the first time Julian Marquet will partner a ballerina other than his wife in a major

television production of *Giselle*. It has been rumored about that Miss Dahl is ill, and also rumored that the ballet team are about to split.

There was more to read, including the fact that Yolanda Lange was to replace me! This was our big chance—another of many, to make stars of ourselves, and he was putting Yolanda in my part! Damn him! Why didn't he grow up? Every chance we had he blew it. He couldn't lift Yolanda easily, not with his bad back.

Chris threw me a strange look before he asked, "What are you going to do about it?" I yelled back, "Nothing!" For a second or two he didn't say anything.

"Cathy, he didn't want you to come to my graduation, did he? And that's why he's put Yolanda in your role. I warned you not to let him be your manager. Madame Zolta would have treated you more fairly."

I got up to pace the porch. Our original contract with Madame Z. had expired two years ago, and all we owed her now was twelve performances a year. The rest of the time Julian and I were freelance, and could dance with whatever company we chose.

Let Julian have Yolanda. Let him make a fool of himself—I hoped to God he dropped her! Let him have all his teenybopper playmates for sex games ... I didn't care. Then I was running in the house and up to my bedroom where I flung myself face down and bawled.

Everything was made worse by the fact that I had made a secret trip to the gynecologist the day before. Two missed periods didn't really mean anything for a woman like me, who was so irregular. I might not be pregnant; it might be just another false alarm ... and if it wasn't, I prayed I'd have the strength to go through with an abortion! I didn't need a baby in my life. I knew once I had a child, he or she would become the center of my world, and *luv* would again spoil a ballerina who could have been the best.

Ballet music was in my head when I drove Chris's car to visit Madame Marisha one hot spring day when all the world

seemed sleepy and lazy except for those idiot children being instructed by a shrill little bat wearing black, as always. I sat in the shadows near the far wall of a huge auditorium and watched the large class of boys and girls dance. It was scary to think of how soon those girls would grow up to replace the stars of the present. Then I too would become another Madame Marisha and the years would flow like seconds, until I was Madame Zolta, and all my beauty would be preserved only in old, faded photographs.

“Catherine!” called Madame M. joyfully when she spied me. She came striding swiftly, gracefully my way. “Why do you sit in shadows?” she asked. “How nice to see your lovely face again. And don’t think I don’t know why you look so sad! You’re one big fool to leave Julian! He’s a big baby; you know he can’t be left alone or he does things to hurt himself, and when he hurts himself, he hurts you too! Why did you let him get control of management? Why did you let him burn up your money as fast as it hits your pockets? I tell you this, in your place, I would never, never have let him put another in my role of *Giselle!*”

God, what a blabbermouth he was!

“Don’t worry about me, Madame,” I said coolly, “if my husband doesn’t want me for his partner anymore, I’m sure there will be others who will.”

She scowled, advanced. She put those bony hands on me and shook me as if to wake me up. Up close, I could see she’d aged terribly since Georges had died. Her ebony hair was almost white now, and streaked with charcoal. She snarled then, baring teeth whiter than they used to be and far more perfect. “You gonna let my son make a fool of you? You let him put another dancer in your place? I gave you credit for having more backbone! Now you hightail it back to New York and push that Yolanda out of his life! Marriage is sacred, and wedding vows are meant to be kept!”

Then she softened and said, “Come now, Catherine,” and led me into her small cluttered office. “Now you tell me about this foolishness going on between you and your husband!”

“It is really none of your business!”

She swung another straight chair to where she could straddle it. Leaning forward upon her arms, she stabbed me with her hard penetrating glare. “Anything, and everything concerning my son is my business!” she snapped. “Now you just sit there and keep quiet, and let me tell you what you don’t know about your husband.” Her voice turned a little kinder. “I was older than Georges when we were married, and even so I dared putting off having a child until I believed the best of my career was behind me, and then I became pregnant. Georges never wanted a child to hold him down, and back, and so, from the beginning Julian had two strikes against him.

“I tell myself we didn’t force the dance upon our son, but we did keep him with us, so the ballet became part of his world, the most important part.” She sighed heavily and wiped a bony hand over her troubled brow. “We were strict with him, I admit that. We did everything we could to make him what was perfect in our eyes, but the more we tried, the more determined he became to be everything we didn’t want him to be. We tried to teach him perfect diction, so he ended up mocking us with all kinds of vulgar street language—gutter talk, Georges called it. You know,” she went on with a wistful expression, “only after my husband was dead and buried did I realize that he never spoke to our son unless it was an order not to do something, or an order to improve his dancing technique. I never realized that Georges could have been jealous of his own son, seeing that he was a better dancer and would achieve more fame. It wasn’t easy for me to become only a ballet mistress, and for Georges to be only an instructor. Many a night we lay on our bed and held to each other, craving the applause, the adulation... . It was a hunger that would not be satisfied until we heard the applause for our son.”

Again she paused, and birdlike craned her neck to peer at me and see if I was paying full attention. Oh, yes, she had my attention. She was telling me so much I needed to know.

“Julian tried to hurt Georges and Georges got hurt because Julian made light of his father’s reputation. One day he called

him only a second-class performer. Georges didn't speak to his own son for a whole month! They never got back together after that. Farther and farther they drifted apart ... until one fine Christmas Day when another prodigy drifted into our lives, and offered herself. *You!* Julian had flown back to visit us, only because I had pleaded with him to try and make it up with his father ... and Julian saw you.

“It is our responsibility to pass along our skills of technique to the younger generation, and still I felt some apprehension in taking you on, mostly because I thought you would hurt my son. I don't know why I thought that, but it seemed obvious from the very start, it was that older doctor you loved. Then I thought you had something very rare, a passion for the dance that is seldom seen. You were, in your own way, equal to what Julian was, and the two of you together were so sensational I couldn't believe my eyes. My son felt it too, the rapport between you two. You turned those big, soft, admiring blue eyes on him, so later he came and told me you were a sex kitten who would fall easily under his spell and into his arms. He and I always had a close relationship, and he confessed to me what other boys would have kept secret.”

She paused, flicked her stony eyes over me and went on breathlessly, “You came, you admired him, you loved him when you were dancing with him, and when you weren't, you were indifferent. The harder you were to win, the more determined he was to have you. I thought you clever, playing a skillful woman's game when you were only a child! And now you, you ... you go and leave him when he was in a foreign country, when he couldn't speak the language, when you should have learned he has weaknesses, many of them, and that he cannot bear to be alone!”

She jumped up like a black, scrawny alleycat and stood above me. “Without Julian to give you inspiration and enhance your talent with his own, where would you be? Without him would you be in New York, dancing with what is fast becoming one of the leading ballet companies? No! You'd be here, raising babies for that doctor. God knows why you said yes to Julian, and how you can keep from loving him. For he tells me you don't, and never have! So you drug him. You

leave him. You take off to see your brother become a doctor, when you know damn well your place is at your husband's side, making him happy and taking care of his wants!

“Yes! Yes!” she shrilled, “he called me long distance and told me everything! Now he thinks he hates you! Now he wants to cut you off. And when he does, he won't have a heart left to keep him alive! For he gave you his heart years and years ago!”

Slowly I rose to my feet; my legs felt weak and trembly. I brushed a hand over my aching forehead, and held back tired tears. All of a sudden it hit me hard, I did love Julian! Now I saw how very much we were alike, him with his hate for his father who had denied him as a son. And me with my hatred for my mother, making me do crazy things, like sending off hateful letters and Christmas cards to sadden her life and never, never let her find peace. Julian in competition with his father, never knowing he'd won, and was better ... and me in competition with my mother—but I had yet to prove myself better. “Madame, I am going to tell you something Julian might not know, and I didn't really know until today; I do love your son. Perhaps I always loved him, and just couldn't accept it.”

She shook her head, then fired her words like bullets. “If you love him, why did you leave him? Answer me that! You left him because you found out he has a liking for young girls? Fool! All men have yearnings for young girls—but still they go on loving their wives! If you let his desire for young flesh drive you away, you are crazy! Slap his face; kick his behind—tell him to leave those girls alone or you will divorce him! Say all of that, and he will be what you want. But when you say nothing, and act like you don't care, you tell him plainly you don't love him, or want him, or need him!”

“I'm not his mother, or a priest, or God,” I said wearily, sick of all the passion she used. Backing toward the door, I tried to leave. “I don't know if I can keep Julian from young girls, but I'm willing to go back and try. I promise to do better. I'll be more understanding, and I'll let him know I love him so

much, I can't abide the thought of him making love to anyone but me."

She came to take me in her arms. She soothed, "Poor baby, if I have been hard on you, it was for your own good. You have to keep my son from destroying himself. When you save him, you save yourself, for I lied when I said you would be nothing without Julian. *He* is the one who would be nothing without you! He has a death wish, always I've known it. He thinks he's not good enough to live on because his father could never convince him he was, and that was my fault too, as well as Georges's. Julian waited for years and years for his father to see him as a son, worthy of being loved for himself. He waited equally as long for Georges to say yes, you will be even a better dancer than I was, and I'm proud of what and who you are. But Georges kept his silence. But you go back and tell Julian Georges did love him. To me he said it many times. Tell him too that his father was proud of him. Tell him, Catherine. Go back and convince him of how much you need and love him. Tell him how sorry you are to have left him alone. Go quickly before he does something terrible to himself!"

* * *

It was time to say good-bye to Carrie, Paul and Henny again. Only this time I didn't have to bid adieu to Chris. He put his foot down. "No! I'm coming with you! I'm not letting you go back to a crazy man. When you've made your peace with him, and I know everything is all right—only then will I leave."

Carrie cried, as she always did, and Paul stood back and let only his eyes speak and say yes, I could find a place in his heart again.

I looked down as the plane began to lift, and saw Paul holding Carrie's small hand, as she tilted her face to stare up at us and waved, and waved until we could see her no more. I squirmed into a comfortable position and put my head on Chris's shoulder, and told him to wake me when we reached New York. "A fine traveling companion you make," he grumbled, but soon his cheek was on my hair as he dozed off too. "Chris," I said sleepily, "remember that book about

Raymond and Lily who were always seeking the magical place where purple grass grew that would fulfill all their wishes? Wouldn't it be wonderful to look down and see purple grass?"

"Yeah," he said as sleepily as I. "I keep looking for it too."

* * *

The plane set down at La Guardia around three. A hot, sultry day. The sun played coy, darting in and out of gathering storm clouds. We were both tired. "At this hour Julian will be in the theater rehearsing. They'll use the rehearsals as a promotion film. There have to be a lot of rehearsals; we've never danced in this theater before and it's important to get the feel of the space you have to move in."

Chris was lugging along my two heavy suitcases, while I carried his much lighter bag. I laughed and smiled his way, glad he was with me, though Julian would be furious. "Now you stay in the background ... and don't let him even see you if everything goes all right. Really, Chris, I'm sure he'll be glad to see me. He's not dangerous."

"Sure," he said glumly.

We sauntered on into the darkened theater. The stage up ahead was very brightly lit. The TV cameras were in position, ready to shoot the warm-ups. The director, producer and a few others were lined up in the front-row seats.

The heat of the day was chased by the chill of the huge space. Chris opened up one of my bags and spread a sweater about my shoulders after we both sat down near the aisle, midway back in the center section. Automatically I lifted both my legs to stretch them on top of the seat just ahead. Though I shivered, the *corps de ballet* were sweating from the hot klieg lights. The eye was down and a few flats were up. I looked for Julian but didn't see him.

Just to think of Julian was to bring him out of the wings, onto the stage in a series of whirling *jetés*. Oh, he looked terrific in that snug, white leotard with bright green leg warmers.

“Wow!” whispered Chris in my ear. “Sometimes I forget how sensational he is on stage. No wonder every ballet critic thinks he will be the star of this decade when he learns some discipline. Let it be soon ... and I mean you too, Cathy.” I smiled, for I too needed discipline. “Yes,” I said, “I too, of course.”

No sooner had Julian finished his solo performance than Yolanda Lange pirouetted out from the wings, wearing red. She was more beautiful than ever! She danced extraordinarily well for a girl so tall. That was, she danced well until Julian came to partner her, and then everything went wrong. He reached for her waist and got her buttocks, then he had to quickly shift his hold, so she slipped and nearly fell and again he adjusted to save her. A male dancer who let a ballerina fall would soon never have a partner to lift. They tried again the same jump, lift, and fall back, and this time it went almost as awkwardly, making Yolanda seem ungainly, and Julian unskilled.

Even I, sitting halfway down the row of seats, could hear her loud curse. “Damn you!” she screeched. “You make me look gauche—if you let me fall, *I’ll see you never dance again!*”

“Cut!” called the director, getting to his feet and looking impatiently from one to the other.

The *corps de ballet* milled about, grumbling, throwing angry looks at the pair center stage that was wasting so much time. Obviously, from the sweaty, hot looks of all of them, this had been going on for some time, and badly. “Marquet!” called the director, well known for having little patience for those who required two, or even more takes. “What the hell is wrong with your timing? I thought you said you knew this ballet. I can’t think of one thing you’ve done right in the past three days.”

“Me?” Julian railed back. “It’s not *me* ... it’s *her*—she jumps too soon!”

“Okay,” the director said sarcastically, “it’s always *her* fault and never yours.” He tried to control his impatience, knowing

Julian would walk out in a second if criticized too much. “When is your wife going to be well enough to dance again?”

Yolanda screamed out, “Hey, wait a minute! I came all the way from Los Angeles and now you’re sounding as if you’re going to replace me with Catherine! I won’t have it! I’m written into that contract now! I’ll sue!”

“Miss Lange,” said the director smoothly, “you are the *cover* only—but while you are, let’s attempt it again. Marquet, listen for your cue—Lange, make ready—and pray to God this time it will be fit to show an audience who might expect better from professionals.”

I smiled to hear she was only the cover; I had thought I was really written out.

I perversely enjoyed watching Julian make a fool out of himself and Yolanda as well. Yet, when the dancers on stage groaned, I groaned along with them, feeling their exhaustion, and despite myself I began to feel pity for Julian who was diligently trying to balance Yolanda. Any second the director could call “take ten” and that’s when I would make my move.

Up ahead, first row, Madame Zolta suddenly turned her wizened giraffe neck to crane my way, and those sharp little beady eyes saw me sitting tensely, watching like an eagle. “Hey, you, Catherine,” she called with great enthusiasm. *Come*, she gestured, *sit by my side*.

“Excuse me a minute, Chris,” I whispered. “I’ve got to go up there and save Julian before he ruins both our careers. I’ll be all right. There’s not much he can do with an audience—is there?”

Once I was seated beside Madame Zolta, she hissed, “Sooo, you not so sss-ick after all! Thank God for small favors. Your husband up there is ruining my reputation along with his and yours. I should have known better than to always let him partner you, so now he can dance with no one as well.”

“Madame,” I asked, “who arranged for Yolanda to be my stand-in?”

“Your husband, my luv,” she whispered cruelly. “You let him get control—you were a fool to do that. He is *impossible!* He is a tempest, a devil, so unreasonable! Soon he will go mad, if he doesn’t see your face—or *we* will go *mad*. Now run fast and put on dance clothes and save me from extinction!”

It was only a matter of seconds before I had on a practice outfit and, as soon as I had my hair bound up and securely fastened in place, I strapped on my *pointes*. At the dressing room barre I warmed up quickly. Doing my *pliés*, and the *rond de jambes* to pump blood into each limb. Soon enough I was ready. Not a day passed I didn’t do my exercises for several hours.

In the darkened wings I hesitated. I was prepared, I thought, for most anything when Julian saw me—what would he do? While I watched him on stage, suddenly from behind I was brutally shoved aside! “You’ve been replaced,” hissed Yolanda. “Ssssooo, get out—and stay out! You had your chance and loused it up—now Julian is *mine!* You hear that—he’s *mine!* I have slept in your bed, and used your makeup and worn your jewelry—I have taken your place in everything.”

I wanted to ignore her and not believe anything she said. When the cue came for Giselle to go on, Yolanda tried to hold me—that’s when I turned savagely upon her and pushed her so hard she fell. She blanched with pain, while I went on *pointe* and glided onto the stage, making my perfect little string of pearls... . Each tiny step could have been measured and proven to be of an exact distance. I was the shy, young village girl, sweetly, sincerely falling in love with Loys. Others on stage gasped to see me. Relief lit up Julian’s dark eyes—for an instant. “Hi,” he said coolly as I neared him, and fluttered my dark lashes to enchant him more. “Why’d you come back? Your doctors kick you out? Sick of you already?”

“You are a nasty, inconsiderate brute, Julian, to replace me with Yolanda! You know I despise her!”

His back was to the lookers as he sneered wickedly, all the while keeping time, “Yeah, I *know* you hate her; that’s why I wanted her.” He curled his beautiful red lips so they looked ugly. “Listen to this, dancing doll. *Nobody* runs out on me,

especially my wife, and comes back and thinks she can still fit in my life. My love, my dearest heart, I don't want you now, I don't *need* you now, and you can go and play bitch to any man you want! Get the hell out of my life!"

"You don't mean that," I said, as we both performed perfectly, and no one called out. How could they when we did everything so exquisitely right?

"You don't love me," he said bitterly. "You've never loved me. No matter what I did, or what I said, and now I don't give a damn! I gave you the best I had to give, and it wasn't enough. So, dear Cath-er-ine—I *give you this!*" And with those sudden words, he broke the routine, jumped high into the air, to come down forcefully and directly onto my feet. All his weight, brought down like a battering ram to crush my toes!

I uttered some small cry of pain, then Julian was whirling back to chuck me under the chin. "Now, *luv*, see who will dance Giselle with me. Certainly it won't be you, will it?"

"Take ten!" bellowed the director, too late to save me.

Julian gripped my shoulders and shook me like a rag doll. I stared at him rattle-eyed, expecting anything. Then suddenly he whirled away leaving me center stage, alone, on two damaged feet that hurt so badly I could have screamed. Instead, I sank to the floor and sat there staring at my rapidly swelling feet.

From out of the darkened auditorium Chris came running to my assistance. "Damn him to hell for doing this!" he cried, falling on his knees to take off my *pointe* shoes and examine my feet. Tenderly he tried to move my toes, but I cried out from the awful pain. Then he picked me up easily and held me tight against him. "You'll be all right, Cathy. I'll see that your toes heal properly. I fear a few are broken on each foot. You'll need an orthopedist."

"Take Catherine to our orthopedist," ordered Madame Zolta who teetered forward and stared at my darkening, enlarging feet. She peered more closely at Chris, having seen him only a few times before. "You're Catherine's brother who caused all

this trouble?" she asked. "Take her quick to the doctor. We have insurance. But that fool husband, this is it. I *fire* him!"

The Thirteenth Dancer



Both of my feet were X-rayed, disclosing three broken toes on my left foot, and one broken small toe on my right. Thank God both my big toes were spared, or else I *might* never dance again! An hour later Chris was carrying me out of the doctor's office with a plaster cast drying on one foot that reached to my knee, while the small toe was only taped and left to heal without such protection. Each of the toes in the cast was nestled securely in its own little padded compartment so I couldn't move a one, and left exposed for everyone to admire the lovely shades of black, blue and purple. In my thoughts the sour lemon-drops of the doctor's last words failed to melt and sweeten the future. "You may, or you may not dance again, it all depends." On what it depended, he didn't say.

So I asked Chris. "Sure," he said confidently, "of course you'll dance again. Sometimes a doctor likes to be overly pessimistic so you can think how great he was when everything works out fine—due to his special skill." Clumsily he tried to support me while he used my key to open the door of the apartment Julian and I shared. Then he carefully lifted me up again, carried me inside and kicked the door closed behind him. He tried to make me as comfortable as possible on one of the soft couches. I had my eyes squeezed tightly together, trying to suppress the pain I felt at every move.

Chris tenderly supported both legs so he could stuff pillows under and keep them elevated to reduce the swelling. Another fat pillow was carefully eased under my back and head ... and he never said one word ... not one word.

Because he was so silent, I opened my eyes and studied his face that loomed above me. He tried to look professional, detached, but he failed. He showed shock each time his eyes moved from one object to another. Fearful I looked around.

My eyes bulged. My mouth opened. This room! The mess! Oh, God, it was awful!

Our apartment was a wreck! Every painting Julian and I had so carefully selected was torn down from the walls, smashed on the floor. Even the two watercolors Chris had painted especially for me, portraits with me in costume. All the expensive bric-a-brac lay broken on the hearth. Lamps were on the floor, the shades slashed to ribbons and the wire frames bent. Needlepoint pillows I'd made during the long tedious flights from here to there while on tour were ripped, destroyed! Houseplants had been dumped from their pots and left with roots exposed to die. Two cloisonné vases that Paul had given as a wedding gift, gone too. Everything fine and costly, and very cherished, things he and I had planned to keep all our lives and leave to our children—all beyond restoration.

“Vandals,” said Chris softly. “Just vandals.” He smiled and kissed my forehead and squeezed my hand as tears came to my eyes. “Stay calm,” he said, then he went to check the other three rooms, while I sank back on the pillows and sniffed back my sobs. Oh, how he must hate me to do this! Shortly Chris was back with his expression very composed, in that same eye-of-the-hurricane way I'd seen a few times on his face. “Cathy,” he began, settling cautiously down on the edge of the sofa and reaching for my hand, “I don't know what to think. All your clothes and shoes have been ruined. Your jewelry is scattered all over the bedroom floor, the chains ripped apart, the rings stepped on, bracelets hammered out of shape. It looks as if somebody set out deliberately to ruin all of your things and left Julian's in perfect condition.” He gave me a baffled, troubled look, and maybe the tears I tried to hold back jumped from my eyes to his. With glistening blue eyes he extended his palm to show me the setting of a once exquisite diamond engagement ring, given to me by Paul. The platinum band was now a crooked oval. The prongs had released their clasp on the clear and perfect two-carat diamond.

Sedatives had been shot into my arm so I couldn't feel the pain of my broken toes. I felt fuzzy and disoriented, and rather detached. Someone inside me was screaming, screaming—hatred was near again—the wind was blowing, and when I

closed my eyes, I saw the blue-misted mountains all around me, shutting out the sun—like upstairs, like in the attic.

“Julian,” I said weakly, “he must have done this. He must have come back and vented his rage on all my belongings. See the things left whole—they are things he chose for himself.”

“Damn him to hell!” cried Chris. “How many times has he vented his rage on you? How many black eyes—I’ve seen one—but how many others?”

“Please don’t,” I said sleepily, hazily. “He never hit me that he didn’t cry afterward, and he’d say he was sorry.” *Yes, so sorry, my sweetheart, my only love ... I don’t know what makes me act as I do when I love you so much!*

“Cathy,” began Chris tentatively, tucking the platinum band in his pocket, “are you all right? You look close to fainting. I’ll go in and straighten up the bed, so you can rest in that. Soon you’ll fall asleep and forget all of this, and when you wake up, I’m taking you away. Don’t cry for the clothes and things *he* gave you, for I’ll give you better and more. As for this ring Paul gave you, I’ll search around the bedroom until I find the diamond.”

He looked, but he didn’t find the diamond, and when I drifted into sleep, he must have carried me to the bed he’d made up with clean sheets. I was under a sheet and a thin blanket when I opened my eyes, and he was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching my face. I glanced toward the windows and saw it was getting dark. Any moment Julian would come home, and find Chris with me—and there’d be hell to pay!

“Chris ... did you undress me and put on this gown?” I asked dully, seeing the sleeve of a blue gown that was one of my favorites.

“Yes. I thought you’d be more comfortable than wearing that pantsuit with the leg split up the seam. And I’m a doctor, remember? I’m used to seeing all there is—and I took care not to look.”

The darkness of late twilight was in the room, turning all the shadows soft and purplish. Fuzzily I saw him as he used to

be, when the attic atmosphere was like this, purplish, dim, scary, and we were alone and facing some unknown horror ahead. Always he gave me comfort when nothing else could. Always he was there when I needed him to do and say the right thing.

“Remember the day Momma received the letter from the grandmother saying we could stay in her home? We thought wonderful things were ahead of us then; we later thought all joy lay in the past. Never, never in the present.”

“Yes,” he said softly, “I remember. We believed we’d be rich as King Midas, and everything we touched would turn to gold. Only we’d have more self-control, enough to keep those we loved still made of flesh and blood. We were young and silly then, and so trusting.”

“Silly? I don’t think we were silly, only normal. You’ve achieved your goal of being a doctor. But I’m still not a prima ballerina.” I said this last bitterly.

“Cathy, don’t belittle yourself. You will be a prima ballerina yet!” he said fervently. “You would have been a long time ago, if Julian could control his fits of temper that makes every company manager afraid to sign the pair of you on. You get stuck in a minor company just because you won’t leave him.”

I sighed, wishing he hadn’t said that. It was true enough Julian’s fiery temper tantrums had scared off more than one offer that would have placed us in a more prestigious company. “You’ve got to leave, Chris. I don’t want him to come home and find you here. He doesn’t want you near me. And I can’t leave him. In his own way he loves me and needs me. Without me to keep him steady he would be ten times more violent, and I do love him after all. If he struck out sometimes, he was just trying to make me see that. Now I do see.”

“See?” he cried. “You’re not seeing! You’re letting pity for him rob you of good common sense! Look around you, Cathy! Only a crazy man could have done this. I’m not leaving you alone to face a madman! I’m staying to protect you. Tell me

what you could do if he decides to make you pay again for leaving him alone in Spain? Could you get up and run? No! I'm not leaving you here, unprotected, when he might come home drunk, or on drugs—”

“He doesn't use drugs!” I defended, protective of the good that was in Julian, and for some reason, wanting to forget all that wasn't.

“He jumped on your toes, when you need those toes to dance on—so don't tell me you will have a sane man to deal with. When you were putting on your clothes, I overheard someone say that since Julian started running around with Yolanda he's been an entirely different man. Everyone else suspects he's on drugs—that's why I said it,” and here he paused, “and besides, I know for a fact that Yolanda takes anything she can get.”

I was sleepy, in pain and worried about Julian who should be home by now, and there was an *incipient* baby in me whose fate I had to decide. “Chris, stay then. But when he comes home, let me do the talking—just fade into the background—promise?”

He nodded, while I began to drift off again, feeling as if nothing was real but the bed underneath me and the sleep I needed. Lazily, without thought, I tried to turn on my side, and my legs slipped from the heaped pillows, making me cry out. “Cathy ... don't move,” said Chris, quickly adjusting my legs back on the pillows. “Let me lie beside you, and hold you until he comes. I promise not to sleep, and the minute he comes through that door, I'll jump up and fade away.” He smiled to charm me into cheer again, so I too nodded and welcomed the warm, strong arms he put around me as again I sought the sweet relief of sleep.

As in a dream I felt soft lips move on my cheek, in my hair, then lightly over my eyelids, and finally my lips. “I love you so much, oh, God, how much I love you,” I heard him say, and I thought for a disoriented moment it was Julian who'd come home to say he was sorry for hurting and humiliating me ... for this was his way, to give me pain, and then apologize, and make love with passionate abandon. So I turned a bit on my

side and responded to his kisses, and put my arms around him, and twined my fingers into his strong dark hair. That's when I knew. The hair I felt wasn't strong and crisp, but silky and fine, like my own. "Chris!" I cried out, "stop!" But he was out of control as he lavished my face, my neck, and the bosom he bared with his ardent kisses.

"Don't cry stop," he murmured, caressing and stroking me, "all my life I've had nothing but frustrations. I try to love others, but it's always you ... you, whom I can never have! Cathy ... leave Julian! Come away with me! We'll go to some distant place, where no one knows us, and together we can live as man and wife. We won't have any children ... I'll see to that. We can adopt babies. You know we make good parents ... you know we love each other and always will! Nothing can change that! You can run from me and marry twelve other men, but your heart is in your eyes when you look at me—it's me you want—as I want you!"

He was carried away with his own persuasions and wouldn't listen to my weak words. "Cathy, just to hold you, to have you again! This time I'll know how to give you the pleasure I couldn't before—please, if you ever loved me—leave Julian before he destroys us both!"

I shook my head, trying to focus on what he was saying and what he was doing. His blond hair was beneath my chin, nuzzling at my breasts, and he didn't see my denial, but he did hear my voice. "Christopher—I'm going to have Julian's baby. I went to a gynecologist while I was in Clairmont—it's the reason I stayed longer than I originally intended. Julian and I are having a baby."

I could have slapped him from the way he moved backward, abandoning the sweet ecstasy of kissing forbidden places that had aroused me. He sat up on the side of the bed and bowed his head into his hands. Then he sobbed, "Always you manage to defeat me, Cathy! First Paul, then Julian ... and now a baby." Then suddenly he faced me. "Come away and let me be the father to that child! Julian isn't fit! If you never let me touch you, let me live near enough so I can see you every

day and hear your voice. Sometimes I want it back like it used to be ... just you and I, and our twins.”

Silence that we both knew well came and took us, and shut us away in our own secret world where sin lived and unholy thoughts dwelled, and we'd pay, pay, pay, if ever ... but no, there wouldn't be any “if ever”... .

“Chris, I'm going to have the baby with Julian.” I said with a firm resolution that surprised me. “I want Julian's child—for I do love him, Chris—and I've failed him in so many ways. Failed him because you and Paul got in my eyes, and I didn't appreciate what I could have had in him. I should have been a better wife, and then he wouldn't have needed those girls. I'll always love you—but it's a love that can't go anywhere, so I give it up. You give it up! Say good-bye to yesterdays and a Catherine Doll who doesn't exist anymore.”

“You forgive him for breaking your toes?” he asked, astonished.

“He kept begging me to say I loved him, and I never would. I kept a deceptive parasol over my head, to keep dark doubts in my mind, and I refused to see anything that was noble and fine about him but his dancing. I didn't realize that to love me, even when I denied him, was noble and fine in itself. So, let me go, Chris—even if I never dance again, I'll have his child ... and he will go on to fame without me.”

He slammed the door and left me, and I soon fell asleep to dream of Bart Winslow, my mother's second husband. We were waltzing in the grand ballroom of Foxworth Hall, and upstairs, near the balcony balustrade, two children were hidden inside the massive chest with the wire screen backing. The Christmas tree over in the corner towered up to heaven, and hundreds of people danced with us, but they were made of transparent cellophane, not of the healthy flesh, blood and muscle that was the beauty of Bart and I. Bart suddenly stopped dancing, and picked me up to carry me up the broad stairs, and down on the sumptuous swan bed he laid me. My beautiful gown of green velvet and softer green chiffon melted beneath the touch of his burning hands—and then that powerful male shaft that entered me and wound about me

started shrieking, screaming, and each loud cry sounded exactly like a telephone ringing.

I bolted awake ... why did a telephone ringing in the dead of night always have such a threatening sound? I sleepily reached for the receiver. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Julian Marquet?"

I came awake a bit more, and rubbed at my eyes. "Yes, this is she."

She named a hospital on the other side of town. "Mrs. Marquet, would you please come as quickly as possible? If you can, have someone else drive you. Your husband was in an auto accident, and is even now in surgery. Bring with you his insurance papers, identification, and any medical history you have... . Mrs. Marquet ... are you there?"

No. I wasn't there. I was back in Gladstone, Pennsylvania, and I was twelve years old. Two state troopers were in the driveway, with a white car parked ... and swiftly they were striding to interrupt a birthday party to tell us all that Daddy was dead. Killed in an accident on Greenfield Highway.

"Chris! Chris!" I screamed, terrified he might have gone.

"I'm here. I'm coming. I knew you'd need me."

* * *

In that dim and lonely hour that comes before dawn, Chris and I arrived at the hospital. In one of those sterile waiting rooms we sat down to wait and find out if Julian would survive the accident and the surgery. Finally, around noon, after hours in the recovery room, they brought him down.

They had him laid out on what they called a "fracture bed"—a torturous looking device that strung up his right leg which wore a cast from his toes to his hip. His left arm was broken, and in a cast, and strung up in a peculiar way too. His pale face was lacerated and bruised. His lips, usually so full and red, were as pale as his skin. But all of that was nothing compared to his head! I shivered to look! His head had been shaved and small holes drilled for metal calipers to be hooked in to pull his head up and backward! A leather collar lined

with fleece was fastened about his neck. *A broken neck!* Plus a leg fracture, and a compound fracture of his forearm—to say nothing of the internal injuries that had kept him on the operating table three hours!

I cried out, “Will he live?”

“He is on the critical list, Mrs. Marquet,” they answered so calmly. “If he has other close relatives, we suggest you contact them.”

Chris made the call to Madame Marisha, for I was deathly afraid he’d pass away any moment, and I might miss the only chance to tell him I loved him. And if that happened, I’d be cursed and haunted all through the rest of my life.

* * *

Days passed. Julian flitted in and out of consciousness. He stared at me with eyes lackluster, unfocused. He spoke but his voice came so thick, heavy and unintelligible I couldn’t understand. I forgave him for all the little sins, and the big ones too, as you are apt to when death is around the corner. I rented a room in the hospital next to his where I could catch naps, but I never had a full night’s rest. I had to be there when he came to, where he could see and know me, so I could plead with him to fight, to live, and, most of all, say all the words I’d so stingily kept from his ears. “Julian,” I whispered, my voice hoarse from saying it so often, “please don’t die!”

Our dancing friends and musicians flocked to the hospital to offer what consolation they could. His room filled with flowers from hundreds of fans. Madame Marisha flew up from South Carolina and stalked into the room wearing a dreary black dress. She gazed down on the unconscious face of her only child without any expression of grief. “Better he die now,” she said flatly, “than to wake up and find himself a cripple for life.”

“How dare you say that?” I flared, ready to strike her. “He’s alive—and he’s not doomed. His spinal cord wasn’t injured! He’ll walk again, and dance again too!”

Then came the pity and disbelief to shimmer her jet eyes—and then she was in tears. She who'd boasted she never cried, never showed grief, wept in my arms. "Say it again, that he'll dance—oh, don't lie, he's got to dance again!"

Five horrible days came and went before Julian could focus his eyes enough to really see. Unable to turn his head, he rolled his eyes my way. "Hi."

"Hello, dreamer. I thought you were never going to wake up," I said.

He smiled, a thin ironic smile. "No such luck, Cathy love." His eyes flicked downward to his strung-up leg. "I'd rather be dead than like this"

I got up and went to his fracture bed that was made with two wide strips of rough canvas slipped over strong rods, and a mattress was beneath this that could be lowered enough to allow a bedpan to be placed in position. It was a hard, unyielding bed to lie on, yet I stretched beside him very carefully, and curled my fingers into his tangle of uncombed hair—what he had left. My free hand stroked his chest. "Jule, you're not paralyzed. Your spinal cord was not severed, crushed, or even bruised. It's just in shock, so to speak."

He had an uninjured arm that could have reached to hold me, but it stayed straight at his side. "You're lying," he said bitterly. "I can't feel one damn thing from my waist down. Not your hand on my chest either. Now get the hell out of here! You don't love me! You wait until you think I'm ready to kick off, and then you come with your sweet words! I don't want or need your pity—*so get the hell out, and stay out!*"

I left his bed and reached for my purse. Crying, even as he cried and stared at the ceiling. "Damn you for wrecking our apartment!" I stormed when I could talk. "You tore up my clothes!" I rampaged, angry now, and wanting to slap his face that was already bruised and swollen. "Damn you for breaking all our beautiful things! You knew how painstakingly we chose all those lamps, the accessories that cost a fortune. You know we wanted to leave them as heirlooms for our children. Now we've got nothing left to leave anyone!"

He grinned, satisfied. “Yeah, nothing left for nobody.” He yawned, as if dismissing me, but I was unwilling to be dismissed. “Got no kids, thank God. Never gonna have any. You can get a divorce. Marry some son of a bitch and make his life miserable too.”

“Julian,” I said with such heavy sadness. “Have I made your life miserable?”

He blinked, as if not wanting to answer that, but I asked him again, and again, until I forced him to say, “Not altogether miserable—we had a few moments.”

“Only a few?”

“Well ... maybe more than a few. But you don’t have to stay on and take care of an invalid. Get the hell out while you can. I’m no good, you know that. I’ve been unfaithful to you time and again.”

“If you are again, I’ll cut your heart out!”

“Go ‘way, Cathy. I’m tired.” He sounded sleepy from the many sedatives they fed into him and shot into him. “Kids are not good for people like us anyway.”

“People like us ... ?”

“Yeah, people like us.”

“How are we different?”

He mockingly, sleepily laughed, bitterly too. “We’re not real. We don’t belong to the human race.”

“What are we then?”

“Dancing dolls, that’s all. Dancing fools, afraid to be real people and live in the real world. That’s why we prefer fantasy. Didn’t you know?”

“No, I didn’t know. I always thought we were real.”

“It wasn’t me who ruined your things, it was Yolanda. I watched, though.”

I felt sick, scared he was telling the truth. Was I only a dancing doll? Couldn’t I make my way in the real world,

outside the theater? Wasn't I, after all, any better at coping than Momma?

"Julian ... I do love you, honest I do. I used to think I loved someone else, because it seemed so unnatural to go from one love to another. When I was a little girl, I used to believe love came only once in a lifetime, and that was the best kind. I thought once you loved one person, you never could love another. But I was wrong."

"Get out and leave me alone. I don't want to hear what you've got to say, not now. Now I don't give a damn."

Tears coursed my face and dropped down on him. He closed his eyes and refused to see, or listen. I leaned to kiss his lips, and they stayed tight, hard, unresponding. Next he spat, "*Stop! You sicken me!*"

"I love you, Julian," I sobbed, "and I'm sorry if I realized it too late, and said it too late—but don't let it *be* too late. I'm expecting your baby, the fourteenth in a long line of dancers ... and that baby is a lot to live for, even if you don't love *me* anymore. Don't close your eyes and pretend not to hear, because you are going to be a father, whether or not you want to be." He rolled his dark, shining eyes my way, and I saw why they shone, for they were full of tears. Tears of self-pity, or tears of frustration, I didn't know. But he spoke more kindly, and there was a tone of love in his voice. "I advise you to get rid of it, Cathy. Fourteen is no luckier a number than thirteen."

* * *

In the room next door, Chris held me in his arms all through the night.

I woke up early in the morning. Yolanda had been thrown from the car in that accident, and today she would be buried. Cautiously I eased from the fold of Chris's arms, and I arranged his nodding head more comfortably before I stole away to take a peek into Julian's room. He had a night nurse on duty, and she was sound asleep beside his bed. I stood in the doorway and watched him in the dim, greenish light from the lamp covered by a green towel. He was asleep, deeply

asleep. The intravenous tube that led to his arm ran under the sheet and into his vein. For some reason I fixed my eyes upon that bottle with the pale yellow liquid that seemed more water than anything else, so quickly it was being depleted. I ran back to shake Chris awake. “Chris,” I said, as he tried to pull himself together, “isn’t that IV supposed to just trickle into his arm? It’s running out very quickly—too quickly, I think.”

Hardly were the words out of my mouth when Chris was up and running toward Julian’s room. He snapped on the ceiling light as he entered, then wakened the sleeping nurse. “Damn you for falling asleep! You were in here to watch him!” By the time he had that said, he’d pulled back the covers and there was Julian’s casted arm with the opening for the needle—and the needle was still inserted, and taped in position—but the tube had been cut! “Oh, God,” sighed Chris, “an air bubble must have reached his heart.”

I stared at the shiny scissors held so loosely in Julian’s slack right hand. “He cut the tube himself,” I whispered, “he cut the tube himself, and now he’s dead, dead, dead... .”

“Where did he get the scissors?” snapped Chris, while the nurse began to tremble. They were her small embroidery scissors she used to cut her crochet thread. “They must have fallen out of my pocket,” she said weakly. “I swear I don’t remember losing them—or maybe he took them when I was leaning over... .”

“It’s all right,” I said dully. “If he hadn’t done it this way, it would have been another. I should have known and warned you. There was no life for him if he could never dance again. No life at all.”

* * *

Julian was buried next to his father. On the headstone, I made sure Madame Marisha agreed to the name I added: *Julian Marquet Rosencoff, beloved husband of Catherine, and thirteenth in a long line of Russian male ballet stars*. Maybe it was ostentatious and gave away my own failure to love him enough while he lived, but I had to let him have it the way he wanted—or as I thought he wanted.

Chris, Paul, Carrie and I paused at the foot of Georges's grave too, and I bowed my head to show respect to Julian's father. Respect I should have given him too. Graveyards with their marble saints, angels, all so sweetly smiling, so pious or sober—how I hated them! They patronized we who lived; we who were made of fragile tissue and blood, who could grieve and cry while they would stand there for centuries, smiling piously down on all. And I was right back where I'd started.

* * *

“Catherine,” said Paul when we were all seated in the long black limousine, “your room is still as it was, all yours. Come home and live with Carrie and me until your baby is born. Chris will be there too, doing his internship at Clairmont Hospital.”

I stared over at Chris who was seated on the jumpseat, knowing he'd won a much better position in a very important hospital—and he was interning in a small, unimportant one. “Duke is so far away, Cathy,” he said with his eyes avoiding mine. “It was bad enough traveling when I was in college and med school ... so if you don't mind, let me be somewhere near so I can be here the day my nephew or niece arrives in the world.”

Madame Marisha jolted so her head almost struck the ceiling of the car. “You carry Julian's child?” she cried. “Why didn't you tell me before? How wonderful!” She glowed, so the sadness dropped from her like a gloomy cloak. “Now Julian's not dead at all—for he will father a son, who will be exactly like him!”

“It may be a girl, Madame,” Paul said softly, while he reached for my hand. “I know you long for a boy like your son, but I long for a little girl like Cathy and Carrie ... but if it's a boy, I won't object.”

“Object?” cried Madame. “God in his infinite wisdom and mercy will send to Catherine the exact duplicate of Julian! And he will dance, and he will reach the fame that was waiting just around the corner for the son of my Georges!”

* * *

Midnight found me all alone on the back veranda, rocking back and forth in Paul's favorite chair. My head was full of thoughts for the future. Thoughts of the past conflicted and nearly drowned me. The floorboards squeaked faintly; they were old and had known grief like mine before; they sympathized. The stars and moon were out; even a few fireflies came to bob about in the garden darkness.

The door behind me opened and closed quietly. I didn't look to see who it was, for I knew. I was good at sensing people, even in the dark. He sat in the chair next to mine, and rocked his chair in the same rhythm as I rocked.

"Cathy," he said softly. "I hate to see you sitting there with that lost and drained expression. Don't think all the good things in your life have passed you by and nothing is left. You're still very young, very beautiful, and after your baby is born, you can quickly whip yourself back into shape, and dance until you feel you're ready to retire and teach."

I didn't turn my head. Dance again? How could I dance when Julian lay in the ground? All I had was the baby. I would make the baby the center of my life. I would teach my child to dance, and he or she would reach the fame that should have been Julian's and mine. Everything that Momma failed to give us I would bestow on my child. Never would my child be neglected. When my child reached for me, I would be there. When my child cried out for Momma, he wouldn't have to make do with only an older sister. No ... I'd be like Momma was when she had Daddy. That was what hurt the most, that she could change from someone loving and kind into what she was, a monster. Never, never would I treat my child as she'd treated hers!

"Good night, Paul," I said as I stood to go. "Don't stay out here too long. You have to get up early, and you looked tired at dinner."

"Catherine ... ?"

"Not now. Later. I need time."

Slowly I ascended the back stairs, thinking of the baby in my womb, how I had to be careful and not eat junk food; I had

to drink plenty of milk, take vitamins, and think happy thoughts ... not vengeful ones. Every day from now on I would play ballet music. Inside me my baby would hear, and even before he or she was born a small living soul would be indoctrinated to the dance. I smiled, thinking of all the pretty tutus I could buy for my little girl. I smiled even more to think of a boy like his father with a wild tumble of dark curls. Julian Janus Marquet would be his name. Janus for looking both ways, ahead and behind.

I passed Chris who was ready to come down the stairs. He touched me. I shivered, knowing what he wanted. He didn't have to say the words. I knew them backward and forward, inside and out, upside down, or right side up; I knew them ... as I knew him.

Though I tried diligently to think only of the innocent child growing within me, still my thoughts would steal to my mother, filling me with hate, filling me with unwanted plans for revenge. For somehow she had caused Julian's death too. If we'd never been locked away in the first place and needed to escape and run, then I would never have loved Chris, or Paul, and perhaps Julian and I would have met inevitably in New York. Then I could have loved him as he needed and wanted to be loved. I could have gone to him "virgin pure, brand new."

And would that have made any difference, I asked over and over... . Yes! Yes! I convinced myself it would have made *all* the difference!

Interlude for Three



As my baby grew within me, I began to find the identity I had lost, for the ballet kept the real me always in an embryo state, enclosed by my desire to dance and succeed. I was now standing firmly on the ground with the fantasy of glamorous life pushed to the background. Not that I didn't still crave the stage and the applause now and then. Oh, I had my sorrowful moments—but I had one sure way to shut them out. I turned my thoughts on my mother, on what she'd done to us. Another death on your record, Momma!

Dear Mrs. Winslow,

Are you still running away from me? Don't you know yet you can never run fast enough or far enough? Someday I will catch up, and we will meet again. Perhaps this time you will suffer as you made me suffer, and, hopefully, thrice the amount.

My husband has just died as the result of a car accident, just as your husband died many years ago. I am expecting his baby, but I won't do anything as desperate as you did. I will find a way to support him or her, even if I have triplets—or quadruplets!

I mailed that letter off, addressed to her home in Greenglenna, but the newspapers later informed me she was in Japan. Japan! Wow, she did get about.

I was turning into a woman I'd never seen before. Mirrors showed I wasn't slim and supple anymore. That terrified me. I saw my breasts become rounder, fuller, as my middle swelled outward. I hated to move less than gracefully, but my hands loved to caress the swell of my baby's small rump.

One day I realized I was luckier than most widows, I had two men needing me. Men who let me know in subtle ways

they were ready to take Julian's place. And I had Carrie, Carrie who considered me a model by which she could mold her own life. Dear, sweet little Carrie who was now sixteen, and had never had a date, or a boyfriend, or been to a prom. Not that she couldn't have, if she'd forget her smallness. Chris persuaded his friends to date a younger sister who was dying on the vine for want of romance. She complained to me: "Chris doesn't have to make dates for *you!* That college student, he doesn't want me. He just comes to worm in closer to you." I laughed at how ridiculous that was. Nobody would want me in the condition I was, pregnant, a widow, and too old for a college boy.

Carrie heard this, but sulked near the window. "Since you came back, Dr. Paul doesn't take me out to the movies and to dinner like he used to. I used to pretend he wasn't my guardian, but my sweetheart, and that made me feel good inside, because all the ladies look at him, Cathy. He is handsome, even if he is old."

I sighed, for to me Paul would never be old. He was wonderfully young looking for his age of forty-eight. I took Carrie in my arms and consoled her, saying love was waiting for her just around the corner. "He'll be young too, Carrie, near your own age. And once he sees you, and really knows what you are, he won't have to be coerced, he'll be more than willing to love you." Quietly she got up and entered her own room, not convinced by anything I'd said.

Madame Marisha came often to check on my condition, and filled me with authoritative advice. "Now you keep up your practicing; play the ballet music to fill Julian's baby with love for beauty before he is born; inside you he'll know the dance is waiting for him." She glanced down at my feet that had finally healed. "How do those toes feel now?"

"Fine," I answered dully, though they ached when it rained.

Henny was there to wait on me hand and foot when Carrie wasn't around. She was growing old amazingly fast. I worried about her. She diligently tried to keep to the rigid diet both her "doctor-sons" insisted on, but she ate what she wanted to, never counting calories or cholesterol.

* * *

The long days of grief sped by more quickly because I had Julian's baby, part of him to keep with me. Soon Christmas was upon us, and I was so large I didn't feel I should show myself. Chris insisted, along with Paul, that it would be good therapy to go shopping.

I bought an antique gold locket to send to Madame Zolta, and inside I put two small photos of Julian and I, in our *Romeo and Juliet* costumes.

Shortly after Christmas her thank-you note arrived.

Dear Catherine, my own luv,

Yours is the best gift of all. I grieve for your beautiful dancing husband. I grieve for you most of all if you decide not to dance again just because you are to become mother! Long ago you would have been a prima ballerina if your husband had shown less arrogance and more respect for those in authority. Keep in shape, do exercises, bring your baby with you and we will all live together in my place until you find new *danseur* to luv. Life offers many chances, not just one. Come back.

Her note put a wistful smile on my face. She even spelled love "luv." "What is it that makes you smile like that?" asked Paul, laying aside the medical journal that must have held only a part of his interest. Awkwardly I leaned forward to hand the note to him. He read it, then held out his arms, inviting me to come and cuddle on his lap and in his arms. Eagerly I accepted his invitation, I was hungry for affection. Life seemed to me nothing without a man.

"You could go on with your career," he said softly. "Though I pray to God you won't go back to New York and leave me again."

"Once upon a time," I began, "there was a beautiful set of blond parents who gave life to four children who should never have been. And they adored them beyond reason. Then one day the father was killed, and the mother changed, and forgot all about the love, affection and attention those four children

so desperately needed. So, now that another beautiful husband is dead, I will not have my child feel neglected, or fatherless, or unwanted and unnecessary. When my child cries, I'll be there. I'll be there always to make my child feel secure, and very loved, and I'll read to him, and sing to him, and he'll never feel left out, or betrayed—as Chris felt betrayed by the one he loved most.”

“He? You sound as if you know.” His iridescent eyes looked sad. “And are you going to be both mother and father to this child? Are you going to close the gates to any man who might want to share your life? Catherine, I hope you're not going to be one of those women who lets herself go sour because life doesn't always fulfill her wishes.”

I leaned my head backward to stare into his eyes. “You don't still love me, do you?”

“Don't I?”

“That's no answer.”

“I didn't think I needed to answer. I thought you could tell. I thought too, from the way you look at me, that you would turn to me again. I love you, Catherine... . Since the day you first came up my veranda steps, I've loved you. I love the way you talk, the way you smile, the way you walk—that is, before you became pregnant and started leaning backward and holding to your back—does it hurt that much?”

“Oh,” I said in disgust, “why did you have to stop saying all those sweet words to ask if my back hurts? Of course it bothers me. I'm not used to carrying an extra nineteen pounds in front—go on with what you were saying before you remembered you're a doctor.”

He slowly lowered his lips to brush mine, just lightly, before passion came and he pressed them hard with his own. My arms found their way around his neck and ardently I returned kiss for kiss.

The front door opened and then banged shut. I pulled quickly away from Paul and tried to stand up before Chris came into the room—but I wasn't quick enough. He strode in,

his overcoat covering his white intern suit. He carried a bag with a quart of pistachio ice cream that I had expressed a desire for at dinner. “I thought you were on duty tonight,” I said too quickly to hide my distress and surprise. He thrust the ice cream into my hands and looked at me coldly.

“I *am* on duty. But it’s a dull night, so I thought I could take a few minutes off to drive and get you the dessert you seemed to want so much.” He flicked his glance to Paul. “I’m sorry I arrived at the wrong time. Go on with what you were doing.” He spun on his heel and left the room, then slammed the front door a second time.

“Cathy,” said Paul who got up to take the ice cream from me. “We have to do something about Chris. What he wants can never be. I’ve tried to talk to him about it, but he won’t listen. He closes his ears and walks away. You must make him understand that he’s ruining his life by refusing to let any other girl into his heart.” He went on into the kitchen, coming back in a few minutes with two sherbet dishes of the green ice cream I didn’t want now.

He was right. Something did have to be done about Chris—but what? I couldn’t hurt him; I couldn’t hurt Paul. I was like a battlefield wanting both sides to win.

“Catherine,” said Paul softly, as if he’d been watching my reaction, “you don’t owe me if you don’t love me. Cut Chris off, make it clear that he has to let go and find someone else. Anyone else but you ...”

“I find it so difficult to tell him that,” I said in a low voice, ashamed to admit I didn’t want Chris to find anyone else. I wanted him with me always—just the nearness of him, the confidence he gave me—nothing else. I was trying to balance my time between Chris and Paul, to give each of them enough, but not too much. I watched the jealousy between them grow, and felt it was none of my fault—only Momma’s! As everything wrong in my life was her fault.

* * *

It was a cold February night when I felt my first contraction. I gasped from the sharp pain—I had known it

would hurt, but not so much! I glanced at the clock—two in the morning of St. Valentine’s Day. Oh, how marvelous, my baby would be born on what would have been our sixth wedding anniversary! “Julian,” I cried out, as if he could hear me, “you are about to become a father!”

I got up and dressed as speedily as I could before I crossed the hall to rap on Paul’s door. He mumbled something in way of a question. “Paul,” I called, “I think I just had my first contraction.”

“Thank God!” he cried from the other side, instantly wide awake. “Are you all set to go?”

“Of course. I’ve been ready for a month.”

“I’ll call your doctor, then alert Chris—you sit down and take it easy!”

“Would it be all right if I came in?”

He swung open the door, wearing only his trousers. His chest was bare. “You’re the calmest mother-to-be I’ve ever seen,” he said as he helped me sit. He raced next to swipe at his face with an electric razor, then he was running to put on a shirt and tie. “Had any more contractions?” It was on the tip of my tongue to say no, when another seized me. I doubled over. “Fifteen minutes since the last.” I gasped. He looked pale as he pulled on his jacket, then came to help me up. “Okay, I’ll put you in the car first, then go for your suitcase. Keep calm, don’t worry, this baby will have three doctors doing their very best ...”

“To get in each other’s way,” I concluded.

“To see you have the best medical attention possible,” he corrected, then he bellowed toward the kitchen. “Henny, I’m taking Catherine to the hospital! Tell Carrie when she wakes up. Then call Madame Marisha and put on that tape we made for her.”

We’d thought of everything. When Paul opened the front door after he’d backed his car out, I heard behind me the tape playing for Madame M., my own voice speaking “Madame,” I’d taped weeks ago, “your grandchild is on the way.”

It seemed forever before the hospital loomed up ahead. Under a protective canopy at the emergency entrance, a solitary intern paced restlessly back and forth. Chris, who said “Thank God you’re here! I was picturing all sorts of calamities,” even as he assisted me out, while someone else rushed up with a wheelchair, and without any of the preliminaries other patients had to endure, I was snug in bed in no time at all—and gasping from another contraction.

Three hours later, my son was born. Chris and Paul were there, both of them with tears in their eyes, but it was Chris who picked up my son, still with the cord attached, messy and bloody. He put him upon my belly and held him there while another doctor did what he had to. “Cathy ... can you see him?”

“He’s beautiful,” I breathed in awe, seeing all the dark, curling hair, the perfect little red body. With a fierce anger so like his father’s he waved his tiny fists and flailed his thin legs, screaming at all the indignities inflicted upon him—and all the light that came so suddenly to shine in his eyes, and put him center stage, so to speak.

“His name is Julian Janus Marquet, but I’m going to call him Jory.”

Both Chris and Paul heard my thin whisper. I was so tired, so sleepy.

“Why would you call him Jory?” asked Paul, but it wasn’t me who had the strength to answer. It was Chris who understood my reasoning.

“If he had been blond, she would have named him Cory—but the J will stand for Julian, and the rest for Cory.”

Our eyes met and I smiled. How wonderful to be understood, and never have to explain.

PART FOUR



My Sweet Small Prince



If ever a child was born into a palace of adoring worshipers, it was my Jory with his blue-black curls, his pale creamy skin, and his dark, dark blue eyes. He was Julian all over, and to him I could give the lavish affection I'd been unable to give his father.

From the very first Jory seemed to know I was his mother. He seemed to know my voice, my touch, even the sound of my footsteps. Yet he had almost as great a love for Carrie who ran home every night straight from Paul's office to gather him in her arms and play with him for hours.

"We should find our own place," said Chris, who wanted to establish himself firmly as Jory's father. In Paul's home, this wasn't possible.

I didn't know what to say to that. I loved Paul's big house, and being with him and Henny. I wanted Jory to have the garden paths where I could push him in his carriage and he'd be surrounded by beauty. And in no way could Chris and I give him as much. Chris didn't know about my sky-high debts.

Upstairs Paul had made a nursery, completely refurbished with crib, playpen, bassinet and dozens of soft plushy stuffed animals a baby could enjoy without harming himself. There were times when both Paul and Chris would rush home with the same toy. They'd look at each other, and both would force a smile to hide the embarrassment. Then I had to rush forward and exclaim, "Two men with the same idea." And one would have to be taken back ... but never, never did I let either one know whose gift it was that I returned.

Carrie graduated from high school the June she was seventeen. She didn't want college; she was very much contented to be Paul's private secretary. Her small fingers could fly over the typewriter keyboard; she took dictation with

remarkable speed and accuracy—but still she kept wishing for someone to love her, despite her small size.

To see her unhappy made me furious with my mother—again! I began to dwell on what I would do when I had my chance. Now I was free, no husband to hold me back—make her pay, as Carrie was paying!

Each day she saw Paul and Chris battling for my attention, each desiring me, each beginning to look at the other with enmity. I had to settle something that should have been settled a long time ago. If only Julian hadn't put himself in the way, I would now be Paul's wife, and Jory would be Paul's son, and yet, and yet ... I loved Jory for who he was, and on second thought I was glad I'd had Julian for a while. I was no longer a sweet, innocent virgin—two men had taught me well. I would have the knowledge to hold my own when it came time to steal my mother's husband away from her. I'd be like she'd been with Daddy. I'd cast Bart Winslow shy glances, meaningful long, long looks. I'd reach to caress his cheek... . And my biggest asset of all was I looked like her, but I was years younger! How could he resist? I'd put on a few pounds to make myself curvier—like her.

Christmas came and Jory, less than a year old, sat amidst his presents, wide-eyed and bewildered, not knowing what to do, or which toy to pick up first. Snap, snap, snap went the click of three cameras. But Paul had the movie camera, not Chris, Carrie or I.

“Lullabye and good night,” sang Carrie softly to my son, rocking him to sleep on Christmas night, “... may heaven's sweet charms hold you safe in its arms.”

I couldn't help but cry to see her there, like a child herself, but so longing to have a child of her own. Chris came up behind me and put his arms around my waist as I leaned back against him. “I should run for a camera,” he whispered, “they look so sweet together, but I don't want to break the spell. Carrie is so much like you, Cathy, except in size.”

One little word, “except.” One little word that kept Carrie from ever feeling really happy.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Quickly I jerked from Chris's arms and went in to tuck my small son into his crib. I sensed Paul in the doorway now that Chris had gone on to his room. "Cathy," whispered Carrie so Jory wouldn't awaken, "do you think I'll ever have a baby?"

"Yes, of course you will."

"*I* don't think I will," she said, and then ambled away, leaving me to stare after her.

Paul came into the nursery, kissed Jory good night, then turned as if to take me in his arms. "No," I said in a small voice, "not while Chris is in the house." He nodded stiffly, then said good night, and I went to lie awake until almost dawn—wondering how I could solve the dilemma I was in.

Jory seemed quite happy with his situation; he wasn't spoiled; he didn't whine and cry or make unnecessary demands, he just accepted. He could sit for minutes staring from one to the other of us, as if sizing us up, and our relationship to him. He had the patience of Chris; the quiet sweetness of Cory, and only occasionally the brashness of his father—and his mother. But nothing at all about Jory reminded me of Carrie; he smiled so much more than she. Nevertheless, when Carrie strolled through Paul's gardens with Jory in her arms, she pointed out the differences between this tree and that. Incessantly explaining. She forced Jory to imitate speech sooner than he would have otherwise.

"Regard this oak leaf," said Carrie one day after Jory had learned to walk, and spring breezes stirred the air. "Each tree leaf has its own shape, texture and smell. All flowers open up easily for a bee to enter, except the rose. But daisies don't smell as pretty as roses, so the bees fly right on by, and head for the roses that are so stingy with their nectar, and hold their heads high on tall stems." She pointed to a rose, then glanced at me. Next she was showing Jory the daisies and the pansies.

"Now, if I were a bee, you could bet I'd go straight for the violets and pansies too, even though they don't stand as tall." She lifted her eyes to meet mine and said in a strange, tight small voice. "You are like a rose, Cathy. All the bees come to

you, and they don't even see me down so low. Please don't get married again before I have my chance. Please don't be around if ever some man looks my way... . Don't you smile at him, please."

* * *

Oh, how fast the years go when you have a baby to fill all the hours. All of us took snapshots like crazy: Jory's first smile; his first tooth; his first crawl from me to Chris, and then over to Paul, and to Carrie.

Paul began his courtship that was to last two years; the same two years Chris interned in the Clairmont Hospital. They couldn't hurt each other when each loved and respected the other. They couldn't even speak of the barrier between them, except through me.

"It's this town," said Chris. "I think Carrie would fare better in another city. All of us together."

It was twilight in the gardens, our favorite time there. Paul was off making his rounds in three hospitals, and Carrie was entertaining Jory before she put him to bed. Henny rattled pots and pans to let us know she was still up—and still busy.

Chris had completed his two years of internship, and had started on his residency which would take another three years. When he told me he was considering another hospital, far more famous, to further his training, I felt a deep shock. He was leaving me!

"I'm sorry, Cathy, the Mayo Clinic has accepted me, and that's an honor. I'll only be there nine months, and then back here to complete my training. Why don't you and Jory come with me?" His eyes were very bright and lambent. "Carrie can stay to keep Paul company."

"Chris! You know I can't do that!"

"You are going to stay on here after I'm gone?" he asked bitterly.

"If Julian's insurance company would pay off, I could afford a house of my own, and start my own dance school. But they keep insisting his death was suicide. I know that policy

has a two-year suicide clause, and we paid on it since the day we married—so it was not in effect when he died. Yet, they won't pay."

"What you need is a good attorney."

My heart jumped. "Yes. Yes I do. Chris, go on to the Mayo Clinic without me. I'll make out fine, and I swear not to marry anyone until you are back and give your approval. Worry about finding someone yourself. After all, I'm not the only woman who resembles our mother."

He flared. "Why the hell do you put it like that? It's *you*, not *her*! It's everything about you that's not like her that makes me need and want you so!

"Chris, I want a man I can sleep with, who will hold me when I feel afraid, and kiss me, and make me believe I am not evil or unworthy." My voice broke as tears came. "I wanted to show Momma what I could do, and be the best prima ballerina, but now that Julian's gone all I want to do is cry when I hear ballet music. I miss him so, Chris." I put my head on his chest and sobbed. "I could have been nicer to him—then he wouldn't have struck out in anger. He needed me and I failed him. You don't need me. You're stronger than he was. Paul doesn't really need me either, or he would insist on marrying me right away... ."

"We could live together, and, and ..." And here he faltered as his face turned red.

I finished for him, "No! Can't you see it just wouldn't work?"

"No, I guess it wouldn't work for you," he said stiffly. "But I'm a fool; I've always been a fool, wanting the impossible. I'm even fool enough to want us locked up again, the way we were—with me the only male available to you!"

"You don't mean that!"

He seized me in his arms. "Don't I? God help me but I do mean it! You belonged to me then, and in its own peculiar way our life together made me better than I would have been ...

and you made me want you, Cathy. You could have made me hate you, instead you made me love you.”

I shook my head, denying this; I’d only done what came naturally from watching my mother with men. I stared at him, trembling as he released me. I stumbled as I turned to run toward the house. Before me Paul loomed up! Startled I faltered guiltily and stared at him as he turned abruptly and strode in the opposite direction. Oh! He’d been watching and listening! I pivoted about, then raced back to where Chris had his head resting against the trunk of the oldest oak. “See what you’ve done!” I cried out. “*Forget me, Chris!* I’m not the one and only woman alive!”

He appeared blind as he turned his head and he said, “You are for me the only woman alive.”

* * *

October came, the time for Chris’s departure. To see him pack, to know he was going, to say good-bye as if I didn’t care when he came back made me deathly ill while I smiled.

I cried in the rose arbor. It would be easier now. I wouldn’t have to keep putting Paul off so Chris wouldn’t be hurt. No longer would I have to weigh each smile and balance it off against what I’d given the other. Now I had a clear, straight path to Paul—but something got in my eyes. The vision of my mother as she stepped off the plane with her husband on the step behind her. She was coming back to Greenglenna! I clipped out the newsphoto and the caption and put that in my scrapbook. Perhaps if she’d stayed away, I would have married Paul then and there. As it was, I did something entirely unplanned.

* * *

Madame Marisha was “getting along” and needed an assistant, so I went to convince her I should be the one to keep her school running—if ever, well, you could never tell. . . .

“I don’t intend to die,” she snapped. Then begrudgingly she nodded, her ebony eyes suspicious. “Yes, I suppose *you* would think of me as old, though I never do. But don’t you try and

take over, and try to run *me*. I am still the boss here, and will be until I am in my grave!”

By the time November rolled around I realized working with Madame M. was impossible. She had fixed ideas about everything, while I had a few ideas of my own. But I needed money, I needed a place of my own. I wasn't ready to marry Paul, and if I stayed there, that's just what would happen. I had spent enough years plotting and planning. It was time to make my move. The first pawn to play would be Mr. Attorney at Law. It wouldn't work if I stayed with Paul, and though he objected, saying it was an unnecessary expense, I explained I had to have a chance to be my own person, and in my own home to find out what I really wanted. He gave me a puzzled look, then a more shrewd one. “All right, Catherine, do what you must. You will anyway.”

“It's only because Chris insisted that I not marry again until Carrie had her chance, and Chris objects to my staying here with you ... when he isn't here... .” My ending was lame, and oh, such a lie!

“I understand,” he said with a wry smile. “Since the day Julian died, it has been very clear that I am in competition with your brother for your affection. I've tried to talk to him about it, but *he* won't let me. I try to talk to you about it, and *you* won't let me. So go live in your own home, and be your own person, and find your own self, and when you feel grown up enough to act adult, come back to me.”

Opening Gambit



As soon as I was installed in a small, rented cottage, halfway between Clairmont and Greenglenna, I sat down to draft a blackmail letter to my mother. I was deeply in debt, with one child, but I had Carrie too. The enormous bills Julian had run up in New York stores were still unpaid; there was also his hospital bill, his funeral bill, plus my own hospital bills made when Jory was born. Credit cards just didn't solve everything. Not for one moment was I going to accept more from Paul. He'd done enough. I needed to prove I was better than Momma, more able, smarter ... and what did I do but write her a letter, as she'd written to her mother after Daddy died. Why not ask for just one paltry million? Why not? She owed us! It was ours too! With that money I could pay off all the debts I owed, pay back Paul and do something to make Carrie happier. And if I felt some shame to do the same thing she'd done—in a way—I rationalized it away by thinking it was her own fault! She'd asked for it! Jory was not going to live his life in need, when she had so much!

Finally, after many futile attempts, I came up with what I believed the perfect letter of extortion:

Dear Mrs. Winslow:

Once upon a Gladstone, Pennsylvania time, there lived a man and wife who had four children everyone referred to as the Dresden dolls. Now one of those dolls lies in a lonely grave and another of those dolls fails to grow to the height that should have been hers if she'd have been given sunlight and fresh air, and the love that a mother owed her when she needed it most.

Now the ballerina doll has a small son of her own, and not much money. I know, Mrs. Winslow, you don't have much compassion for children who might cast a shadow

over your sunny days, so I will come directly to the point. The ballerina doll *demands* payment of one million dollars—if you are to keep any of *your* millions—or billions. You may send that amount to the post office box I name, and be assured, Mrs. Winslow, that if you fail to do so, the ears of Mr. Bartholomew Winslow, Attorney at Law, will be filled with horror tales I'm sure you'd rather he not hear.

Cordially yours, the ballerina doll,
Catherine Dollanganger Marquet

Each day I waited for a check to come in the mail. Each day I was disappointed. I wrote another letter, then another, and another. Each day for seven days I mailed off a letter to her, with a fierce anger growing in my heart. What was one measly million to her who had so many? I wasn't asking for too much. Part of that money belonged to us anyway.

Then, after fruitless months of waiting while Christmas and the New Year came and went, I decided I'd waited long enough. She was going to ignore me. I looked up a number in the Greenglenna telephone book, and in no time at all I had an appointment to see Bartholomew Winslow, Attorney at Law.

It was February and Jory was three. He was to spend the afternoon with Henny and Carrie as I, dressed in my very best with my hair becomingly styled, sauntered into the posh office to gaze upon my mother's husband. At last I was looking at him up close—and this time he had his eyes open. Slowly he rose to his feet, wearing a bemused expression—as if he'd seen me before and couldn't quite remember where. I thought back to the night I had stolen to Momma's grand suite of rooms in Foxworth Hall and found Bart Winslow asleep in the chair. He'd had a big dark mustache then, and I had dared to kiss him while he dozed. Believing as I did that he was fully asleep ... and he hadn't been! He'd seen me and thought me part of his dream. Because of one stolen kiss that Chris was to hear about later, the repercussions had led Chris and I down a path we'd determined never to follow. Now we were paying the price—and it was *her* fault that Chris was now living apart from me, trying to deny what she'd started. I could not accept

Paul as my husband until I had made her pay—and not just in money.

He smiled at me then, my mother's ruggedly handsome husband, and I saw for the first time the dazzling charisma of him. A light of recognition came into his dark brown eyes. "As I live and breathe, if it isn't Miss Catherine Dahl, the lovely ballerina who takes my breath away even before she dances. I'm enchanted you have need of a lawyer and you chose me, though I cannot possibly imagine why you are here."

"You've seen me dance?" I asked, stunned to hear he had. If he had seen me, then Momma must have too! Oh, and I never knew! Never knew! I glowed, I dimmed, saddened, became confused. Somewhere deep within me, despite all the hate on top, I still felt some of the love I'd had for her when I was young and trusting.

"My wife is a ballet buff," he went on. "Actually, I didn't care much for it when she first started dragging me to every one of your performances. But soon I learned to enjoy it, especially when you and your husband were featured in the lead roles. In fact, my wife seemed to have no interest in ballet at all unless you and your husband *were* featured. I used to fear she had a crush on your husband—he looks a little like me." He took my hand and lifted it to his lips, flashing his eyes upward and smiling with the easy charm of a man who knew what he was, a ladies' man used to putting notches on his belt. "You are even more beautiful off stage than on. But what are you doing in this part of the country?"

"I live here."

He pulled out a chair for me, sat me down so close he could watch my legs when I crossed them. He perched on the edge of his desk to offer me a cigarette, which I refused. He lit one for himself, then asked, "You're on vacation? Visiting your husband's mother?"

I realized he didn't know about Julian. "Mr. Winslow, my husband died from injuries sustained in an auto accident more than three years ago—didn't you hear about it?"

He appeared shocked and a bit embarrassed. “No, I didn’t hear. I’m very sorry. Please accept my belated condolences.” He sighed and ground out his half-smoked cigarette. “The two of you were sensational on stage—it’s a terrible pity. I’ve seen my wife cry she was so impressed.”

Yeah! I’ll bet she was impressed. I shrugged off more questions and came directly to the object of my visit by handing him Julian’s insurance policy. “He took out this policy shortly after we were married and now they won’t pay because they think he cut the intravenous tube that was feeding him. But, as you can see, after two years the suicide clause is no longer in effect.”

He sat down to read it carefully, and then looked up at me again. “I’ll see what I can do. Are you in immediate need of this money?”

“Who isn’t in need of money, Mr. Winslow, unless they are millionaires?” I smiled and tilted my head in the manner of my mother. “I have hundreds of bills and I have a small son to support.”

He asked the age of my son; I told him. He appeared puzzled and confounded in more ways than one as I looked at him with sleepy, half-closed eyes, my head tilted backward and slightly to one side, in a mannerism that was my mother’s way of looking at a man. I was only fifteen when I’d kissed him. He was far more handsome now. His mature face was long and lean, his bones too prominent, but in a very virile, masculine way he was strikingly good looking. Something about him suggested an exaggerated sensuality. And no wonder my mother hadn’t sent a check. Probably all my blackmail letters were still following her from place to place.

Bart Winslow asked a dozen or more questions, then he said he’d see what he could do. “I’m a pretty good lawyer once my wife allows me to stay home and get my hand into a practice.”

“Your wife is very rich, isn’t she?”

This appeared to annoy him. “I suppose you could say she is,” he answered stiffly, letting me know he didn’t like

discussing the subject.

I stood to leave. “I’ll bet your rich wife leads you around like a pet poodle on a jeweled leash, Mr. Winslow. That’s the way rich women are. They don’t know the least thing about working for a living, and I wonder if *you* do.”

“Well, by God,” he said, jumping off the desk and standing with feet wide apart, “why did you come if you feel that way? Go to another attorney, Miss Dahl. I don’t want a client who insults me and has no regard for my abilities.”

“No, Mr. Winslow, I want *you*. I want *you* to prove you know your business as you claim to. Maybe, in a way, you can then prove something to yourself as well—that you aren’t after all, just a rich woman’s bought little plaything.”

“You have the face of an angel, Miss Dahl, but a bitch’s tongue! I’ll see your husband’s insurance firm pays off. I’ll petition them to appear in court, and threaten to sue. Ten to one they’ll settle within ten days.”

“Good,” I said. “Let me know, for as soon as I have the money, I’m moving.”

“Where?” he asked, striding forward to take hold of my arm.

I laughed, looking up into his face and using the ways a woman had to make a man interested, “I’ll let you know where I go, in case you want to keep *in touch*.”

* * *

In ten days, true to his word, Bartholomew Winslow came by the dance school to hand me the check for one hundred thousand dollars, “Your fee?” I asked, waving off the girls and boys who came running to surround me. I was wearing a tight practice outfit, and he was all eyes.

“Dinner at eight, next Tuesday night. Wear blue to match your eyes, and we’ll discuss the fee then,” he said, then turned to leave, not even waiting for my answer.

When he was gone, I turned around and looked at the children doing their warm-up positions, and somewhere above

I hovered, looking down, and feeling scorn for the pitiful thing I was that innocence should admire me so much. I felt sad for them, for me.

“Who was that man who came to give you check?” Madame Marisha asked me when class was over.

“An attorney I hired to force Julian’s insurance company to pay off—and they did.”

“Ah,” she said, falling into her old swivel desk chair, “now you have money and can pay off bills—I suppose you will quit working for me and go off somewhere, yah?”

“I’m not sure just what I plan to do yet. But you must admit, Madame, you and I don’t get along very well, do we?”

“You have too many ideas I don’t like. You think you know more than me! You think now that you work here few months, you can go away and start new school of your own!” She smiled evilly to see my start of surprise, revealing the truth she only guessed at. “So ... you think me stupid too! You’ll look all your life before you find another as smart as me. I read your mind, Catherine. You don’t like me, never have, never will ... yet you come to work for me to learn the business, right again? I don’t care. Dancing schools come and dancing schools go, but the Rosencoff School of Ballet go on forever! Once I thought I’d leave it to Julian, but he’s dead, then I thought when I die, I’d leave it to you—but I won’t if you take your son away so I can’t teach him!”

“Madame, that is your choice, but I am taking Jory away.”

“Why? You think you can teach him as well as I can?”

“I don’t know for certain, but I think I can. My son may not choose to be a dancer,” I continued, ignoring her hard stony eyes. “If he does decide one day, I think I will make an able teacher—as good as any.”

“*If he choose to dance!*” Words like cannonshot. “What other choice does Julian’s son have *but to dance*? It is in his bones, in his brain—and most of all in his blood and in his heart! *He dances—or he dies!*”

I got up to leave. It was in my heart to be kind to her, to let her share in Jory's life ... but the meanness in her hard eyes changed my mind. She would take my son and make of him what she'd made of Julian, someone who could never find fulfillment because life offered to him but one choice.

"I didn't expect to say this today, Madame, but you force me. You made Julian believe if he couldn't dance, then life held nothing. He would have recovered from that broken neck and his internal injuries, except you said he would never dance again—and he overheard you. He wasn't sleeping. So, he chose to die! The very fact that he could move the arm that wasn't strapped down, enough to steal the scissors from that nurse's pocket, proved he was already recovering but all he could see was a bleak desert where the ballet didn't exist! Well, Madame ... *you are not doing that to my son!* My son will have the chance to choose for himself what kind of life he wants—and I hope to God it is *not* the ballet!"

"You fool!" she spat at me, jumping up to pace back and forth in front of her old, beat-up desk, "there is nothing better than adulation from your fans, the sound of thundering applause, the feel of roses in your arms! And soon enough you will find that out for yourself! You think to take my husband's grandson away, and hide him from the stage? *Jory will dance, and before I die I will live to see him on stage—doing what he must—or he too will die!*

"You wanna play 'mommy,'" she sneered, curling her lip scornfully, "and 'wifey' to that big handsome doctor too, perhaps? And make another child for him, yah? *Well ... to hell with you, Catherine, if that is all you want out of life.*" She broke then, and sobs came from deep down in her depths, to make her voice when she spoke again harsh and husky, when before it had been high and shrill. "Yess, go on ... marry that big doctor you've had a yen for since you came starry-eyed and fresh faced as a kid to me—and ruin his life too!"

"Ruin his life too?" I repeated dully.

She spun about. "*You got something eating at you, Catherine, Something gnawing at your guts. Something so bitter it simmers in your eyes and grits your teeth together! I*

know your kind. You ruin everyone who touches your life and God help the next man who loves you as much as my son did!"

Unexpectedly, some enigmatic, invisible cloak dropped down to wrap me in my mother's cool, detached poise. Never before had I felt so untouchable. "Thank you for enlightening me, Madame. Good-bye and good luck. You won't be seeing me again, or Jory." I turned and left. Left for good.

* * *

Tuesday night Bart Winslow showed up at my cottage door. He was dressed in his best, and I was wearing blue; he smiled, pleased I'd obeyed. He took me to a Chinese restaurant where we ate with chopsticks, and everything was black or red.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, with the exception of my wife," he said while I read my fortune cookie slip. "*Beware of impulsive actions.*"

"Most men don't mention their wives when they take another woman out—"

He interrupted: "I am not an ordinary man. I'm just letting you know, you are not the most beautiful woman I know."

I smiled at him sweetly, closely watching his eyes. I saw I irritated him, charmed him, but most of all intrigued him, and when we danced, I also learned I excited him. "What is beauty without brains?" I asked, my lips brushing his ear as I stood on tiptoes. "What is beauty that is growing old, and overweight, and no challenge at all?"

"You are the damndest female I've ever known!" His dark eyes flashed. "How dare you imply my wife is stupid, old and fat? She looks very young for her age!"

"So do you," I said with a small mocking laugh. His face reddened. "But don't worry, Mr. Attorney ... I'm not competing with her—I don't want a pet poodle."

"Lady," he said coldly, "you won't have one, not in me. I'm leaving soon to set up my offices in Virginia. My wife's mother isn't well and needs some attendants. As soon as you've settled your account with me, you can say good-bye to a man who obviously brings out the worst in you."

“You haven’t mentioned your fee.”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

* * *

Now I knew where I was going—back to Virginia to live somewhere near Foxworth Hall.

Now I could begin the real revenge.

“But Cathy,” wailed Carrie tearfully, very upset because we were leaving Paul and Henny. “I don’t want to leave! I love Dr. Paul and Henny! You go anywhere you want to, but leave me here! Can’t you see Dr. Paul doesn’t want us to go? Don’t you care when you hurt him? You’re always hurting him! I don’t want to!”

“I care very much about Dr. Paul, Carrie, and I don’t want to hurt him. However, there are certain things I must do, and I must do now. And Carrie, you belong with me and Jory. Paul needs his chance to find a wife without so many dependents. Don’t *you* see, we are an encumbrance to him?”

She backed off and glared at me. “Cathy, he wants *you* for his wife!”

“He hasn’t said so in a long, long time.”

“That’s because you got your mind set on going and doing something else. He told me he wants you to have what you want. He loves you too much. If I were him, I’d make you stay, and wouldn’t care what you wanted!” She sobbed then, and ran from me to slam her bedroom door.

I went to Paul and told him where I was going and why. His happy expression turned sad, and then his eyes went vague. “Yes, I suspected all along you would feel it necessary to go back there and confront your mother face to face. I’ve seen you making your plans and I hoped you’d ask me to go with you.”

“It’s something I have to do myself,” I said, holding to both his hands now. “Understand, please understand I still love you and always will.”

“I understand,” he said simply. “I wish you luck, my Catherine. I wish you happiness. I wish all your days are bright and sunny and you get what you want—whether or not I am included in your plans. When you need me, *if* you ever need me, I’ll be here, waiting to do what I can. Every minute I’ll be loving you and missing you... . Just remember, when you want me I’ll be there.”

I didn’t deserve him. He was much too fine for the likes of me.

I didn’t want Chris or Carrie to know what part of Virginia I was headed for. Chris wrote to me once or twice a week and I responded letter for letter—but not one word did I tell him ... he’d find out when he saw the change of address.

* * *

The month was May, and the day after Carrie’s twentieth birthday party, celebrated without Chris there, Carrie, Jory and I set off in my car, backing out of Paul’s driveway where we had come to say good-bye. Paul waved and when I looked in the rear-view mirror I saw him reach in his breast pocket for his handkerchief. He touched the tears in the corners of his eyes even as he kept on waving.

Henny stared after us. I thought I saw written in her expressive brown eyes. *Fool, fool, fool to go away and leave good man!*

Nothing proved more what a fool I was than the sunny day I set out for the mountains of Virginia with my small sister and son in the front seat next to me. But I had to do it—compelled by my own nature to seek the revenge in the place of our incarceration.

The Siren Call of the Mountains



At the last moment I decided I couldn't risk seeing Bart Winslow even long enough to pay his fee, so I dropped a check for two hundred dollars in a mailbox and considered that enough—whether or not it was.

With Carrie beside me and Jory on her lap I headed straight for the Blue Ridge Mountains. Carrie was very excited now that we were on our way, her big blue eyes wide as she commented on everything we passed. “Oh, I love to travel!” she said happily. When Jory grew sleepy, she carefully made a bed for him on the back seat and sat with him to be sure he didn't roll off and fall to the floor. “He's so beautiful, Cathy. I am going to have at least six children, or maybe even more. I want half to look just like Jory, and half like you and Chris, and two or three like Paul.”

“I love you, Carrie, and I pity you too. You're planning on a dozen children, not just six.”

“Don't worry,” she said, settling back to take a nap herself. “Nobody is gonna want me, so I won't ever have any children but yours to love.”

“That's not true. I've got the feeling, once we are in our new home, Miss Carrie Dollanganger Sheffield is going to have a love of her own. I'll even bet you five dollars—is it a bet?” She smiled, but she refused to take on the bet.

As I drove on northwest and the night began to descend Carrie grew very quiet. She stared out the windows and then back at me, and her large blue eyes held a look of fear. “Cathy, are we going back *there*?”

“No, not exactly.” That's all I'd say until we'd found a hotel and settled in for the night.

The first thing in the morning a real estate woman I'd contacted in advance came to drive us in her car to look over the "properties for sale." She was a large, mannish woman and all business. "What you need is something compact, utilitarian and not too expensive. In this neighborhood all the houses run into big money. But there are a few small houses that the rich people used to use for guest homes, or they housed their servants in some. There's one that's very pretty with a nice flower garden."

She showed us that five-room cottage first and immediately I was won over. I think Carrie was too, but I'd warned her to show no signs of approval. I picked at small details to lead the agent astray. "The chimney looks like it won't work."

"It's a fine chimney, a good draft."

"The furnace—does it use oil or gas?"

"Natural gas was installed five years ago and the bath has been remodeled, the kitchen too. A couple used to live here who worked for the Foxworths on the hill, but they sold out and went down to Florida. But you can tell they loved this house."

Of course they had. Only a house that had been very beloved would have all the nice little details that made it exceptional. I bought it and signed all the papers without a lawyer, though I'd read up on the subject and insisted on having the deed checked.

"We'll have a wall oven put in with a glass door," I said to Carrie who loved to cook—thank God, for I'd hardly have the time. "And we'll repaint the whole interior of the house ourselves and save the money."

Already I was finding out that one hundred thousand, after paying all the accounts I had to settle and putting the down payment on the cottage, was not going to last long. But I hadn't gone into this venture blindfolded. While Carrie stayed with Jory in a motel, I visited the ballet instructor who was selling her school and retiring. She was blond and very small, and nearing seventy. She seemed pleased to see me as we shook hands and settled on the amount she wanted. "I've seen

you and your husband dance and really, Miss Dahl, though I'm delighted you want my school, it's a shame you are retiring at such an early age. I couldn't have given up performing at twenty-seven, never!"

She wasn't me. She didn't have my past or my kind of childhood. When she saw my determination to go through with the deal, she gave me the list of her students. "Most of these children belong to the wealthy people who live around here, and I don't think any of them seriously intend to become professional dancers. They come to please their parents who like to see them looking pretty in little tutus during the recitals. I have failed to turn out one gifted performer."

All three bedrooms in our cottage were very small, but the living room was L-shaped and of reasonable proportions, with a fireplace sided by bookcases. The short part of the L could be used as a dining room. Carrie and I set to with paint brushes and in one week we had painted every room a soft green. With the white woodwork it looked delicious. The space opened up and everything seemed larger. Carrie, of course, would have to have red and purple accessories for "her" room.

In three weeks we had both settled into a new routine, with me teaching the ballet school located over the local pharmacy and Carrie doing the housework and most of the cooking while she looked out for Jory. As often as possible I took Jory with me to class, not only to relieve Carrie of the responsibility, but also to have him near me. I was remembering Madame Marisha's talk of letting him look and listen and get the feel of the dance.

I sat one Saturday morning in early June staring out the windows at the blue-misted mountains that never changed. The Foxworth mansion was still the same. I could have turned back the clock to 1957 and on this night taken Jory and Carrie by the hand and followed those meandering trails from the train depot. It would have been the same as when Momma led her four children up to their prison of hope and despair, then left them to be tortured, whipped and starved. I went over and over everything that had happened: the wooden key we'd made to escape our prison room, the money we'd stolen from

our mother's grand bedroom, that night when we found a large book of sexual pleasures in the nightstand drawer. Maybe if we'd never seen that book ... maybe then things would have turned out differently.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Carrie. "Are you thinking we should go back to visit Dr. Paul and Henny—I hope that's what you're thinking."

"Really, Carrie, you know I can't do that. It's recital time and the little girls and boys in my class will be rehearsing every day. It's the recitals the parents pay to see. Without them they have nothing to boast of to their friends. But maybe we could ask Paul and Henny to visit us."

Carrie pouted and then for some reason brightened. "You know, Cathy, the day the man came to put in the new oven he was young and good looking, and when he saw me with Jory he asked if that was my son. That made me giggle, and he smiled too. His name was Theodore Alexander Rockingham, but he asked me to call him Alex." Here she paused and looked at me fearfully, with hope trembling her all over. "Cathy, he asked me for a date."

"Did you accept?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know him well enough. He said he's going to college and works part-time doing electrical work to help pay his tuition. He says he's going to be an electrical engineer or maybe a minister... . He hasn't decided yet which one." She gave me a small smile of both pride and embarrassment. "Cathy, he didn't seem to notice how little I am."

The way she said that made me smile too. "Carrie—you're blushing! You tell me one moment you don't know this fella very well, and then you come up with all sorts of pertinent facts. Let's invite him to dinner. Then I can find out if he's good enough for my sister."

"But, but ..." she stammered, her small face flushed red. "Alex asked me to go home with him to Maryland for a

weekend. He told his parents about me ... but Cathy, I'm not ready to meet his parents!" Her blue eyes were full of panic. That's when I realized that Carrie must have seen this young man many, many times while I was teaching my ballet classes.

"Look, darling, invite Alex here to dinner and let him fly home alone. I think I should know him better before you go off with him alone."

She gave me the strangest long look, then lowered her eyes to the floor. "Will you be here if he comes to dinner?"

"Why, of course I will." Only then did it dawn on me. Oh God! I drew her into my arms. "Look, sweetheart, I'll ask Paul to come up this weekend, so when Alex sees I go for older men he won't even glance my way. Besides, you saw him first and he saw you first. He won't want an older woman with a child."

Happily she threw her thin arms about my neck. "Cathy, I love you! And Alex can fix toasters, steam irons. Alex can fix *anything!*"

* * *

One week later Alex and Paul were at our dinner table. Alex was a nice-looking young man of twenty-three who complimented my cooking. I was quick to point out that Carrie had prepared most of the meal. "No," she denied modestly, "Cathy did most of it. I only stuffed the chicken, made the dressing, mashed the potatoes, made the hot rolls and the lemon meringue pie—Cathy did the rest." Suddenly I felt I'd done nothing but set the table. Paul winked to show he understood.

When Alex took Carrie to the movies and Jory was snug in bed with his favorite stuffed toys, Paul and I settled down before the fire like an old married couple.

"Have you seen your mother yet?" he asked.

"They're here, my mother and her husband," I said quietly. "Staying in Foxworth Hall. The local newspaper is full of their comings and goings. It seems my dear, stone-eyed grandmother has suffered a slight stroke, so the Bartholomew

Winslows will now make their home with her—that is, until she is dead.”

Paul didn't say anything for the longest time. We sat before the fire and watched the red coals burn down to gray ashes. “I like what you've done with this house,” he said finally. “It's very cozy.”

He got up then and came to sit close by my side on the sofa. Tenderly he drew me into his arms. He just held me, with our eyes locked. “Where do I fit in?” he whispered. “Or don't I fit anywhere now?”

My arms tightened about him. I'd never stopped loving him, even when Julian was my husband. It seemed there wasn't any one man who could give me everything.

“I want to make love with you, Catherine, before Carrie comes back.”

Quickly we shed our clothes. Our passion for each other had not lessened in all the years since we'd first met in this most intimate way. It didn't seem wrong. Not when he could murmur, “Oh, Catherine, if there is one thing I wish for, it is to have you as mine all my life through, and when I die, let it be after such as this, with you in my arms, your arms about me, and you will be looking at me as you are now.”

“How beautiful and poetic,” I said. “But you won't be fifty-two until September. I know you'll live to be eighty or ninety. And when you are, I pray passion will still rule both of us as it does now.”

He shook his head. “I don't want to live to eighty unless you're with me and still love me. When you don't love me, let my time on earth be over.” I didn't know what to say. But my arms spoke for me, drawing him closer so I could kiss him again and again. Then the phone was ringing. Lazily I reached for it—then bolted straight up in the bed.

“Hello, my lady Cath-er-ine!” It was Chris. “Henny had a friend over when I called Paul, and her friend gave me your phone number. Cathy, what the hell are you doing in Virginia?”

I know Paul is with you—and I hope to God he can persuade you not to do whatever it is you’ve got on your mind!”

“Paul is much more understanding than you are. And you are the one who should know best why I’m here!”

He made some noise of disgust. “I do understand, that’s the worst of it. But you’ll be hurt, I know that. And there’s Momma. I don’t want you to hurt her more than she already hurts, and you know she does. But more than anything I don’t want you to be hurt again, and you will be. You’re always running from me, Cathy, and you can’t ever run far enough or fast enough, because I’ll be right at your heels, loving you. Whenever anything good happens to me I sense you by my side, clinging to my hand, loving me as I love you, but refusing to recognize it because you think it’s sin. If it is a sin, then hell would be heaven with you.”

I felt a terrible sense of panic, as I nastily said good-bye and hung up, then turned to cuddle close to Paul, hoping he wouldn’t know why I trembled.

* * *

In the dead of night, with Paul deeply asleep in the tiny third bedroom, I woke suddenly. I thought I heard the mountains calling out, Devil’s spawn! The wind through the hills whistled and shrieked and added its voice to call me unholy, wicked, evil and everything else the grandmother had named us.

I got up and padded over to the windows to stare at the shadowy, dark peaks in the distance. The same mountain peaks I’d gazed on so often from the attic windows. And yes, just like Cory, I could hear the wind blowing and howling like a wolf searching for me, wanting to blow me away too, just as it had blown Cory and made him into only dry dust.

Quickly I ran to Carrie’s room and crouched by her bed, wanting to protect her. For it seemed to me, in my nightmarish state, it was more likely the wind would take her before it got me.

Carrie's Bittersweet Romance



Carrie was twenty now, I was twenty-seven, and this November Chris would be thirty. That seemed an impossible age for him to be. But when I looked at my Jory it hit me hard how quickly time moves as you get older.

Time that had once moved so slowly speeded up, for our Carrie was in love with Alex! It sparkled from her blue eyes and danced her tiny feet around the room as she dusted, ran the vacuum, washed the dishes or planned menus for the next day. "Isn't he handsome, Cathy?" she asked and I agreed, though honestly he was just an average, nice-looking boy of five eight or nine with light brown hair that ruffled up easily and gave him a shaggy-dog appearance that was somehow appealing, for he was so neat in other ways. His eyes were turquoise and his expression that of someone who has never once had an ugly, unkind thought.

Carrie thrilled to hear the phone ring. She bubbled with excitement for so often the call was for her. She wrote Alex long, passionate love poems, then gave them to me to read and stored them away without mailing them off to the one who should read them.

I was happy for her and for myself too, for my ballet school was progressing nicely and any day Chris would be coming home! "Carrie, can you believe it? Chris's extended course is almost up!" She laughed and came running to me, as she had when she was a little girl, and in my outstretched arms she flung herself. "I know!" she cried. "Soon we will be a whole family again! Like we used to be. Cathy, if I have a little boy with blond hair and blue eyes, guess who I'll name him after." I didn't have to guess, I knew. Her firstborn, blond, blue-eyed son would be called Cory.

Carrie in love was pure enchantment to watch. She stopped talking of her small size and even began to feel she wasn't inadequate. For the first time in her young life she began to use makeup. Her hair was naturally wavy, like mine, but she had it cut shoulder length and there it curled upward in a wild tumble.

“Look, Cathy!” she cried when she came home from the beauty parlor with her new, smarter hair style. “Now my head doesn't look so big, does it? And have you noticed how much taller I've grown?”

I laughed. She was wearing shoes with three-inch heels and two inches of platform! But she was right. The shorter hair did make her head look smaller.

Her youth, her loveliness, her joy all touched me so much my heart ached in the awful apprehension that something might happen to spoil it for her.

“Oh, Cathy,” said Carrie, “I would want to die if Alex didn't love me! I want to make him the best possible wife. I'll keep his house so clean dust motes won't dance in the sunlight. Every night he'll eat the gourmet meals I prepare—never frozen TV junk. I'll make my own clothes and his and our children's. I'll save him loads of money in lots of ways. He doesn't say much; he just sits and looks at me in that special, soft way. So, I take what I can from that and not what words he says—or he hardly says any.”

I laughed and hugged her close. Oh, I did so long for her to be happy. “Men don't talk as freely about love as women do, Carrie. Some like to tease you, and that's a pretty good indication you've got their interest, and it can grow into something larger. And the way you find out how much they care is by looking into the eyes—eyes never learn how to lie.”

It was easy to see that Alex was enchanted with Carrie. He was still working part-time as an electrician for a local appliance store while he took summer courses at the university, but he spent every spare minute with Carrie. I suspected he either had asked or was about to ask her to marry him.

I woke suddenly a week later to see Carrie sitting before the bedroom windows and staring off toward the shadowy mountains. Carrie who never had insomnia as I often did. Carrie who could sleep through thunderstorms, a tornado, telephone shrills a foot from her ears and a fire across the street. So naturally I was alarmed to see her there. I got up and went to her.

“Darling, are you all right? Why aren’t you asleep?”

“I wanted to be with you near,” she whispered, her eyes still riveted on the distant mountains, dark and mysterious in the night. They were all around us, boxing us in like they used to do. “Alex asked me to marry him tonight.” She told me this in a flat, dull tone and I cried out, “How wonderful! I’m so happy for you, Carrie, and for him!”

“He told me something, Cathy. He’s decided he wants to be a minister.” Pain and sorrow were in her voice, and I didn’t understand at all.

“Don’t you want to be a minister’s wife?” I asked, while I was so frightened underneath. She seemed so remote.

“Ministers expect people to be perfect,” she said in that deadly, scary tone, “especially their wives. I remember all the things the grandmother used to say about us. About us being Devil’s issue and evil and sinful. I didn’t used to understand what she meant, but I remember the words. And she was always saying we were wicked, unholy children who should never have been born. *Should* we have been born, Cathy?”

I choked, overwhelmingly frightened, and swallowed over the lump that rose in my throat. “Carrie, if God hadn’t wanted us to be born He wouldn’t have given us life in the first place.”

“But ... Cathy, Alex wants a perfect woman—and I’m *not* perfect.”

“Nobody is, Carrie. Absolutely nobody. Only the dead are perfect.”

“Alex is perfect. He has never done even one bad thing.”

“How would you know? Would he tell you if he had?”

Her lovely young face was darkly shadowed. Falteringly she explained. “It seems Alex and I have known each other for a long, long time, and until recently he didn’t tell me much about himself. I’ve talked my head off to him, but I’ve never told him about our past, except how we became wards of Dr. Paul’s after our parents died in an auto accident. And that’s a lie, Cathy. We aren’t orphans. We still have a mother who is alive.”

“Lies are not deadly sins, Carrie. Everyone tells little lies now and then.”

“Alex doesn’t. Alex has always felt drawn toward God and religion. When he was younger he wanted to become a Catholic so he could be a priest. He grew older and learned priests have to live lives of celibacy, so he decided against being a priest. He wants a wife and children. He told me he’s never had sex with anyone because he’s been looking all his adult life for just the right girl to marry—somebody perfect, like me. Somebody godly, like him. And *Cath-eee*,” she wailed pitifully, “*I’m not perfect! I’m bad!* Like the grandmother was always telling us, I’m evil and unholy too! I have ugly thoughts! I hated those mean little girls who put me on the roof and said I was like an owl! I wished them all to die! And Sissy Towers, I hated her more than any other! And Cathy, did you know Sissy Towers drowned when she was twelve? I never wrote and told you, but I felt it was my fault for hating her so much! I hated Julian too for taking you away from Paul, and he died too! You see how it is; how can I tell Alex all of that and then tell him our mother married her half-uncle too? He’d hate me, Cathy. He wouldn’t want me then, I know he wouldn’t. He’d think I would give birth to deformed children, like me—and I love him so much!”

I knelt by the side of her chair and held her close as a mother would. I didn’t know what to say, and how to say it. I longed for Chris and his support, and for Paul who always knew how to say everything just right. And remembering this I took his words, said to me, and I repeated them to Carrie, even as I felt a terrible wrath against the grandmother who’d implanted all these crazy notions in the head of a five-year-old child. “Darling, darling, I don’t know how to say everything

right, but I'm going to try. I want you to understand that what is black to one person is white to another. And nothing in this world is so perfect that it is pure white, or so bad it is pure black. Everything concerning human beings comes in shades of gray, Carrie. None of us is perfect, without flaws. I've had the same doubts about myself as you have."

Her teary eyes widened to hear this, as if she considered me, of all people, perfect. "It was our doctor Paul who set me straight, Carrie. He told me long ago, if a sin was committed when our parents married and conceived children, it was *their* sin and not ours. He said God didn't intend to make us pay the price for what our parents did. And they weren't that closely related, Carrie. Do you know in ancient Egypt the pharaoh would only allow his sons and daughters to marry a brother or sister? So you see, society makes the rules; and never forget, our parents had four children and not one of us is a freak—so God didn't punish them, or us."

She glued her huge blue eyes to my face, desperately wanting to believe. And never, never should I have mentioned "freak."

"Cathy, maybe God did punish me. I don't grow; that is punishment."

I laughed shakily and drew her closer. "Look around you, Carrie. Many other people are smaller than you. You aren't a midget or a dwarf, you know that. Even if you were, which you aren't, still you would have to accept it and make the best of it, just as many do who consider themselves too tall, or too fat, or too thin, or too something. You have a beautiful face, sensational hair, a lovely complexion, an adorable figure with everything where it should be. You have a beautiful singing voice, and you've got a brilliant mind; look at how fast you can type and how well you take shorthand and keep Paul's books, and you can cook twice as well as I can. You are also a much better housekeeper than I am, and look at the dresses you sew. They look better than anything I see in a store. When you add all that up, Carrie, how can you think you aren't good enough for Alex or any other man!"

“But, Cathy,” she wailed, stubbornly unappeased by what I’d said, “you don’t know him like I do. We went by an X-rated movie theater and he said anybody who did any of those things was evil and perverted! And you and Dr. Paul told me sex and making babies was a natural, loving part of living—and I’m bad, Cathy. Once I did something very wicked.”

I stared at her, taken by surprise. With whom? It was as if she read my mind, for she shook her head while tears streamed down her cheeks. “No ... I’ve never had ... had ... intercourse, not with anybody. But I did other things that were wicked, Alex would think so, and I should have known it was evil.”

“What did you do, darling, that was so terrible?” She gulped and bowed her head in shame. “It was Julian. One day when I was visiting and you weren’t home he wanted to do ... do something with me. He said it would be fun and wasn’t real sex, the kind that made babies—so I did what he wanted, and he kissed me and said next to you he loved me best. I didn’t know it was wicked just to do what I did.”

I swallowed over the huge, aching lump in my throat, smoothed her silken hair from her fevered forehead and wiped away her tears. “Don’t cry and feel ashamed, darling. There are all kinds of love and ways to express love. You love Dr. Paul and Jory and Chris in three different ways, and me in another—and if Julian convinced you to do something you feel was wicked, that was *his* sin, not yours. And mine too, for I should have told you what he might want. He promised me never to touch you or do anything sexual with you, and I believed him. But if you did it, don’t be ashamed any longer—and *Alex doesn’t have to know*. Nobody will tell him.”

Very slowly her head lifted, and the moon that suddenly came into view from behind dark clouds shone in her eyes full of self-torture. “But *I’ll* know.” She began to sob, wild, hysterical sobs. “That’s not the worst thing, Cathy,” she screamed, “I liked doing what I did! I liked him wanting me to do it—I tried not to let my face show I was feeling any pleasure for God might have been watching. So you see why Alex won’t understand? He’d hate me, he would, I know he

would! And even if he never knows, I'll still hate myself for doing it and liking it!"

"Please stop crying. What you did isn't that bad, really. Forget our grandmother who kept talking about our evil blood. She's a bigoted, narrow-minded hypocrite who can't tell right from wrong. She did all kinds of horrible things in the name of righteousness and nothing at all in the name of love. You're not bad, Carrie. You wanted Julian to love you, and if what you did gave him pleasure and you pleasure, then that's normal too. People are made to feel sensual pleasure, made to enjoy sex. Julian was wrong and he shouldn't have asked you, but that was *his sin*, not yours."

"I remember lots of things you don't think I do," she whispered. "I remember the funny way Cory and I used to talk to each other, so you and Chris couldn't understand. We knew we were the Devil's issue. We heard the grandmother. We talked about it. We knew we were locked up because we weren't good enough to be out in the world with people better than us."

"Stop!" I cried. "Don't remember! Forget! We did get out, didn't we? We were four children not responsible for the actions of our parents. That hateful old woman tried to steal our confidence and our pride in ourselves—don't let her succeed! Look at Chris, aren't you proud of him? Weren't you proud of *me* when I was on stage dancing? And one day, after you and Alex are married, he will change his mind about what is perverted and what isn't—for I did. Alex will grow up and stop being overly righteous. He doesn't know yet the pleasures love can give."

Carrie pulled from my arms and went to stare out of the windows at the dark and distant mountains, and at the quarter moon that sailed as an uptilted Viking ship through the black seas of night. "Alex won't change," she said dully. "He's gonna be a minister. Religious people think everything is bad, just like grandmother. When he told me he was going to give up the idea of being an electrical engineer, I knew it was all over between us."

“Everybody changes! Look at the world about us, Carrie. Look at the magazines and the movies that decent people go to and enjoy, and the stage plays with everyone naked, and the kind of books being published. I don’t know if it’s for the better, but I do know people aren’t static. We all change from day to day. Maybe twenty years from now our children will look back to our time and be shocked, and maybe they will look back and smile and call us innocents. Nobody knows how the world will change—so if the world can change, *so can one man named Alex.*”

“Alex won’t change. He hates today’s lack of morals, hates the kinds of books being published, the movies that are dirty and the magazines with couples doing wicked things. I don’t think he even approves of the kind of dancing you used to do with Julian.”

I wanted to yell out, *To hell with Alex and his prudery!* Yet I couldn’t slander the only man Carrie had found to love. “Carrie, sweetheart, go to bed. Go to sleep and remember in the morning that the world is full of all sorts of men who would be delighted to love someone as pretty, sweet and domestically oriented as you are. Think of what Chris tells us always, ‘things always happen for the best.’ And if it doesn’t work out for you and Alex, then it will work out for you and someone else.”

She threw me a quick glance of deepest despair. “How was it for the best when God made Cory die?”

Dear Lord, how to answer a question like that?

“Was it for the best when Daddy was killed on the highway?”

“You don’t remember that day.”

“Yes I do. I’ve got a good memory.”

“Carrie, absolutely no one is perfect, not me, not you, not Chris, not Alex. Not anybody.”

“I know,” she said, crawling into her bed like a good little girl obeying her mother. “People do bad things and God sees them and punishes them later on. Sometimes he uses a

grandmother with her whip, like she beat you and Chris. I'm not dumb, Cathy. I know you and Chris look at each other in the way Alex and I look at each other. I think you and Dr. Paul were lovers too—and maybe that's why Julian died, to punish you. But you're the kind of woman men like and I'm not. I don't dance; I don't know how to make everybody love me. Only my family loves me, and Alex. And when I tell Alex he won't love me or want me.”

“You won't tell him!” I ordered sternly. She lay with her eyes fixed on the ceiling until finally she drifted off to sleep. Then I was the one left to lie awake, hurting inside, still astonished by the effect one old woman had on the lives of so many. I hated Momma for taking us to Foxworth Hall. She'd known what her mother was like and still she took us there. She'd known her mother and father better than anyone and still she married a second time and left us alone, so she had the fun and we had the torture. And it was us who were still suffering while she had the fun!

Fun that would soon be over, for I was here and Bart was here, and sooner or later we would meet. Though how he had managed to avoid me so far I wasn't to learn until later.

I comforted myself with the thoughts of how Momma would be suffering soon too, like we had suffered. Pain for pain, she'd learn how we had felt when *she* was left alone and unloved. She wouldn't be able to cope ... not again. One more blow would be her undoing. Somehow I knew that perhaps because I was so much like her.

* * *

“Are you sure you're all right?” I asked Carrie a few days later. “You haven't been eating well. Where has your appetite gone?”

She said quietly, her face expressionless. “I'm just fine. I just don't feel like eating much. Don't take Jory with you today to your dance studio. Let me keep him all day. I miss him when he goes away with you.”

I felt uneasy about leaving her all day with Jory who could be a handful, and Carrie didn't look like she was feeling well.

“Carrie, be honest with me, please. If you feel unwell, let me take you to a doctor.”

“It’s my time of the month,” she said with her eyes downcast, “I just feel crampy in my middle three or four days before it starts.”

Only the blues of the month—and when you were her age you did feel more cramps than at mine. I kissed my small son good-bye while he set up a terrible wail, wanting to go with me and watch the dancers.

“Wanna hear the music, Mommy,” objected Jory who knew very well what he wanted and what he didn’t. “Wanna watch the dancers!”

“We’ll go for a walk in the park. I’ll push you in the swing and we’ll play in the sandbox,” said Carrie hastily, picking up my son and holding him close. “Stay with me, Jory. I love you so much and I never see enough of you... . Don’t you love your aunt Carrie?”

He smiled and threw his arms about her neck, for yes, Jory loved everyone.

* * *

It was a terribly long day. Several times I called to check on Carrie to see if she was all right. “I’m fine, Cathy. Jory and I had a wonderful time in the park. I’m going to lie down now and take a nap—so don’t call and wake me up again.”

Four o’clock came, and my last class of the day, when my six- and seven-year-olds moved on out into the center of the studio. While the music played I counted, “*Un, deux, pliés, un, deux, pliés*, and now, *un, deux, tendu*, close up, *un, deux, tendu*, close up.” And on and on I instructed, when suddenly I felt that prickly rise of my neck hackles to inform me that someone was staring at me intently. I whirled about to see a man standing far to the rear of the studio. Bart Winslow—my mother’s husband!

The minute he saw I recognized him he came striding toward me. “You do look sensational in purple tights, Miss Dahl. May I have a moment of your time?”

“I’m busy!” I snapped, annoyed that he could ask when I had twelve little dancers I couldn’t take my eyes off of. “My day will be over at five. If you care to you can sit over there and wait.”

“Miss Dahl, I’ve had one devil of a time finding you, and you’ve been right here under my nose all the time.”

“Mr. Winslow,” I said coolly, “if I didn’t mail you an adequate fee you could have written a letter and it would have been forwarded to me.”

He knitted his dark, thick brows together. “I’m not here about the fee—though you didn’t pay me the price I had in mind.” Smiling and assured, he slipped a hand inside his jacket and pulled from the breast pocket a letter. I gasped to see my own handwriting and all the postmarks and cancellation marks on that letter that had followed my mother all about Europe! “I see you recognize this letter,” he said with his keen brown eyes watching my every flicker of expression.

“Look, Mr. Winslow,” I said, very much in a state of flurry, “my sister isn’t feeling well today and she’s taking care of my son who is hardly more than a baby. And you can see I’ve got my hands full here. Can we talk about this some other time?”

“At your convenience, Miss Dahl, any time.” He bowed and then handed me a small business card. “Make it as soon as possible. I’ve many questions to ask you—and don’t try skipping out. This time I’m keeping close tabs on you. You don’t think one dinner date was enough, do you?”

It upset me so much to see him with that letter that the moment he was gone I dismissed my class and went into my office. There I sat down to pore over my green ledger, totaling the figures and seeing I was still in the red. Forty students I’d been assured when I bought out this school, but I hadn’t been told most of them went away during the summers and didn’t return until fall. All the spoiled little rich kids in the winter and the middle-class children in the summer who could only come once or twice a week. No matter how I stretched the money I earned it didn’t cover all my costs of redecorating and installing new mirrors behind the long barre.

I glanced then at my watch, saw it was almost six o'clock, then changed into my street clothes and ran the two blocks to my small house. Carrie should have been in the kitchen preparing dinner while Jory played in the fenced-in yard. But I didn't see Jory, nor was Carrie in the kitchen!

"Carrie," I called, "I'm home—where are you and Jory hiding?"

"In here," she responded in a thin whisper.

All the way I ran to find her still in bed. Weakly she explained Jory was staying with the next-door neighbor. "Cathy ... I don't really feel very good. I've thrown up four or five times; I can't remember how many ... and I'm so crampy. I feel funny, real funny... ."

I put my hand to her head and found it strangely cold, though the day was very warm. "I'm going to call a doctor." No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I had to laugh bitterly at myself. There wasn't a doctor in this town who made house calls. I ran back to Carrie and stuck a thermometer in her mouth, then gasped to read the figures.

"Carrie, I'm going to get Jory and then I'm driving you to the nearest hospital. You have a temperature of one hundred and three point six!"

Listlessly she nodded, then drifted off to sleep. I rushed next door to check on my son who was happily playing with a little girl a month older than he was. "Look, Mrs. Marquet," said Mrs. Townsend, a sweet, motherly woman in her early forties who was taking care of her granddaughter, "if Carrie is sick, let me keep Jory until you come home. I do hope Carrie isn't seriously ill. She's such a dear little thing. But I've noticed she's been looking pale and miserable for a day or so."

I'd noticed the same thing and had tied it all to her romance with Alex that was going awry.

How wrong I was!

* * *

The very next day I called Paul. "Catherine, what's wrong?" he said when he heard the panic in my voice.

I spilled it all out, how Carrie was sick and in the hospital where they had already made several tests, and still they didn't know what was wrong with her. "Paul, she looks dreadful! And she's losing weight fast, unbelievably fast! She's vomiting, can't keep any food down and has diarrhea too. She keeps calling for you and Chris too."

"I'll have another doctor fill in for me here and fly right up there," he said without hesitation. "But wait before you try and get in touch with Chris. The symptoms you name are so common to a number of minor ailments."

I took him at his word and didn't try and contact Chris who was enjoying a two-week tour of the West Coast before he came home and continued his residency. In three hours Paul was with me in the hospital room staring down at Carrie. She smiled weakly to see him there and held out her thin arms. "Hello," she whispered thinly, "I'll bet you didn't think you'd see me in an ole hospital bed, did you?"

Immediately he took her in his arms and began to ask questions. What were her first signs that something was wrong?

"About a week ago, I started feeling very tired. I didn't tell Cathy 'cause she worries so much about me anyway. Then I had headaches and I felt sleepy all the time, and I got big bruises and didn't know how I got them. Then I combed my hair and lots and lots of it came out, and then I just started throwing up ... and other things that other doctors have already asked me and I told them." Her thin, whispering voice drifted off. "I wish I could see Chris," she mumbled before her eyes closed and she was asleep.

Paul had already seen Carrie's chart and talked to her doctors. Now he turned to me with that blank expression that put dread in my heart ... it was so fraught with meaning. "Maybe you ought to send for Chris."

"Paul! Do you mean ... ?"

"No, I don't mean that. But if she wants him, he should be here with her."

I was in the hall, waiting for the doctors to do certain tests on Carrie. They had chased me from the room. As I paced back and forth before the closed door to her room, I sensed him before I saw him. I whirled about, catching my breath to see Chris striding down the long corridor, bypassing nurses carrying bedpans and trays of medicines who gaped to see him in all his splendid glory.

Time rolled backward and I saw Daddy, Daddy as I best remembered him, dressed in white tennis clothes. I couldn't speak when Chris took me in his arms and bowed his tanned face down into my hair. I heard the thud of his heart beating strong and regular. I sobbed, so near a deluge of tears, "It didn't take you long to get here." His face was in my hair and his voice was husky. "Cathy," he asked, raising his head and looking me directly in the eyes, "what is wrong with Carrie?"

His question stunned me—for he should know! "Can't you guess? It's that damned arsenic, I know it is! What else could it be? She was fine until a week ago, then all of a sudden she's sick." I broke then and sobbed, "She wants to see you." But before I led him to Carrie's small room, I put in his hand a note I'd found in the diary she'd started the day she met Alex. "Chris, Carrie knew for a long time something was going wrong, but she kept it to herself. Read this and tell me what you think." While he read, my eyes stayed glued to his face.

Dear Cathy and Chris,

Sometimes I think you two are my real parents, but then I remember my real momma and daddy, and she seems like a dream that never was, and I can't picture Daddy unless I have his photograph in my hand—though I can picture Cory just like he was.

I've been hiding something. So if I don't write this you are going to blame yourselves. For a long time I've felt I was going to die soon, and I don't care anymore, like I used to. I can't be a minister's wife. I wouldn't have lived this long if you two, and Jory, and Dr. Paul and Henny hadn't loved me so much. Without all of you to hold me here, I would have gone on to Cory a long time ago. Everybody has somebody special to love,

except me. Everybody has something special to do, except me. I've always known I'd never get married. I knew I was fooling myself about having children, for my hips are too narrow, and I think too I'm too small to make a good wife. I'd never be anybody special, like you, Cathy, who can dance and have babies and everything else. I can't be a doctor like Chris, so I'd just be nothing much, just somebody to get in the way and worry everybody because I'm unhappy.

So, right now, before you read on further, promise in your heart you won't let the doctors do anything to make me live on. Just let me die, and don't cry. Don't feel sad and miss me after I'm buried. Nothing has been right, or felt right since Cory went away and left me. What I regret most is I won't be around to watch Jory dance on stage like Julian used to. Now I have to confess the truth, I loved Julian, the same as I love Alex. Julian never thought I was too little, and he was the only one who made me feel a normal woman, for a short time. Though it was sinful, even when you say it was not, I know it was, Cathy.

Last week I started thinking about the grandmother and what she used to say to us all the time about being the Devil's spawn. The more I thought about it, the more I knew she was right—I shouldn't have been born! I am evil! When Cory died because of the arsenic on the sugared doughnuts the grandmother gave us, I should have died too! You didn't think I knew, did you? You thought all the time I was sitting on the floor, in the corner, I couldn't hear and didn't take notice, but I was seeing and hearing, but I didn't believe, back then. Now I believe.

Thank you, Cathy, for being like my mother and the best sister alive. And thank you, Chris, for being my substitute father and my second best brother, and thank you, Dr. Paul, for loving me even though I didn't grow. Thank all of you for never being ashamed to be seen with me, and tell Henny I love her. I think maybe God won't want me either, until I grow taller, and then I think

about Alex, who thinks God loves everybody, even when they aren't so tall.

She'd signed that letter in a huge scrawl to make up for her small size. "Oh, dear God!" cried Chris. "Cathy, what does this mean?"

Only then could I open my purse and take from it something I'd found hidden away in the dark, far end of the closet in Carrie's room. His blue eyes grew wide and the color seemed to fade as he read the name of the rat poison bottle, then saw the package of sugared doughnuts with only one left. One left. It had been bitten into just once. Tears began to course down his cheeks, then he was really sobbing on my shoulder. "Oh, God ... she put that arsenic on the doughnuts, didn't she, so she could die in the same way Cory did?"

I broke free from his clutching arms and backed a few feet away, feeling I was drained of all blood. "Chris! Read that letter over again! Didn't you notice what she wrote, how she didn't believe, and 'Now I believe.' Why wouldn't she believe back then, and believe now? Something happened! Something happened to make her believe that our mother could poison us!"

He shook his head in a bewildered fashion, the tears still eking from his eyes. "But if she knew all along, how could anything more happen to convince her, when overhearing us talking and seeing Mickey die didn't?"

"How can I tell you?" I cried out desperately. "But the doughnuts have been liberally coated with arsenic! Paul had them tested. Carrie ate those, knowing they would kill her. Can't you see this is another murder our mother committed?"

"She isn't dead yet!" Chris cried. "We'll save her! We won't let her die. We'll talk to her, tell her she has to hold on!"

I ran to hold him, fearing it was too late and desperately hoping it wasn't. Even as we clung together, made parents again by our common suffering, Paul came from Carrie's room. The solemn expression on his drawn face told me everything.

“Chris,” said Paul calmly, “how wonderful to see you again. I’m sorry the circumstances are so sad.”

“There’s hope, isn’t there?” cried Chris.

“There’s always hope. We are doing what we can. You look so tan and vibrant. Hurry in to see your sister and pass along some of that vitality to her. Catherine and I have said all we can think of to try to make her fight back and gain her will to live. But she has given up. Alex is in there on his knees by her bed, praying for her to live, but Carrie has her head turned toward the windows. I don’t think she realizes what is said or what is done. She’s gone off somewhere out of our reach.”

Paul and I trailed along behind Chris who ran to Carrie. She lay thin as a rail beneath a pile of heavy covers, when it was still summer. It just didn’t seem possible she could age so quickly! All the firm, ripe, rosy roundness of youth had fled, leaving her small face gaunt and hollow. Her eyes were deep pits to make her cheekbones very prominent. She even seemed to have lost some of her height. Chris cried out to see her so. He leaned to gather her in his arms, called her name repeatedly, stroked her long hair. To his horror hundreds of the golden strands clung to his fingers when he drew them away. “Good God in heaven—what’s being done for her?”

When he brushed the hair from his fingers I hurried forward to pluck them from his hands, and in a plastic box I carefully laid them out. The electric static of the box kept them in place. An idiot notion, but I couldn’t bear to see her beautiful hair swept up and thrown away. Her hair glinted on the pillows, on the bedspread, on the white lace of her bedjacket. As in a trance of nightmares unending I gathered up the long hairs and arranged them neatly while Alex prayed on and on. Even as he was introduced to Chris he paused only long enough to nod.

“Paul, answer me! What is being done to help Carrie?”

“Everything we know how to do,” answered Paul, his voice low and soft, the way people speak when death is near. “A team of good doctors are working around the clock to save her. But her red blood cells are being destroyed faster than we can replace them with transfusions.”

Three days and nights all of us lingered beside Carrie's bedside while my neighbor took care of Jory. Each of us who loved her prayed that she'd live. I called Henny and told her to go to church and have all her family and church members pray for Carrie too. She tapped over the line her signal for "Yes, Yes!"

Flowers arrived daily to fill her room. I didn't look to see who sent them. I sat beside Chris or Paul, or between both, and held to their hands and silently prayed. I looked with distaste upon Alex, whom I believed responsible for much of what was wrong with Carrie. Finally I could keep my question to myself no longer; I got up and stalked Alex and backed him into a corner. "Alex, why would Carrie want to die during the happiest days of her life? What did she tell you and what did you say?"

He turned his bewildered, unshaven, grief-stricken face to mine. "What did I say?" he asked, his eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep. I repeated my question with an even harder edge to my voice. He shook his head as if to clear it, looking hurt and sleepy as he ran long fingers through the tumble of his uncombed brown curls. "Cathy, God knows I've done everything I can to convince her I love her! But she won't listen to me. She turns her face aside and says nothing. I asked her to marry me and she said yes. She threw her arms about my neck and said yes over and over again. Then she said, 'Oh, Alex, I'm not nearly good enough for you.' And I laughed and said she was perfect, just exactly what I wanted. Where did I go wrong, Cathy? What did I do to make her turn against me so now she won't even look my way?"

Alex had the kind of sweet, pious face you expect to see carved only on marble saints. Yet, as he stood there, so humbled, so racked by grief and torn by love turned against him, I reached out and soothed him as best I could, for he did love Carrie. In his own way he loved her. "Alex, I'm sorry if I sounded harsh; forgive me for that. But did Carrie confess anything to you?"

Again his eyes clouded. "I called and asked to see her a week ago and her voice sounded strange, as if something

terrible had happened and she couldn't speak about it. I drove as fast as I could to be with her, but she wouldn't let me in. Cathy, I love her! She's told me she's too small and her head is too large, but in my eyes her proportions are just right. To me she was a dainty doll who didn't know she was beautiful. And if God lets her die I will never in this life find my credence again!" That's when he buried his face in his hands and began to cry.

It was the fourth night after Chris arrived. I dozed beside Carrie. The others were trying to catch a catnap before they too were ill and Alex was napping in the hall on a cot when I heard Carrie call my name. I ran to her bed and knelt beside it, then reached for her small hand under the covers. It was only a bony hand now, with skin so translucent her veins and arteries could be seen.

"Darling, I've been waiting for you to wake up," I whispered in a hoarse voice. "Alex is in the hall and Chris and Paul are napping in the doctor's quarters—shall I call them in?"

"No," she whispered. "I want to talk only to you. I'm gonna die, Cathy." She said it so calmly, as if it didn't matter, as if she accepted it and was glad. "No!" I objected strongly. "You are *not* going to die! I'm not going to let you die! I love you as my own child. Many people love and need you, Carrie! Alex loves you so much and he wants to marry you, and he won't be a minister now, Carrie; I've told him it makes you uncomfortable. He doesn't really care what his career as long as you stay alive and love him. He doesn't care if you are small or if you have children. Let me call him in so he can tell you all ..."

"Nooo," she whispered thinly. "I've got something secret to tell you. Her voice was so faint it seemed to come from over hundreds of soft, rounded, little hills far, far away. "I saw a lady on the street." Her voice was so low I had to lean to hear. "She looked so much like Momma I had to run up. I caught hold of her hand. She snatched hers away and turned cold hard eyes on me. 'I don't know you' she said. Cathy, that was our mother! She looks like she used to almost, only a little older.

She even had on the pearl necklace with the diamond butterfly clasp that I remember. And, Cathy, when your own mother doesn't want you—don't that mean nobody can want you? She looked at me and she knew who I was; I saw it in her eyes, and still she didn't want me because she knows I'm bad. That's why she said what she did—that she didn't have any children. She doesn't want you or Chris either, Cathy, and all mothers love and want their children unless they're evil, unholy children ... like us."

"Oh, Carrie! Don't let her do this to you! It's the love of money that made her deny you ... not that you are bad or wicked or unholy. You haven't done anything evil! It's money that matters to her, Carrie, not us. But we don't need her. Not when you have Alex and Chris, Paul and me ... and Jory too, and Henny... . Don't break our hearts, Carrie, hang on long enough to let the doctors help you. Don't give up. Jory wants his aunt back; every day he asks where you are. What am I going to tell him—that you didn't care enough to live?"

"Jory don't need me," she said in the manner she'd spoken when she was a child. "Jory's got lots of people besides me to love and care for him ... but Cory, he's waiting for me, Cathy. I can see him right now. Look over there behind your shoulder; he's standing next to Daddy and they want me more than anyone here."

"Carrie, don't!"

"It's nice where I'm going, Cathy, flowers everywhere, and beautiful birds, and I can feel myself growing taller... . Look, I'm almost as tall as Momma, like I always wanted to be. And when I get there nobody's ever gonna say again I got eyes big and scary as an owl's. Nobody will ever call me 'dwarf' again, and tell me to use a stretching machine ... 'cause I'm just as tall as I want to be."

Her weak and trembling voice faded away. Her eyes rolled heavenward and stayed open without blinking. Her lips stayed parted, as if she had something else to tell me. *Dear God, she was dead!*

Momma had started all of this. Momma who got out of everything scot-free! Scar-free! And rich, rich, rich! All she had to do was shed a few tears of self-pity after she went home. That's when I screamed! I know I screamed. I wailed and wanted to rip the hair from my head and tear the skin from my face—for I looked too much like that woman who had to pay, pay, pay ... and then pay some more!

* * *

On a hot August day we buried Carrie in the Sheffield family plot, a few miles outside the city limits of Clairmont. No rain this time. No snow on the ground. Now death had claimed every season but winter and left only that cold, blustery weather for me to rejoice in. We covered Carrie over with the crimson flowers she so loved, and purple ones too. The sun above was a rich saffron color, almost orange before it turned to vermilion as it sank to the horizon and turned the heavens rosy-red.

My thoughts were like the dry leaves blowing in the strong wind of hate as I sat on and on and on, though the marble bench beneath me was hard and uncomfortable. I made those dry leaves, after I gathered them together and twisted them, into a cruel witch's stick, a thing to stir up a neglected brew of revenge!

Out of the four Dresden dolls only two were left. And *one* would do nothing. He had taken an oath to do what he could to preserve life and keep alive even those who didn't deserve to live.

I was loath to leave Carrie alone in the night, the first one she'd spend in the ground. I had to spend this one night with her and comfort her in some unknown way. I threw a glance at where Julia and Scotty lay asleep too, near Paul's parents, and an older brother who had died even before Amanda was born. I wondered what we, the Foxworths, were doing in the Sheffield family plot? What meaning was there to any of this?

If Alex hadn't come into Carrie's life when he did and given her love, would she have been better off? If Carrie hadn't spied Momma on the street and raced to catch up with

her, happy enough to take hold of her hand and call her Momma, would that have made a difference? It must have made *all* the difference! It must have! Straight from her mother's denial she had gone to purchase rat poison because she didn't feel fit to live, not when even her mother could deny her. And the poison on her doughnuts hadn't been just a trace, but heavily laced—pure arsenic!

Someone spoke my name softly. Someone reached with tenderness to lift me up by my elbows. With his arm about my waist, supporting me, he led me from the cemetery where I would have stayed until dawn to see the sun come up. “No, darling,” said Chris. “Carrie doesn't need you now. But others do. Cathy, you must forget the past and your plans for revenge. I see the look on your face and read your mind. I'll share with you my secret for finding peace. I've tried to give it to you before but you refuse to listen. *Now this time listen and believe!* Do as I do and force yourself to forget everything that gives you pain, and remember only what gives you joy. It is the whole secret to happy living, Cathy. Forgetting and forgiving.”

Bitter, bleak eyes I turned upon him and scornfully I said, “You are indeed very good at forgiving, Christopher—but at forgetting, now that is another matter.”

He flushed as red as the dying sun. “Cathy, please! Isn't forgiving the better half? I only remember the sweeter part.”

“No! No!” But I clung to him as one who approaches hell holds tight to salvation.

Though I'm not sure, I thought I saw a woman dressed in black, with her head and face covered by a black veil, duck behind a tree as we approached the road and the parked car. Hiding so we wouldn't see her. But I caught a glimpse, enough to reveal the rope of lustrous pearls she wore. Pearls that were there for a thin white hand to lift and nervously, out of long habit, twist and untwist into a knot.

Only one woman I knew did that—and she was the perfect one to wear black, and should run to hide! *Forever hide!*

Color all her days black! Every last one!

I'd see to it that all her remaining days on earth were black. Blacker than the tar put on my hair. Blacker than anything in that locked room and in the darkest shadows in the attic that had been given to us when we were fearful and young and needing so much to be loved enough. Blacker than the deepest pit in hell.

I'd waited long enough to deliver what I must. Long enough. And even with Chris here to try and stop me—even he wouldn't be enough to prevent what I had to do!

PART FIVE



The Time for Vengeance



The untimely death of Carrie left a hole in the lives of all of us who loved her. Now the little porcelain dolls were mine to cherish and keep. Chris went away to be a resident at the University of Virginia just so he wouldn't be too far from me.

“Stay, Catherine,” pleaded Paul when I told him I was going back to my place in the mountains to pick up my life as dance instructor. “Don't go and leave me alone again! Jory needs a father; I need a wife; he needs a man to emulate. I'm sick to death of having you to love only once in a while.”

“Later,” I said with hard determination, backing off from his arms. “I'll come to you one day and we will be married, but I have some unfinished business to attend to first.”

* * *

Soon I was back into my routine of work, not far from where the Foxworths lived in their mansion. I settled down to scheming. Jory was a problem now that I didn't have Carrie. He grew tired at the dance school and wanted to play with children his own age. I enrolled him in a special preschool and hired a maid to help out with the housework and stay with Jory when I wasn't there. At night I went on the prowl, looking, of course, for one particular man. So far he had eluded me, but sooner or later fate would see that we met—God help you then, Momma!

The local newspaper gave Bartholomew Winslow a big write-up when he opened his second law office in Hillendale while his junior partner ran his first office in Greenglenna. Two offices, I thought. What money couldn't buy! I didn't plan or, being so bold as to approach him directly; ours would be an “accidental” confrontation. Leaving Jory in the care of Emma Lindstrom, as he played in our fenced-in yard with two

other children, I drove my car to the woods that weren't so far from Foxworth Hall.

Bart Winslow was a celebrity of sorts, with all the details of his life explored, so I knew from the news story that it was his habit to jog a few miles each day before breakfast. Indeed, he would need a strong heart for what was coming up in his near future. For days on end I jogged myself, using dirt paths that twisted and turned, cluttered by dead, dry and crackling leaves. It was September and Carrie had been dead a month. Sad thoughts while I sniffed the pungent aroma of wood-fires burning and heard the noise of wood being chopped. Sounds and smells Carrie should be enjoying—they'll pay, Carrie! I'll make them pay, and somehow I forgot, Bart Winslow didn't have anything to do with it. Not him, only *her*! How quickly time passed and I was getting nowhere! Where was he? I couldn't prowl the singles' bars; that was too commonplace and too obvious. When we met, and someday we had to, he'd say something that was a cliché, or I would, and that would be the beginning—or the ending I had in mind since the first time I laid eyes on Bartholomew Winslow dancing with my mother on Christmas night.

As contrary as life would be, I didn't meet him jogging. One Saturday noon I sat in a sleazy café and suddenly Bart Winslow sauntered in the door! He glanced around, spied me seated by the windows and came toward me in his three-piece lawyer's suit that must have cost a fortune. With attaché case in hand, he actually swaggered! His smile was wide, his lean, tanned face slightly sinister—or maybe it was me scaring myself.

"We-ll," he drawled, "as I live and breathe, if it isn't Catherine Dahl, the very woman I've been hoping to run into for months." He set down his attaché case, sat across from me without my invitation, then leaned on his elbows to peer into my eyes with intense interest. "Where the hell have you hidden yourself?" he asked, using his foot to draw his case nearer and guard it.

"I haven't hidden myself," I said, feeling nervous and hoping it wouldn't show.

He laughed as his dark eyes scanned over my tight sweater and skirt and what he could see of my foot that nervously swung. Then his face grew solemn. “I read in the newspaper about your sister’s death. I am very sorry. It always hurts to read of someone so young dying. If it’s not too personal, may I ask what killed her? A disease? An accident?”

My eyes opened wide. What killed her? Oh, I could write a book about that!

“Why don’t you ask your wife what killed my sister?” I said stiffly.

He appeared startled, then shot out, “How can she know when she doesn’t know you or your sister? Yet, I saw her with the clipping cut from the obituary page, and she was crying when I snatched it from her hand. I demanded an explanation; she got up and ran upstairs. She still refuses to answer my questions. Just who the hell are you, anyway?”

I bit again into my ham, tomato and lettuce sandwich and chewed irritatingly slowly just to watch his vexation. “Why not ask *her*?” I said again.

“I do hate people who answer questions with questions,” he snapped, then motioned to a red-haired waitress who hovered nearby and gave her his order to have the same as I. “Now,” he said, scooting his chair forward. “Some time ago I came to your dance studio and showed you those blackmail letters you keep writing to my wife.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out three I’d written years ago. From the dog-eared look of them, and the many stamps and cancellations, they had followed her about the world to end up again in my hands, with him almost shouting again, “Who the hell are you?”

I smiled to charm him. My mother’s smile. I tilted my head as she did hers and fluttered one hand up to play with my simulated pearls. “Do you really have to ask—can’t you guess?”

“Don’t play coy with me! Who are you really? What is your relationship to my wife? I know you look like her, same hair, same eyes, and even some of your mannerisms are the same. You must be some kind of relative ... ?”

“Yes. You could say that.”

“Then why haven’t I met you before? A niece, cousin?” He had a strong animal magnetism that almost frightened me from playing the kind of game I had in mind. This was no adolescent boy who would be timidly impressed with a former ballerina. His dark appeal was strong, almost overwhelming me. Oh, what a wild lover he’d make. I could drown in his eyes and, making love with him, I’d be forever lost to any other man. He was too confidently masculine, too assured. He could smile and be at ease while I fidgeted and longed to escape before he led me down the trail I thought I’d wanted up until this very moment.

“Come,” he said, reaching to forcefully restrain my departure when I rose to go, “stop looking frightened and play the game you’ve had in mind for some time.” He picked up the letters and held them before my eyes. I looked away, unhappy with myself. “Don’t turn away your eyes. Five or six of your letters came while my wife and I were in Europe, and she’d see them and paled. She’d swallow nervously—as you are swallowing nervously now. Her hand would lift to play with her necklace, just as you are playing with your beads now. Twice I saw her write on the envelope, ‘Address unknown.’ Then one day I collected the mail and I found these three letters you’d written to her. I opened them. I read them.” He paused, leaned forward so his lips were only inches from mine. His voice came hard and cold and fully in control of any savagery he might feel. “What right have you to try and blackmail my wife?”

I’m sure the color left my cheeks. I know I felt sick and weak and wanted to flee this place and him. I imagined I heard Chris’s voice saying, *Let the past rest in peace. Let it go, Cathy. God in his own way will eventually work the vengeance you want. In his own way, at his own speed He will take the responsibility from your shoulders.*

Here was my chance to spill it forth—*all of it!* Let him know just what kind of woman he’d married! Why couldn’t my lips part and my tongue speak the truth? “Why don’t you

ask your wife who I am? Why come to me when she has *all* the answers?”

He leaned back against the gaudy, bright orange, plastic-covered chair and took out a silver cigarette case with his monogram in diamonds. That just had to be a gift to him from my mother—it looked like her. He offered that case to me. I shook my head. He tapped the loose tobacco from one end and then lit the other with a silver lighter with diamonds too. All the while his dark, narrowed eyes held mine and, like a fly caught in a web of my own making, I waited to be pounced upon.

“Each letter you write says you need desperately a million dollars,” he said in a flat monotone, then blew smoke directly into my face. I coughed and fanned the air. All around the walls bore signs reading NO SMOKING. “Why do you need a million?”

I watched the smoke; it circled and came directly to me, wreathed about my head and neck. “Look,” I said, struggling to regain my control, “you know my husband died. I was expecting his child and I was inundated with bills I couldn’t pay, and even after the insurance paid off, with *some* assistance from you, still I’m going under. My dance school is in the red. I have a child to support, and I need things for him, to save for his college education, and your wife has so many millions. I thought she could part with just one.”

His smile was faint, cynical. He blew smoke rings to make me dodge and cough again. “Why would an intelligent woman like you presume to think my wife would be so generous as to turn over one dime to a relative she doesn’t even claim?”

“Ask her why!”

“I have asked her. I took your letters and pushed them in her face and demanded to know what it was all about. A dozen times I’ve asked just who you are and how you are connected to her. Each time she says she doesn’t know you, except as a ballerina she’s seen dance. This time I want straight answers from you.” To assure that I didn’t turn my face and hide my eyes, he reached forward to firmly grip my chin so I couldn’t

turn my head. “*Who the hell are you?* How are you connected to my wife? Why should you think she would pay you blackmail money? Why should your letters send her running upstairs to take out a picture album she keeps locked in her desk drawer or in a safe? An album she quickly hides and locks away whenever I come into the room.”

“She took the album—the blue album with a gold eagle on the leather cover?” I whispered, shocked that she would do that.

“Everywhere we go the blue album goes with her in one of her locked trunks.” His dark eyes narrowed dangerously. “You described that blue and gold album exactly, though it’s old and worn shabby now. While my wife looks in a picture album, my mother-in-law reads her Bible to rags. Sometimes I catch my wife crying over the photographs that blue album holds, which I presume are pictures of her first husband.”

I sighed heavily and closed my eyes. *I didn’t want to know she cried!*

“Answer me, Cathy. *Who are you?*” I felt he would grip my chin and hold me there throughout eternity if I didn’t speak up and say something, and for some stupid reason I lied. “Henrietta Beech was your wife’s half-sister. You see, Malcolm Foxworth had an extramarital affair, and three children were the result. I am one. Your wife is my half-aunt.”

“Ahhh,” he sighed, releasing my chin and leaning back in his chair, as if satisfied I was telling the truth. “Malcolm had an affair with Henrietta Beech who gave him three illegitimate children. What extraordinary information.” He laughed mockingly. “I never thought the old devil had it in him, especially after that heart attack soon after my wife married the first time. Gives a man inspiration to know that.” He sobered then to give me a long and searching look. “Where is your mother now? I’d like to see and talk to her.”

“Dead,” I said, hiding my hands under the table and keeping my fingers crossed like a superstitious, silly child. “She’s been dead a long, long time.”

“Okay. I get the picture. Three young, illegitimate Foxworth children hoping to cash in on their bloodline by blackmailing my wife—right?”

“Wrong! It was only me. Not my brother or my sister. I only want what is due us! At the time I wrote those letters I was in a desperate situation, and even now I’m not much better off. The hundred thousand the insurance paid didn’t go very far. My husband had run up huge bills and we were behind in our rent and car payments; plus I owed hospital bills for him, the money for his funeral, and then the costs of having my baby. I could go on all night telling you my dance school’s problems and how I was tricked into believing it was a profitable, going concern.”

“And it’s not?”

“Not when it consists of so many little rich girls who take off and go on vacations two or three times a year and aren’t really serious about dancing anyway. All they want to do is look pretty and feel graceful. If I had one really good student it would be worth all my efforts. But I don’t have one, not one.”

He drummed his strong fingertips on the tablecloth, looking deeply reflective. Next he had a cigarette lit again, not as if he truly enjoyed smoking, but more as if he had to have something to keep his restless fingers busy. He inhaled deeply, then looked me straight in the eyes. “I’m going to speak very frankly to you, Catherine Dahl. First, I don’t know if you are lying or telling the truth, but you do look like a member of the Foxworth clan. Second, I don’t like you trying to blackmail my wife. Third, I don’t like to see her unhappy, so much so that she cries. Fourth, I happen to be very much in love with her, though there are times, I admit, I’d like to choke the past from her throat. She never speaks of it; she is full of secrets my ears will never hear. And one great big secret I’ve never heard before is that Malcolm Neal Foxworth, the good, pious, saintly gentleman, had a love affair after he had heart trouble. Now before his heart trouble, I happen to know he had at least one, possibly, but no more.”

Oh! He knew more than I. I had shot an arrow into the sky, not knowing it would hit a bulls-eye!

Bart Winslow glanced about the café. Families were coming in to dine early, and I suppose he feared someone might recognize him and report back to his wife, my mother.

“C’mon, Cathy, let’s get out of here,” he urged, getting to his feet and reaching to pull me on mine. “You can invite me to have a drink in your home, then we can sit and talk and you can tell me everything in more detail.”

Twilight came like a quickly dropped shade to the mountains—suddenly it was evening—and we’d been hours in that café. We were on the sidewalk when he held my cardigan sweater for my arms to fill the sleeves, though the air was so brisk I needed a jacket or coat.

“Your home, where is it?”

I told him and he looked disconcerted. “We’d better not go there ... too many people might see me go inside.” (He didn’t know then, of course, I had chosen that cottage mainly because it backed up to a wooded area, and there was plenty of privacy for a man to come and go on the sly.) “My face is in the newspapers so often,” he continued, “I’m sure your neighbors would see me. Could you call your babysitter and have her stay on awhile longer?”

I did just that, speaking first to Emma Lindstrom, and then to Jory, telling him to be a good boy until Mommy was home again.

Bart’s car was sleek and black, a Mercedes. It purred along like one of Julian’s sleek luxury cars, so heavy it didn’t rattle or clank, and firmly it gripped the curved mountain roads. “Where are you taking me, Mr. Winslow?”

“To a place where we can talk and no one will see us or hear us.” He looked my way and grinned. “You’ve been studying my profile. How do I rate?”

A hot rush of blood heated my face. Knowing I was blushing made me blush again, so then I felt damp. My life was full of handsome men, but this man was far different from any I had known. A rakish, bandit type of man who was filling me with alarm signals—go slow with this one! My

intuitiveness warned as I studied his face and took note. Everything, his expensive, beautifully fitted suit, shouted that he should be as determined as I was in getting what he wanted, when he wanted.

“Well-ll,” I drawled to make a mockery of this, “your looks tell me to run fast and lock the door behind me!”

Wickedly he grinned again, seemingly satisfied. “So, you find me exciting and a bit dangerous. Nice. To be handsome but boring would be worse than being ugly and charming, wouldn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know. If a man is charming and intelligent enough, I often forget how he actually looks and think he’s handsome regardless.”

“Then you must be easily pleased.”

I shifted my eyes and sat up primly. “Truthfully, Mr. Winslow—”

“Bart.”

“Truthfully, Bart, I am very difficult to please. I’m inclined to put men up on a pedestal and think of them as perfect. As soon as I find out they have feet of clay, I fall out of love, become indifferent.”

“Not many women know themselves so well,” he mused. “Most go around never knowing what they are beneath the facade. At least I know where I stand—a sex symbol not on a pedestal.”

Nooo! I’d never put *him* on a pedestal. I knew him for what he was, a womanizer, a skirt-chaser, wind and fire, enough to drive a jealous wife crazy! Certainly my mother had never bought that sex manual to instruct him how to or when to and where to! He’d know everything. Abruptly he pulled his car to a stop, then turned to meet my gaze. Even in the darkness the whites of his dark eyes shone. Too virile, too vibrant for a man who should be showing signs of aging. He was eight years younger than my mother. That made him forty years old, a man’s most attractive time, his most vulnerable time, his time to think youth would soon be over. He’d have to make his new

conquests now, before the sweet and fleeting bird of youth had flown away and taken with it all the young and pretty girls that could have been his. And he must be tired of the wife he knew so well, though he professed to love her. Why then were his eyes gleaming, challenging me? *Oh, Momma, wherever you are, you should be down on your knees praying! For I'm not going to show you mercy, no more than you showed us!*

Yet as I sat there summing him up I realized he was no self-sacrificing, quiet man like Paul. This one wouldn't need seducing. He'd do that himself, staccato time. He'd stalk like a black panther until he had what he wanted, and then he'd walk out and leave me and it would be all over. He was not going to give up his chance to inherit millions and the pleasures millions gave for some chance mistress who came his way. Red lights were flashing behind my eyes ... go easy ... do it right, for there's danger if you do it wrong.

As I measured him, he was measuring me in just about the same way. Did I remind him too much of his wife so there would be no real difference? Or was my likeness to her an advantage? After all, didn't men always fall over and over again for the same type?

"Beautiful night," he said. "This is my favorite season. Fall is so passionate, even more than spring. Come walk with me, Cathy. This place puts me in a strange, melancholy mood, as if I've got to run fast to catch up with the best thing in my life, which up until now has always eluded me."

"You sound poetic," I said as we left his car and he caught hold of my hand. We began to stroll, with him deftly guiding me—would you believe it—alongside a railroad track in the country! It seemed so familiar. Yet it couldn't be, could it? Not the same railroad track that had taken us as children to Foxworth Hall fifteen years ago when I was twelve!

"Bart, I don't know about you, but I've got the weirdest feeling that I have walked this path with you before, on some other night before this."

"Déjà vu," he said. "I have that same feeling. As if once you and I were deeply in love, and we walked through those

woods over there. We sat on that green bench beside these train tracks. I was compelled to bring you here, even when I didn't know where it was I was driving to."

This forced me to stare up into his face to see if he could be serious. From his bemused and slightly discomforted look, I believe he was surprising himself. "I like to ponder all things considered impossible or implausible," I said. "I want everything impossible to become possible, and everything implausible to reverse and become reality. Then when everything is explainable I want new mysteries to confront me so I always have something inexplicable to think about."

"You are a romantic."

"Aren't you?"

"I don't know. I used to be when I was a boy." "What made you change?"

"You can't stay a boy with romantic notions when you go to law school and you are faced with the harsh realities of murder, rape, robbery, corruption. You have professors pounding dogmatic ideas into your head to drive out the romance. You go into law fresh and young, and you come out tough and hard, and you know every step of the way ahead you've got to fight and fight hard to be any good. Soon enough you learn you are not the best, and the competition is astounding."

He turned to smile with a great deal of winsome charm. "I think, though, you and I have much in common, Catherine Dahl. I too had that need of the mysterious, the need to be confounded, and the need to have someone to worship. So I fell in love with an heiress to millions, but those millions she wanted to inherit got in my way. They put me off and scared me. I knew everyone would think I was marrying her just for her money. I think she thought it too, until I convinced her otherwise. I fell for her hard, before I knew who she was. In fact I used to think she was like you."

"How could you think that?" I asked, all tight inside from hearing his revelations.

“Because she *was* like you, Cathy, for a while. But then she inherited millions, and in great orgies of shopping she’d buy everything her heart desired. Soon there was nothing to wish for at all—but a baby. And she couldn’t have a baby. You can’t imagine all the time we spent in front of shops that sold infant clothes, toys and furniture. I married her knowing we couldn’t have children and I thought I didn’t care. Soon I began to care too much. Those infant shops held a fascination for me too.”

The faint path we followed led straight to the green bench stretched between two of the four rickety old green posts that supported a rusty tin roof. There we sat in the cold mountain air, with the moon bright, the stars flickering on and off; bugs were humming, just as my blood was singing.

“This used to be a mail pick-up and drop-off station, Cathy.” He lit another cigarette. “They don’t run the trains by here anymore. The wealthy people who live nearby finally won their petition against the railroad company and put an end to trains that so inconsiderately blew their whistles at night and disturbed their rest. I was very fond of hearing the train whistles at night. But I was only twenty-seven, a bridegroom living in Foxworth Hall. I’d lie on my bed near my wife, with a swan overhead—can you believe that? She would sleep with her head on my shoulder or we’d hold hands all through the night. She took pills so she’d sleep soundly. Too soundly, for she never heard the beautiful music coming from overhead. It puzzled me so—and she said, when I told her, it was my imagination. Then one day it stopped, and I guessed she was right, it was only my imagination. When the music ended I missed it. I longed to hear it again. The music had given that old dry house some enchantment. I used to fall asleep and dream of a lovely young girl who danced overhead. I thought I was dreaming of my wife when she was young. She told me that often, as a way of punishment, her parents would send her into the attic schoolroom and force her to stay there all day, even in the summers when the temperature up there must have been over a hundred degrees. And they sent her up there in the winters too—she said it was frigidly cold and her fingers would turn blue. She said she spent her time crouched on the

floor near the window, crying because she was missing out on some fun thing her parents considered wicked.”

“Did you ever go and take a look in the attic?”

“No. I wanted to, but the double doors at the top of the stairs were always locked. And besides, all attics are alike; see one and you’ve seen them all.” He flashed me a wicked smile. “And now that I’ve revealed so much about myself—tell me about you. Where were you born? Where did you go to school? What made you take up dancing—and why haven’t you ever attended one of those balls the Foxworths throw on Christmas night?”

I sweated, though I was cold. “Why should I tell you everything about myself. Just because you sat there and revealed a *little* about yourself? You didn’t tell me anything of real importance. Where were *you* born? What made *you* decide to become an attorney? How did you meet your wife? Was it in the summer, the winter, what year? Did you know she’d been married before, or did she tell you only after you were married?”

“Nosy little thing, aren’t you? What difference does it make where I was born. I haven’t led an exciting life like you have. I was born in the nothing little town called Greenglenna, South Carolina. The Civil War ended the prosperous days of my ancestors, and we went steadily downhill, as did all the friends of the family. But it’s an old story, told so many times. Then I married a Foxworth lady and prosperity reigned again in the South. My wife took my ancestral home and practically had it reconstructed, and refurbished, and spent more than if she had bought a new place. And what was I doing during all of this? A top grad from Harvard running around the world with his wife. I’ve done very little with my education; I’ve become a social butterfly. I’ve had a few court cases and I helped you with your difficulties. And, by the way, you never paid the fee I had in mind.”

“I mailed you a check for two hundred dollars!” I objected hotly. “If that wasn’t enough, please don’t tell me now; I don’t have another two hundred to give away.”

“Have I mentioned money? Money means little to me now that I have so much of it at my disposal. In your special case I had another kind of fee in mind.”

“Oh, come off it, Bart Winslow! You’ve brought me way out into the country. Now do you want to make love on the grass? Is it your lifelong ambition to make love to a former ballerina? I don’t give sex away and I don’t pay any bills that way. And what’s so attractive about you, a lap dog for a pampered, spoiled, rich woman who can buy anything she wants—including a much younger husband! Why, it’s a wonder she didn’t put a ring through your nose to lead you around and make you sit up and beg!”

He seized me then hard and ruthlessly, then pressed his lips down on mine with a savagery that hurt! I fought him off with my fists, battering his arms as I tried to twist my head from beneath his, but whichever way my head went, right or left, up or down, he kept his kiss, demanding my lips to separate and yield to his tongue! Then, realizing I couldn’t escape the arms of steel he banded about me to mold my form to his, against my will, my arms stole up around his neck. My unruly fingers betrayed me and twined into his thick, dark hair, and that kiss lasted, and lasted, and lasted until both of us were hot and panting—and then he thrust me from him so cruelly I almost fell from the bench.

“Well, little Miss Muffet—what kind of lap dog do you call me now? Or are you Little Red Riding Hood who has just met the wolf?”

“Take me home!”

“I’ll take you home—but not until I’ve enjoyed a little more of what you just gave.” He lunged again to seize me, but I was up and running, running for his car, running to seize my purse so that when he got there I held my manicuring scissors ready to stab with.

He grinned, reached out and wrested them from me. “They would deliver a nasty scratch,” he mocked. “But I don’t like scratches except on my back. When I let you out you can have your little two-inch scissors back again.”

In front of my cottage he handed me the scissors. “Now, do your worst. Cut out my eyes; stab me in the heart—you might as well. Your kiss has begun it, but I still demand my total payment.”

Tiger by the Tail



Early on a Sunday morning a few days later I was warming up at the barre in my bedroom. My small son was earnestly trying to do as I did. It was sweet to watch him in the mirror I'd moved from the dresser over to the barre.

“Am I dancing?” asked Jory.

“Yes, Jory. *You are dancing!*”

“Am I good?”

“Yes, Jory. *You are wonderful!*”

He laughed and hugged my legs and looked up into my face with that ecstatic rapture only the very young can express—all the wonder of being alive was in his eyes, all the wonder of learning something new every day. “I love you, Mommy!” It was something we said to each other a dozen or more times each day. “Mary’s got a daddy. Why don’t I have a daddy?”

That really hurt. “You did have a daddy, Jory, but he went away to heaven. And maybe someday Mommy will find you a new daddy.”

He smiled because he was pleased. Daddy’s were big in his world, for all the children in the nursery school had one ... all but Jory.

Just then I heard the front door bang. A familiar voice called my name. Chris! He strode through the small house as I hurried toward him in my blue tights, leotards and *pointe* shoes. Our eyes met and locked. Without a word he held out his arms and I ran unhesitatingly into them, and though he sought my lips to kiss he found only my cheek. Jory was pulling on his gray flannel trousers, eager to be swept up in strong, manly arms. “How’s my Jory?” asked Chris after he

kissed both round, rosy cheeks. My son's eyes were huge as they stared at him. "Uncle Chris, are you my daddy?"

"No," he said gruffly, putting Jory again on his small feet, "but I sure wish I had a son like you." This made me shift around uncomfortably so he couldn't see my eyes, and then I asked what he was doing here when he should be attending his patients.

"Got the weekend off, so I thought I'd spend it with you; that is, if you'll let me." I nodded weakly, thinking of someone else who was likely to come this weekend. "I was as good as a resident can be and was rewarded and given a weekend without duty." He gave me one of his most winning smiles. "Have you heard from Paul?" I asked. "He doesn't come as often as he used to, and he doesn't write much either."

"He's away on another medical convention. I thought he always kept in touch with you."

He put just a little stress on the "you." "Chris, I'm worried about Paul. It isn't like him not to answer every letter I write."

He laughed and fell into a chair, then lifted Jory up on his lap. "Maybe, dear sister, you have finally met a man who can get over loving you."

Now I didn't know what to say or what to do with my legs and hands. I sat and stared down at the floor, feeling Chris's long, steady gaze trying to read my intentions. No sooner did I think that than he was asking, "Cathy, what are you doing here in the mountains? What are you planning? Is it your scheme to take Bart Winslow from our mother?"

My head jerked up. I met his narrowed blue eyes and felt the heat that sprang up from my heart. "Don't question me like I'm some ten-year-old without a brain. I do what I have to—just as you do."

"Sure, you do. I didn't have to ask, I know. It doesn't take a crystal ball to read you. I know what makes you tick and how your thoughts range—but leave Bart Winslow alone! He'll never leave her for you! She's got the millions and all you

have is youth. There are thousands of younger women he can choose from—why should he choose you?”

I didn't say anything, just met his scowling look with my own confident smile, making him flush, then turn aside his face. I felt mean, cruel and ashamed. “Chris, let's not argue. Let's be friends and allies. You and I are all that's left out of four.”

His blue eyes grew soft as they studied me. “I was only trying, as I am always trying.” He looked around, then back to me. “I share a room with another resident at the hospital. It would be nice if I could live here with you and Jory. It would be like it used to be, just us.”

What he said made me stiffen. “It would be a long drive for you every morning, and you couldn't be on immediate call.”

He sighed. “I know—but how about the weekends? Every other weekend I have off-duty time—would that bug you too much?”

“Yes, it would bug me too much. I have a life of my own, Christopher.”

I watched him bite down on his lower lip before he forced a smile. “Okay, have it your way ... do what you must, and I hope to God you won't be sorry.”

“Will you please drop the subject?” I smiled and went to him and hugged him close. “Be good. Take me as I am, obstinate as Carrie. Now, what would you like for lunch?”

“I haven't had breakfast yet.”

“Then we'll eat brunch—and that can do for two meals.” From then on the day went swiftly. On Sunday morning he came to the table ready for the cheese omelet he favored. Jory, thank God, would eat anything. Despite myself I thought of Chris as a father to Jory. It seemed so right to have him at the table, like it used to be ... him and I playing at being parents. Doing the best we could, all we could, and we had been only children ourselves.

We ambled through the woods after breakfast, using all the trails I followed when I jogged. Jory rode on Chris's shoulder.

We looked at the world that was just outside Foxworth Hall, all the places we hadn't been able to see when we were on the roof or locked away. Together we stood and stared at that huge mansion. "Is Momma in there?" he asked in a tight thick voice.

"No. I've heard she's down in Texas in one of those beauty spas for very wealthy women, trying to lose fifteen extra pounds."

Alerted, he swiveled his head. "Who told you that?"

"Who do you think?"

He shook his head violently, then lifted Jory down and set him on his feet. "Damn you for playing with him, Cathy! I've seen him. He's dangerous—leave him alone. Go back to Paul and marry him if you must have a man in your life. Let our mother live out her life in peace. You don't believe for one moment, do you, that she doesn't suffer? Do you think she can be happy knowing what she did? All the money in the world can't give her back what she's lost—and that is *us*! Let that be enough revenge."

"It isn't enough. I want to confront her in front of Bart with the truth. And you can stay one hundred years and get down on your knees and plead until your tongue falls out—I will still go ahead and do what I must!"

* * *

The time Chris stayed with me he slept in the room that had been Carrie's. We did very little talking, though his eyes followed my every movement. He looked drained, lost ... and, most of all, hurt. I wanted to tell him that when I'd finished what I had to do I'd go back to Paul and have a safe life with him, and Jory would have the father he needed, but I said nothing.

Mountain nights were cold, even in September when the days were warm still. In that attic we'd nearly melted from the sweltering heat, and I guess this was on both our minds as we sat before the guttering log fire on the night before Chris had to leave. My son had been in bed for hours when I rose,

yawned, stretched wide my arms, then glanced at the clock on the mantel which read eleven. "It's time for bed, Chris. Especially for you who has to get up so early tomorrow."

He followed me toward Jory's room without speaking and together we looked down on Jory, sleeping on his side, his dark curls damp and his face flushed. In his arms he cuddled a stuffed, plushy pony, much like the real one he said he had to have when he was four.

"When he's sleeping he looks more like you than Julian," whispered Chris. Paul had said the same thing.

"Good night, Christopher Doll," I said as we paused by the door of Carrie's room, "sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite."

What I said made his face contort in pain. He turned from me, opened the door to Carrie's room, then swung back to face me. "That's the way we used to say good night when we slept in the same room," he said, then he turned and closed the door behind him.

* * *

Chris was gone by the time I got up at seven o'clock. I cried a little. Jory stared at me with widened, surprised eyes. "Mommy ... ?" he asked fearfully.

"It's all right. Mommy just misses your uncle Chris. And Mommy is not going to work today." No, why should I? Only three students were due and I could teach them tomorrow when the class would be full.

My plans were moving too slowly. To speed them up I asked Emma to come and stay with Jory while I jogged through the woods. "I won't be gone longer than an hour. Let him play outside until lunchtime, and by then I'll be back."

Dressed in a bright blue jogging outfit trimmed with white, I set off down the dirt trails. This time I used a right fork I'd never tried before and into a denser pine forest I ran. The trail was faint and jaggedly crooked, so I had to keep a keen eye on the ground for tree roots that might trip me up. The mountain trees that grew between the pines were a brilliant blaze of fall

colors, like fire against the emerald green of the pines, firs and spruces. And it was, as I'd told myself long ago, the year's last passionate love affair before it grew old and died from the frosty bite of winter.

Someone was jogging behind me. I didn't turn to look. The crispy crackle of the dead leaves pleased my ears, so I ran faster, faster, letting the wind take my loose hair just as I let the beauty of the day take my grief, remorse, shame and guilt and make them transparent shadows that didn't hold up beneath the sun.

"Cathy, hold up!" called a man's strong voice. "You run too fast!"

It was Bart Winslow, of course. As it had to be sooner or later. Fate couldn't always outwit me, and my mother couldn't always win. I threw a glance over my shoulder, smiling to see him panting as he ran in his stylish jogging costume of maple-sugar tan, trimmed with bands of orange and yellow knit at the cuffs, neck and waistband. Two vertical lines of yellow and orange ran down the sides of the loose pants. Just what a local runner should wear when on the prowl.

"Hello, Mr. Winslow," I called back as I speeded up. "A man who can't catch a woman *is no man at all!*"

He took the challenge and put more speed into his long legs and I really had to put out to keep ahead! I flew, my long hair bannered behind. Squirrels on the ground scrounging around for nuts had to scamper to get out of my way. I laughed with the power I felt, then threw out my arms and pirouetted, feeling I was on stage playing out the best role of my life. Then from nowhere a knobby tree root caught beneath the toe of my dirty sneaker and down I fell, flat on my face. Luckily, the dead leaves cushioned me.

In a flash I was up and running again, but my fall had given Bart the chance to draw nearer. Panting, gasping, clearly indicating he didn't have nearly the stamina I had, despite the advantage of his longer legs, he cried out again, "Stop running, Cathy! Have mercy! This is killing me! There are other ways I can prove my manhood!"

I had no mercy! It was catch me if you can, or else I'd never be taken. I shouted this back to him and ran on, rejoicing in my powerful dancer's legs, my supple, long muscles and all that ballet training had done to make me feel a blue streak of light.

No sooner did this self-conceit flash through my mind than my stupid knee suddenly gave way and down I went again, on my face in the dead leaves. And this time I was hurt, really hurt. Had I broken a bone? Sprained an ankle, torn a ligament—again?

In a few moments Bart was beside me, down on his knees, rolling me over so he could see my face before he asked with a great deal of concern, “Are you hurt? You look so pale—what's paining?”

I wanted to say of course I was all right, for dancers knew how to fall, except when they didn't know they were going to fall—and why was my knee aching so badly? I stared down at it, feeling betrayed by a knee that was always the one to foul me up and hurt me in more than one way. “It was my stupid knee. If I bump my elbow on the shower door, my right knee hurts. When I have a headache, my knee hurts along with it to keep it company. Once I had a tooth filled, and the dentist was careless enough to let the drill slip and cut my gum, and my right knee shot right out and kicked him in the stomach.”

“You're kidding.”

“I'm serious—don't you have anything peculiar about your physical makeup?”

“Nothing I'm going to speak of.” He smiled and the devil made his dark eyes sparkle, then he assisted me to my feet and felt my knee as if he knew what he was doing. “Seems a good, functional knee to me.”

“How would you know?”

“My knees are functionally good, so I know one when I feel one—but if I could see the knee I could tell more.”

“Go home and look at your wife's functional knee.”

“Why are you being so hateful to me?” He narrowed his eyes. “Here I was, delighted to see you again, and you act so antagonistic.”

“Pain always makes me antagonistic—are you any different?”

“I’m sweet and humble when I’m suffering, which isn’t often. You get more attention that way—and remember you threw down the challenge, not me.”

“You didn’t have to accept it. You could have gone along your merry way and let me go along mine.”

“Now we’re arguing,” he said, disappointed. “You want to fight when I want to be friendly. Be nice to me. Say you’re glad to see me. Tell me how much better looking I’ve grown since you saw me last, and how exciting you find me. Even if I don’t run like the wind I have my own bag of tricks.”

“I’ll bet you do.”

“My wife is still in that beauty spa and I’ve been all by my lonesome for long, long months, bored to death by living with an old lady who can’t talk and can’t walk, but manages to scowl every time she sees me. One evening I was just sitting before the fire, wishing someone around here would commit murder so I’d have an interesting case for a change. It’s damn frustrating to be an attorney and be surrounded by nothing but happy, normal people with no suppressed emotions to erupt suddenly.”

“Congratulations, Bart! Before you stands someone full of aggressive resentment and mean, hateful spite seeking revenge that will erupt—you can count on that!”

He thought I was joking, playing a cat and mouse, man and woman game, and willingly he rose to that challenge too, not at all suspicious of my real purpose. He looked me over good, stripping off my sapphire jogging suit with the sensual eyes of a man starving for what I could give. “Why did you come to live up here near me?”

I laughed. “Arrogant, aren’t you? I came to take over a dance school.”

“Sure you did. . . . There’s New York and your home town, wherever that is, and you come here—to enjoy the winter sports as well?” His eyes insinuated the kind of indoor winter sport he had in mind, if I didn’t.

“Yes, I do like all kinds of sports, inside and outside,” I said innocently.

Confidently he chuckled, assuming as all conceited men do that already he’d scored a point in the only intimate game a man really wanted to play with women.

“That old lady who can’t talk, does she get around at all?” I asked.

“A little. She’s my wife’s mother. She speaks but her words come out jumbled and unintelligible to anyone but my wife.”

“You leave her there all alone—is that safe?”

“She’s not alone. There’s a private duty nurse there with her all the time, and a staff of servants.” He frowned as if he didn’t like my questions, but I persisted. “Why stay there at all then, why not go and have fun while the cat’s away?”

“You do have a shrewish way about you. Though I’ve never cared much for my mother-in-law, as she is now I feel sorry for her. And human nature being what it is, I don’t trust servants to take proper care of her without a family member in the house to keep check on what’s done to keep her comfortable. She’s helpless and can’t rise from a chair without assistance, or get out of bed unless she’s lifted out. So, until my wife is home again, I’m in charge to see that Mrs. Malcolm Foxworth is not abused or neglected or stolen from.”

An overwhelming curiosity came over me then. I wanted to know her first name, for I’d never heard it. “Do you call her Mrs. Foxworth?”

He hadn’t understood my interest in an old lady, and tried to turn the conversation elsewhere, but I persisted. “Olivia, that’s what I call her!” he said shortly. “When I was first married, I tried not to speak to her at all, to try to forget she existed. Now I use her first name; I think it pleases her, but I

can't be sure. Her face is of stone, fixed in one expression—icy.”

I could picture her, unmoving but for her flintstone eyes of gray. He'd told me enough. Now I could make my plans—just as soon as I found out one more small thing. “Your wife, when is she due back?”

“Why should you know?”

“I too get lonely, Bart. I have only my small son after Emma, his babysitter, goes home. So ... I thought maybe some evening you might like to have dinner with us... .”

“I'll come tonight,” he said immediately, his dark eyes aglow.

“Our schedule revolves around my son. We eat at five-thirty in the summer, but now that the days are shorter five is dinner time.”

“Great. Feed him at five and put him to bed. I'll be there at seven-thirty for cocktails. After dinner we can get to know each other better.” He met my considering look with grave intensity, as a proper attorney should. Then, because of that look we held too long, simultaneously we both broke into laughter.

“And incidentally, Mr. Winslow, if you cut through the woods back of your place, you can reach mine and no one will see you unless, of course, you make a big show of yourself.”

He put his palm up and nodded, as if we were both conspiring. “Discretion is the password, Miss Dahl.”

The Spider and the Fly



Exactly at seven-thirty the door chimes sounded, punched by an impatient finger, forcing me to hurry lest he waken Jory who hadn't liked being put to bed at such an early hour.

If I had taken pains to look my best, so had Bart. He strode in as if he already owned the place and me. He left behind a drift of shaving lotion with a piney forest scent, and every hair on his head was carefully in place, making me wonder if he had a thinning spot—which I'd find out for myself sooner or later. I took his coat and hung it in the hall closet, then sashayed over to the bar where I busied myself as he sat down before the log fire I had burning (nothing had been overlooked; I even had soft music playing). By this time I knew enough about men and the ways of pleasing them best. There wasn't a man alive who wasn't charmed by a lovely woman bustling about, eager to wait on him, pamper and wine and dine him. "Name your weakness, Bart."

"Scotch."

"On the rocks?"

"Neat."

He watched my every movement, which was deliberately graceful and deft. Then, turning my back I mixed a fruity drink for myself, lacing it lightly with vodka. And with my two little stemmed goblets on a silver tray, I seductively ambled his way, leaning to give him an enticing view of my braless bosom. I sat across from him and swung one leg over the other to allow the long slit of my rose-colored dress to open and expose one leg from silver sandal midway to the hip. He couldn't take his eyes off it. "Sorry about the glasses," I said smoothly, well pleased with his expression, "I don't have room in this cottage to unpack everything I own. Most of my crystal

is in storage and I have here only wine glasses and water goblets.”

“Scotch is scotch no matter how it’s served. And what in the world is that thing you’re sipping?” By this time he’d shifted his gaze to the low V of my gown.

“Well, you take orange juice freshly squeezed, a dab of lemon juice too, a dash of vodka, bit of coconut oil, and drop in a cherry to dive after. I call it A Maiden’s Delight.”

After a few minutes of conversation, we drifted to the dining table, not so far from the fireplace, to eat by candlelight. Every so often he’d drop his fork, or spoon, or I would, and both of us would go for it, then laugh to see who was fastest. I was, every time. He was much too distracted to spot a missing fork or spoon when a neckline opened up so obligingly.

“This is delicious chicken,” he said after demolishing five hours of hard labor in about ten minutes. “Usually I don’t like chicken—where’d you learn to prepare this dish?”

I told him the truth. “A Russian dancer taught me, she was on tour over here, and we liked each other. She and her husband stayed with Julian and me, and we’d cook together whenever we weren’t dancing or shopping or touring. It took four chickens to feed four people. Now you know the nasty truth about dancers; when it comes to eating we are not in the least dainty. That is, after a performance. Before we go on we have to eat very lightly.”

He smiled and leaned across the small drop-leaf table. Candlelight was in his eyes, sparkling them devilishly. “Cathy, tell me honestly why you came to live in this hick town and why you’ve got your heart set on me for a lover.”

“You flatter yourself,” I said in my most aloof manner, thinking I was very successful in appearing cool on the outside while inside I was a web of conflicting emotions. It was almost as if I had stage fright and was in the wings waiting to go on. And this was the most important performance of my life.

Then almost magically I felt I *was* on stage. I didn't have to think of how to act or what to say to charm him and make him forever mine. The script had been written a long time ago when I was fifteen and locked away upstairs. *Yes, Momma, it's first act time.* Expertly written by someone who knew him well from all the answers to her many questions. How could I fail?

After dinner I challenged Bart to a game of chess, and he accepted. I hurried to bring out the chessboard as soon as the table was cleared and the dishes were stacked in the sink. We began to set up the two armies of medieval warriors. "Exactly what I came for," he said, darting me a hard look, "to play chess! I showered, shaved and put on my best suit—so I could play chess!" Then he smiled, devastatingly winsome. "If I win—what reward?"

"A second game."

"When I win the second game—what reward?"

"If you win two games, then comes the playoff. And don't sit there and grin at me so smugly. I was taught this game by a master." Chris, of course.

"*After I win the playoff—what reward?*" he insisted. "You can go home and fall asleep very satisfied with yourself."

Very deliberately he picked up the chessboard with its hand carved ivory chessmen and put it on top of the refrigerator. He caught my hand and drew me into the living room. "Put on the music, ballerina," he said softly, "and let's dance. No fancy footwork, just something easy and romantic."

Popular music I could listen to only on the car radio to cheer up a long, lonely drive, but when it came to spending my money on records I bought classical or ballet. However, today I'd made a special purchase of "The Night Was Made for Love." And, as we danced in the dimness of the living room with only the fire for light, I was reminded of the dry and dusty attic and Chris.

"Why are you crying, Cathy?" he asked softly, then turned my head so his cheek was smeared by my tears. "I don't

know,” I sobbed. And I didn’t... .

“Of course you know,” he said, rubbing his smooth cheek against mine as we danced on and on. “You are an intriguing combination, half child, half seductress, half angel.”

I laughed short and bitterly. “That’s what all men like to think about women. Little girls they have to take care of—when I know for a fact it is the male who is more boy than man.”

“Then say hello to the first grown-up man in your life.”

“You’re not the first arrogant, opinionated man in my life!”

“But I’ll be the last. The most important one—the one you will never forget.” Oh! Why did he have to say that? Chris was right. I was over my head with this one.

“Cathy, did you really think you could blackmail my wife?”

“No, but I gave it a try. I’m a fool. I expect too much, then I’m angry because nothing ever works out the way I want. When I was young and full of hopes and aspirations, I didn’t know I would get hurt so often. I think I’ll get tough and won’t ache again, then my fragile shell shatters, and again, symbolically, my blood is spilled with the tears I shed. I pull myself back together again, go on, convince myself there is a reason for everything, and at some point in my life it will be disclosed. And when I have what I want, I hope to God it stays long enough to let me know I have it, and it won’t hurt when it goes, for I don’t expect it to stay, not now. I’m like a doughnut, always being punched out in the middle, and constantly I go around searching for the missing piece, and on and on it goes, never ending, only beginning... .”

“You’re not being honest with yourself,” Bart said softly. “You know better than anyone where that missing piece is, or I wouldn’t be here.”

His voice was so low and seductive I put my head on his shoulder as we went on dancing. “You’re wrong, Bart, I don’t know why you’re here. I don’t know how to fill my days. When I’m teaching class and when I’m with my son, then I’m alive—but when he’s in bed and I’m alone, I don’t know what

to do with myself. I know Jory needs a father, and when I think of his father I realize I've always managed to do the wrong thing. I've read my reviews that rave about the potential I had ... but in my personal life I've made only mistakes, so what I accomplished professionally doesn't matter at all." I stopped moving my feet and sniffled, then tried to hide my face—but he tilted it upward, then dried my tears and held his handkerchief so I could blow my nose.

Then came the silence. The long, long silence. Our eyes met and clung and my heart started a faster thumping. "Your problems are all so simple, Cathy," he began, "all you need is someone like me, who needs someone like you. If Jory needs a father, then I need a son. See how simply all complicated matters are solved?"

Too simply, I thought, when he had a wife and I was discerning and cynical enough to know he couldn't possibly care for me enough. "You have a wife *you love*," I said bitterly. I shoved him away. I didn't want to get him too easily, but only after long and difficult struggles against my mother, and she wasn't here to know.

"Men are liars too," he said flatly, with some of the zest gone from his eyes. "I have a wife and occasionally we sleep together, but the fire has gone out. I don't know her. I don't think anyone knows her. She's a bundle of secrets, wound up tight, and she won't let me inside. It's gone on so long I don't care to be let in now. She can keep her secrets and her tears, and eat her way out of her anxieties and whatever it is that makes her wake up in the night and go and look in that damned blue album! Now she's overweight and she's written she's just had plastic surgery—face lift—and I won't know her when she comes back. As if I ever really knew her!"

I panicked inside—he had to care! How could I break up a marriage that was already coming apart? I needed to feel I'd accomplished this against overwhelming odds! "Go home!" I said, pushing at him. "Get out of my house! I don't know you well enough to even listen to your problems—and I don't believe you. I don't trust you!"

He laughed, mocking me, aroused by my puny efforts to push him away. His libido was fired... . It flamed in his eyes as he grabbed my upper arms and drew me hard against him. “Now you come off it! Look at the way you’re dressed. You had me come here for a reason. So here I am, ready to be seduced. You seduced me the first time I saw you—and for the life of me it seems I’ve known you much longer than I actually have. Nobody plays games with me, then calls it a draw. You win or I win, but if we go to bed together we might wake up in the morning and find out we’ve both won.”

Red lights flashed, *Stop! Resist! Fight!* I did none of those things. I beat on his chest with ineffectual small fists as he laughed and picked me up and threw me over his shoulder. With one hand he gripped both of my legs to keep them from kicking, and with the other he turned out the lamps. In the dark, with me still beating on his back, he carried me into my bedroom and threw me down on the coverlet. I scrambled to get up, but he came at me fast! There wasn’t a chance to use the knee I had ready. He sensed my dancer’s ability could defeat him so he lunged, caught me about the waist so we both tumbled to the floor! I opened my mouth to scream. He clamped his hand upon my open lips, then pinioned my arms with his iron strength and sat on the legs that tried to kick myself free.

“Cathy, my lovely seductress, you went to such a lot of trouble. You seduced me long ago, ballerina. Until the week before Christmas you are mine, and then my wife will be home—and I won’t need you.”

His hand eased away from my lips and I thought I would scream, but instead I bit out, “At least *I* didn’t have to buy you with my father’s millions!” That did it. He crushed his lips brutally hard down on mine before I realized what was happening. This wasn’t the way I wanted it! I wanted to tempt him, set him on fire, make him chase me, and give in only after a long and arduous pursuit that my mother could watch and suffer through, knowing she could do nothing or I’d talk. And yet he was taking me heartlessly, more ruthless than Julian at his worst! Savagely he bore down on me. He squirmed and writhed to grind in, even as his hands ripped and

tore off my clinging rose dress. All I had on then was pantyhose, and soon he had those pulled down so my silver slippers came off and stayed inside of them.

With his lips still crushed brutally hard on mine, he carried my resisting hand to his zipper and squeezed until my knuckles cracked. It was either tug it down or have my fingers broken! How he managed to wiggle out of his clothes, even as he held me naked beneath him, I'll never know. When he was naked, but for his socks, I kept on wiggling, writhing, squirming, butting and trying to scratch or bite while he kissed, fondled and explored. I had my chance to scream several times—but I too was breathing fast and hard, and jerking upward to force him off. But he took this as a welcoming arch of invitation. He entered, and had his too-quick satisfaction, then pulled out before I had any!

“Get out of here.” I screamed. “I’m calling the police! I’ll have you thrown in jail, charged with assault and rape!”

He laughed scornfully, chucked me under the chin playfully, then stood up to pull on his clothes. “Oh,” he said, mocking me with an imitation of my own voice, “I am so frightened.” Then his voice was deeply earnest. “You aren’t happy, are you? It didn’t work out the way you planned it, but don’t you worry, tomorrow night I’ll be back, and maybe then you can please me enough, so I’ll feel like taking the time to please you.”

“I’ve got a gun!” (I didn’t.) “And if you dare set foot in this house again you’re a dead man! Not that you are a man. You are more brute than human!”

“My wife often says the same thing,” he said casually, zipping up his trousers shamelessly, without the decency to even turn his back. “But she likes it just the same, just as you did. Beef Wellington, you can have that tomorrow night, plus a tossed salad and a chocolate mousse for dessert. If you make me fat, we can burn off the calories in the most pleasant way possible—and I don’t mean jogging.” He grinned, saluted me, put one foot behind the other to turn smartly, military fashion, then paused at the doorway as I sat up and clutched the

remnants of my gown to my breasts. “Same time tomorrow night, and I’ll stay the night—that is, if you treat me right.”

He left, and slammed the front door behind him. *Damn him to hell!* I began to cry, not from pity for myself. It was frustration so huge I could have torn him limb from limb! *Beef Wellington!* I’d lace it with arsenic!

A small timid sound came from outside my door. “Mommy ... I’m scared. Are you cryin’, Mommy?”

Hastily I pulled on a robe and called him in, then held him close in my arms. “Darling, darling, Mommy is all right. You had a bad dream. Mommy isn’t crying ... see?” I brushed away the tears—for I’d get even.

Three dozen red roses arrived while Jory and I were eating breakfast—the long-stemmed variety from the florist. A small white card read:

I’m sending you a big bouquet of roses,

One for every night you’ll have my heart.

No name. And what the devil was I supposed to do with three dozen roses in a matchbox house? I couldn’t send them to a children’s ward; the hospital was miles and miles away. Jory decided what to do with them. “Oh, Mommy, how pretty! Uncle Paul’s roses!”

For Jory I kept the roses instead of throwing them out, and in many vases I scattered them throughout the house. He was delighted, and when I took him with me to dancing school he told all my students roses were all over his home—even in the bathroom.

After lunch I drove Jory to the nursery school he so loved. It was a Montessori school that was inspiring him to want to learn by appealing to his senses. Already he could print his name, and he was only three! He was like Chris, I told myself, brilliant, handsome, talented—oh, my Jory had everything—but a father. From his bright blue eyes shone the quick intelligence of someone who would have a lifetime curiosity about everything. “Jory, I love you.”

“I know that, Mommy.” He waved good-bye as I drove off.

I was there to meet him when he came from his school, his small face flushed and troubled. “Mommy,” he said as soon as he was beside me in the car, “Johnny Stoneman, he said his mommy slapped him when he touched her—there.” And he shyly pointed at my breast. “You don’t slap me when I touch you there.”

“But you don’t touch me there, not since you were a little baby and Mommy nursed you for a short while.”

“Did you slap me then?” He looked so worried. “No, of course not. Babies are meant to suckle their mother’s breasts—and I would never slap you for touching there—so if you want to try me, go ahead and touch.” His small hand reached out tentatively while he watched my face to see if I’d be shocked. Oh, how fast the young learned all the taboos! And when he’d touched and God’s lightning hadn’t struck him down, he smiled, very relieved. “Oh, it’s just a soft place.” He’d made a pleasant discovery, and around my neck he threw his arms. “I love you too, Mommy. ’Cause you love me even when I’m bad.”

“I’ll always love you, Jory. And if you’re bad sometimes, I’ll try and understand.” Yes, I was not going to be like my grandmother—nor my mother. I was going to be the perfect mother, and someday he’d have a father too. How was it that little children, such young ones, would already be talking of sin and being slapped for only touching? Was it because it was too high here, too near God’s eyes? So that everyone lived under his spell, living afraid, acting righteous, while they committed every sin in the book? *Honor thy father and thy mother. Do unto others as thou wouldst have done unto you. An eye for an eye.*

Yes ... *an eye for an eye*—that’s why I was here.

I stopped to buy stamps before I reached my cottage, and left Jory dozing on the front seat. *He* was in the post office, which was no larger than my living room, buying stamps too. Charmingly he smiled at me, as if nothing untoward had happened between us the night before. He even had the nerve to follow me to my car so he could ask how I liked the roses. “Not your kind of roses,” I snapped, then got primly into my

car and slammed the door in his face. I left him staring after me without a smile—in fact, he looked rather miserable.

At five-thirty a special-delivery man brought a small package to our front door. It was certified so I had to sign for it. Inside a larger box was another box, and inside of that was a velvet jewelry case which I quickly opened while Jory watched, all eyes. On black velvet lay a single rose comprised of many diamonds. Also a card with a note that read, “Perhaps this kind of rose is more to your liking.” I put the thing away as a trifle bought with *her* money, so it wasn’t really from him—no more than the real roses.

He had the nerve to come that night at seven-thirty just as he’d said he would. Nevertheless, I readily let him in, then led him silently to the dining table with no to do about cocktails or other niceties. The table was set even more elaborately than the night before. I’d hauled out some boxes and done some unpacking, and on the table were my best lace mats and covered silver serving dishes. Neither of us had as yet spoken. All his forgive-me roses I’d gathered together and they were in the box near his plate. On his empty plate was the jeweler’s velvet container with the diamond rose brooch inside. I sat to watch his expression as he put the jewelry box aside casually, and just as casually moved the flower box out of his way. He then took from his breast pocket a folded note that he handed to me. He’d written in a bold hand:

I love you for reasons that have no beginning and no ending. I loved you even before I knew you, so that my love is without reason or design. Tell me to go and I will. But know first, if you turn me away, I will remember all my life that love that should have been ours, and when I’m stretched out cold, I will but love you better after death.

I glanced upward to meet his eyes squarely for the first time since he’d entered. “Your poetry, it somehow has a familiar ring, with a bit of strangeness.”

“I composed it only a few minutes ago—how could it sound familiar?” He reached for the domed silver lid, ostensibly hiding the Beef Wellington underneath. “I warned

you I was an attorney, not a poet—so that accounts for the strangeness. Poetry was not my best subject in school.”

“Obviously.” I was very interested in his expression. “Elizabeth Barrett Browning is sweet, but not your type.”

“I did my best,” he said with a wicked grin, meeting my eyes and challenging me before his gaze lowered to stare at the huge platter that held one hot dog and a small dab of cold canned beans. The disbelief in his eyes, his utter offended shock gave me so much satisfaction I almost liked him.

“You are now gazing upon Jory’s favorite menu,” I said, gloating. “It is exactly what he and I ate tonight for dinner, and since it was good enough for us, I thought it was good enough for you, so I saved some. Since I’ve already eaten, *all* of that is yours alone, and you may help yourself.”

Scowling, he flashed me a burning, hard look, then savagely bit down into the hot dog which I’m sure had grown cold as the beans. But he gobbled down everything and drank his glass of milk, and for dessert I handed him a box of animal crackers. First he stared at the box in another expression of dumbfounded amazement, then ripped it open, seized up a lion and snapped off the head in one bite.

Only when he’d eaten every animal cracker and then picked up each crumb did he take the trouble to look at me with so much disapproval I should have shrunk to ant size. “I take it you are one of those despicable liberated women who refuses to do anything to please a man!”

“Wrong. I am liberated only with *some* men. Others I can worship, adore and wait on like a slave.”

“You made me do what I did!” he objected strongly. “Do you think I planned it that way? I wanted us to find our relationship on an equal basis. Why did you wear that kind of dress?”

“It’s the kind all chauvinist men prefer!”

“I am not a chauvinist—and I hate that kind of dress!”

“You like what I’ve got on better?” I sat up straighter to give him a better view of the old nappy sweater I had on. With

it I wore faded blue jeans, with dirty sneakers on my feet, and my hair was skinned back and fastened in a granny's knot. Deliberately I'd pulled long strands free so they hung loose about my face, slovenly fringes to make me look more appealing. And no makeup prettied my face. He was dressed to kill.

"At least you look honest and ready to let me do the pursuing. If there is one thing I despise, it's women who come on strong, like you did last night. I expected better from you than that kind of sleazy dress that showed everything to take the thrill from discovering for myself." He knitted his brows and mumbled, "From a damned harlot's red dress to blue jeans. In the course of one day, she changes into a teenybopper."

"It was rose-colored, *not red!* And besides, Bart, strong men like you always adore weak and passive stupid women, because basically you're meek yourself and afraid of an aggressive woman!"

"I am not weak or meek or anything but a man who likes to feel a man, not to be used for your own purposes. And as for passive women I despise them as much as I do aggressive ones. I just don't like the feeling of being the victim of a huntress leading me into a trap. What the hell are you trying to do to me? Why dislike me so much? I sent you roses, diamonds, imitation poetry, and you can't even comb your hair and take the shine from your nose."

"You are looking at the natural me, and now that you've seen, you can leave." I got up and walked to the front door and swung it open. "We are wrong for each other. Go back to your wife. She can have you, for *I* don't want you."

He came quickly, as if to obey, then seized me in his arms and kicked the door closed. "I love you, God knows why I do, but it seems I've always loved you."

I stared up in his face, disbelieving him, even as he took the pins from my hair and let it spill down. Out of long habit I tossed it about so it fluffed out and arranged itself, and smiling a little he tilted my face to his. "May I kiss your *natural* lips?"

They are very beautiful lips.” Without waiting for permission he brushed his lips gently over mine. Oh—the shivery sensation of such a feathery kiss! Why didn’t all men know that was the right way to start? What woman wanted to be eaten alive, choked by a thrusting tongue? Not me, I wanted to be played like a violin, strummed pianissimo, in largo timing, fingered into legato, and let it grow into crescendo. Deliciously I wanted to head toward the ecstatic heights that could only happen for me when the right words were spoken and the right kind of kisses given before his hands came into play. If he’d done for me only a little last night, this night he used all the skills he had. This time he took me to the stars where we both exploded, still holding tight to each other, and doomed to do it again, and then again.

He was hairy all over. Julian had been hairless but for one thatch that grew in a thin line up to his navel. And Julian had never kissed my feet that smelled of roses from a long perfumed bath before I put on old work clothes. Toe by toe he mouthed before he started working upward. I felt the grandmother watching, blazing her hard, gray eyes to put us both in hell. I turned off my mind, shut her out, and gave in to my senses and to this man who was now treating me like a lover.

But he didn’t love me, I knew that. Bart was using me as a substitute for his wife, and when she came back I’d never see him again. I knew it, knew it, but still I took and I gave until we fell asleep in each other’s arms.

When I slept, I dreamed. Julian was in the silver music box my father had given me when I was six. Round and round he spun, his face ever turning toward me, accusing me with his jet eyes, and then he grew a mustache and was Paul, who only looked sad. I ran fast to set him free from death in a music box turned into a coffin—and then it was Chris inside, his eyes closed, his hands folded one over the other on his chest ... dead, dead. Chris!

I awoke to find Bart gone and my pillow wet with tears. *Momma, why did you start this, why?*

Holding tight to my son's small hand I led him out into the cold morning air on my way to work. Faint and far away I heard someone calling my name, and with it came the scent of old-fashioned roses. Why don't you come, Paul, and save me from myself—why only call in your thoughts?

Part one was done. Part two would begin when my mother knew I had Bart's child—and then there was the grandmother who had to pay as well. And when I looked I saw that the mountains curved upward into a satisfied smirk. At last I had responded to their call. Their vengeful, tormenting wail.

The Grandmother, Revisited



Foxworth Hall was at the end of a cul-de-sac, the largest and most impressive of many fine, large homes and the only one that sat high, high on the hillside, looking down on all the others like a castle. For days I went to stare at it, making my plans.

Bart and I didn't have to sneak around furtively to meet. The houses where he lived were far apart and no one could see us when he came to me through the back door that opened out into a yard with a fence. In back of that was a country lane, shrubbed, and made private by many trees. Sometimes we met in a distant town and our lovemaking in a motel room was wild, sweet, tender, erotic and altogether satisfying, and yet I froze when he told me at lunch, "She called this morning, Cathy. She'll be home before Christmas."

"That's nice," I said and went right on eating my salad and anticipating the Beef Wellington that would show up soon. He frowned and his fork loaded with salad hesitated on the way to his mouth. "It means we won't be able to see as much of each other. Aren't you sorry?"

"We'll find ways."

"If you aren't the damndest woman!"

"Don't get so worked up over nothing. All women are monsters to men, and maybe to ourselves. We are our own worst enemies. You don't have to divorce her and give up your chance to inherit her fortune. Though she could outlive you and have the chance to buy another younger husband."

"Sometimes you are just as bitchy as she is! *She did not buy me!* I loved her! She loved me! I was crazy about her, as crazy for her as I am for you now. But she changed. When I met her she was sweet, charming, everything I wanted in a woman and

wife, but she changed.” He stabbed the salad fork toward his mouth and chewed viciously. “She’s always been a mystery—like you.”

“Bart, my love,” I said, “very soon all mystery walls will crumble.”

He went on, as if I hadn’t interrupted, “That father of hers, he too was a mystery; you’d look at him and see a fine old gentleman, but underneath was a heart of steel. I thought I was his only attorney, but he had six others, each of us assigned to different tasks. Mine was to make out his wills. He changed them dozens of times, putting this family member in, and writing another out, and adding codicils like a mad man, though he was sane enough right up until the very end. The last codicil was the worst.”

Of course, no children for him, ever. “Then you really were a practicing lawyer?” He smiled bitterly, then answered, “Of course I was. And now I am again. A man needs something meaningful to do. How many times can anyone tour Europe before boredom sets in? You see the same old faces, doing the same old things, laughing at the same jokes. The Beautiful People—what a laugh! Too much money buys everything but health, so they have no dreams left to purchase, and no aspirations, so in the end they are only bored.”

“Why don’t you divorce her and do something meaningful with your life?”

“She loves me.” That’s the way he said it. Short. Sweet. He stayed because she loved him, forcing me to say, “You told me when we first met that you loved her, and then you say you don’t—which is it?” He thought about it for a long time.

“Honestly, ballerina, I’m ambivalent and resentful. I love her, I hate her. I thought she was what you seem to be now. So please, smother that bitchy side that reminds me of her and don’t try and do to me what she did. You are putting a wall between us because you know something I don’t. I don’t fall in love easily, and I wish I *didn’t* love you.”

He seemed suddenly a small boy, wistful, as if his pet dog might betray him and life would never be good again. I was

touched and dared to say, “Bart, I swear there will come a day when you know all my secrets and all of hers—but until that time comes say you love me, even if you don’t mean it, for I can’t enjoy being with you if I don’t feel you love me just a little.”

“A little? It seems I’ve loved you all my life. Even when I kissed you the first time it seemed I’d kissed you before—why is that?”

“Karma.” I smiled at his baffled expression.

* * *

There was something I had to do before my mother came home. One day when I had no classes and Jory was in his special school I slipped over to Foxworth Hall, using all the hidden ways. At the back door I used the old wooden key that Chris had fashioned so long ago. It was Thursday. All the servants would be in town. Since Bart had told me in detail his routine, that also told me a lot of the grandmother’s daily life. I knew at this time the nurse would be napping, as my grandmother had her rest time in the afternoon too. She’d be in the same little room beyond the library, the same room that had confined our grandfather during his last days, while upstairs we four children waited for him to pass on to his rewards, and death would set us free.

I strolled through all those rich, grand rooms and hungrily stared at all the fine furnishings and saw again the dual winding staircases in the front foyer large enough to be used as a ballroom. Where the curving staircases met was a balcony on the second floor, and from that rose another flight of stairs, straight up to the attic. I saw, the massive chest where Chris and I had hidden inside to watch a Christmas party going on below. So long ago, and yet my clock of time turned swiftly backward. I was twelve again and scared, afraid this mammoth house would swallow me down if I moved or spoke above a whisper. I was awed again by the three giant crystal chandeliers suspended from a ceiling some forty feet above the floor. And because it was a dance floor of mosaic tiles, I automatically had to dance just a little to see how it felt.

I ambled on, taking my time, admiring the paintings, the marble busts, the huge lamps, the fabulous wall hangings that only the super-rich, who could be so stingy in small ways, could buy. Imagine my grandmother buying bolts of gray taffeta just to save a few dollars, when they bought the best to furnish their rooms and they had millions!

The library was easy to find. Lessons learned at an early age and under miserable conditions could never be forgotten. Oh, such a library! Clairmont didn't have a library with so many fine books! Bart's photograph was on the ponderous desk that had been my grandfather's. Many things were there to indicate that Bart often used this room for his study, and to keep his mother-in-law company. His brown house-slippers were beneath a comfortable-looking chair near the immense stone fireplace with a mantel twenty feet long. French doors opened onto a terrace facing a formal garden with a fountain to spray water into a bird bath formed by a rock garden of steps, with the water trickling down into a pool. A nice, sunny place for an invalid to sit, protected from the wind.

At last I'd seen enough to satisfy my curiosity, harbored for years, and I sought out the heavy door at the far end of the library. Beyond that closed door was the witch-grandmother. Visions of her flashed through my mind. I saw her again as she'd been the first night we came, towering above us, her thick body strong, powerful, her cruel, hard eyes that swept over us all and showed no sympathy, no compassion for fatherless children who had lost so much, and she couldn't even smile to welcome us or touch the pretty round cheeks of the twins who had been so appealing at age five.

The second night flashed, when the grandmother ordered our mother to show us her naked back striped with red and bleeding welts. Even before we'd seen that horror she'd picked Carrie up by the hair and Cory had hurled himself against her, trying to inflict some pain with his small white shoe that kicked her leg and his small sharp teeth that bit—and with one powerful slap she'd sent him reeling. All because he had to defend his beloved twin who had screamed and screamed. Again I saw myself before the mirror in the bedroom without a stitch on, and her punishment had been so

harsh, so heartless, trying to take from me what I admired the most, my hair. A whole day Chris had spent trying to take the tar from my hair and save it from the shears. Then no food or milk for two whole weeks! *Yes!* She deserved to see me again! Just as I'd vowed the day she whipped me that there would come a day in the future when she would be the helpless one and I would be the one to wield the whip and keep the food from her lips!

Ah, the sweet irony of it—that she would gloat to see her husband dead, and now she was in his bed and even more helpless—and alone! I took off my heavy winter coat, sat down to tug off my boots, and then I put on the white satin *pointes*. My leotards were white and sheer enough to let the pink of my skin show through. I unbound my hair so it fell in a luxuriant, golden cascade of rippling waves down my back. Now she would see and envy the hair the tar hadn't ruined after all.

Get ready, Grandmother! Here I come!

Very quietly I stole to her door. Then carefully I eased it open. She was on the high, high hospital bed, her eyes half-closed. The sun through the windows fell upon her pink and shining scalp, clearly revealing how nearly bald she was. And oh, how old she looked! So gaunt, so much smaller. Where was the giantess I used to know? Why wasn't she wearing a gray taffeta dress to whisper threats? Why did she have to look so pitiful?

I hardened my heart, closed out mercy, for she'd never had any for us. Apparently she was on the verge of sleep, but as the door opened slowly, slowly her eyes widened. Then her eyes bulged. She recognized me. Her thin, shriveled lips quivered. She was afraid! Glory hallelujah! My tune had come! Still, I paused in the open doorway, appalled. I had come for revenge and time had robbed me! Why wasn't she the monster I recalled? I wanted her that way, not what she was now, an old, sick woman with her hair so scant most of her scalp showed, and the hair left was pulled to the top of her head and fastened up there by a pink satin ribbon bow. The bow gave her a ghoulish-girlish look, and even bunched

together as they were, the thin wisps were no wider than my small finger—just a tuft like a worn-out, bleached brush for watercolor painting.

Once she'd stood six feet tall and weighed over two hundred pounds and her huge breasts had been mountains of concrete. Now those breasts hung like old socks to reach her puffy abdomen. Her arms were withered old dry sticks, her hands corded, her fingers gnarled. Yet, as I stared and she stared in complete silence as a small clock ticked relentlessly on, her old despicable personality flared hot to let me know her outrage. She tried to speak to order me out. *Devil's issue, she'd scream if she could, get out of my house! Devil's spawn, out, out, out!* But she couldn't say it, any of it.

While I could greet her pleasantly, "Good afternoon, *dear* Grandmother. How very nice to see you again. Remember me? I'm Cathy, one of the grandchildren you helped hide away, and each day you brought us food in a picnic basket—every day by six-thirty you were there, with your gallon thermos of milk, and your quart thermos of lukewarm soup—and canned soup at that. Why couldn't you have brought us hot soup at least once? Did you deliberately heat that soup to only warm? I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. And only then did she see the willow switch I'd hidden behind my back.

Casually I tapped the switch on my palm. "Grandmother," I said softly, "remember the day you whipped our mother? How you forced her to strip in front of her father, and then you whipped her, and she was an adult—a shameless, wicked, evil deed, don't you agree?"

Her terrified gray eyes fixed on the switch. A terrible struggle was going on in her brain—and I was *glad*, so *glad* Bart had told me she wasn't senile. Pale, watery, gray eyes, red-rimmed and crinkled all about with deep crow's feet, like cuts that never bled. Thin, crooked lips now shrunken to only a tiny buttonhole and puckered about by a radiating sunburst of deep lines, etching beneath her long hooked nose a spiderweb design of crosshatch lines. And, believe it or not, to the high and severe neckline of that yellow cotton jacket was fastened *the* diamond brooch! Never had I seen her without the brooch

pinned to the neckline of her gray taffeta dresses with the white crocheted collars.

“Grandmother,” I chanted, “remember the twins? The dear little five-year-olds you enticed into this house, and not once while they were here did you ever speak their names—or any of our names. Cory’s dead, and you know that—but did my mother tell you about Carrie? Carrie is dead too. She didn’t grow very tall because she was robbed of sunlight and fresh air in the years when she needed it most. Robbed too of love and security and given trauma instead of happiness. Chris and I went onto the roof to sit and sun ourselves, but the twins were afraid of the high roof. Did you know we went out there and we’d stay for hours and hours ... no, you didn’t know, did you?”

She moved a bit, as if trying to shrink into the thin mattress. I gloated to see her fear, rejoiced that she could move a little. Her eyes now were as mine used to be, windowpanes to reveal all her terrified emotions—and she couldn’t cry out for help! At my mercy. “Remember the second night, dearest, loving Grandmother? You lifted Carrie up by her hair, and you must have known that hurt, yet you did it. Then you sent Cory spinning with one blow, and that hurt too, and he was only trying to protect his sister. Poor Carrie, how she grieved for Cory. She never got over his death, never stopped missing him. She met a nice boy named Alex. They fell in love and were going to be married when she found out he was going to be a minister. That shook Carrie up. You see, you made us all deeply fearful of religious people. The day Alex said he was going to be a minister Carrie went into a despairing depression. She had learned the lesson you taught very well. You taught us that no one can ever be perfect enough to please God. Something dormant came to life the day Carrie was weakened by shock, depression and the lack of the spirit to go on. Now listen to what she did—because of you! Because you impressed on her young brain that she was born evil and she’d be wicked no matter how much she sought to be good! She believed you! Cory was dead. She knew he had died from the arsenic put on sugared doughnuts... . So when she felt she could no longer put up with life and all the people who

expected perfection, she bought rat poison! She bought a package of twelve doughnuts and coated them with that rat poison full of arsenic! She ate all but one—and that had a bite mark. Now ... shrink into your mattress and try and run from the guilt that is yours! You and my mother killed her as much as you killed Cory! I despise you, old woman!”

I didn't tell her I hated my mother more. The grandmother had never loved us, so anything *she* did was to be expected. But our mother who had borne us, who had cared for us, who had loved us well when Daddy lived—that was another story—an unbearable horror story! And her time would come!

“Yes, Grandmother, Carrie is dead now too, because she wanted to die in the same way Cory had and be with him in heaven.”

Her eyes squinched and a small shudder rippled the covers. I gloated.

I brought from behind my back the box containing a long length of Carrie's hair that had taken me hours to arrange and brush into one long, shimmering switch of molten gold. At one end it was tied with a red satin bow, and at the other, a bow of purple satin. “*Look old woman*, this is Carrie's hair, some of it. I have another box full of loose, tangled strands, for I can't bear to part with a piece of it. I saved it to keep not only for Chris and myself, but to show you and our mother ... for the two of you killed Carrie as surely as you killed Cory!”

Oh, I was near mad with hate. Revenge blazed my eyes, my temper, and shook my hands. I could see Carrie as she lay near death, turning old, withered, bony until she was only a little skeleton covered by loose, pale skin, so translucent all her veins showed—and the remains had to be sealed quickly in a box of pretty metal to shut away the stench of decay.

I stepped nearer the bed and dangled the bright hair with its gay ribbons before her wide and frightened eyes. “Isn't this beautiful hair, old woman? Was yours ever so beautiful, so bountiful? *No!* I *know* it wasn't! Nothing about you could ever have been pretty, *nothing!* Not even when you were young! That's why you were so jealous of your husband's

stepmother.” I laughed to see her flinch. “Yes, dear Grandmother, I know a lot more about you now than I did. Your son-in-law has told me all the family secrets my mother told him. Your husband Malcolm was in love with his father’s younger wife, ten times more beautiful and sweeter than you ever were! So when Alicia had a son, you suspected that child was your own husband’s, and that’s why you hated our father, and why you sent for him, deceiving him into believing he’d found a good home. And you educated him and gave him the best of everything so he’d have to taste of the good, rich life and to more hurt and disappointed later on, when you threw him out and left him nothing in your will. But my father fooled you instead, didn’t he? He stole your only daughter, whom you hated too, because her father loved her more than he loved you. And half-uncle married half-niece. Yet how wrong you were about Malcolm! She fought him off time and again—and the baby she had was not your husband’s son! Though he would have been, if Malcolm had had his way!

Blankly she stared at me, as if the past was of no importance to her now. Only the present mattered, and the switch in my hand. “I’m going to tell you something now, old woman, that you need to know. There was never a better man born than my father or more honorable woman than his mother. But don’t lie there and think I’ve inherited any of Alicia’s or my father’s godly traits—for I am like *you!* Heartless! I never forget, never forgive! *I hate you for killing Cory and Carrie. I hate you for making of me what I am!*” I screamed this, out of control, forgetful of the nurse napping down the hall. I wanted to feed her arsenic by the handfuls and sit and watch her die and rot before my eyes, like Carrie had. I pirouetted round the room to release my frustrations, lashing my legs, showing off my fine young body, and then I drew up short and snapped in her face, “All those years you locked us up, and you never said our names, never looked at Chris because he was our father all over again—and your husband too, when he was young, and before you made him evil too. You blame everything wrong with human beings on their evil souls, and ignore the truth. *Money* is the god who rules in this house! It’s *money* that’s always made the worst things happen! You were married for your money and you knew it! And greed

brought us here, and greed locked us up and stole three years and four months from our lives, and put us at your mercy and you didn't have any, not even for your grandchildren, the only grandchildren you'd ever have, and we never touched you, did we? Though we tried in the beginning, remember?" I jumped up on the bed and lashed at her with the length of Carrie's golden hair. A soft whip that didn't hurt, though she cringed from the touch. Then I tossed Carrie's precious hair to her bedside table and snapped the switch before her eyes. I danced and whirled on her bed, over her frozen body, displaying my fine agility as my long hair flared in a golden circle.

"Remember how you punished our mother before we grew to hate her too? I owe you for that," I said, legs apart and straddling her covered body. "From your neck down to your heels, I owe you that, plus the whip lashes you gave Chris and me, I owe you that too. And all the other things, each one of them is etched in my memory. Didn't I tell you there would come a day when I held the switch in my hand, and there would be food in the kitchen you'd never eat? *Well ... that day is here, Grandmother.*"

The sunken gray eyes in her gaunt face sparkled hate, malicious and strong. Daring me to strike her—daring me!

"What shall I do first," I said as if to myself, "shall it be the switch, or the hot tar in your hair? Where did you get the tar, old woman? I always wondered where you got it. Did you plan it way in advance and wait for an excuse to use it? I'm going to confess something now you don't know. Chris never cut off all my hair, only the front part to fool you into thinking I was bald-headed. Beneath that towel I wrapped on my head was all the long hair he saved. Yes, old woman, love saved my hair from being cut off. He loved me enough to work for hours and hours to save what hair he could—more love than *you've* ever known, and from a brother."

Deep in her throat she made a strangling sound, and how I wished she could speak!

"Grandmother darling," I taunted, hands on my hips as I leaned to look down on her, "why don't you tell me where to get the tar? I haven't been able to find any. No road

construction going on anywhere near—so I guess I'll have to use hot wax. *You* could have used melted wax, for it would have done the job just as well. Didn't you think of melting a few of your candles?" I smiled, menacingly, I hoped. "Oh, dear Grandmother, what *fun* you and I are going to have! And nobody will know, for *you can't talk* and *you can't write*, all you can do is be there and suffer."

I didn't like myself or what I was saying or what I was feeling. My conscience hovered near the ceiling, looking down with shame at this released fury that was me in white tights. Aghast, I was up there feeling pity for this old woman who'd suffered through two strokes—but on the bed was another kind of me. A vicious, mean, vindictive Foxworth, with blue eyes as cold as hers used to be as I stared her down, and then suddenly, cruelly I bent; I yanked down the sheet and blanket that covered her and she was exposed. Her garment was like a hospital jacket that was slit and tied down the back, for there was no front opening. Just a plain yellow cotton thing with that incongruous diamond brooch at the throat. No doubt they would attach that brooch to her funeral garments.

Naked. She had to be stripped, as Momma was, as Chris had been, as I had been too. She had to suffer through the humiliation of being without clothes while contemptuous eyes made her shrivel even smaller. Relentlessly I seized hold of the hem of her stingy, cheap cotton garment and without compunction I yanked it upward to her armpits. In ruffled, unironed folds it half-hid her face, and carefully I pulled back the cloth that could hide from me any expression she might manage to reveal. Then I stared down at her body, expressing scorn and revulsion as she had expressed it with her hard eyes and knife-slashed lips when I was a child of fourteen and she had caught me looking at myself in the mirror, admiring the beauty of a figure I'd never seen before nude.

The body in its youth is a beautiful thing ... a joy to behold, the sweet young curves, the smooth unblemished skin, firm and taut flesh, but oh, to grow old! Those twin hills of concrete were flabby loose udders that sagged to her waist, and the nipples were at the very bottom, large brown, mottled and bumpy. The blue veins of her breasts stood up like thin

ropes covered by a translucent sheath. The pasty whiteness of her skin was dimpled, furrowed, creased by stretch marks from childbirth, and a long scar from navel to her almost hairless mound of Venus showed she'd either had a hysterectomy or a caesarean section. It was an old scar, pale and shinier than the doughy, white, wrinkled skin around it. Her thin, long legs were gnarled old branches of a tired tree. I sighed—would *I* someday look like this?

Without pity or an attempt to be gentle I rolled her over and yanked her back into the center of the bed. And all the while I was babbling on of how Chris and I had joked she either nailed on her clothes or glued them in and never, of course, did she take off her underclothes unless she was in a closet with the light out. Her back showed fewer ravages than her front, though her buttocks were flat, flabby and too white.

“I’m going to whip you now. Grandmother,” I said tonelessly, my heart gone out of this now. “I promised a long time ago I was going to do this if ever I had the chance and so I will do it!” And closing my eyes and, asking God to forgive me for what I was about to do, I lifted my arm high and then brought down that willow switch as hard as I could, and flat on her bare buttocks!

She shuddered. Some noise came from her throat. Then she seemed to sink into unconsciousness. She relaxed so much she released her bladder. I began to cry. Terrible sobs from *me* as I ran to the adjoining bath to find a washcloth and soap, and back I hurried with toilet tissue to clean her. Then I washed her and put salve on the awful welt I’d made.

I turned her over on the bed, straightened out her gown so she was covered modestly, neatly, and only then did I check to see if she was alive or dead. Her gray eyes were open and staring at me without expression as tears streaked *my* face. Next, slowly, as I sobbed on, her eyes began to gleam in unspoken triumph!

Mutely she called me *coward!* *I knew you couldn’t be anything but a soft weakling! No spine, no starch! Kill me. Go on, kill me! I dare you, do it, do it, go on!*

Down from the bed I jumped, and I ran fast into the library and on into the parlor I'd seen. In a frenzy of anger I grabbed up the first candelabra I saw and dashed back to her—but I didn't have matches! Back again to the library where I rummaged through the desk Bart used. He smoked; he'd have matches or a cigarette lighter. I found a book of matches from a local disco.

The candles were ivory colored, dignified, like this house. Terror was in her iron eyes now. She *wanted* that bit of tufted hair tied with a pink ribbon. I lit a candle and watched it flame, then I held it angled over her head so the melting wax dribbled down drop by drop onto her hair and her scalp. Maybe six or seven drops fell before I could stand no more. She was right. I was a coward, I couldn't do to her what she'd done to us. I was a Foxworth twice over, and yet God had changed the mold so I didn't fit.

I blew out the ivory candle, replaced it in the candelabra, then left.

No sooner was I in the ballroom than I remembered I'd forgotten the precious length of Carrie's hair. I raced back to get it. I found the grandmother lying as I'd left her, only her head was turned and two huge glistening tears were in her eyes that stared at the switch of Carrie's beautiful hair. Ahh! Now I had my pound of flesh!

* * *

Bart spent more time at my small home than at his huge one. He plied me with gifts, as he did my son. He ate his breakfast, lunch and dinner with us on the days he didn't spend in his office, which I privately believed was more a facade for appearing useful than a functioning law office. My dancing school suffered from his attention, but it didn't matter. I was now a kept woman.

Paid to be his mistress.

Jory was delighted with the little leather boots Bart gave him. "Are *you* my daddy?" asked my son who would be four in February. "No. but I sure wish I was and I could be."

As soon as Jory was out in the yard, tromping around and staring down at his feet that fascinated him now that they sported cowboy boots, Bart turned to me and flung himself wearily down in a chair. “You’d never guess what happened over at our place. Some sadistic idiot put wax in my mother-in-law’s hair. And there’s a long welt on her buttocks that won’t heal. The nurse can’t explain it. I’ve questioned Olivia, and asked if it was anyone she knew, one of the servants, and she blinked her eyes twice, meaning no. Once is for yes. I’m mad as hell about it! It must have been one of the servants, yet I can’t understand why one would be so cruel as to torment a helpless old woman who can’t move to defend herself. She refuses to identify anyone I name. I promised Corrine I’d take good care of her, and now her bottom is such a raw mess she has to lie on her stomach two to four hours each day, and she is turned during the night.”

“Oh,” I breathed, feeling a bit sick. “How awful—why won’t it heal?”

“Her circulation is bad. It would have to be, wouldn’t it, since she can’t move about normally?” He smiled then, brilliantly, like the sun coming out after a storm. “Don’t concern yourself, darling. It’s my problem, not yours—and, of course, hers.” He held out his arms and I went quickly into them to snuggle in his lap, and he kissed fervently before he carried me into my bedroom. He laid me down and began to undress. “I could wring the neck of the fiend who did that to her!”

* * *

We lay entwined after our lovemaking, listening to the wind blending with Jory’s shrill laughter, racing after the toy poodle Bart had given him. A few snow flurries were beginning to fall. I knew I had to get up soon so Jory wouldn’t run in and catch us, just to tell us it was snowing. He couldn’t remember other snows, and barely would the ground be sugar-coated than he’d want to make a snowman. Sighing first, I kissed Bart, then reluctantly pulled from his embrace. I turned my back to pull on bikini panties as he propped up on an elbow and watched. “You’ve got a lovely behind,” he said. I said

thanks. “What about my front?” He said it wasn’t bad. I threw a shoe at him.

“Cathy, why don’t you say you love me?”

I whirled about, startled. “Have you ever said it to me and meant it?” I snapped on a tiny bra.

“How do you know I don’t mean it?” he asked with anger.

“Let me tell you how I know. When you love, you want that person with you all of the time. When you avoid the subject of divorce, that alone is an indication of how much you care for me and just where I belong in your life.”

“Cathy, you’ve been hurt, haven’t you? I don’t want to hurt you more. You play games with me. I’ve always known that. What does it matter if it is only sex and not love? And tell me how to know where one ends and the other begins?”

His teasing words were a knife in my heart, for somehow, without meaning to let it happen, I’d fallen madly, idiotically in love with him.

* * *

According to Bart’s enthusiastic report, his long gone wife came home from her rejuvenation trip looking smashingly young and beautiful. “She’s lost twenty pounds. I swear, that face lift has done wonders! She looks sensational, and damn it, so unbelievably like you!”

It was easy to see how impressed he was with his new, younger-looking wife, and if he was only trying to take the wind from my too confident sails, I didn’t let it show. Then he was telling me I was just as necessary to him as before in a tone that said I was not. “Cathy, while she was in Texas she changed. She’s like she used to be, the sweet, loving woman I married.”

Men! How gullible they were! Of course my mother was sweeter and nicer to him now—now that she knew he had a mistress who was very accessible, and that the other woman was her own daughter. She’d have to know, for it was whispered all about now—everyone knew.

“So, why are you here with me when your wife is back and so like me? Why don’t you put your clothes on and say goodbye and never come back? Say it was sweet while it lasted, but it’s all over now, and I’ll say thank you for a wonderful time before I kiss you farewell”

“Well-ll,” he drawled, pulling me hard against his naked body. “I didn’t say she, was *that* sensational looking. And then again, there is something special about you. I can’t name it. I can’t understand it. But I don’t know if I can live without you now.” He said it seriously, truth in his dark eyes.

I’d won, won!

* * *

Quite by accident my mother and I met in the post office one day. She saw me and shivered. Her lovely head lifted higher as she turned it slightly away, pretending she didn’t know me. She would deny me as she’d denied Carrie, even though it was so obvious that we were mother and daughter and not strangers. I wasn’t Carrie. So I treated her as she treated me, indifferently, as if she were nobody special and never would be again. Yet, as I waited impatiently for my roll of stamps, I saw my mother dart her eyes to follow the restless prowl of my young son who had to stare at everything and everyone. He was handsome, graceful, a charming boy who drew the eyes of everyone who had to stop and admire him and pat his head. Jory moved with innate style, unstudied and relaxed, at ease wherever he was, because he thought the whole world was his, and he was loved by everyone. He turned to catch my mother’s long stare and he smiled. “Hello,” he greeted. “You’re pretty—like my mommy.”

Oh, the things children say! What innocent knowledge they had, to see so readily what others instinctively refused to acknowledge. He stepped closer to reach out and tentatively touch her fur coat. “My mommy’s got a fur coat. My mommy is a dancer. Do you dance?”

She sighed, I held my breath. *See, Momma, there is the grandson your arms will never hold. You’ll never hear him say your name ... never!*

“No,” she whispered, “I’m not a dancer.” Tears filmed her eyes.

“My mommy can teach you how.”

“I’m too old to learn,” she whispered, backing off.

“No, you’re not,” said Jory, reaching for her hand as if he’d show her the way, but she pulled back, glanced at me, reddened, then fumbled in her purse for a handkerchief. “Do you have a little boy I can play with?” questioned my son, concerned to see her tears, as if having a son would make up for not knowing how to dance.

“No,” she said in a quivering weak whisper, “I don’t have any children.”

That’s when I moved in to say in a cold, harsh voice, “Some women don’t deserve to have children.” I paid for my roll of stamps and dropped them in my purse. “Some women like you, Mrs. Winslow, would rather have money than the bother of children who might get in the way of good times. Time itself will sooner or later let you know if you made the right decision.”

She turned her back and shivered again as if all her furs couldn’t keep her warm enough. Then she strode from the post office and headed toward a chauffeur-driven, black limousine. Like a queen she rode off, head held high, leaving Jory to ask, “Mommy, why don’t you like that pretty lady? I like her a lot. She’s like you, only not so pretty.” I didn’t comment, though it was on the tip of my tongue to say something so ugly he would never forget it.

* * *

In the twilight of that evening I sat near the windows, staring toward Foxworth Hall and wondering what Bart and my mother were doing. My hands were on my abdomen which was still flat, but soon it would be swelling with the child that might be started. One missed period didn’t prove anything—except I wanted Bart’s baby, and little things made me feel sure there was a baby. I let depression come and take me. He wouldn’t leave her and her money to marry me and I’d have

another fatherless child. What a fool to start all of this—but I'd always been a fool.

And then I saw a man slipping through the woods, coming to me, and I laughed, made confident again. He loved me! He did ... and as soon as I knew for certain, I would tell him he was to be a father.

Then the wind came in with Bart and blew the vase of roses from the table. I stood and stared down at the crystal pieces and the petals scattered about. Why was the wind always trying to tell me something? Something I didn't want to hear!

Stacking the Deck



“Cathy, you told me there was no need for precautions!”

“There was no need. I want your baby.”

“You want my baby? What the hell do you think I can do, marry you?”

“No. I did my own assuming. I presumed you’d have your fun with me and when it was over you’d go back to your wife and find yourself another playmate. And I’d have just what I set out to get—your baby. Now I can leave. So kiss me off, Bart, as just another of your little extramarital dalliances.”

He looked furious. We were in my living room, while a fierce blizzard raged outside. Snow heaped in mounds window-high, and I was before the fireplace, knitting a baby bunting before I began a bootie. I was getting ready to slip a stitch then knit two together when Bart seized my knitting from my hands and hurled it away. “It’s unraveling!” I cried in dismay.

“What the hell are you trying to do to me, Cathy? You know I can’t marry you! I never lied and said I would. You’re playing a game with me.” He choked and covered his face with his hands, then took them down and pleaded, “I love you. God help me but I do. I want you near me always, and I want my child too. What kind of game are you playing now?”

“Just a woman’s game. The only game she can play and be sure of winning.”

“Look,” he said, trying to regain his control of the situation, “explain what you mean, don’t double talk. Nothing has to change because my wife is back. You’ll always have a place in my life—”

“In your life? Don’t you mean more correctly, on the fringes of your life?”

For the first time I heard humility in his voice. “Cathy, be reasonable. I love you, and I love my wife too. Sometimes I can’t separate you from her. She came back different, as I told you, and now she is like she was when we first met. Maybe a more youthful figure and face has given her back some confidence she lost, and because of it she can be sweeter. Whatever the cause. I’m grateful. Even when I disliked her, I loved her. When she was hateful, I’d try and strike back by going to other women, but still I loved *her*. The one big issue we fight over is her unwillingness to have a child, even an adopted one. Of course she’s too old to have one now. Please, Cathy, *stay! Don’t leave!* Don’t take my child away so I will never know what happens to him, or to her ... or to you.”

I laid it out flat. “All right, I will stay on one condition. If you divorce her and marry me, only then will you have the child you always wanted. Otherwise, I’m taking myself, and that means your child too, far away. Maybe I’ll write to let you know if you have a son or a daughter, and maybe I won’t. Either way, once I leave, you are out of my life for good.” I thought, *look at him, acting as if that codicil weren’t in the will forbidding his wife to have children*. Protecting her! Just like Chris, when all along he had to know. He’d drawn up the will. He had to know.

Before the fireplace he stood with his arm up on the mantel, then he rested his forehead on that and stared down at the fire. His free hand was behind his back and clenched into a fist. His confused thoughts were so deep they reached out and touched me with pity. He turned then to face me, staring deep into my eyes. “My God,” he said, shocked by his discovery. “You planned this all along, didn’t you? You came here to accomplish what you have, but why? Why should you choose me to hurt? What have I ever done to you, Cathy, but love you? True, it started with sex, and sex only was what I wanted it to stay. But it has grown into something much more than that. I like being with you, just sitting and talking, or walking in the woods. I feel comfortable with you. I like the way you wait on me, and touch my cheek when you pass, and rumple

my hair and kiss my neck, and the sweet, shy way you wake up and smile when you see me beside you. I like the clever games you play, keeping me always guessing, and always amused. I feel I have ten women in one, so now I feel I can't live without you. But I can't abandon my wife and marry you. She *needs* me!"

"You should have been an actor, Bart. Your words move me to tears."

"Damn you for taking this so lightly!" he bellowed. "You've got me on a rack and you're twisting the screws! Don't make me hate you and ruin the best months of my life!"

With that he stormed out of my cottage, and I was left alone, ruefully regretting that always I talked too much, for I would stay as long as he needed me.

Emma, Jory and I thought it a wonderful idea to make an excursion to Richmond and do some Christmas shopping. Jory had never seen Santa Claus that he could remember, and most fearfully he approached the red-suited, white-bearded man who held out his arms to encourage him. Tentatively he perched on Santa's knee in Thalhimers Department Store, and stared disbelievingly into twinkling blue eyes while I snapped pictures from every angle, even crawling to get what I wanted.

Next we visited a dress shop I'd heard about where I handed to them a sketch I'd drawn from memory. I selected the exact shade of dark green velvet, and then the lighter green chiffon for the skirt. "And make the straps of the velvet bodice shoestrings of rhinestones—and remember, the floating panels must reach the hem."

While Jory and Emma watched a Walt Disney movie. I had my hair cut and styled differently. Not just trimmed, as was my habit, but really cut shorter than I'd ever worn it. It was a style that flattered me, as it should, for it had flattered my mother when she wore her hair this way, fifteen years ago.

"Oh, Mommy!" cried Jory, distress in his voice. "You've lost your hair!" He began to cry. "Put your long hair back on—you don't look like my mommy now!"

No, that was the purpose. I didn't want to look like me this Christmas—not this special Christmas when I had to duplicate exactly what my mother had been when first I saw her dancing with Bart. Now, at long last, my chance—in a gown the same as hers, with her hair style, her younger face. I would confront my mother in her own home, on *my* terms. Woman to woman—and let the best one win! She'd be forty-eight, with a recent face lift—still I knew she was very beautiful. But she couldn't compete with her daughter who was twenty-one years younger! I laughed when I looked in the mirror after slipping on the new green gown. Oh, yes, I'd made myself into what she was—the kind of woman men just couldn't resist. I had her power, her beauty—and ten times more brains—how could she win?

Three days before Christmas I called Chris and asked if he'd like to go with me to Richmond. I'd forgotten a few necessary items the little local shops didn't have. "Cathy," he said sternly, his voice cold and hostile, "when you give up Bart Winslow you will see me again, but until you do. I don't care to be near you!"

"*All right!*" I flared. "*Stay where you are!* You can miss out on *your* revenge, but I am not going to miss out on mine! Good-bye, Christopher Doll, and I hope *all the bedbugs bite!*" I hung up!

I didn't teach ballet class as often as I used to, but at recital times I was always there. My little dancers delighted in dressing up, and showing off before their parents, grandparents and friends. They looked adorable in their costumes for *The Nutcracker*. Even Jory had two minor roles to play, a snowflake and a sugarplum.

In my opinion there was no more magical way to spend at least one Christmas Eve than as a family attending a performance of *The Nutcracker*. And it was a thousand times more wonderful when one of those gifted, small, graceful children was your own small son, fifty-two days short of being four years old. The sweet babyiness of him dancing on stage with so much passion drew applause time and again from the

audience who stood up to cheer his solo performance that I'd choreographed especially for him.

And best of all, I'd made Bart swear he'd force my mother to attend that recital—and they were there; I checked by peeking through the curtains, front row center, Mr. and Mrs. Bartholomew Winslow. He looked happy; she looked grim. So I did have some control over Bart. It showed up in a huge bouquet of roses for the dance instructor, and a huge box for the solo performing snowflake.

“What can it be?” asked Jory, his face flushed, his happiness rebounding from the sky. “Can I open it now?”

“Sure, soon as we're home, and tomorrow morning Santa will leave a hundred gifts for you.”

“Why?”

“Because he loves you.”

“Why?” asked Jory.

“Because he couldn't help but love you—that's why.”

“Oh.”

Before five in the morning Jory was up, playing with the electric train Bart had sent him. All over the living room floor were the splendid wrappings from hundreds of gifts from Paul, Henny, Chris, Bart, and Santa Claus. Emma gave him a box of homemade cookies that he polished off between ripping open the packages. “Gee, Mommy,” he cried, “I thought it would be lonely without my uncles, but I'm not lonely. I'm having fun.”

He wasn't lonely, but I was. I wanted Bart with me, not over there with her. I waited for him to make up some excuse to drive to the drug store and slip over to see me and Jory. But all I saw of Bart on Christmas morning was the two-inch wide diamond bracelet he enclosed in a box with two dozen red roses. His card read, “I love you, Ballerina.”

* * *

If ever there was a woman who dressed more carefully than I did that night it must have been Marie Antoinette. Emma complained it was taking me forever. I painted my face as if a

camera was going to shoot me close up for a magazine cover. Emma styled my hair as my mother had worn hers long ago. “Wave it back softly from the face, Emma, then catch it high at the crown with a cluster of curls, and make sure a few hang long enough to brush my shoulders.”

When she finished, I gasped to see I was almost an exact duplicate of what my mother had been when I was twelve! My high cheekbones were emphasized just as hers had been with this hair style. As in a dream I never truly expected to happen I stepped into the green gown with the velvet bodice and chiffon skirt. This was the type of gown that never went out of fashion. I spun around before the mirror, getting the feel of being my mother with her power to control men, while Emma stood back and flattered me with compliments.

Even my perfume was the same. Musky with an Oriental garden scent. My slippers were straps of silver with four-inch heels. My silver evening bag matched. All I needed now was the emerald and diamond jewelry she had worn. Soon I’d have that too. Surely fate wouldn’t let her be wearing green tonight. At some point in my life fate had to be on my side. I figured it was due tonight.

Tonight I’d deliver the surprises and the slaps. She would feel the pain of losing! What a pity Chris wouldn’t come and enjoy the ending of a long, long play, started the day our father was killed on the highway.

I threw myself one more admiring glance, picked up the fur stole Bart had given me, gathered up my faltering courage, took a last peek at Jory who was curled up on his side and looking angelic. I leaned over to tenderly kiss his round, rosy cheek. “I love you, Jory,” I whispered.

He partially awakened from a hazy dream and stared up at me as if I were part of that dream. “Oh, Mommy, you look so pretty!” His dark blue eyes shone with childish wonder as he asked quite seriously, “Are you going to a party to get me a new daddy?”

I smiled and again kissed him and said yes, in a way I was. “Thank you, darling, for thinking I look pretty. Now go back

to sleep and dream of happy things, and tomorrow we'll build a snowman.”

“Bring a daddy to help.”

* * *

On the table by the front door was a note from Paul.

“Henny is very ill. It's a pity you can't give up your plans to visit her before it is too late. I wish you good luck, Catherine.” With a sigh I put that note aside and picked up the note Henny had enclosed with Paul's written on festive red paper, with the letters made rooked because of painful arthritic knuckles.

Dear Fairy-Child,

Henny is old; Henny is tired; Henny is glad own son is by her side, but unhappy because other children far away.

I tell you now, before I go on to better place, the simple secret of living happy. All you need do is say good-bye to yesterday's loves, and hello to the new. Look around and see who needs you most and you won't go wrong. Forget who needed you yesterday.

You write and say you have new baby inside you made by husband of your mother. Rejoice in child, even if mother's husband will stay married to her. Forgive your mother, even if once she did evil. Nobody all bad, and a lot of the good in her children must have come from her. When you can forgive and forget the past, peace and love will come again to you, and this time it will stay.

And if you never in this world see Henny again, remember that Henny loved you well, as her own daughter, just as I loved your angel-sister whom I expect to meet again soon.

Soon to be in heaven,

Henny

I put the note down with a heavy feeling of sadness in my chest, then shrugged my shoulders. What had to be done would be done. A long time ago I'd set my feet on this path, and I'd follow it, come what may.

How strange the wind wasn't blowing when I stepped out the door and turned to wave to Emma who was spending the night with Jory. With boots covering my silver slippers, I headed for my car. How hushed it was, like nature was holding back in suspense as it focused on me.

Soft as eiderdown snow began to drift down. I glanced up at the gray, leaden sky, so much like the grandmother's eyes. Resolved again, I turned the key in the ignition and headed toward Foxworth Hall, though I wasn't an invited guest. I'd stormed at Bart for that. "Why didn't you insist and force her to invite me?"

"Really. Cathy, isn't that a bit too much to ask? Can I insult my wife by asking my mistress to her party? I may be a fool, Cathy. but I am not that cruel."

* * *

That first Christmas of imprisonment when I was twelve I'd lain with my head on Chris's boyish chest, wistfully wishing to be grown up, with curves as shapely as my mother's, with a face as beautiful as hers, wearing clothes as stunning as hers. And most of all I'd wished to be in control of my life.

Some Christmas wishes did come true.

Revelations



Just a little after ten o'clock I used the wooden key Chris had carved so many years ago to slip unseen through a back door into Foxworth Hall. Already many guests were there and more were still arriving. The orchestra was playing a Christmas carol and faintly it drifted up to me. Music so sweetly haunting I was taken back to my childhood. Only this time I was alone in alien territory with no one to back me up as I stole quietly up the back stairs, keeping to the shadows, ready to hide quickly if necessary. I wended my solitary way to the grand central rotunda to stand near the cabinet where Chris and I had hidden to look down on another Christmas party. I gazed downward to spy upon Bart Winslow standing beside his wife who was wearing bright red lamé. His strong voice was hearty as he greeted his arriving guests warmly, shaking hands, kissing cheeks, acting the genial host in true fashion. My mother seemed somehow secondary to him, hardly needed at all in this huge mansion that was soon to be hers.

Smiling bitterly to myself, I stole on to my mother's grand suite of rooms. It took me back in time! Oh, golly-golly! I used my little-girl exclamation of delight, of surprise, of dismay or frustration, though I had better and more accurate words at my disposal now. Tonight I had no frustrations, only a lilting sense of justification. Whatever happened, she had brought it upon herself. Look, I thought, there was the splendid swan bed, still there, with the little swan bed across the foot. I glanced around, seeing it was all the same, but for the brocade fabric on the walls—that was different.

Now it was a soft plum color, and not strawberry pink. There was a brass valet to hold a man's suit ready, and unwrinkled, until he put it on. That was new. I hurried on into my mother's dressing room. On my knees, I pulled out a special bottom drawer to feel around for the tiny button that

had to be pushed in a certain combination of numbers to trigger the complicated lock. And would you believe it—she still used her birthday numbers of month, day and year! My! She was a trusting soul.

In no time at all I had the huge velvet tray on the floor before me, so I could help myself to the emeralds and diamonds she had worn to that Christmas party when first Chris and I beheld Bartholomew Winslow. How we'd loved her then, and how we'd resented *him*. We had been still in the shadow of our grief for our father, and hadn't wanted Momma to marry again—not ever again.

As in a dream I donned the emerald and diamond jewelry that went so well with my green velvet and chiffon gown. I glanced in the mirror to see if I looked as she had way back then. I was a few years younger, but yes, I did look like her. Not exactly, but almost—and enough to convince—for were two leaves from the same tree ever duplicates? I replaced the jewelry tray, put back the drawer, leaving everything as it had been. Except now I wore several hundred thousand dollars worth of gems I didn't own. One more look at my watch. Ten-thirty. Too soon. At twelve I wanted to make my grand entrance, like Cinderella in reverse.

With utmost caution, I crept stealthily along the long halls to the northern wing, and found that end room with the door locked. The wooden key still fitted. But my heart didn't seem to fit my chest. It beat too fast, too fierce, too loud and my pulse raced too excitedly. I had to keep calm, self-possessed, do everything right and not be intimidated by this awesome house that had done its best to destroy us.

When I stepped into that room with the two double beds, I stepped back into childhood. The gold-colored, quilted satin spreads were still on the beds, precisely made without a wrinkle. The ten-inch TV was still in the corner. The doll house with its porcelain people and antique made-to-scale furniture waited for Carrie's hands to bring it to life again. The old rocker that Chris had brought down from the attic, still there. *Why, it was as if in here time stood still and we'd never left!*

Even hell was still on the walls, gruesomely represented by three reproductions of masterpieces. Oh, God I hadn't known this room would make me feel so—so shredded inside. I couldn't afford to cry. That would make my mascara run. Yet I wanted to cry. All about me flitted the ghosts of Cory and Carrie, just five years old, laughing, crying, wanting outside, the sunlight, and all they could do was push tiny trucks to make-believe San Francisco or Los Angeles. There used to be train tracks that ran all over the room and under the furniture. Oh, where did the train tracks go—the coal cars, the engines? I pulled a tissue from my tiny evening bag and held it to the corner of one eye and then the other. I leaned to peer into the doll house. The porcelain maids were still cooking in the kitchen; the builder still stood near the front door to welcome the guests arriving in a coach pulled by two horses—and lo, when I looked in the nursery, the cradle was there! The missing cradle! For weeks we'd hunted to find it, fearful all the time the grandmother would notice it missing and punish Carrie—and there it was, just where it should be! But the baby wasn't in it, nor were the parents in the front parlor. Mr. and Mrs. Parkins and baby Clara were now mine and never would they reside in this doll house again.

Had the grandmother herself stolen the cradle, so she could then see it missing, and ask Carrie where it was, and when it couldn't be produced, she'd have good reason to punish Carrie? And Cory as well, for he would automatically, without fear for himself, run to protect his twin sister. It was like her to do something mean and cruel like that. But if she had, why had she stayed her hand, and not played out her role to the end? I laughed bitterly to myself. She *had* played out her role to the end—not just a whipping, but something better, something *worse*. Poison. Arsenic on four sugared doughnuts.

I jumped then. It seemed I heard a child laugh. My imagination, of course. And then, when I should have known better, I headed for the closet and the high and narrow door at the very back end and the steep and narrow dark stairs. A million times I'd ascended these stairs. A million times in the dark, without a candle, or a flashlight. Up into the dark, eerie, gigantic attic, and only when I was there did I feel around for

the place where Chris and I had hidden our candles and matches.

Still there. Time *did* stand still in this place. We'd had several candle holders, all of pewter with small handles to grasp. Holders we'd found in an old trunk along with boxes and boxes of short, stubby, clumsily made candles. We'd always presumed them to be homemade candles, for they had smelled so rank and old when they burned.

My breath caught! Oh! It was the same! The paper flowers still dangled down, mobiles to sway in the drafts, and the giant flowers were still on the walls. Only all the colors had faded to indistinct gray—ghost flowers. The sparkling gem centers we'd glued on had loosened, and now only a few daisies had sequins, or gleaming stones, for centers. Carrie's purple worm was there only now he too was a nothing color. Cory's epileptic snail didn't appear a bright, lopsided beach ball now, it was more a tepid, half-rotten squashy orange. The BEWARE signs Chris and I had painted in red were still on the walls, and the swings still dangled down from the attic rafters. Over near the record player was the barre Chris had fashioned, then nailed to the wall so I could practice my ballet positions. Even my outgrown costumes hung limply from nails, dozens of them with matching leotards and worn out *pointe* shoes, all faded and dusty, rotten smelling.

As in an unhappy dream I was committed to, I drifted aimlessly toward the distant schoolroom, with the candelight flickering. Ghosts were unsettled, memories and specters followed me as things began to wake up, yawn and whisper. No, I told myself, it was only the floating panels of my long chiffon wings ... that was all. The spotted rocking-horse loomed up, scary and threatening, and my hand rose to my throat as I held back a scream. The rusty red wagon seemed to move by unseen hands pushing it, so my eyes took flight to the blackboard where I'd printed my enigmatic farewell message to those who came in the future. How was I to know it would be me?

We lived in the attic,

Christopher, Cory, Carrie and me—

Now there are only three.

Behind the small desk that had been Cory's I scrunched down, and tried to fit my legs under. I wanted to put myself into a deep reverie that would call up Cory's spirit that would tell me where he lay.

As I sat there waiting, the wind outside began to blow, picking up strength so it howled and hurled the snow slantwise. Another blizzard was on, full force. With the storm came the drafts to blow out my candle! The darkness shrieked, and I had to run to get out! Run *fast* ... run, run, run before I became one of *them*!

* * *

The next hour had been choreographed to the smallest detail. As the big grandfather clock began to strike twelve, I positioned myself in the center of the second-floor balcony. I did nothing spectacular to pull all eyes my way, just stood there with my flesh warmed by the flashing jewels. In her crimson dress of lamé, so high in front it reached her throat that was encircled with a lavish choker of diamonds, my mother slightly turned. I saw the backless gown made up for the severity in front, so a hint of her buttock cleavage showed. Her blond hair was styled shorter than I'd ever seen it, and fluffed out around her face in a flattering way. From this distance she looked very young and lovely, and nowhere near her actual age. Ahh ... the last stroke of twelve sounded ...

Some sixth sense must have warned her, for she turned her head slowly to look my way. I began my descent. She froze in shock. Her eyes grew wide and dark as her hand that held a cocktail glass trembled so much a bit of the liquid sloshed out and fell to the floor. Because she stared, Bart followed the direction of her gaze. He gawked as if at an apparition. Now that both host and hostess were mesmerized, each guest had to look where no doubt they expected to see Santa Claus, and it was only me. Only me as once my mother had been years ago, wearing the same gown, and before many, I was sure, of those very same people who were here that other Christmas when I was twelve. I even recognized a few, older, but I knew them! Oh, the joy to have them here!

This was my moment of triumph! Moving as only a ballerina can, I meant to play my role to the utmost of my dramatic ability. As the guests stared upward, clearly caught in thrall by time moved backward, I gloated to see my mother blanch. Then I rejoiced to see Bart's eyes widen more as they jumped from me, to her, then back to me. Slowly, in a dead silence, for the music had stopped, I descended the left side of the dual winding staircases, thinking I was Caraboose, the wicked fairy who put upon Aurora the curse of death. Then I made myself the Lilac Fairy to steal away Aurora's prince while she slept her sleep of one hundred years. (It was clever of me not to think of myself as my mother's daughter, and how soon I would destroy her. Very clever to make of this a stage production, when I was dealing with reality, and not fantasy and the blood that could be spilled.)

Gracefully I trailed my sparkling fingers along the rosewood railing, feeling my green chiffon wings fluttering and floating as step by step, and second by second, I neared the place where my mother and Bart were standing very close together. She was trembling all over, but managing to hold onto her poise. I thought I glimpsed a flicker of panic in the blue of her Dresden eyes. I kindly bestowed on her my most gracious smile while standing on the second step from the bottom. In this way I gave myself the height I needed to be taller than anyone else. All had to look up to me wearing four-inch silver heels on platform soles like Carrie's, so as to be on an even height with my mother when we met eye to eye. The better to see her dismay. Her discomfort. Her utter collapse!

"Merry Christmas!" I called to one and all in a loud clear voice. It resounded like a heralding trumpet to attract others from different rooms, and they came in by the dozens, as if drawn more by the total silence but for my voice. "Mr. Winslow," I called invitingly, "come dance with me, just as you danced with my mother fifteen years ago, when I was twelve and hiding above, and she wore a gown just like the one I have on now." Bart was visibly jolted. Stunned shock made his dark eyes blacken, but he refused to move from my mother's side!

He forced me to do what I did next. As everyone stood there and waited, held in breathless suspense, expecting more explosive revelations, I gave them what they wanted.

“I’d like to introduce myself.” My voice was high-pitched so it would carry well. “I am Catherine Leigh Foxworth, the firstborn daughter of Mrs. Bartholomew Winslow, whom most of you must remember was first married to my father, Christopher Foxworth. Remember too that he was my mother’s half-uncle, the younger brother of Malcolm Neal Foxworth who disinherited his only daughter, his sole remaining heir, because she had the unholy temerity to wed his half-brother! What is more, I also have an older brother, named Christopher too—he’s a doctor now. Once I had a younger brother and sister, twins seven years younger than I—but Cory and Carrie are dead now—for they were—” I stopped short for some reason, then went on. “That Christmas party fifteen years ago, Chris and I were hiding in the chest on the balcony, while the twins slept in the end room of the northern wing. Our playground was the attic, and never, never did we go downstairs. We were attic mice, unwanted and unloved once money came into the picture.” And I would have screamed it all out, every last detail, but Bart came striding over to me.

“Bravo, Cathy!” he cried. “You play your part to perfection! Congratulations.” He put his arm about my shoulders, charmingly smiled at me, then turned to the guests who appeared not to know what to think, or whom to believe, much less how to react. “Ladies, gentlemen,” he said, “let me introduce to you Catherine Dahl, whom many of you must have seen on stage when she danced with her husband, Julian Marquet. And as you have just witnessed, she is also an actress of merit. Cathy here is a distant relative of my wife, and if you can see any resemblance, that explains it. In fact, Mrs. Julian Marquet is one of our neighbors now, you may know that. Since her resemblance to my wife is so remarkable, we cooked up this little farce between us, and did what we could to enliven and make different this party with our little joke.”

He ruthlessly pinched my upper arm, before he caught my hand, put his arm about my waist and asked me to dance.

“Come now, Cathy, certainly you want to show off your dancing ability after that fine dramatic performance.” As the music began to play, he forcefully made me dance! I turned my head to see my mother sagging against a friend, her face so pale her makeup stood out like livid blotches. Even so, she couldn’t take her eyes from me in the arms of her husband.

“You brazen little bitch!” Bart hissed at me. “How dare you come in here and pull such a stunt? I thought I loved you. I despise catty women with long claws. I won’t have you ruining my wife! You little idiot, whatever made you tell so many lies?”

“You are the idiot, Bart,” I said calmly, though I was panicked inside—what if he refused to believe? “Look at me. How would I know she wore a gown like this, if I hadn’t seen her with it on? How would I know you went with her to see her bedroom with the swan bed, if my brother, Chris, hadn’t hidden and heard and seen everything the two of you did up on the second-floor rotunda.”

He met my eyes, and he looked so strange, so distant and strange.

“Yes, Bart darling, I *am* your wife’s daughter, and I know if your law firm finds out your wife had four children born from the union of her first marriage, then you and she lose everything. All that money. All your investments. Everything you have bought will be taken back. Oh, the pity of that makes me want to cry.”

We danced on his cheek inches from mine. A smile was fixed to his lips. “That gown you’re wearing, how the hell did you find out she had one exactly like that the first time I came to this house to a party?”

I laughed with fake merriment. “Dear Bart, you are so stupid. How do you think I know? I saw her in this gown. She came to our room and showed us how pretty she looked, and I was so envious of all her curves and the way Chris looked at her with so much admiration. She wore her hair as I am wearing mine now. These jewels were taken from her safe in the dressing room table drawer.”

“You’re lying,” he said, but doubt was in his voice now.

“I know the combination,” I went on softly, “she used her birthday numbers. She told me that when I was twelve. She *is* my mother. She did keep us locked in that room, waiting for her father to die, so she could inherit. And you know why she had to keep us a big, dark secret. You wrote the will, didn’t you? Think back to a certain night when you fell asleep in her grand suite of rooms, and you dreamed a young girl wearing a short blue nightie stole in and kissed you. You weren’t dreaming, Bart. That kiss was from me. I was fifteen then, and had snuck into your room to steal money—remember how you used to miss cash? You and she thought the servants were stealing, but it was Chris, and one time it was me ... who didn’t find anything because you were there to scare me away.”

“Nooo,” he said with a sigh. “*No!* She wouldn’t do that to her own children!”

“Wouldn’t she? She did. That big chest up there near the balcony balustrade has a backing of wire mesh screening. Chris and I could see just fine. We saw the caterers fixing crepes and waiters in red and black and a fountain spraying champagne, and there were two huge silver punch bowls. Chris and I could smell everything so delicious and we drooled to have a taste of what was down there. Our meals were so boring, and always cold or lukewarm. The twins hardly ate anything. Were you there the Thanksgiving Day dinner when she got up and down so much? Do you want to know why? She was preparing a tray of food to take up to us whenever the butler John was out of his pantry.”

He shook his head, his eyes dazed.

“Yes, Bart, the woman you married had four children she hid away for three years and almost five months. Our playground was in the attic. Have you ever played in an attic in the summertime? In the winter? Do you think it was pleasant? Can you imagine how we felt, waiting year after year for an old man to die so our lives could begin? Do you know the trauma we suffered knowing she cared more for the money than she did for us, her own children? And the twins,

they didn't grow. They stayed so small, grew so large-eyed and haunted looking, and she'd come and never look at them! She pretended not to notice their ill health!"

"Cathy, please! If you are lying, stop! Don't make me hate her!"

"Why not hate her? She deserves it," I went on as my mother went to lean against a wall, and looked sick enough to throw up. "Once I lay on the swan bed, with the little swan bed across the foot. You had a book in your nightstand drawer about sex, disguised under a dustjacket that read *How to Create and Design Your Own Needlepoint* or something like that."

"*How to Create Your Own Needlepoint Designs*," he corrected, looking sick and as pale as my mother, though he kept on smiling, hatefully smiling.

"You are making all of this up," he said in an odd tone that showed no sincerity. "You hate her because you want me, and connive to deceive me and destroy her."

I smiled and lightly brushed his cheek with my lips. "Then let me convince you more. Our grandmother always wore gray taffeta with hand-crocheted collars, and never without a diamond brooch with seventeen stones pinned at her throat. Very early each morning, before six-thirty, she brought us food and milk in a picnic hamper. At first she fed us rather well, but gradually, as her resentment grew, our meals grew worse and worse until we were fed mostly sandwiches of peanut butter and jelly and occasionally fried chicken and potato salad. She gave us a long list of rules to live by, including one that forbade us from opening the draperies to let in light. Year after year we lived in a dim room without sunlight. If only you knew how dreary life is, shut away, without light, feeling neglected, unwanted, unloved. Then there was another rule very hard to abide by. We were not supposed to even *look* at each other—especially one of the opposite sex."

"Oh, God!" he exclaimed, then sighed heavily. "That sounds like her. You say it was more than three years you were locked up there?"

“Three years and *almost* five months, and if that seems a long time to you, how do you think it was for small children of five, and one of twelve, and the other of fourteen? Back then, five minutes passed like five hours, and days were like months, and months were like years.”

Doubt fought clearly with his legal mind that saw all the ramifications, if my tale were true. “Cathy, be honest, totally honest. You had two brothers and one sister—and all that time, when I was here too, you were living locked up?”

“In the beginning, we believed in her, every word she said, for we loved her, trusted her, she was our only hope, and our salvation. And we wanted her to inherit all that money from her father. We agreed to stay up there until the grandfather died, although when our mother explained how we were to live in Foxworth Hall she failed to mention we were to be hidden away. At first we thought it would only be for a day or so, but it went on and on. We filled our time by playing games—and we prayed a lot, slept a lot. We grew thin, half-sick, malnourished, and suffered through two weeks of starvation while you and our mother traveled throughout Europe on your honeymoon. And then you went to Vermont to visit your sister, where our mother bought a two-pound box of maple-sugar candy. But by then we’d already been eating, doughnuts with arsenic laced in the powdered sugar.”

He gave me a hard, fierce look of terrible anger. “Yes. she did buy a box of that kind of candy in Vermont. But Cathy! whatever else you may say, I can never believe my wife would deliberately set out to poison her own children!” His scornful eyes raked over me, then back to my face. “*Yes, you do look like her!* You could be her daughter. I admit that! But to say Corrine would kill her own children. I can’t believe that!”

I shoved him away forcefully, and whirled about. “*Listen everyone!*” I yelled out. “*I am* the daughter of Corrine Foxworth Winslow! She *did* lock her four children in the end room of the northern wing. Our grandmother was in on the scheme and gave us the attic for our playroom. We decorated it with paper flowers, to make it pretty for our little twins, all so our mother could inherit. Our mother told us we *had* to hide,

for if we didn't our grandfather would never have her written into his will. All of you know how he despised her for marrying his half-brother. Our mother persuaded us to come and live upstairs, and be as quiet as attic mice; we went, trusting and believing she would keep her word and let us out the day her father died. *But she didn't!* She didn't! She let us suffer up there for *nine* months after he was dead and buried!"

I had more to spill out. But my mother shrilled out in a loud voice, "*Stop!*" She stumbled forward; her arms outstretched as if she were blind. "*You lie!*" she screamed. "I've never seen you before! Get out of my house! Get out this instant before I call the police and have you thrown out! *Now you get out, and you stay out!*"

Everyone was staring at her now, not me. She, the ultra-poised and arrogant had lost control, was trembling, her face livid, wanting to scratch the eyes from my face! I don't think a soul there believed her then, not when they could see I was her very image—and I knew too many truths.

Bart left my side and went to his wife to whisper something in her ear. He put his arms consolingly around her, and kissed her cheek. She clung to him helplessly, with pale, shaky hands of desperation, beseeching his help with great teary eyes of cerulean blue—like mine, like Chris's, like the twins' blue eyes.

"Thank you again, Cathy, for a fine performance. Come into the library with me and I'll pay you your fee." He scanned over the guests clustered around and quietly he said, "I'm sorry, but my wife has been ill, and this little joke was ill-timed on my part. I should have known better than to plan such a show. So, if you will please forgive us, do go on with the party; enjoy yourselves; eat, drink and be merry; and stay as long as you like, Miss Catherine Dahl may have some more surprises in store for you."

How I hated him then!

As the guests milled about and whispered and looked from me to him, he picked up my mother and carried her toward the library. She was heavier than she used to be, but in his arms

she seemed a feather. Bart glanced over his shoulder at me, gestured with his head that I was to follow, which I did.

I wanted Chris here with me, as he should be. It shouldn't be left up to me to confront her with the truth. I was strangely alone, defensive, as if in the end Bart would believe *her* and not me, no matter what I said, no matter what proof I gave him. And I had plenty of proof. I could describe to him the flowers in the attic, the snail, the worm, the cryptic message I'd written on the blackboard, and, most of all, I could show him the wooden key.

Bart reached the library and carefully put my mother into one of the leather chairs. He snapped an order my way. "Cathy, will you please close the door behind you."

Only then did I see who else was in the library! My grandmother was seated in the same wheelchair her husband had used. Ordinarily you can't tell one wheelchair from another, but this one was custom-made and much finer. She wore a gray-blue robe over her hospital jacket, and a lap robe covered her legs. The chair was placed near the fireplace so she could benefit from the heat of a roaring log fire. Her bald head shone as she turned it my way. Her flintstone gray eyes glowed maliciously.

A nurse was in the room with her. I didn't take the time to look at her face.

"Mrs. Mallory," said Bart, "will you please leave the room and leave Mrs. Foxworth here." It wasn't a request, but an order.

"Yes, sir," said the nurse who quickly got up and scuttled to leave as fast as possible. "You just ring for me when Mrs. Foxworth wants to be put to bed, sir," she said at the door and then disappeared.

Bart seemed on the verge of exploding as he stalked the room, and what wrath he felt now seemed directed not only at me, but also at his wife. "All right," he said as soon as the nurse was gone, "let's have done with it, all of it. Corrine, I've always suspected you had a secret, a big secret. It occurred to me many times you didn't truly love me, but it never once

crossed my mind you might have four children you hid away in the attic. *Why?* Why couldn't you have come to me and told me the truth?" He roared this, all control gone. "How could you be so selfishly heartless, so brutally cruel as to lock away your four children and then try and kill them with arsenic?"

Sagging limply in a brown leather chair, my mother closed her eyes. She seemed bloodless as she asked in a dull voice. "So, you are going to believe *her* and not me. You know I could never poison anyone, no matter what I had to gain. And you know that I don't have any children!"

I was stunned to know Bart believed me and not her, and then I guessed he didn't truly believe me, but was using a lawyer's trick, attacking and hoping to take her off guard, and maybe get to the truth. But that would never work, not with her. She'd trained herself over too many years for anyone to take her by surprise.

I strode forward to glare down at her, and in the harshest of voices I spoke. "Why don't you tell Bart about Cory, Momma? Go on, tell him how you and your mother came in the night and wrapped him in a green blanket and told us you were taking him to a hospital. Tell him how you came back the next day and told us he died from pneumonia. Lies! All lies! Chris sneaked downstairs and overheard that butler, John Amos Jackson, telling a maid of how the grandmother carried arsenic up to the attic to kill the little mice. *We were the little mice who ate those sugared doughnuts, Mother!* And we proved those doughnuts were poisoned. Remember Cory's little pet mouse that you used to ignore? He was fed only a bit of sugared doughnut and he died! Now sit there and cry, and deny who I am, and who Chris is, and who Cory and Carrie used to be!"

"I have never seen you before in my life," she said strongly, bolting upright and staring me straight in the eyes, "except when I went to the ballet in New York."

Bart narrowed his eyes, weighing her, then me. Then he looked at his wife again and his eyes grew even more slotlike and cunning. "Cathy," he said, still looking at her, "you are making very serious allegations against my wife. You accuse

her of murder, premeditated murder. If you are proven right, she will face a jury trial for murder—is that what you want?”

“I want justice, that is all. No, I don’t want to see her in prison or put in an electric chair—if they still do that in this state.”

“She is lying,” whispered my mother, “lying, lying, lying.”

I had come prepared for accusations like this and calmly I pulled from my tiny purse duplicates of four birth certificates. I handed them to Bart who took them over to a lamp and bent to study them. Cruelly and with great satisfaction I smiled at my mother. “Dear mother, you were very foolish to sew those birth certificates in the lining of our old suitcases. Without them I wouldn’t have had any proof at all to show your husband and, no doubt, he would go on believing you—for I am an actress and accustomed to putting on a good show.

“It’s a pity he doesn’t know *you* are an even better actress. Cringe away, Momma, but I have the proof!” I laughed wildly, near tears as I saw them begin to glisten in her eyes, for once I had loved her so well, and under all the hatred and animosity I felt for her, a little light of innate love still waxed and waned, and it hurt, oh, it did hurt to make her cry. Yet she deserved it, she did, I kept telling myself she did!

“You know something else. Momma. Carrie told me how she met you on the street and you denied her, and shortly afterwards she became so ill she died—so you helped kill her too! And without the birth certificates you could have escaped all retribution, for that courthouse in Gladstone, Pennsylvania, burned down ten years ago. See how kind fate would have been to you, Mother? But you never did anything well. Why didn’t you burn them? Why did you save them ... ? That was very thoughtless of you, dearest loving Mother, to save the evidence; but then you were always careless, always thoughtless, always extravagant about everything. You thought if you killed your four children you could have others—but your father tricked you, didn’t he?”

“*Cathy! Sit down and let me handle this!*” ordered Bart. “My wife has just undergone surgery and I’ll not have you

threaten her health. *Now sit before I push you down!*”

I sat.

He glanced at my mother, then at *her* mother.

“Corrine, if you have ever cared for me, loved me even a little—is any of what this woman says true? *Is she your daughter?*”

Very weakly my mother answered, “... Yes.”

I sighed. I thought I heard the whole house sigh, and Bart along with it. I lifted my eyes to see my grandmother staring at me in the oddest way.

“Yes,” she continued flatly, her dull eyes fixed on Bart. “I couldn’t tell you, Bart. I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid you wouldn’t want me if I came with four children and no money, and I loved and wanted you so much. I racked my brains trying to figure out a solution so I could keep you, my children and the money too.” She sat up and made a ramrod of her spine as her head lifted regally high. “And I *did* figure out a solution! I *did*! It took me weeks and weeks of scheming, but I did figure a way!”

“Corrine,” said Bart with ice in his voice as he towered above her, “murder is never a solution to anything! All you had to do was tell me, and I would have thought of a way to save your children and your inheritance.”

“But don’t you see,” she cried out excitedly, “I figured out a way all by myself! I wanted you; I wanted my children and the money too. I thought my father *owed* me that money!” She laughed hysterically, beginning to lose control again, as if hell was at her heels and she had to speak fast to escape its burn. “Everyone thought I was stupid, a blond with a pretty face and figure but no brains. Well, I fooled you, Mother,” she threw out at that old woman in the chair. And at a portrait on the wall she screamed, “And I fooled you too, Malcolm Foxworth!” Then at me she flared her eyes, “And you too, Catherine. You thought you had it so tough up there, locked away, missing out on schooldays and friends, but you don’t realize how *good* you had it compared to what my father did to me! *You*, you and

your accusations, always at me, *when could I let you out?* When down below my father was ordering me to do this, do that, for if you don't you won't inherit one penny and I'll tell your lover about your four children too!"

I gasped. Then jumped to my feet. "He knew about us? The grandfather knew?"

Again she laughed, hard, diamond-brittle laughter. "Yes, he knew, but I didn't tell him! The day Chris and I ran away from this horrible house he hired detectives to follow and keep tabs on us. Then, when my husband was killed in that accident, I was persuaded by my lawyer to seek their help. How my father rejoiced! Don't you see, Cathy," she said so fast her words piled one on the other, "he *wanted* me and my children in his house and under his thumb! He had it planned along with my mother, to deceive me and let me think he didn't know you were hidden upstairs. But he knew all the time! It was his plan to keep you locked up *for the rest of your lives!*"

I gasped and stared at her. I doubted her too; how could I trust anything she said now after she'd done so much? "The grandmother, she went along with his plan?" I asked, feeling a numbing sensation creeping up from my toes.

"Her?" said Momma, tossing her mother a hard look of contempt. "She'd do anything he said, for she hated me; she's always hated me; he loved me too much when I was a girl, and cared nothing at all about his sons whom she favored more. And after we were here, snared in his trap, he gloated to have his half-brother's children captured as animals in a cage, to keep locked up until they were dead. So, while you were up there, playing your games and decorating the attic, he kept at me, day in, day out. 'They should never have been born, should they?' he'd slyly say, and cunningly suggest you would all be better off dead than kept prisoners until you grew old, or sickened and died. I didn't truly believe he meant this at first. I thought it was only another of his ways to torture me. Each day he'd say you were wicked, flawed, evil children who should be destroyed. I'd cry, plead, go down on my knees and beg, and he'd laugh. One evening he raged at me. 'You fool,' he said. 'Were you idiot enough to think I could ever forgive

you for sleeping with your half-uncle—the ultimate sin against God? Bearing his children?’ And on and on he’d rave, screaming sometimes. Then he’d lash out with his walking cane, striking whatever he could reach. My mother would sit nearby and smirk with pleasure. Yet, he didn’t let me know he knew you were up there for several weeks ... and by that time, I was trapped.” She pleaded with me to believe, to have mercy. “Can’t you see how it was? I didn’t know which way to turn! I didn’t have any money, and I kept thinking his terrible temper tantrums would kill him, so I provoked him so he *would* die—but he kept on living, and berating me and my children. And every time I went into your room, you’d be pleading to be let out. *Especially you, Cathy—especially you.*”

“And what else did he do to make you keep us prisoners?” I asked sarcastically, “except scream and rail and hit you with his cane? It couldn’t have been very hard, for he was very frail, and we never saw any marks on you after the first whipping. You were free to come and go as you wanted. You could have worked out some plan to slip us outside unknown to him. You wanted his money, and you didn’t care what you had to do to get it! You wanted that money more than you wanted your four children!”

Before my very eyes her delicate and lovely restored face took on the aged look of *her* mother. She seemed to shrivel and grow haggard with the countless years she had yet to live with her regrets. Her gaze took wild flight, seeking some safe refuge in which to forever hide, not only from me, but from the fury she saw in her husband’s eyes.

“Cathy,” pleaded my mother, “I know you hate me, but—”

“Yes, Mother. I do hate you.”

“You wouldn’t if you understood—”

I laughed, hard and bitterly. “Dearest Mother, there is not one thing you could tell me to make me understand.”

“Corrine,” said Bart, his tone sterile, as if his heart had been removed. “Your daughter is right. You can sit there and cry, and talk about your father forcing you to poison your children—but how can I believe when I can’t remember him even

giving you a hard glance? He looked at you with love and pride. You did come and go as you chose. Your father lavished money on you, so you could buy new clothes and everything else you wanted. Now you come up with some ridiculous tale of how you were tortured by him, and forced by him to kill your hidden children. God, you sicken me!”

Her eyes took on a glassy stare; her pale and elegant hands trembled as they unfolded and fluttered up from her lap to her throat, and there they fingered over and over again the diamond choker that must be keeping her gown from falling off. “Bart, please, I’m not lying... I admit I’ve lied to you in the past, and deceived you about my children—but I’m not lying now. Why can’t you believe me?”

Bart stood with his feet spread apart, as a sailor would to brace himself on a rocky sea. His hands were behind his back and clenched into fists. “What kind of man do you think I am—or was?” he asked bitterly. “You could have told me anything then, and I would have understood. I loved you, Corrine. I would have done anything legally possible to thwart your father and help you gain his fortune, and at the same time keep your children alive, free to live normal lives. I’m not a monster, Corrine, and I didn’t marry you for your money. I would have married you if you were penniless!”

“You couldn’t outwit my father!” she cried, jumping up and beginning to pace the floor.

In that shiny crimson dress my mother appeared a bright lick of flame, a color that made her eyes dark purple as they darted from one to the other of us. Then, finally, when I couldn’t stand to watch her as she was, broken, wild, with all her queenly poise gone, her eyes came to rest on *her* mother—that old woman who slumped in the wheelchair, as if without bones. Her gnarled fingers worked weakly at the afghan, but her gray zealot’s eyes burned with a strong, mean fire. I watched as the eyes of mother and daughter clashed. Those gray eyes that never changed, never softened with old age or fear of the hell that must be lying in wait for her.

And, to my surprise, from this confrontation my mother rose straight and tall, the winner in this battle of wills. She

began to speak in a dispassionate way, as if discussing someone else. It was like hearing a woman talk who knew she was killing herself with each razored word, and yet she didn't care, not anymore—for I was the winner, after all, and to me, her most severe judge, she turned to appeal. "All right, Cathy. I knew sooner or later I would have to face up to you. I knew it would be *you* who would force the truth from me. It has always been *your* way to look through me, and guess I wasn't always what I wanted you to believe I was. Christopher loved me, trusted me. But you never would. Yet in the beginning, at the time your father was killed, I was trying to do the best I could by you. I told you what I believed to be the truth, when I asked you to come and live here hidden away until I won back my father's favor. I didn't truly think it would take more than one day, or possibly two."

I sat as frozen, staring at her. Her eyes pleaded mutely, *have mercy, Cathy, believe me! I speak the truth.*

She turned from me, and in great distress she appealed to Bart and spoke of their first meeting in a friend's home. "I didn't want to love you, Bart, and involve you in the mess I was in. I wanted to tell you about my children and the threat my father posed to them, but just when I would he'd worsen and appear ready to die, so I'd put it off and keep quiet. I prayed that when eventually I did tell you, you'd understand. It was stupid of me, for a secret kept too long becomes impossible to explain. You wanted to marry me. My father kept saying no. My children pleaded every day to be let out. Even though I knew they had every right to complain, I began to resent them, the way they kept harassing me, making me feel guilty and ashamed when I was trying to do the best I could for them. And it was Cathy, always it was Cathy, no matter how many gifts I gave her, who kept at it the most." She threw me another of her long, tormented looks, as if I'd tortured her beyond endurance.

"Cathy," she whispered then, her watery, drowning look of anguish brightening a little, as once more she turned to me. "I did do the best I could! I told my parents all of you did have hidden afflictions, especially Cory. They wanted to think God had punished my children, so they believed easily. And Cory

was always having one cold after another, and his allergy. Can't you see what I tried to do, make all of you just a little sick, so I could rush you one by one to the hospital, then report back to my mother you died. I used a minute bit of arsenic, but not enough to kill you! All I wanted to do was make you a little bit sick, just enough to get you out!"

I was appalled by her stupidity to scheme in such a dangerous way. Then I guessed it was all a lie, just an excuse to satisfy Bart who was staring at her in the oddest way. I smiled at her then, while inside I was hurting so badly I could cry. "Momma," I said softly, interrupting her pleas, "have you forgotten your father was dead before the sugared doughnuts started coming? You didn't have to trick him in his grave."

She darted her tormented eyes to the grandmother who had a stern, forbidding look fixed on her daughter.

"Yes!" cried Momma, "I knew that! But for that codicil I would never have needed the arsenic! But my father let our butler John in on our secret, and he was alive to see that I followed through and kept you upstairs until each one of you was dead! And if he didn't, then my mother was to see he didn't inherit the fifty thousand dollars promised to him. Then there was my mother, who wanted John to inherit everything!"

A terrible silence came while I tried to digest this. The grandfather knew all the time and had wanted to keep us prisoners for life? And as if that weren't enough punishment, he then tried to force her to kill us? Oh, he must have been even more evil than I thought! Not human at all! Then, as I watched her and took note of her anxiously waiting blue eyes, her hands busily trying to twist an invisible rope of pearls, I knew she was lying. I glanced at the grandmother and saw her frown as she tried to speak. Fierce indignation was in her eyes, as if she would deny all my mother had said. But she hated Momma. She would want me to believe the worst—oh, God, how was I to find out the truth?

I glanced at Bart who stood before the fire, his dark eyes gazing at his wife as if he'd never seen her before, and what he was seeing now appalled him.

“Momma,” I began in a flat voice, “what did you really do with Cory’s body? We have looked in all the cemeteries around here and checked their records, and not one little boy of eight years died in that last week of October, 1960.”

She swallowed first, then wrung her hands, flashing all the diamonds and other jewels. “I didn’t know what to do with him,” she whispered. “He died before I could reach the hospital. Suddenly he stopped breathing, and when I looked in the back seat I knew he was dead.” She sobbed with the memory. “I hated myself then. I knew I could be charged with murder, and I hadn’t meant to kill him! Only make him a little sick! So I threw his body in a deep ravine and covered him over with dead leaves, sticks and stones... .” Her huge desperate eyes pleaded with me to believe.

I too had to swallow, thinking of Cory in a deep dark ravine, left to decay there. “No, Momma, you didn’t do that.” My soft voice seemed to cut through the frozen atmosphere of the huge library. “I visited the end room of the northern wing before I came down here.” I paused for better effect and made my next words more dramatic. “Before I came down the stairs to confront you I first used stairs that lead directly to the attic, then the hidden little stairway in the closet of our prison. Chris and I always suspected there was another way into the attic, and correctly we reasoned there had to be a door hidden behind the giant heavy armoires we couldn’t shove out of the way no matter how hard we pushed. Momma ... I found a small room we’d never seen before. There was a very peculiar odor in that room, like something dead and rotten.”

For a moment she couldn’t move. Her expression went totally blank. She stared at me with vacant eyes and then her mouth and her hands began to work, but she couldn’t speak. She tried, but she couldn’t speak. Bart started to say something, but she put her hands up to her ears to shut out anything anyone would say.

Suddenly the library door opened. I whirled in a fury.

My mother turned as in a nightmare to see why I kept staring. Chris pulled up short and gazed at her. She jumped

then, as if terribly startled, then put up both her hands in a gesture that seemed to ward him off.

Was she seeing a ghost of our father? “Chris ... ?” she asked. “Chris, I didn’t mean to do it, really I didn’t! Don’t look at me like that, Chris! I loved them! I didn’t want to give them the arsenic—but my father made me! He told me they should never have been born! He tried to tell me they were so evil they deserved to die, and that was the only way I could make amends for the sin I’d committed when I married you!” Tears streamed down her cheeks as she went on, though Chris kept shaking his head. “I loved my children! *Our* children! But what could I do? I only meant to make them a little sick—just enough to save them, that’s all, that’s all... . Chris, don’t look at me like that! You know I wouldn’t ever kill our children!”

His eyes turned icy blue as he stared at her. “Then you did deliberately feed us arsenic?” he asked. “I never fully believed it once we were free of this house and had time to think about it. But you did do it!”

She screamed then. In all my life I’d never heard such a scream as that one that rose and fell hysterically. Screams that sounded like the howls of the insane! On her heel she whirled about, still screaming, as she raced for a door I hadn’t even known was there, and through it she ran and disappeared.

“Cathy,” said Chris, tearing his eyes from the door and scanning the library to take note of Bart and the grandmother, “I’ve come to fetch you. I’ve had bad news. We have to go back to Clairmont immediately!”

Before I could answer Bart spoke up, “Are you Cathy’s older brother, Chris?”

“Yes, of course. I came for Cathy. She’s needed someplace else.” He stretched out his hand as I drifted toward him.

“Wait a minute,” said Bart. “I need to ask you a few questions. I’ve got to know the full truth. Was that woman in the red dress your mother?”

First Chris looked at me. I nodded to tell him Bart knew, and only then did Chris meet Bart’s eyes with some hostility.

“Yes, she is my mother and Cathy’s mother, and once the mother of twins named Cory and Carrie.”

“And she kept all four of you locked up in one room for more than three years?” asked Bart, as if he still didn’t want to believe.

“Yes, three years and four months and sixteen days. And when she took Cory away one night she came back later and told us he died of pneumonia. And if you want more details, you will have to wait, for there are others we have to think about now. Come, Cathy,” he said, reaching for my hand again. “We’ve got to hurry!” He looked then at the grandmother and gave her a wry smile. “Merry Christmas, Grandmother. I had hoped never to see you again, but now that I have I see time has worked its own revenge.” He turned again to me. “Hurry, Cathy, where is your coat? I have Jory and Mrs. Lindstrom out in my car.”

“Why?” I asked. Sudden panic filled me. What was the matter?

“No!” objected Bart. “Cathy can’t leave! She’s expecting my child and I want her here with me!”

Bart came to take me in his arms and tenderly he gazed with love at my face. “You have lifted the blinders from my eyes, Cathy. You were right. Certainly I was meant for better things than this. Perhaps I can still redeem my existence by doing something useful for a change.”

I threw the grandmother a look of triumph and avoided looking directly at Chris, and with Bart’s arm about my shoulders we left the library and the grandmother and strode through all the other rooms until we reached the grand foyer.

Bedlam had broken loose! Everyone was screaming, running, searching to find a wife or a husband. Smoke! I smelled smoke.

“My God, the house is on fire!” Bart cried. He shoved me toward Chris. “Take her outside and keep her safe! I’ve got to find my wife!” He looked wildly about, calling, “Corrine, Corrine, where are you?”

The milling throng were all headed for the same exit. From the stairs above black smoke billowed down. Women fell and people stepped over them. The merry guests of the party were hell-bent now on getting out, and woe to those who didn't have the strength to fight their way to the door. Frantically I tried to follow Bart with my eyes. I saw him pick up a telephone, no doubt to call the fire department, and then he was racing up the right side of the dual staircase and into the very heart of the fire! "No!" I screamed. "Bart—don't go up there! You'll be killed! Bart—don't! Come back!"

I think he must have heard me, for he hesitated midway up and smiled back at me as I was frantically waving. He mouthed the words *I love you*—and then pointed toward the east. I didn't understand what he meant. But Chris took it that he was telling us of another way out.

Coughing and choking, Chris and I sped through another parlor, and finally I had the chance to see the grand dining room—but it was full of smoke too! "Look," cried Chris, pulling me on, "there are French doors—the fools, there must be a dozen or more exits on the first floor, and everyone rushes for the front door!"

We made it outside and finally over to the car I recognized as Chris's, and there Emma held Jory in her arms as she stared at the great house that was burning. Chris reached inside and pulled out a car robe to throw over my shoulders, and then he held to me as I leaned against him and sobbed for Bart—where was he? Why didn't he come out?

I heard the wail of fire engines winding around the hills, screaming in the night that was already wild with the wind and the snow. The snow that fell above the house on fire was speckled red dots that sizzled as they met the flames. Jory put out his arms, wanting me, and I held him close as Chris put his arms about me and held us both. "Don't worry, Cathy," he tried to comfort, "Bart must know all the ways to get out."

Then I saw my mother in her red flame dress, being restrained by two men. She screamed on and on, crying out her husband's name—and then that of the grandmother. "My mother! She's in there! She can't move!"

Bart was on the front steps when he heard her voice. He whirled about and sped back into the house. Oh, my God! He was going back to save the grandmother who didn't deserve to live! Risking his life—doing what he had to prove, after all, he wasn't just a lap dog.

This was the fire of my childhood nightmares! This was what I'd always feared more than anything! This was the reason I'd insisted we make the rope ladder of torn-up sheets so we could escape and reach the ground—just in case.

It was more than horrible to watch that mammoth house burn when once I would have been glad to see it go. The wind blew relentlessly and whipped the flames higher, higher until they lit up the night and fired the heavens. How easily old wood burned along with the antique furnishings, the priceless heirlooms that could never be replaced. If anything survived, despite what those heroic firemen did who raced about like crazy, connecting up hoses that squirted forth foam, it would be a miracle! Someone screamed, "People are trapped inside! Get them out!" I think it was me. The firemen worked with superhuman speed and agility to get them out while I cried wild and frantic. "Bart! I didn't want to kill you! I only wanted you to love me, that's all. Bart, don't die, please don't die!" My mother heard and she came running to where Chris was holding me tight in his arms.

"*You!*" she screamed, her distraught expression that of the insane, "*You think Bart loved you? That he would marry you? You are a fool!* You betrayed me! As you've always betrayed me, and now Bart will die because of you!"

"No, Mother," said Chris who tightened his arms about me, and his tone was that of ice, "it wasn't Cathy who cried out to remind your husband your mother was still inside. *You* did that. You must have seen he couldn't go back in that house and live. Perhaps you would rather see your husband dead than married to your daughter."

She stared at him. Her hands worked nervously. Her cerulean blue eyes were darkly shadowed by the pools of black mascara. And as I watched and Chris watched something in her eyes broke—some minute thing that had lent

clarity and intelligence to the eyes dissolved and she seemed to shrink. “Christopher my son, my love, I’m your mother. Don’t you love me anymore, Christopher? Why? Don’t I bring you everything you need and ask for? New encyclopedias, games and clothes? What is it you lack? Tell me, so I can go out and buy it for you, please tell me what you want. I’ll do anything, bring you anything to make up for what you’re losing. A thousandfold over you will be rewarded when my father dies, and he will die any day, any hour, any second, I know! I swear you won’t have to be up here much longer! No, not much longer, not much longer, not much longer.” And on and on until I could have screamed. Instead I put my hands over my ears and pressed my face against Chris’s broad chest.

He made some signal to one of the ambulance drivers, and warily they approached our mother who saw them, shrieked and then tried to run. I saw her stumble and fall, her heel caught in the long hem of her flaming red, glittering gown, and on the snow she fell flat, kicking, screaming and pounding her fists.

They took her away in a straightjacket, still screaming of how I had betrayed her, while Chris and I clung to one another and watched with wide eyes. We felt like children again, helpless with the fresh grief and shame we bore. I followed him about while he did what he could for those who had been burned. I only got in his way, but I couldn’t let him out of my sight.

The body of Bart Winslow was found on the floor of the library with the skeletal grandmother still clutched in his arms—both suffocated by the smoke and not the flames. I stumbled over to fold down the green blanket and stared into his face to convince myself death had come again into my life. Again and again it kept coming! I kissed him, cried on his unyielding chest, I raised my head and he was looking straight at me—and through me—gone on to where I could never reach him and confess that I had loved him from the start—fifteen years ago.

“Cathy, please,” said Chris, tugging me away. I sobbed when Bart’s hand slipped from my grasp. “We have to go!

There's no reason for us to stay on now that it is all over."

All over, all over—it was all over.

My eyes followed the ambulance with Bart's body inside, and my grandmother too. I didn't grieve for her—for she had got out of life what she put in.

I turned to Chris and cried again in his arms, for who would live long enough to let me keep the love I had to have? Who?

* * *

Hours and hours passed while Chris pleaded with me to leave this place that had brought us nothing but unhappiness and sorrow. Why hadn't I remembered that? Sadly I leaned to pick bits and pieces of craft paper that once had been orange and purple, and other pieces of our attic decorations blew on the wind, torn petals, jagged leaves, ripped from their stems.

It was dawn before the fire was brought under control. By that time the mammoth greatness that had once been Foxworth Hall was only a smoldering ruin. The eight chimneys still stood on the sturdy brick foundation, and, oddly enough, the dual winding staircases that curved up into nowhere still remained.

Chris was eager to depart, but I had to sit and watch until the last wisp of smoke was blown away and became part of the wind called nevermore. It was my salute, the final one to Bartholomew Winslow whom I'd first seen at the age of twelve. On first sight I'd given my heart to him. So much so that I had to have Paul grow a mustache so he'd look more like Bart. And I'd married Julian because his eyes were dark, dark like Bart's... Oh, God, how could I live with the knowledge I had killed the one man I'd loved best?

"Please, please Cathy, the grandmother is gone and I can't say I'm sorry, though I am about Bart. It must have been our mother who started the fire. From what the police say, it began in that attic room at the top of the stairs."

His voice came to me as from a far distance, for I was locked up in a shell of my own making. I shook my head and tried to clear it. Who was I? Who was that man next to me—

who was the little boy in the back seat asleep in the arms of an older woman?

“What’s the matter with you, Cathy?” Chris said impatiently. “Listen, Henny had a massive stroke tonight! In trying to help her Paul suffered a heart attack! He needs us! Are you going to sit here all day too and grieve for a man you should have left alone, and let the one man who has done the most for us die?”

The grandmother had said a few things so right. I was evil, born unholy. Everything was my fault! All my fault! If I’d never come, if I’d never come, on and on I kept saying this to myself as I cried bitter tears for the loss of Bart.

Reaping the Harvest



It was autumn again, that passionate month of October. The trees this year were ablaze from the touch of early frost. I was on the back veranda of Paul's big white house, shelling peas and watching Bart's small son chase after his older half-brother Jory. We'd named Bart's son after him, thinking it only right, but his last name was Sheffield, not Winslow. I was now Paul's wife.

In a few months Jory would be seven years old, and though at first he'd been a bit jealous he was now delighted to have a younger brother to share his life—someone he could boss, instruct and patronize. However young, Bart was not the kind to take orders. He was his own person, right from the beginning.

“Catherine,” called Paul's weak voice. I put the bowl of green peas quickly aside and hurried to his bedroom on the first floor. He was able to sit up in a chair for a few hours a day now, though on our wedding day, he'd been in bed. On our wedding night he'd slept in my arms, and that was all.

Paul had lost a great deal of weight; he looked gaunt. All his youth and vitality, held on to so valiantly, had disappeared almost overnight. Yet he'd never moved me more than when he smiled at me and held out his arms. “I just called to see if you'd come. I ordered you to get out of this house for a change.”

“You're talking too much,” I cautioned. “You know you aren't supposed to talk but a little.” This was a sore point with him, to only listen and not join in, but he tried to accept it. His next words took me by complete surprise. I could only stare at him, mouth agape and eyes wide. “Paul, you don't mean that!”

Solemnly he nodded, his still beautiful iridescent eyes holding mine. “Catherine, my love, it's been almost three

years that you have been a slave to me, doing your best to make my last days happy. But I'm never going to get well. I could live on like this for years and years, like your grandfather did, while you grow older and older, and miss out on the best years of your life."

"I'm not missing out on anything," I said with a sob in my throat.

He smiled at me gently and held out his arms, and gladly I went to cuddle on his lap, though his arms about me no longer felt strong. He kissed me, and I held my breath. Oh, to be loved again ... but I wouldn't let him, I wouldn't!

"Think about it, my darling. Your children need a father, the kind of father I can't be now."

"It's my fault!" I cried. "If I had married you years ago, instead of Julian, I could have kept you well, and forced you not to work so hard and drive yourself night and day. Paul, if we three hadn't come into your life, you wouldn't have had to earn so much money, enough to send Chris through college and me to ballet classes... ."

He put his hand over my mouth, and told me but for us, he would have died years ago from overwork. "Three years, Catherine," he said again. "And when you think about it, you will realize you are very much a prisoner, just as when you were in Foxworth Hall, waiting for your grandfather to die. I don't want you and Chris to grow to hate me ... so think about it, and talk to him about it—and then decide."

"Paul, Chris is a doctor! You know he wouldn't agree!"

"Time is running out, Catherine, not only for me, but for you and Chris too. Soon Jory will be seven years old. He will be remembering everything more clearly. He will know Chris is his uncle, but if you leave now and forget about me, he will consider Chris his stepfather, not his uncle."

I sobbed. "No! Chris would never agree."

"Catherine, listen to me. It wouldn't be evil! You are now unable to have more children. Though I was terribly sorry you had such a difficult time giving birth to your last son, maybe it

was a blessing in disguise. I'm impotent; I'm not a real husband, and soon you will be a widow again. And Chris has waited for so long. Can't you think about him, and forget the sin?"

* * *

And so, like Momma, we'd written our scripts too, Chris and I. And maybe ours were no better than hers, though I'd never plotted to kill anyone, nor had I meant to drive her over the brink of insanity so the rest of her life she'd live in a "convalescent" home. And the irony of ironies, when all that she'd inherited from her father had been taken away, it had reverted to her mother. The grandmother's will had been read and her entire fortune, plus the remains of Foxworth Hall, now belonged to a woman who could only sit in a mental institution and stare at four walls. Oh, Momma, if only you could have looked into the future when first you considered taking your four children back to Foxworth Hall! Cursed with millions—and unable to spend a cent. Nor would one penny come to us. When our mother died, it would be distributed to different charities.

* * *

In the spring of the following year we sat near the river water where Julia had led Scotty, then held him under so he drowned in the shallow, greenish water where my own two small sons sailed small boats and waded in water that only reached their ankles.

"Chris," I began falteringly, embarrassed, and yet happy too, "Paul made love to me last night for the first time. We were both so happy, we cried. It was safe enough, wasn't it?"

He bowed his head to hide his expression, and the sun blazed his golden hair. "I'm happy for the both of you. Yes, sex is safe enough now, as long as you don't work him up to a great pitch of excitement."

"We took it easy." After four severe heart attacks, it had to be easy sex.

"Good."

Jory shrieked out then he'd caught a fish. Was it too small? Would he have to throw back another? "Yes," called Chris, "that's just a baby. We don't eat baby fish, only the big ones."

"Come," I called, "let's head for home and dinner." They came running and laughing, my two sons, both so much alike they appeared whole brothers, and not halves. And as yet we hadn't told them any different. Jory hadn't asked, and Bart was too young to question. But when they did, we would tell them the truth, as difficult as it was.

"We've got two daddies," cried Jory, flinging himself into Chris's arms as I picked up Bart. "Nobody at school but me has two daddies and they don't understand when I tell them ... but maybe I don't tell it right."

"I'm sure you don't tell it right," said Chris with a small smile.

In Chris's new blue car we drove home to the big white house that had given us so much. As we had the first time we came, we saw a man on the front veranda with his white shoes propped up on the balustrade. As Chris took my sons into the house I went over to Paul and smiled to see him dozing with a pleased smile upon his face. The newspaper he'd been reading had slipped from his slack hand to fan on the veranda floor. "I'll go in and bathe the boys," whispered Chris, "and you can pick up the newspapers before the wind blows them onto our neighbors' lawns."

As quietly as you can try to pick up papers and fold them neatly, somehow they will crackle and rustle, and soon Paul half-opened his eyes and smiled at me. "Hi," he said sleepily. "Did you have a good day? Catch anything?"

"Two small fish bit on Jory's line, but he had to throw them back. What were you dreaming before you woke?" I asked, leaning to kiss him. "You looked so happy—was it a sexy dream?"

Again he smiled, sort of wistfully. "I was dreaming of Julia," he said. "She had Scotty with her, and they were both smiling at me. You know, she very seldom smiled at me after we married."

“Poor Julia,” I said, kissing him again. “She missed out on so much. I promise my smiles will make up for all she didn’t give.”

“They already have.” He reached to touch my cheek and stroked my hair. “It was my lucky day when you climbed my veranda steps on that Sunday... .”

“That damned Sunday,” I corrected. He smiled. “Give me ten minutes more before you call me in to dinner. I’d like to get hold of that bus driver and tell him no Sundays are damned when you are on the bus.”

I went in to help Chris with the boys, and while he buttoned up Jory’s pj’s I helped Bart Scott Winslow Sheffield with his yellow pajamas. We ate early, so we could dine with our children.

Soon the ten minutes were up and again I went to waken Paul. Three times I said his name softly and stroked his cheek gently, then blew in his ear. Still he slept on. I started to say his name again, and louder, when he made some small sound that sounded like my name. I looked, already trembling and afraid. Just the strangeness of the way he said that filled me with a terrible dread.

“Chris,” I called weakly, “come quick and look at Paul.”

He must have been in the hall, sent by Emma to see what was taking us so long, for he stepped out of the door immediately, then ran to Paul’s side. He seized up his hand and felt for his pulse, and then in another second he was pulling his head back and holding his nose and breathing into his mouth. When that didn’t work he struck him several times very hard on his chest. I ran into the house and called an ambulance.

But, of course, none of it did any good. Our benefactor, our savior, my husband was dead. Chris put his arm about my shoulder and drew me to his chest. “He’s gone, Cathy, the way I would like to go, in my sleep, feeling well and happy. It’s a good way for a good man to die, with no pain and no suffering—so don’t look like that, it’s not your fault!”

* * *

Nothing was ever my fault. Behind me lay a trail of dead men. But I wasn't responsible for the death of even one, was I? No, of course not. It was a wonder Chris had the nerve to climb in the car and sit beside me, heading his car west. Behind us, we trailed a U-Haul with all our worldly goods inside. Going west like the pioneers to seek a new future and find different kinds of lives. Paul had left everything he owned to me, including his family home. Though his will had stated, if I decided to sell, he wanted Amanda to have the final bid.

So at last Paul's sister had their ancestral home she had always wanted and schemed to get—but I made sure it was at a steep price.

Chris and I rented a home in California until we could have a custom-designed ranch house built to our specifications, with four bedrooms and two and a half baths. Plus we had another bath and bedroom for our maid, Emma Lindstrom. My sons call my brother Daddy. They both know they have other fathers who went on to heaven before they were born. So far, they don't realize Chris is only their uncle. A long time ago. Jory forgot that. Maybe children too forget when they want to, and ask no questions that would be embarrassing to answer.

At least once a year we travel east to visit friends, including Madame Marisha and Madame Zolta. Both make a great to-do about the dancing abilities of Jory, and both try with fervent zeal to make Bart a dancer too. But so far, he doesn't have the inclination to be anything but a doctor. We visit all the graves of our beloved ones, and put flowers there. Always red and purple ones for Carrie, and roses of any color for Paul and Henny. We have even sought out our father's grave in Gladstone, and paid our respects to him too with flowers. And Julian is never overlooked, or Georges.

Last of all, we visit Momma.

She lives in a huge place that tries unsuccessfully to look homey. Usually she screams when she sees me. Then she jumps up and tries to tear the hair from my head. When she is restrained, she turns the hatred upon herself, trying time after time to mutilate her face, and free herself forever of any resemblance to me. Just as if she no longer looked in the

mirrors that would tell her we no longer look alike. Remorse has made of her something terrible to see. And once she'd been so very beautiful. Her doctors allow only Chris to visit with her an hour or so, while I wait outside with my two sons. He reports back that if she recovers, she won't be faced with a murder charge, for both Chris and I have disclaimed there ever was a fourth child named Cory. She doesn't fully trust Chris, sensing he is under my evil influence, and if she lets go her facade of being insane, she will end up with a death penalty. So year after year passes as she clings to her calculated fallacy as a way to escape also the future with no one who really cares for her. Or perhaps, more truly, she seeks to torment me through Chris and the pity he insists on feeling for her. She is the one issue that keeps our relationship from being perfect.

So, the dreams of perfection, of fame, of fortune, of undying, ever-abiding love without one single flaw, like the toys and games of yesteryears, and all other youthful fantasies I have outgrown, I have put away.

Often I look at Chris, and wonder just what it is he sees in me. What is it that binds him to me in such a permanent way? I wonder too why he isn't afraid for his future and the length of it, since I am better at keeping pets alive than husbands. But he comes home jauntily, wearing a happy grin, as he strides into my welcoming arms that respond quickly to his greeting, "Come greet me with kisses if you love me."

His medical practice is large, but not too large, so he has time to work in our four acres of gardens with the marble statues we brought along from Paul's gardens. As much as possible we have duplicated what he had, except for the Spanish moss that clings, and clings, and then kills.

Emma Lindstrom, our cook, our housekeeper, friend, lives with us as Henny lived with Paul. She never asks questions. She has no family but us, and to us she is faithful, and our business is our own.

Pragmatic, blithe, the eternal, cockeyed optimist, Chris sings when he works in the gardens. When he shaves in the mornings he hums some ballet tune, feeling no trepidations, no regrets, as if long, long ago he had been the man who danced

in the shadows of the attic and had never, never let me see his face. Did he know all along that just as he had won over me in all other games it would be him in the end?

Why hadn't I known?

Who had shut my eyes?

It must have been Momma who told me once, "Marry a man with dark, dark eyes, Cathy. Dark eyes feel so terribly intense about everything." What a laugh! As if blue eyes lacked some profound steadfastness; she should have known better.

I should know better too. It worries me because I went yesterday into our attic. In a little alcove to the side, I found two single-size beds, long enough for two small boys to grow into men.

Oh, my God! I thought, who did this? I would never lock away my two sons, even if Jory did remember one day that Chris was not his stepfather but his uncle. I wouldn't even if he did tell Bart, our youngest. I could face the shame, the embarrassment, and the publicity that would ruin Chris professionally. Yet ... yet, today I bought a picnic hamper, the kind with the double lids that open up from the center; the very same kind of hamper the grandmother had used to bring us food.

So, I go uneasily to bed and lie there awake, fearing the worst in myself, and struggling to keep firm hold of the best. It seems, as I turn over, and snuggle closer to the man I love, that I can hear the cold wind blowing from the blue-misted mountains so far away.

It's the past that I can never forget, that shadows all my days, and hides furtively in the comers when Chris is home. I do make an effort to be like he is, always optimistic, when I am not at all the kind who can forget the tarnish on the reverse side of the brightest coin.

But ... I am not like her! I may look like her, but inside I am honorable! I am stronger, more determined. The best in me

will win out in the end. I know it will. It has to sometimes ...
doesn't it?

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There
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Prologue



In the late evening when the shadows were long, I sat quiet and unmoving near one of Paul's marble statues. I heard the statues whispering to me of the past I could never forget; hinting slyly of the future I was trying to ignore. Flickering ghostly in the pale light of the rising moon were the will-o'-the-wisp regrets that told me daily I could and should have done differently. But I am what I have always been, a person ruled by instincts. It seems I can never change.

I found a strand of silver in my hair today, reminding me that soon I might be a grandmother, and I shuddered. What kind of grandmother would I make? What kind of mother was I? In the sweetness of twilight I waited for Chris to come and join me and tell me with the true blue of his eyes that I'm not fading; I'm not just a paper flower but one that's real.

He put his arm about my shoulder and I rested my head where it seemed to fit best, both of us knowing our story is almost over and Bart and Jory will give to both of us, either the best or the worst of what is yet to be.

It is their story now, Jory's and Bart's, and they will tell it as they knew it.

PART ONE



Jory



Whenever Dad didn't drive me home from school, a yellow school bus would let me off at an isolated spot where I would recover my bike from the nearest ravine, hidden there each morning before I stepped onto the bus.

To reach my home I had to travel a winding narrow road without any houses until I came to the huge deserted mansion that invariably drew my eyes, making me wonder who had lived there; why had they deserted it? When I saw that house I automatically slowed, knowing soon I'd be home.

An acre from that house was our home, sitting isolated and lonely on a road that had more twists and turns than a puzzle maze that leads the mouse to the cheese. We lived in Fairfax, Marin County, about twenty miles north of San Francisco. There was a redwood forest on the other side of the mountains, and the ocean too. Ours was a cold place, sometimes dreary. The fog would roll in great billowing waves and often shrouded the landscape all day, turning everything cold and eerie. The fog was spooky, but it was also romantic and mysterious.

As much as I loved my home, I had vague, disturbing memories of a southern garden full of giant magnolia trees dripping with Spanish moss. I remembered a tall man with dark hair turning gray; a man who called me his son. I didn't remember his face nearly as well as I remembered the nice warm and safe feeling he gave me. I guess one of the saddest things about growing bigger, and older, was that no one was large enough, or strong enough, to pick you up and hold you close and make you feel that safe again.

Chris was my mother's third husband. My own father died before I was born; his name was Julian Marquet, and everyone in the ballet world knew about him. Hardly anyone outside of

Clairmont, South Carolina, knew about Dr. Paul Scott Sheffield, who had been my mother's second husband. In that same southern state, in the town of Greenglenna, lived my paternal grandmother, Madame Marisha.

She was the one who wrote me a letter each week, and once a summer we visited her. It seemed she wanted almost as much as I did, for me to become the most famous dancer the world had ever known. And thus I would prove to her, and to everyone, that my father had not lived and died in vain.

By no means was my grandmother an ordinary little old lady going on seventy-four. Once she'd been very famous, and not for one second did she let anyone forget this. It was a rule I was never to call her Grandmother when others could overhear and possibly guess her age. She'd whispered to me once that it would be all right if I called her *Mother*; but that didn't seem right when I already had a mother whom I loved very much. So I called her Madame Marisha, or Madame M., just as everyone else did.

Our yearly visit to South Carolina was long anticipated during the winters, and quickly forgotten once we were back and safely snuggled in our little valley where our long redwood house nestled. "Safe in the valley where the wind doesn't blow," my mother said often. Too often, really—as if the wind blowing greatly distressed her.

I reached our curving drive, parked my bike and went inside the house. No sign of Bart or Mom. Heck! I raced into the kitchen where Emma was preparing dinner. She spent most of her time in the kitchen, and that accounted for her "pleasingly plump" figure. She had a long, dour face unless she was smiling; fortunately, she smiled most of the time. She could order you to do this, do that, and with her smile take the pain from the ordeal of doing for yourself, which was something my brother Bart refused to do. I suspected Emma waited on Bart more than me because he spilled when he tried to pour his own milk. He dropped when he carried a glass of water. There wasn't anything he could hold on to, and nothing he could keep from bumping into. Tables fell, lamps toppled. If an extension wire was anywhere in the house Bart would be

sure to snag his sneaker toes underneath and down he'd go—or the blender, the mixer, or the radio, would crash to the floor.

“Where’s Bart?” I asked Emma, who was peeling potatoes to put in with the roast beef she had in the oven.

“I tell you, Jory, I’ll be glad when that boy stays in school just as long as you do. I hate to see him come in the kitchen. I have to stop what I’m doing and look around and anticipate just what he might knock off or bump into. Thank God he’s got that wall to sit on. What is it you boys do up on that wall, anyway?”

“Nothing,” I said. I didn’t want to tell her how often we stole over to the deserted mansion beyond the wall and played there. The estate was off-limits to us, but parents weren’t supposed to see and know everything. Next I asked “Where’s Mom?” Emma said she’d come home early after canceling her ballet class, which I already knew. “Half her class has colds,” I explained. “But where is she now?”

“Jory, I can’t keep my eye on everybody and still know what *I’m* doing. A few minutes ago she said something about going up to the attic for old pictures. Why don’t you join her up there and help her search?”

That was Emma’s nice way of saying I was in her way. I headed for the attic stairs, which were hidden in the far end of our large walk-in linen closet in the back hall. Just as I was passing through the family room I heard the front door open and close. To my surprise I saw my dad standing stock-still in the foyer, a strange look of reflection in his blue eyes, making me reluctant to call out and break into his thoughts. I paused, undecided.

He headed for his bedroom after he put down his black doctor’s bag. He had to pass the linen closet with its door slightly ajar. He stopped, listening as I was to the faint sound of ballet music drifting down the stairs. Why was my mother up there? Dancing there again? Whenever I asked why she danced in such a dusty place, she explained she was “compelled” to dance up there, despite the heat and dust. “Don’t you tell your father about this,” she’d warned me

several times. After I questioned her, she'd stopped going up there—and now she was doing it again.

This time I was going up. This time I was going to listen to the excuses she gave *him*. For Dad would catch her!

On tiptoe I trailed him up the steep, narrow stairs. He paused directly under the bare electric bulb that hung down the apex of the attic. He riveted his eyes upon my mom, who kept right on dancing as if she didn't see him there. She held a dustmop in one hand and playfully swiped at this or that, miming Cinderella and certainly not Princess Aurora from *The Sleeping Beauty*, which was the music she had on the ancient record player.

Gosh. My stepfather's heart seemed to jump right up into his eyes. He looked scared, and I sensed she was hurting him just by dancing in the attic. How odd. I didn't understand what went on between them. I was fourteen, Bart was nine, and we were both a long, long way from being adults. The love they had for each other seemed to me very different from the love I saw between the parents of the few friends I had. Their love seemed more intense, more tumultuous, more passionate. Whenever they thought no one was watching they locked eyes, and they had to reach out and touch whenever they passed one another.

Now that I was an adolescent, I was beginning to take more notice of what went on between the most meaningful models I had. I wondered often about the different facets my parents had. One for the public to view; another for Bart and me; and the third, most fervent side, which they showed only to each other. (How could they know their two sons were not always discreet enough to turn away and leave like they should?)

Maybe that was the way all adults were, especially parents.

Dad kept staring as Mom whirled in the *pirouettes* that fanned her long blonde hair out in a half circle. Her leotards were white, her *pointes* white too, and I was enthralled as she danced, wielding that dustmop like a sword to stab at old furniture that Bart and I had outgrown. Scattered on the floor and shelves were broken toys, kiddy-cars and scooters, dishes

she or Emma had broken that she meant to glue back together one day. With each swipe of her dustmop she brought zillions of golden dustmotes into play, Frenzied and crazy they struggled to settle down before she attacked again and once more drove them into flight.

“Depart!” she cried, as a queen to her slaves. “Go and stay away! Torment me no more!”—and round and round she spun, so fast I had to turn to follow her with my eyes or end up dizzy just from watching. She whipped her head, her leg, doing *fouettes* with more expertise than I’d seen on stage. Wild and possessed she spun faster! faster! keeping time to the music, using the mop as part of her action, making housework so dramatic I wanted to kick off my shoes and jump in and join her and be the partner my real father had once been. But I could only stand in the dim purplish shadows and watch something I sensed I shouldn’t be watching.

My dad swallowed over the lump which must have risen in his throat. Mom looked so beautiful, so young and soft. She was thirty-seven, so old in years but so young in appearance, and so easily she could be wounded by an unkind word. Just as easily as any sixteen-year-old dancer in her classes.

“Cathy!” cried Dad, jerking the needle from the record so the music screeched to a halt. “STOP! What are you doing?”

She heard and fluttered her slim pale arms in mock fright, flittering toward him, using the tiny, even steps called *bouffées*. For a second or so only, before she was again spinning in a series of *pirouettes* around him, encircling him—and swiping at him with her dustmop! “STOP IT!” he yelled, seizing hold of her mop and hurling it away. He grabbed her waist, pinioning her arms to her sides as a deep blush rose to stain her cheeks. He released his hold enough to allow her arms to flutter like broken bird wings so her hands could cover her throat. Above those crossed pale hands her blue eyes grew larger and very dark. Her full lips began to quiver, and slowly, slowly, with awful reluctance she was forced to look where Dad’s finger pointed.

I looked too and was surprised to see two twin beds set up in the portion of the attic that was soon to be under

construction. Dad had promised her we'd have a recreation room up here. But twin beds in all this junk? Why?

Mom spoke then, her voice husky and scared. "Chris? You're home? You don't usually come home this early ..."

He'd caught her and I was relieved. Now he could straighten her out, tell her not to dance up here again in the dry, dusty air that could make her faint. Even I could see she was having trouble coming up with some excuse.

"Cathy, I know I brought those bedsteads up, but how did you manage to put them together?" Dad shot out. "How did you manage the mattresses?" Then he jolted for a second time, spying the picnic hamper between the beds. "Cathy!" he roared, glaring at her. "Does history have to repeat itself? Can't we learn and benefit from the mistakes of others? *Do we have to do it all over again?*"

Again? What was he talking about?

"Catherine," Dad went on in the same cold, hard voice, "don't stand there and try to look innocent, like some wicked child caught stealing. Why are those beds here, all made up with clean sheets and new blankets? Why the picnic hamper? Haven't we seen enough of that type of basket to last us our whole lives through?"

And here I was thinking she'd put the beds together so she and I could have a place to fall down and rest after we danced, as we had a few times. And a picnic hamper was, after all, just another basket.

I drifted closer, then hid behind a strut that rose to the rafters. Something sad and painful was between them; something young, fresh, like a raw wound that refused to heal. My mother looked ashamed and suddenly awkward. The man I called Dad stood bewildered; I could tell he wanted to take her in his arms and forgive her. "Cathy, Cathy," he pleaded with anguish, "don't be like *her* in every way!"

Mom jerked her head high, threw back her shoulders, and, with arrogant pride, glared him down. She flipped her long hair back from her face and smiled to charm him. Was she

doing all of that just to make him stop asking questions she didn't want to answer?

I felt strangely cold in the musty gloom of the attic. A chilling shiver raced down my spine, making me want to run and hide. Making me ashamed, too, for spying—that was Bart's way, not mine.

How could I escape without attracting their attention? I *had* to stay in my hidden place.

“Look at me, Cathy. You're not the sweet young *ingenue* anymore, and this is not a game. There is no reason for those beds to be there. And the picnic basket only compounds my fears. *What the hell are you planning?*”

Her arms spread wide as if to hug him, but he pushed her away and spoke again: “Don't try to appeal to me when I feel sick to my stomach. I ask myself each day how I can come home and not be tired of you, and still feel as I do after so many years, and after all that has happened. Yet I go on year after year loving you, needing and trusting you. Don't take my love and make it into something ugly!”

Bewilderment clouded her expression. I'm sure it clouded mine, too. Didn't he truly love her? Was that what he meant? Mom was staring at the beds again, as if surprised to see them there.

“Chris, help me!” she choked, stepping closer and opening her arms again. He put her off, shaking his head. She implored, “Please don't shake your head and act like you don't understand. I don't remember buying the basket, really I don't! I had a dream the other night about coming up here and putting the beds together, but when I came up today and saw them, I thought you must have put them there.”

“Cathy! I DID *NOT* PUT THE BEDS THERE!”

“Move out of the shadows. I can't see you where you are.” She lifted her small pale hands, seeming to wipe away invisible cobwebs. Then she was staring at her hands as if they'd betrayed her—or was she really seeing spiderwebs tying her fingers together?

Just as my dad did, I looked around again. Never had the attic been so clean before. The floor had been scrubbed, cartons of old junk were stacked neatly. She had tried to make the attic look homey by hanging pretty pictures of flowers on the walls.

Dad was eyeing Mom as if she were crazy. I wondered what he was thinking, and why he couldn't tell what bothered her when he was the best doctor ever. Was he trying to decide if she was only pretending to forget? Did that dazed, troubled look in her terrified eyes tell him differently? Must have, for he said softly, kindly, "Cathy, you don't have to look scared. You're *not* swimming in a sea of deceit anymore, or helplessly caught in an undertow. You are *not* drowning. *Not* going under. *Not* having a nightmare. You don't have to clutch at straws when you have me." Then he drew her into his arms as she fell toward him, grasping as if to keep from drowning. "You're all right, darling," he whispered, stroking her back, touching her cheeks, drying the tears that began to flow. Tenderly he tilted her chin up before his lips slowly lowered to hers. The kiss lasted and lasted, making me hold my breath.

"The grandmother is dead. Foxworth Hall has been burned to the ground."

Foxworth Hall? What was that?

"No, it hasn't, Chris. I heard her climbing the stairs a short while ago, and you know she's afraid of small, confined places—how could she climb the stairs?"

"Were you sleeping when you heard her?"

I shivered. What the devil were they talking about? Which grandmother?

"Yes," she murmured, her lips moving over his face. "I guess I did drift into nightmares after I finished my bath and lay out on the bedroom patio. I don't even remember climbing the stairs up here. I don't know why I come, or why I dance, unless I am losing my mind. I feel I am *her* sometimes, and then I hate myself!"

“No, you’re not her, and Momma is miles and miles away where she can never hurt us again. Virginia is three thousand miles from here, and yesterday has come and gone. Ask yourself one question whenever you are in doubt—if we could survive the worst, doesn’t it stand to reason we should be able to bear the best?”

I wanted to run, wanted to stay. I felt I, too, was drowning in their sea of deceit even when I didn’t understand what they were talking about. I saw two people, my parents, as strangers I didn’t know—younger, less strong, less dependable.

“Kiss me,” Mom murmured. “Wake me up and chase away the ghosts. Say you love me and always will, no matter what I do.”

Eagerly enough he did all of that. When he had her convinced, she wanted him to dance with her. She replaced the needle on the record and again the music soared.

Shriveled up tight and small, I watched him try to do the difficult ballet steps that would have been so easy for me. He didn’t have enough skill or grace to partner someone as skilled as my mom. It was embarrassing to even see him try. Soon enough she put on another record where he could lead.

Dancing in the dark,

Till the tune ends, we’re dancing in the dark ...

Now Dad was confident, holding her close, his cheek pressed to hers as they went gliding around the floor.

“I miss the paper flowers that used to flutter in our wake,” she said softly.

“And down the stairs the twins were quietly watching the small black-and-white TV set in the corner.” His eyes were closed, his voice soft and dreamy. “You were only fourteen, and I loved you even then, much to my shame.”

Shame? Why?

He hadn’t even known her when she was fourteen. I frowned, trying to think back to when and where they’d first met. Mom and her younger sister, Carrie, had run away from

home soon after Mom's parents were killed in an auto accident. They'd gone south on a bus and a kind black woman named Henny had taken them to her employer Dr. Paul Sheffield, who had generously taken them in and given them a good home. My mom had started ballet classes again and there she had met Julian Marquet—the man who was my father. I was born shortly after he was killed. Then Mom married Daddy Paul. And Daddy Paul was Bart's father. It had been a long, long time before she met Chris, who was Daddy Paul's younger brother. So how could he have loved her when she was *fourteen*? Had they told us lies? Oh gosh, oh gosh ...

But now that the dance was over, the argument began again: "Okay, you're feeling better, yourself again," Dad said. "I want you to solemnly promise that if anything ever happens to me, be it tomorrow, or years from now, you swear that you will never, so help you God, hide Bart and Jory in the attic so you can go unencumbered into another marriage!"

Stunned, I watched my mom jerk her head upward before she gasped: "Is that what you think of me? *Damn you for thinking I am so much like her!* Maybe I did put the beds together. Maybe I did bring the basket up here. But never once did it cross my mind to ... to ... Chris, you know I wouldn't do that!"

Do what, what?

He made her swear. Really forced her to speak the words while her blue eyes glared hot and angry at him all the while.

Sweating now, hurting too, I felt angry and terribly disillusioned in my dad, who should know better. Mom wouldn't do that. She couldn't! She loved me. She loved Bart, too. Even if she did look at him sometimes with shadows in her eyes, still she would never, never hide us away in this attic.

My dad left her standing in the middle of the attic as he strode forward to seize the picnic hamper. Next he unlatched, then pushed open the screen and hurled the basket out the open window. He watched it fall to the ground before once more turning to confront my mom angrily:

“Perhaps we are compounding the sins of our parents by living together as we are. Perhaps in the end both Jory and Bart will be hurt—so don’t whisper to me tonight when we’re in bed about adopting another child. We cannot afford to involve another child in the mess we’ve made! Don’t you realize, Cathy, that when you put those beds up here you were unconsciously planning what to do in case our secret is exposed?”

“No,” she objected, spreading her hands helplessly. “I wouldn’t. I couldn’t do that ...”

“You have to mean that!” he snapped. “No matter what happens, we will not, or *you* will not, put your children in this attic to save yourself, or me.”

“I hate you for thinking I would!”

“I am trying to be patient. I am trying to believe in you. I know you still have nightmares. I know you are still tormented by all that happened when we were young and innocent. But you have to grow up enough to look at yourself honestly. Haven’t you learned yet that the subconscious often leads the way to reality?”

He strode back to cuddle her close, to soothe and kiss her, to soften his voice as she clung to him desperately. (Why did she have to feel so desperate?)

“Cathy, my heart, put away those fears instilled by the cruel grandmother. She wanted us to believe in hell and its everlasting torments of revenge. There is no hell but that which we make for ourselves. There is no heaven but that which we build between us. Don’t chip away at my belief, my love, with your ‘unconscious’ deeds. I have no life without you.”

“Then don’t go to see *your* mother this summer.”

He raised his head and stared over hers, pain in his eyes. I slid silently on the floor to sit and stare at them. What was going on? Why was I suddenly so afraid?

Bart



And on the seventh day God rested,” read Jory as I finished patting the earth nice and firm over the pansy seeds that were meant to honor my aunt Carrie’s and uncle Cory’s birthday on May fifth. Little aunt and uncle I’d never seen. Both been dead a long, long time. Dead before I was born. People died easy in our family. (Wonder why they liked pansies so much? Silly little nothing flowers with pudding faces.) Wish Momma didn’t think honoring dead people’s birthdays was so darn important.

“You know what else?” asked Jory, like nine was a dumb age, and he was a big adult. “In the beginning, when God created Adam and Eve, they lived in the Garden of Eden without wearing any clothes at all. Then one day an evil talking snake told them it was sinful to walk around naked, so Adam put on a fig leaf.”

Gosh ... naked people who didn’t know naked was wicked. “What did Eve put on?” I asked as I looked around, hoping to see a fig leaf. He went on reading in a singsong way that took me to olden times when God was looking out for everyone—even naked people who could talk to snakes. Jory said he could put Biblical stories into “mind” music, and that made me mad and scared—him dancing to “mind” music *I* couldn’t hear! Made me feel stupid, invisible, dumber than crazy. “Jory, where d’ya find fig leaves?”

“Why?”

“If I had one, I’d take off all my clothes and wear it.”

Jory laughed. “Good golly, Bart, there’s only one way for a boy to wear a fig leaf—and you’d be embarrassed.”

“I would not!”

“You would too!”

“I’m never embarrassed!”

“Then how do you know what it’s like? Besides, have you ever seen Dad wear a fig leaf?”

“No ...” But I figured since I’d never seen a fig leaf, how could I know whether or not I had? I said this to Jory.

“Boy, you’d know!” he answered, with another laugh to mock me.

Then he was grinning, jumping up to leap up all the marble steps in one long bound that I couldn’t help but admire. Me, I had to trail along behind. Wish I was graceful like him. Wish I could dance and charm everybody into likin me. Jory was bigger, older, smarter—but wait a minute. Maybe I would make myself smarter if not bigger. My head was big. Had to have a big brain inside. I’d grow taller by and by, catch up with Jory, bypass him. Why, I’d grow taller than Daddy; taller than the giant in “Jack and the Beanstalk”—and that giant was taller than anybody!

Nine years old ... wish I was fourteen.

There was Jory sitting on the top step, waitin for me to catch up. Insultin. Hateful. God sure hadn’t been kind to me when he passed out coordination. Remembered five years ago when I was four and Emma gave each of us a baby chick, all soft yellow fuzz, making chirps and cheeps. Never felt nothin so good before in my whole livelong life. There I was lovin it, holdin it, sniffin its baby smell before I put it kindly on the ground—and darn if that chick didn’t fall over dead.

“You squeezed,” said Daddy, who knew about stuff like that, “I warned you not to hold it too tight. Baby chicks are fragile and you have to handle them with care. Their hearts are very near the surface—so next time, gentle hands, okay?”

Thought God might strike me dead then and there, even though most of it was His fault anyway. Wasn’t my fault he didn’t make my nerve endings go all the way to the surface of my skin. Wasn’t my fault I couldn’t feel pain like everybody else—was His! Then I’d shivered, fearful He might do something. But when He was forgivin I went an hour later to

the little pen where Jory's live chick had been walkin around lonesome. I picked him up and told him he had a friend. Boy, we had a good time with me chasin him and him chasin me, when all of a sudden, after only two hours of havin fun—that chick keeled over dead too!

Heated stiff cold things. Why'd it give up so easily? "What's the matter with you?" I shouted. "I didn't squeeze! My hands didn't hold you! I was careful—so stop playin dead and get up or my daddy will think I killed you on purpose!" Once I'd seen my daddy haul a man out of the water and save his life by pumpin out the water and blowing in air, so I did the same things to the chick. It stayed dead. Next I massaged its heart, then I prayed, and still it stayed dead.

I was no good. No good for nothin. Couldn't stay clean. Emma said clean clothes on me were a waste of her good time. Couldn't hold on to a dish when I dried it. New toys fell apart soon after they came my way. New shoes looked old in ten minutes after knowin my feet. Weren't my fault if they scuffed up easily. People just didn't know to make good, unscuffable shoes. Never saw a day when my knees weren't scabby or covered with bandaids. When I played ball I tripped and fell between bases. My hands didn't know how to catch right, so my fingers bent backward and twice I'd had fingers broken. Three times I'd fallen from trees. Once I broke my right arm, once my left arm. Third time I only got bruises. Jory never broke anything.

Was no wonder my mom kept telling me and him not to go next door to that big ole house with so many staircases, 'cause sooner or later she knew I'd fall down steps and break all my bones!

"What a pity you don't have much coordination," mumbled Jory. Then he stood up and yelled, "Bart, stop running like a girl! Lean forward, use your legs like pumps. Put your heart in it and let go! Forget about falling. You won't if you don't expect to. And if you catch me I'll give you my superspeed ball!

Boy, wasn't nothin I wanted in this whole wide world more than I wanted that ball of his. Jory could throw it with a curve.

When he pitched at tin cans setting on the wall, he'd hit 'em one after another. I never hit anything I aimed for—but I did hit a lot I didn't even see, like windows and people.

“Don't want yer ole speedball?” I gasped, though I did want it. It was a better ball than mine; they were always givin him better than me.

He looked at me with sympathy, making me want to cry. Hated pity! “You can have it even if you don't win the race and you can give me yours. I'm not trying to hurt your feelings. I just want you to stop being afraid of doing everything wrong, and then maybe you won't—sometimes getting mad enough helps you win.” He smiled, and I guess if my momma had been around she would have thought his flash of white teeth was charmin. My face was born for scowlin. “Don't want yer ole ball,” I repeated, refusing to be won over to someone handsome, graceful and fourteenth in a long line of Russian ballet dancers who'd married ballerinas. What was so great about dancers? *Nothin', nothin'!* God had smiled on Jory's legs and made them pretty, while mine looked like knobby sticks that wanted to bleed.

“You hate me, don't you? You want me to die, don't you?”

He gave me a funny, long look. “Naw, I don't hate you and I don't want you to die. I kinda like you for my brother even if you are clumsy and a squealer.”

“Thanks heaps.”

“Yeah ... think nothing of it. Let's go look at the house.”

Every day after school we went to the high white wall and sat up there, and some days we went inside the house. Soon school would be over and we'd have nothing to do all day but play. It was nice to know the house was there, waitin for us. Spooky ole house with lots of rooms, jagged halls, trunks full of hidden treasures, high ceilings, odd-shaped rooms with small rooms joinin, sometimes a row of little rooms hidin one behind the other.

Spiders lived there and spun webs on the fancy chandeliers. Mice ran everywhere, havin hundreds of babies to put

droppins all over. Garden insects moved inside and climbed the walls and crept on the wood floors. Birds came down the chimneys and fluttered about madly as they tried to find a way out. Sometimes they banged against walls, windows, and we'd come in and find 'em dead and pitiful. Sometimes Jory and I would arrive in the nick of time and throw open windows and doors so they could escape.

Jory figured someone must have abandoned the ole house quickly. Half the furniture was there, settin dusty and moldin, givin off smelly odors that made Jory wrinkle his nose. I sniffed it and tried to know what it was sayin. I could stand real still and almost hear the ghosts talking, and if we sat still on a dusty ole velvet couch and didn't talk, up from the cellar would come faint rustling like the ghosts wanted to whisper secrets in our ears.

“Don't you ever tell anybody ghosts talk to you, or they'll think you're crazy,” Jory had warned. We already had one crazy person in our family—our daddy's mother, who was in a nuthouse way back in Virginia. Once a summer we went East to visit her and ole graves. Momma wouldn't go in the long brick building where people in pretty clothes strolled over green lawns, and nobody would have guessed they were crazy if attendants in white suits hadn't been there too.

Every summer Momma would ask, when Daddy came back from seein his mother, “Well, is she better?” And Daddy would look sad before he'd say, “No, not really much progress ... but there would be if you would forgive her.”

That always shook Momma up. She acted like she wanted that grandmother to stay locked up forever.

“You listen to me, Christopher Doll” my momma had snapped, “it's the other way around, remember! She's the one who should go down on her knees and plead—she should ask for *our* forgiveness!”

Last summer we hadn't gone East to visit anybody. I hated ole graves, ole Madame Marisha with her black rusty clothes, her big bun of white and black hair—and I didn't care even now if two ole ladies back East never had a visit from us

again. And as for them down in those graves—let 'em stay there without flowers! Too many dead people in our lives, messin it up.

“C'mon, Bart!” called Jory. He had already scaled the tree on our side of the wall, and he was sittin up there waitin for me. I managed the climb, then settled down next to Jory, who insisted I sit against the tree trunk—just in case. “You know what?” said Jory wistfully. “Someday I'm gonna buy Mom a house just as big. Every once in a while I overhear her and Dad talking about big houses, so I guess she wants one larger than the one we've already got.”

“Yeah, they sure do talk a lot about big houses.”

“I like our house better,” said Jory, while I set about drummin my heels against the wall, which had bricks under the crumblin white stucco. Momma had mentioned once she thought the bricks showin through added “interesting texture contrast.” I did what I could to make the wall more interestin'.

But it was sure true that in a big house like that one over there you could get lost in the dark and ramble on and on for days on end. None of the bathrooms worked. No water. Crazy sinks with no water and stupid fruit cellar with no fruit, and wine cellar with no wine.

“Gee, wouldn't it be nice if a big family moved in over there?” Jory said, wishin like me we could have lots and lots of nearby friends to play with. We didn't have anybody but each other once we came home from school.

“And if they had two boys and two girls it would be just perfect,” went on Jory dreamily. “Sure would be neat to have *all* girls living next door.”

Neat, sure. I'll bet he was wishin Melodie Richarme would move in over there. Then he could see her every day and hug and kiss her like I'd seen him do a few times. Girls. Made me sick. “Hate girls!—want all boys!” I grouched. Jory laughed, saying I was only nine and soon enough I'd like girls more than boys.

“What makes Melodie's arms rich?”

“Do you realize how dumb that makes you sound? That’s her last name and doesn’t mean anything.”

Just when I wanted to say he was the dumb one because all names had to mean somethin, or else why have them?—two trucks pulled up in the long driveway of the mansion. Wow! Nobody ever went over there but us.

We sat on and watched the workmen runnin around doin this and that. Some went up on the orange roof Momma said was called “pantile” and began to check it over. Others went inside the house with ladders and cans that looked like they held paint. Some had huge rolls of wallpaper under their arms. Others checked over the windows, and some looked at the shrubs and trees.

“Hey!” said Jory, very upset lookin. “Somebody must have bought that place. I’ll bet they’ll move in after it’s fixed up.”

Didn’t want no neighbors who would disturb Momma and Daddy’s *privacy*. All the time they were talking about how nice it was not to have close neighbors to “disturb their privacy.”

We sat on until it grew dark, then went into our house and didn’t say a word to our parents—for when you said something out loud, that meant it was really true. Thoughts didn’t count.

Next day it was Sunday and we went on a picnic at Stinson Beach. Then came Monday afternoon and Jory and I were back up on the wall, starin over at all that activity. Was foggy and cold, but we could see just well enough to be bothered. We couldn’t go over there and have a place of our own anymore. Where would we play now?

“Hey, you kids!” called a burly man on another day when we were only watchin. “Whadaya doin’ up there?”

“Nothing!” yelled Jory. (I never talked to strangers. Jory was always teasin me for not talking to anybody much but myself.)

“Don’t you kids tell me you’re not doin’ nothin’ when I see you over here! This house is private property—so stay off

these grounds or you'll hear from me!"

He was real mean, and fierce lookin; his workclothes were old and dirty. When he came closer I saw the biggest feet in my life, and the dirtiest boots. I was glad the wall was ten feet high and we had the advantage over him.

"Sure we play over there a little," said Jory, who wasn't scared of anybody, "but we don't hurt anything. We leave it like we found it."

"Well, from now on stay off altogether!" he snapped, glarin first at Jory, then at me. "Some rich dame has bought this place and she won't want kids hangin around. And don't you think you can get by with anything because she's an old lady livin alone. She's bringin servants with her."

Servants. Wow!

"Rich people can have everything their own way," muttered the giant on the ground as he moved off. "Do this, do that, and have it done yesterday. Money—God, what I wouldn't do to have my share."

We had only Emma, so we weren't really rich. Jory said Emma was like a maiden aunt, not really a relative *or* a servant. To me she was just somebody I'd known all my life, somebody who didn't like me nearly as much as she liked Jory. I didn't like her either, so I didn't care.

Weeks passed. School ended. Still those workmen were over there. By this time Momma and Daddy had noticed, and they weren't too happy about neighbors they didn't intend to visit and make welcome. Both me and Jory wondered why they didn't want friends comin to our house.

"It's love," whispered Jory. "They're still like honeymooners. Remember, Chris is our mom's third husband, and the bloom hasn't worn off."

What bloom? Didn't see any flowers.

Jory had passed on to the junior year of high school with flyin colors. I sneaked into the fifth grade by the skin of my teeth. Hated school. Hated that ole mansion that looked like

new now. Gone were all the spooky, eerie times when we'd had lots of fun over there.

"We'll just bide our time until we can sneak over there and see that old lady," Jory said, whispering so all those gardeners trimming the shrubs and snippin at the trees wouldn't hear.

She owned acres of land, twenty or more. That made for lots of cleanup jobs, since the workmen on the roof were lettin everythin fall. Her yard was littered with papers, spills of nails, bits of lumber left over from repair jobs, plus trash that blew through the iron fence in front of the driveway that was near what Jory called "lover's lane."

That hateful construction boss was pickin up beer cans as he headed our way, scowlin just to see us when we weren't doin a thing bad. "How many times do I have to tell you boys?" he bellowed. "Now, don't force me to say it again!" He put his huge fists on his hips and glared up at us. "I've warned you before to stay off that wall—now *Scat!*"

Jory was unwillin to move from the wall when it wasn't any harm to just sit and look.

"Are the two of you deaf?" he yelled again.

In a flash Jory's face turned from handsome to mean. "No, we are *not* deaf! We live here. This wall is on the property line, and just as much *ours* as it is *hers*. Our dad says so. So we will sit up here and watch just as long as we like. And don't you dare yell and tell us to 'scat' again!"

"Sassy kid, aren't yah?" and off he wandered without even lookin at me, who was just as sassy—inside.

Introductions



It was breakfast time. Mom was telling Dad about one of her ballerinas. Bart sat across the table from me, poking at his cold cereal and scowling. He didn't like to eat much of anything but snack foods, which Dad said were bad for him.

"Chris, I don't think Nicole is going to pull out of this," Mom was saying with a worried frown. "It's awful that cars hurt so many people, and she's got a little girl only two years old. I saw her a few weeks ago. Honestly, she reminded me so much of Carrie when she was two."

Dad nodded absently, his gaze still fixed on the morning newspaper. The scene between them in the attic still haunted me, especially at night when I couldn't sleep. Sometimes I'd just sit alone in my room and try and remember what was hidden way back in the dark recesses of my mind. Something important I was sure, but I couldn't remember what it was.

Even as I sat and listened to them talk about Nicole and her daughter, I kept thinking of that attic scene, wondering what it meant, and just who was the grandmother they were afraid of. And how could they have known each other when Mom was only fourteen?

"Chris," implored Mom, her tone trying to force him to put down the sports page. "You don't listen when I talk. Nicole has no family at all—did you hear that? Not even an uncle or an aunt to care for Cindy if she dies. And you know she has never been married to that boy she loved."

"Hmmm," he answered before biting into his toast. "Don't forget to water our garden today."

She frowned, really annoyed. He wasn't listening as I was. "I think it was a huge mistake to sell Paul's home and move here. His statues just don't look right in this kind of setting."

That got his attention.

“Cathy, we have vowed never to have regrets about anything. And there are more important things in life than having a tropical garden where everything grows rampant.”

“Rampant? Paul had the most manicured garden I’ve ever seen!”

“You know what I mean.”

Silent for a second, she spoke again about Nicole and the two-year-old girl who would go into an orphanage if her mother died. Dad said someone was sure to adopt her quickly if she did. He stood up to pull on his sports jacket. “Stop looking on the darkest side. Nicole may recover. She’s young, strong, basically healthy. But if you’re so worried, I’ll stop by and have a talk with her doctors.”

“Daddy,” piped up Bart, who’d scowled darkly all morning. “Nobody here can make me go East this summer! I won’t go and can’t nobody make me!”

“True,” said Dad, chucking Bart under the chin and playfully rumpling his already unruly dark hair. “Nobody can make you go—I’m just hoping you’d rather go than stay home alone.” He leaned to kiss Mom good-bye.

“Drive carefully.” Mom had to say this every day just as he was leaving. He smiled and said he would, and their eyes met and said things I understood, in a way.

“There was an ole lady who lived in a shoe,” chanted Bart. “She had so many children she didn’t know what to do.”

“Bart, do you have to sit there and make a mess? If you aren’t going to finish your meal, excuse yourself and leave the table.”

“Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater, had a wife and couldn’t keep her; put her in a pumpkin shell, and there he kept her very well.” He grinned at her, got up and left the table—that was his way of excusing himself.

Great golly, almost ten and he was still chanting nursery rhymes. He picked up his favorite old sweater, tossed it over

his shoulder, and, in so doing, he knocked over a carton of milk. The milk puddled to the floor, where Clover was soon lapping it up like a cat. Mom was so enthralled with a snapshot of Nicole's little girl that she didn't notice the milk.

It was Emma who wiped up the milk and glared at Bart, who stuck out his tongue and sauntered away. "Excuse me, Mom," I said, jumping up to follow Bart outside.

Again on the top of the wall, we sat and stared over, both of us wishing the lady would hurry and move in. Who knows, maybe she'd have grandchildren.

"Missin that ole house already," complained Bart. "Hate people who move in our place."

We both fiddled away the day, planting more seeds, pulling up more weeds, and soon I was wondering how we were going to pass a whole summer without going next door even once.

At dinner Bart was grouchy because he too missed the house. He glared down at his full plate. "Eat heartily, Bart," said Dad, "or else you may not have enough strength to enjoy yourself in Disneyland."

Bart's mouth fell open. "Disneyland?" His dark eyes widened in delight. "We're goin there really? Not goin East to visit ole graves?"

"Disneyland is part of your birthday gift," explained Dad. "You'll have your party there, and then we'll fly to South Carolina. Now don't complain. Other people's needs have to be considered as well as yours. Jory's grandmother likes to see him at least once a year, and since we skipped last summer, she's doubly anticipating our visit. Then there's my mother, who needs a family too."

I found myself staring at Mom. She seemed to be smoldering. Every year she was like this when the time came to visit "his" mother. I thought it a pity she didn't understand why mothers were so very important. She's been an orphan so long maybe she'd forgotten—or maybe she was jealous.

"Boy, I'd rather have Disneyland than heaven!" said Bard. "Can never, never get enough of Disneyland."

“I know,” said Dad in a dry way.

But no sooner did it sink in that Bart was getting his “heart’s delight” than he was complaining again about not wanting to go East. “Momma, Daddy, I am not goin! Two weeks is too long for visitin ole graves and ole grandmothers!”

“Bart,” said Mom sharply, “you show such disrespect for the dead. Your own father is one of those dead people whose grave you don’t want to visit. Your aunt Carrie is there too. And you are going to visit their graves, and Madame Marisha too, whether you want to or not. And if you open your mouth again, there will be no trip to Disneyland!”

“Momma,” now a subdued Bart wanted to make up. “Why did your daddy who’s dead in Gladstone, Pa... .”

“Say Pennsylvania, not Pa.”

“How come the picture of him looks so much like the daddy we have now?”

Pain flashed in her eyes. I spoke up, hating the way Bart had of grilling everyone. “Gee, Dollanganger is sure some whopper of a name. Bet you were glad to get rid of it.”

She turned to stare at a large photograph of Dr. Paul Sheffield, then quietly said, “Yes, it was a wonderful day when I became Mrs. Sheffield.”

Then Dad was looking upset. I sank deeper into the cut-velvet plush of a dining chair. All about me in the air, creeping on the floor, hiding in the shadows, were pieces of the past that they remembered and I didn’t. Fourteen years old, and still I didn’t know what life was all about. Or what my parents were about either.

* * *

Finally the day came when the mansion was completed. Then came the cleaning ladies to work on the windows and scrub the floors. Yard men came to rake, mow, trim again, and we were there all the time, peeking into windows, then running swiftly back to the wall and skimming up a tree, hoping not to get caught. On the top of the wall we quietly sat as if we’d never disobey any rule made by our parents. “She’s a’comin!”

whispered Bart, very excited, “Any moment, that ole lady, she’s a’comin!”

The house was fixed up so grand we expected to see a fancy movie actress, a president’s wife, somebody important. One day when Dad was at work and Mom was shopping, and Emma was still in the kitchen like always, we saw a huge long black limousine turn slowly into the long drive next door. An older car followed, but still, it was a snazzy-looking car. Two weeks ago that driveway had been cracked and buckled concrete, and now it was smooth black asphalt. I nudged Bart to calm his excitement. All about us the leaves made a fine concealing canopy, and still we could see everything.

Slowly, slowly, the chauffeur pulled the long, luxurious car to a stop; then he got out and circled the car to let out the passengers. We watched breathlessly. Soon we’d see her—that rich, rich woman who could afford anything!

The chauffeur was young and had a jaunty air. Even from a distance we could tell he was handsome, but the old man who stepped from the limo wasn’t handsome at all. He took me by surprise. Hadn’t that workman told us a lady and servants? “Look,” I whispered to Bart, “that must be the butler. I never knew butlers rode in the same car as their employer.”

“Hate people who move in our house!” grumbled Bart.

The feeble old butler stretched out his hand to help an old woman out of the back seat. She ignored him and took the arm of the chauffeur instead. Oh, gosh! She wore all black, from head to toe covered over like an Arab woman. A black veil was over her head and face. Was she a widow? A Moslem? She looked so mysterious.

“Hate black dresses that drag on the ground. Hate ole ladies who want black veils over their heads. Hate spooks.”

All I could do was watch, fascinated, thinking that the woman moved rather gracefully beneath the black robe. Even from our hidden place, I could tell she felt nothing but scorn for the feeble old butler. Gee—intrigue.

She looked around at everything. For the longest time she stared our way, at the white wall, at the roof of our house. I knew she couldn't see very much. Many a time I'd stood where she was, looking homeward, and I'd seen only the peak of our roof and the chimney. Only when she was inside on her second floor could she see into some of our rooms. I'd better tell Mom to plant some more big trees near the white wall.

It occurred to me then why two workmen might have chopped down a number of her large eucalyptus trees. Maybe she wanted to look over at our house and be nosy. But it was more likely she didn't want those trees growing so near her house.

Now the second car drew up behind the first. Out of this one stepped a maid in a black uniform with a fancy white apron and cap. Following her came two servants dressed in gray uniforms. It was the servants who rushed about, carrying in many suitcases, hatboxes, live plants and such, all while the lady in black stood stock-still and looked at our chimney. I wonder what she was seeing?

A huge yellow moving van drew up and began to unload elegant furniture, and still that lady stayed outside and let the maids decide where to put each piece. Finally, when one of the maids kept running to her and asking questions, she turned away and disappeared into the mansion. All the servants vanished with her.

“Bart, would you look at that sofa those men are carrying in! Have you ever seen such a fancy sofa?”

Long ago he'd lost interest in the movers. He was now staring intently at the yellow and black caterpillar undulating along a thin branch not far below his dirty sneakers. Pretty birds were singing all around. The deep blue sky was full of fluffy white clouds. The air felt fresh, cool, fragrant with pine and eucalyptus—and Bart was staring at the one ugly thing in view. A blessed horny caterpillar!

“Hate ugly things that creep with horns on their heads,” he mumbled to himself. I knew he always had a desire to know what was inside. “Betcha got icky-sticky green goo under all

that pretty-colored fuzz. You mean little dragon on the branch, stop comin my way. Get too close and yer dead.”

“Quit that silly talk. Look at that table those men are taking in now. Boy, I’ll bet that chair came from a castle in Europe.”

“Jus’ one more inch and something ugly is gonna get it!”

“You know what? I’ll bet that lady who’s moving in is kinda nice. Anybody who has such good taste in furniture must be real quality.”

“One more inch ... and yer dead!” Bart told the caterpillar.

As the sun set, the sky turned rosy, and wide streaks of violet came to make the early evening even more beautiful.

“Bart, look at the sunset. Have you ever seen more glorious colors? Colors are like music to me. I can hear them singing. I’ll bet if God struck me deaf and blind this very moment I’d go right on hearing the music of colors, and seeing them behind my eyes. And in darkness I’d dance and never know it wasn’t light.”

“Crazy talk,” mumbled my brother, his eyes still on the fuzzy worm coming closer and closer to that deadly sneaker held above him. “Blind means black as pitch. No colors. No music. No nothin. Dead is silence.”

“Deaf ... d-e-a-f—not *dead*.”

Just then Bart smashed down his sneaker on the caterpillar. Then he jumped from the tree to the ground, and there he wiped the sticky green goo on the lady’s new lawn.

“That was a mean thing you did, Bart Winslow! Caterpillars go through a stage called metamorphosis. The kind you just killed makes the most beautiful butterfly of all. So you didn’t kill a dragon but a fairy king or queen—the sweetest lover of roses.”

“Stupid ballet talk,” was his opinion, though he did manage to look slightly scared. “I can make up for it,” he said uneasily, looking around nervously. “I’ll set a trap, catch a caterpillar alive. Keep it for a pet, and wait until it turns into a fairy king, and then I’ll let it go.”

“Hey, I was just joking, but from now on, don’t kill any insect that isn’t on the roses.”

“If I find some on the roses can I kill ’em all?”

Puzzling the way Bart needed to kill all insects. Once I’d caught him pulling off a spider’s legs one by one before he squashed it between his thumb and forefinger. Then the black blood held his interest. “Do bugs feel pain?”

“Yeah,” I said, “but don’t let it worry you. Sooner or later you’ll feel pain too. So don’t cry. It was only a fuzzy worm, not a fairy king or queen. Let’s go home now.” I was feeling sorry for him because I knew he was sensitive about not being able to feel pain like I did, though gosh knows he should be glad.

“NO! Don’t wanna go home! Want to see inside that house next door.”

Just then Emma came out to ring her dinner bell, making us scamper home quickly.

* * *

Next day we were right back on the wall. The movers had finished up after we’d gone to bed. No more trucks coming and going. I’d spent most of my morning and early afternoon in Mom’s ballet class, while Bart stayed home and played alone. And summer days were long. He smiled, happy to have me with him again. “Ready?” I asked.

“Ready!” he agreed. Having decided on our course of action earlier, we slipped over the wall and down to the other side by climbing down a sapling tree. It was ground we’d been forbidden to step on, but rightly or wrongly it was ground we considered ours, for it had belonged to us first. Like two shadows freed, we slithered along. Bart looked at the shrubs that had been trimmed into shapes of animals! How weird. A strutting rooster beside a fat hen on a nest. Neat, really neat. Who would have guessed that old Mexican man was so clever with those snippers?

“Don’t like shrubs that look like animals,” complained Bart. “Don’t like green eyes. Green eyes are mean eyes. Jory

—they’re watchin us!”

“Sssh, don’t whisper. Watch where you put your feet. Step only where I step.” I glanced over my shoulder to see that the sky had changed to a dark plum color streaked with crimson that looked like freshly spilled blood. Soon night would descend, and the moon wasn’t always a friendly face.

“Jory,” came Bart’s whisper as he tugged on my shirttail, “didn’t Momma tell us to be home by dark?”

“It’s not dark yet.” But almost. The creamy white of the mansion in daylight was bluish white in the dusk and scary-looking.

“Don’t like bony-looking ole house made to look like new.”

Bart and his ideas.

“Sure must be time to be gettin home now.”

I resisted his tugs. Since we’d come this far we might as well go all the way. I put my finger to my lips, whispered “Stay where you are,” and by myself stole to the only window that was bright in a huge house of many windows.

Instead of staying where I’d told him to, Bart followed at my heels. Again I cautioned him, then I climbed a small oak tree just strong enough to bear my weight. I climbed high enough to peek into the house. At first I couldn’t see anything but a huge dim room cluttered with cartons as yet unpacked. A tall and fat lamp blocked my view, and I had to lean away from the tree to see around it. Fuzzily I could make out a black-robed figure seated in a hard wooden rocker that looked very uncomfortable, after the soft, luxurious couches and chairs I’d seen carried inside. Was that a woman under the black veil?—the same one I’d seen outside?

Arab men wore dresses, so that could be the feeble butler, but then I saw a pale, slim hand with many sparkling rings and I knew it was the mistress of this manor. Shifting my weight, I sought a better viewing position, and, as I did, the branch supporting my weight cracked. The woman inside lifted her head and stared my way.

Her eyes were wide and frightened-looking. I told myself that people in a bright room couldn't look out into darkness and see. My heart throbbed in triple time as I held my breath. Little winged night insects buzzed around my head and began to nibble on my skin.

Below me Bart was growing impatient. He shook my frail tree. I tried to hang on and at the same time signal to Bart to stop. Fortunately, at that moment a maid opened the door and came in with a large silver tray laden with many covered dishes.

“Hurry up!” groused scaredy-cat. “I want to go home!”

What was he afraid of? *I* was the one about to fall from the tree. The clatter of the dishes and silverware being taken from the tray and placed on a small table covered the noise Bart was making. No sooner was that maid out of the room than the veiled woman lifted her hands to take off the veil.

She began to eat. All alone, she picked at her food. Just when I felt sure she hadn't heard any noise to warn her someone was spying—the weak branch of my tree made a splitting sound.

She turned her head. Now was my chance to see her without the black veil. I saw her. Really saw her! But I didn't really see her nose, her lips, her eyes; I saw only the jagged rows of scars on each side of her face. Had a cat scratched her and made those scars? I felt suddenly sorry for an old woman who had to sit alone at a table without enough appetite to enjoy anything. It didn't seem fair to live such a lonely, unloved life. Not fair either for fate to show me how age could steal the beauty of someone who might have been just as lovely as my mother—once.

“Jory ... ?”

“Sssh ...”

She kept on staring, then quickly lowered the veil over her face. “Who's out there?” she called. “Go away, whoever you are! If you don't, I'll call the police!”

That did it. I jumped to the ground, seized Bart by his hand and took off. He stumbled and fell, holding me back as usual. I jerked him upright and ran on, forcing him to run faster than he could have without my help. He gasped, “Jory! Not so fast! What did you see? Quick, tell me—was it a ghost?”

Worse than that. I’d seen how my mother might look thirty years from now, if she lived long enough to be ravaged by time.

* * *

“Where’ve you two been?” Mom blocked our way as we tried to slip into the bathroom to wash up before she had a chance to notice our disheveled clothes.

“We came from the garden in back,” I answered, feeling guilty. Immediately she saw my guilt and grew suspicious. “Where were you really?”

“Just out back ...”

“Jory, are you going to grow evasive like Bart?”

I threw my arms about her and pressed my face against the softness of her breast. I was too old to do this, but I had the sudden need to feel safe and comforted.

“Jory darling, what’s wrong?”

Nothing was wrong. I didn’t know what bothered me, not really. I’d seen old age before, my own grandmother Marisha, but she’d always been old.

That night Momma came in my dreams and was a lovely angel who put an enchanted spell over all the world to stop people from growing older. I saw two-hundred-year-old ladies as young and pretty as when they’d been twenty—all but one old woman in black, all alone, rocking in her chair.

Toward morning Bart slipped into my bed and cuddled up behind my back, watching with me the gray fog that obliterated the trees, erased the golden grass, smothered all signs of life, and made the world out there seem dead.

Bart rattled on to himself. “Earth is full of dead people. Dead animals and plants too. Makes all that stuff Daddy calls

mulch.”

Death. My half-brother Bart was obsessed by death, and I pitied him. I felt him cuddle closer as we both stared out at the fog that was so much a part of our lives.

“Jory, nobody ever likes me,” he complained.

“Yes, they do.”

“No, they don’t. They like you better.”

“That’s because you don’t like them and it shows.”

“Why do you like everybody?”

“I don’t. But I can put on a smile and pretend even when I don’t. Perhaps you’d better learn to put on a false face sometimes.”

“Why? It’s not Halloween.”

He troubled me. Like those beds in the attic troubled me. Like that strange thing between my parents that rose up every so often, reminding me that they knew something that I didn’t.

I closed my eyes and decided everything always worked out for the best.

Gone Hunting



They looked at me, but they didn't see me. They didn't know who I was. To them I was just a thing to sit at their table and try to swallow the stuff they put on my plate. My thoughts were all around, but they didn't read my mind, couldn't figure me out at all. I was goin next door to the mansion to where I'd been invited. And when I went I'd remember to pronounce my "ings"—always they were telling me to say the G's. I'd do it right, everything, for the old lady next door.

Gonna go alone and not tell Jory. Jory didn't need new friends anyway. He had his ole ballet classes, with pretty girls all around and that was enough. With Melodie, more than enough. Me—I didn't have nobody but parents who didn't understand. Soon as I was excused from breakfast I'd make it quickly to our garden while Jory was still inside eatin his stack of pancakes with melted maple sugar poured all over. Pig, that's what he was ... a darn hog!

Day was hot. Sun was too bright. Shadows long on the ground. White wall rose up so dratted high—had that wall known in advance I was comin, and I'd be clumsy, and "they" wanted to make it difficult? Tree I climbed wasn't so bad.

Yard was so big it tired my short legs. Wish I had long pretty legs like Jory. Always fallin, always hurtin myself, but never felt no pain. Daddy had been amazed when he first found that out. "Bart, because your nerve endings don't reach your skin, you will have to be doubly careful of infections. You could seriously hurt yourself and not even know it. So always wash all your cuts and scratches with soap and water, then tell your mother and me so we can put on disinfectant."

Washing with soap kept away germs. Wonder where they went?—up to heaven, down to hell? Wonder what a germ looked like? Monsters, Jory had said, ugly itty-bitty monsters.

A billion of them could sit on the point of a pin. Wish I had eyes like a microscope.

I gave her yard another long-long look, then jumped, closed my eyes so I couldn't see the ground smack me. Landed square in a clump of her rose bushes. More cuts and scratches to add to my collection. More germs too. Didn't care. Crouched down low, squinted my eyes against the sun, and tried to spot all the dangerous wild animals that lurked in dark, mysterious places—like this.

Look over there. Behind that big bush—a tiger! I raised my rifle and took careful aim. It swished its long tail and sparked its yellow eyes, then licked its chops, thinking soon it would have me for lunch. I squeezed hard on the trigger. BANG! BANG! BANG! Got yah! Dead as a doornail!

Slingin my rifle over my shoulder, I wended a careful way along all the dangerous jungle paths. Ignorin an orange and white kitten that mewed “plaintively” (Plaintively was one of the new words I had to use. One new word each day, and Daddy gave a list of seven words to both Jory and me, insistin we use today's word at least five times in our conversation. Didn't need a bigger vocabulary. Knew how to talk good enough already.)

A tune popped into my head. Came from a movie I saw last night on TV about West Point. That song was right:

There was somethin about a soldier ...

that is fine, fine, fine ...

Marchin to the tune in my head, I carried my rifle smartly on my shoulder, my chest out, my chin in. Straight up to her front door I marched. Then I banged hard, usin the brass knocker that was a lion's head with a loose jaw.

My perfect military bearin was so admirable I just knew that ole lady would be impressed. Doctors weren't so special. Dancers either. But a five-star general—that was impressive! Nobody had a name longer than mine: General Bartholomew Scott Winslow Sheffield. Even Jory Janus Marquet Sheffield

was not so long, not so good soundin. Just wait until the enemy knew who was in charge of the war.

Should have been that creepy ole butler who opened the door, but it was the ole lady herself. I'd seen her a few times in her yard. She held the door open a slot and stingily allowed a long wedge of sunlight to shine on her floor. "Bart ... ?" she whispered, her voice surprised and happy. Was she really so glad to see me? Gee, and she didn't even know me yet.

"Bart, how wonderful! I was hoping you'd come."

"Step aside, Madame!" I commanded. "My men got you surrounded." Made my voice deep and gruff to scare the living lights out of her. "No use resistin. Better to give up and raise yer white flag. The odds are all against you."

"Oh, Bart," she said with silly giggles. "It's so sweet of you to accept my invitation. Sit down and talk to me. Tell me about yourself, your life. Tell me if you're happy; if your brother is happy, if you like where you live, and love your parents. I want to know everything!"

Forcefully I kicked the door to behind me, as all good generals did. BANG! To see her blue eyes smiling while her lips were covered by that dratted black veil was very weird. My tough military composure vanished. Why'd she have to wear that scary veil? "Lady," I said weakly, feeling young and timid again, "you did call over the wall yesterday. You said you wanted me to come over when I was lonely. I sneaked over ..."

"Sneaked?" she asked in an odd voice. "Do you have to slip away from your parents? Do they punish you often?"

"Naw," I said. "Wouldn't do them no good. Couldn't hurt me with spankins; couldn't starve me for I don't like food anyway." I hung my head and whispered, "Momma and Daddy tole me not to pester rich ole ladies who live in big spooky houses next door."

"Oh!" she said with a sigh. "Do you have a great many big spooky houses next door with rich old ladies inside?"

“Heck no, ma’am,” I drawled, then sauntered over to a wall in a pretty parlor where I could look out and see who was comin, who was goin. I slouched against the wall and took the makins for a good smoke from my pocket and rolled my own as she sat down in a rocker to watch. She kept watchin me blow smoke rings in her air, faintly smiling as they wreathed around her head. Stupid veil puffed in and out as she breathed. Wonder if she slept with that thing over her head and face.

“Bart, often I hear you and your brother talking in your yard. I use a stepladder sometimes to look over the wall—I hope you don’t mind.” Wouldn’t answer. Blew smoke rings right in her face. “Please talk, Bart ... sit down and relax, feel comfortable, feel at home. I want my house to feel like your home, open to you and Jory. My own life is so lonely, all I have is myself and John Amos, my butler. To have a real family living next door is so comforting. You can say anything you want to me, anything at all.”

Wasn’t nothin to say—but here was an adult who wanted to listen. What could we talk about? “People shouldn’t spy on me and my brother.”

“I wasn’t spying,” she said in hurry, “just taking care of my roses that climb the wall and need pruning—and I can’t help if I overhear, can I?”

Spy. That’s what she was. Ground out the butt of my cigarette with my dusty boot heel. Sun was getting in my eyes again, makin me tilt the brim of my hat. Ole Devil sun makin me thirsty. “Ma’am, ya’ll done asked me over and here ah is ... so get t’ the point.”

“Bart, if you take a chair, we’ll have refreshments soon. See that bell-pull? My maid will bring in ice cream and cake. It is a long time until lunch, so your appetite shouldn’t be spoiled.”

Might as well stay a bit longer. Fell into a soft chair and fixed my eyes on her feet, which could barely be seen. Was she wearing high heels?—fancy sandals?—painted toenails? Then in the door came a pretty Mexican maid with a tray full of goodies. Wow-wow! The maid smiled at me, nodded to the lady, then disappeared. I politely accepted what she gave me—

not enough of anything—and set to. Didn't like food that was good for me; it tasted so bad. I stood up to go as soon as I polished off my treats.

“Thank you, ma'am, for takin kindly to an ole cowpoke who just ain't used to yer kind of hospitality. I've got to be ambling on now... .”

“All right, if you have to go,” she said sadly, and I felt sorry for her livin with servants only, no kids like me. “Come back tomorrow if you want, and bring Jory with you. I'll have whatever you want... .”

“Don't want to bring Jory!”

“Why not?”

“You're *my* secret! He gets to do everything. I never get to do nothin! Nobody ever likes me.”

“I like you.”

Gee, she made me feel good. I peeked at her face, but couldn't see anything but her blue eyes. “Why do you like me?” I asked with so much wonder—nobody else did.

“I don't just like you, Bart Winslow,” she said queerly, “I love you.”

“Why?” I didn't believe her. Ladies fell at first sight for Jory, never for me.

“Once I had two sons, now I don't,” she said with her eyes cast down and her voice sad and tight. “Then I wanted to have another son by my second husband, and I couldn't.” She looked up and met my eyes. “So I want *you* to take the place of the third son I couldn't have. I'm very rich, Bart. I can give you anything you want.”

“My heart's desire—my real heart's desire?”

“Yes, anything that can be bought with money, I can give you.”

“Can't everything be bought?”

“Sadly, it can't. I used to think it could, but now I know money can't buy the most important things. Things I used to

take for granted and treated lightly—oh, if I had my life to live over, how different I would be! I've made so many mistakes, Bart. I want to do everything right for you, with you ... and if you have to keep me as your secret, perhaps one day ... well, let's save that for later. You will come again?"

She sounded so pitiful and made me feel so uneasy. I shuffled my feet about and decided I'd better get away quick before she tried to kiss me. "Ma'am, gotta get back to camp. My men will be wonderin if I'm wounded or dead. But remember this—I got you surrounded and you cannot win this war!"

"I know," she said, her voice so sad sounding. "I've never won any game I've tried to play. I've always gone down in defeat even when I thought I held the winning cards."

Just like me! Made me feel sorry for her. "Lady, you play your cards right and I'll come over every day and pay you a visit—or even two or three."

"Thank you, Bart. You just tell me what cards to play and I'll have them on the table waiting for you."

Had me an idea then. Lots and lots of things I wanted and never got. Didn't want books, games, toys, or other ordinary stuff. One thing I had to have, and hopefully I stared at her ... maybe she'd be the one to give it to me. "What's your name?"

"Come again and I'll tell you."

I'd be comin again. Darn if I could stay away now.

* * *

Went home and nobody even noticed I was there. Momma went right on talking about that baby girl she had to have if her favorite student Nicole died. *God, don't let Nicole die*, I silently prayed.

"Jory, let's play ball."

"Can't. Mom's driving me to afternoon class. Melodie's parents are taking me to dinner tonight, then to a movie."

Nobody ever took me anywhere—except my parents. No friends. No pet of my own. Dratted Clover liked Jory better,

squealin like he was hurt when I stepped on his tail by accident, or stumbled over him, and he was always underfoot.

A few days later I again headed for the back door. “Where are you going?” asked Momma, who had been starin at a picture of that little girl she wanted for her own. Weren’t enough she had two boys—had to have a daughter too. Sissy-silly girl.

“Bart, answer me. Where are you going?”

“Nowhere.”

“Every time I ask you what you do, and where you go, you say you haven’t been anywhere and haven’t done anything. Now I want to hear the truth.”

Jory laughed and hugged her. “Gee, Mom, you oughta know him by this time. When Bart steps out the back door he’s *everywhere*. You never saw a kid so crazy about pretending. He’s this, he’s that, and the only thing he never is ... is himself.”

The power I poured into my mean, piercing eyes should have shut Jory up—but he went right on. “He prefers fantasy to reality, Mom, that’s all.”

Weren’t so. Was bored, that’s all. Didn’t get enough of what I wanted in real life, and in my pretend games I did everything right—and got everything I wanted. Then he and Momma were laughing, and I was shut out again. Mad. They were makin me mad.

Drat everybody who made fun of me! But hatin everybody made me feel bad, and pretendin made me happy. What did I have to lose if I went over to *her* place? Nothin, nothin at all.

Riskin my life in the darkest of dangerous jungles, I fought my way over to her place. Bravely I struggled onward, facin death over and over just to get to her ... climbin that slippery tree that wanted me to fall. Scalin that high wall to get to her. Through the wind and snow, through the sleet and rain, freezin my feet, blindin my eyes, I struggled onward to her.

I stumbled to her house for the fifth time in three days. And there she was, smilin beneath her veil, lovin me as no one else

did. I felt happy and warm all over as she called and opened her arms wide. I went flyin into them, huggin her, eager to sit on her lap and be petted and pampered. She needed me. She wanted to love me like her own. Her lap didn't burn me as I was afraid it would. It didn't feel so awful to be kissed on my cheeks—but it did feel dry. Drat that veil!

Because she loved me, and I loved her now, she'd given me a room of my own to hold all the things she gave me. Two miniature electric trains with all the accessories, toy cars, trucks, and games. All this stuff for me to play with—in her house, not mine.

Time went by. I was gettin to love her more and more each day. Then one Tuesday I found that creepy ole butler John Amos in her favorite room, messin around with her things, mutterin to himself about a fool and her money bein soon parted. Didn't like him touchin her things. Didn't like him talking mean about her behind her back.

“*You get out of here!*” I said in my big man voice. “You tell my lady I'm here, and tell your chef I want chocolate ice cream today with Oreo cookies, not brownies.”

He was an awful sight. “You can trust a few some of the time, and most none of the time. Feel lucky if you have even one to trust *all* of the time.”

What was that supposed to mean? I scowled and tried to draw away. Didn't like his false teeth that kept slippin so he had to push them back, and they clacked too, as if they didn't fit his mouth.

“You like her, don't you?” he asked, slyly smilin, noddin his head up and down, from side to side, so I could be confused if I wanted. “When you want the full truth about who you are—and who she is—come to me.” The lady's steps on the stairs sent him scurryin off.

Creepy. He made me feel creepy and scared. I knew who I was—most of the time.

All alone now. Nothin to do. I sat down and crossed my legs like my daddy did, then leaned back to light up an

expensive cigar, which Daddy never did. (Momma didn't like men who smoked.) Nothin wrong with smokin as far as I could tell, I thought, as I blew four perfect smoke rings into the air ... and away they sailed toward the Pacific. They'd end up in Japan over Mt. Fugi.

"Good morning, Bart darling. I'm so glad to see you." She came in and sat in the rocker.

"You got my pony yet?"

Her voice sounded worried. "Sweetheart, I know I promised you a pony as your heart's desire, but I did that without knowing how much trouble a pony can be."

"You promised!" I cried. Was I puttin my trust in the wrong person? One who failed to deliver what she promised.

"Sweetheart, a pony needs a stall, and ponies make you smell bad. When you went home your parents and Jory would guess you had a pet over here."

Instead of answerin, I began to cry. "All my life I been wantin a pony," I sobbed. "All my livelong life, and now I've got to grow old without havin one ..." Sobbed some more, then hung my head and headed for home, never to return.

"Bart ... there is a beautiful big dog that won't smell and betray your secrets. A St. Bernard—a dog so big you can ride it like a pony. If you keep him clean and fluffy he won't betray you with his odors ..."

Slowly I turned to glare at her. "Ain't no dog as big as a pony!"

"Isn't there?"

"NO! You're tryin to make fun of me. I don't like you anymore! I'm goin home and never comin back—not until you have a pony I can name Apple."

"Darling, you can call your puppy Apple—but he won't eat them—and just think how jealous Jory would be if you have a dog more marvelous than his."

Turned to the door. Disgusted.

“Only the super rich can afford to feed a St. Bernard, Bart!”

Like I was a pin and she was the magnet, I turned back to her unwillingly. She lifted me up on her lap and cuddled me there, and it wasn't so awful after all. “You can call me Grandmother.”

“Grandmother.” Felt good to have a grandmother at last. I snuggled closer and waited for her to call me Baby, but she just went right on rockin and singin a lullaby. I put my thumb in my mouth. Nice to be hugged and kissed and made to feel helpless and loved. And she didn't smell like mothballs after all.

“Are you ugly under that veil?” I asked, always curious about what she looked like. The veil was almost transparent, but not enough.

“I guess you would think so, but once I was very beautiful—like your mother.”

“You know my mother?” I asked.

The door opened and my favorite pretty maid came in with a dish of ice cream and hot brownies fresh from the oven. “Now only eat one brownie, and let this little bit of ice cream be enough so you can come over after lunch.” She went on to tell me not to shove in such huge mouthfuls because it was not good manners, and was also a shock to my digestive system.

I had good manners. My momma taught me all the time. For some reason I was angry enough to jump down from her lap, wonderin just what it was John Amos had to tell me. As I stumbled toward the door, all of a sudden John Amos was there in the hall, smiling at me spooky-like. He bowed a little and put a small red-leather book in my hands. “I sense you're not very confident about yourself,” he whispered, making lots of hiss'n sounds like a snake. “It's time you knew just who you really are. That lady who told you to call her grandmother *is really your true grandmother.*”

Oh, good golly! I didn't know I had my own true grandmother. I thought my grandmothers were either dead or in the looney bin.

“Yes, Bart, she’s your grandmother, and not only that, once she was married to your father. Your *real* father.”

Didn’t know what to think, except I was awful happy havin a genuine true grandmother of my very own, just like Jory had his own. And she wasn’t dead, or crazy.

“Now you listen to me, boy, and you will never feel weak and ineffective again. You read a little of this book every day and it will teach you to be like your great-grandfather, Malcolm Neal Foxworth. Never on this earth did there live a man who was smarter than your own great-grandfather—the father of your grandmother who sits in that rocker and wears that ugly black veil.”

“She’s pretty underneath,” I said. I didn’t like what he was sayin and the way he was lookin. “Never have seen her face, but I can tell from her voice that she’s pretty—prettier than you!”

He sneered, then quickly changed his expression to smilin.

“All right, have it your way. But after you read this book written by your own dear great-grandfather, you will understand that women are not to be trusted, especially pretty women. They have ways, cunning ways, of making men do what they want. You’ll find that out soon enough when you become a man. A man as handsome as your own father was, and she took him and made him her slave, made him her lap dog like she’s making you.”

Wasn’t no lap dog, wasn’t!

“He was her second husband, Bartholomew Winslow, and eight years younger than her, and he didn’t know any better. He thought he could use her—but she used him. I want to save you from her so you won’t end up like your father did—dead.”

Dead. Almost everybody was dead in our family. Wasn’t really surprised by nothin he said, except I hadn’t known women were that bad. Always suspected they were, but never really knew. I should warn Jory.

“Now, if you want to save your everlasting soul from the fires of eternal hell, you will read this book and grow strong

and powerful like your great-grandfather. The women will never rule you again. You will rule them.”

I looked up into his long gaunt face, seeing his skinny mustache and his yellowish teeth through which he not only hissed but sometimes whistled. He was uglier than anyone I'd seen before. But I'd heard Emma say more than once that pretty was as pretty did. So I guessed I might as well give my powerful great-grandfather a try, and read his little red-leather book with its sprawly handwritin.

Didn't take much to readin. Wasn't my kind of thing to do at all. But when I was in the barn near the stall that would soon be a home for my pony, I snuggled down in the hay. Wanted that pony so bad it hurt. Didn't really care if it smelled bad and was lots of trouble. I opened the book, which looked mighty old.

* * *

I am beginning this journal with the most bitter day of my life, the day my beloved mother ran away and left me for another man. She left my father, too. I remember how I felt when he told me what she'd done, how much I cried, how lost I felt without her. How lonely to go to bed and have no mother to kiss me good night and hear my prayers. I was five years old. And until she left, she'd always said I was the most important person in her life. How could she have left me, her only son? What evil thing possessed her so she could turn her back on a loving son?

I was so innocent then, so unknowing. When I read the words of the Lord, I began to realize that ever since Eve women have betrayed men in one way or another, even mothers. Corrine, Corrine, how I began to hate that name.

* * *

Funny. Felt strange as I lifted my eyes from that red journal with its small, cramped handwriting that sometimes sprawled larger at the bottom of the page, as if he had to use every bit of space.

I too had always been scared my momma might up and go for no reason except she didn't want to be near me anymore. And I'd be left alone with a stepfather who couldn't possibly love me as much as if I'd been his own true son. Jory would be all right, for he had his dancin and that was all that really mattered to him.

"You like that book?" asked John Amos, who had sneaked into the barn and was standing still in the shadows and watchin me with small, glittery eyes.

"Sure, it's a good book," I managed to say, though it made me feel bad inside, and so afraid Momma might run away too with some man who wasn't a doctor. All the time she was wishin Daddy wasn't a doctor and could stay home more.

"Now, you keep reading that book each day," advised John Amos, who might really like me, even though his face was mean, "and you will learn all about women and how to control them." I could listen better when I couldn't see him very good. "And not only will you learn how to control women, but also all people. That small red book in your hands will save you from making the mistakes so many men make. You remember that when you grow tired of reading. You remember it is the god-given duty of men to dominate women who are basically weak and stupid."

Gee, I hadn't guessed Momma was weak and stupid. I thought she was strong and wonderful. Just like my grandmother was generous and kind ... and in some ways, much better than my own mother, who always seemed too busy to bother with me.

"Malcolm was the kind of man other people looked up to, Bart. The kind of man everyone respected and feared. When you can inspire that kind of awe it makes you revered—like a god. You don't have to tell your grandmother about this book. It would be better if you didn't, and just went on pretending to love her as much as before. Never let women know what you're thinking. Keep your honest thoughts to yourself."

Maybe he was right. Maybe if I read this book to the very end I'd end up smarter than Jory, and the whole world would

look up to me.

I smiled that night in my bed, hugging the journal of Malcolm close to my heart. Here I had the tool to use to make me the richest man in the world—just like Malcolm Neal Foxworth, who used to live in a faraway place called Foxworth Hall.

I had two friends now. My lady grandmother in black and John Amos, who talked to me more than my daddy ever did. Boy, sure was funny how strangers came into my life and started givin me more than my parents.

Sugar and Spice



Mom had purchased a ballet school that still bore the name of the original owner. She adopted that name, *Marie DuBois School of Ballet*, and led her students to think she was Marie DuBois. She explained to me and Bart later that it was easier than changing the name of the school and more profitable, too. Dad seemed to agree.

Her school was located on the top floor of a two-story building in San Rafael, not far from where Dad had his medical office. Often they ate lunch together or spent the night in San Francisco so they could see a ballet or go to movies and not have to drive back and forth. Emma was with us, so we didn't really mind too much, except sometimes I felt left out to see them come home so happy and glowing. It made me think we weren't as important to them as we liked to believe.

One night when I was restless and couldn't sleep, I silently stole out of my bedroom with the idea of a midnight snack on my mind, nothing else. The second my feet hit the hall near the living room I could hear the sound of my parents' voices. Loud. They were arguing, and they seldom even spoke crossly to one another.

I didn't know what to do, to stay or to return to my room. Then I remembered that scene in the attic, and for my protection and Bart's, too, I felt I had to know what this was all about.

Mom still wore the pretty blue dress she'd worn out to dinner with Dad. "I don't know why you keep objecting!" she stormed, as she paced back and forth, throwing Dad furious looks. "You know as well as I do that Nicole isn't going to get well. And if we wait until she's buried, then the state will have custody of Cindy, and we'll have a devil of a time getting her away from them! Let's move now. Possession is nine-tenths of

the law, and that landlady doesn't want to be bothered any longer. Chris, *please make up your mind!*"

"No," he said coldly. "We have two children and that's enough. There are other young couples who will be delighted to adopt Cindy. Couples who don't have as much to lose as we do when the adoption agency starts to investigate ..."

Mom threw her hands wide. "That's what I'm saying! If we have Cindy before Nicole dies, the agency won't have any reason to investigate. I'll go tonight and tell Nicole what I plan. I'm sure she'll agree and sign whatever legal papers are needed."

"Catherine," said my stepfather in a firm voice, "you can't have everything the way you want it. Nicole may very well recover in a few weeks, and even if she is permanently crippled, she'll still want her child."

"But what kind of mother will she make?"

"That's not for us to decide."

"She can't recover! You know it, and I know it—and what's more, Christopher Doll, I have already gone to the hospital and talked to Nicole, and she *wants* me to have her daughter. She signed the papers I took, and I had Simon Daughtry with me. He's an attorney, and had his secretary along—so what can you do now to stop me?"

Appearing shocked, my stepdad put his hands to his face, while my mother railed on and on:

"Christopher, stop cringing behind your hands. Show your face, and recognize what you made me do. You were there the night Bart was born—there with your pleading eyes telling me Paul wouldn't be enough, and it would be you in the end who won. If you hadn't been there, pleading with those damned blue eyes, I wouldn't have let the doctors talk me into signing those papers and allowing the sterilization! I would have borne another child even if it did kill me. But you were there, and I gave in—for your sake, damn it! *For your sake!*"

Sobbing, she fell to the floor and lay curled up on her side, her fingers working in the deep shag of the carpet. Her long

blonde hair spread like a golden fan on the carpet and cushioned her cheek as she cried on and on, berating him and herself for what they were doing.

What were they doing?

She rolled onto her back, spreading her arms wide. Dad uncovered his face and stared at her, looking deeply wounded.

“You’re right, Christopher! You are always right! There’s only been one time when I was right, but that single time might have saved Cory’s life.” Sobbing, she jerked her head away from Dad, who knelt beside her and tried to pull her into his embrace. She hit at him, making me gasp.

“You were right again when you told me not to marry Julian! I’ll bet you gloated when our marriage turned out to be a miserable failure. I’ll bet you were delighted when Julian sat back and allowed Yolanda Lange to destroy everything we owned. Everything happened just the way you predicted, making you so happy. Then Bart suffocated in the fire that burned Foxworth Hall to the ground. Were you laughing inside then too?—glad to be rid of him? Did you think I’d run straight into your arms and forget about all I owed Paul? Did you doubt I loved Paul?” Her voice rose to a shrill shriek. “When Paul and I were lovers I never thought of him as too old, until you kept harping on his age. Perhaps I wouldn’t have paid any attention to Amanda and what she said if you hadn’t bugged me so much about marrying a man twenty-five years older.”

I shrank into a tighter ball. Ashamed to stay and listen; afraid to get up and go now that I’d overheard so much. Mom was wound up, as if she’d saved this for a long time, ready to throw it into his face at the right opportunity—and here it was. He recoiled from the viciousness of her attack.

“Remember the afternoon I married Paul?” she yelled. “Remember? Think of the moment when you handed me the ring he put on my finger. You hesitated so long the minister had to urge you with a whisper. And all the time you were pleading with your eyes. I resisted you then, as I should have resisted you after he died. Did you wish for him to die soon so

that you'd have YOUR chance? A self-fulfilling wish, Christopher Doll! YOU WIN! YOU ALWAYS WIN! YOU SIT BACK AND WAIT WHILE YOU DO WHAT YOU CAN TO MESS UP MY LIFE! WELL, HERE I AM! RIGHT WHERE YOU WANTED ME!—in your bed, acting as your wife. Are you enjoying yourself? ARE YOU?" She sobbed, then slapped his face hard.

He reeled backward but didn't say a word. She hadn't finished with him even then. "Don't you realize I would never have gone to Bart in the first place if you hadn't always been hanging around, coming between Paul and me; making me ashamed of what Momma had done to you, to me? I had to take Bart away from her then—it was the only way I could punish her for what she did to us. And now, after all Paul did for us, you won't even have the decent generosity to take in a poor little girl who will soon be an orphan. Even when I have paved the way legally so there won't be any investigation by the authorities. Still you want me for yourself, thinking two sons are enough to get in the way of our privacy, and another child might bring down our house of cheating cards."

"Cathy, please ... ," he moaned.

She hit at him with small, balled fists, then yelled again, "Perhaps you even told me it was all right for Paul to have sex just so he would have another heart attack!"

The she sank back, panting, tears streaking her face while her watery blue eyes stared up at Dad, but he only stayed still, hunkered down on his heels as if frozen by all she'd said.

I wanted to cry, for him, for her, for Bart and for me. Though I didn't understand nearly enough.

My dad began to shiver uncontrollably, as if winter had come unexpectedly into our living room. Had Mom told the truth? Was he the one who was behind all the deaths in our lives? I was scared too, for I loved him.

"Great God, Catherine," he said at last, rising to his feet and heading toward their bedroom. "I'll pack my bags and move out before the hour is over, if that's what you want. And I hope you're satisfied. This time, you win!"

In one single graceful bound, she was on her feet and running after him. She caught hold of his arm and spun him around before she flung her arms about his waist and clung. “Chris!” she cried out, “I’m sorry! So sorry. I didn’t mean a word I said. It was cruel, and I know it. I love you; I’ve always loved you; I lie, I cheat, I say anything I want to get my way. I’ll put the blame on anyone. I can’t bear it as my own. Don’t look so hurt, so betrayed. You’re right to deny me Nicole’s daughter, for I do end up hurting everyone I love. I do destroy what I care about most. If I’d been the right kind of person I would have found the right words to say to Carrie, but I didn’t say anything right to her then, and nothing right to Julian either.”

She still clung to him while he stood like a tall stick of wood in her embrace, doing nothing to return all the passion she lavished with her words, her kisses, her embraces. She took one of his limp hands and tried to slap her face with it, and failing, she slapped her own face with her free hand.

“Why don’t you hit me, Chris? God knows I’ve given you reason enough tonight. And I don’t have to have Cindy, not when I have you, and my sons ...”

I could tell my stepdad felt impotent against all the anguish she displayed. Her histrionics had driven him into a corner and he wanted to stay there long enough to reason out his position. But she was at him, demanding of him, until she was yelling out again: “What’s the matter now, Christopher Doll? There you stand, wooden, saying nothing, trying to judge me by your own ethics. Recognize the truth—*that I don’t have any ethics!* You want to believe I am only an actress playing a role, like our mother played hers. Even now, after all these years, you can’t tell when I’m acting and when I’m not. Do you know why?” Now her voice became nasty, cynical. “Since you have never bothered to analyze my pathetic case, I’ll do it for you. Christopher, you are afraid to look at me honestly. You don’t want to know what I am really like. If I’m not acting, and this side I’m showing you now is the real me—then you can’t face up to being a fool. You would discover then you have based your great unselfish love on a woman who is ruthless, demanding, and utterly selfish. Go on, see the truth! I’m not a

divine goddess and never was, never will be! Chris, you've been a fool all your adult life, trying to make me into something I'm not—so that makes you a liar too. Doesn't it?" She laughed as he paled.

"Look at me, Christopher. Who do I remind you of?" She pulled back and looked at him in silence for a long time as she waited. When he refused to answer she said, "Come on, say it—I'm like her, right? This is the way she was that last night in Foxworth Hall when the guests were there swarming about the Christmas tree in the ballroom, and in the library she was screaming as I'm screaming now!—yelling out how her father beat her and made her do what she did. What a pity you weren't there. So yell at me, Chris! Strike out and hit me! Scream as I'm screaming and show you're human!"

Slowly, slowly he was losing his temper. I was so afraid of what might happen next. I wanted to rush in and stop what was going on, for if he did raise his hand to strike her, I'd run to her defense. I'd never let him hit my mother.

Did she hear my silent pleas? She let go of him and slid down to the floor again. I was so confused to see them fighting, really going at it. And why was the name Foxworth Hall stirring up hidden fears I didn't want to come out into the light? And who was this *her* Mom kept screaming about? And where had Daddy Paul been at this time?—at this too distant time when Mom had not yet met his younger brother?—or so they'd told me. Did parents tell lies?

Foxworth Hall, why did that have such a familiar ring?

Once more he went down on his knees beside her, and this time with great tenderness he took her in his arms and she didn't fight him off. His quick kisses rained on her pale face, his lips trying to smother her words which kept coming anyway. "Chris, how can you keep on loving me when I'm such a bitch? How can you keep on understanding why I'm ugly so often? I know I'm as much a bitch as *she* is, only I would give my life to undo the harm she's done us."

Without a word he locked eyes with her until their breathing began to come in short pants. Between them that

passion that was always just below the surface ignited, caught fire, and something electric tingled my skin too.

Lest I see too much, I silently crawled back to my room with the embarrassing vision of them rolling about on the floor still on my mind. Over and over again, turning, clutching at each other, both wild—and the last thing I heard was a zipper being pulled. His or hers, I didn't know. Though I wondered about it. Did a woman ever pull down a man's fly zipper of her own free will—even a wife?

I ran into the garden. In the dark, near the great white wall, near a pale, nude statue of marble, I fell down on the ground and cried. Rodin's statue "The Kiss" was the first thing I saw when I looked up. Just a copy, but it told me a whole lot about adults and their feelings.

I'd been a child believing my parents' integrity was flawless, their love a brilliant, smooth ribbon of unbroken satin. Now it was tattered, stained, and no longer shining. Had they argued many times and I just hadn't heard? I tried to remember. It seemed to me that they'd never had such a terrible argument before, only brief conflicts that had been resolved.

Too old to cry, I told myself. Though fourteen was almost a man's age. Already I was sprouting a few hairs above my lips and other places. Sniffing, choking my sobs back, I ran to the white wall and climbed the oak tree. Once there on the wall I sat in my favorite place and stared off at the huge white mansion, which looked ghostly in the moonlight. I thought and I thought about Bart and who was his father. Why hadn't he been named after Daddy Paul? Surely a son should have his father's name. Why Bart instead of Paul?

As I watched, as I wondered, fog from the sea began to roll in, curling back upon itself, enfolding the mansion until I couldn't see it. All about me spread the thick gray mist. Eerie, frightening, mysterious.

From the grounds next door came strange muffled noises. Was that someone crying over there? Great wracking sobs that

were punctuated by moans and short prayers that asked for forgiveness.

Oh, God! Was that pitiful old woman crying just like my mother had cried? What had *she* done? Did everyone have some shameful past to conceal? Would I be like them when I grew up?

“Christopher,” I heard her sob. Startled, I jerked and tried to find where she was. How did she know my dad’s name? Or did she have a Christopher of her own?

I knew one thing. Something dark and threatening had come into our lives. Bart was acting stranger than usual. Something or someone had to be influencing him in subtle ways I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Whatever was changing Bart didn’t have anything to do with Mom and Dad. If I couldn’t understand them, Bart wouldn’t have a chance. But whatever it was between my parents, and whatever was going on with Bart, I felt I had the weight of the world on my shoulders, and they weren’t that strong yet.

* * *

One afternoon I deliberately hurried home from ballet class early. I wanted to find out what Bart did with himself when I was away. He wasn’t in his room, he wasn’t in the garden, so that left only one place he could possibly be. Next door.

I found him easily. Much to my surprise, he was inside the house and sitting on the lap of the old woman who never wore any clothes that weren’t black.

I sucked in my breath. The little rascal cuddled up cozily on her black lap. I stole closer to the window of the parlor she seemed to favor above the others. She was singing softly to him as he gazed up into her veil-shrouded face. His huge dark eyes were full of innocence before his expression suddenly changed to that of someone sly and old. “You don’t really love me, do you?” he asked in the strangest voice.

“Oh, yes I do,” she said softly. “I love you more than I have ever loved anyone before.”

“More than you could love Jory?”

Why the Devil should she love me?

She hesitated, glanced away, answered, “Yes ... you are very, very special to me.”

“You will always love me best of all?”

“Always, always ... ”

“You will give me everything I want, no matter what?”

“Always, always ... Bart, my dear love, the next time you come over you will find waiting for you—your heart’s desire.”

“You’d better have it here!” said Bart in a hard way that surprised me. All of a sudden he sounded years older. But he was always changing his way of talking, walking. Playacting, always pretending.

I’d go home and tell Mom and Dad. Bart really needed friends his own age, not an old lady. It wasn’t healthy for a boy not to have peers to play with. Then again, I wondered why my parents never asked any of their friends to our home the way other parents had their friends over occasionally. We lived all to ourselves, isolated from neighbors—until this Moslem woman, or whatever she was, came to win my brother’s affections. I should be glad for him; instead, I was uneasy.

Finally Bart got up and said, “Good-bye, Grandmother.” Just his ordinary little boy voice—but what the heck did he mean by *grandmother*?

I waited patiently until I was sure Bart was in our yard before I circled the huge old house and banged hard on her front door. I expected to see that old butler come shambling down the long hall to the foyer, but it was the old lady herself who put an eye to the peephole and asked who it was.

“Jory Marquet Sheffield,” I said proudly, just as my dad would.

“Jory,” she whispered. In another moment she had flung open the door. “Come in,” she invited happily, stepping aside to admit me. Way back in the shadows I thought I glimpsed someone who quickly dodged out of sight. “I’m so happy to

have you visit. Your brother was here and had depleted our supply of ice cream, but I can offer you a cola drink and cake or cookies.”

No wonder Bart wasn't eating Emma's good cooking. This woman was feeding him junk food. “Who are you?” I asked angrily. “You have no right to feed my brother anything.”

She stepped back, appearing hurt and humble. “I try to tell him he should wait until after his meals, but he insists. And please don't judge me harshly without giving me a chance to explain.” Her gesture invited me to take a chair in one of her fancy parlors. Though I wanted to decline, my curiosity was aroused. I followed her into what must have been the grandest room outside of a French palace! There was a concert grand piano, love seats, brocade chairs, a desk, and a long marble fireplace. Then I turned to look her over good. “Do you have a name?”

Floundering, she managed a small voice. “Bart calls me ... Grandmother.”

“You're not his grandmother,” I said. “When you tell him you are, you confuse him, and Lord knows, lady, if there is one thing my brother doesn't need, it is more confusion.”

A slow redness colored her forehead. “I have no grandchildren of my own. I'm lonely, I need someone ... and Bart seems to like me ...”

Pity for her overwhelmed me, so I could hardly say what I'd planned beforehand, but I managed nevertheless. “I don't think coming over here is good for Bart, ma'am. If I were you I would try to discourage him. He needs friends his own age ...” and here my voice dwindled away, for how could I tell her she was too old? And two grandmothers, one in a nut house, and the other a ballet nut, were more than enough.

* * *

The very next day Bart and I were told that Nicole had died in the night, and from now on her daughter, Cindy, would be our sister. My eyes met Bart's. Dad had his eyes on his plate, but he wasn't eating. I looked around, startled, when I heard a

young child crying. “That’s Cindy,” said Dad. “Your mother and I were at Nicole’s side when she died. Her last words were a request for us to take care of her child. When I thought about you two boys being left alone like Cindy, I knew I could die feeling more at peace knowing my children had a good home ... so I let your mother say what she’s been wanting to say ever since Nicole’s accident.”

Mom came into the kitchen. In her arms she carried a small girl with blonde ringlets and large blue eyes almost the same color as hers. “Isn’t she adorable, Jory, Bart?” She kissed a round rosy cheek while the big blue eyes looked from one to the other of us. “Cindy is exactly two years and two months and five days old. Nicole’s landlady was delighted to be rid of what she thought a heavy burden.” She gave us a happy smile. “Remember when you asked for a sister, Jory? I told you then I couldn’t have more children. Well, as you can see, sometimes God works in mysterious ways. I’m crying inside for Nicole, who should have lived to be eighty. But her spine was broken and she had multiple internal injuries—”

She left the rest unsaid. I knew it was terribly sad for someone as young and pretty as nineteen-year-old Nicole Nickols to die just so we could have the sister I’d only mentioned casually a long time ago.

“Was Nicole your patient?” I asked Dad.

“No, son, she wasn’t. But since she was a friend, and your mother’s student, we were notified of her failure to respond to medical treatment. We rushed to the hospital to be with her. I suppose neither of you heard the phone ring about four this morning.”

I stared at my new sister. She was very pretty in her pink pajamas with feet. Her soft curls fluffed out around her face. She clung to my mother and stared at strangers before she ducked her head and hid from our eyes. “Bart,” said Mom with a sweet smile, “you used to do that. If you hid your face, you thought we couldn’t see you just because you couldn’t see us.”

“Get her out of here!” he yelled, his face a red mask of anger. “Take her away! Put her in the grave with her mother!

Don't want no sister! I hate her, hate her!"

Silence. No one could speak after this outburst.

Then, while Mom stood on looking too shocked even to breathe, Dad reached to control Bart, who jumped up to hit Cindy! Then Cindy was crying, and Emma was glaring at my brother.

"Bart, I have never heard anything so ugly and cruel," said Dad as he lifted Bart up and sat him on his knee. Bart wiggled and squirmed and tried to get away, but he couldn't escape. "Go to your room and stay there until you can learn to have some compassion for others. You would feel very lucky in Cindy's place."

Grumbling under his breath, Bart stomped to his room and slammed his door.

Turning, Dad picked up his black bag and prepared to leave. He gave my mother a chastising look. "Now do you see why I objected to adopting Cindy? You know as well as I that Bart has always had a very jealous streak. A child as lovely and young as Cindy wouldn't have been two days in an orphanage before some lucky couple seized her up."

"Yes, Chris, you are right, as always. If Cindy had been taken into legal custody she would have been adopted by others—and you and I would have gone daughterless all our lives. As it is I have a little girl who seems so much like Carrie to me."

My father grimaced as if from sharp pain. Mom was left sitting at the table with Cindy on her lap, and for the first time since I could remember, he didn't kiss her good-bye. And she didn't call out, "Be careful."

In no time at all Cindy had me enchanted. She toddled from here to there, wanting to touch everything and then have a taste. A nice warm feeling rushed over me to see the little girl so well cared for, so loved and pampered. The two of them together looked like mother and daughter. Both dressed in pink, with ribbons in their hair, only Cindy had on white socks with lace.

“Jory will teach you to dance when you’re old enough.” I smiled at Mom as I passed her on my way to ballet class. Quickly Mom got up to hand Cindy over to Emma, then she joined me in her car that was still parked in our wide garage. “Jory, I think Bart will soon learn to like Cindy a little more, don’t you?”

I wanted to say, no he wouldn’t, but I nodded, not letting her know how worried I was about my brother. *Trouble, trouble, boil and double ...*

“Jory, what was that you just mumbled?”

Gee, I didn’t know I said it aloud. “Nothing, Mom. Just repeating something I overheard Bart saying to himself last night. He cries in his sleep, Mom. He calls for you, screaming because you’ve run away with your lover.” I grinned and tried to look lighthearted. “And I didn’t even know you play around.”

She ignored my facetious remark. “Jory, why didn’t you tell me before that Bart has nightmares?”

How could I tell her the truth?—that she was much too taken up with Cindy to pay attention to anyone else. And never, never should she give anyone more attention than Bart. Even me.

* * *

“Momma, Momma!” I heard Bart cry out in his sleep that night. “Where are you? Don’t leave me alone! Momma, please don’t leave me. I’m not bad, really not bad ... just can’t help what I do sometimes. Momma Momma ... !”

Only crazy people couldn’t help what they did. One crazy person in our family was enough. We didn’t need another living under our roof.

So ... it was up to me to save Bart from himself. Up to me to straighten out something crooked that had begun a long time ago. And way back in the shadow recesses of my brain, there were vague, unsettling memories of something that had troubled me years ago when I was too young to understand. Too young to put the jigsaw pieces together.

Trouble was, I'd been doing so much thinking about the past, that now it was waking up, and I could remember a man with dark hair, a man different from Daddy Paul. A man Mom used to call Bart Winslow—and those were my half brother's first and second names.

My Heart's Desire



Wicked little girl, that Cindy. Didn't care who saw her naked. Didn't care who saw her sit on the potty. Didn't care about being decent or clean. Took my toy cars and chewed on them.

Summer wasn't so good no more. Nothin t'do. No where t'go but next door. Ole lady kept promising that pony and never did it show up. Leading me on, teasing me. I'd show her. Make her sit over there all alone, wouldn't visit. Punish her. Last night I heard Momma telling Daddy how she saw that ole lady in black standing on a ladder propped against the wall. "And she was staring at me. Chris. Really staring!"

Daddy laughed. "Really, Cathy. What harm can her stares do? She's a stranger in a strange land. Wouldn't it have been friendly of you to wave and say hello—perhaps introduce yourself?" I snickered to myself. Grandmother wouldn't have answered. She was shy around all strangers but me. I was the only one she trusted.

Another day of being mean to Cindy had caused everywhere to be named off-limits to me. But I was clever and stole outside and snuck quickly away, to next door, to where people liked me.

"Where's my pony?" I screeched when I saw the barn still empty. "You promised me a pony—so if you don't give me one I'll tell Momma and Daddy you are trying to steal me away!"

She seemed to shrink inside her ugly black robe while those pale, thin hands of hers fluttered to the neckline so she could tug out a heavy rope of pearls she usually kept hidden.

"Tomorrow, Bart. Tomorrow you get your heart's desire."

Met John Amos on the way home. He led me into his secret cubbyhole and whispered of "man-doings." "Women like her

are born rich and they never need brains,” said John Amos, his watery eyes hard and slitlike. “You listen to me, boy, and never fall in love with a stupid woman. And *all* women are stupid. When you deal with women you have to let them know who is boss right from the start—and never let them forget it. Now, your lesson for today. Who is Malcolm Neal Foxworth?”

“My great-grandfather who is dead and gone but powerful even so,” I said, not really understanding even as I said it.

“What else was Malcolm Neal Foxworth?”

“A saint. A saint deserving of a lordly place in heaven.”

“Correct. But tell it all, leave nothing out.”

“Never was there a man born smarter than Malcolm Neal Foxworth.”

“That’s not all I’ve taught you. You should know more about him from reading his journal. Are you reading it daily? He wrote in that book faithfully all his life. I’ve read it a dozen or more times. To read is to learn and to grow. So never stop reading your great-grandfather’s journal until you are just as clever and smart as he is.”

“Is clever the same as being smart?”

“No, of course not! Clever is not letting people suspect just how smart you are.”

“Why didn’t Malcolm like his Momma?” I asked, though I knew she’d run away, but would that make me hate my momma?

“Like his mother? Lord God above, boy, Malcolm was wild about his mother until she ran off with her lover and left Malcolm with his father, who was too busy to pay him any attention. If you read on, boy, you’ll find out soon just what turned Malcolm against all women. Read on and increase your knowledge. Malcolm’s wisdom will become yours. He will teach you to never trust a woman to be there when you need her.”

“But my momma is a good momma,” I defended weakly, not so sure anymore that it was true. Life was so “devious.”

(New word for today, devious.)

“Now, Bart,” Daddy had said early this morning when he carefully printed the word and explained to me exactly what it meant, “I want you and Jory to find a way to fit *devious* into your conversation today at least five times. It means departing from the shortest way; crooked and unfair—D-E-V-I-O-U-S.”

Spelled it for me, Golly day, I sure hated living in a “devious world.” Dratted new vocabulary words were teaching me how *devious* everyone could be.

“Now I’m going to leave you alone so you can read more of Malcolm’s words,” said John Amos before he shuffled off, bent slightly forward and to the side.

I opened the book to the page where the leather bookmark was.

* * *

Today I just wanted to try a little of my father’s tobacco, so I filled his pipe with what I found in his office, then stole outside and smoked behind the garage.

I don’t know how he found out unless one of the servants told on me, but he knew. Fire came in his hard eyes and he ordered me to strip down to naked. Cringing, I cried when he whipped me, and then he put me in the attic until I could learn the ways of the Lord and redeem my sins. While I was up there I found old photographs of my mother when she was a just a girl. How beautiful she was, so innocent and sweet-looking. I hated her! I wanted her to die that very moment wherever she was in the world. I wanted her to be suffering as I was, with cuts bleeding down my back, while I nearly suffocated in that airless hot attic.

I found things in that attic, corsets with laces so a woman swelled out in front, deceiving men into believing she has more than what came naturally. I knew I would never be deceived by any woman, no matter how beautiful. For it was beauty that put me in the attic, and beauty that used the whip on my back, and it wasn’t really my father’s fault what he did. He was hurting too, like I was.

Now I knew what he'd said all the time was true: No woman could be trusted. And most especially those with beautiful faces and seductive bodies.

* * *

Lifting my eyes I stared into space, seeing not the barn and all the hay, but the sweet and beautiful face of my mother. Was *she* devious? Would she one day run away with her “lover” and leave me to fend for myself with a stepfather who didn’t love me nearly as much as he loved Jory and Cindy?

What would I do then? Would my grandmother take me in?

I asked her later on. “Yes, my love, I will take you in. I will care for you, fight for you, do what I can for you, for you are the true son of my second husband, Bart Winslow. Haven’t I told you that before? Trust me, believe in me, and stay away from John Amos. He is not the kind of friend you should have.”

Son of her second husband. Did that mean my momma had been married to him too? All the time marryin somebody! I closed my eyes and thought about Malcolm, who was long gone in his grave. Rock, rock, rock went her chair. Thud, thud, thud went the dirt on my grave. Dark now. Smothery. Cramped and cold. Heaven ... where was Heaven?

“Bart, your eyes are glassy.”

“Tired, Grandmother, so tired.”

“Soon you will have your heart’s desire.”

Money, wanted money, piles and piles of greenbacks. At that moment someone banged on the front door. I jumped off her lap and quickly hid.

Jory ran in ahead of John Amos, who had admitted him. “Where is my brother?” he asked, looking around the room. “I don’t like what’s happening to him and I think it has something to do with coming over here—”

“Jory,” said my grandmother, putting out her hand with all the sparkling, jeweled fingers. “Don’t glare at me. I don’t

harm him. I only give him a little ice cream after his meals. Sit down and talk for a while. I'll send for refreshments."

Ignoring her, with the nose of a bloodhound Jory raced straight to me and yanked me out from behind the potted palms. "No thank you, lady," he said coldly. "My mom gives me all I need to eat—and what you're doing over here is changing him, so please don't let him come again."

Her barely visible lips clamped together and I saw tears in her eyes as I was pulled away. Jory shook me in our backyard. "Don't you ever go back there again, Bart Sheffield! She is not your grandmother! You look at her as if you like her more than Mom!"

* * *

There were some who said Bart Winslow Scott Sheffield was not as tall as other boys at nine. But I knew as soon as I hit ten I'd shoot up like a weed in the summertime. Soon as I was in Disneyland again, I'd be inspired enough to grow as tall as a giant.

"Why are you looking so solemn, darling?" asked Grandmother when I was snuggled on her lap again the next day. The pony still hadn't come.

"Not coming to see you no more," I said grumpily. "Daddy will give me a pony for my birthday when I tell him again I want one. Won't need yours."

"Bart, you haven't told your parents about me, have you?"

"No, ma'am."

"If you lie God will punish you."

Sure, why not? Everybody else did. "Never tell nobody nothing," I mumbled. "Momma and Daddy don't like me noway. They got Jory. Now they got Cindy, too. That's enough for them."

She took a quick glance around, paying special attention to the pocket doors that were closed and latched tight. She whispered. "Bart, I've seen you talking to John, I've asked you

to stay away from him. He's an evil old man who can be very cruel. Keep that in mind."

Gee, who could I trust? He said the same thing about her. Once I'd thought everyone in my family could be trusted. Now I was learning people weren't always what they seemed to be on the surface. Weren't loving, never cared enough, especially when it came to me. Maybe it was only Grandmother who really cared—and John Amos. Then I was bewildered again. Was John Amos my true friend? If he was, then my grandmother couldn't be. Had to choose. Which to choose? How did I made big decisions like that? Then, when Grandmother had her arms about me, my face held to her soft breast, I knew, she was the one who loved me best. She was my own true-for-a-fact grandmother.

But ... what if she wasn't?

I'd seen my grandmother a dozen or more times. John Amos had been my friend only for a few days. Maybe if he waited for me seven times in a row that would tell me he was lucky and good for me. Seven times of anything meant good luck. Five times of talking to me in his spooky place had taught me already that women were sneaky and devious.

"Bart, my darling," whispered my granny, putting her dry lips on my cheek near my ear. "Don't look so afraid, just leave John Amos alone, and don't believe anything he tells you." She stroked my face, then I felt her smile. "Now, if you run down to the barn and take a look inside, you will find something any boy would love to have, and those who don't will envy you."

She started to say something else, but I jumped from her lap and raced from her room and ran all the way to the barn. Oh gosh, oh gee, every day I carried an apple in my pocket, just hoping. Every day I carried lumps of Momma's sugar, just hoping. Prayed every night for that pony I just had to have. This pony was going to love me more than anybody! I ran to the barn and didn't fall once. Then I pulled up short and stared. THAT wasn't a pony!

It was only a dog, A big hairy dog who stood with his tail waggin, and his eyes lookin at me adoringly already, and I hadn't done one thing to win his love. I wanted to cry. It was leashed and tied by a rope to a stump in the barn dirt floor. The dog wiggled all over, as if happy to see me—and I hated that dog.

Behind me she came runnin up, all breathless and pantin. “Bart, darling, don't be disappointed. I really wanted to give you a pony, but as I told you, if I did, you would go home reeking of horses, and Jory and your parents would find out, and never let you come back to visit me.”

I sank down on my knees and bowed my head. I wanted to die. I'd eaten all that ice cream, suffered through all those kisses and hugs ... and still she hadn't given me a pony. “You lied to me.” I choked, with tears in my eyes. “You've made me waste all my days visitin you when I could have done somethin better.” And there I went, dropping my G's again. Not so grown up after all.

“Bart, darling, you don't understand about St. Bernards at all!” she said, gathering me up in her arms. “This dog is still just a puppy, and see how big he is. He will grow up to be as big as a pony. You can saddle him and ride him around. And did you know in the mountains they use this breed of dog to rescue people who have been lost in the snow? A keg of brandy is tied around the dog's neck, and all by himself, a dog like this can find a lost man and save his life. A St. Bernard is the world's most heroic dog.”

I didn't believe her. Still, I had to stare at the puppy with more interest—that was a puppy? He strained at his leash, trying to get at me, and I liked him a little more for doing that. “Will he really grow up to be as big as a pony?”

“Bart, he's only six months old, and already he's almost as big as some ponies!” She laughed and caught my hand and pulled me inside the barn. “See,” she said, pointing to a red saddle with bit and bridle, and then to a little two-wheeled red cart. “You can ride him, or hitch him to the cart—and have an all-purpose dog or pony, whatever you want. All you have to do is use your imagination.”

“Will he bite me?”

“No, of course not. Darling, look at him, how happy he is to see a boy. Put out your hand and let him sniff your palm. Treat him kindly, feed him well, and keep his hair free of briars and tangles, and you will not only have the most beautiful dog in the world, but the best friend of your life.”

Fearfully I inched my hand away from my body—and the puppy licked it like ice cream. Slurpy kisses. I laughed because it tickled. “Go way, Grandmother,” I ordered.

She backed way reluctantly while I knelt in front of the pony so I could tell it what it was. “Now you look here,” I said firmly, “and you remember what I say. You *are not* a dog but a pony. You are not meant to carry brandy in kegs to people who are lost and snowed in—you are meant for carrying me only. You are my pony, and mine alone!”

He looked at me as if bewildered, cocking his big shaggy head to one side as he sat on his haunches. “Don’t you sit like that!” I yelled. “Ponies don’t sit, only dogs.”

“Bart,” came my grandmother’s soft voice, “be kind, remember.”

I ignored her. Women didn’t count in man-doings like this. John Amos had told me that. Men ruled the world, and women had to sit back and keep quiet.

I had to cast a spell and make a puppy over into a pony. Mean witches on stage knew how to do that. I thought and thought about every stage witch I’d seen in ballets and finally I thought I knew just how it was done.

Needed a long hooked nose and a jutting long chin, and hollowed-out eyes and bony long fingers with black nails two inches long. Only thing I had right was mean, black, piercing eyes—maybe that would do the trick. Knew how to make mean eyes real good.

I flung my arms overhead, curled my fingers into claws, hunched my back, and cast my spell: “I chriss-en thee Apple! With this magic potion I give, and with this spell I put upon thee, I make you into a pony.” I gave him the magic potion

which was an apple. “Now you are mine, all mine! Never will you eat or drink if I am not the one to give you the food and water. Never will you love anyone but me. You will run to me and die when I do. MINE, APPLE, MINE! NOW AND FOREVERMORE ... MINE!”

The power of my magic spell had Apple sniffing at the fruit I offered. He whimpered unhappily and turned his nose away, showing more interest in the sugar I was saving for later. “Now, don’t you whinny and try to eat everything,” I scolded, biting into the apple myself to show him how it was done. Again I held the apple out for my pony to eat. Again he turned away his giant white and golden head. Some of his fur was reddish gold and sorta pretty. I bit into the apple again and chewed, showing him what good food he was missing.

“Bart,” called Grandmother with a choke in her voice, “perhaps I made a mistake. I’ll take the puppy back to the pet shop and buy you that pony you wanted.”

I looked from her to my new pet, then toward my home, considering. They’d be sure to smell a horse, if ponies smelled horsey. And doggy smells would seem natural; they’d be convinced Clover had finally learned to trust me—when he never would let me near him. “Grandmother, I’m going to keep this here puppy-pony. I’ll teach him all about how to play horse. If he doesn’t learn before I go to Disneyland you can take him back—and never can I come to visit you again.”

Laughing and happy then, I fell onto the hay and frolicked with my puppy-pony, the only puppy-pony in the whole wide world. And his big warm body felt good in my arms, real good.

I looked at her, then, and I knew John Amos was wrong. Women were not evil and devious, and I was so relieved to have found out at last that it was John Amos who was devious, and Momma and my grandmother were the best things in my whole life—next to Apple.

“Grandmother, are you truly my real grandmother, and my real daddy was your second husband?”

“Yes, it’s true,” she said with her head bowed. “But it’s a secret. Just between us. You must promise not to tell anyone.” She seemed to droop, looking sad, but I was so happy inside I wanted to burst. A puppy-pony and a real grandmother who had been married to my real father. Gosh, I was getting lucky at last.

And there I was saying my “ings.” That’s what loving Apple and my grandmother did for me, taught me how to pronounce the “ings” with a G. In only one day they had succeeded, when Momma and Daddy had been trying for years and years.

Soon I found out that eating had lots to do with loving. The more food I gave Apple, the more he loved me. And without the help of more spells, he was mine, all mine. When I came in the mornings he raced to me, jumping up and spinning in circles, wagging his tail, licking my face. When I hitched him to the new pony cart he bucked just like a real horse. Tried his best to rid himself of the small saddle I put on his back too. Boy, just wait until Jory got a load of the kind of magic I could work.

“Gonna be eleven soon,” I said to Grandmother one day, in hopes of giving her a few ideas. “Ten,” she corrected. “You will be ten on your next birthday.”

“Eleven!” I shouted, insisting. “All year I’ve been going on ten. I have to be eleven by now.”

“Bart, don’t start wishing your life away. Time goes by quickly enough. Hold on to your youth, stay as you are.”

I went on stroking Apple’s head. “Granny, tell me about your little boys.”

She looked sad again, not from her face I couldn’t see, but from the way her shoulders drooped. “One went to heaven,” she whispered hoarsely, “the other ran away.”

“Where did the other go?” I asked, thinking maybe I’d go there too.

“South,” she said simply, drooping more.

“I’m going south too. Hate that place!—full of ole graves and full of ole grandmothers. One is locked up in a looney bin. The other is a mean-faced ole witch. You’re my best grandmother,” for by now I knew she couldn’t be Daddy’s crazy mother, but the mother of my real daddy. And women changed names when they changed husbands, so that’s ... and then I knew I didn’t even know her last or first name. “Corrine Winslow,” she said when I asked, her head still bowed. I could see a little of her face where her nose lifted the black veil from her cheeks. A bit of her hair showed too. Gray hair with streaks of gleaming gold, soft hair. I pitied her. She was really going to suffer when I was gone.

“Going to Disneyland, Grandmother. Gonna stay there one week and have a party with more gifts from Momma and Daddy and Jory and Emma, and then we’ll all fly East and spend two rotten weeks just visiting—”

“I know,” she interrupted with a smile in her voice, “two weeks wasted by visiting ole graves and ole grandmothers. But you have a good time anyway.” She leaned to kiss and hug me tight. “And while you’re gone I’ll take good care of Apple.”

“NO!” I screamed, terrified Apple would love her more than me when I came back. “You leave my pet alone. He’s mine. Don’t you go feedin him and makin him more yours than mine.”

She agreed to do what I wanted. I told her next I was gonna find a way to go to Disneyland, then sneak back to take care of Apple. How I was gonna do this wasn’t really clear in my mind—and from the way she looked, it wasn’t clear in hers either.

Later I was in the barn with Apple. John Amos stood tall and skinny above, as I sprawled on the hay. He lectured again on how evil women were, and how they made men “sin.”

“Nobody does anything for nothing,” he said. “Don’t you think for one second she doesn’t have wicked plans for you, Bart Winslow.”

“Why’d you call me that?”

“It’s your name, isn’t it?”

I grinned, really proud to tell him I had the longest name ever.

“That’s not important,” he said with no patience. “Be attentive, boy. You asked me yesterday about sin and I wanted to tell you exactly, but I had to plan the wording. Sin is what men and women do together when they close their bedroom door.”

“What’s so bad about sin?”

He scowled, showing his teeth, and I shrank back into the hay, wishing he’d go away and leave me and Apple alone.

“Sin is what women use to make a man weak. You’ve got to face up to certain facts. Inside of every man there is a weak, spineless streak, and women know how to find it by taking off their clothes and using earthly pleasures to sap a man’s strength by desire. Watch your own mother, see how she smiles at your father, how she paints her face and nails and wears skimpy clothes, and see your stepfather’s eyes light up—both are on their way to sinning when you see that.”

I swallowed, kinda hurting inside. Didn’t want my parents to do bad things to make God punish them.

“Now hear the words of Malcolm again. ‘I cried and cried for five years after my mother went away and left me with my father, who hated me for being hers. He told me all the time she was married to him she was unfaithful, deceiving him with many lovers. And then he couldn’t love me. Couldn’t stand for me to be near him, and it grew so lonely shut up in that big house with no one who cared. Time and again Father told me he’d never be able to remarry because of me. None of his paramours liked me. But they did fear me. You can bet I let them know what I thought. I knew they’d burn in the eternal fires of hell.’”

“What’s a paramour?” I asked, bored sometimes with Malcolm.

“A derelict soul on its way to hell.” His eyes burned into me. “And don’t you think you can go away on a vacation and

leave the care of Apple to another. When you accept the love of an animal, that animal is your responsibility for its entire life. You feed him, water him, groom and exercise him—or God will see that you suffer!”

I shivered and looked at my puppy-pony, who was chasing his tail.

“There is power in your dark eyes, Bart. The same kind of power Malcolm had. God has sent you to carry out an unfinished duty. Malcolm will never rest easy in his grave until all the Devil’s spawn are sent down to roast over the fires of hell!”

“Fires of hell,” I repeated dully.

“Two are there already ... three more to go.”

“Three more to go.”

“Evil seeds reproduce and multiply over and over.”

“Over and over.”

“And when you have done your duty, Malcolm will rest easy in his grave.”

“Rest easy in my grave.”

“What’s that you said?”

I was confused. Sometimes I pretended *I* was Malcolm. John Amos smiled for some reason and seemed pleased. I was allowed to go home then.

Jory came on the run to question me. “Where’ve you been? What do you do over there? I see you talking to that old butler. What does he tell you?”

He made me feel like a mouse facing up to a lion. Then I remembered Malcolm’s book and how he handled situations like this. I put a cold mask on my face. “John Amos and I have secrets that are none of your damn business.”

Jory stared. I strode off.

Under a huge spreading tree Momma was pushing Cindy in her baby-swing. Sissy girls had to be strapped in to keep from

falling out. “Bart,” she called, “where have you been?”

“Nowhere!” I snapped.

“Bart, I don’t like smart answers.”

I stopped and decided I’d do like Malcolm and wither her small with my mean glare—instead I saw to my amazement she wore a skimpy blue halter-top that didn’t meet the top of her white shorts, showing her bellybutton. She was showing bare skin! Sin was connected to bare skin. In the Bible the Lord had commanded Adam and Eve to put on clothes and cover their wicked flesh. Was my momma just as sinful as that wicked Corrine who had run off with her “paramour”?

“Bart, don’t stare like you don’t know who I am.”

Into my mind popped one of the lines from the Bible John Amos was always quoting. Bit by bit I was learning what God expected from the people he created. “Be warned, Momma, the Lord will see when I do not, and He will punish.”

Momma almost jumped. Then she swallowed and in a dry voice asked, “Why did you say that?”

Look at her tremble, I thought. I turned my head to glare at all the naked statues in this evil garden of sin. Wicked naked people made Malcolm rest uneasy in his grave.

But I loved her; she was my mother; sometimes she came and kissed me good night and stayed to hear my prayers. Before Cindy came she was better and spent more time with me. And she didn’t appear to be in love with a “paramour.”

Didn’t know what to do. “Sleepy, Momma,” I said and then drifted away, feeling at odds with myself and the rest of the world. What if what Malcolm wrote, and John Amos quoted, was true? Was she evil and sinful, luring men to be like animals? Was it bad to be like animals? Apple wasn’t bad, or sinful. Not even Clover was, and he didn’t like me.

Inside Jory’s room I paused before his thirty-gallon aquarium. The air made a steady stream of tiny bubbles that burbled to the surface like the champagne Momma had let me sip once.

Pretty fish wouldn't live in my tank. Fish in Jory's tank never died. My empty tank held nothing but water, and a toy pirate ship spilled out fake jewels on the fake ocean floor. Jory's tank grew seaweed that snaked in and out of a small castle. His fish darted in and out of coral reefs.

Jory did everything better than me. I didn't like being Bart anymore. Bart had to stay home and forget about Disneyland now that he had responsibilities.

A pet could be a heavy, heavy burden.

I fell on my bed and stared up at the ceiling. Malcolm didn't need his power and strength anymore, or his clever brain that was smart too. He was dead and his talents were wasted. Nobody ever made Malcolm do anything he didn't want to after he grew up. Didn't want to be a boy anymore. Wanted to be a man, like Malcolm the powerful, the financial wizard.

Was gonna make people jump when I spoke. Tremble when I looked. Cower when I moved. The day was coming. Felt it.

Shadows



Jory,” said Mom as we picked up our totes and headed for her car, “I can’t understand what’s happening to Bart this summer. He’s not the same child. What do you think he does outside alone all the time?”

I felt uncomfortable. I wanted to protect Bart and let him have the old lady next door for this friend, and I couldn’t tell Mom that woman was saying she was Bart’s grandmother. “Don’t you worry about Bart, Mom,” I assured her. “You just keep on having fun with Cindy. She’s sure a cute kid, like you must have been.”

She smiled and kissed my cheek. “If my eyes aren’t deceiving me, there’s another cute kid you admire too.”

I felt a blush heat up my cheeks. I couldn’t help but look at Melodie Richarme. She was so darn pretty, with hair that was a deeper shade of blonde than Mom’s, but blue eyes that were just as soft and shining. I thought I’d never love any girl who didn’t have blue eyes. Just then Melodie showed up, running to her father’s car, making me stare at the way she was turning into a woman. Gosh, it was miraculous the way flat-chested little girls showed up one day with bosoms, tiny waists, and swelling hips, and suddenly they were ten times more interesting.

* * *

The minute we hit home Mom had me hunting up Bart. “If he’s over in that other yard, you tell me. I don’t want you children bothering an old recluse, though I wish to heaven she’d stop climbing that ladder and staring at me over the wall.”

Climbing, jumping, calling, I searched until I found Bart in the old barn that had once been what was called in olden times

“a carriage house.” Now it had empty stalls where horses used to live, and Bart was in one, using a rake to pull out the dirty hay. I stared, disbelieving my eyes. With him was a St. Bernard puppy. The dog was almost as big as he was. It was easy enough to tell it was only a puppy, for it had kiddish ways, frolicking and making puppy noises.

Bart threw down his rake and scolded the dog. “You stop jumping around like that, Apple! Ponies don’t jump anything but hurdles—now you eat that hay or I won’t give you clean hay tomorrow.”

“Bart . . . ,” I called softly, leaning against the barn wall and smiling to see *him* jump. “Dogs don’t eat hay.”

His face flamed. “You go way! You get out of here! You don’t belong!”

“Neither do you.”

“You get out of here,” he sobbed, hurling down his rake and pulling the huge puppy into his arms. “This is my dog; he was supposed to have been a pony—so I’m making him both a puppy and a pony. Don’t you laugh and think I’m crazy.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” I said, a lump in my throat to see him so upset. It really was a shame I had more affinity for animals than he did. They seemed to know he’d step on their tails or trip over them. In fact, even I wasn’t too comfortable lying on the floor when Bart was around.

“Who gave you the puppy?”

“My grandmother,” Bart said, with so much pride in his eyes. “She loves me, Jory, really loves me more than Momma does. And she loves me more than your ole Madame Marisha loves you!”

That was the trouble with Bart. No sooner did I feel close to him than he slapped me in my face, making me regret I’d ever let him under my skin.

I didn’t pat the beautiful puppy on his head, though he was making up to me. I let Bart have his way; maybe this time he’d make a friend after all.

He smiled at me happily as we headed for home. “You’re not mad at me?” he asked. Of course I wasn’t. “You won’t tell on me, Jory? It’s important not to tell Momma or Daddy.”

I didn’t like to keep secrets from my parents, but Bart was insistent, and what would it hurt anyway if a kind lady gave Bart a few gifts and a new puppy? She was making him feel loved and happy.

In the kitchen Emma was spooning cereal into Cindy’s open mouth. Cindy had been dressed by Mom in new baby-blue coveralls with a white blouse embroidered with pink rabbits. Mom had done that embroidery work herself. Cindy’s hair had been brushed until it gleamed like silvery gold; a blue satin ribbon held her ponytail high on the back of her head. She was so clean and fresh I wanted to hug her, but I only smiled. I knew better than to be demonstrative when Bart was around to get jealous. Strangely, it was Bart who fascinated Cindy far more than me. Perhaps because he wasn’t so much larger than she was.

My brother hurled himself down into a kitchen chair that almost toppled over backward from the force. Emma looked his way and frowned. “Go wash your hands and face, Bart Winslow, if you expect to eat at my table.”

“Not your table,” he grouched as he headed for the bathroom. He pulled his dirty hands along the walls to leave long smudges.

“Bart! Take your filthy hands off the walls!” called Emma sternly.

“Not her walls,” he mumbled. It took him forever to wash his hands, and when he was back only his palms were clean. He stared with disgust at the soup and sandwiches Emma had prepared.

“Eat up, Bart, or you’ll fade away to nothing,” said Emma.

Already I was on my second sandwich, my second bowl of homemade vegetable soup, and ready for dessert while Bart still nibbled on half of his sandwich, his soup as yet untouched.

“What do you think of your new sister?” asked Emma, wiping Cindy’s messy mouth, taking off the soiled bib. “Isn’t she a living doll?”

“Yeah, she’s sure cute,” I agreed.

“Cindy’s not our sister!” flared Bart. “She’s just another messy little baby that nobody but our mother would want!”

“Bartholomew Winslow ... don’t you ever let me hear you talk like that again.” Emma gave him a long, chastising look. “Cindy is a lovely child who resembles your mother so much she could be her own daughter.”

Bart continued to scowl at Cindy, at me, at Emma, even at the wall. “Hate blonde hair and red lips that are wet all the time,” he mumbled under his breath before he stuck out his tongue at Cindy, who laughed and patty-caked. “If Momma didn’t fuss around her so much, curling her hair and buying her new clothes, she’d be ugly.”

“Cindy will never be ugly,” denied Emma, looking at the little girl with admiration. Then she leaned to kiss the child’s pretty small face.

That kiss drew another of Bart’s darkest frowns.

I sat there, uptight, frightened. Each morning I woke up knowing I’d have to face a brother who was growing more and more strange. And I loved him; I loved my parents, and darn if I wasn’t beginning to love Cindy too. Somehow I knew I had to protect everyone—but from what I didn’t know and couldn’t even guess.

Changeling Child



Drat Jory and Emma, I was thinking as I slipped through the hot Arizona desert. Good thing I had Apple to love me as well as my grandmother, or I'd be in a sorry state. There stood my lady in black with her arms wide open to welcome me and I was kissed and hugged much more than Cindy ever was.

She served me a bowl of soup. It was so good, with cheese on top. "Why can't I tell my parents how much I like you, and how much you love me? That would be so neat." I didn't tell her I thought she wasn't really my own true grandmother, but only said that to please me. In a way that made her love better, for families had to love each other. Strangers didn't.

Square in the middle of one of her tables she put a large dump truck before she answered my question. Odd she seemed so sad, and in a way scared, when a moment ago she'd seemed happy enough.

"Your parents hate me now, Bart," she whispered thinly. "Please don't tell them anything about me. Keep me your secret."

My eyes widened. "Did you know them once?"

"Yes, a long, long time ago, when they were very young."

Gee. "What did you do to make them hate you?" Everyone hated me, almost, so I wasn't surprised someone might hate her.

Her hand reached for mine. "Bart, sometimes even adults make mistakes. I made a terrible mistake that I'm paying for dearly. Every night I pray for God to forgive me; I pray for my children to forgive me. I find no peace when I look in the mirror, so I hide my face from myself, from others, and sit in uncomfortable rockers so I'll never forget for one second all the harm I did to those I loved most."

“Where did your children go?”

“Have you forgotten?” she sobbed, tears in her eyes now. “They ran away from me. Bart, that hurts so much. Don’t you ever run away from your parents.”

Gosh, hadn’t intended to run. World out there was too big. Too scary. Safe, had to stay where it was safe. I ran to embrace her, then turned to play with my truck—and that’s when John Amos limped into the room, his watery eyes angry. “Madame! You do not develop strength in young children by indulging their every whim. You should know that by now.”

“John,” she said haughtily, “don’t you ever come in this room again without knocking—stay in your place.”

Tough. My grandmother was tough. I smiled at John Amos, who backed away, mumbling under his breath about how she wasn’t giving him *any* place, or not the place he deserved. I forgot him the moment he was out of sight as I fell under the spell of my enchanting new dump truck and why it worked like it did. Soon I’d find out—and maybe my curiosity was the same thing as being mean, for everything given to me ended up broken within an hour.

My grandmother sighed and looked unhappy as my truck came apart.

* * *

Long summer days passed slowly, with John Amos teaching me lots of important things about being powerful and fearsome like Malcolm, who knew all about being sneaky and clever. In his own kind of way John Amos was fascinating, with his queer shuffling walk, his skinny legs more knobby than mine, his whistling breath, his hissing words, his stringy mustache and bald head where one white hair grew. One day I was gonna pull it out. Wonder why my grandmother didn’t like him. She was the boss, she could fire him, and yet she didn’t. Something hard and mean was between them.

I was happy living between them, blessed on one side by my grandmother, with all her nice gifts, her hugs and kisses, and on the other side by John Amos, who was teaching me

how to be a powerful man who could make women do his bidding. And now that I had someone who loved me for myself, no matter how mean or clumsy I was, I began to feel that special kind of magic that Momma and Jory shared. I thought I, too, could hear the music of sunset colors. I thought the lemon tree made little harp chords sound. I had Apple, my puppy-pony. And, best of all, Disneyland was waiting for me and my birthday was coming up soon.

Now that I was getting brilliant like Malcolm, I tried to figure out a way to keep Apple's love while I went away for three weeks. It woke me up at night. Worried me all day. Who would feed Apple and steal his love while I was gone? Who?

I went back to the wall and checked on a peach pit that hadn't sprouted any roots as yet. It was supposed to be growing—and it wasn't. Next I checked my sweetpea seeds. Dumb things were just lying there, not doing anything.

Cursed. I was cursed. I glared at the part of the garden Jory cared for. All his flowers were in full bloom. Wasn't fair how even flowers wouldn't grow for me. I crawled to where Jory's hollyhocks grew. My knees crushed petunias, squashed portulaca. What would Malcolm do if he was me? He'd rip up all of Jory's flowers, dig holes with his thumbs in his own garden, and stick in the blossoms.

One by one I filled my thumb holes with Jory's hollyhocks. They refused to stand up straight, but I arranged them so they could lean against one another and now I had blooming flowers in my garden too. Clever. Devious and sneaky—smart too.

Glanced down at my filthy knees and saw I'd ripped my new pants on the doghouse I'd started building for Clover. It was my way of asking forgiveness for tripping over him so often. Right now he was up on that "veranda" keeping a keen eye on me, afraid to sleep while I was in sight. I didn't need him now. Once I had, but now I had a better pet.

Bugs were biting my face. I rubbed at my eyes, not caring if my hands were covered with grease from fooling around in my dad's garage workshop. Emma wouldn't like seeing my new

white tank-top that had grease all over, and even Momma couldn't repair the rip from neck to shirrtail. I chewed on my lip.

Saturdays were for having fun and I wasn't having any. Nothing special to do like Jory. Wasn't born to dance, only to get dirty and have scratches. Momma had Cindy. Daddy had patients. Emma had cooking and cleaning. Nobody cared if I was bored. I threw Clover a hateful look. "I gotta dog better than you!" I yelled. Clover backed up closer to the house, then hid under a chair. "You're just a miniature French poodle!" I screamed. "You don't know how to save people lost in the snow! You don't know how to wear a red saddle or eat hay either!" Every day I was giving Apple a little more hay that I mixed up in his dogfood just so he'd get to like hay better than meat.

Clover looked ashamed. He inched himself under the chair more and gave me another of his sad looks that got on my nerves. Apple never did that.

I sighed, got up, brushed off my knees, my hands. Time to visit Apple. On my way over I got distracted by the white wall, which needed more texture. Picking up a stone, I began to pound on the wall in order to chip off more of the white stucco. Gosh, what if this wall went on forever? It might even end up in China, keeping out the Mongol hordes. Wonder what Mongols were? Apes? Yeah, sounded like apes—mean kind of big apes that ate people who were in the *throes* of something. Would be nice to be as huge as King Kong so I could step on things I hated.

I'd step on teachers first, schools next—and step over churches. Malcolm respected God, and I didn't want to make God mad with me. I'd pluck the stars from the sky and stick them on my fingers for diamond rings, like my grandmother's. I'd wear the moon for my cap. I'd leave the sun alone because it might burn my hand—but if I picked up the Empire State Building I could use it as a bat and swat that sun right out of our universe! Then everything would go black as tar. There'd be no daytime and only forever night. Black was like being blind, or dead.

“Bart,” came a soft voice, making me jump.

“Go ’way!” I ordered. I was having fun all by myself. And what was she doing up on that ladder again? Spying on me? I sat on the ground again and poked at it with a stick.

“Bart,” she called again. “Apple is waiting for you to feed him, and he needs fresh water. You promised to be a good master. Once you make an animal love and trust you, you are obligated to it.”

Today her eyes weren’t covered over; the veil only covered from her nose downward. “I want cowboy boots, a new genuine cowboy saddle of real leather, not fake, and a hat, buckskins, chaps, spurs, and beans to cook over campfires.”

“What is that you just dug up?” She poked her head up higher to see better. She looked funny, like a head on the wall with no body underneath.

Gosh ... look what was buried in the dirt. Dead bones. Where had the fur gone? And the soft white ears?

I began to tremble, very scared as I tried to explain. “Tiger. There I was the other night, helpless, wearing only my pajamas, when out of the dark came this man-eating tiger with the green eyes. He snarled, then jumped me. He meant to eat me. But I grabbed up my rifle in the nick of time and shot him through his eye!”

Silence. Silence meant she didn’t believe me. Pity was in her voice when she spoke. “Bart, that’s not the skeleton of a tiger. I see a bit of the fur. Is that the kitten I used to have? The stray one I took in and cared for? Bart, why did you kill my kitten?”

“NOOO!” I yelled. “Wouldn’t kill a kitty! Wouldn’t ever do that! I like kitties. This is a tiger, a not so big one. Old bones been here a mighty long time, way before I was born.” Yet, they looked like kitty bones, they did. I rubbed at my eyes so she wouldn’t see the tears.

Malcolm wouldn’t cry like this. He’d be tough. Didn’t know what to do. Ole John Amos over there kept telling me to be like Malcolm, and hate all women. I decided it was better to

act like Malcolm than like me who was a sorry thing. Wasn't no good trying to be King Kong, Tarzan, or even superman; being Malcolm was better, for I had his book of instructions of how to do it right.

“Bart, it's growing very late. Apple is hungry and waiting for you.”

Tired, so tired. “I'm coming,” I said wearily. Gee, pretending to be an old man was tiring. Bad to act so old, better to be a boy again. Old meant no time off from work and trying to make money with no fun at all. Took all my time getting there now that I made my legs walk slow. Foggy all around. Summer wasn't so hot when you were old. *Momma, Momma, where are you? Why don't you come when I need you? When I call, why don't you answer? Don't you love me anymore, Momma? Momma, why aren't you helping me?*

I stumbled on, trying to think. Then I found the answer. Nobody *could* like me, for I didn't belong here, and I didn't belong there. I didn't belong anywhere.

PART TWO



Tales of Evil



I gobbled down my bacon, scrambled eggs with sour cream and chives, and a third slice of toast as Bart nibbled on and on as if he didn't have any teeth at all. His toast grew cold—waiting for Bart to sip orange juice as if it were poison. An old man on his deathbed could have had more appetite.

He shot a hostile glance my way before he fixed his eyes on Mom. I was jolted. I knew he loved her—how could he look like that?

Something weird was going on in Bart's head. Where was the shy, introverted little brother I used to have? Gradually he was changing into an aggressive, suspicious, cruel boy. Now he was staring at Dad as if he'd done something wrong—but it was Mom who drew most of his scathing looks.

Didn't he know we had the best mother alive? I wanted to shout this out, make him go back to the way he used to be, mumbling to himself as he stumbled around hunting big game, fighting wars, riding herd on cattle. Where had all his love and admiration for Mom gone? Soon as I had the chance I backed Bart up against the garden wall. "What the heck is wrong with you, Bart? Why do you look at Mom so mean?"

"Don't like her no more." He crouched over, put out his arms horizontally and turned himself into a human airplane. That was normal—for Bart. "Clear the way!" he ordered. "Make way for the jet taking off for faraway places!—it's kangaroo shoot in time in Australia!"

"Bart Sheffield, why do you always want to kill something?"

His wings fluttered; his plane stalled; his engine died and he was staring at me in confusion. The sweet child he'd been at the beginning of summer came fleeing to his dark brown

eyes. “Not gonna kill real kangaroos. Just gonna capture one of those itty-bitty ones and put it in my pocket and wait for it to grow big.”

Dumb, Dumb! “First of all, you don’t have a pocket with a nipple for the baby to suck.” I sat him down hard on a bench. “Bart, it’s time you and I had a man-to-man talk. What’s troubling you, fella?”

“In a big bright house setting on a high-high hill, while the night was on and the snow came down, the flames of red and yellow shot up higher, higher! Snowflakes turned pink. And in that big old house was an old-old lady who couldn’t walk and couldn’t talk and my real daddy who was an attorney ran to save her. He couldn’t!—and he burned!—burned!—burned!”

Spooky. Crazy. I pitied him, “Bart,” I began carefully, “you know that isn’t the way Daddy Paul died.” Why had I put it like that? Bart had been born only a few years before Daddy Paul died. How many years? Almost I could remember my thoughts back then. I could ask Momma, but somehow I didn’t want to trouble her more, so I led Bart toward our house. “Bart, your real daddy died while he was sitting on his front veranda reading the newspaper. He didn’t die in a fire. He had heart trouble that led to a coronary thrombosis. Dad told us all that, remember?”

I watched his brown eyes grow darker, his pupils dilate, before he raged with a terrible temper. “Don’t mean *that* daddy! Talking about my *real* daddy! A big strong lawyer daddy who never had a bad heart!”

“Bart, who told you that lie?”

“Burning!” he screamed, whirling around like a man blinded by smoke as he tried to find his way outside. “John Amos told me how it was. All the world was on fire, one Christmas night when the tree burned up. People screamed, ran, stepped on the ones who fell down!—and the biggest, grandest house of them all snared my true father so he died, died, died!”

Boy, I’d heard enough. I was going straight into the house and tell my parents. “Bart, you hear this. Unless you stop

going next door and listening to lies and crazy stories, I'm telling Mom and Dad about you—and them next door.”

He had his eyes squinted shut, as if trying to see some scene scorched on his brain. He seemed to be looking inward as he described it in more detail to me. Then his dark eyes flew wide open. His look was wild and crazy. “Mind your own damn business, Jory Marquet, if you don't want yours.” He swooped to pick up a discarded baseball bat, then took a wild swing that might have splattered my brains if I hadn't ducked. “You tell on me and Grandmother and I'll kill you while you sleep.” He said it loud, cold and flat, his eyes challenging mine.

Swallowing, I felt fear raise the hair on my neck. Was I scared of him? No. I couldn't be. As I watched, he suddenly lost his bravado and began to gasp and clutch at his heart. I smiled, knowing his secret—his way of backing out of a real fighting encounter. “All right, Bart,” I said coldly. “Now I'm going to let you have it. I'm going next door and I am going to speak to those old people who fill your head with garbage.”

His old-man act was quickly abandoned. His lips gaped apart. He stared at me pleadingly, but I whirled on my heel and strode off, never thinking he'd do anything. Wham! Down flat on my face I fell with a weight on my back. Bart had tackled me. Before I could congratulate him for being fast and accurate for a change, he began to pummel my face with his fists.

“You won't look so pretty when I finish.” I warded him off as best I could before I noticed he was delivering his blows with his eyes squeezed shut, punching blindly, childishly, sobbing as he did. And I swear, as much as I wanted to I couldn't punch out my kid brother.

“Got yah scared, huh?” He pulled back his upper lip and snarled, looking pleased with himself. “Guess yah know now who's boss, huh? Ain't got nearly the guts you thought you had, do yah?”

I shoved him hard. He fell backward, but darn if I could fight a baby like him, who was strong only when he was

angry. “You need a good spanking, Bart Sheffield, and I might be just the one to give it to you. The next time you pull any stunt on me think twice—or *you* might be the one left without guts.”

“Yer not my brother,” he sobbed, all the fight gone out of him. “You’re only a half brother, and that’s as good as none.” He choked on his own emotions and ground his fists into his eyes as he wailed louder.

“You see! That old woman is putting nutty ideas in your head, and one thing you don’t need is more nuts in the belfry. She’s turning you against your own family—and I’m going to tell her exactly that.”

“Don’t you dare!” He shrieked, his tears gone, his rage back, “I’ll do something terrible. *I will! I swear I will! If you go you’ll be sorry!*”

My smile was wry. “You and who else is gonna make me sorry?”

“I know what you want,” he said, all child again. “You want my puppy-pony. But he won’t like you, he won’t! You want my grandmother to love you more, but she won’t! You want to take everything from me—but you can’t!”

I felt sorry for him, but I’d neglected my duty long enough. “Aw, go suck your baby bottle!” and with that I was off. He screamed behind me, yelling out how he’d make me sorry by hurting something that couldn’t fight back. “And you’ll cry, Jory!” he warned. “You’ll cry more than you ever have before!”

The road was dappled with sunlight and shadows, and soon enough Bart and his temper were far behind me. The sun burned down hot on top of my head, and behind me little feet came running. I turned to see Clover racing to catch up. Waiting, I knelt to catch him as he leaped into my arms, licking my face with the same devoted adoration he’d given me since I was three.

Three years old. I remembered where Mom and I had lived then, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, in a little

cottage nestled down near the mountains. I remembered a tall man with dark eyes had given me not only Clover but also a cat named Calico, and a parakeet we called Buttercup. Calico had roamed off in the night and never came back. And Buttercup had died when I was seven. “Would you like to be my son?” I heard the man’s voice in my memory. That man who was called ... What was his name? Bart? Bart Winslow? Oh, golly, was I just beginning to understand something that had slipped over my head until now? Was my half brother Bart the son of that man, and not Daddy Paul? Why would Mom name her baby for a man not her husband?

“You gotta go back home now, Clover,” I said, and he seemed to understand. “You’re eleven years old and not up to frisking around in the noonday sun. Go back and find your favorite cool place and wait for me, okay?”

Wagging his tail, he turned obediently and headed home, looking back often to see if I’d turn away and he could follow again. I watched until he was out of sight around the bend in the road. Then I headed once more for the huge old mansion. In my head the distant past beat like muffled drums, reminding me of events I’d forgotten. The ballet on Christmas Eve, and the handsome man who gave me my first electric train. I shut off memories, wanting to keep my mother sacred, my love for Daddy Paul intact, my respect for Chris intact too. No, I wasn’t going to let myself remember too much.

Lovers came and went in everyone’s life, I told myself, if ballets were just true stories exaggerated a bit. And like my dad would, I strode boldly up to the iron fence and demanded into the box to be let in. The iron gates swung silently open, like jail bars to beckon me forward. I almost ran up the curving drive until I was before the double front doors, and there I jabbed at the doorbell, then banged the brass knocker as loud as I could.

Impatiently I waited for that crotchety old butler to show up. Behind me the iron gates had closed. I felt like I was walking into a trap. Gee, just like Bart and his imagination that gave him fun, I used my ballet background to write this script.

I felt like some wretched, unwanted prince who didn't possess the magic password. Only Bart knew that.

Confusion and regrets brewed and unsettled my determination. This didn't seem the castle of some wicked fairy queen, only the big, outdated home of a lonely old woman who needed Bart just as much as he needed her. But she couldn't be his grandmother, she just couldn't be. That grandmother was way back in Virginia, locked up for something terrible she'd done once.

Quiet was all around me, smothering me, making me feel old. My home was full of noises from the kitchen, music, clover barking, Cindy squealing, Bart shouting, and Emma bossing. Not even a squeak came from this house. Nervously I shuffled my feet about, thinking I might give up my idea of confronting her. Then I glimpsed a dark shadow behind one of the windows draped with sheer curtains. I shivered. Almost left. But just then the door opened a crack, enough to allow the butler to put a squinty watery eye to the slit. "You can enter," he said inhospitably, "but don't you stay too long. Our lady is frail and tires easily."

I asked her name, tired of calling and thinking of her as old woman, or woman in black. My request was ignored. The butler intrigued me with his shuffling gait, his suggestion of a limp, his bald pate that was pink and shiny. His thin white mustache hung in long strands on either side of his grim lips. But as old as he was, and as weak as he appeared, he still managed to convey a scary, sinister air.

He beckoned me onward, but I hesitated. Then he smiled cynically, showing his too large, too even, and too yellow teeth. I squared my shoulders and followed him bravely, thinking I could set everything straight and our lives would be as happy as they'd been before they came to live in this house that used to be ours alone.

I didn't know suspicions were in my head. I thought it was only curiosity.

The room she always used surprised me again, though I couldn't say exactly why. Maybe it was because she kept her

drapes drawn together on such a beautiful summer day. Behind the drapes the window shutters were closed, making bars of light on the window coverings. The shutters and the drapes held the heat outside at bay, making her parlor unexpectedly chill. There was no real need for air-conditioning in our area. The nearby Pacific kept our weather cool, making sweaters in the evenings a real necessity, even in the middle of summer. But this house was unnaturally cold.

Again she was in that wooden rocker staring at me. Her thin hand made some welcoming gesture to draw me closer. I knew instinctively she was a threat to my parents, to my own security, and most of all to Bart's mental health.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, Jory," she said in a sweet voice. "My home belongs to you as much as to Bart. I will always welcome you here. Sit down and chat for a while. Will you share a cup of tea with me, and a slice of cake?"

Beguiled, our word yesterday to add to our growing vocabulary Daddy insisted upon. "The world belongs to those who know how to speak well, and fortunes are made by those who write well," he'd said.

I admit, she beguiled me, that woman in her hard rocker, sitting so old and yet so proud. "Why don't you open your shutters, pull your drapes, and let in some light and air?" I asked.

Her nervous gestures brought into play the sparkling rays of the many gems she wore. Rubies, emeralds, and diamonds on her fingers, each color spectrum. Her jewels seemed so out of place when she had to wear that plain black chiffon—but today her eyes were revealed, her blue, blue eyes. Such familiar blue eyes.

"Too much light hurts my eyes," she explained in a faint husky whisper when I kept staring.

"Why?"

"Why does the light hurt my eyes?"

"Yes."

Her sigh was small. “For a long time I lived locked away from the world, shut up in a small room, but even worse than that, locked up within myself. When you are forced to encounter yourself for the first time in your life, you draw back from the shock. I recoiled when first I looked deep within myself, staring in a mirror they had in my room, and I was frightened. So now I live in rooms full of mirrors, but I cover my face so I can’t see too much. I keep my rooms dim as I no longer admire the face I used to adore.”

“Then take down the mirrors.”

“How easy you make it. But you are young. The young always think everything is easy. I don’t want to take down the mirrors. I want them there to remind me constantly of what I’ve done. The closed windows, the stuffy atmosphere are my punishments, not yours. If you want, Jory,” she went on as I sat silently, “open the windows, spread the shutters; let in the sunlight and I will take off my veils and let you look at the face I hide from—but you won’t find it pleasant. My beauty is gone, but it is a small loss compared to everything else that has come and gone, all the things I should have held on to valiantly.”

“Valiantly?” I asked. That was a word not too familiar to me in any meaningful way, just a word suggesting bravery.

“Yes, Jory, valiantly I should have protected what was mine. I was all they had, and I let them down. I thought I was right, they were wrong. I convinced myself each day I was right. I resisted their pitiful pleas, and even worse, at the time I didn’t even think they were pitiful. I told myself I was doing all I could because I brought them everything. They grew to distrust me, dislike me, and that hurt, hurt more than any pain I’ve ever felt. I hate myself for being weak, so cowardly, so foolishly intimidated when I should have stood my ground and fought back. I should have thought only of them and forgotten what I wanted for myself. My only excuse is that I was young then, and the young are selfish, even when it comes to their own children. I thought my needs were greater than theirs. I thought their time would come and then they could have their way. I felt it was my last chance at happiness. I had to grab for

it quick, before middle age made me unattractive, and there was a younger man I loved. I couldn't tell him about them."

Them? Who was she talking about?

"Who?" I asked weakly, for some reason wishing she wouldn't tell me anything—or at least not too much.

"My children, Jory, My four children, fathered by my first husband, whom I married when I was only eighteen. He was forbidden to me, and yet I wanted him. I thought I never would find a man more wonderful ... and yet I did find one just as wonderful."

I didn't want to hear her story. But she pleaded for me to stay. I sat on the edge of one of her fine chairs.

"So," she continued, "I put my fear out in front, allowed my love for a man to blind me to their needs, and I ignored what they wanted—their freedom—and now, as the result, I cry myself to sleep every night."

What could I say? I didn't understand what she was talking about. I reasoned she must be crazy, and no wonder Bart was acting just as nutty. She leaned forward to peer at me more closely.

"You are an exceptionally handsome boy. I suppose you know that already."

I nodded. All my life I'd heard remarks about my good looks, my talent, my charm. But talent was what counted, not looks. In my opinion looks without talent were useless. I knew, too, that beauty faded with the passing years, but still I loved beauty.

Looking around, I saw this woman loved beauty as much as I did, and yet ... "What a pity she sits in the dark and refuses to enjoy all that's been done to make this place beautiful," I murmured without thought.

She heard and replied tonelessly, "The better to punish myself."

I didn't reply, only sat on in the chair while she rambled on and on about her life as a poor little rich girl who made the

mistake of falling in love with her half uncle, who was three years older, and for this she was disinherited. Why was she telling me her life history? I didn't care. What did her past have to do with Bart? He was my reason for being here.

"I married for a second time. My four children hated me for doing that." She stared down at her hands folded on her lap, then began to twist the sparkling gems one by one. "Children always think adults have it so easy. That's not always true. Children think a widowed mother doesn't need anyone but them." She sighed. "They think they can give her enough love, because they don't understand there are all kinds of love, and it's hard for a woman to live without a man once she's been married."

Then, almost as if she'd forgotten me, she jolted to see me there. "Oh! I've been a poor hostess. Jory, what would you like to eat and drink?"

"Nothing, thank you. I came only to tell you that you must not encourage Bart to come over here anymore. I don't know what you tell him, or what he does here, but he comes home with weird ideas, acting very disoriented."

"Disoriented? You use large words for a boy so young."

"My father insists we learn one new word each day."

Those nervous hands of hers flitted up to her throat to play with her string of large pearls with a diamond butterfly clasp. "Jory, if I ask you a hypothetical question, would you give me an answer—a truthful answer?"

I got up to go. "I'd really rather not answer questions ..."

"If your mother or your father ever disappointed you, failed you in some way, even a major one—could you find it in your heart to forgive them?"

Sure, sure, I thought quickly enough, though I couldn't imagine them ever failing me, Bart, or Cindy. I backed to the door that would allow me to leave while she was waiting for my answer. "Yes, Madame, I think I could forgive them anything."

“Murder?” she asked quickly, standing too. “Could you forgive them for that? Not premeditated murder, but accidental?”

She was crazy, just like her butler. I wanted to get out of there, and fast! I cautioned her one more time to send my brother home. “If you want Bart to stay sane, leave him alone!”

Her eyes teared before she nodded and inclined her head. I’d hurt her, I knew that. I had to harden my heart not to say I was sorry. Then, just as I was leaving, a deliveryman was banging on the door, and I opened to allow him to carry in a huge oblong crate. It took two men to rip off the nailed cover.

“Don’t go, Jory,” she begged. “Stay! I’d like you to see what’s inside this crate.”

What difference did it make? But I stayed, having the same curiosity as most people about the contents of a closed box.

The old butler came tapping down the hall, but she shooed him away, “John! I didn’t ring for you. Please stay in your part of the house until you’re sent for.”

He gave her a smoldering look of resentment and hobbled into his hole, wherever that was.

By this time the crate was open, and the two men were pulling out packing straw. Then they lifted a huge thing wrapped in a gray quilt from its nest in the crate.

It was like waiting for a ship to be launched. I grew sort of breathless in anticipation, even more so because she had such a look on her face ... as if she couldn’t wait for me to see the contents. Was she giving me a gift, like she gave Bart anything he wanted? He was the greediest little boy ever born, needing double the amount of affection most people required.

I gasped then and stepped backward.

It was an oil painting the men unwrapped.

There stood my beautiful mother in a formal white gown, pausing on the next to the bottom step with her slender hand resting on a magnificent newel post. Trailing behind her lay

yards and yards of the shimmering white fabric. The curving stairs behind her rose gracefully and faded into swirling mists through which the artist had cleverly managed to give the impression of gold and glittering jewels, hinting at a palace-like mansion.

“Do you know whose portrait that is?” she asked when the men had hung it in place in one of the parlors she didn’t seem to use often. I nodded, dumbfounded and speechless.

What was she doing with my mother’s portrait?

She waited for the two men to go. They smiled, thrilled with the tip she gave them. I was panting, hearing my heavy breathing and wondering why I felt sort of numb. “Jory,” she said softly, turning again to me, “that’s a portrait of *me* that my second husband commissioned shortly after we were married. I was thirty-seven when I posed for that.”

In the portrait the woman looked just like my mother looked today. I swallowed and wanted to run, suddenly needing the bathroom badly, but still I wanted to stay. I wanted to hear her explain, even though I was paralyzed with the fear of what she might tell me.

“My second husband, who was younger, was named Bartholomew Winslow, Jory,” she said quickly, as if to make sure I heard before I got up and ran. “Later on, when my daughter was old enough, she seduced him, stole his love away from me, just so she could hurt me with the child she gave him. The child I couldn’t have. Can you guess who that child is, can you?”

I jumped up and backed away. Holding out my hands to ward off any more information I didn’t want to hear.

“Jory, Jory, Jory,” she chanted, “don’t you remember me at all? Think back to when you lived in the mountains of Virginia. Think of that little post office, and the rich lady in the fur coat. You were about three then. You saw me, and smiling, you came to stroke my coat, and you told me I was pretty—remember?”

“No!” I cried more stoutly than I felt. “I have never seen you before in my life, not until you moved here! And all blondes with blue eyes look somewhat alike!”

“Yes,” she said brokenly, “I suppose you’re right. I just thought it would be amusing to see your expression. I shouldn’t have played a trick on you. I’m sorry, Jory. Forgive me.”

I couldn’t look at those blue, blue eyes. I had to get away.

I felt miserable as I slowly trudged home. If only I hadn’t stayed. If only the portrait hadn’t been delivered while I was there. Why did I have to sense that that woman was more a threat to my mother than my stepfather? What had I accomplished? *Was it you, Mom, who stole her second husband’s love?* Was it? Didn’t it make good sense when Bart had the same name as him? Everything she’d said confirmed the suspicions that had been sleeping in my mind for so many years. Doors were opening, letting in fresh memories that almost seemed like enemies.

I climbed the stairs of the veranda Mom jokingly called “Paul’s kind of southern veranda.” Certainly it wasn’t the customary California patio.

There was something different about the patio today.

If I had been less troubled, perhaps I would have spotted immediately what was missing. As it was, it took me minutes to realize Clover wasn’t there. I looked around, distressed, calling him.

“For heaven’s sake, Jory,” called Emma from the kitchen window, “don’t yell so loud. I just put Cindy down for a nap and you’ll wake her up. I saw Clover a few minutes ago heading into the garden, chasing a butterfly.”

Of course, I felt relieved. If one thing brought out the puppy in my old poodle, it was a fluttery yellow butterfly. I joined Emma in the kitchen and asked, “Emma, I’ve been wanting to ask for a long time, what year did Mom marry Dr. Paul?”

She was leaning over, checking inside the refrigerator, grumbling to herself. “I could swear there was some fried chicken in here, left over from last night. Since we’re having liver and onions tonight I saved what was left of the chicken for Bart. I thought your finicky brother could eat the leftover thighs.”

“Don’t you remember the year they were married?”

“You were just a little one then,” she said, still rummaging through covered dishes.

Emma was always vague about dates. She couldn’t remember her own birthday. Maybe deliberately. “Tell me again how my mother met Dr. Paul’s younger brother ... you know, the stepfather we have now.”

“Yes, I remember Chris, he was so handsome, tall and tan. But not one whit better-looking than Dr. Paul was in his own way ... a wonderful man, your stepfather Paul. So kind, so soft-spoken.”

“It’s funny Mom didn’t fall for a younger brother instead of an older one—don’t you think it’s odd?”

She straightened and put a hand to her back, which she said hurt all the time. Next she wiped her hands on her spotless white apron. “I sure hope your parents aren’t late tonight. Now you run and hunt up Bart before it’s too late for him to take a bath. I hate for your mother to see him so filthy.”

“Emma, you haven’t answered my questions.”

Turning her back she began to chop green bell peppers. “Jory, when you need answers, you go to your parents and ask. Don’t come to me. You may think of me as a family member but I know my place is that of a friend. So run along and let me finish dinner.”

“Please, Emma, not just for my sake, but Bart’s too. I’ve got to do something to straighten out Bart, and how can I when I don’t have all the facts?”

“Jory,” she said, giving me a warm smile, “just be happy you have two such wonderful parents. You and Bart are very

lucky boys. I hope Cindy grows up to realize how blessed she was the day your mother decided she had to have a daughter.”

Outside the day was growing old. Search as I would I couldn't find Clover. I sat on the back steps and stared unhappily at the sky turning rosy with bright streaks of orange and violet. I felt overwhelmingly sad and burdened, wishing all this mystery and confusion would go away. Clover, where was Clover? I never knew until this moment how very much he added to my life, how much I'd miss him if he was gone for good. Please don't let him be gone for good, God, please.

One more time I looked around our yard, then decided I'd better go in the house and call the newspapers. I'd offer a reward for a missing dog—such a big reward somebody would bring Clover back. “Clover!” I yelled, “chow time!”

My call brought Bart stumbling out of the hedges, his clothes torn and filthy. His dark eyes were strangely haunted. “Why yah yellin?”

“I can't find Clover,” I answered, “and you know he never goes anywhere. He's a home dog. I read the other day about people who steal dogs and sell them to science labs for experimentation. Bart, I'd want to die if somebody did something so awful to Clover.”

He stared at me, stricken-looking, “They wouldn't do that ... would they?”

“Bart, I've got to find Clover. If he doesn't come back soon, I'll feel sick, really sick enough to die. Suppose he's been run over?”

I watched my brother swallow, then begin to tremble. “What's wrong?”

“Shot me a wolf back there, I did. Shot me a big bad wolf right through his mean red eye. He came at me lickin his chops, but I was smarter and moved quick and shot him dead.”

“Oh, come off it, Bart!” I said impatiently, really getting irritated with somebody who could never tell the truth. “There aren't any wolves in this area, and you know it.”

* * *

Until midnight I searched all around our neighborhood, calling for Clover. Tears kept clogging my voice, my eyes. I had the strongest premonition that Clover would never come home again.

“Jory,” said Dad, who’d been helping me hunt, “let’s hit the sack and look again in the morning if he doesn’t come home by himself. And don’t you lie in your bed and worry. Clover may be an old dog, but even the elderly can feel romantic on a moonlit night.”

Aw, heck. That didn’t make much sense. Clover had stopped chasing female dogs a long time ago. Now all he wanted was a place to lie where Bart wasn’t likely to stumble over him or step on his tail.

“You go to bed, Dad, and let me look. I don’t have to be in ballet class until ten, so I don’t need my sleep as much as you do.”

He briefly embraced me, wished me luck, and headed for his room. An hour later, I decided it was fruitless effort. Clover was dead. That’s the only thing that would keep him away.

I decided I had to tell my parents what I suspected.

I stood beside their bed looking down at them. Moonlight streamed through the windows and fell over their bodies. Mom was half-turned on her side so she could cuddle up close to Dad, who was on his back. Her head was on his bare chest, while his left arm encircled her so his hand lay on her hip. The covers were pulled up just high enough to shield their nudity, which made me back away, feeling very guilty. I shouldn’t be here, sleep made them look vulnerable, younger, moving me but giving me a deep sense of shame too. I wondered why I felt ashamed. Dad had taught me the facts of life a long time ago, so I knew what men and women did together to make babies—or just for fun.

I sobbed and turned to go.

“Chris, is that you?” asked my mother, half-asleep and rolling over on her back.

“I’m here, darling. Go back to sleep,” he mumbled sleepily. “The grandmother can’t get us now.”

I froze, startled. They both sounded like children. And again that grandmother.

“I’m scared, Chris, so afraid. If they ever find out, what will we say? How can we explain?”

“Sssh,” came his whisper, “life will be good to us from now on. Hold fast to your faith in God. We have both been punished enough; He won’t punish us more.”

Run, run, had to run fast to my room and hurl myself down. I felt hollow inside, emptiness all around instead of the confidence and love I used to feel here. Clover was gone. My dear little harmless poodle who had never done even one bad thing. And Bart had shot a wolf.

What would Bart do next? Did he know what I did? Was that why he was behaving so strangely? Turning his mean glare on Mom like he wanted to hurt her. Tears rose in my eyes again, for memory couldn’t be denied forever. I knew now that Bart was not the son of Dr. Paul. Bart was the son of that old lady’s second husband with the same name as my half brother—that tall, lean man who sometimes haunted my dreams along with Dr. Paul and my own real father, whom I’d seen only in photographs.

Our parents had lied to both of us. Why hadn’t they told us the truth? Was the truth so ugly they couldn’t tell us? Did they have such little faith in our love for them?

Oh, God, their secret must be something so dreadful we could never forgive them!

And Bart, he could be dangerous. I knew he could be. Day by day it was beginning to show more and more. In the morning I wanted to run up to Mom or to Dad and tell them. But when morning came I couldn’t say anything. Now I knew why Dad insisted that we learn one new word each day. It took special words to put across subtle ideas, and as yet I wasn’t as educated as I needed to be to express my troubled thoughts

that wanted to reassure them. And how could I reassure them when Bart was before me, his dark eyes hard and mean?

Oh, God, if you're up there somewhere looking down, hear my prayer. Let my parents have the peace they need so they don't have to dream of evil grandmothers at night. Right or wrong, whatever they've done, I know they've done the best they could.

Why did I put it like that?

Safe was a word that no longer had substance. Like dead people who were only shadows in my memory, nothing as concrete as Bart's hate, which was growing larger day by day.

Lessons



July. My month. “Conceived in fire, born in heat,” said John Amos when I told him it would soon be my tenth birthday. Didn’t know what he meant and didn’t care either. Disneyland would see me in a few days. Hip-hip-hooray! Drat Jory for not looking happy, spoiling my fun with his long, sad face just because some silly little ole dog wouldn’t come home when he called.

I was making plans that would see Apple through until I could steal back to him after seeing Disneyland. John Amos grabbed me when I went over and hauled me up to his room over the garage. I looked around, thinking it smelled sour, old, like medicine.

“Bart, you sit down in that chair and read aloud to me from Malcolm’s journal. For the Lord will punish you if you say you’re reading his book when you are not.”

I didn’t need John Amos as much as I used to, so I looked at him with scorn. With the kind of scorn Malcolm would show for a bent and lame old man who couldn’t speak without hissing, whistling or spitting. But I sat and I read from Malcolm’s red-leather journal.

* * *

My youth had been squandered in earthly pleasures, and as I approached thirty I realized what was missing in my life was a purpose other than money. Religion. I needed religion, and redemption for all my sins, for despite the vows of my childhood, I had regressed into desiring women, and the more wicked they were, the more they seemed to please me. There was no sight more pleasurable to me than to see some haughty beautiful woman, humbled and made to do obscene things that went against the rules of decency. I took pleasure in beating them, putting red welts on their fair unbroken skins. I saw

blood, their blood, and it made me excited. That's when I knew I needed God. I had to save my everlasting soul from hell.

I looked up, tired of trying to figure out all those long words that didn't mean much to me.

“Do you see what Malcolm is telling you, boy? He's telling you no matter how much you hate women, still there is pleasure to be had from them—*but at a cost, boy*, at a dear, dear cost. Unfortunately God built into mankind sensual desires—you must try to smother yours as you approach manhood. Plant it in your mind so deep it can never be removed: Women will be your destruction in the end. I know. They have destroyed me and kept me a servant when I could have been far more.”

I got up and walked away, sick of John Amos. I was going to my grandmother, who loved me more than God ever would. More than anyone ever would. She loved me for myself. She loved me so much she even made up lies, like me, to tell me she was my own true grandmother when I knew that just couldn't be so.

* * *

Saturday was the best day of the week. My stepfather stayed home and made Momma happy. She hired some dumb assistant to help out on Saturday in her ballet class now that she had to spend so much time dolling up Cindy—like anybody cared how she looked. Jory had to go to ballet class on Saturdays too so he could see his stupid girlfriend. By noon he'd be home to mess up all my plans. Had lots of plans to fill my time. Take care of Apple. Sit on my grandmother's lap and let her sing to me. Why, mornings could pass quicker than a wink with all I had to do.

John Amos gave me more lessons on how to be like Malcolm, and darn if it wasn't working. I was feeling his power growing bigger and stronger.

That afternoon Cindy was in a brand-new plastic swimming pool. The old one wasn't good enough for *her*. Bratty kid has to have everything new, even a bathing suit with red and white

stripes and little red straps that tied over her shoulders to keep the thing up. Little bows she was trying to undo!

Jory jumped up and rushed into the house for his camera, then ran back to take Cindy's picture. Snap, snap, snap. He tossed the camera to Momma, who caught it. "Take my picture with Cindy," he said.

Sure, she was happy to take *his* picture with Cindy. Didn't bother to ask about me. Maybe once too often I'd made a face, ducked my head, or stuck out my tongue. Everyone was always saying Bart sure did know how to ruin a perfectly good shot.

Dratted bushes were all around me, scratching my legs, arms. Bugs crawled on me. Hated bugs! Slapped at them as I narrowed my eyes to see that sissy girl splashing in the water, having more fun than I ever had in a pool.

When they tried to take me East from Disneyland, I'd sneak away and catch a ride and come home and take care of Apple—that's what Malcolm would do. Dead people wouldn't miss me. They wouldn't care if I wasn't there to put flowers on their graves. Jory's nasty grandmother would be glad I wasn't there.

Ran to where I could climb the tree, the wall, and on to the barn to visit with Apple, who was growing huge. I shoved a doggy biscuit in Apple's mouth. It vanished in a second. He jumped and made me fall down. "Now you eat this carrot—it will be like a toothbrush to clean your teeth!" Apple sniffed at the carrot. Wagged his tail. Jumped and then swiped at the carrot with his paw. Apple still didn't know how to play pony games at all.

Soon I had Apple hitched up to my new pony cart and we flew all over the place. "Gitty-up!" I yelled. "Catch those rustlers over yonder! Run faster, you gol-durn horse, if yer gonna get me home before chow is served!" I saw a movement in the hills. Twisted round and spied Indians comin lickity-split—scalpin Indians! Indians gave us a mad chase until we lost them in the hills that soon became desert. Tired and thirsty, my mount and I looked for an oasis. Saw a mirage.

There she was, the woman of the oasis mirage. Wearin her flutterin black rags, her bare feet sandy, glad to welcome us both back to the land of the livin ...

“Water,” I gasped. “Need cold, clear water.” I sprawled in a fancy chair and spread out my long, thin legs that ended in dusty, worn boots. I reached to flick sand from my chaps. “Make it a beer,” I said to the saloon girl. She brought me beer, all foamy and brown, and cold, too cold. Hit my stomach like a rattler, makin me hunch over and give her the eye. “What’s a nice girl like you doin in a rotten place like this?”

“I’m the local schoolmarm. Snapping Sam, don’t you remember?” Behind her veil she cast down her eyelids and fluttered her lashes. “But when hard times come, a lady must do what she can to survive.” She was playin my game. Nobody ever played my games with me. It felt so good to have a playmate.

I smiled, real friendly like. “Took good care of Apple. He’s so clean he can’t die.”

“Darling, you play too hard. And it’s not healthy to think so much about dying. Come sit on my lap and let me sing you a song.”

Nice. Liked being treated like a baby. Cozy on her soft lap, with my face on her breast, and her singing in my ears. Each rock of the chair put me more and more in a trance. I looked up and tried to see through her veils. Was I getting to love her more than Momma? I saw then that her veils were attached to little combs she caught in her hair, for today she had left her hair uncovered. Most of it was silver-colored with streaks of gold.

Didn’t want Momma to grow old and have gray hair. Already she was leaving me each day she cared for Cindy; leaving me for others to take over. Why did Cindy have to come and spoil my life?

“More, please,” I whispered when she stopped rocking. “Do you love me more than Madame M. loves Jory?” I asked. If she said yes, much, much more, I might move in.

“Does Jory’s grandmother love him a great deal?” Was that envy in her voice? I felt mad, mean—and she saw this and began to cover my face with kisses, dry kisses on account of that veil.

“Granny, got to tell you somethin.”

“Fine ... but remember to sound your G’s. Tell me anything, I’ve got the rest of my life to listen.” She stroked my hair back from my face and tried to make it neat. Couldn’t.

“Two days before my birthday we’re heading for Disneyland. A week there and we fly to where the graves are. Gotta visit cemeteries, buy flowers, put the flowers in the sun where they can die. Hate graves. Hate Jory’s grandmother, who don’t like me ’cause I can’t dance.”

Again she kissed me. “Bart ... tell your parents there have been too many graves in your life. Tell them again how unhappy it makes you feel.”

“Won’t listen,” I said dully. “They don’t ask what I want like you do. They just tell me I have to do.”

“I’m sure they’ll listen if you tell them about your dreams of being dead. They’ll know then they have taken you too many times into cemeteries. Just tell them the truth.”

“But ... but ... ,” I sputtered unhappily. “I want Disneyland!”

“You tell them like I said, and I’ll take care of Apple.”

Felt frantic. Once I turned the care of Apple over to anyone, he’d never be all mine again. I sobbed because life was so impossible. And my plan to escape had to work, it would, had to ...

We rocked on and on, and she said we were on a sailing ship riding choppy waters to a beautiful island called peace. I lost my land legs, so when I reached there I couldn’t stand or find my balance. She disappeared. Alone, all alone. Like on Mars—and way back on Earth Apple was waiting for me to show up. Poor Apple. In the end he’d have to die.

I woke up, I think—where was I? Why was everyone so old? Momma ... why have you got your face covered with black?

“Wake up, sweetheart. I think you’d better hurry home before your parents become alarmed. You’ve had a nice nap, so you must feel better.”

* * *

Next morning I was in the yard trying to finish up that doghouse I was building for Clover. Poor Clover should have had his own house all along, and then he wouldn’t have run away looking for one. From Daddy’s toolshed I took a hammer, nails, saw, wood, and lugged it out into the yard. I set to. Dratted saw didn’t know how to cut straight. Gonna have a crooked house. If Clover complained I’d give him a kick. I picked up my jaggedly sliced board and put it on the roof. Dratted nail! Didn’t stand still, made the hammer hit my thumb. Stupid hammer didn’t see my fingers! I went right on hammering. Good thing I couldn’t feel little pains or I’d be crying. Then I smashed my thumb good and it hurt. Gosh, I was feeling pain like any normal boy.

Jory dashed out of the house yelling at me: “Why are you building a house for Clover when he’s been gone two weeks? Nobody has answered our ads. He’s no doubt dead by now, and if he does come home he will sleep on the foot of my bed, remember?” Dumb. Dumb, that’s what he meant, and Clover might come back. Poor Clover.

I sneaked a glance and saw Jory swipe at the tears in his eyes. “Day after tomorrow we’re leaving for Disneyland, and that should make you happy,” he said hoarsely. Did it make me happy? My swollen thumb began to ache a little. Apple was gonna die from loneliness.

Then I had an idea. John Amos had told me that prayers brought about miracles, and God was up there in his heaven looking out for dumb animals down here and people too. Momma and Daddy had always told me not to ask for things in my prayers, only blessings for other people, not myself. So, as soon as Jory was gone I threw down my hammer and raced

to where I could kneel and pray for my puppy-pony and for Clover. Next I went to Apple, rolling with him on the golden grass, me laughing, him trying to whinny-bark. His tongue slurped my face with wet kisses. I kissed him back. When he lifted his leg and aimed at the roses—I took off my pants and let go too. We did everything together.

It came to me then just what to do. “Don’t you worry none, Apple I’ll only spend one week in Disneyland before I come back to you. I’ll hide your puppy-pony biscuits under the hay and leave the water tap dripping in your pail. But don’t you dare eat or drink anything John Amos gives you, or my grandmother either. Don’t you let anybody bribe you with goodies.”

He wagged his tail, telling me he’d be good and obey my orders. He’d made a big pile of do-do. I picked it up and squashed it through my fingers, letting him know I was a part of him now and he was really mine. I wiped my hands on the grass and saw ants come running and flies going to work. No wonder nothing lasted, no wonder.

“Time for your lessons, Bart,” called John Amos from the barn, his bald head gleaming in the sunlight. I felt captured as I lay on the hay and stared at him towering over me. He smelled old and stale.

“Are you reading Malcolm’s journal faithfully?” he asked.

“Yes sir.”

“Are you teaching yourself the ways of the Lord and saying your prayers dutifully?”

“Yes sir.”

“Those who follow in his footsteps will be judged accordingly, as will those who don’t. Let me give you an example. Once there was a beautiful young girl who was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, and she had everything money could buy—but did she appreciate all she had? *No, she didn’t!* When she grew older she began to tempt men with her beauty. She’d flaunt her half-nakedness before their eyes. She was high and mighty, but the Lord saw and He punished her,

though it took Him some time. The Lord, through Malcolm, made her crawl and cry and pray for release, and Malcolm bested her in the end. Malcolm always bested everyone in the end—*and so must you.*”

Boy, he sure could tell boring stories. We had naked people in our garden and I wasn't tempted. I sighed, wishing he had more subjects to talk about than God and Malcolm ... and some darn beautiful girl.

“Beware of beauty in women, Bart. Beware of the woman who shows you her body without clothes. Beware of all those women who lie in wait to do you in and be like Malcolm, *clever!*”

Finally he let me go. I was glad to be done with pretending I was like Malcolm. All I had to do to feel really good was to crawl sneakily on the ground, listening to the jungle noises in the dense foliage where wild animals lurked. Dangerous animals ready to gobble me down. I jerked. Bolted upright. *No!* That couldn't be what I thought it was. Just wasn't fair for God to send a dinosaur. Taller than a skyscraper. Longer than a train. I had to jump up and run off to find Jory and tell him what we had hangin around our backyard.

A noise in the jungle ahead! I stopped short, gasping for breath.

Voices. Talking snakes?

“Chris, I don't care what you say. It is not necessary for you to visit her again this summer. Enough is enough. You've done what you can to help her and you can't. So forget her and concentrate on us, your family.”

I peeked around a bush. Both my parents were in the prettiest part of the garden, where the larger trees grew. Momma was on her knees, mulching the ground around the roses. Green thumb she had, and he did too.

“Cathy, must you stay a child forever?” he asked. “Can't you ever learn to forgive and forget? Perhaps you can pretend she doesn't exist, but I can't. I keep thinking we are the only family she has left.” He pulled her to her feet, then put his

hand over her mouth when it opened to interrupt. “All right, hold on to your hatred, but I’m a doctor sworn to do what I can for those in distress. Mental illnesses can be more devastating than physical ailments. I want to see her recover. I want her to leave that place—so don’t glare at me and tell me again that she was never insane, that she was only pretending. She’d have to be crazy to do what she did. And for all we know the twins might never have grown tall anyway. Like Bart. He’s not of normal height for a boy his age.”

Oh, wasn’t I?

“Cathy, how can I feel good about myself, or anything, if I neglect my own mother?”

“All right!” stormed Momma. “Go on and visit her! Jory, Bart, Cindy, and I will stay on with Madame Marisha. Or we could fly on to New York so I can visit with some old friends until you’re ready to join us again.” She gave him a crooked smile. “That is, if you still want to join us.”

“Where else would I go but to you? Who cares if I live or die but you and our children? Cathy, think about this—the day I turn my back on my mother will also be the day I turn my back on all women, including you.”

She fell into his arms then and did all that mushy loving stuff I hated to see. I backed away, still on my hands and knees, wondering about what Momma had said, and why she hated his mother so much. I felt a little sick in my stomach. What if my grandmother next door really was my stepfather’s mother, truly crazy, loving me only because she had to. What if John Amos was telling the truth?

It was so hard to figure out. Was Corrine Malcolm’s real daughter like John Amos had told me?—was she the one who had “tempted” John Amos? Or was that Malcolm who hated someone pretty and half-naked. Sometimes I got confused after reading Malcolm’s book; he’d skip back to his childhood and write about his memories even after he was grown up, like his childhood was more important than his adult life. How odd. I couldn’t wait to grow up.

I heard them again, coming at me. Quickly I crawled under the nearest hedges.

“I love you, Chris, as much as you love me. Sometimes I think we both love too much. I wake up at night if you’re not there. I want you to not be a doctor, but a man who stays home every night. I want my sons to grow up, but each day brings them nearer to learning our secret, and I’m so afraid they’ll hate us and won’t understand.”

“They’ll understand,” he said. How could he know I would understand when I wasn’t good at understanding even simple things, much less something so bad it woke Momma up at night.

“Cathy, have we been bad parents? Haven’t we done the best we could? After living with us from their childhood, how can they help but understand? We’ll tell them how it was, give them all the facts, so they will see it as we lived it. In so doing, they’ll wonder, as I often wonder, how we survived without losing our minds.”

John Amos was right. They had to be sinning or they wouldn’t be so afraid we wouldn’t understand. And what secret? Whatever were they hiding?

I stayed under the hedges long after my parents went into the house. I had favorite caves I’d made deep in the hedges, and when I was inside them I felt like some small woody animal, scared of everything human that would kill me if possible.

Malcolm was on my mind, him and his brain that was so wise and cunning. I thought of John Amos, who was teaching me about God, the Bible, and sinning. It wasn’t until I thought of Apple and my grandmother that I felt good. Not real good, only a little good.

Fell on the ground and began to sniff around, trying to find something I’d buried last week, or a month ago. Looked in the little fish pond Daddy wanted us to have so we could watch how baby fish were born. I’d seen itty-bitty fish come out of eggs, and the parents swam like crazy to gobble down their children!

“Jory! Bart!” called Momma from the open kitchen door, “Dinnertime!”

I peered into the water. There was my face, all funny-looking, with jagged edges, hair up in points, not curly and pretty like Jory’s. Something dark red was on my face—ugly face that didn’t belong in a pretty gardens where the little birds came to bathe in a fancy bath. I was bleeding tears. I dipped my hands in the fish water and washed my face. Then sat back to think. That’s when I saw the blood on my leg—lots of blood that was drying in a big dark clot on my knee. Didn’t really matter because it didn’t hurt too much.

Wonder how it got there? I retraced my crawl with my eyes. That board with the rusty nail—had I driven that in my knee? I crawled over to the board and felt the blood sticky on its end. Daddy called nail holes in skin “punctures,” and I guess I had one. “Now, it’s very important that a puncture bleeds freely,” he explained. Mine wasn’t bleeding freely.

I put my finger in the puncture and stirred up the blood so it would run. Freaky people like me could do awful things like that, while sissy people like Momma would look sick. Blood in my wound felt hot and thick, just like that pudding stuff Apple had made and I had squeezed through my fingers because it not only made him more mine, but it felt good too.

Maybe I wasn’t so freaky after all, for all of a sudden I was beginning to feel real pain. Mean pain.

“BART!” bellowed Daddy from the back veranda. “You get in this house instantly! Unless you want a spanking!”

When they were in the dining room they couldn’t see me sneak in the family room sliding door, and that’s just what I did. In the bathroom I washed my hands, put on my pj’s to hide my bad knee, and, quiet and meek, joined my family at the table.

“Well, it’s about time,” said Momma, who looked pretty.

“Bart, why do you insist on causing trouble every time we sit down to eat?” asked Daddy. I hung my head, not feeling sorry, just not feeling well. Knee was really throbbing with

pain, and what John Amos said about God punishing those who disobeyed must be right. I was being judged, and a knee puncture was my own hellfire.

Next day I was back in the garden, hiding in one of my special places. All day I sat there and enjoyed my pain, which meant I was normal, not a freak. I was being punished like all other sinners who'd always felt pain. Wanted to miss dinner. Had to go and see Apple. Couldn't remember if I'd been over there or not. Drank a little from the fishpond. Lap, lap, lap, like a cat.

Momma had been packing all day, smiling even early this morning when she put my clothes in a suitcase first. "Bart, try to be a good boy today for a change. Come to your meals on time and then Daddy won't have to spank you before bedtime. He doesn't like punishing you, but he does have a way to discipline you. And do try to eat more. You won't enjoy Disneyland if you feel sick."

Sunset changed the blue sky to pretty colors. Jory ran outdoors to watch the colors he said were like music. Jory could also "feel" colors; they made him glad, sad, lonely, and "mystical." Momma was another one who could "feel" colors. Now that I was getting the knack of feeling pain, maybe soon I'd learn to feel colors too.

Real night started coming. Darkness could bring out the ghosts. Emma tinkled her little crystal bell to call me in to dinner. Wanted so badly to go, but couldn't do it.

Something rotting was in the hollow tree behind me. I turned and crawled out of my cave and peeked into the dark hole in the tree. Rotten eggs inside! Phew! I put my hand in slowly, feeling around for what I couldn't see. Something stiff and cold and covered with fur! Dead thing had a collar around its neck with points that cut my hand—was that barbed wire? Was that rotten dead thing Clover?

I sobbed, wild with fear.

They'd think I did it.

They were always thinking I did everything that was bad. And I'd loved Clover, I had. Always wanted him to like me more than Jory. Now poor Clover would never live in that wonderful doghouse I'd finish someday.

Jory came down the main garden path, calling and searching for me. "Come out from where you are, Bart! Don't make waves now that we're all ready to leave."

Found me a new place he didn't know about and lay flat on my stomach.

Jory left. Next came my mother. "Bart," she called, "if you don't come inside ... Please, Bart. I'm sorry I slapped you this morning." I sniffed away my tears of self-pity. I had only accidentally dumped a whole box of detergent in the dishwasher thinking I could help. How was I to know one small box could make a whole ocean of suds? Foamy suds that filled the kitchen. This time it was Daddy. "Bart," he called in a normal voice, "come in and eat your dinner. No need to sulk. We know what you did was an accident. You are forgiven. We realize you were trying to help Emma, so come in."

On and on I sat, feeling guilty for making them suffer more. Panic had been in Momma's voice, as if she really did love me, and how could she when I never did anything right? Wasn't fit for her to love.

The pain in my knee was much worse. Maybe I had lock-jaw. Kids at school had told me all about how it made your jaws lock together so you couldn't eat, making doctors knock out your front teeth so they could put a tube in your mouth and you could suck in soup. Soon the ambulance would come screaming down our street, and, with me inside it, would sound its siren all the way to Daddy's hospital. They'd rush me to the emergency room and a masked surgeon would shout: "Off with his rotten, stinking leg!" They'd hack it off short, and I'd be left with a stump full of poison that would put me in my coffin.

Then they'd put me in that cemetery in Clairmont, South Carolina. Aunt Carrie would be at my side, and at last she'd have someone small like her to keep her company. But I

wouldn't be Cory. I was me, the black sheep of the family—so John Amos had called me once when he was mad about me playing with his “choppers.”

On my back, with my arms crossed over my chest, I lay just like Malcolm Neal Foxworth, staring upward as I waited for winter to come and go and summer to bring Momma, Daddy, Jory, Cindy, and Emma to my grave. Bet they wouldn't bring *me* pretty flowers. Down in my grave I'd stiffly smile, not letting them know I liked the killer Spanish moss much better than I liked the smelly roses with prickly thorns.

My family would leave. I'd be trapped in the ground, in the dark, forever and ever. When at last I was in the cold-cold ground, and the snow lay all around, I wouldn't have to pretend to be like Malcolm Neal Foxworth. I pictured Malcolm when he was old. Frail, with thin hair and a limp like John Amos, and only a little better-looking John Amos, who was very ugly.

Just in the nick of time, I was solving all Momma's problems and Cindy could live on and on in peace.

Now that I was dead.

Wounds of War



Dinnertime came and went. Bedtime was drawing nearer and still Bart didn't show up. We had all searched, but I was the one who kept it up longest. I was the one who knew him best. "Jory," said Mom, "if you don't find him in ten more minutes I'm calling the police."

"I'll find him," I said, not nearly as confident as I tried to sound. I didn't like what Bart was doing to our parents. They were trying to do the best they could for us. They weren't getting any big kick out of visiting Disneyland for the fourth time. That was Bart's treat, and he was too dumb to understand.

He was bad, too. Dad and Mom should punish him severely, not indulge him like they did. He'd know, at least, that they cared enough to punish him for his wicked ways.

Yet when I'd mentioned this to them once or twice, both had explained they'd learned in the worst way about parents who were strict and cruel. I'd thought it odd at the time that both of them had come from the same kind of heartless parents, but my teacher often said that likes were attracted to one another more than opposites. All I had to do was look at them to know this was true. Both had the same shade of blonde hair, the same color blue eyes, and the same dark eyebrows and long, black, curling lashes—though Momma used mascara, which made Daddy tease her, for he didn't think she needed any.

No, they wouldn't punish Bart severely even when he was wicked, for they had found out firsthand what harm it could do.

Boy did Bart love to talk about wickedness and sin. A new kind of talk, like he'd been reading the Bible and taking from it the kind of ideas that some preachers screamed out behind

the pulpits. He could even quote passages from the Bible—something from the song of Solomon, and a brother’s love for his sister whose breasts were like ...

Gee, I didn’t even like to think about that kind of thing. Made me feel so uneasy, even more uneasy than when Bart spoke of how he hated graves, ole ladies, cemeteries, and almost everything else. Hate was an emotion he felt often, poor kid.

I checked his little cave in the shrubs and saw a bit of cloth torn from this shirt. But he wasn’t there now. I picked up a board meant for the top of the doghouse Bart was building, and stared at the rusty, bloody end of the nail.

Had he hurt himself with his nail and crawled off somewhere to die? Dying was all he talked about lately, excluding talk of those already dead. He was always crawling around, sniffing the ground like a dog, even relieving himself like a dog. Boy, he was a mixed-up little kid.

“Bart, it’s Jory. If you want to stay out all night, I’ll let you, and won’t tell our parents ... just make some noise so I can know you’re alive.”

Nothing.

Our yard was big, full of shrubs and trees and blooming bushes Mom and Dad had planted. I circled a camellia bush. Oh, golly—was that Bart’s bare foot?

There he was, half under the hedge, with only his legs stretched out. I’d overlooked him before because this was not his usual place to hide. It was really dark now, the fog making it even more difficult to see.

Gently I eased him out from the shrubs, wondering why he didn’t complain. I stared down at his flushed hot face, his murky eyes staring dully at me. “Don’t touch me,” he moaned. “Almost dead now ... almost there.”

I picked him up and ran with him in my arms. He was crying, telling me his leg hurt ... “Jory, I really don’t want to die, I don’t.”

By the time Dad picked him up and put him in his car, he was unconscious. “I don’t believe this,” said Dad. “That leg of his is swollen three times larger than it should be. I only pray he doesn’t have gas gangrene.”

I knew about gangrene—it could kill people!

In the hospital Bart was put to bed immediately, and other doctors came to check over his leg. They tried to force Dad to leave the room, since it was professional ethics for doctors not to treat someone in their own family. Too emotionally involved, I guessed.

“No!” stormed Dad, “he’s my son, and I’m staying to see what’s done for him!” Mom cried all the time, kneeling and holding on to Bart’s slack hand. I was sick inside too, thinking I hadn’t done nearly enough to help Bart.

“Apple, Apple,” whimpered Bart whenever his eyes opened. “Gotta have Apple.”

“Chris,” said Mom, “can’t he have an apple?”

“No. He can’t eat in his condition.”

What a terrible state he was in. Sweat beaded on his forehead and his small, thin body soaked the sheets. Mom began to really sob. “Take your mother out of this room,” ordered Dad. “I don’t want her to watch all of this.”

As Mom cried in the waiting room down the hall, I stole back inside Bart’s private room and watched Dad shoot penicillin into Bart’s arm. I held my breath. “Is he allergic to penicillin?” asked another doctor. “I don’t know,” said Dad in a calm way. “He’s never had a serious infection before. At this point there isn’t much else we can do but take a chance. Get everything ready in case he reacts.” He turned to see me crouched in the corner, trying to stay out of the way. “Son, go to your mother. There’s nothing you can do to help here.”

I couldn’t move. For some reason, perhaps guilt for neglecting my brother, I had to stay and see him through. Soon enough Bart was in worse trouble. Dad frowned, signaled a nurse, and two more doctors came. One of them inserted a tube in Bart’s nostril. Next something so dreadful happened I

couldn't believe my eyes. All over his body, Bart was breaking out in huge, swollen welts. Red as fire, and they itched, too, because his hand kept moving from one patch of fire to another. Then Dad was lifting Bart and putting him on a stretcher so orderlies could wheel him away.

"Dad!" I cried, "where is that stretcher going? They're not going to take off his leg, are they?"

"No, son," he said calmly. "Your brother is having a severe allergic reaction. We have to move fast and perform a tracheotomy before his throat tissues become inflamed and cut off his air passage."

"Chris," called the stretcher, "it's okay. Tom has cleared an air passage—no trache necessary."

A day passed and still Bart was no better. It seemed likely Bart would scratch himself raw and die from another kind of infection. With fascinated horror I stayed very late watching his stubby, swollen fingers work convulsively in useless efforts to relieve the torment of his itching body. His entire body was scarlet. I could tell his condition was serious from Dad's face and from the attitudes of the other professionals all around his bed. Then Bart's hands were bandaged so he couldn't scratch. Next his eyes puffed up so much they looked like two huge, red goose eggs. His lips swelled and protruded three inches beyond normal.

I couldn't believe all this could happen just on count of an allergic reaction.

"Oh!" cried out Mom, clinging tightly to Dad, her tired eyes glued on Bart. He'd been sick forever, or so it seemed. Two days passed and still Bart was no better. He'd spent his tenth birthday on a hospital bed, delirious and raving, his fourth trip to Disneyland canceled, our trip back to South Carolina put off for another year.

"Look," said Dad, pointing with a glow of hope on his tired face. "The hives are diminishing."

The second hurdle cleared. I thought now Bart would get well fast. Wasn't so. His leg grew ever larger—and soon he

proved allergic to every antibiotic they had. “What are we going to do now?” cried Mom with so much anxiety I feared for *her* health.

“We’re doing everything we can,” was all Dad would say.

“Oh, Lord, why hast thou forsaken me?” mumbled Bart in his delirium. Tears streamed down my face and fell on my shirt like rain.

“The Lord has not forsaken you,” said Dad. He knelt by Bart’s bed and prayed, holding fast to his small hand while Mom slept on a cot put in the room for her to use. She didn’t know the pills Dad had given her were tranquilizers, not aspirin for her headache. She’d been too upset to even notice the color.

Dad touched my head. “Go home and sleep, son. There’s only so much you can do, and you’ve done that.” Slowly I got up, stiff from sitting for so long, and headed for the door. When I gave Bart one more long last glance, I saw him tossing restlessly as my father fitted himself on the cot behind my mother.

The next day Mom had to rush to the hospital from ballet class, leaving me to warm up to piano music. “Life goes on, Jory. Forget your brother’s problems for a while, if you can, and join us later on.” No sooner was she out of sight than something dawned on me. Apple! Of course! Bart didn’t want *an apple* ... he wanted his dog. His puppy-pony!

In ten minutes I was out of my leotards and in a telephone booth calling my father. “How’s Bart?” I asked.

“Not very good. Jory, I don’t know how to tell your mother, but the specialist working on Bart wants to amputate his leg before the infection has a chance to weaken him more. I can’t let him do that—and yet, we don’t want to lose Bart.”

“Don’t you let them amputate!” I almost screamed. “You tell Bart—and make him hear—that I’m going home to take care of Apple. Please let Bart keep both his legs.” God knows, Bart would feel even more inferior if he lost one.

“Jory, your brother lies on his bed and refuses to cooperate. He isn’t trying to recover. It seems he wants to die. We can’t give him any kind of antibiotic and his temperature is steadily rising. But I’m with you. There must be something we can do to bring down that fever.”

* * *

For the first time in my life I hitched a ride home. A nice lady let me off at the bottom of the hill and I raced the rest of the way. Once Bart knew Apple was okay he’d get well. He was punishing himself, just the way he beat his fists against the rough bark of a tree when he broke something. I sobbed with the realization my kid brother was more important to me than I’d known before. Nutty little kid who didn’t like himself very much. Hiding in his pretend games, telling tall tales so everyone would be impressed. Dad had told me a long time ago, “... indulge him in his pretense, Jory.” But maybe we’d indulged him too much.

I gasped when I saw Apple in the barn of the mansion. He was chained to a stake driven into the ground of the floor. A dish of moist dog food was placed just beyond his reach.

His thick shaggy fur told the story of his hunger. He was ragged, panting, looking at me with huge pleading eyes. Who had done this? He’d clawed the ground in his futile efforts to dig free, and now, still only an overgrown puppy, he lay and panted in the barn, which had been closed and shuttered cruelly.

“It’s all right, boy,” I soothed, as I set about getting him fresh water. He lapped it up so thirstily I had to take it away. I knew a little about doctoring. Dogs, like people, had to drink sparingly after a long thirst. Next I set him free and went to his shelf of supplies and took what looked best to me from a long row of cans. Apple was starving in the midst of plenty. I could feel his ribs when I ran my hands over his pitiful shabby coat that had been so beautiful.

When he’d eaten and had his fill of water, I curry-combed his thick mat of hair. Then I sat on the dirt floor and held his huge head on my lap. “Bart’s coming home to you, Apple.

He'll have two good legs too, I promise. I don't know who did this to you and why, but you can bet I'll find out." What worried me most was the awful suspicion that the very person who loved Apple most might be the very one who'd starved and punished his pet. Bart had such an odd way of reasoning. To his way of thinking, if Apple really suffered when he was gone, Apple would be ten times more grateful to see him.

Could Bart be that heartlessly cruel?

Outside, the July day was mildly hot. As I approached the great mansion I heard the low voices of two people. That old woman in black and the creepy old butler, both of them seated on a cool patio lush with colorful potted palms, and ferns planted in huge stone urns.

"John, I feel should go down again and check on Bart's puppy. He was so happy to see me this morning, I couldn't understand why he was so hungry. Really, do you have to keep him chained up like that? It seems so cruel on a beautiful day like this."

"Madame, it is not a beautiful day," said the mean-looking butler, as he sipped a beer and sprawled in one of her chaise longues. "When you insist on wearing black, naturally you feel hotter than anyone else."

"I don't want your opinion on how I dress. I want to know why you keep Apple chained."

"Because the dog might run off to look for his young master," said John sarcastically. "I guess you didn't think of that."

"You could lock the barn door. I'm going down to look at him again. He seemed so thin, so desperate."

"Madame, if you have to concern yourself, make it worthy of the bother. Be concerned for your grandson, who is about to lose his leg!"

She'd half risen from her chair, but at this announcement she sank back on the pillows. "Oh. He's worse? Did Emma and Marta talk again this morning?"

I sighed, knowing Emma liked to gossip and she shouldn't. Though I honestly didn't think she'd say anything important. She never told me any secrets. And Mom never had time to listen.

"Of course they did," groused the butler. "Did you ever hear of a woman who didn't? Those two use stepladders every day to gab away. Though to hear Emma talk, the doctor and his wife are perfect."

"John, what did Marta find out about Bart? Tell me!"

"Well, Madame, it seems that kid has managed to drive a rusty nail into his knee and now he has gas gangrene—the kind of gangrene that demands amputation of the limb or the patient dies."

I stared from my hidden place at the two who sat and talked, the one very upset, the other totally unconcerned, almost amused at the reaction of his mistress.

"You're lying!" screamed the woman, jumping to her feet. "John, you tell me lies just to torture me more. I know Bart will be fine. His father will know what to do to help him recover. I know he will. He has to ..." And then she broke into tears. She took off the veil then and wiped at her tears, and I glimpsed her face, not noticing the scars so much this time, only her look of suffering. Did she really care so much for Bart? Why should she care? Could she really be Bart's grandmother?—naw, she couldn't be. His grandmother was in a mental institution in Virginia.

I stepped forward then to let my presence be known. She appeared surprised to see me, remembered her bare face, and hastily put on her veil again.

"Good morning," I said addressing myself to the lady and ignoring the old man I couldn't help but detest. "I heard what your butler said, ma'am, and he's right only to a certain extent. My brother is very ill, but he does not have gas gangrene. And he will not lose his leg. My father is much too good a doctor to let that happen."

“Jory, are you sure Bart will be all right?” she asked with so much concern. “He’s very dear to me ... I can’t tell you how much.” She choked and bowed her head, working her thin, ringed hands convulsively.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “If Bart wasn’t allergic to most of the drugs the doctors have given him, they would have destroyed the infection—but that won’t matter in the long run, for my dad will know what to do to help him. My father always knows just what to do.” I turned then toward the butler and tried to put on adult authority. “As for Apple, he does not need to be kept chained in a hot barn with all the windows shuttered over. And he doesn’t need to have his food and water placed just out of his reach. I don’t know what’s going on in this place, and why you want to make a nice dog like that suffer—but you’d better take good care of him if you don’t want me to report you to the humane society.” I whipped about and started toward home.

“Jory!” called the lady in black. “Stay! Don’t leave yet. I want to know more about Bart.”

Again I turned to look at her. “If you want to help my brother, there’s only one thing you can do—leave him alone! When he comes back, you tell him some nice reason why you can’t be bothered—but don’t you hurt his feelings.”

She spoke again, pleading for me to stay and talk, but I strode on, thinking I’d done something to protect Bart. To protect him from what, I didn’t know.

That very night Bart’s fever raged higher. His doctors ordered him to be wrapped in a thermal blanket that worked like a refrigerator. I watched my father, I watched my mother, I saw them look at each other, touch each other, giving each other strength. Strangely, both turned to pick up cubes of ice that they rubbed on Bart’s arms and legs, then his chest. Like one person with no need to speak. I choked up and bowed my head, feeling moved by their kind of love and understanding. I wanted then to speak up and tell them about the woman next door, but I’d promised Bart not to tell. He had the first friend in his life, the first pet that could tolerate him; yet the longer I withheld what I knew, the more my parents might be hurt in

the long run. Why did I have to think that? How could that old lady hurt my parents?

Somehow I knew she could. Someday I knew she would. I wished I were a man, with the ability to make right decisions.

As I grew sleepier, I remembered the expression Dad used so often: “God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.”

Next thing I knew Dad was shaking me awake. “Bart’s better!” he cried. “Bart’s going to keep his leg and recover!”

* * *

Slowly, day by day, that hideous swollen leg diminished in size. Gradually it turned a normal color, though Bart seemed listless and uncaring as he stared blankly ahead, not saying anything to anybody.

We were at the breakfast table one morning when Dad rubbed his tired eyes and informed us of something incredible. “Cathy, you’re not going to believe this, but the lab technicians found something odd in the culture they took from Bart’s wound. We suspected rust; they found rust, which caused the tetanus, but they also found the very kind of staphylococcus often associated with fresh animal feces. It’s truly a miracle Bart still had both of his legs.”

Looking pale and tired enough to be sick herself, Mom nodded before her head bowed weakly to his shoulder. “If Clover were still around, I’d easily understand how he might —”

“You know how our Bart is. If anything filthy is within a mile he’ll be the one to step on it, crawl in it, or pick it up and check it over. You know, when he kept on raving last night about apples I gave him one I’d bought and he let it fall to the floor, showing no interest.” Mom closed her eyes while he went on stroking her back and talking. “When I told him we weren’t flying East I could tell he was pleased.” He looked my way. “I hope you’re not too disappointed, Jory. We’ll have to wait until next summer to visit your grandmother, or maybe this Christmas I can get away.”

I was thinking mean thoughts. Bart always got what he wanted. He'd figured out a sure way to avoid visiting "ole" graves and "ole" grandmothers. He'd even given up Disneyland. And it wasn't like Bart to give up anything.

* * *

That evening I was with Bart alone, and Mom and Dad were in the hospital corridor talking to friends. I told Bart about the conversation I'd overheard between the old lady and her butler. "There they were, Bart, both of them on her terrace. She was so worried about you."

"She loves me," he whispered proudly, his voice very faint. "She loves me more than anybody," and here he looked thoughtful, "except perhaps, Apple."

Bart, I thought, don't think like that. But I couldn't speak and steal his pride in having found love outside his family. With mixed emotions I watched his expressive face, my own emotions a tumble of uncertainty. What kind of kid brother did I have? Surely he had to know his parents would love him more than anyone else.

"Grandmother is afraid of that ole butler," he said, "but I can handle him good. I've got hidden powers real powerful."

"Bart, why do you keep going over there?"

He shrugged and stared at the wall. "Don't know. Jus' wanna go there."

"You know that Dad would give you a dog, any kind you want. All you have to do is ask, and he'll give you a puppy just like Apple."

His fierce, angry eyes drilled a hole in me. "There ain't no other dog like my puppy-pony. Apple is special."

I changed the subject. "How do you know that woman is scared of her butler? Did she tell you?"

"She don't have to tell me. I can jus' tell. He looks at her mean. She looks at him scared."

Scared, the same way I was beginning to look at just about everything.

Homecoming



Nice the way Momma kept fussing over me. Wouldn't last. She'd change as soon as I got well. Two long long weeks in this stinking hospital that wanted to take my leg and burn it in their furnace. Made me happy to look down and see my leg still there. Boy, just wait until I went back to school and I told them how I nearly had an "amputated" leg. They'd be impressed. Was made of good stuff that refused to rot and die. And I hadn't cried. Was brave too.

I remembered how Daddy hovered over me, looking sad and worried. Maybe he really did love me even if I wasn't his own true son. "Daddy!" I cried when I saw him. "You got good news, I can tell."

"It's nice to see you bright and happy-looking." He sat on the side of my bed and pulled me into his arms before he gave me a big kiss. Embarrassing. "Bart, I have great news. Your temperature is normal. Your knee is healing nicely. But being a doctor's son has a few advantages. I'm signing you out today. If I don't I fear you'll fade away to nothing. Once you're home I know Emma's delicious food will soon put some meat on those bones."

He looked at me in a kind way, like I really mattered just as much as Jory; it made me want to cry. "Where's Momma?" I asked.

"I had to get away early, so she stayed home to arrange a special homecoming party for you—so you really can't mind, can you?"

Could so! Wanted her here! Bet she didn't come 'cause she had to fiddle around with that lil ole Cindy, putting ribbons in her hair. I kept my silence and allowed Daddy to carry me out to his car. Felt good to be out in the sun, going home.

In the foyer Daddy stood me on my wobbling legs. I stared at Momma, who went first to Daddy and kissed him on the cheek—when I was there, wanting to be kissed first. I knew why she'd done that. She was afraid of me now. She saw my skinny body, my ugly, bony face. She was forcing herself to smile when she looked my way. I cringed when she finally came my way to do her duty to her son who hadn't died. Look at her fake happiness. I knew she didn't love me, didn't really want me anymore. And there was Jory, too, smiling and pretending he was happy for me to be home again when I knew all of them would have been glad to see me dead. I felt like Malcolm when he'd been a little boy, unwanted and unneeded, and so darn miserable.

“Bart, my darling!” said Momma. “Why do you look unhappy? Aren't you glad to be home?” She gathered me in her arms and tried to kiss me, but I yanked away. Saw her hurt face but that didn't count. She was only pretending, like I had to pretend all the time.

“It's so wonderful to have you here again, sweetheart,” she went on with her lies. “Emma and I have been busy all morning planning just what we can do to make you happy. Since you complained so much about the awful hospital food, we've made all your favorite dishes.” She smiled again and reached once more to hug me, but I wasn't gonna let her get under my skin with her “feminine wiles” John Amos had told me about. Good food and smiles and kisses were all parts of “feminine wiles.”

“Bart, don't look so skeptical. Emma and I did fix *every one* of your favorite dishes.” I stared at her. She turned red, then said with an effort, “You know, the ones you like best.”

She went on forcing herself to be nice as Daddy came up and gave me a short cane. “Bear most of your weight on that until your knee is stronger.”

Kinda fun hobbling around like an old man, like Malcolm Foxworth. Liked having them fuss over me, worried when I wouldn't eat. None of the presents they had for me were as good as what my grandmother next door would give. “Good gosh, Bart,” whispered Jory during dinner, “do you have to act

so ungrateful? Everybody went to an awful lot of trouble to please you.”

“Hate apple pie.”

“You said before apple pie was your favorite kind.”

“Never said that! Hate chicken, too, and mashed potatoes, green salads—hate everything!”

“I believe it,” said a disgusted brother who turned his back and ignored someone as picky as me. Then he reached to take a chicken leg from my plate. “Well ... as long as you don’t want it, it shouldn’t go to waste.” He ate every last piece of the chicken. Now I couldn’t sneak into the kitchen late at night and stuff myself when they weren’t watching. Let ’em all worry about me fading away to skin and bones, ending up in a damp, cold grave. Let ’em find out how much they missed me.

“Bart, please try and eat a little something,” pleaded Momma. “What’s wrong with the pie?”

I scowled, then slapped Jory’s hand when he reached to take my slice of pie. “Can’t eat pie without ice cream on top.”

She smiled at me brilliantly, then called, “Emma, bring in the ice cream.”

I shoved my plate away and slouched in my chair. “Don’t feel so good. Need to be alone. Don’t like people making such a fuss over me. Spoils my appetite.”

Daddy looked as if he were losing patience with me. He didn’t scold Jory for taking my pie either. That’s all it took— one hour and they were tired of me and wishing I had died.

“Cathy,” said Daddy, “don’t plead with Bart anymore. If he doesn’t want to eat he can excuse himself. He’ll eat when he’s hungry enough.”

Stomach was rumbling right now. I couldn’t eat that stuff in front of me now that Jory had taken away what I wanted most. There I sat, starving, while everyone forgot me and began to talk, laugh, and act like I was still in the hospital. I got up and hobbled toward my room. Daddy called, “Bart, I don’t want you playing outside until that leg has time to heal thoroughly.

Take a nap with your leg propped up. Later on you can watch television.”

TV. What kind of homecoming treat was that? Appearing obedient, I entered my bedroom and stood near the doorway so I could shout to those in the dining room, “Don’t nobody disturb my rest!”

Kept me two weeks in that hospital, and now I was home they were gonna keep me locked inside some more. I’d show ’em! Nobody was gonna keep me inside for another rotten week! But somebody kept an eye on me night and day before finally I could escape through the window after six whole days of being kept a prisoner. Already I’d missed too much of summer, and my Disneyland trip. Wasn’t gonna miss anything else.

The big ole tree by the wall was not friendly, making it harder for me to climb. By the time I was next door my leg would ache. Pain wasn’t nearly as good as I’d thought it would be. Being “normal” wasn’t so hot. Jory sprained his ankle once and went right on dancing, ignoring the pain. I could ignore pain too.

When I was on top of the wall I looked behind to see who might be following. Nobody. Nobody cared what I did to hurt myself. Began to sniff—what was that rotten stinking smell coming from out of the hollow oak tree? Ah, I could just remember. Something dead in the hollow tree. What was it? Couldn’t remember good anymore. Mind was fuzzy, full of mists that rolled like the fog.

Apple, better to think of Apple. Forget the stiff and aching knee by pretending it belonged to some frail ole man like Malcolm grew up to be. My young leg wanted to run, but my old one controlled all of me, taking over my mind, forcing me to lean heavily on my cane.

Ohh! What a pitiful sight it would be to see poor Apple lying dead in the barn. A pitiful bag of fur, skin, and bones. I’d cry, scream, hate those who’d tried to force me to fly East and abandon the very best friend I had. Animals were the only ones who knew how to really love with devotion.

A hundred years had come and gone since last I came this way before. More years passed, it seemed, while I limped to its doors. Get a grip on yourself, I thought. Steel your spine, like Malcolm steeled his. Prepare your eyes for a grisly sight, for Apple loved you too much, and now he had to pay the price by dying. Never, never again would I find such a true friend as the puppy-pony who'd been my Apple.

My balance, never good, swayed me right to left, from front to back, and made me feel hazy and crazy. I sensed something was behind me. I peeked over my shoulder and saw no one there. Nothing but those frightening animal shapes that were only green shrubs. Stupid gardeners should have something better to do than waste their time snipping at bushes when real money was out there waiting for real brains to pick it up. Thinking now just like Malcolm; John Amos would be pleased. Had to hunt up John Amos so he could smarten up my brains some more.

Suspecting the worst, I approached the place that Apple liked most. Now I couldn't see. Gone blind! My cane tapped the ground ahead of me. Dark. Why was it so dark? I inched along, peering this way and that. All the barn shutters were closed. Poor Apple, left in the dark to starve. A lump rose in my throat while I cried inside for a pet who'd loved me more than life itself.

I had to force myself to take another step forward. To see Apple dead would scar my soul, my eternal soul which John Amos said had to stay clean and pure if I was to get to heaven's pearly gates where Malcolm had gone.

One step more. I stopped. There was my Apple—and he wasn't dead! He was in a stall with the window open and he was chasing a red ball, swatting it with his huge pawlike hoofs—and there was plenty of food in his dish. Clean water in his bowl too. I stood there shaking all over as Apple ignored me and went on playing like I wasn't even there. *Why, he hadn't missed me at all!*

“YOU! YOU!” I screamed. “You've been eating and drinking, and having a good time! And all the time I was at death's door and you didn't care. And I thought you loved me.

I thought you'd miss me a whole lot. And now you don't even bark-whinny to tell me you're glad I'm back! I HATE YOU, APPLE! HATE YOU FOR NOT CARING ENOUGH!"

Apple saw me then and ran to me, leaping to put his huge paw-hoofs on my shoulders as he slurped my face. His tail wagged furiously, but he wasn't fooling me. He'd found someone else to take care of him better—darn if *I'd* made his coat look so pretty. "Why didn't you die from loneliness?" I shrieked. I glared hatred at him, wanting him to wither away and disappear. He sensed my anger and dropped to all fours and stood with his tail between his legs and his head hanging down, his eyes rolled slantwise.

"YOU GET AWAY FROM ME! YOU NEED TO SUFFER AS I SUFFERED! THEN YOU'LL BE GLAD TO HAVE ME BACK!" I took all his food, his water, and threw them in a wooden barrel. I picked up his red ball and hurled that so far he'd never find it. All the time Apple stood there, watching, not wagging his tail. He wanted me back, but now it was too late.

"You'll miss me now," I sobbed, stumbling away, locking him in the barn with all the windows closed and the shutters too. "Stay in darkness and die of hunger! I'll never come back, never!"

No sooner was I in the sunlight than I thought of the nice soft hay he had inside to lie on. I went into the barn again, seized up a pitchfork and raked all the hay away. He was whimpering now, trying to nuzzle up to me. Wouldn't let him. "You lie on the cold, hard floor! It will make all your bones ache, but I don't care, for I don't love you now!" Angry, I wiped the tears away and scratched my face.

In all my life I'd made only three friends. Apple, my grandmother, and John Amos. Apple had killed my love, and one of the other two had betrayed me by feeding him and stealing his love. John Amos wouldn't bother—had to be Grandmother.

Drifted home in a daze. That night my leg ached so badly Daddy came in and gave me a pill. He sat on the side of my

bed and held me in his arms, making me feel safe as he spoke softly about falling into sweet dreams.

Fell into ugliness. Dead ones everywhere. Blood gushing out in great rivers, taking pieces of human beings down into the oceans of fire. Dead. I was dead. Funeral flowers on the altar. People sent me flowers who didn't know me, telling me they were glad to see me dead. Heard the sea of fire play devil music, making me hate music and dancing even more than I had.

The sun came in my window and fell on my face, stealing me from the devil's grasp. When I opened my eyes, terrified of what I might see, I saw only Jory at the foot of my bed, looking at me with pity. Didn't need pity. "Bart, you cried last night. I'm sorry your leg still hurts."

"Leg don't hurt at all!" I yelled.

Got up to go limping into the kitchen where Momma was feeding Cindy. Blasted Cindy. Emma was frying bacon for my breakfast. "Coffee and toast only," I yelled. "That's all I want to eat."

Momma winced, then looked up with her face strangely pale. "Bart, please don't yell. And you don't drink coffee. Why would you ask for coffee?"

"Time I started acting my age!" I barked. Carefully I eased myself down into Daddy's chair with arms. Daddy came in and saw me in his chair, but he didn't order me out. He just used my armless chair, then poured coffee into a cup until it was half full. He filled the cup to an inch of the brim with cream and then gave it to me.

"Hate cream in my coffee!"

"How can you be so sure when you haven't tried it?"

"Just know." I refused to drink the coffee he'd spoiled. (Malcolm like his coffee black—and so would I from now on.) Now all I had before me was dry toast—and if I had to be like Malcolm and grow smart brains, I couldn't spread butter and strawberry jam on my toast. Indigestion. Like Malcolm, had to worry about indigestion.

“Daddy, what’s indigestion?”

“Something you don’t need to have.”

Sure was hard trying to be like Malcolm all the time. Seconds later Daddy was down on his knees, checking over my bad leg. “It looks worse today than it did yesterday,” he said as he lifted his head, met my eyes, and scowled suspiciously. “Bart, you haven’t been crawling on this bad knee, have you?”

“No!” I yelled, “I’m not crazy! The covers rubbed off some of my skin. Rough sheets. Hate cotton sheets. Like silk ones best.” (Malcolm wouldn’t sleep on anything but silk.)

“How would you know?” asked Daddy. “You’ve never had silk sheets.” He continued to care for my knee, washing it first and then sprinkling on some white powder before covering my wound with a gauze pad held on with sticky tape. “Now, I’m serious, Bart. I warn you to stay off that knee. You stay in the house, out of the garden, or sit on the back veranda—no crawling in the dirt.”

“It’s a patio.” I scowled to let him know he didn’t know everything.

“All right, a patio—does that make you feel happy?”

No. Never was happy. Then I gave it more thought. Yes, I was happy sometimes—when I was pretending to be Malcolm, the all-powerful, the richest, the smartest. Playing the role of Malcolm was easy and better than anything or anyone else. Somehow I knew if I kept it up I’d end up just like Malcolm—rich, powerful, loved.

Longest kind of dull day dragged on endlessly with everybody keeping a close eye on me. Twilight came, and Momma got busy making herself prettier for Daddy who was due home any minute. Emma was fixing dinner. Jory was in his ballet class, and I slipped off the patio unseen. Down into the garden I hurried before anybody stopped me.

Evening time was spooky, with long, mean shadows. All the little humming, buzzing creatures of night came out and swarmed about my head. I fanned them away. I was going to

John Amos. He was sitting alone in his room, reading some magazine that he hid as quickly as I entered without knocking. “You shouldn’t do that,” he said sourly, not even smiling to say he was glad I was alive, with two legs.

It was easy to put on Malcolm’s glum look and scare him. “Did you give Apple water and food while I was sick?”

“Of course not,” he said eagerly. “It was your grandmother who fed him and cared for him. I told you women can never be trusted to keep their word. Corrine Foxworth is no better than any other women with their wiles to trick men into being slaves.”

“Corrine Foxworth—is that her name?”

“Of course, I’ve told you that before. She is Malcolm’s daughter. He named her after his mother so he’d always be reminded of how false women are, how even a daughter could betray him—though he loved her well, too well, in my opinion.”

I was growing bored of tales of women and their “wiles.” “Why don’t you get your teeth fixed?” I asked. I didn’t like the way he hissed and whistled through teeth too loose.

“Good! You said that just like Malcolm. You’re learning. Being sick has been good for your soul—as it was for his. Now, listen carefully, Bart. Corrine is your real grandmother and was once married to your real father. She was Malcolm’s most beloved child and she betrayed him by doing something so sinful she has to be punished.”

“Has to be punished?”

“Yes, punished severely, but you are not to let her know your feelings for her have changed. Pretend you still love her, still admire her. And in that way she will be made vulnerable.”

Knew what vulnerable meant. Another of those words I had to learn. Weak, bad to be weak. John Amos went for his Bible and put my hand on its worn black cover, all cracked and peeling. “Malcolm’s own Bible,” he said. “He left it to me in his will ... though he could have left me more ...”

I realized that John Amos was the one person in the world who had not yet disappointed me. Here was the true friend I needed. Old—but I could be old too when I wanted. Though I couldn't take my teeth from my mouth and put them in an ivory-colored cup.

I stared at the Bible, wanting to pull my hand away but afraid of what might happen if I did. “Swear on this Bible that you will do as Malcolm would have wanted his great-grandson to do—wreak vengeance against those who harmed him most.”

How could I promise what he wanted, when a little of me still loved her? Maybe John Amos was lying. Maybe Jory had fed Apple.

“Bart, why do you hesitate? Are you a weakling? Have you no spine? Look again at your mother, at how she uses her body, her pretty face, her soft kisses and hugs to make your father do anything she wants. Take notice of how late he works at night, how tired he is when he comes home. Ask yourself why. Does he do it for himself—or for her, so he can buy her new clothes, fur coats, jewelry, and a big fine house to live in. That's how women use men, making them work while they play.”

I swallowed. Momma had a job. She taught ballet dancing. But that was more fun than work, wasn't it? Did she ever buy anything with her money? Couldn't remember.

“Now, you go in to see your grandmother, and be like you were before, and soon you will find out who betrayed you. It wasn't me. You go in and pretend you are Malcolm. Call her Corrine—watch the guilt and shame flood her face, watch her eyes show fear, and you will know which one of us is loyal and trustworthy.”

I had sworn hurt on those who had betrayed Malcolm, but I wasn't happy with myself as I limped on to the front parlor she like best of all. I stood in the doorway and stared at her, my heart pounding, for I wanted so much to run to her arms and sit on her lap. Was it right for me to pretend to be Malcolm when I hadn't given her a chance to explain?

“Corrine,” I said in a gruff voice. Oh, the game was so good, I couldn’t be just Bart and feel secure. When I was Malcolm I felt so strong, so right.

“Bart,” she cried happily, rising to extend her arms. “You’ve finally come to see me! I’m so glad to see you well and strong again.” Then she hesitated. “Who told you my name?”

“John Amos told me.” I said frowning at her. “He told me you fed Apple and gave him water while I was away. Is that true?”

“Yes, darling, of course I did what I could for Apple. He missed you so much I pitied him. Surely you aren’t angry.”

“You stole him from me,” I cried like a baby. “He was the best friend I ever had; the only one who really loved me, and you stole him away so now he likes you better.”

“No he doesn’t. Bart, he likes me, but he loves you.”

Now she wasn’t smiling and pleased-looking. Just like John Amos had said, she knew I was on to her wiles. She was gonna tell me more lies. “Don’t speak to me so gruffly,” she begged. “It doesn’t become a boy of ten years. Darling, you’ve been gone so long, and I’ve missed you so much. Can’t you even show me a little affection?”

Suddenly, despite my promise, I was running into her arms and throwing my arms about her. “Grandmother! I really did hurt my knee bad! I was sweating so much my bed was wet. They wrapped me in a cold blanket and Momma and Daddy rubbed me down with ice. There was a man doctor who wanted to cut off my leg, but Daddy wouldn’t let him. That doctor said he was glad I wasn’t his son.” I paused to take a breath. I forgot all about Malcolm. “Grandmother, I found out my daddy loves me after all—or else he would have been glad for that doctor to cut off my leg.”

She seemed shocked. “Bart, for heaven’s sake! How can you have the slightest doubt that he loves you? Of course he does. He’d have to love you, and Christopher was always a kind, loving boy ...”

How did she know my daddy's name was Christopher? I narrowed my eyes. She was holding her hands over her mouth like she'd given away some secret. Then she was crying.

Tears. One of the ways women had to work men.

I turned away. Hated tears. Hated people who were weak. I put my hand on my shirtfront and felt the hard cover of Malcolm's book against my bare chest. That book was giving me his strength, transferring it from the pages to my blood. What if I did wear a child's weak, imperfect body? What difference did it make when soon she'd know just who was her master?

Home, had to get home before they missed me.

"Good night, Corrine."

I left her crying, still wondering how she knew my daddy's name.

In my garden I checked my peach pit again. No roots yet. I dug up my sweetpeas again. Still not sprouting. I didn't have luck with flowers, with peach pits, with nothing. With nothing but playing Malcolm the powerful. At that I was getting better and better. Smiling and happy, I went to bed.

The Horns of Dilemma



Never was Bart in our yard where he should be. I climbed the tree and sat on the wall, and then I saw Bart over in that lady's yard, down on his knees crawling. Sniffing the ground like a dog. "Bart!" I yelled, "Clover's gone, and you can't take his place."

I knew what he was doing—burying a bone and then sniffing around until he found it. He looked up, his eyes glazed and disoriented—and then he began to bark.

I yelled to set him straight, but he went on playing the frolicking puppy before he suddenly became an old man who dragged his leg. And it wasn't even the leg he'd hurt. What a nut he was. "Bart, straighten up! You're ten, not a hundred. If you keep walking crooked you'll grow that way."

"Crooked days make crooked ways."

"You don't make good sense."

"And the Lord said: 'do unto others as they have done unto you.'"

"Wrong. The correct quotation is: 'Do unto others *as you would have done unto you.*'" I reached to assist what seemed to be an old man. Bart scowled, panted, grabbed at his chest, then cried out about his bad heart that shouldn't have to endure tree-climbing.

"Bart, I'm fed up with you. All you do is make trouble. Have some sympathy for Mom and Dad—and me. It's going to be embarrassing having you for my brother when we go back to school."

He limped along behind me as I headed toward home, still panting, muttering between moans about how already he was a

master of finances. “Never was born a brain more clever than mine,” he mumbled.

He has really gone bananas, was all I could think as I listened to him. When he’d scrubbed his filthy hands with a brush as if he really wanted to get them clean, I gasped. That wasn’t like Bart at all. He was still pretending to be someone else. Soon he had his teeth clean and was in bed. I ran fast to where I could eavesdrop on my parents, who were in the living room dancing to slow music.

As always, something sweet, soft, and romantic stole over me to see them like that. The tender way she looked at him; the gentle way he touched her. I cleared my throat before they did anything too intimate. Without changing their positions, both looked at me questioningly. “Yes, Jory,” said Mom, her blue eyes dreamy.

“I want to talk to you about Bart,” I said. “I think there are a few things you should know.”

Dad looked relieved. Mom seemed to shrink into herself as she quietly sat beside Dad on the sofa. “We’ve been hoping you would come to us with Bart’s secret.”

None of it was easy to say. “Well,” I began slowly, hoping to find the right words, “first, you should know Bart has lots of nightmares in which he wakes up crying. He pretends too much, such as hunting big game and normal kid stuff like that, but when I catch him crawling around sniffing the ground, then digging up a nasty old bone and carrying it between his teeth to bury it somewhere else, that’s going too far.” I paused and waited for them to say something. Mom had her head turned as if she were listening to hear the wind. Dad leaned forward, watching me intensely.

“Go on, Jory,” he urged. “Don’t stop now. We’re not blind. We see how Bart is changing.”

Dreading to tell more, I hung my head and spoke very low. “I’ve tried several times to tell you before. I was afraid then too. You’ve both been so worried about Bart that I couldn’t speak.”

“Please don’t hold anything back,” Dad said.

I looked only at my father, unable to meet my mother’s fearful gaze. “The lady next door gives Bart all sorts of expensive gifts. She’s given him a St. Bernard puppy he calls Apple, two miniature electric trains along with a small village and mountain settings—the complete works. She’s had one huge room of hers turned into a playroom just for him. She would give me gifts too, but Bart won’t let her.”

Stunned, they turned to one another. Finally Dad said, “What else?”

I swallowed and heard my odd, husky voice. This was the worst part, the part that really hurt. “Yesterday I was in the backyard near the wall ... you know, where that hollow tree is. I had the hedge clippers and was pruning like you showed me, Dad, when I smelled something putrid. It seemed to come from that hole in the tree. When I checked ... I found ...” Again I had to swallow before I could say it. “*I found Clover.* He was dead and decaying. I dug a grave for him.” Hastily I turned my back to wipe away tears, then I told them the rest. “I found a wire twisted around his neck. Somebody deliberately murdered my dog!”

They just sat on the sofa looking shocked and scared. Mom blinked back her tears; she too had loved Clover. Her hands trembled when she reached for a handkerchief. Next she locked her nervous hands together and kept them on her lap. Neither she nor Dad asked who had killed Clover. I figured they thought the same as I did.

Before he went to bed, Dad came into my room and talked to me for an hour, asking all sorts of questions about Bart, what he did with his time, where he went, and about the woman next door, and that butler too. I felt better now that I’d warned them. Now they could plan what to do with Bart. And I cried that night for the last time over Clover, who had been my first and only pet. I was going on fifteen, almost a man’s age, and tears were only for little boys—not for someone almost six feet tall.

* * *

“You leave me alone!” yelled Bart when I asked him not to go next door. “You stop telling tales on me or you’ll be sorry.”

Each day took us closer to September and school days. As far as I could see, Bart wasn’t responding to the tender loving care my parents gave him. They were too understanding in my opinion. “You listen to me, Bart, and stop pretending you’re an old man named Malcolm Neal Foxworth, whoever he is!” But Bart couldn’t let go of his pretend limp, his fake bad heart that made him gasp and pant. “Nobody is waiting for you to die to inherit your fortune. Dear little brother, you don’t have any fortune!”

“Got twenty billion, ten million, fifty-five thousand, and six hundred and forty-two cents!” He used his fingers to tally up. “But I can’t remember how much I have in stocks and bonds, so I guess you could triple that figure. A man isn’t rich if he can name what he owns.”

I hadn’t known he could even name a figure like that. Just when I would say something sarcastic, Bart let out a yelp and doubled over. He fell to the floor and gasped. “Quick ... my pills. I’m dying! My left arm is going numb! Save me, send for my doctors!”

That’s when I left the house and went outdoors. I sat on a lawn chair and pulled out a paperback novel to read. Bart was getting to me, really getting to me. It was like living with Jekyll and Hyde. If he had to act, why the heck didn’t he choose some role better than a lame old guy with a bad heart?

“Jory, don’t you care if I die?” Bart came out and asked me.

“Nope.”

“You’ve never liked me!”

“I liked you better when you acted your own age.”

“Would you believe Malcolm Neal Foxworth is the father of that lady next door, and she is my real grandmother, truly my own grandmother?”

“She told you that?”

“No. John Amos told me some, she told me more. John Amos tells me lots of stuff. He told me Daddy Paul and Daddy Chris were not brothers, that my momma only said that so we wouldn’t find out her sin. He says a man named Bartholomew Winslow was my real daddy and he died in a fire. Our mother seduced him.”

Seduced? I gave him a long searching look. “Do you know what that word means?”

“Nope—but I know it’s bad, *real* bad!”

“Do you love our mother?”

Worry tormented his dark eyes. He sat heavily on the ground and contemplated his sneakers. He should have answered quickly, spontaneously. “Bart, do me a big favor and yourself too—go into the house and tell Mom and Dad what’s bothering you. They’ll understand anything. I know you think Mom loves me best, but it’s not so. She has room in her heart for ten children.”

“Ten?” he screamed. “You mean Momma is gonna adopt more?” He jumped up and ran then, haltingly, as if pretending to be old had made him lose what little agility he had. That hospital stay had robbed him of a great many things, in my opinion.

It was sneaky of me and not quite honorable, but I had to hear what Bart told our mother when they were alone. She was on the back veranda. Cindy was on her lap, dozing as Mom read a book. When Bart ran up she quickly put the book down, then shifted Cindy onto a nearby chair as Bart stood staring at her, mutely pleading with his eyes.

Then, of all things, he asked, “What’s your name?”

“You know my name,” she said.

“Does it begin with a C?”

“Yes, of course it does.” Now she looked disturbed.

“But—but—” he stumbled, “I know someone who cries after you go away. Someone little like me who is locked in closets and other scary places by his father, who doesn’t like

him anymore. Once the father put him in the attic for punishment. Big, dark, scary attic with mice and spooky shadows and spiders everywhere.”

She seemed to freeze. “Who told you all of that?”

“His stepmother had dark red hair until he found out she was only his father’s paramour.”

Even from where I hid I could hear Momma breathing hard and fast, as if that small boy she lifted on her lap had suddenly turned dangerous. “Darling, you don’t know what a paramour is, do you?”

He stared ahead into space. “There was a lady slender and fair who had red in her dark-dark hair. And she wasn’t even married to his father who didn’t care what he did, how he cried, or even if he died.”

Her lips trembled, but she forced a smile. “Bart, I believe you have some poet in you. All that has a cadence, and it rhymes, too.”

He scowled, turning dark burning eyes on her. “I despise poets, artists, musicians, dancers!”

She shivered, and I can’t say I blamed her. He scared me, too. “Bart, I have to ask you this, and you must give me a truthful answer. Remember, no matter what you say you won’t be punished. Did you hurt Clover?”

“Clover done gone away. Won’t come back to live in my doghouse now.”

She pushed him away then and quickly got up to leave the patio. Then she remembered Cindy and rushed back to pick her up. None of what she did made me feel better as I watched Bart’s eyes.

* * *

As always, soon after one of his mean “attacks,” Bart grew tired and sleepy and went to bed without his dinner. My mother smiled, laughed, and dressed to attend a formal celebration in honor of my father, who had been voted chief-

of-staff of his hospital. I stood at the window and watched Dad lead her proudly to his car.

Late, way after two, I heard them come in. I had yet to fall asleep, and I could hear their conversation in the living room.

“Chris, I don’t understand Bart at all, the way he talks, the way he moves, or even how he looks. I feel afraid of my own son, and that’s sick.”

“Come now, darling,” he said with his arm about her shoulders, “I think you exaggerate. Bart will grow up to be a great actor if he keeps this up.”

“Chris, I know sometimes high fevers leave a child with brain damage. Did the fever destroy part of his brain?”

“Look, Cathy, Bart tested out just fine. Don’t go getting notions just because we gave him that test. All high fever patients have to undergo such examinations.”

“But did you find anything unusual?” she persisted.

“No,” Dad said firmly, “he’s just an ordinary little boy with lots of emotional problems, and we, if anyone can, should understand what he’s going through.”

What did that mean?

“But Bart has everything! He isn’t growing up as we did. He should be happy. Don’t we do everything we can?”

“Yes, but sometimes even that isn’t enough. Each child is different, each has different needs. Obviously we are not giving Bart what he needs.”

Mom was given to hot quick answers. Yet she sat on, silent and still, as I waited for more information. Dad wanted her to go to bed immediately, which was easy enough to see from the way he kissed her neck. But she was deep in thought. Her eyes were fixed on her silver sandals as she spoke of how Clover had died.

“It couldn’t have been Bart,” she said slowly, as if to convince herself as well as Dad. “It had to be some sadist who tortures animals—you know how we read that the animals in the zoo were being crippled? One of them must have seen

Clover,” and her voice died away, for so seldom did we ever see a stranger on our road.

“Chris,” she added, while that horrible look of fright was still on her face, “today Bart took me completely by surprise. He told me about a little boy who was locked in closets and in the attic. Later on he told me that little boy’s name was Malcolm. Could he know about him? Who could have told him that name? Chris, do you think somehow Bart has found out about us?”

I jerked. What was there to know about them that I didn’t already know? I knew they had some terrible secret. I crawled away, then raced to my room and threw myself on my bed. Something awful was wrong with our lives. I felt it in my bones—and Bart must have sensed it in his, too.

The Snake



Sun and fog were playing games, keeping each other company. I had to sit alone in our garden. For fun I stared down at the thick scabs on my knee. I'd been warned by Daddy not to pick them off or they'd leave scars—but who cared about scars? I began to carefully lift the edges of the crust just to see what was underneath. I didn't see a darn thing but red, tender-looking flesh, ready to bleed again.

Sun won the game in the sky and shone hot on my head. Almost heard my brains frying. Didn't want fried brains. I moved to the shade.

Now my head was aching. I bit down on my lower lip hard enough to draw blood. Didn't hurt but later it would swell up so big Momma would have to feel worried. That would be good. She should be worried about what was happening to me.

Used to be Momma's little boy who got lots of attention until that dratted little girl came to take my place. Soon Mamma and Jory would return from ballet class. That's all they cared about—dancing and Cindy. I knew about the important things in life, what really counted most—money. Having lots of it, then you didn't have to think about needing it or how to get it. John Amos and Malcolm's book had taught me that.

“Bart,” said Emma, who'd stolen up behind me. “I'm so sorry you missed your birthday trip to Disneyland. To make up for that I've made you a little birthday cake of your very own.” She held in her hands a tiny cake with one candle in the middle of the chocolate. Was not just one year old! I struck that cake from her hands so it fell to the ground. She cried out, looking hurt enough to cry as she backed off. “That wasn't very grateful, or very kind,” she said in a choked way. “Bart, why do you have to act so ugly? We all try to do our best.”

I stuck out my tongue. She sighed and left me alone.

Later Emma came out again with that bratty girl in her arms. Wasn't my sister. Didn't want any sister. I hid behind a tree and peeked around. Emma put Cindy in the plastic swimming pool. She began to kick and splash the shallow water. Dumb, dumb, dumb ... couldn't even swim. See how Emma laughed and enjoyed all her baby-doings when I could stand on my head. If I sat in that pool and splashed with my hands and feet she wouldn't think it was cute.

I waited for Emma to go away, but she pulled up a chair, sat down and began to shell peas. Plop, plop, plop went the green peas into the blue bowl. "That's it, dearie," Emma encouraged Cindy. "Splash the water, kick your pretty legs, flap your sweet arms, and make your limbs strong so soon you'll be swimming."

I watched and waited, each pea she shelled telling me that soon Emma would have to get up and go into the kitchen. Cindy would be left alone. All alone. And she couldn't swim. Cats crouched down low like me when they wanted to catch a bird. Wish I had a tail to swish.

The last green pea fell. Emma rose to leave. I tensed my muscles. Just then Momma drove up in her bright red car and pulled to a stop by the garage. Emma waited to say hello. First it was Jory bounding over the lawn. "Hi, Emma!" he called. "What's for dinner?"

"You'll like my dinner no matter what," answered Emma, all grins for him, her handsome darling. *Not like she treated me—the brat!* "As for Bart," she went on, "I know he'll hate the peas, the vegetable casserole, the lamp chops, and the dessert. Lord knows that boy is hard to please."

Momma stopped to talk to Emma like she wasn't a servant, then she ran to play with Cindy, kissing and hugging her as if she hadn't seen the dummy in ten years. "Mom," sang out Jory, "why don't we both put on swimsuits and join Cindy in her pool?"

"I'll race you to the house, Jory!" agreed Momma, and off they ran like little kids.

“Now, you be a good little girl and keep on playing with your rubber ducky and boat,” said Emma to Cindy. “Emma will be right back.”

My head lifted before I began to wiggle on my belly on the ground. The brat in the pool stood up and took off her bathing suit. Stark naked and bold she hurled her wet suit at me, then teased and laughed and tormented me with her bare flesh. Then, as if bored with my reaction, she sat again in the shallow water and stared down at herself with a secret little smile. Wicked! Shameless! Imagine her showing her private parts to me.

Mothers should teach their daughters how to act decent, proper, modest. My mother was just like Corrine, whom John Amos had said was weak and never punished her children enough. “Yes, Bart, your grandmother ruined her children, and now they live in sin and flaunt God and his moral rules!”

I guess it was up to me to teach Cindy a lesson about modesty and shame. Forward I wiggled. *Now* I had her attention. Her blue eyes opened wide. Her rosy full lips parted. At first she seemed happy that finally I was gonna play kiddy games with her. Then, something wise put fright in her eyes. She froze and made me think of a timid rabbit scared by a vicious snake. Snake. Much better to be a snake than a cat. Snake in The Garden of Eden doing unto Eve what should have been done in the beginning. *Lo, said the Lord when he spied Eve in her nakedness, go forth from Eden and let the world hurl their stones.*

Hissing and flicking my tongue in and out, I edged closer. Was the Lord who spoke and I who obeyed. Wicked mother who refused to punish had made me what I was, an evil snake willing to do the Lord’s bidding, even if it wasn’t my own way.

I tried to flatten my head with willpower and make it small, flat, and reptilelike. Tears came to Cindy’s huge, scared eyes, and she began to bawl as she tried to wiggle over the rounded rim of the wading pool. The water wasn’t deep enough for a little girl to drown in, or else Emma wouldn’t have left her alone.

But ... if a boa constrictor from Brazil was on the loose—what chance did a two-year-old have?

I wiggled over the side and squirmed in the water. She screamed, “Barr-tie! Go’way, Barr-tie!”

“Hsss ... ssss,” I went. My S’s longer than John Amos’s. I coiled my body around her small naked one and hooked my legs under her neck, dragging her down into the water. Couldn’t really drown, but the Lord above had to warn those who sinned. I’d seen jungle snakes unhinge their jaws on TV. I tried to unhinge mine. Then I could swallow Cindy whole.

All of a sudden another snake had me! I yelped and released my grip on Cindy to keep from drowning ... or being eaten alive! *Lord, why hast thou forsaken me?*

“What the Devil do you think you’re doing?” yelled Jory, red with rage as he shook me until my head rolled. “I watched you wiggle your way along to see what you had in mind. Bart—did you try to drown Cindy?”

“No!” I gasped. “Just punishing her a little, not much.”

“Yeah,” he sneered, “like you punished Clover a little.”

“Never did nothing to Clover. I take good care of Apple. I am not a bad boy ... I’m not, not, not.”

“Why are you crying if you are so innocent? You killed him! I see it in your eyes!”

I glared hard at Jory, fury washing over me. “You hate me! I know you do!” I lunged forward and tried to hit him. Couldn’t. I lowered my head, backed up, and ran forward to butt him squarely in the stomach. Down he went, all doubled over, crying out from the pain. Before he could kill me, I kicked him but didn’t know it would end up where it did. My aim was never good. Gee ... that must hurt a lot.

“Unfair to kick in the groin,” he groaned, his face so pale he seemed on the edge of a faint. “That’s dirty fighting, Bart. Gross, too.”

Meanwhile Cindy had recovered enough to scramble from the pool, and she tottered off naked toward the house, howling

at the top of her lungs.

“Wicked sinful girl!” I screamed. “All this is her fault! Her fault!”

From the back door Emma came on the run, her white apron fluttering, her hands covered with flour. She was closely followed by Momma, who had put on a skimpy blue bikini. “Bart, what have you done?” screamed Momma. She swept Cindy up in her arms, then swooped to pick up a towel Emma had dropped.

“Mommy,” sobbed Cindy. “Big snake came ... big snake!”

Why, imagine that. She’d known what I was. Not so dumb after all. Momma wrapped the towel about Cindy and stood her on the ground. She glared at me just as I had my foot raised to kick Jory, who was panting with pain. “Bart ... if you dare to kick Jory again, you will regret it!”

Emma glared at me with hatred. I looked from one to the other. Everybody hated me, would be glad to see me in my grave.

Sore and full of pain, Jory tried to rise, not so graceful now. Just as awkward as me. He wasn’t so handsome now. Still he could shout: “You’re crazy, Bart! Crazy as a loon!”

“Bart, don’t you dare throw that stone at your brother!” cried Momma when she saw me swoop to pick up one.

“You dreadful boy! Don’t you throw that!” screamed Emma.

I whipped around and ran to pound on Emma with my fists. “You stop calling me names!” I yelled. “I’m not dreadful! I’m not bad!”

Momma raced toward me and grabbed me and threw me down. “Don’t you ever throw another stone as long as you live, or use your fists on another woman!” Momma shouted as she pinned my shoulders to the ground.

Red rage entered my mind, making me see her as all women with “beguiling” curves and wiles. Malcolm knew about them all, told everything about how he’d wanted to

pound all their breasts flat. I filled my eyes with Malcolm's malicious hatred, and it worked. Momma trembled as she held me down. "Bart, what's wrong with you? You don't know what you're saying or doing. You don't even look like yourself."

I bared my teeth as if to bite her—then I tried to. She slapped me, hard, repeatedly, until I began to cry.

"You go up into the attic and stay there, Bart Sheffield, until I come up and see what has to be done to set you straight!"

Scary in the attic. I sat on the edge of one of those little beds and waited for her to come in. She'd never spanked me. A few slaps besides the ones on my face today were all the punishment I'd had up until now ... and now she was doing to me just what had been done to Malcolm. I was just like Malcolm.

The door into the attic opened and I heard her climbing the steep, narrow stairs. Her mouth was set in a grim line as she towered above me, staring downward, as if forcing herself to look at me. I never thought she could look so mean.

"Pull down your pants, Bart."

"No!"

"Do as I say or your punishment will be much worse."

"No! You can't hurt me. You lay one hand on me and I'll wait until you're in your ole ballet class and then I'll get Cindy—and Emma won't be able to stop me! I can be in a thousand places before she can move to one—and the police won't put me in jail because I'm a minor!"

"Bart, I'm losing patience with you."

"That won't be all you'll lose if you hit me!" I bellowed.

She paused three feet from where I sat on the bed. Her small pale hands rose to her throat and she said quietly, "Oh, God ..." and it was just a hoarse whisper. "I should have known a child conceived under such circumstances would turn out like this. Bart, I'm so sorry your son is a monster."

A monster? Was I a monster?

No—she was the monster! She was doing to me just what Malcolm’s mother had done, the cause of him being put in the attic and punished. I hated her then, just as much as I’d loved her before.

I screamed it out: “I hate you, Momma! I hope you drop dead!”

That’s when she backed away, tears in her eyes. Then she turned and ran. But before she went down the stairs she locked the door to keep me up in that miserable dry attic that I hated and feared. She was gonna make me strong like Malcolm, and mean too. Someday she’d pay. I’d make her pay for doing this to me, when I wanted to be good, and wanted her to love me just a little more than Cindy or Jory. I began to cry. Nothing ever worked out the way I wanted it to.

It was Daddy who spanked my bare bottom after he came home and heard all they had to tell him about me. I admired him for ignoring the way I pleaded and apologized.

“Did you feel any of that?” he asked when he was finished, and I pulled up my pants.

I smiled. “No. To hurt me you gotta break my bones, and then the police would throw you in jail for child abuse.” He studied me with those stern blue eyes. “You think you have the best of us, don’t you?” he asked in his calm, rational way. “You think because you are a minor there is no law that can touch you, but you are wrong, Bart. We live in a civilized society where people are expected to conform to the rules. No one is ever beyond the control of the law, even the President. And one of the worst punishments for a child to endure is being locked away so he cannot come and go at his own free will.” He looked sad then. “That can be a very traumatic experience.”

I didn’t say anything. He spoke again. “Your mother and I have decided we can no longer tolerate your behavior. So as soon as I can arrange it, you will go once a day to a psychiatrist. If we have to, if you persist in defying us, we will

leave you in the care of doctors who can help you to learn how to behave normally.”

“You can’t make me,” I gasped, terrified some shrink would have me locked away behind bars forever. “If you try and force me, I’ll kill myself!”

He looked at me sternly. “Bart, you won’t kill yourself. So don’t you sit there and think you can outwit your mother or me. Your mother and I have faced up to bigger and better than a ten-year-old boy—remember that.”

Later that evening when I was in my bed, I heard Momma and Daddy really yelling at each other, yelling like I’d never heard them before.

“Why did you send Bart into the attic, Catherine? Did you have to do that? Couldn’t you just have ordered him to stay in his room and wait until I came home?”

“No! He likes being in his room. He has everything in there to make it a pleasant place to be—and as you know well, the attic is not pleasant. I did what I had to.”

“What you had to? Cathy—do you realize who you sound like?”

“Well,” she said with ice in her voice, “haven’t I been telling you all along that’s what I am—a bitch who cares only about herself?”

* * *

They took me to a shrink the very next day, shoved me down in a chair and told me to stay there. They sat beside me until a door opened and we were called inside. A woman doctor was behind a big desk. At least they could have chosen a man. I hated her because her hair was slick and black like Madame Marisha’s hair when she was young and posing for pictures. Her white blouse bulged in front so I had to turn my eyes away.

“Dr. Sheffield, you and your wife can wait outside, we will talk later.” I watched my parents go out the door. Never had I felt so all alone as when that woman turned to me and looked me over with her kind eyes that were hiding mean thoughts.

“You don’t want to be here, do you?” she asked. I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of letting her know I heard. “My name is Dr. Mary Oberman.”

So what?

“There are toys over on that table ... help yourself.”

Toys ... I wasn’t a baby. I glared at her. She turned her head and I knew she was uncomfortable, though trying not to let it show. “Your parents have told me you like to play pretend games. Is that because you don’t have enough playmates?”

Didn’t have any. But darn if that idiot woman was gonna know. I’d be a fool to tell her John Amos was the best friend I had. Once it had been my grandmother, but she had betrayed me.

“Bart, you can sit there and be silent, but you only succeed in hurting those who love you most, and *you* are hurt more than anyone else. Your parents want to help you. That’s why they brought you here. You have to cooperate and try. Tell me if you’re happy. Tell me if you feel frustrated, and if you like the way your life is going.”

Wouldn’t say yes, wouldn’t say no. Wouldn’t say anything and she couldn’t make me. Then she talked about people who kept themselves locked up, and how that could ruin them emotionally. All her words were like rain on the windowpane I made myself into.

“Do you hate your mother and father?”

Wouldn’t answer.

“Your brother Jory, do you like him?”

Jory was okay. He’d be better if he was more clumsy than me, and ugly too.

“Your adopted sister Cindy ... what do you think of her?”

Maybe my eyes told her something, for she scribbled away on her notepad. “Bart,” she began when she put her pen aside, her face trying to look motherly and kind, “if you refuse to cooperate, we will have no choice but to put you in a hospital where many doctors can try to help you regain control of your

emotions. You won't be mistreated, but it won't be as nice as being at home. You won't have your own room, your own things, your own parents except once a week for an hour. So don't you think it would be much nicer to try and help yourself before this goes any further? What is it that changed you from the boy you were last summer?"

Didn't want to be locked in some crazy house with lots of nuts who might be bigger and meaner than me, and I wouldn't be able to visit John Amos and Apple.

What could I do? I remembered words from Malcolm's book, and how he made people think he was "giving in," all the time going his own way.

I'd cry, I'd say how sorry I was, and when I did this, even I thought I was sincere. I said, "It's Momma ... she loves Jory more than me. She loves Cindy better too. I don't have anybody. I hate not having anybody."

It went on and on. Even after I really blabbed, she told my parents I'd have to continue seeing her for a year or more. "He's a very confused little boy." She smiled and touched my mother's shoulder. "Don't blame yourself. Bart seems programmed for self-loathing, and though he might seem to hate you for not loving him enough, he doesn't like himself. Therefore he believes anyone who does love him is a big fool. It's a sickness all right. As real as any physical disease, and worse in many ways, for Bart cannot find himself."

I was hiding, eavesdropping, surprised to hear her say what she did.

"He loves you, Mrs. Sheffield, with a love almost religious. Therefore he expects you to be perfect, at the same time knowing he is unworthy of your attention; and still, paradoxically, he wants you to see him and acknowledge him as the best son you have."

"But I don't understand," said Momma, leaning her head on Daddy's shoulder. "How can he love me and want to hurt me so much?"

“Human nature is very complex. Your son is very complex. The good and the bad are fighting to dominate his personality. He is unconsciously aware of this battle and has found a very intriguing solution. He identifies the evil side of himself as an old man he’s named Malcolm. Just another of the many characters who enable him to like himself better.”

Both my parents sat very still with wide eyes, looking sort of helpless.

Hours later, before I said my bedtime prayers, I crept down the long hall and listened outside my parent’s bedroom. Momma was saying, “It’s as if we will always be in the attic and never, never set free.”

What did the attic have to do with Malcolm and me? Was it only because both of us had been sent up there for punishment?

On my hands and knees I stole away down the hall, crept into my bed, and lay there quietly, scared of myself and my “subconscious.”

Beneath my pillow was Malcolm’s journal, which I was absorbing day by day, night by night. Growing stronger, and smarter.

Gathering Darkness



In the living room the next evening. Mom and Dad settled down before the fire I'd kindled. Forgotten by them because I said so little, I crouched down on the floor near the doorway, hoping they wouldn't see me there, and they'd think I'd gone away as I should have. I didn't feel good about deliberately deceiving them, but sometimes it was better to know for certain than to keep on guessing.

At first Mom didn't say anything much, then she brought up the visit to Dr. Oberman. "Bart hates me, Chris. He hates you too, and Jory, and Cindy. I think he's got Emma on his list too, but more than anyone, it's me he despises. He resents me for not loving him exclusively." He pulled her closer to his chest and held her there as on and on they talked. When they mentioned slipping into Bart's bedroom and seeing if he was there, I quickly scurried into a nearby closet and waited for them to pass on to Bart's room.

"Has he eaten dinner?" asked Dad.

"No." She said this like she wanted him to stay asleep so she could avoid the problem he was when awake. But just them being there, staring down at him, brought Bart out of his nap, and without a word in response to their affectionate greetings, he followed them into the dining room. Meals had to be eaten, even when a ten-year-old boy sat silent and scowling, refusing to meet anyone's eyes.

It was a terribly awkward meal, with no one comfortable. Appetites were small, and even Cindy was cross. Emma didn't speak either, only performed her duties silently. Even the wind that blew incessantly died down and the trees stood still, their leaves hanging as if frozen. All of a sudden it felt so cold, making me think of the graves Bart was always talking about.

I sat wondering how Mom and Dad could force Bart to go to Dr. Oberman's sessions. How could anyone force him to talk when he could be so darn stubborn? And Dad was busy enough without taking time from his patients—that alone should show Bart who cared enough.

"Going to bed now," said Bart coldly, standing without asking permission to leave the table. He left the dining room. We sat on, caught in some kind of spell Bart had cast.

Dad broke the silence. "Bart isn't himself. Obviously something is bothering him so much he can't even eat. We have to find out what it is."

"Mom," I said, "I think if you went in and sat on Bart's bed first tonight, and stayed a long time with him, and didn't come in to my room or Cindy's, that might make up for a lot."

She gave me a strange, long look, as if not believing it could be that simple. Dad agreed with me, saying it wouldn't do any harm.

Bart was faking sleep, it was easy to see that. I backed away and stood near Dad in the hallway, in the shadows where Bart couldn't see us. I was ready to spring forward and save Mom if Bart turned mean. Dad kept a restraining hand on my shoulder, and whispered softly, "He's just a boy, Jory, a very troubled little boy. A bit smaller than most ten-year-old boys, a bit thinner too, and maybe that's part of the problem. Bart is having more trouble growing up than most boys do."

Tensing, I waited for him to say more. "It's amazing how he could be born with so little grace, when his mother has so much."

I looked to where Mom stood gazing down on Bart, who looked darkly sullen in sleep—if he was asleep. Then she came running from his room, throwing Dad a wild, distraught look. "Chris, I'm afraid of him! You go in. If he wakes up and yells at me as he did before, I'll slap him. I'll feel like putting him in the closet, or up in the attic." Both her hands rose to clamp over her mouth. "I didn't mean that," she whispered weakly.

“Of course you didn’t. I hope he didn’t hear you. Cathy, I think you’d better take two aspirins and go to bed, and I’ll tuck Bart and Jory into bed.” He gave me a big joking smile as I grinned back. Our nighttime talks were the kind of tucking in he gave me ... advice on how to handle difficult situations. Man-to-man stuff a woman didn’t have to know about.

It was Dad who had the nerve to approach Bart, and he perched with ease on the side of his bed. I knew Bart always slept lightly, and when Dad sat down, the depression he made rolled Bart’s slight figure onto his side. That would awaken even someone like me, who *used* to sleep deeply and soundly.

Cautiously I stole closer, wanting to see for myself if Bart was faking. Behind his closed lids his eyeballs were jerking spasmodically, as if he watched a tennis game or something much more terrifying.

“Bart ... wake up.”

As if Dad had fired the words from a giant cannon put near his ears, Bart jolted wide awake. He bolted upright, his dark eyes bulging and terrified. He stared at Dad.

“Son, it’s not eight o’clock yet. Emma has made a lemon pie for dessert that she had to leave in the fridge to set. Don’t tell me you don’t want a slice. It’s a beautiful evening. I used to think, when I was your age, that twilight was the best time of all to play outside. Hide-and-seek, or red light, green light ...”

Bart stared at Dad as if he spoke in a foreign tongue.

“Come, Bart, don’t sulk alone. I love you, and your mother loves you. It doesn’t matter if sometimes you move less than gracefully. There are other things that count more, such as honor and respect. Stop trying to be what you aren’t. You don’t have to be anyone super-special; in our eyes, you already are super-special.”

Bart just sat on his bed and stared at Dad with hostility. Why couldn’t Dad see him as I did? Could a man as smart as Dad be blind when it came to seeing his son honestly? Had Bart opened his eyes when Mom was in the room, and had she

seen the hatred there? She could always see more than Dad, even if he was a doctor.

“Summer’s almost gone, Bart. Lemon pies get eaten by others. What you don’t take today may not be there tomorrow.”

Why was he being so nice to that boy who looked at him with daggers that could kill?

Obediently, when Dad turned to leave the room, Bart tagged along behind him. I was Bart’s unseen shadow. Suddenly Bart ran ahead of Dad, who was on the back porch now, and skipped backward until he nearly tumbled down the steps. “You aren’t my father,” he growled, “and you can’t fool me. You hate me and want me dead!”

Heavily Dad sat in a chair close to the one where Mom was sitting with Cindy on her lap. Bart went to the swings to sit, not pushing with his feet, just sitting and holding fast to the ropes, as if he might fall off the wooden slat.

We all ate a slice of Emma’s delicious lemon pie, all but Bart, who just sat where he was and refused to budge. Then Dad was getting up and saying he had to check on a patient in the hospital. He threw Bart a worried glance and spoke softly to Mom. “Take it easy, darling. Stop looking so troubled. I’ll be home soon. Maybe Mary Oberman isn’t the best psychiatrist for Bart. He seems to have a great deal of hostility toward women. I’ll find another psychiatrist, a man.” He leaned to kiss her upturned face. I heard the soft moist sound of their lips meeting. Then they stared deep into each other’s eyes and I wondered what they saw. “I love you, Cathy. Please stop worrying. Everything will work out fine. We will all survive.”

“Yes,” she said dully, throwing Bart a doubtful look, “but I can’t help worrying about Bart ... he seems so confused.”

Straightening, Dad cast Bart a long, hard, observant look. “Yes,” he said without doubt. “Bart’s a survivor too. See how fast he clings to the ropes, and he’s less than two feet from the ground. He just doesn’t trust or believe in himself. I think he seeks strength in pretending to be older and wiser; security is

in something other than himself. As a ten-year-old boy, he is lost. So it's up to us to find the right person to help him, even though it seems we cannot."

"Drive carefully," she said, as she always did watching him depart with her heart in her eyes.

Very determined to stay up and protect Mom and Cindy, I still found myself growing sleepy. Every time I checked I saw Bart still on the swing, his dark eyes staring blankly into space, as very gently he moved the swing an inch or so, no more than the wind could blow his weight.

"I'm going to put Cindy to bed now, Jory," Mom said to me, then called to Bart, "Bedtime ... I'll be in to see you in a few minutes. Clean your teeth and wash your hands and face. We saved you a slice of lemon pie to eat before you brush your teeth."

No replay from the swing, but he did get up awkwardly, pausing to glance at his bare feet, stopping to stare at his hands, to finger his pajamas, to glance up at the sky, at the distant hills.

Inside the house Bart wandered aimlessly from object to object, picking one up, turning it over, and staring at the bottom before he set it down. A small Venetian glass sailboat held his attention for a moment, and then he seemed to freeze as his eyes found a lovely porcelain ballerina in arabesque position. It was a figurine my mom had given to Dr. Paul after she married my father; in many ways the dancer was like Mom must have looked when she was very young.

Gingerly he picked up the delicate figure with its fluffy frozen froth of lace tutu and frail, pale arms and legs. He turned it over, stared at the information printed on the bottom. *Limoges*, it said, for I'd read it too. Next he touched the golden hair, parted in the middle and drawn softly back in waves and held in place with pink china roses.

Then deliberately he let it slip from his hands.

It fell to the bare floor and broke into several large pieces. I dashed forward, thinking I could glue them back together and

maybe Mom wouldn't notice—but Bart put his foot on the ballerina's head and ground it fiercely with his bare foot.

“Bart!” I cried out, “that was a hateful thing to do! You know mother prizes that more than anything else. You shouldn't have.”

“Don't tell me what I shouldn't and should do! You leave me alone and say nothing about what you just saw. It was an accident, *boy*, an accident.”

Whose voice was that? Not Bart's. He was pretending to be that old man again.

I ran for a broom and a dustpan to clean up the shards of what had been a lovely ballerina, hoping Mom wouldn't notice she was missing from the shelf.

When I remembered Bart again, I hurried to find him slyly watching Mom as she held Cindy on her lap, brushing her hair.

Mom glanced up and happened to catch Bart watching. I saw her blanch and try to smile, but something she saw made her smile fade before it even shone.

In a flashing streak Bart ran forward and shoved Cindy from Mom's lap. Cindy squealed as she fell on the floor—then jumped up to howl. She raced to Mom, who picked her up again, then rose to tower over Bart. “Bart, why did you do that?”

He spread his legs and stared up into her face scornfully. Then he left the room without looking back.

“Mom,” I said, as she calmed Cindy down and put her into bed, “Bart's very sick in his head. You let Dad take him to any shrink he wants, but make him stay there until he's well.”

I heard her sob, but it wasn't until later that she broke and cried.

This time it was me who held her; my arms that gave her comfort. I felt so adult and responsible.

“Jory, Jory,” she sobbed, clinging fast to me, “why does Bart hate me? What have I done?”

What could I say? I didn't know any of the answers.

“Maybe you should try to figure out why Bart is so different from me, for I would die rather than make you unhappy.”

She held me, then stared into space. “Jory, my life has been a series of obstacles. I feel if one more horrible thing happens, I may break ... and I can't allow that to happen. People are so complicated, Jory, especially adults. When I was ten, I used to think that adults had it so easy, with all the power and rights to do as they wanted. I never guessed being a parent was so difficult. But not you, darling, not you ...”

I knew her life had been full of sadness, losing her parents, then Cory, Carrie, my father, and then her second husband.

“The child of my revenge,” she whispered as if to herself. “All the while I carried Bart I suffered from the guilt I felt. I loved his father so much ... and in a way I helped kill him.”

“Mom,” I said with sudden insight, “maybe Bart senses your guilt when you look at him—do you think?”

PART THREE



Malcolm's Rage



Sunlight fell on my face and woke me up. When I was dressed, suddenly I didn't feel so old like Malcolm, and in a way I was glad. In another way I was sad, for Malcolm was so dependable.

Why didn't I have friends my own age, like other boys? Why was it only old people liked me? It didn't matter now that my grandmother had said she loved me, now that she'd stolen Apple. I had to face up to the fact that only John Amos was my true friend.

Went outside and crawled around before breakfast, sniffed at the ground, smelled the wild things that were scared of me in daylight. Little rabbit ran like crazy and I wouldn't hurt it, wouldn't.

They kept watching me at the breakfast table like they expected me to do something awful. I noticed that Daddy didn't ask Jory how he was today, only asked me. I scowled down at my cold cereal. Hated raisins! Looked like little dead bugs.

"Bart, I just asked you a question."

Knew that already. "I'm okay," I said without looking at Daddy, who always woke up in a good mood and never looked glum like me—and Momma. "I just wish you'd hire a really good cook. Or better if Momma would stay home and cook our meals like other mothers. Emma's stuff ain't fit for man nor beast to eat."

Jory stared at me hard and kicked my leg under the table like he was trying to warn me to keep my mouth shut.

"Emma didn't cook your cold cereal, Bart," said Daddy. "It comes that way in a box. And until this morning you always liked plenty of raisins. You used to want Jory's. But if raisins

offend you in some way this morning, don't eat them. And why is your lower lip bleeding?"

Was it? Doctors were always seeing blood 'cause they were always cutting up people.

Jory took it on himself to answer. "He was playing wolf this morning, Dad, that's all. I guess when he jumped at the rabbit and tried to bite off its head, he bit himself." He grinned at me as if pleased with my stupidity.

Something was up. Could tell because nobody asked why I would play wolf. They just looked at me as if they expected me to act crazy.

Heard Momma and Daddy whispering beyond the pantry—taking about me. Heard doctors mentioned, new head shrinks. Wouldn't go! Couldn't make me!

Then Mom was back in the kitchen talking to Jory as Daddy went on to the garage and started his car.

"Mom, are we really going through with the performance tonight?"

She threw me a troubled glance, then forced a smile and said, "Of course. I can't disappoint my students, their parents, and the other guests who have already bought their tickets."

Fools and their money were soon parted.

Jory said, "I think I'll call Melodie. Yesterday I told her the show might be canceled."

"Jory, why would you tell her that?"

He looked at me, as if I were to blame for everything, even shows that weren't canceled—and I wouldn't go. Not even if they remembered to ask me. Didn't want to see sissy-silly ballet where everybody danced and said nothing. They weren't even going to dance *Swan Lake*, but the dumbest, dullest ballet of all—*Coppelia*.

Daddy came back in the house then, having forgotten something as usual. "I guess you'll be the prince," he said to Jory, who turned on him with scorn.

“Gosh, Dad, don’t you ever learn? There isn’t a prince in *Coppelia*! Most of the time I’m only in the *corps*, but Mom will be terrific in her role. She’s choreographed it herself.”

“What are you saying?” roared Daddy, turning to glare at Momma. “Cathy, you know you’re not supposed to dance on your trick knee! You promised me you would never dance professionally again. At any moment that knee could give way, and down you’d go. One more fall and you may end up crippled for life.”

“Just one more time,” she pleaded, as if her whole life depended on dancing again. “I’m going to be only the mechanical doll, sitting in a chair—don’t get so worked up over nothing.”

“No!” he stormed again. “If you go on tonight and don’t fall, then you’ll think your knee is fine. You’ll want to repeat your success, and one more time might see your knee permanently damaged. Just one serious fall and you could break your leg, your pelvis, your back ... it’s happened before, you know that!”

“Name every bone in my body!” she shrilled back at him, and I was thinking, thinking: If she broke her bones and couldn’t dance again, then she’d have to stay home with me all the time.

“Honestly. Chris, sometimes you act like I’m your slave! Look at me. I’m thirty-seven years old, and soon I’ll be too old to dance at all. Let me feel useful, as you feel useful. I have to dance—*just one more time.*”

“No,” he repeated, but less firmly. “If I give in it won’t be the last time. You’ll want to do it again ...”

“Chris, I’m not going to plead. There is not a student I have capable of playing the role—and I am going on whether or not you like it!” She threw me a glance, as if she worried more about what I thought than what he thought. I was happy, very happy ... for she *was* going to fall! Deep inside of me I knew I could make her fall with my wishes. I’d sit in the audience and give her the evil eye; then she’d be my playmate. I’d teach her how to crawl around and sniff the ground like a dog or an

Indian, and she'd be surprised at all that could be found out from sniffing.

"I am not talking of a trifling injury, Catherine," said that hateful husband. "All your life you have given your joints a great deal of stress and disregarded the pain. It's time you started realizing that the good health of your family depends on your well-being."

I scowled at Dad, sorry he'd forgotten something and had to come back and hear too much. Mama didn't even seem surprised he'd forgotten his wallet again, and he was a doctor who was supposed to have a good memory. She gave him his wallet, which had been left beside his breakfast plate, and smiled at him crookedly. "You do this every day. You go out to the garage, start your car, and then remember you don't have your wallet."

His smile was just as crooked as hers. "Yes, of course I do. It gives me the opportunity to come back and hear all the things you don't tell me." He stuffed the wallet in his hip pocket.

"Chris, I don't like to go against your wishes, but I can't allow a second-rate performance, and it's Jory's big chance to show off in his solo ..."

"For once in your life, Catherine, listen to what I say. That knee has been x-rayed, you know the cartilage is broken, and you still complain of chronic pain. You haven't danced on stage for years. Chronic pain is one thing—acute pain another. Is that what you want?"

"Oh, you doctors!" she scoffed. "All of you have such dreary notions of how frail the human body is. My knee hurts, so what? All my dancers complain of aches and pains. When I was in South Carolina, the dancers complained, in New York they complained, in London ... so what is pain to a dancer? Nothing, doctor, absolutely nothing I can't put up with."

"Cathy!"

"My knee has not hurt seriously in more than two full years. Have you heard me gripe about pain? No, you haven't!"

With that, Dad strode from the kitchen, through the utility room, and on into the garage.

In a flash she was running after him, and I was running after her—hoping to hear more of this argument—and hoping she'd win. Then I'd have her for my very own.

“Chris,” she cried, throwing open the passenger door and slipping inside his car, where she threw her arms about his neck. “Don't go away angry. I love you, respect you, and vow on my word of honor that this will be the very last time I perform. I swear I will never, never dance on stage again. I know why I should stay home ... I know ...”

They kissed. Never saw people who liked to kiss so much. Then she was pulling away and looking softly into his eyes, stroking his cheek as she murmured, “This is my first chance to dance professionally with Julian's son, darling. Look at Jory, how much he resembles Julian. I've choreographed a special *pas de deux* in which I'm the mechanical doll and Jory is a mechanical soldier. It's the best thing I've ever done. I want you out in the audience watching, feeling proud of your wife and son. I don't want you sitting there worrying about my knee. Honestly, I've rehearsed, and it does not hurt!”

She stroked him and kissed him some more, and I could see he loved her more than anything, more than us, even more than himself. Fool! Damned fool to love any woman that much!

“All right,” he said. “But this must be the last time. Your knee cannot take years and years of practice. Even in teaching you use that knee too much, so much so that other joints could become impaired.”

I watched her turn from him and leave the car, her voice so sad when she spoke. “Years ago Madame Marisha told me there would be no life for me without dancing, and I denied this was so. Now I'm going to have the chance to find out.”

Good!

Just the words he needed to hear to make him come up with a new idea. He leaned and called to her: “Cathy, what about

that book you said you were going to write? This is a good time to start ...” He gave me a long look, and I felt like a clear windowpane. “Bart, remember you are very loved. If you feel resentment about anyone, or anything, all you have to do is tell me, or tell your mother. We are willing to listen and do what we can to make you happy.”

Happy? I’d be happy only when he was gone from her life. Happy only when I had her all to myself—and then I remembered that old man ... two old men. Neither one of them wanted her to stay alive ... neither one. I wanted to be like them, especially like Malcolm, so I pretended *he* was in the garage, waiting for Daddy to drive away, and I’d be alone. *He* liked it when I was alone, when I felt sad, lonely, mean angry ... and right now *he* was smiling.

* * *

No sooner had Momma and Jory driven away, shortly after Daddy left, than Emma was at me again, pestering me, hating me.

“Bart, can’t you wipe that blood from your lip? Do you have to keep on biting down? Most people refrain from deliberately hurting themselves.”

What did she know about being me? I didn’t feel pain when I chewed on my lip. Liked to taste the blood.

“I’ll tell you one thing, Bartholomew Scott Winslow Sheffield, if you were my little boy you’d feel the sting of my hand on your bottom. I believe you like to torment people and do every mean thing you can just to gain their attention. It doesn’t take any psychiatrist with ten diplomas to know that!”

“SHUT UP!” I yelled.

“Don’t you dare yell and tell me to shut up. I’ve had all I am going to take from you! You are responsible for all the terrible things going on in this house. You broke that expensive figurine your mother prized. I found it in the trashcan, wrapped in newspaper. You may sit there and scowl at me with your black ugly eyes, but I’m not afraid. You are the one who wrapped that wire around Clover and killed your

brother's pet. You should be ashamed! You're a mean, hateful little boy, Bart Sheffield, and it's no wonder you don't have any friends, no wonder at all! And I'm going to save your parents thousands of dollars when I turn you over my knee and paddle your bottom until it's black and blue. You won't sit comfortably for two weeks!"

She towered over me, making me feel small and helpless too. I wanted to be anybody but me, anybody who was *strong*.

"You touch me and I'll kill you!" I said in a cold voice. I rose stiffly, planted my feet wide apart, put my hands on the table to steady my balance. Inside I was boiling with rage. I knew now how to turn into Malcolm and be ruthless enough to get what I wanted, when I wanted.

Look at her, afraid now. Now *her* eyes were big and scared. I curled my upper lip and showed my teeth, then allowed both lips to curl into a sneer. "*Woman, get the hell away from me before I lose control of myself!*"

Silently, Emma backed away, and then she was running into the dining room, heading for the hall so she could protect Cindy.

* * *

All day I waited. Emma thought I was hiding in my hole in the shrubs, so she left Cindy alone in her sandbox under the shade of a huge old oak tree. Had a pretty little canopy too. Nothing too good for Cindy and she was only adopted.

She tittered when she saw me limping up, as if I looked funny and was only pretending to be an old man. Look at her smile and try to charm me. Sitting there half naked, nothing on but little green and white shorts. She'd grow up, become more beautiful and be like all women, sinfully enticing men to be their worst. And she'd betray the man who loved her, betray her children, too. But ... but ... if she were ugly, what man would want her then? Wouldn't make babies if she was ugly. Wouldn't be able to charm men then. I'd save all her children from what she'd do later on. Save the children, that was important.

“Barr-tee,” she said, smiling at me, sitting crosslegged so I could see her lacy panties beneath her play shorts. “Play, Barr-tee? Play with Cindy ... ?”

Plump little hands reached for me. She was trying to “seduce” me! Only two years old and a few months and already she knew all the wicked ways of women.

“Cindy,” called Emma from the kitchen, but I was down low and she couldn’t see me behind the bushes, “are you all right?”

“Cindy’s playing sand castle!” answered little nobody, as if to protect me. Then she picked up her favorite red sand pail and offered it to me—and the red and yellow shovel too.

In my hand I gripped the handle of my pocket knife tighter. “Pretty Cindy,” I crooned softly as I crawled closer, putting a sweet smile on my face that made her giggle. “Pretty Cindy wants to play beauty parlor ...”

She clapped her hands “Ohhh,” she trilled. “Nice.”

The blonde hair in my hand felt silky and clean. She laughed when I tugged at her hair and took the ribbon from the ponytail. “I’m not going to hurt you,” I said, showing her my pearl-handled knife. “So don’t you scream ... just sit quietly in the beauty parlor until I’ve finished.”

* * *

In my room I had my list of new words. Had to pronounce them, practice spelling them, and use them at least five times in that same day—and from then on. Had to know big words in order to impress people, make them know I was smarter.

Intimidating. Got that—meant to make people scared of you.

Ultimately—had that down too. Meant sooner or later my time would come.

Sensuous—bad word. Meant thrills you got from touching girls. Had to do away with sensuous things.

Grew tired after a short while of big words I had to learn in order to gain respect. Grew tired of pretending to be Malcolm.

But the trouble was, I was losing the real me. Now I wasn't Bart all the way through. And now that he was slipping away, suddenly Bart didn't seem nearly as stupid and pitiful as he once had.

I reread a certain page in Malcolm's book when he was the very same age I was. He'd hated pretty blonde hair like his mother's, like his daughter's—but he didn't know about his little "Corrine" when he wrote:

* * *

Her name was Violet Blue, and her hair reminded me of my mother's hair. I hated her hair. We attended the same Sunday school class, and I'd sit in back of her and stare at that hair that would beguile some man someday and make him want her, as that lover had wanted my mother.

She smiled at me one day, expecting a compliment, but I fooled her. I said her hair was ugly. To my surprise she laughed. "But it's the same color hair you have."

I shaved off all my hair that day—and the next day I caught Violet Blue and threw her down. When she went home crying, she was as bald as I was.

* * *

All that pretty blonde hair that used to be Cindy's was blowing on the wind. She was crying in the kitchen. Not because I'd scared her, or hurt her. It was Emma's shriek that told her something had gone wrong. Now Cindy's hair looked like mine. Stubby, short, and ugly.

The Last Dance



Jory,” called Mom in relief when she saw me come in, “thank God you’re back. Did you enjoy your lunch?”

Sure, I said, fine lunch, and she didn’t pay much attention if I didn’t elaborate, for she was much too busy with last-minute details. This was the way it went on performance days: class in the morning, rehearsal in the afternoon, and the performance at night. Rush, rush, rush, all the while making yourself believe the world would stop turning if you didn’t dance your role to the best of your ability. When the world wouldn’t stop ...

“You know, Jory,” gushed Mom happily in the dressing room we were sharing—she was behind a screen, and we really couldn’t see one another—“all my life the ballet has thrilled me. But this night will be the grandest of them all because I will be dancing with my own son! I know you and I have danced many times together, but this night is special. Now you’re good enough to dance solo. Please, please, do your best so Julian in heaven can be proud of his only son.”

Sure, I’d do my best, always did. The foots went on, the overture ended; the curtain lifted. There was a moment of silence before the first-act music began. Mom’s kind of music and mine—taking us both to that happy never-never land where anything could happen, even happy endings.

“Mom, you look wonderful—prettier than any of the other dancers!” She did too. She laughed joyfully and told me I certainly knew how to please a woman, and if I kept it up I’d be the Don Juan of the century. “Now listen carefully to the music, Jory. Don’t get so absorbed in counting that you forget the music—that’s the best way to catch the magic, by feeling the music!”

I was so keyed up and tense I’d likely burst in another second or two. “Mom, I hope the father I love best will be

sitting front row center.”

That’s when she ran to where she could peek out and see the audience. In certain places the foots didn’t blind my eyes. “He’s not there,” she said dismally, “nor Bart either ...”

No time for me to answer. I heard my musical cue and danced out with the other members of the *corps*. Everything went just fine, with Mom up on the balcony as the beautiful doll Coppelgia, lifelike enough to inspire love from afar.

But when the first act was over she was left gasping and panting for breath. She hadn’t told Dad she was also dancing the role of the village girl, Swanhilda, who loved Franze even as he fell foolishly in love with a mechanical doll. Two roles for Mom—difficult roles too, as she had choreographed them. Dad certainly would have forbidden her to dance if he had known the full truth about her last dance. Had I been wrong to help her deceive him?

“Mom, how’s your knee feeling?” I asked when I saw her grimace once or twice between acts.

“Jory, my knee is fine!” she said sharply, once more trying to see Dad and Bart in their seats. “Why aren’t they out there? If Chris doesn’t show up to see me dance for the last time, I’ll never forgive him!”

I saw Dad and Bart just before the second act started. They sat in the second row, and I could tell Bart had been brought along forcibly. His lower lip pouted sullenly as he glared at the curtain that would lift and display beauty and grace—and he’d frown more. Beauty and grace did not light up Bart’s life as they did mine.

Third act time. Mom and I danced together, dolls wound up by huge keys attached to our backs. Woodenly we began, limbering up our squeaky joints. The huge room where Dr. Coppelius kept his inventions was mysteriously dim, and made more dramatic by blue lights. I could tell Mom was having trouble, but she didn’t miss a step as we both kept time to the music and turned on all the other mechanical toys that came alive to dance with us. “Mom, are you okay?” I asked in a whisper when we were close enough. “Sure,” she said, still

smiling, never doing anything but smiling, for it was supposed to be painted on.

I felt scared for her even as I admired her courage. I knew out in the audience Bart was looking at us, thinking us stupid fools and feeling jealous of our grace.

Suddenly I could tell from Mom's tight smile that she was in terrible pain. I tried to dance closer, but one of the down dolls kept getting in my way. It was going to happen. I knew it would—just what Dad feared.

Next came a series of whirling pirouettes which would take her in a circle around the stage. To do these she had to know precisely where everyone else was located, and all the props too. When she spun near me I reached out to keep her on balance before she whirled on by. Oh, golly, I couldn't stand to watch. Then I saw she was going to make it; pain or not, she'd dance without falling. Joyfully now, I bounded into the air and landed on one knee as I playfully proposed marriage to the doll of my dreams. Then my heart jumped. One of the ribbons of her points had come undone!

"Your ribbons, Mom, watch out for your left shoe ribbon!" I called above the music, but she didn't hear. The dragging ribbon was stepped on by another dancer. Mom was thrown off balance. She put out her arms to steady herself and might have succeeded in doing this—but I saw her painted-on smile turn into a silent shriek of pain as her knee gave way and down she went. Right in the center of the stage.

People in the audience screamed. Some stood up to see better. We on the stage went right on dancing as the manager came out and carried Mom backstage. Her back-up whirled onto the stage, and the ballet went on.

At last the curtain descended. I didn't wait to take any bows. I couldn't get to Mom fast enough. Terribly afraid, I raced up to where Dad held her in his arms while ambulance men in white suits were feeling her legs to find out if one or both might be broken.

"Chris, did I do all right?" she was asking, though pain had made her face very pale. "I didn't really louse up the show, did

I? You did see Jory and I in our *pas de deux*?”

“Yes, yes,” he said, kissing her face all over and looking so tender as he helped lift her onto a stretcher. “You and Jory were magnificent. I’ve never seen you dance better—and Jory was brilliant.”

“And this time I didn’t have to bleed on my feet,” she whispered before she closed her eyes wearily, “I only had to break a leg.”

What she said didn’t make much sense. I turned my thoughts to the look on Bart’s face as he stared at her. He seemed to be glad, almost gloating. Was I being unfair to him? Or was it guilt I saw in his eyes?

I sobbed as Mom was lifted onto a stretcher and put in an ambulance that would drive her and Dad to the nearest hospital. Melodie’s father promised he’d drop me off at the hospital, then drive Bart home safely. “Though I’m sure Melodie wishes it was Jory who’d go home, and Bart who’d insist on staying with his mother in the hospital.”

* * *

Much later Mom awakened from the sedatives given her to stare at the flowers filling her room. “Why, it looks like a garden,” she breathed. She smiled weakly at Dad, stretching out her arms to embrace him and then me. “I know you’re going to say I told you so, Chris. But until I fell, I did dance well, didn’t I?”

“It was your slipper ribbon,” I said, anxious to protect her from his anger. “If it hadn’t loosened you wouldn’t have fallen.”

“My leg isn’t broken, is it?” she asked Dad.

“No, darling, just torn ligaments and some broken cartilage that was repaired during the operation.” Then he sat on the edge of her bed and gravely told her every detail of her injury, which wasn’t as minor as she wanted to believe.

Mom reflected aloud: “I really can’t understand how that ribbon could come loose. I always carefully sew on the

ribbons myself, not trusting anyone else ...” She paused, staring into space.

“Where are you hurting now?”

“Nowhere,” she flared as if annoyed. “Where’s Bart? Why didn’t he come with you?”

“You know how Bart is. He hates hospitals and sick people, just as much as he hates everything else. Emma’s taking good care of him and Cindy. But we want you home soon, so do what your doctor and nurses tell you—and don’t be so damned stubborn you won’t listen or obey.”

“What’s wrong with me?” she asked, alerted as I was. I sat up straighter, feeling something was about to slam down on all of us.

“Your knee is in bad shape, Cathy. Without going into specifics, you are going to have to sit in a wheelchair until some torn ligaments heal.”

“A *wheelchair*?” Stunned-looking, she said that like it was an electric chair! “What’s really wrong? You’re not telling me everything. You’re trying to protect me!”

“When your doctors are sure, you will know. But one thing is certain, you can never dance again. And they have told me, too, that you cannot even demonstrate to your pupils. No dancing whatsoever, not even waltzing.” He said it so firmly, but compassion and pain were in his eyes.

She looked stunned, not believing that such a small fall could have done so much harm. “No dancing ... ? None at all?”

“None at all,” he repeated. “I’m sorry, Cathy, but I warned you. Think back and count the times you have fallen and hurt that knee. How much damage do you think it can take? Even walking won’t be as effortless as it used to be. So cry your heart out now. Get it out of your system.”

She cried in his arms, and I sat in a chair and sobbed inwardly, feeling as bereft as if it had been me who had lost the use of my legs for dancing.

“It’s all right, Jory,” she said when she had dried her tears and put on a faltering smile. “If I can’t dance, I’ll find something better to do—though Lord knows what it will be.”

Another Grandmother



In a few days Mom was feeling much better, and that's when Dad brought to the hospital a portable typewriter, a thick stack of yellow legal pads and other writing utensils. He stacked everything on the table that rolled over Mom's bed and gave her one of his big, charming smiles. "This is a fine time to finish that book you began so long ago," he said. "Look at your old journals, and let it all loose—and be damned to those you might hurt! Hurt them as you've been hurt, as I've been hurt. Stab a few times for Cory and Carrie too. And while you're at it, throw in a few blows for me, Jory, and Bart, for they too are affected."

They looked at each other for long moments, then unhappily she took an old memorandum book from his hands and opened it so I could see her large girlish handwriting. "I don't know if I should," she murmured with a strange look in her eyes. "It would be like living it all over again. All the pain would come back."

Dad shook his head. "Cathy, do what you think you must. There must have been a good reason for you to have started those books in the first place. Who knows, perhaps you'll be on your way to a new career more satisfying than the last."

It didn't seem possible to me that writing could ever replace dancing, but when I visited her in the hospital the next day, she was scribbling away like crazy. On her face I saw a strange intense look, and in a way, I felt envious.

"How much longer?" she asked Dad, who had driven me to see her.

* * *

We were all there waiting, Emma with Cindy in her arms, and me holding fast to Bart's hand. Dad lifted Mom out of the

front seat and put her in the folding chair he'd rented. Bart stared at that rolling chair with repulsion, while Cindy called out "Mommy, Mommy!" She didn't care how Mom came home, as long as she did, but Bart hung back and eyed Mom up and down, as if he were looking at a stranger he didn't like.

Next Bart turned and headed for the house. He hadn't even said hello. An expression of hurt passed over Mom's face before she called, "Bart! Don't go away before I've had a chance to say hello to you. Aren't you glad to see me? You just don't know how much I've missed you. I know you don't like hospitals, but I wish you had come just the same. I know, too, that you don't like this chair, but I won't be using it forever. A lady in the physical therapy class showed me how much can be done while sitting in this kind of chair ..." She faltered because his dark, ugly look didn't encourage her to go on.

"You look funny sitting in that chair," he said with his brows knitted together. "Don't like you in that chair!"

Nervously Mom laughed. "Well, to be honest, it's not my favorite throne either, but remember it's not a permanent part of my life, only until my knee heals. Come, Bart, be friendly to your mother. I forgive you for not visiting me in the hospital, but I won't forgive you if you can't show me a little affection."

Still frowning, he backed away as she wheeled forward. "No! Don't touch me!" he cried out in a loud voice. "You didn't have to dance and fall! You fell because you didn't want to come home and see me again! You hate me now for cutting off Cindy's hair! And now you want to punish me by sitting in that chair when you don't need to!"

Wheeling around, he raced for the backyard, using the stepping stones. He'd covered two when he tripped and fell. Picking himself up, he ran on again, bumping into a tree and crying out. I could see his nose was bleeding. Boy, talk about awkward!

Dad made light of Bart's rebellion as he pushed Mom into the house, with Cindy delighted to ride on her lap. "Don't

worry about Bart ... he'll come back and be contrite ... he's missed you very much, Cathy. I've heard him crying in the night. And his new psychiatrist, Dr. Hermes, thinks he's getting better, working out some of this hostility.”

She didn't say anything, just kept running her hand over the smooth cap of Cindy's short-short hair. She looked more like a boy in her coveralls, though Emma had tried to tie a ribbon in a short tuft of her hair. I guessed Dad had told Mom what Bart had done to Cindy, for she didn't ask questions.

Later on in the evening when Bart was in bed, I ran for a book I'd left in the family room and heard Mom's voice coming from “her” room. “Chris, what am I going to do about Bart? I tried to show love and affection for him, and he rejected me. Look what he did to Cindy, a helpless child who trusts that no one will hurt her. Did you spank him? Did you do anything to punish him? Does he show respect to any of us? A few weeks in the attic might teach might teach him a thing or two about obedience.”

Hearing Mom talk like this made me feel depressed. So sad I had to hurry away and hurl myself onto my bed and stare at the walls with the posters of Julian Marquet dancing with Catherine Dahl. This wasn't the first time I'd wondered what my real father had been like. Had he loved my mother very much? Had she loved him? Would my life have been happier if he hadn't died before I was born?

Then there was Daddy Paul, who came after that tall man with the dark hair and eyes. Was Bart really Dr. Paul's son—or was he ... ? I couldn't even finish the question, it made me feel so disloyal for doubting.

I closed my eyes, feeling in the air around me a dreadful tension, as if an invisible sword were held, ready to hack all of us down.

* * *

Early the next evening, I cornered Dad in his study and burst out with all I'd held back until now.

“Dad, you’ve just got to do something about Bart. He frightens me. I don’t see how we can go on living with him in the house, when it seems he is going mad—if he isn’t already there.”

My dad bowed his head into his hands. “Jory, I don’t know what to do. It would kill your mother if we had to send Bart away. You don’t know all she’s been through. I don’t think she can take too much more ... another child gone would destroy her.”

“We’ll save her!” I cried passionately. “But we have to prevent Bart from going to visit those people next door who tell him lies. He goes over there all the time, Dad, and that old lady holds him on her lap and tells him stories that make him come home acting queer, like he’s old, like he hates women. It’s all her fault, Dad, that old woman in black. When she leaves Bart alone he’ll go back to where he was before she came.”

He stared at me in the strangest way, as if something I’d said had triggered thoughts in his head. As always he had places to go and patients to see, but this time he called his hospital and told them he had an emergency at home. And he did, you bet he did!

I often looked at my mother’s third husband and wished he were my own blood father, but at that moment when he canceled his appointments to save Bart—and Mom—I knew in all the ways that counted that he was my true father.

That evening, shortly after dinner, Mom went to her room to work on her book. Cindy was in bed and Bart was out in the yard when Dad and I donned warm sweaters and slipped out the front door.

It was murky with fog, cold with damp as we strode side by side toward the huge shadowy mansion with its impressive black iron gates. “Dr. Christopher Sheffield,” said Dad into the black box attached to the side of the gates. “I want to see the lady of the house.” As the gates swung silently open, he asked why I’d never learned the woman’s name. I shrugged, as if she

didn't have a name, and as far as I was concerned, didn't need one. Bart had never called her anything but Grandmother.

At the front door Dad banged the brass knocker. Finally we heard shuffling noises in the hall, and John Amos Jackson admitted us.

"Our lady tires easily," said John Amos Jackson, his thin, long face hollow-cheeked, gaunt-eyed, his hands trembling, his narrow back bent. "Don't say anything to upset her."

I stared at the way Dad looked at him, frowning and perplexed as the bald-headed man shuffled away, leaving us to enter a room whose door he'd opened.

The lady in black was seated in her rocking chair.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," said Dad, staring at her intensely. "My name is Dr. Christopher Sheffield and I live next door. This is my eldest son, Jory, whom you have met before."

She seemed excited and nervous as she gestured us in and indicated the chairs we were to use. We perched tentatively, not intending to stay very long. Seconds stretched by that seemed like hours before Dad leaned forward to speak: "You have a lovely home." He glanced around again at all the elaborate chairs and other fine furnishings, and he stared at the paintings, too. "I have the strangest sense of *déjà vu*," he murmured almost to himself.

Her black-veiled head bowed low. Her hands spread expansively, supplicating, it seemed, for his understanding for her lack of words. I knew she spoke English perfectly well. Why was she faking?

Except for those aristocratic hands with all the glittering rings she sat so still, but her hands fluttered, knotted the pearls I knew she wore beneath her black dress. His eyes shot her way, and quickly she sat on her hands.

"You don't speak English?" Dad asked in a tight voice.

Vigorously she nodded, indicating she could *understand* English. His brows knitted. Puzzled-looking again, "Well, to get to the point of our visit, my son Jory has told me you and my youngest son Bart are very familiar. Jory says you give

Bart expensive gifts and feed him sweets between meals. I'm sorry, Mrs... Mrs... ? He paused, waiting for her to give her name. When she didn't he went on: "When Bart comes again I want you to send him home unrewarded. He's done a number of ugly things that deserve punishment. His mother and I cannot have a stranger coming between Bart and our authority. When you indulge him here we face the consequences." All this time he was doing his darnedest to see her hands—as she did her best to keep them hidden.

What was this all about? Why did Dad want to see her hands? Was it all those fabulous rings that held his fascination? I'd never guessed he liked things like that, since Mom had an aversion for jewelry of any kind but earrings.

And then, when Dad seemed to be looking toward another of her original oil paintings, her hands came into view and fluttered up near her throat to the magnet of her hidden pearls.

His head jerked around. Dad spoke then out of context, startling me, startling her. "Those rings you wear—I've seen those very rings before!"

When she too obviously shoved her hands inside her full sleeves, Dad jumped to his feet as if thunderstruck. He stared at her, spun around once more to survey the sumptuous room, and once more nailed her with his eyes. She cringed.

"The ... best ... that ... money ... can ... buy," Dad said slowly, separating each word. I caught his bitterness, though I didn't understand. It seemed lately I never understood anything.

"Nothing too good for the elegant and aristocratic Mrs. Bartholomew Winslow," he said. "Those rings, Mrs. Winslow—why didn't you have the good sense to hide them away? Then your disguise might have worked, though I doubt it. I know your voice, and your gestures too well. You wear black rags but your fingers sparkle with your status symbols. Do you forget what those symbols did to us? Do you think I've forgotten those endless days of suffering from the cold or heat, from the loneliness—all our pain symbolized by a string of pearls and those rings on your fingers?"

I was shocked and bewildered. Never before had I seen Dad so upset. He wasn't easily provoked—and who was this woman he knew and I didn't? Why had he called her Mrs. Bartholomew Winslow—the very name of my half brother? Could it be true she really was Bart's grandmother—and Bart might not be the son of Daddy Paul?

Dad railed on. “*Why*, Mrs. Winslow, *why*? Did you think you could hide here and we wouldn't find out? How can you fool anyone when even the way you sit and hold your head betrays your true identity? Haven't you done enough to hurt me and Cathy? Do you have to return to do more? I should have guessed that you were behind Bart's confusion—behind his weird behavior. What have you been doing to our son?”

“Our son?” she asked. “Don't you mean, more correctly, *her* son?”

“Mother!” he raged before he looked at me guiltily. Looking from one to the other of them, I thought, how wonderful and how strange. At last his mother was free from the loony bin and she really was Bart's grandmother after all. But why did he call her Mrs. Winslow? If she was his mother and Dr. Paul's mother, then she'd have to be Mrs. Sheffield—wouldn't she?

I was thinking all of this even as she said, “Sir, my rings are not that exceptional. Bart has told me you're not his real father, so please leave my home. I didn't come to harm him—or anyone.” It seemed she gave my father a warning look. I guessed she was giving him a road out on account of me.

“My dear mother, the game is up.” She sobbed, then covered her veiled face with her hands. He shot out with no regard for her tears, “When did your doctors release you?”

“Last summer,” she whispered. Her hands lowered so she could use her voice better for pleading. “Even before I moved here I had my lawyers do what they could to help you and Cathy buy whatever piece of land you selected. I ordered them to keep me anonymous, knowing you wouldn't want my help.”

Dad fell into a chair, bent over to rest his elbows heavily on his knees.

Why wasn't he happy to see his mother free from that place? She was living nearby, and he'd always wanted to visit her. Didn't he love his own mother? Or was he afraid she might go crazy any moment? Did he think Bart might have inherited her madness?—or her insanity might infect Bart like a physical disease? And why didn't my mother like her? I looked from one to the other, wanting answers to my unspoken questions, and so afraid I might learn Paul wasn't Bart's father at all.

When Dad lifted his head I could see his drawn face, the deep lines that etched from his nose to his mouth. Lines I'd never seen before.

"I cannot in good conscience call you Mother again," he said dully. "If you helped buy the land my home sits on, I thank you. Tomorrow I'll see that a *For Sale* sign is put up, and we'll move far away if you refuse to move first. I will not allow you to turn my sons away from their parents."

"Their parent," she corrected.

"The only parents they have," he said in return. "I should have known you'd come here. I've called your doctor and he told me you'd been released, but he didn't say when, or where you went."

"Where else do I have to go?" she cried pitifully, wringing her bejeweled hands like pale limp rags. It was as if she reached out and touched him then, even as she restrained herself from reaching for him. Each word she said, each look she gave him, said she loved him—even I could tell.

"Christopher," she pleaded, "I have no friends, no family, no home—and nowhere to go but to you and yours. All I have left is you and Cathy and the sons she bore—my grandsons. Would you take them from me too? Each night I pray on my knees that you and Cathy will forgive me and take me back and love me as you once did."

He seemed made of steel, so unreachable, but I was on the verge of crying.

“My son, my beloved son, take me back and say you love me again. And if you cannot do that, then just let me live where I can see my grandsons now and then.”

She paused then, waiting for him to respond. When he refused, she went on: “I hoped you could be lenient if I stayed over here and never let her know who I was. But I’ve seen her, heard her voice; heard yours, too. I hide behind the wall and listen. My heart throbs. My chest aches with longing. Tears fill my eyes from holding back my voice that wants to cry out and let you know I’m sorry! So terribly sorry!”

Still he didn’t say anything. He wore his detached, professional look.

“Christopher, I would gladly give ten years of my life to undo the wrong I’ve done! I’d give another ten years just to sit at your table and feel welcomed by my own grandchildren!”

Tears were in her eyes, in mine too. My heart cried for my father’s mother even as I wondered why he and Mom hated her.

“Christopher, Christopher, don’t you understand why I wear these rags? I cover my face, my hair, my figure, so she won’t know! But all the time I keep hoping, praying that sooner or later both of you can forgive me enough to let me become a member of your family again! Please, please, accept me as your mother again! If you do, perhaps then she can too!”

How could he sit here and not feel the same pity for her that I did? Why wasn’t he crying like I was?

“Cathy will never forgive you,” he said tonelessly.

Strangely, she cried out happily, “Then you will? Please say it—you forgive me!”

I trembled as I waited for him to speak.

“Mother, how can I say I forgive you? By saying that I would betray Cathy, and I can never betray her. Together we stand and together we will fall, still believing we did right, while you stand guilty and alone. Nothing you say or do can undo death. And every day that you stay here sees Bart more

and more deranged. Do you realize he is threatening our adopted daughter Cindy?”

“No!” she cried, shaking her head so the veils swung violently. “Bart would not hurt his sister.”

“Wouldn’t he? He hacked off her hair with a knife, Mrs. Winslow. And he’s threatened his mother as well.”

“NO!” she yelled more passionately than before. “Bart loves his mother! I give Bart treats because you are too busy with your professional life to give him all the attention he needs. Just as his mother is too busy with her life to care if he has enough love. But I cater to his needs. I try to take the place of the peers he doesn’t have. I do everything I can to make him happy. And if feeding him treats and giving him gifts makes him feel better, what harm can I do? Besides, once a child has all the sweets he can eat, soon he loses the taste for them. I know. Once I was like Bart, loving ice cream, candy, cookies, and other sweets ... and now I cannot tolerate them at all.”

Dad got up and motioned to me. I stood and moved to his side as he looked at his mother with pity. “It’s a terrible shame you came too late to try to redeem your actions. Once I would have been touched by any sweet word you said. Now your very presence shows how little you care if we are deeply hurt again, as we will be if you stay.”

“Please, Christopher,” she begged. “I have no other family, and no others who care if I live or die. Don’t deny me your love when to do so will kill the very best part of you, the part that makes you what you are. You’ve never been like Cathy. Always you could hold on to some of your love—hold fast to it now, Christopher. Hold so fast and so true, you can eventually help Cathy to find a little love for me too!” She sobbed and weakened. “Or if not love, help her find forgiveness, for I admit that I could have served my children better.”

Now Dad was touched, but not for long. “I have to think of Bart’s welfare first. He’s never had much confidence in himself. Your tales have disturbed him so much he has nightmares. Leave him alone. Leave us alone! Go away, stay

away, we don't belong to you anymore. Years ago we gave you chance after chance to prove you loved us. Even when we ran you could have answered the judge's summons and spared us the pain of knowing we weren't loved enough for you to even appear and show some interest in our futures.

"So get out of our lives! Make another life for yourself with the riches you sacrificed us to get. Let Cathy and me live the lives we've worked so hard to achieve."

I was baffled—what was he talking about? What had his mother done to her two sons, Christopher and Paul—and what did my mother have to do in their youthful lives?

She rose too, standing tall and straight. Then, slowly, slowly, she removed the veil that covered her head and face. I gasped. My dad gasped. Never before had I seen a woman who could look so ugly and so beautiful at the same time. Her scars looked as if a cat had scratched her face. Her jowls sagged with age; her pretty blonde hair was streaked with gray. I'd been terribly curious to see up close what she hid under her veil—now I wished I hadn't.

Dad bowed his head. "Did you have to do that?"

"Yes," she said. "I wanted you to see what I did so I would no longer look like Cathy." She gestured to her wooden rocker. "See that chair? I have one in every room in this house." She indicated all the comfortable chairs with fluffy soft cushions. "I sit in hard wooden chairs to punish myself. I wear the same black rags every day. I keep mirrors on the walls so I can see how ugly and old I am now. I want to suffer for the sins I committed against my children. I despise this veil, but I wear it. I can't see well through the veil, but I deserve that too. I do what I can to make the same kind of hell for myself as I made for my own flesh and blood, and I keep on believing that there will come a time when you and Cathy will recognize how I am trying to atone for my sins so that you can forgive me and return to me, and we can be a whole family again. And when you and Cathy can do that, I can go peacefully into my grave. When I meet your father again, perhaps he won't judge me too harshly."

“Oh,” I cried out spontaneously, “I forgive you for whatever you did! I’m sorry you have to wear black all the time, with that veil over your face!” I turned to Dad and tugged on his arm. “Say you forgive her, Dad. Please don’t make her suffer more! She *is* your mother, and I could always forgive my mother, no matter what she did.”

He spoke to my grandmother as if he hadn’t even heard me. “You were always good at persuading us to do what you wanted.” I’d never heard him speak so coolly. “But I’m not a boy anymore,” he went on. “Now I know how to resist your appeal, for I have a woman who has never let me down in any important way. She has taught me not to be as gullible as I once was. You want Bart because you think he should have been yours. But you cannot have Bart. Bart belongs to us. I used to think Cathy did wrong when she sought revenge and stole Bart Winslow from you. But she didn’t do wrong—she did what she had to do. And so we have two sons instead of one.”

“Christopher,” she cried, looking desperate, “you don’t want the world to know of your indiscretion, surely you don’t.”

“Yours too,” he responded coldly. “If you expose us, you expose yourself as well. And remember, we were only children. Who do you think a judge and jury would favor—you or us?”

“For your own sakes!” she called as we stepped from her parlor and headed toward the double front doors (he had to push me ahead of him, for I was holding back, pitying her), “love me again, Christopher! Let me redeem myself, please!”

Dad whirled about, furious and red-faced. “I cannot forgive you! You think only of yourself. As you have always thought only of yourself. I don’t know you, Mrs. Winslow. I wish to God I had never known you!”

Oh, Dad, I thought, you’re going to be sorry. Forgive her, please.

“Christopher,” she called once more, her voice so weak and thin it sounded old and brittle, “when you and Cathy can love

me again, you'll find better lives for yourselves and for your children. There is so much I could do to help if only you would let me."

"Money?" he asked with scorn. "Are going to use blackmail? We have enough money. We have enough happiness. We have managed to survive, and managed to love, and we have not killed anyone to achieve what we have."

Killed? Had she killed?

Dad pulled me by my hand as he stalked to the door. I said to him on the way home from her mansion, "Dad, it seemed I could smell Bart in that room. He might have been hiding and listening. He was there, I'm sure of it."

"All right," he answered in a tired way. "You go back and look for him."

"Dad, why don't you forgive her? I believe she's truly sorry for whatever she did to make you hate her—and she is your mother." I smiled and tugged on his arm, wanting him to go back with me and say he loved her. "Wouldn't it be nice to have both my grandmothers here for Christmas?"

He shook his head and strode away leaving me to race back to the big house. He'd taken only a few steps before he turned. "Jory, promise not to tell your mother anything about tonight."

I promised, but I was unhappy about it, unhappy about everything I'd heard. I didn't know if I had heard the full truth about my dad and his mother, or only part of a long, secret story never told to me. I wanted to run after Dad and ask why he hated his mother so much, but I knew from his expression what he wouldn't tell me. In some odd way, I was glad not to know more.

"If Bart is over there, you bring him home and sneak him into his room, Jory. Please, for God's sake, don't mention anything to your mother about the woman next door again. I'll take care of her. She'll go away, and it will be just as it was before she came."

Being what I was, I believed, though I felt sorry for his mother, I didn't owe her the loyalty I owed him, but I couldn't

keep the most important question from my tongue. “Dad, what did your mother do that makes you hate her so much? And if you hate her, why did you always insist upon going to visit her, when Mom wouldn’t?”

He stared off into space, and, as if from a far distance, his voice came to me, “Jory, I fear you will know all of the truth soon enough. Give me time to find the right words, the true explanation that will satisfy your need to know. But believe this: your mother and I always intended to tell you. We were only waiting for you and Bart to grow up enough, and when you hear our story, I think you will understand how I can both love and hate my mother. It’s sad to say, but there are many children who feel ambiguous about their mothers or fathers.”

I hugged him, even if it was unmanly. I loved him, and if that was unmanly too, then darn if being manly was so great. “Don’t you worry about Bart, Dad,” I said. “I’ll bring him home safely.”

I managed to squeeze between the gates just in the nick of time. Softly they clanked behind me. Then ... silence. If there was a more silent place in the world than those spacious grounds, I’ve never been there.

I jumped and quickly dodged behind a tree. John Amos Jackson had Bart by the hand, and he was leading him away from the house.

“Now you know what you have to do, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” intoned Bart, as if in a stupor.

“You know what will happen if you don’t do as I say, don’t you?”

“Yes sir. Bad things will happen to everyone, even me.”

“Yessss, bad thingsss, thingsss you will regret.”

“Bad things I will regret,” he repeated flatly.

“From woman man is born into sin ...”

“From woman man is born into sin ...”

“And those who originate the sin ...”

“Must suffer.”

“And how must they suffer?”

“In all ways, by any ways, by death they will be redeemed.”

I froze where I crouched, not believing my ears. What was that man doing to Bart?

They drifted beyond my hearing, and I peeked just in time to see Bart disappearing over the wall, going home. I waited until John Amos Jackson shuffled into the house and turned out all the lights.

Then suddenly I realized I hadn't heard Apple bark. Wasn't a dog as old and big as Apple supposed to bark and warn those in the house that a prowler was on the grounds? I sneaked into the barn and called Apple by name. He didn't come running to lick my face and wag his tail. “Apple,” I called again, louder. I hit a kerosene lamp that hung near the door and I shone it into the horse stall where Apple had his home.

I sucked in my breath! Oh, no! NO!

Who would be so cruel as to starve a dog like that? Who could then drive a pitchfork into that poor bag of bones covered by beautiful fur ... and now he was all bloody. Dark with old blood that had dried to the color of black rust. I ran outside and threw up. An hour later Dad and I were digging a grave and burying a huge dog that never had a chance to reach maturity. Both of us knew “they” would lock Bart up forever if ever this got out.

“He may not have done it,” said Dad when we were home. “I can't believe he did it.” By now I could believe anything.

There was an old woman who lived next door.

Who wore black rags and black covered her hair.

She was twice Mom's mother-in-law, twice hated, and much more.

And all I could do was wonder, wonder what she had done to my mom and my dad. Dad hadn't yet explained it all to me as he'd promised. Though I had found a glimmer of a fuzzy solution—I'd let my emotions run away with me, and for a

moment I'd thought she was my grandmother too, for Chris was so much my real father in my heart.

But in reality, it was Bart who was Paul's son, and I knew why his grandmother wanted him so badly and not me. I belonged to Madame Marisha as Bart belonged to her. It was the blood relationship that made them love each other. And I sighed to be only a stepgrandson to such a mysterious and touching woman who felt she had to suffer to redeem her mistakes. I thought I should take better care of Bart—protect him, guide him, keep him straight.

Right away I had to get up and look at Bart, who was curled on his side in his bed with his thumb in his mouth. He looked like a baby—just a little boy who'd always stood in my shadow, always trying to live up to what I'd done at his age, and never achieving the goals I'd already set. He hadn't walked sooner, talked at a younger age, or smiled until he was almost a year old. It was as if he'd known from birth that he'd always be number two, never number one. Now he'd found that one person in the world who would let him come first. I was happy Bart had his very own grandmother. Even if she did wear nothing but black, I could tell she'd once been very beautiful. More beautiful than my Grandmother Marisha could ever have hoped to be when she was young.

Yet ... yet ... some pieces in the puzzle were missing,

John Amos Jackson—just where did he fit into the picture? Why would a loving grandmother and mother who wanted to be reunited with her son and his wife and her grandson ... why would she bring that hateful old man along with her?

Honor Thy Mother



He never bothered to look around. He thought I was safely asleep, in that little bed where they liked to keep me. But I saw Daddy leave the house. Was he going to see my grandmother? Wish everybody'd leave her alone, so I could have her back like she used to be, all mine.

Apple was gone. Gone to where puppies and ponies went. "That great big pasture in the sky," said John Amos with his glittery pale eyes watching me carefully, like he thought I was the one who stabbed the pitchfork in. "You saw Apple dead? You really saw him dead?"

"Deader than a doornail."

I sneaked along the winding jungle paths that were taking me straight into hell. Down, down, down. Caves and canyons and deep pits, and sooner or later we'd find the door. Red. The door to hell would be red—maybe black.

Black gates. Magic gates swung wide to let Daddy through. She wanted him. Fine son he was, putting his mother into the loony bin, and next he'd put me in one of those funny farms where they laced you up in straitjackets (wonder what they were?). Terrible anyway, whatever it was.

The gates clanked together. Knew Mom was back in her room typing away those pages like she really thought it was just as important as dancing. She didn't seem to mind sitting in that wheelchair, didn't seem to mind at all unless she heard Jory playing that dance music. Then her head would lift; she'd stare into space; her feet would begin to keep time.

"What's intricate mean, Momma?" I'd asked when she said Jory had the concentration to learn *intricate* dances quickly.

"Complicated," she'd answered, just like a dictionary. She had dictionaries all over the place, little ones, middlesized

ones, a huge fat one that had its own stand that swiveled around.

Had to make my feet do *intricate* things. I tried as I slipped along behind Daddy, who never glanced backward. I was always looking over my shoulder, staring to the left or to the right, wondering, always wondering. Dratted shoelace—ouch! Down I was—again. If he heard me cry out, he didn't look back. Good ... had to do all this secret stuff like a good spy. Or a thief, a jewel thief. Rich ladies had lots and lots of jewels. Ought to get in some practice while she was gabbing with her doctor son, crying and constantly asking him to forgive her, have mercy, take her back and love her again. Boring. Didn't like Daddy so much now, was back to how I used to feel before he saved my leg from being "amputated." Dratted man was trying to drive away the one grandmother I had. What other kid had a grandmother so rich she could give him everything?

"Where you going, Bart?"

John Amos appeared out of nowhere, his eyes glowing in the dark. "None of your damn business!" I snapped like Malcolm would have done. Had Malcolm's journal flat against my chest, under my shirt. The red leather was sticking to my skin. I was learning how to make money out of rage.

"Your father is in that house, talking with your grandmother. Now you get in there and do your job, and report back to me every word they say. You hear?"

Hear? Was him who needed a hearing aid, not me. Else he would do his own spying through the keyhole. But all he could do was peek, couldn't hear very good. Couldn't bend over much better, and couldn't pick up anything he dropped.

"Bart ... did you hear me? What the devil are you doing heading for the back stairs?"

Turned to stare at him. On the fifth step I was taller. "How old are you, John Amos?"

He shrugged and scowled. "Why do you want to know?"

"Never saw anybody older, that's all."

“The Lord has ways of punishing those who show disrespect to their elders.” He gritted his teeth. They made the sound of dishes clinking in the sink.

“I’m taller than you are now.”

“I’m six feet tall—or I used to be. Boy, that’s a height you will never reach unless you always stand on stairs.”

I narrowed my eyes and made them mean like Malcolm would. “There will come a day, John Amos, when I’ll stand head and shoulders taller than you. And on your knees you will come begging to me, pleading, pleading; sir, sir, you’ll say, please let me get rid of those attic mice. And I will say to you, How do I know you are worthy of my trust, and you will say to me, In your footsteps I will follow, even when you lie in your grave.”

What I said made him slyly smile.

“Bart, you are learning to be as clever as your great-grandfather, Malcolm. Now, put off whatever you plan to do. Go back to your father, who is with your grandmother this very second. Remember every word you hear, and report back to me.”

Like a spy, I crawled through the dumbwaiter, which was hidden behind a pretty Oriental screen. From there I could sneak my way to a hidden place behind the potted palms.

There they were, the two of them, doing the same old thing. Grandmother pleading, Daddy rejecting. Sat down and made myself comfortable before I pulled out my pack of roll-my-owns. Cigarettes helped when life got boring, like now. Nothing to do but listen. Spies never got to say anything, and it was action I needed.

Daddy looked nice in his pale gray suit, like I wanted to look when I grew up—but I wouldn’t—I didn’t have his kind of good looks. I sighed, wishing I was his real son.

“Mrs. Winslow, you promised to move, but I look around and see you haven’t even packed one box. For the sake of Bart’s mental health, for the sake of Jory whom you say you love well too, and most of all for Cathy, go away. Move to San

Francisco. That's not too far away. I swear I'll visit you when I can. I'll be able to find opportunities to see you and Cathy will never suspect."

Boring. Why couldn't he say something different? Why did he care so much what my momma said about his mother? If ever I was so unlucky as to have a wife, I'd tell her she'd better accept my mother or get out. Get the hell out, as Malcolm would put it.

"Oh, Christopher," she sobbed, pulling out another of those lacy handkerchiefs to wipe at her tears. "I want Cathy to forgive me so I can have a small place in your lives. I stay on because I'm hoping eventually she'll realize I'm not here to harm any of you ... I'm here only to give what I can."

Daddy smiled bitterly. "I suppose you are talking again about material things, but that's not what a child needs. Cathy and I have done all we can to make Bart feel needed, loved, and wanted—but he can't seem to understand his relationship to me. He isn't secure in what he is, who he is, or where he's going. He doesn't have a dance career like Jory to guide him into the future. Now he's grasping, trying to find himself, and you aren't helping. He keeps his innermost self very private, locked up. He adores his mother, he distrusts his mother. He suspects she loves Jory more than she loves him. He knows that Jory is handsome, talented, and most of all, adroit. Bart is not adroit at anything but pretending. If he would confide in us, or his psychiatrist, he could be helped—but he doesn't confide."

I had to wipe a tear from my eye. So hard to hear about myself, and what I was, and worse, what I wasn't—like they knew me inside out, and they didn't. They couldn't.

"Did you hear any of what I just said, Mrs. Winslow?" Daddy shouted. "Bart does not like his image that reflects only weakness—no skills, no grace, and no authority. So he borrows from all the books he's read, from all the TV shows he's watched, and sometimes he even borrows from animals, pretending he's a wolf, a dog, a cat."

“Why, why?” she moaned. He was telling all my secrets. And a secret told had no value, none at all.

“Can’t you guess why? Jory has thousands of photographs of his father, Bart has none. Not even one.”

That made her bolt straight up. She flared with anger. “And why should he have his father’s pictures? Is it my fault my second husband didn’t give his mistress his photograph?”

I felt stunned. *What was this?* Sure, John Amos had told me crazy stories, but I’d thought he made them up, just as I made up stories to chase away boredom. Was it all true that my own momma had been the bad woman who had seduced my own grandmother’s second husband? Was I really the son of that lawyer-man named Bartholomew Winslow? Oh, Momma, how can I ever stop hating you now?

Daddy was wearing that funny smile again. “Perhaps your beloved Bart thought he didn’t need to give her his photograph when she’d have the living man in her own home and in her bed as her lawful husband. She told him before he died that she was expecting his child, and he would have divorced you to be the father of his child, and have Cathy—I don’t doubt that in the least.”

I was in a tight ball, agonized by all I’d heard. My poor, poor daddy, who died in the fire at Foxworth Hall. John Amos *was* a true friend, the only one who treated me like an adult and told me the truth. And Daddy Paul, whose picture set in my bedroom on the night table, had been only another step-father, like Christopher. Was crying inside from losing yet another daddy. My eyes rolled from Daddy to her, trying so hard to know what to feel about him and her—and Momma. It wasn’t right for parents to mess up the lives of little babies who weren’t even born, mess it up so much I’d never really know who I was.

Hopefully I stared at my grandmother, who seemed to be very hurt by what her son had said. Her white hands fluttered up to her forehead, which was glistening with beads of sweat, touching it as if her head ached. Oh, how easily she could feel pain, why couldn’t I?

“All right, Christopher,” she said when I thought she might never find the words, “you’ve had your say, now let me have mine. When it came down to an ultimatum, Cathy and her unborn child, or me and my fortune—Bart would have stayed with me, his wife. He might have kept her on as his mistress until he tired of her, but then he would have figured out some legal way to take possession of his child—and then my husband would have bowed out of Cathy’s life, holding fast to his son. I know he would have stayed on with me, even as he looked around for the next pretty face and younger body.”

My own daddy. My own blood father wouldn’t have wanted my momma after all. Tears stuck to my lashes. My throat hurt, proving I was human after all, not the freak I’d believed. I could feel a different kind of pain. But still I couldn’t feel happy; why couldn’t I feel happy and real? Then I remembered some of her words ... my real daddy would have found some “legal way” to take possession of me. Did that mean he would have stolen me away from my own mother? That thought didn’t make me happy either.

Grandmother sat on, unmoving. I shriveled even smaller, scared, so scared of what I might hear next. *Daddy, don’t let out any more bad secrets and make me take action.* John Amos would force me to take action. I glanced behind me, suspecting he might be listening with a glass held to the wall so he could hear better.

“Well,” said my father, wound up now. “Bart’s psychiatrist shows an incredible interest in you, whom he believes to be my mother only. I wonder why time and again he keeps harping back to you. He seems to think you are the clue to Bart’s secret inner life. He thinks you lived a secret inner life too—did you, Mother? When your father made you feel less than human, did you sit alone and plot how to have your own kind of revenge, and make him suffer?”

What was this?

“Don’t,” she pleaded, “please don’t. Have mercy on me, Christopher. I did the best I could under the circumstances. I swear I did my best!”

“Your best?” He laughed and sounded like Momma when she poked mean fun. “When your father’s younger half brother walked into Foxworth Hall at age seventeen, did you immediately seize hold on an inspiration?—the supreme way to punish your father for making you dislike yourself? Did you set out to make our father fall in love with you? Did you? Did you hate him in a way too, because he looked like Malcolm? I think you did. I think you schemed and plotted to wound your father in the one way that would shatter his ego most, so it might never recover. And I think you succeeded! You eloped and married the younger half brother he despised, and you thought you’d won in two ways. You had stung him where it hurt most. Now you had power to gain his tremendous fortune through our father!—but it didn’t work, did it? I haven’t forgotten those days when we lived in Gladstone, when I overheard you pleading with my father to sue, to get what was rightfully his. But our father refused to cooperate. He loved you and married you for what he thought you were, and not for the money you couldn’t keep from dreaming about.”

Stunned again, I stared at my grandmother. She was crying, her frail body shaking; even her rocking chair seemed to quiver. I was quivering too, crying too—inside.

“You’re wrong, so wrong, Christopher!” she sobbed, her chest heaving. “I loved your father! You know I loved him! I gave him four children and the best years of my life—the best I had in me to give to anyone.”

“Your best is so poor, Mrs. Winslow, so very, very poor.”

“Christopher!” she cried out, getting to her feet painfully. She spread her hands in a helpless way, stepping closer to look up into his face. The black shroud she wore fluttered as she shook. She threw a fearful glance around the room, forcing me to shrink smaller into the dim shadowy corner. Her voice lowered.

“All right, we’ve said enough about the past. Live with Cathy, but accept me into your lives. Let me have Bart as my own son. You have Jory and that little girl you adopted. Let me take Bart and go away, so far away you’ll never see or hear from me again. I swear I’ll never let anyone know about you

and Cathy. I'll do what I can to protect your secret—but let me have Bart for my own, please, please!”

She fell to her knees and clutched at his hands, and when he quickly moved them out of reach, she pulled on his jacket.

“Don't embarrass me further, Mother,” he said uneasily, but I could tell he was touched. “Cathy and I don't give away our children. He is not our pride and joy at this moment, but we love him, we need him, and we will do what is necessary to see that he is mentally healthy again.”

“Tell me what to do, and I'll do it,” she pleaded, tears streaking her cheeks as at last she caught hold of his evasive hands and she crushed them to her breasts. “Tell me what to do—anything but leave. I need to see him and watch and admire as he pretends. He's wonderfully gifted.” She began to kiss his hands as he tried to pull them away, but he must not have tried too hard, for she was able to retain them both with her fragile strength.

“Mother, please ... ,” he begged, looking away before he sat down and hid his face.

“He needs me, Christopher, more than any of my own children have ever needed me. He loves me too ... I know he does. He sits on my lap and I rock him, and I see a look of contentment on his face. He's so young, so vulnerable, so bewildered by things he can't understand. And I can help. I know I can help him.

“Something inside of me says I won't be here too much longer,” she whispered, and I had to strain my ears to hear. “Let me have him until then ... please, as one last gift to the mother you used to love very much ... the mother of your youth, Christopher ... the mother who cared for you when you had the measles, the chicken pox, all those colds from staying out in the snow too long. Remember? I remember. Without my memories of the good times, I could never have lived through the bad ...”

She was getting to him. He was staring down at her, his eyes soft.

“You said a while ago I seduced your father and deliberately schemed to hurt my father by marrying him. You are wrong. I loved your father from the first moment I laid eyes on him. I could no more have held back from loving him than you held back from loving Cathy. Chris, I have nothing left of my past. I’ve lost everything. John’s the only one from my past,” she murmured low, like she was scared. “He’s the only one I have left from the days at Foxworth Hall.”

“He must know who I am then! And who Bart is!”

Leaning forward, she stretched to put her pale hand with all the rings on his trousered knee—I saw him shudder at her touch. “I don’t know what John knows. He thinks all my children ran off and were lost somewhere in the world. As far as I know, he doesn’t know Bart’s middle name is Winslow ... but then again, he’s so sly, he may know everything.” She trembled and withdrew her hand as if she knew it offended him. “All this land around here belonged to my father. So he thinks it’s only natural I would come out here and settle down on an estate that’s been in our family for years and years.”

He shook his head. “And you did arrange for me to buy my land cheaper?”

“Christopher, my father owned land everywhere. Now I own all of it. But I would give it all away just to have you and Cathy back as my family. No one knows about you and Cathy but me, and I’ll never tell anyone who you are. I promise not to shame and hurt you—just let me stay! Let me be your mother again!”

“Get rid of John!”

First she sighed, then bowed her head. “I wish to God I could.”

“What do you mean?”

“Can’t you guess?” she asked, her graying head lifted so her eyes could search his.

“Blackmail?”

“Yes. He doesn’t have any family either. He pretends not to know about you and Cathy, but I can’t be sure. He’s sworn to

help me keep my whereabouts a mystery, for there are news reporters who would be hot on my heels if they knew where I was. So I give him a good home and plenty of money to keep me safe.”

“Bart is not safe. Jory has seen John Amos whispering to him. I think he knows who we are.”

“But he won’t do anything,” she cried. “I’ll talk to him, make him understand. He won’t tell ... I’ll pay him off.”

Daddy stood up to leave. For a moment his hand rested lightly on her head. Then, looking guilty, he quickly withdrew it. “All right. You speak to John, order him to leave Bart alone. Don’t let Bart know you are his natural grandmother—let him keep on believing you are only a kind-hearted woman who needs him for a friend. Can you do this one small thing for me?”

“Yes, of course,” she agreed weakly.

“And please start wearing that veil over your head again. Jory knows you are my mother ... but, well, you know. And who knows when Cathy might decide to be friendly and visit her new neighbor? She was busy with her dance classes before. Now that she’s not so occupied, she’ll need to see people. That was one of the hardest things for her to bear when she was young ... to be kept locked up for what seemed to her centuries, and only her mother and grandmother ... That made her need even greater.”

Again her head drooped. “I know. I’ve sinned and I regret it. I pray to turn back the clock, but I wake up to another lonely day—and I have only Bart to give me hope.”

Oh, gosh, they’d known so much before I came along.

“I have to ask something,” she said in a faint whisper. “Do you love her as a man loves ... a wife?”

He turned so she could see only his back. “That is none of your business.”

“But I’d understand. I question Bart but he doesn’t know what I mean. But he’s told me you share one bedroom.”

Angry, he flared, glaring at her: “And one bed. Now, are you satisfied?” Once more he spun on his heel, and this time he left.

Puzzling, gosh darn puzzling. Why did Momma hate his momma? And why did my grandmother ask about bedrooms and bed?

Ran home next. Didn't stop to report to John Amos. Momma was at that dratted barre, trying to pull herself out of that ugly wheelchair. I hid and watched. Strange to see her awkward—like me. Clumsy like me, but she managed to pull herself to her feet and then she stood shaking all over. Her face in the mirror was pale, her hair a frame of gold. Molten gold, hot as hell, burning as running lava.

“Bart, is that you?” she called. “Why do you stare at me so strangely? I won't fall, if you're thinking that. Each day I feel better, stronger. Come sit with me and talk to me. Tell me what you do all the time when I can't see you. Where do you go? Teach me to play your pretend games. When I was your age I liked to pretend too. Why, I used to dream about being the world's most famous prima ballerina, and I made that the most important thing in my whole life. Now I know it was never that important. Now I know it's making the ones you love happy that matters most. Bart, I want to make you happy ...”

I hated her for “seducing” my real father and taking him from my poor lonely grandmother, who was her own mother-in-law. And she must have been married then to Dr. Paul Sheffield, who was Chris's brother but not my real father at all. Look at her, trying to make up to me for her neglect! Too late! I wanted to run and shove her down. Hear her bones break, all of them. She was unfaithful to all husbands! But I couldn't say any of this. My legs went rubbery and weak and made me sink to the floor as all the silent screams bounced in my head. Wicked sinful evil woman! Sooner or later she'd run away with some lover—like Malcolm's mother did. Like all mothers did.

And why hadn't my grandmother come right out and told me who she was? Why was she keeping it a secret? Didn't she

know I needed a real grandmother? She even lied to me about who my daddy was! Only John Amos told me the truth.

“Bart—what’s wrong?”

Alarm on her face. Should be alarmed. Never, never did she tell me anything but lies. There was no one I could trust but John Amos. All the while he shuffled along, looking weird and old, he was honest, doing his best to set the world straight.

“Bart, what’s the matter? Can’t you tell me, your own mother?”

Stared at her. Saw all that mass of hair as golden snares to ruin men. Took all men and made them suffer. Her fault. All her fault. Took my real daddy from my grandmother and “seduced” him.

“Bart, don’t crawl on the floor. Stand up and use your legs. You’re not an animal.”

I threw back my head and howled. Howled all the rage and hate I felt. It wasn’t fair for God to give me her for a mother. Wasn’t fair when he burned my real daddy to death. Gotta do something. Make it all right.

“Bart, please tell me what’s wrong!”

I could barely see her. She tried to take a few steps away from the barre and her hands reached for me, as if she wanted me in her arms.

I’d never let her touch me again. Never, never, never!

“I hate you!” I screamed, jumping to my feet and backing away. “I hope you never walk again. I hope you fall down and die. I hope your house burns up and you and Cindy too!”

Ran—ran and ran until my sides hurt and my mind was empty.

In Apple’s stall I fell down to rest. I kept Malcolm’s journal there, hidden under the old hay and I fished it out to read more. Boy, he sure did hate women, especially when they were pretty. Didn’t seem to notice the ugly ones. I lifted my head and stared into space. Alicia. Nice name—wonder what made

him love Alicia more than Olivia? Just because she was only sixteen when she married his old, old father of fifty-five?

Alicia slapped his face when he tried to kiss her. Maybe Malcolm wasn't as good at kissing as his father.

The more I read the more I learned how Malcolm succeeded in everything he did, except in making women love him. Proving to me I'd better leave all women alone since I was so much like Malcolm. Over and over I was reading his words so I could turn into him, all powerful.

C names. Wonder why women like C names so much? Catherine, Corrine, Carrie, and Cindy—whole wide world full of C names. Wish I liked my grandmother like I used to. Now that I knew she was my real grandmother it wasn't as good. She should have told me. She was just another lying, sneaking, cunning female. Just as John Amos had warned me.

I could smell Apple faintly. My ears heard him munching his food; I felt his cold nose nuzzling my hand—and I was crying. Crying so hard I wanted to die and join him. But Apple should have missed me more. He made me do it. He was supposed to suffer when I did—and he didn't. He was mine and he let Grandmother feed him, give him water—so it was his own fault. And there was Clover, dead too. Strangled and stuffed in the hollow oak.

Boy, I was bad.

Thinking about my badness made me sleepy. Dreamed of Apple, who loved me. I woke up and it was almost dark. John Amos was grinning down at me, smirking too. "Hello, Bart. Do you feel lonely in Apple's stall?"

Towering above me, John Amos didn't notice the hay that fell from the loft above and caught on his stringy mustache and made him look gruesome.

"How did Malcolm make all his money, John Amos?" I asked just to see if the hay fell off his mustache when he spoke.

"By being more clever than those who would stop him."

"Stop him from what?" The hay didn't fall off.

“From getting what he wanted.”

“What did he want?”

“Everything. Everything that wasn’t his he wanted—and to get everything that belongs to others you have to be ruthless and determined.”

“What’s ruthless?”

“Doing what you have to to get what you want.”

“Doing anything?”

“Anything,” he repeated. Stiffly he bent over to peer into my eyes. “And don’t hesitate to step on those who get in your way—including members of your own family. For they would do the same to you if you stood in their way.” He smiled thinly. “You know, of course, that sooner or later that doctor who is dissecting your personality bit by bit will lock you in an institution. That’s what your parents are doing—getting ready to remove from their lives a little boy who is proving to be too much of a problem.”

Baby tears got in my eyes.

John Amos scowled. “Don’t show weakness with tears that belong to women. Be hard, like your great-grandfather Malcolm was.” He paused to eye me up and down. “Yes, you have inherited many of his genes. Someday, if you keep going as you are, you will be just as powerful as Malcolm.”

* * *

“Where’ve you been, Bart?” snapped Emma, who looked at me all the time like she was disgusted, even when I was clean. “Never in my life have I seen a boy who could get dirtier more quickly than you. Look at your shirt, your pants, your face and hands! Filthy, that’s what. What do you do, make mud puddles and wallow in them?”

Didn’t answer. Headed for the bathroom down the hall.

Momma looked up from her desk in her bedroom. “Bart, I’ve been wondering where you were. You’ve been gone for hours.”

Was my own business, none of hers.

“Bart ... answer me.”

“Was outside.”

“I know that. Where outside?”

“Near the wall.”

“What were you doing there?”

“Digging.”

“Digging for what?”

“For worms.”

“Why do you need worms?”

“Goin’ fishin.”

She sighed. “It’s too late to go fishing, and you know I don’t like you to go off by yourself. Ask your father if he will take you fishing this Saturday.”

“He won’t.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“He never has time.”

“He’ll take time.”

“No, he won’t. Never has, never will.”

Again she sighed. “Bart, try to be understanding. He’s a doctor, and he has many very sick patients. You wouldn’t want his patients to go unattended, would you?”

Wouldn’t care. Rather go fishing. Too many people in the world anyway ... especially women. I ran to bury my face in her lap. “Momma, please get well quick. YOU take me fishin! Now you don’t have to dance, you can do all the things Daddy never has time for. You can spend all the time with me you used to spend with Jory dancing. Momma, Momma, I’m sorry about what I said,” I sobbed, “I don’t really hate you! I don’t want you to fall down and die. I just feel mean sometimes and I can’t stop. Momma, please don’t hate me for what I said.”

Her hands were soft and comforting in my hair as she tried to smooth it down and make it stay neat. Hairbrushes and hairspray never worked, so how could her hands? I buried my face deeper in her lap, thinking of how John Amos would scold me if he knew, though I'd already told him what I'd said to her, and he'd smiled, so pleased I was talking like Malcolm. "You shouldn't have done that, Bart," he said to confuse me. "You have to be clever, make her think she's having her way. If you let her know how you feel she'll find a way to defeat our purpose. And we do have to save her from the Devil, don't we?"

I raised my head to stare up into her pretty face, making tears streak my face for the living lie she had to be. Been married three times, John Amos had told me. I didn't really care if she was good or evil. I'd make her good. I'd teach her to leave all men alone—but me.

To win I had to play my cards just right, and deal out the aces one by one, like John Amos had told me. Fool her, fool Daddy, make them think I wasn't crazy. But I got mixed up. I wasn't crazy, only pretending to be Malcolm.

"What are you thinking, Bart?" she asked, still stroking my hair.

"Got no playmates. Got none but what I make up. Got nothing but bad genes from inbreeding—and as for my environ—well, that's no good either. You and Daddy don't deserve any children. You don't deserve anything but the hell you have already made for yourself!"

Left her sitting stunned. Glad to make her unhappy, like she was always making me. But why didn't happiness come and make me laugh? Why did I run to my room and throw myself down on my bed and cry?

Then I remembered the one person who didn't need anyone—Malcolm. He knew he was strong. Malcolm never hesitated in making decisions, even wrong ones, for he knew how to twist them about and make them right. So I scowled, hunched my shoulders, stood up, and shuffled down the hall, wanting what Malcolm wanted. I saw Jory dancing with Melodie and

went in Momma's room to report to her. "Stop what you're doing!" I yelled. "Sinning is going on between Jory and Melodie—they're kissing—making a baby."

Her flying fingers paused over the typewriter keys. She smiled. "Bart, it takes more than hugging and kissing to make a baby. Jory is a gentleman and won't take advantage of an innocent young girl who is decent and wise enough to know when to say stop."

She didn't care. All she cared about was that damn book she was writing. I didn't have any more chance with her now than I'd had when she was a dancer. Always, always she found something better to do than play with me.

I clenched my fists and hit at the doorframe. There'd come a time when I was her boss, and she'd listen then. She'd know who she'd better play with. She'd been a better mother when she taught ballet classes. At least she had a free moment once in awhile. Now all she did was write, WRITE. Mountains and mountains of white paper.

Again she stopped paying attention to me, and reloaded her typewriter as if she had a shotgun to kill the world. She didn't even notice when I took a box she'd filled and put aside as she began to fill another with her words on paper.

John Amos would be interested in what she'd written. But before he read a sheet, I'd read them first. Even if I had to use a dictionary every minute I struggled to understand some of the longer words she used. Appropriate ... knew what that meant. I think.

"Good night, Momma."

She didn't hear me. Just went right on as if I weren't there.

Nobody ever ignored Malcolm. When he spoke people jumped to do his bidding. I was gonna make myself over into Malcolm.

A week later I was spying on Mom and Jory. They were before the long mirror in the "rec" room and Jory was helping Momma use her bad leg. "Now, don't think of falling. I'm

right in back and I'll catch you if your knee gives way. Just take it easy, Mom, and soon you will be walking just fine."

She didn't walk just fine. Every step she took seemed to hurt. Jory kept his hands on her waist to keep her from even tottering, and somehow she made it to the end of the barre without falling. Weakly she waited for him to push up her chair so she could sit down again. He turned the footrests into position as she held up her legs. "Mom, you're stronger each day."

"But it's taking so long."

"You sit and write too long at a time. Remember, your doctor said to get up more often, and sit less ..."

She nodded, looking exhausted. "Who was that long distance call from? Why didn't they want to speak to me?"

His face breaking into a smile, Jory explained: "It was my grandmother Marisha. I wrote and told her about your fall, and now she's flying west so she can replace you in your school. Isn't that great, Mom?"

She didn't look happy even a little bit. As for me, I hated that ole witch!

"Jory, you should have told me before."

"But, Mom, she wanted it to be a surprise. I wouldn't have told you today, but I think it's not very polite for people to drop in out of the blue. I knew you'd want to get ready, look pretty, tidy up the house ..."

Funny kind of look she gave him. "In other words, I don't look my best now, and my house is messy?"

Jory smiled with all that charm I hated. "Mom, you're always pretty, you know that, but too skinny, and too pale. You've got to eat more and get outside a little more each day. After all, great novels aren't written in a few weeks."

Later on that same day I followed Jory out into the yard, then I hid in my special hideaway place to spy on Momma and Jory as both took turns pushing hateful Cindy in her baby swing. Never let me swing Cindy. Nobody trusted me. Head

shrink wasn't getting anywhere, so why couldn't everybody give up and leave me alone?

“Jory, it's sometimes a torment to hear your ballet music and not be able to dance and express all the emotions I feel. Now when I hear an overture begin, I tighten up and cringe inside. I yearn to dance, and the more I yearn, the harder I have to write. Writing saves me, but it seems Bart resents my writing as much as he used to resent my dancing. It seems I am never going to have the ability to please my younger son.”

“Aw, heck, Mom,” said Jory with his dark blue eyes sad and worried too, “he's only a little boy who doesn't know what he wants. I know something weird is going on in his mind.”

I wasn't weird. They were the weird ones, thinking dancing and stupid fairy tales mattered, when all others with sense knew money was king, queen, and God almighty.

“Jory, I give as much of myself to Bart as I can. I try to show affection and he pulls away. Then he's running away from me, or to me, and putting his face in my lap and crying. His psychiatrist says he's torn between hating me and loving me. And I'll tell you this in confidence: His behavior isn't helping me recover from my accident.”

Left then. Heard enough. Good time to sneak into her bedroom and steal some more of her book pages. Stuffed in my shirt drawer I had the ones John Amos had read and returned, so I put those back and took some new ones.

In my little green cave made of hedges I sat down to read. Stupid Cindy was laughing and squealing while her two adoring slaves pushed her into the air. Boy, wish I had the chance to swing her. I'd push so hard she'd sail right over the white wall and end up in the swimming pool next door. The pool that never had any water.

Reading Momma's book was very interesting. “The Road to Riches,” read the title of one of her chapters. Was that girl really my own mother? Were she and her two brothers and one sister really going to be locked up in one bedroom?

Read on until the day grew old and the fog came in and smothered me.

Got up and went inside the house, thinking about another title in her book. “The Attic.” What a wonderful place to hide things. I stared at Momma, who was kissing Daddy’s lips, teasing him, asking him about his pretty nurses, and had he found someone to replace her yet. “A beautiful young blonde of twenty or so?”

He appeared hurt. “I wish you wouldn’t make a joke out of my devotion. Cathy, don’t provoke me with silly remarks like that. I give all I can to you because I love you with a passion I recognize as idiotic.”

“Idiotic?” she asked.

“Yes, it is, when you don’t respond as passionately as I do! I need you, Cathy. Don’t let this writing come between us.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You *do* understand! Our past is coming alive. You’re living it again as you write. I peek in and see your face, watch the tears streak your face and fall on the paper. I hear you laugh and say aloud the words that Cory said, or Carrie. You’re not just writing, Cathy ... you are reliving.”

Her head bowed down and her loose hair fell and covered her face. “Yes, what you say is true. I sit at the desk and relive it all again. I see again the attic gloom, the dusty, immense space; I hear the silence more terrifying than thunder. Loneliness that knew me well then comes and burdens my shoulders, so I look up startled to see where I am, wondering why the windows aren’t heavily covered over and when the grandmother will come in and catch us with windows not covered. Sometimes I’m startled to look up and catch Bart standing in the doorway staring at me. First I think he’s Cory, then I can’t account for his dark hair and his brown eyes. I look at Cindy and think she should be larger, as old as Cory with the dark hair, and I’m confused, not knowing the past from the present.”

“Cathy.” His voice was worried. “You’ve got to give this up.”

Yes, yes, Daddy ... make her give it up!

She sobbed as she fell into his arms, and tightly he cradled her to his heart, murmuring sweet love words in her ear that I couldn’t hear. Rocking back and forth, like true wicked lovers. They look like the couples I spied on sometimes, the ones who “made out” on lover’s lane, which wasn’t so far from my grandmother’s mansion.

“Will you put the book away, wait until the children are grown and safely married ... ?”

“I can’t!” Even I could hear the agony in her voice, as if she’d like to if she could. “That story is in my brain screaming to get out, to let others know how some mothers can be. Something intuitive and wise tells me that when I have it down, and it’s sold to a publisher, and made into a book for everyone to read—only then will I be set free from all the hate I feel for Momma!”

Daddy couldn’t speak. Just went on holding her, rocking, and his blue eyes, staring into space above the head that was pressed against his chest, seemed tormented.

Stole away to play alone in the garden. Jory’s old witch grandmother was coming. Didn’t want to ever see her again. Momma didn’t like her either; I could tell from the way she grew tense and careful around her, as if afraid her quick tongue would betray her.

“Bart, my darling,” called my own grandmother softly from her side of the thick white wall, “I’ve been waiting for you to come over all day. When you don’t come I get worried, and then I’m unhappy. Darling, don’t sit alone and pout. Remember I’m over here, willing to do anything I can to make you happy.”

I ran. Fast as my legs could take me. I climbed the tree, and she had a stepladder waiting there for me so I could get to the ground safely. It was the same ladder she used to peer over at us.

“I’m going to leave the ladder there for you to use,” she whispered, hugging me, covering my face with her kisses. Lucky for me she took off that dry veil first. “I don’t want you to fall and hurt yourself. I love you so much, Bart. I look at you and think of how proud your father would be. Oh, if only he could see his son. His handsome, brilliant son!”

Handsome? Brilliant? Gee ... didn’t know I was either one. It felt good to be told I was wonderful. She made me believe I was every bit as good-looking as Jory, and every bit as talented, too. *This* was a grandmother. The kind I’d always wanted. One who loved me and no one else. Maybe John Amos was wrong about her after all.

Again I sat on her lap and let her spoon ice cream into my mouth. She fed me a cookie, a slice of chocolate cake, then held the glass of milk for me to drink. With a full stomach I snuggled more comfortably on her lap and rested my head on the softness of her full breasts that smelled of lavender. “Corrine used to use lavender,” I mumbled sleepily with my thumb in my mouth. “Sing me a lullaby ... nobody ever sang me to sleep like Momma sings to Cindy ...”

“Lullaby and good night ...”

Funny. As she sang softly, seemed I was only two years old, and a long, long time ago I’d sat just like this on my mother’s lap, and heard her sing that very song.

“Wake up, darling,” she said, tickling my face with the edge of her sleeve. “Time for you to go home now. Your parents will be worried—and they have suffered enough without having more anxiety about your whereabouts.”

Oh! Over in the corner John Amos had overheard her speak. It was in his watery pale blue eyes that gleamed dangerously. He didn’t like my grandmother or my parents or Jory or Cindy. He didn’t like anyone but me and Malcolm Foxworth.

“Grandmother,” I whispered, hiding my face so he couldn’t see my lips move, “don’t let John Amos hear you say you feel sorry for my parents. I heard him say yesterday they didn’t

deserve sympathy.” I felt her shiver and try not to let him know she was aware he was there.

“What’s sympathy mean exactly?”

Sighing, she held me tighter. “It’s an emotion you feel when you understand the troubles of others. When you want to help, but there’s nothing you can do.”

“Then what good is sympathy?”

“Not much good in any meaningful way,” she said with her eyes looking sad. “It’s only good is letting you know you are still human enough to have compassion. The best kind of sympathy moves one into action to solve problems.”

* * *

John Amos whispered as I sneaked out into the evening shadows: “The Lord helps those who help themselves. Remember that, Bart.” Gravely he returned the pages of my mother’s manuscript I’d given him to read. “Put these back exactly as you found them. Don’t get them soiled. And when she’s written more, bring those—and you will be able then to solve all your own problems. Her book is telling you how. Don’t you understand, that’s why she’s writing it.”

Ever Since Eve



She was coming now, coming from Greenglenna, South Carolina, where the graves grew like weeds. Any day I could expect to look up and see her ugly mean face.

My own grandmother was a thousand times better. Sometimes lately she left her face unveiled. She'd wear a little makeup to please me—and it did. Sometimes she even put on a pretty dress—but never-never did she let John Amos see her in anything but that black robe and the veil over her face. Only for me was she pretty.

“Bart, please don't spend too much time with John.”

He'd warned me many times she wouldn't approve. “No, ma'am. John Amos and me don't get along.”

“I'm glad. He's an evil man, Bart—cold, cruel, and heartless.”

“Yes, ma'am. He don't like women much.”

“He told you that?”

“Yep. Tells me he gets lonely. Tells me you treat him like dirt and refuse to speak to him for days on end.”

“Leave John alone. Avoid him all you can—but keep on coming to see me. You're all I have now.” She patted the soft sofa cushion, inviting me to sit beside her. I knew by now that she sat in comfortable chairs whenever John Amos had gone into the city.

“What does he do in San Francisco?” I asked. He went there often.

Frowning, she pulled me into her arms and held me close against the soft silk of her rose-colored dress. “John is an old man, but still he has many appetites that must be satisfied.”

“What does he like to eat?” I asked, curious about an old man who had false teeth and great difficulty chewing even chicken, much less steak. Mush, jello, bread sopped in milk—that’s what John Amos usually ate.

She chuckled and kissed the top of my hair.

“How’s your mother? Is she walking well now?”

Changing the subject. Didn’t want to tell me what he ate. I shifted away. “Bit by bit she’s getting well, so she tells my daddy, but she’s not so hot. When he’s not home sometimes she gets a cane and uses that, but she doesn’t want Daddy to know.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. All she wants to do now is play with Cindy, or write. That’s all she does, honest Injun! Writing books is just as exciting to her as dancing ... sometimes she gets all hot and bothered lookin.”

“Oh,” she murmured weakly, “I was hoping she’d give it up.”

So was I. But it didn’t seem likely. “Jory’s grandmother is comin’ soon, *real* soon. Think I might run away if she decides to stay in our house.”

Again she said “oh” as if surprises were stealing her tongue. “It’s all right, Granny,” I said, “don’t like her like I like you.”

Went home around lunchtime, chock full of ice cream and cake. (Really was beginning to hate sweets.) Momma was at the barre, doing exercises before the long mirror, and I had to be careful she didn’t spot me when I ducked behind a chair. I guess we had the only family room in the world with a barre at one end and a ten-foot-long mirror in back of it.

“Bart, is that you hiding behind the chair?”

“No, ma’am, it’s Henry Lee Jones ...”

“Really? I’ve been looking for Henry Lee for some time. I’m glad you’ve finally been found around the corner, around the bush ... always looking for Henry Lee.”

Made me giggle. It was the game we used to play when I was little, real little. “Momma, can you take me fishin today?”

“I’m sorry. I’ve got a full day planned. Perhaps tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. It was always tomorrow.

In a dark corner I hid myself, crouched down so small I felt nobody could see me. Sometimes when I was following Momma in her chair, I tiptoed with my back hunched, making myself into the way John Amos said Malcolm looked when he was old and at his peak of power. I stared and stared at her, morning, afternoons, nights, trying always to decide if she was as bad as John Amos said she was.

“Bart.” Jory could always find me no matter how I hid. “Whatyah doing now?” he asked. “We used to have fun together. You used to talk to me. Now you don’t talk to anyone.”

Did so. Talked to my grandmother, to John Amos. I smiled crookedly, sneering my lips in the way John Amos curled his lips as I turned to watch Momma, who was walking just as clumsy as me now.

Jory went away and left me to amuse myself, when I didn’t know how to anymore except by playing Malcolm. Was Momma really so sinful? How could I talk to Jory like I used to, when he wouldn’t believe Momma told lies about who was my real father? Jory still thought it was Dr. Paul, and it wasn’t, wasn’t.

Later on at dinner, while Momma and Daddy were exchanging glances, and saying silly things that made them laugh, and Jory too, I sat and glared at the yellow tablecloth. Why did Daddy want Momma to use a yellow tablecloth at least once a week? Why did he keep saying she had to learn to forgive and forget?

Then Jory spoke up.

“Mom,” Jory said, “Melodie and I have a date tonight. I’m taking her to a movie and then to a supperclub that doesn’t serve hard liquor. Will it be all right if I kiss her good night?”

“Such a momentous question,” she said with a laugh, while I sat in my corner. “Yes, kiss her good night, and tell her how much you enjoyed the evening ... and that’s all.”

“Yes, Mother,” he said mockingly, grinning. “I know your lesson by heart. Melodie is a sweet, nice, innocent girl who would be insulted if I took advantage of her, so I’ll insult her by *not* taking advantage.”

She made a face at him—he just smiled back. “How’s the writing going?” Jory sang out before he returned to his room to moon over the picture of Melodie that he kept on his nightstand.

Stupid question. Already she’d told him writing absorbed her every wakeful moment, and new ideas woke her up at night, and Daddy was complaining she kept him awake with her light on. As for me, I couldn’t wait to read what was going to happen next. Sometimes I thought she was making it all up, and it hadn’t happened to her, it hadn’t. She was pretending, the way I did.

“Jory,” she asked, “have you been bothering my script? I can’t find some of my chapters.”

“Gosh, Mom, you know I wouldn’t read what you write without your permission—do I have your permission?”

She laughed. “Some day when you are a man, I’m going to insist you read my book, or books. It keeps growing and growing, so it may end up two books.”

“Where are you getting your ideas?”

Stooping, she picked up an old spiral-bound book. “From this book, and from my memory.” She quickly flipped through the pages. “See how large I wrote when I was twelve? As I grew older my writing became more precise and much smaller.”

Suddenly Jory snatched the spiral-bound book from her hands, then ran to a window where he could read a few lines before she had it back in her hands. “You misspelled a few words, Mom,” he teased.

I hated their relationship; they were more like friends than mother and son. Hated the way she kept scribbling on lined paper before she typed those words up. Hated all her junk, her pencils, pens, erasers, and the new books she'd bought for her new project. Didn't have a mother anymore; didn't have a father. Never had a real father. Had nobody, not even a pet.

* * *

Summer was getting old now, like me. My bones felt old and brittle, my brain wise and cynical. And I thought, as Malcolm wrote in his journal, that nothing was as good as it used to be, and no toy gave me the pleasure I thought it would before I had it. Even my grandmother's mansion didn't look as huge as it had.

In Apple's stall, which was my special place for reading Malcolm's journal, I fell on the hay and tried to read the ten pages a day John Amos had assigned me. Sometimes I hid the book under the hay, sometimes I wore it next to my skin. As I began to read I chewed on a piece of the hay, finding my place marked with one of Momma's little leather bookmarks:

* * *

I remember so well the day when I was twenty-eight and came home to find my widowed father had finally remarried. I stared at his bride, whom I later found out was only sixteen. I knew immediately a girl so young and beautiful had married him only for his money.

My own wife, Olivia, had never been what anyone would call a beauty, but she'd had some appealing aspects when I married her, and her father was very wealthy. Suddenly I found out after she'd borne me two sons, she had no appeal for me whatsoever. She seemed so grim compared to Alicia, my stepmother of sixteen ...

* * *

I'd read this mushy love-junk before. I'd lost my place, gosh darn it. But I had a way of flipping through the book and reading here and there, especially when boring stuff like

kissing came into Malcolm's story. It seemed so odd, as much as he hated women, that he'd want to kiss them.

Now, here it was, where I'd left off.

* * *

Alicia was giving birth to her first child, whom I hoped desperately would be a girl. But no, it had to be another son to compete with me for my father's fortune. I remember standing and looking at her, and the baby she snuggled at her side in the big swan bed, and I hated them both.

I said to her when she smiled up at me innocently, and so proud of her son, as if I'd welcome him as much as my father did, "My dear stepmother, your son will never live long enough to inherit your husband's fortune, for I am alive to prevent that."

She annoyed me then so much I could have slapped her beautiful, cunning face. "I don't want your father's money, Malcolm. My son won't want it either. My SON will earn his way, not inherit what money other men have made. I'll teach my son the true values in life—the values you know nothing about."

* * *

Wonder what she'd been talking about? What were values anyway?—sale prices? I turned my attention to Malcolm's journal again. He had skipped fifteen years before he wrote again.

* * *

My daughter, Corrine, grew more and more like the mother who had abandoned me when I was only five.

I saw her changing, beginning to develop into a woman, and I'd find myself staring at her young budding breasts that would soon entice some man. Once she saw me staring there and blushed. I liked that—at least she was modest. "Corrine, promise that you will never marry and leave your father when he's old and sick. Swear to me you won't leave me EVER."

Her face grew very pale, as if she feared I might send her back into the attic if she refused my simple request. “ALL my fortune, Corrine, if you promise—every cent I will leave to you if you never leave me.”

“But, Father,” she said, inclining her head and looking miserable, “I want to get married and have babies.”

She swore she loved me, but in her eyes I could see she’d leave me at the first opportunity.

I’d see to it she had no boys or men in her life. She’d attend a school for girls only, a strict religious school that would allow no dating.

* * *

I closed the book and headed home. To my way of thinking Malcolm should never have married Olivia and had any children—but then, as I thought about it more, I would never have known my grandmother.

And even though she was a liar and had betrayed me, still I wanted to love and trust her again.

Another day I was in the barn reading about Malcolm when he was fifty. He wasn’t so regular now about writing in his journal.

* * *

There’s something sinful going on between that younger half brother of mine and my daughter. I’ve done what I can to catch them touching, or looking at each other in a suggestive way, but they are both very clever. Olivia tells me my fears are groundless, that Corrine could never feel anything for her half uncle, but then, Olivia is just another woman, true to her devious sex. Damn the day she talked me into taking that boy into our home. It was a mistake, perhaps the most grave mistake of my life.

* * *

So, even Malcolm made a few mistakes, but only with those people who were members of his family. Why was it he couldn’t stand for his sons to be musicians?—for his daughter

to marry? If I'd been Malcolm, I'd have been glad to get rid of her, just like I wished day after day that Cindy would disappear.

I hurled Malcolm's journal to the floor and kicked hay over it, then stomped toward the mansion, wanting Malcolm to write about *power*, and how to get it, and *money*, and how to earn it, and *influence*, and how to demand it. All he did was write about how miserable his two sons, his wife, and his daughter made him, to say nothing of that young half brother who liked Corrine.

"Hello, darling!" cried my grandmother when I limped into her parlor. "Where've you been? How's your mother's knee?"

"Bad," I said. "Doctors say Momma will never dance again."

"Oh," she sighed. "How dreadful. I'm so sorry."

"I'm glad she won't dance again," I assured her. "She and Daddy can't even waltz anymore, and they used to do a lot of that in the living room which they don't want us to use."

She looked so sad. Why should she look so sad? "Grandmother, my momma don't like you."

"You should watch your grammar, Bart," she choked as she wiped away her tears. "You should say, she doesn't like you—and how can you say that, when she doesn't know I'm here?"

"Sometimes you sound like her."

"I'm so sorry I'll never see her again on stage. She was so wonderfully light and graceful she seemed a part of the music. Your mother was born for dancing, Bart. I know she must feel lost and empty without it."

"No, she doesn't," I answered quickly. "Momma's got that typewriter and her book to work on all day and most of the night, and that's all she needs. She and Daddy lie in bed for hours and hours, especially when it rains, and they talk about some big old house in the mountains, and some big ole grandmother who wore gray dresses all the time, and I hide in the closet and think it's just like some dumb fairy tale."

She appeared shocked. “Do you spy on your parents? That’s not very nice, Bart. Adults need privacy—everyone needs privacy.”

I smiled and felt good to tell her I spied on everyone—ever her sometimes.

Her blue eyes grew wider and she stared at me for a long time before she smiled. “You’re teasing me, aren’t you? I’m sure your father has taught you better than that. Bart, if you want people to love you and respect you, you have to treat them as you would want to be treated. Would you like for me to spy on you?”

“NO!” I roared.

Another day, another trip to the office of that gray-haired old doctor who made me lie down and close my eyes so he could sit behind me and ask dumb questions.

“Are you Bart Sheffield today or Malcolm?”

Wouldn’t say nothing.

“What is Malcolm’s last name?”

Was none of his business.

“How do you feel about your mother now that she can’t dance ballet anymore?”

“Glad.”

Took him by surprise. He got busy scribbling down notes, getting real excited so his face was red when I opened my eyes and turned to take a peek. I thought I’d give him more to get excited about. “I wish Jory would fall and smash both his kneecaps. Then I could walk faster than him, and run faster than him, and do everything better too. Then when I come into the room everyone will look at me, not him.”

He waited for more. When nothing else came he said gently, “I understand, Bart. You fear your mother and father don’t love you as much as they do Jory.”

Rage took me over. “Yes, she does! She loves me better! But I can’t dance. It’s the dancing that makes her laugh with

Jory, and frown with me. I was gonna grow up and be a doctor—but now I don't want to. Cause my real daddy wasn't a doctor like they told me. He was an attorney.”

“How do you know that?” he asked

Wouldn't tell him. None of his business. John Amos told me. Heard Grandma telling Dad, too. Lawyers were smart, real smart. That would make me smart too. Dancers didn't have good brains, just good legs.

“Is there anything else you would like to tell me, Bart?”

“Yeah!” I snapped, jumping up from the couch and grabbing his letter opener. “Last night the moon was full. I looked out of the window and heard it calling to me. I wanted to howl. Then I needed to taste blood. I ran like crazy into the woods, and on into the hills, when out of the night appeared a woman who was beautiful, with long, long golden hair.”

“And what did you do?” asked the doctor when I paused.

“I killed her, then ate her.”

He scribbled away, and I picked up several of the lollipops he kept for his younger patients. Then I took about six more, thinking my grandmother might want one, at least.

When I was home I hurried over to Apple's stall and flipped backward through the pages of Malcolm's journal. I needed to find out something—and I'd skipped some mushy pages before. I wanted to know what drew him toward women whom he despised.

It was fall again, and all the trees wore brilliant autumn colors. I followed Alicia into the woods as she rode her horse with admirable skill. I had to spur my horse to make him gallop and give chase. She was so enchanted with the beauty of the season she didn't seem to hear the beat of my horse's hoofs. For a brief second I lost sight of her when she disappeared into a thicket. That's when I suspected she might be headed for the lake where I swam when I was a child. One last swim before summer was gone and winter turned the water icy.

* * *

Cherry-flavored lollipops were my favorites. I licked and licked until I could stick out my tongue and see it red as blood. Good to read and eat sweet stuff as I skimmed through the sickening glop that followed for pages on end. Gee, Malcolm must have started making money and gaining power when he was much older.

* * *

Just as I suspected, she was in the pool, her glorious body as flawless as I'd guessed it would be. And to think my father was enjoying all of that while I had to endure the frigid body of a woman who could only submit, never enjoy.

Dripping and shimmering she stepped from the lake to the grassy bank where her clothes lay waiting. My breath caught as I beheld her in sunlight. The spill of her glorious hair caught red, gold, with dark amber shadows, and the floss between her thighs curled wet and dark.

She saw me then and gasped. I hadn't realized I'd stepped out of the shadows.

* * *

Thank God she slapped him, and told him off. Now, now, he was getting to be like the Malcolm I knew him to be: mean, hard, ruthless, and rich.

* * *

“You'll pay for this, Alicia. Both you and your son will pay, and dearly pay. Nobody rejects me after leading me on, and letting me believe—”

* * *

Closed the book and yawned.

Madame M



Another letter had come from my grandmother Marisha to announce that she was on her way to take over my mother's ballet class. "And I'll have the chance to see my grandson more often, and give him the benefit of my experience."

Mom was none too happy, since she and Madame M. did not have a close or warm relationship, and this had always bothered me. I loved them both, and wanted them to love each other.

We were all waiting for Madame to show up, all starving because already she was an hour late. She'd telephoned to say she didn't want anyone to meet her, as she was independent and not accustomed to being waited on. Nevertheless, Mom had helped Emma prepare a gourmet meal, and now it was growing cold.

"Lord, but that woman can be inconsiderate," complained Dad after looking at his watch for the tenth time. "If she had allowed me to meet her at the airport, she'd be here by now."

"Isn't it strange," asked Mom with a mocking smile, "when she always insisted that her students be punctual?"

Finally, an hour after Dad ate alone and hurried off to do his hospital rounds, Mom retired to her bedroom to work on her book until my grandmother arrived.

"Bart," I called, "come on and play some game with me. Checkers?"

"No!" he bellowed, keeping to his dark corner, his eyes black and mean as he crouched there, almost unblinking. "I'm wishing for that ole lady to fall from the sky."

"That's mean, Bart. Why do you always say such hateful things?"

He refused to answer, just sat on staring at me.

The doorbell rang. I jumped up and ran to open the door.

My grandmother stood there smiling and rather disheveled looking.

She was at least seventy-four, I knew that, crinkled, old, and gray. Sometimes her hair was jet black, and sometimes it had two inches of white near the roots. Bart said it made her look like a skunk or an old black seal. He thought her hair was so slick she kept it oiled. But I thought she looked wonderful when she threw her arms about me and hugged me close, tears streaking her rouged cheeks. She didn't even give Bart a glance.

"Jory, Jory, how handsome you are," she said. Her bun of hair was so huge I guessed it might be false.

"Can I call you Grandmother when we're not in class?"

"Sure, yah," she agreed, nodding like a bird. "But only when nobody else is around, you hear?"

"There's Bart," I said to remind her to be polite—which she seldom was. She didn't like Bart, and he didn't like her. She gave Bart a brief nod, then casually dismissed him as if he didn't exist.

"I'm so glad to have a few moments alone with you," Madame gushed, hugging me again. She pulled me to the family room sofa, and together we sat while Bart stayed in his dim corner. "I tell you, Jory, when you wrote and said you weren't coming again this summer, I felt ill, really ill. I made up my mind then and there that I'd had enough of this once-a-year grandson, and I was selling my own dance studio and coming out here to help your mother. Of course I knew she wouldn't want me, but so what? I cannot endure two long years of longing to see my only grandchild.

"The flight here was ghastly," she went on. "Turbulence all the way. They searched me too before I boarded, like some criminal. Then we had to circle round and round the airport, wait our turn to land. It made me sick enough to vomit. Finally, just before our plane ran out of fuel, we landed—

bumpiest landing, I thought my neck would break. Great God in heaven, you should have heard what that man wanted for his rented car. He must have thought I was made of money. Since I've come to stay, I decided then and there I'd buy a car of my own. Not a new one, but a nice old one that Julian would have loved. Have I told you before your father loved to tinker around with old cars and fix them up so they'd run?"

Boy had she told me that before.

"So, I paid those crooks the exorbitant price of eight hundred dollars, and stepped into my new red car and took off for your place, reading a map as my car choked and chugged along. I felt so happy to be on my way to you, my beloved grandson, George's only heir. Why, it was just like it used to be when your father was an adolescent, and he'd rush home so proud to take me for a spin in his new car made out of old junk he salvaged from the city dump."

Her sparkling jet eyes seemed young, and she won me again with her affection, her praise. "... and like old ladies everywhere, you have to understand once I get started thinking backward all sorts of memories are triggered. Your grandfather felt so happy the day Julian was born. I held your father in my arms and stared up at my husband who was so handsome, like Julian, like you, and I could have burst with the pride I felt to give birth at my age for the first time with so little difficulty. And such a perfect baby your father was, so wonderful from his very beginning."

I wanted to dare and ask how old she was when my father was born—but I didn't have the nerve. Somehow the question must have shown in my eyes. "None of your damn business how old I am," she snapped, then leaned to kiss me again. "My, but you are even better-looking than your father was at your age, and I didn't think that possible. I always told Julian he would have looked better with a healthy suntan, but he'd do anything to defy me, *anything*—even keep himself unnaturally pale." Sadness clouded her eyes. To my surprise she glanced then at Bart, who was listening too—and another surprise, he seemed interested.

She still wore the same black dress that seemed stiff with age, and over that she wore a ratty old leopard-skin bolero that had seen better days. “No one really knew your father, Jory, just as no one really possessed him. That is, no one but your mother.”

She sighed, then went on as if she had to say it all before my mother appeared. “So, I’ve determined I have to know my Julian’s son better than I knew him. I’ve decided too you have to love me, because I was never sure Julian ever did. I keep telling myself that the son born of the union between my son and your mother would have to make the most wonderful dancer, with none of Julian’s hang-ups. Your mother is very dear to me, Jory, very dear, though she refuses to believe that. I admit I used to be nasty to her sometimes. She took that as my true feeling, but I was only angry because she never seemed to appreciate my son.”

Uncomfortable with this sort of talk, I shifted away from her; my first loyalty was to my mother, not to her. She noticed my attitude but went on regardless:

“I’m lonely, Jory, I need to be near you, near her too.” Remorse like evening shadows came to darken her eyes, putting additional years on her face. “The worst thing about growing old is being lonely, feeling so alone, so purposeless, so used up.”

“Oh, Grandmother!” I cried, throwing my arms about her. “You don’t need to ever feel lonely or purposeless again. You have us.” I hugged her tighter, kissed her again. “Isn’t this the most beautiful house? You can live here with us. Have I told you before my mother designed it herself?”

Madame looked with great curiosity around the family room. “Yes, this is a lovely home, so like Catherine. Where is she?”

“She’s in her room writing.”

“Writing letters?” She looked hurt, as if Mom should be a better hostess and not attending to trivialities.

“Grandmother, Mom is writing a book.”

“A book? Dancers can’t write books!”

Grinning, I jumped up and did a few practice steps out of habit. “Madame Grandmother, dancers can do anything they set their minds to. After all, if we can endure the kind of pain we do, what else is there to fear?”

“Rejections,” snapped Madame. “Dancers have sky-high egos. One rejection slip too many and Mommy will come crashing down.”

I smiled, thinking that was a good one. She’d never come crashing down even if the mailman brought her a thousand rejection slips.

“Where’s your father?” she asked next.

“Making his evening rounds at his hospitals. He said to give you his apologies. He wanted to be here and welcome you to our home, but you didn’t show up on schedule.”

She snorted, as if that were his fault somehow. “Well,” she said, getting up and looking around the room somewhat more critically, “I guess it’s time I went in and said hello to Catherine—though certainly she must have heard my voice.”

Certainly she should have, it was shrill enough. “Mom gets very engrossed, Grandmother. Sometimes she doesn’t even hear her name spoken from a foot away.”

“Har-rumph!” she snorted again. Then she followed me down the hall. I rapped softly on Mom’s closed door, and cautiously opened it when she mumbled something like ... “Yes? ...”

“You’ve got company, Mom.”

For a second it seemed I saw dismay in my mother’s eyes before Madame stalked arrogantly into her bedroom. Grandmother flung herself down, without an invitation to sit, on the velvet chaise longue.

“Madame M.!” cried Mom. “How wonderful to see you again. At last you’ve decided to come and see us instead of the other way around.”

Why was she so nervous? Why did she keep glancing at the portraits on her nightstand? Same old portraits of Dad and Daddy Paul. Even my father was there, but in a small oval frame, not wide silver ones.

Madame glanced at the nightstand too—and frowned.

“I have many wonderfully framed portraits of Julian,” Mom hastily explained, “but Jory likes to keep them in his room.”

Again Madame snorted. “You’re looking well, Catherine.”

“I’m feeling well, thank you. You look well too.” In her lap her hands worked nervously, just as her feet kept the swivel deskchair in constant motion.

“Your husband, how is he?”

“Fine, fine. He’s making hospital rounds. He waited for you, but when you didn’t show up ...”

“I understand. I’m sorry I’m late, but people in this state are robbers. I had to pay eight hundred for a piece of junk, and it dripped oil all the way here.”

Mom ducked her head. I know she was hiding a laugh. “What else can you expect for eight hundred?” Mom finally managed.

“Really, Catherine. Julian never paid much for any car he owned, you know that.” Her strident voice grew reflective. “But then he knew what to do with the junk and I don’t. I guess I let sentiment run away with my common sense. I should have bought the better one for a thousand, but I’m also thrifty.” Next came her question about my mother’s knee. Was it healed? How soon would she be dancing again?

“It’s fine,” said Mom testily. (She hated for people to question her about her knee.) “I only notice a little pain when it rains.”

“And how is Paul? It’s been so long since I saw him last. I remember after you married him I felt so angry I never wanted to see you again, and I gave up teaching for a few years.” Again she glance at the portrait of Dad. “And does your brother still live with you?”

Silence came and burdened the air as Mom studied the smiling portrait of my stepfather Chris. What brother was she talking about? Mom didn't have a brother anymore. Why did Madame look at Dad when she asked about Cory?

"Yes, yes, of course," said Mom, making me puzzled as to what she meant. "Now tell me all about Greenglenna and Clairmont. I want to hear about everybody. How is Lorraine DuVal? Whom did she marry? Or did she go on to New York?"

"He never married, did he?" pursued Grandmother with her eyes narrowed.

"Who?"

"Your brother."

"No, he hasn't married yet," answered Mom, again testy. Then she was smiling. "Now, Madame, I have a big surprise for you. We have a daughter now and her name is Cindy."

"Hah!" snorted Madame, "I already know about Cindy." There was a strange gleam in her eyes. "But still I would like to see and hear more about this paragon of all little girls. Jory writes she may have some dancing abilities."

"Oh, she does, she does! I wish you could see her in her little pink leotards trying to imitate Jory or me—I mean when I could dance."

"Your husband must be getting along in years by now," Madame said, disregarding photographs Mom tried to show her of Cindy, who was already in bed for the night.

"Did Jory tell you I'm writing a book? It's really fascinating. I didn't think it would be when I first started but after I mastered transitions I really surprised myself, and now writing is more fun than work. Just as satisfying as dancing." She smiled and fluttered her hands about, plucking at lint on her blue pants, tugging down her white sweater, fiddling with her hair, shuffling papers to tidy her desk. "My room is a mess. I apologize for that. I need a study, but in this house we don't have the room ..."

"Is your brother making hospital rounds too?"

I sat there, not understanding who this brother was. Cory was dead. He'd been dead for years. Though nobody laid in his grave, nobody at all. Little headstone beside Aunt Carrie and nobody there....

"You must be hungry. Let's go into the dining room and Emma can heat up the spaghetti. The second time around it's always better ..."

"Spaghetti?" snapped Madame. "You mean you eat that kind of junk? You allow my grandson to eat starches? Years and years ago I warned you to stay away from pasta! Really, Catherine, don't you ever learn?"

Spaghetti was one of my favorite dishes—but we'd had leg of lamb tonight in Madame's honor, fixed the way Momma thought she liked it best. Why had she said spaghetti? I gave my mother a hard look and saw her flustered and breathless, looking as young as Melodie, as if she were terribly afraid something might go wrong—and what could?

Madame M. wouldn't eat at our house, wouldn't sleep there either, for she didn't want to "inconvenience" us. Already she'd found a room in town, close to Mom's dance school. "And though you haven't asked me, Catherine, I'll be delighted to stay on and replace you. I sold out my school the moment Jory wrote and told me of your accident."

Mom could only nod, looking queerly blank.

* * *

A few days later Madame looked around the office that had been Mom's. "She keeps everything so neat, not like me at all. Soon I'll have it looking like my own."

I loved her in an odd kind of way, the way you love winter when you're hot in summer. And then when winter was shivering your bones, I wished it would go away. She moved so young and looked so old. When she danced she could almost make you think she was eighteen. Her black hair came and went according to which day of the week it was. I'd learned by now she used some color rinsed that was shampooed in and soon came out to darken the teeth of her

white comb. I liked it best when it was white, silvery under the lights.

“You are everything my own Julian was!” she cried, smothering me with too much gushing affection. Already she’d dismissed the young teacher Mom had hired. “But what makes you so arrogant, huh? Your momma tell you that you are sensational? Always your momma thinks the music is what counts most in the dance, and is not, *is not*. It is the display of the beautiful body that is the essence of ballet. I come to save you. I come to teach you how to do everything perfect. When I am done with you, you will have flawless technique.” Her shrill voice lowered an octave or two. “I come too because I am old and may soon die and I do not know my grandson at all. I come to do my duty by being not only your grandmother, but also your grandfather and your father too. Catherine was a big fool to dance when she knew her knee could fold any second—but your mother was always a big fool, so what’s new?”

She made me furious. “Don’t you talk like that about my mother. She’s not a fool. She’s never been a fool. She does what she feels she must—so I’ll tell you the truth and you let her be. She danced that last time because I pleaded and pleaded for her to dance at least one time with me professionally. She did it for *me*, Grandmother, for *me*, not herself!”

Her small dark eyes turned shrewd. “Jory, take lesson number one in my philosophy course: Nobody ever does anything for anyone else unless it gives them even more.”

Madame swept all the little mementos Mom cherished into the trashcan, like they were so much junk. Next she hauled up a huge beat-up satchel, and in minutes had the desk more cluttered with her junk than it had been before.

Immediately I knelt to take from the trashcan all the things I knew my mother loved.

“You don’t love me like you love her,” complained Madame in a gritty voice of self-pity that sounded weak and old. Startled at the pain in her voice, I looked up and saw her

as I'd never seen her before—an old woman, lonely and pitiful, clinging desperately to the only meaningful link to life she had—me.

Pity flooded me. “I’m glad you’re here, Grandmother, and of course I love you. Don’t ask if I love you more than anyone else, only be happy that I love you at all, as I’m happy you love me for whatever reason.” I kissed her wrinkled cheek. “We’ll get to know each other better. And I’ll be the kind of son you wanted my father to be—in some ways—so don’t cry and feel alone. My family is your family.”

Nevertheless, tears were in her eyes, streaking her face, making her lips quiver as she clutched at me desperately. Her voice came cracked and old: “Never did Julian run to me like you just did. He didn’t like to touch or be touched. Thank you, Jory, for loving me a little.”

Until now she’d been just a summer event in my life, flattering me with too much praise, making me feel special. Now I was uncomfortable to know she’d be here always, shadowing all our lives—perhaps.

Everything was going wrong in our lives. Maybe I could put all the blame on that old woman next door. Yet there was another old woman in black, ten times more trying than Bart’s grandmother, more dominating, too. Bart was a kid who needed some control, but I was almost a man and didn’t need more mothering. With some resentment I pulled away from her clutching, clawlike hands and asked, “Grandmother, why is it all grandmothers like to wear black?”

“Ridiculous!” she snapped. “Not all do!” Her jet eyes were like stones of black fire.

“But I’ve never seen you wear any color but black.”

“You will never see me wear another color.”

“I don’t understand. I’ve heard my mother say you wore black before my grandfather died, before my father died. Are you in perpetual mourning?”

She sneered scornfully. “Ah, I see. You feel uncomfortable around black clothes, yah? Makes you feel sad, yah? Makes

me feel glad. It makes me different. Anyone can wear pretty colors. Takes someone special to be pleased with only black clothes—and besides, it saves money.”

I laughed and drew away farther. I was sure it was more the money she saved than anything else.

“What other grandmother you know who wears black?” she asked, her eyes very narrow and suspicious.

I smiled and backed away more; she frowned and drew closer. My face took on a broader smile as I neared the door. “It’s great having you here, Grandmother Madame. Be especially nice to Melodie Richarme. I’m going to marry her someday.”

“Jory!” she yelled. “You come back here! Do you think I flew halfway around the world just to replace your mother? I came for one reason only. I am here to see that Julian’s son dances in New York, in every major city in the world, and achieves all the fame and glory that was due his father. Because of Catherine he was robbed, robbed!”

She made me angry, she made me want to hurt her as her words hurt me, when only a moment ago I’d loved her. “Will my fame and glory help a father who lies dead in his grave?” I shouted back. I wasn’t putty for her to mold—I was already a great dancer and my mother had done that for me. I didn’t need her to teach me more about dancing—I needed her to teach me more about learning to love someone hateful, old, and bitter. “I know how to dance already, Madame, my mother has taught me well.”

Her look of contempt made me blanch, but she surprised me when she got up to drop to her knees and put her hands in prayer position beneath her chin. She tilted her thin face backward and seemed to stare God straight in his face.

“Julian!” she cried passionately, “if you are up there looking down, hear the arrogance of your fourteen-year-old son. I will make a pact with you today. Before I die I will see your son is the most acclaimed dancer in the world. I will make of him what you could have been if you hadn’t cared so damned much for cars and women, to say nothing of your

other vices. Your son, Julian—through him you will live to dance again!”

I stared as she fell exhausted into the swivel deskchair again, sprawling her powerful legs before her. “Damn Catherine for marrying a doctor years and years older. Where was her common sense?—where was his? Though to give credit where credit is due, he was handsome years ago and appealing enough, but she should have known he’d be old before she even reached her sexual maturity. She should have married a man nearer her own age.”

I stood before her, baffled, trembling, beginning to feel closet doors in my mind opening—creakily opening, reluctantly. No, no, my mind kept saying, keep quiet Madame. I watched her jerk upright, her dark stabbing eyes riveting me to one spot so I was unable to leave when what I wanted most was to run, and run fast.

“Why do you tremble?” she asked. “Why do you look so strange?”

“Do I look strange?”

“Don’t answer questions with questions,” she barked. “Tell me about Paul, your stepfather, how he fares, what he does. He was twenty-five years older than your mother, and she’s thirty-seven now. Doesn’t that make him sixty-two?”

I swallowed over an aching lump that came to clog my throat. “Sixty-two is not so old,” I said meekly, thinking she should know that; she was in her seventies.

“For a man it is old; for a woman life is only beginning to stretch out.”

“That is cruel,” I said, beginning to dislike her again.

“Life is cruel, Jory, very cruel. You snatch from life what you can while you are young, for if you wait for better times to come tomorrow, you wait in vain. I told Julian that time and again, to live his life and forget Catherine, who loved that older man, but he refused to believe any girl could prefer a middle-aged man to someone as handsome and vibrant as he was, and now he lies dead in his grave, as you just said. Dr.

Paul Sheffield enjoys the love that rightly belonged to my son, to your father.”

I was crying tears she couldn't see. Hot scalding tears of disbelief. Had my mother lied to Madame and made her believe Daddy Paul was still alive? Why would she lie? What was wrong about marrying Dr. Paul's younger brother Christopher?

“You look ill, Jory. Why?”

“I feel fine, Madame.”

“Don't lie to me, Jory. I can smell a lie a mile away, see a lie from across three thousand miles. Why is it Paul Sheffield never accompanies his family to his own hometown? Why is it your mother always brings only her children and that brother, Christopher?”

My heart was pounding. Sweat glued my shirt to my skin. “Madame, have you never met Daddy Paul's younger brother?”

“Younger brother? What's that you say?” She leaned forward and peered into my eyes. “Never heard of any brother even during that awful time when Paul's first wife drowned their son. That was spread all over the newspapers, and no younger brother was mentioned. Paul Sheffield had only one sister—no brother, younger or older.”

I felt sick, ready to throw up. Ready to cry out and run and do something wild and painful to myself, like Bart did when he was hurt and disturbed. Bart—for the first time I was feeling what it was to be like Bart. I stood on unsteady ground, afraid everything might crumble if I dared to move.

Through my mind kept running the steady stream of age, years and years of age difference, and Dad wasn't that much older than Mom, only two years and a few months. She was born in April, he was born in November. And they were so much alike in coloring, in background, they spoke without even saying a word, just a glance and they understood.

Madame was sitting coiled, ready, so it seemed, to spring upon me—or Mom? Deeper lines etched around her narrowed

eyes, her grim-thin lips. She pursed her lips and reached into some hidden pocket of her drab outfit for her pack of cigarettes. “Now,” she said as if to herself, seemingly forgetting I was still there, “what was it Catherine gave as an excuse the last time Paul didn’t come? Let’s see, she called first, long distance, explaining Chris would come with her because Paul was too ill with his heart trouble to travel. She was leaving him in the care of his nurse. Thought that odd at the time, that she’d leave him when he needed a nurse, and travel with Chris.” She bit down on her lower lip, chewed it unconsciously. “And last summer no visit because Bart hated ole graves and ole ladies—and I suspect, *me* in particular. Spoiled brat. This summer they don’t come again because Bart has driven a rusty nail into his knee and develops blood-poisoning or something similar. Damn kid is more trouble than he’s worth—serves her right too for playing around so soon after my son’s death. And Paul has heart trouble, on and on he has heart trouble, yet he never has a fatal attack. Every summer she gives me that same worn excuse. Paul can’t travel because of his heart—but Chris, he can always travel, heart or no heart.”

Abruptly she stopped talking, for I had moved to leave. I tried to make my eyes blank and erase all the milling suspicions I didn’t want her to see. Never had I felt more afraid than I did at that moment, just watching her scheming eyes, the wheels churning, planning something I knew.

At that moment she jumped to her feet with great agility. “Put on your coat. I’m going home with you to have a long chat with your mother.”

The Terrible Truth



Jory,” began Madame when we were in her ratty old car and driving homeward. “Your parents don’t confide in you much about their past, do they?”

“They tell us enough,” I said stiffly, resenting the way she kept prying, when it didn’t matter, it didn’t. “They are very good listeners, and everyone says they make the best kind of conversationalists.”

She snorted. “Being a good listener is the perfect way to avoid answering questions you’d rather ignore.”

“Now you look here, Grandmother. My parents like their privacy. They have asked both Bart and me not to talk about our home life to our friends, and after all, it does make good sense for a family to stick together.”

“Really ... ?”

“Yes!” I shouted, “I like my privacy too!”

“You are of an age to need privacy; they are not.”

“Madame, my mother was a celebrity of sorts, and Dad is a doctor, and Mom has been married three times. I don’t think she wants her former sister-in-law, Amanda, to know where we live.”

“Why not?”

“My aunt Amanda is not a very nice person, that’s all.”

“Jory, do you trust me?”

“Yes,” I said, but I didn’t.

“Then tell me all you know about Paul. Tell me if he’s as sick as she says, or if he is alive at all. Tell me why

Christopher lives in your home, and is the one who acts like the father of you and Bart.”

Oh, I didn't know what to say, and I was trying hard to be a good listener so she'd keep on talking and I'd be able to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Certainly I didn't want her to get the picture before I did.

A long silence grew, and finally she spoke. “You know, after Julian died, your mother lived with you in Paul's home, then she took you and her younger sister, Carrie, to the mountains of Virginia. Her mother lived there in a fine home. It seems Catherine was determined to ruin her mother's second marriage. The husband of your mother's mother was named Bartholomew Winslow.”

That cursed darn lump came back in my throat and ached there. I wasn't going to tell her that Bart was the son of anyone but Daddy Paul, I wasn't!

“Grandmother, if you want me to keep on loving you, please do not tell me ugly things about my mother.”

Her skinny hand reached to squeeze mine. “All right, I admire you for being so loyal. I just want you to know the facts.” About that time she almost careened off the road into another ditch.

“Grandmother, I know how to drive. If you are tired and can't see the road signs very well, I can take over, and you could sit back and relax.”

“Let a fourteen-year-old kid drive me around? Are you crazy? Are you saying you don't feel safe with me at the wheel? All my life I've been driven around, first in hay wagons, then carriages, then taxis or limousines, but three weeks before I came here, soon after your letter came telling about your mother's accident, I took driver's lessons at the age of seventy-four ... and you see now how well I learned.”

Finally, after four near misses, we made the turn into our circular drive. And there out front was Bart stalking some invisible animal with his pocketknife held like a dagger, ready to thrust and kill.

Madame ignored him as she pulled to a stop. Briskly I jumped out and raced to open her door, but she was out before I got there, and just behind her Bart was stabbing into the air with his knife. “Death to the enemy! Death to all old ladies who wear black raggedy clothes! Death, death, death!”

Calmly, as if she didn’t hear and didn’t see, Madame strode on. I shoved Bart aside and whispered, “If you want to be locked up today, keep on with what you’re doing.”

“Black ... hate black ... gotta wipe out all dark black evil.”

But he put the knife in his pocket after he carefully folded it and stroked the pearl handle he admired. He should. It had cost me seven bucks for that present.

Without waiting for a response to her impatient push on the doorchimes, Madame stalked into our house and tossed her purse on the love seat in the foyer. The clack of typewriter keys came to us faintly.

“Writing,” she said, “I guess she goes at that just as passionately as she did dancing ...”

I didn’t say anything, but I did want to run ahead and warn Mom. She wouldn’t let me. Mom looked up very startled to suddenly encounter Madame Marisha again in her bedroom.

“Catherine! Why didn’t you tell me Dr. Paul Sheffield was dead.”

Momma’s face went red, then white. She bowed her head and put her hands up to cover her face. Regaining her composure almost immediately, she raised her head, flashed angry eyes at Madame, then began to shuffle her papers into a neat pile. “How nice to see you, Madame Marisha. It would have been nicer if you had called in advance. However, I’m sure Emma can split the lamp chops unevenly and let you have two ...”

“Don’t evade my question with silly talk of eating. Do you think for one moment I would pollute my body with your stupid lamp chops? I eat health foods, and health foods only.”

“Jory,” said Mom, “in case Emma saw Madame, run tell her not to set another place.”

“What is all this idiotic chatter about lamb chops? I drove here to ask an important question, and you talk about food. Catherine, answer my question—is Paul Sheffield dead?”

Mom looked at me and gestured I was to disappear, but I couldn't. I stood my ground and defied her. She paled more and seemed appalled that I, her darling, would not obey. Then, as if resigned, she muttered in an indistinct way: “You never asked me about myself, about my husband, so I took it you weren't interested in anyone but Jory.”

“Catherine!”

“Jory, please leave this room immediately. Or do I have to get up and shove you out?”

I backed out the door just before she reached to throw it shut.

Barely could I make out what she said on the other side of the door, but I pressed my ear against it and heard. “Madame, you don't know how much I have needed someone to confide in. But you were always so cold, so remote, I didn't think you could understand.”

Silence. A snort.

“Yes, Paul died, years ago. I try not to think of him as dead but as still alive, though invisible. We brought his marble statues and benches here and tried to make our garden grow like his. We failed. But still, when twilight comes and I'm not in the garden it seems I can sense him near, still loving me. We were married for such a short time. And he was never really well ... so when he died, I was left feeling unfulfilled, still yearning to give him the years of happy married life I owed him. I wanted somehow to make up for Julia, his first wife.”

“Catherine,” said Madame softly, “who is this man your children call Father?”

“Madame, what I do is none of your business.” I could hear the anger building in Mom's voice. “This is not the same kind of world you grew up in. You have not lived my life, and been inside my mind. You have not known the kind of deprivations I suffered when I was young and needed love most. Don't you

sit there and condemn me with your dark mean eyes, for you can't understand."

"Oh, Catherine, how little credit you give my intelligence. Do you think me dumb, blind, and insensitive? I know now very well who the man is my grandson calls Dad. And it's no wonder you could never love my Julian enough. I used to think it was Paul, but now I see it wasn't Paul you truly loved; it wasn't that Bartholomew Winslow either—it was Christopher, your brother. I don't give a damn what you and your brother do. If you sleep in his bed and you find the happiness you feel was stolen from you long ago, I can rationalize and say that much worse goes on every day than brother and sister who pretend to be husband and wife. But I must protect my grandson. He comes first. You have no right to make your children pay the price for your unlawful relationship."

Oh!—What was she saying?

Mom, do something, say something, make me feel good again! Make me feel safe and real again—make it all go away, this talk of your brother you've never mentioned.

I crouched down lower, bowing my head into my hands, not wanting to hear, not daring to leave.

Mom's voice came strained and very hoarse, as if she were having trouble keeping tears away. "I don't know how you found out. Please try to understand ..."

"As I said before, I don't give a damn—and I think I do understand. You couldn't love my son, as you could never love any man more than you loved your brother. I'm bitter about that. I'm crying inside for Julian, who thought you an angel of perfection, *his* Catherine, *his* Clara, *his* sleeping beauty that he could never wake up. That's what you were to him, Catherine, the personification of all the dancing dolls of the ballet, virgin and pure, sweet and chaste, and in the end you are no better than the rest of us."

"Please!" cried Mom. "I tried to escape Chris. I tried to love Julian more. I did, I really did."

“No, you didn’t try. If you had, you would have succeeded.”

“You can’t know!” came Mom’s distressed cry.

“Catherine, you and I have traveled the same road for many a year, and you’ve let little bits and pieces of information drop along the way. And then there is Jory, who tries his best to shield you ...”

“He doesn’t know? Please say he doesn’t know!”

“He doesn’t know,” Madame soothed in what was a soft voice—for her. “But he talks, and spills more than he knows. The young are like that; they think the old are so senile they can’t put two and two together. They think the old can live to be seventy and still not know more than they do at fourteen. They think they have a monopoly on experience, because they see us not doing very much, while every moment of their lives are full, forgetting we too were young once. And we have turned all our mirrors into windows ... and they are still behind the mirrors looking only at themselves.”

“Madame, please don’t speak so loud. Bart has a way of hiding and eavesdropping.”

Her strident voice toned down, making it more difficult for me to hear. “All right, I’ll have my say and go. I don’t think your home is the proper place for a boy of Jory’s sensitivities to grow up in. The atmosphere here is tense, as if a bomb might explode any moment. Your younger son is obviously in need of psychological help—why, he tried to stab me as I approached your home.”

“Bart is always playing games ... ,” said Mom weakly.

“Hah! Some games he plays! His knife almost slit my coat. And this coat is almost new. It will be my last coat, the one I’ll wear until I’m dead.”

“Please, Madame, I’m not in the mood for talk of death.”

“Did I ask for your pity? If you took it that way, then I reverse positions. I’ll wear this coat as long as I live. And before I die I have to see Jory achieve the fame that should have been Julian’s.”

“I’m doing what I can,” said Mom wearily, sounding so terribly tired.

“What you can? Hell and damnation! You live here with your brother, risking public humiliation, and sooner or later you fragile bubble will pop. Jory will suffer. His schoolmates will taunt him. The reporters will hound you, him, everyone in this house. The law will take your children from you.”

“Please sit down, stop pacing.”

“Damn you, Catherine, for not listening. I guessed a long time ago that in time you would succumb to your brother’s adoration. I thought even when you married your Dr. Paul that you and your brother ... well, never mind what I thought, but you married a man almost dead. Was it a guilty conscience?”

“I don’t know. I used to think it was because I loved him and I owned him. I had a thousand reasons for marrying him, the most important being he wanted me, and that was enough.”

“All right, you had reasons enough. But you hurt my son. You didn’t give him what he needed, and I never understood how you could resist. He used to cry, saying you didn’t love him enough. Always he said there was some mysterious man you loved more—and I didn’t believe him then. Fool, wasn’t I? Fool, wasn’t he? But we were all fools when it came to you, Catherine. You were so beautiful, so young and innocent seeming. Were you born old and clever? How did you know so well, so early, all the ways of making a man love you beyond reason?”

“Love is sometimes not enough,” she said dully, while I felt almost paralyzed with the dreadful information I was overhearing. Moment by moment, heartbeat by heartbeat, I was losing the mother I loved, I was also losing the only father I’d ever had long enough to love. “How did you find out about Chris and me?” Mom asked, making me quiver more.

“Does it matter?” shrieked Madame. I was pinning my hopes to her, hoping she too wouldn’t betray me. “I’m not dumb, Catherine, as I said before. I asked a few questions. I listened to Jory’s answers, and I added up the facts. It’s been years since I saw Paul—but Chris was always there. Bart is on

the brink of insanity from what Jory innocently lets out—never intentionally, only carelessly, for he loves you. Do you think I can stand quietly by and let you and your brother wreck my grandson’s life too? I refuse to let you ruin his career, his mental health. You give me Jory to take back East with me, where he’ll be safe and far removed from the bomb that will explode and splatter your lives onto the front pages of every newspaper in this country!”

I was sick. I’d opened the door a bit, enough to see my mother was paler than death. She began to tremble, as I was trembling—but she didn’t have tears in her eyes as I had in mine. Momma, how could you live with your brother when the whole world knows that’s wrong? How could you deceive Bart and me? How could Chris do that to us? And all this time I’d thought he was so perfect, so right for you, for us. Sin, sin. No wonder Bart went around chanting about sin and the torments of everlasting hell. Somehow Bart had found out before me.

I sank to my knees and leaned my head against the door, closing my eyes and trying to breathe deeply to stop my stomach rumbling and wanting to rise.

Mom spoke again. It was easy to tell she was trying hard to hold on to her temper.

“To lose Bart for even a few months in some institution is nearly driving me crazy. But to lose Jory as well *would* drive me crazy. I love my sons, Madame, both of them. Though you have never given me credit for having mercy on Julian, I did the best I could for him. He was not an easy man to live with. You and your husband made him what he was, not me. I didn’t force him to dance when he would have played ball if given his way. I didn’t punish him by making him practice every weekend, so he never had time for fun—you and Georges did that. But it was me who paid that price. He wanted to devour me alive, forbidding me any friends but him. Jealous of every man who looked my way, every man I looked at. Do you know what it is to live with a man who suspects you deceive him when you’re out of his sight? And it wasn’t me who did the betraying—it was him. I was faithful to Julian. I never let another man touch me, but he couldn’t have said the same

thing. He wanted every pretty girl he saw. He wanted to use them, discard them, then come back to me and have me hold him in my arms and tell him how wonderful he was ... and I couldn't say he was wonderful when the stench of some other woman's perfume was all over him. Then he'd hit me, did you know that? He had to prove something to himself. I didn't know then what he had to prove, but now I do—he had to find the love you denied him.”

I felt weaker, sicker, as I saw my grandmother blanch. Now I was losing my real father, whom I'd adored as a saint.

“You make your points very well, Catherine, and they hurt. But now let me make mine. Georges and I did make mistakes with Julian, I admit that, and you and our son paid the price. Are you going to punish Jory in the same way? Let me take him back to Greenglenna. Once we're there I'll arrange for an audition for him in New York. I have important connections. I did manage to turn out two brilliant dancers, one named Julian, the other named Catherine. I was not all bad, nor was Georges. Perhaps we let our own dreams blind us to what others wanted and we tried too hard to live through our child. That's all we wanted, Catherine, to live through Julian. Now Julian is dead and he has left behind one child, one only—your son. Without Jory I have no reason to stay alive. With Jory I have every reason to go on. For once in your life *give*, don't take.”

NO, NO! I didn't want to go with Madame.

I watched Mom bow her head until her hair fell in two soft wings of pale gold. Her trembling hand fluttered to touch her brow, as if another of those terrible headaches was paining. I didn't want to leave her, sinner or not. This was my home, my world, and she was still my mother and Chris was still my stepdad, and there was Bart, Cindy, and Emma too. We were a family—rightly, wrongly, we were a family.

Finally Mom seemed to find a solution. Hope rose in my heart.

“Madame, I'm throwing myself on your mercy, and hoping to God you have some. I realize you could very well be right,

but I cannot give up my firstborn son. Jory is the one good thing that came from my marriage to Julian. If you take him, you take part of me, a very important part of me I cannot surrender without dying. Jory loves me. He loves Chris as much as he could love his own father. Even if I have to risk his career, I cannot risk losing his love by letting him go away with you ... so don't ask for the impossible, Madame, I cannot let Jory go."

Madame stared at her long and hard while my heart thumped so loudly I was sure they'd both hear. Then Grandmother stood up and prepared to leave. "Hah," she snorted. "I'm going to speak honestly now, Catherine, and perhaps for the first time I'll give you the full truth. I have, since the first day I met you, envied your youth, your beauty, and most of all your genius for the dance. I know you have passed on to Jory your extraordinary skill. You have been a superb teacher. I see so much of you in him, and so much of your brother in him too. The patience Jory has, the cheerful optimism, the drive and dedication—derived from your family, not from Julian. But there is some of Julian in him too. He looks like my son. He has the fire of my son, and the fleshy desires of my son for women. But if I must hurt you to save him, I will do so. I will not spare your brother, or your youngest son either. If you do not turn Jory over to me I will do what I can to bring down your house. The law will give me custody of Jory, and there will not be one thing you can do to stop me once I go to them with the facts. And if you force me to do it this way, which is not the way I would choose, I will take Jory East, and he will never see you again."

Mom rose to her feet and stood taller than my grandmother. I'd never seen her look taller, prouder, stronger. "Go on, do what you must. I will not give in one inch, and allow you to steal from me what is mine. Never will I give a child of mine away. Jory is mine. I gave birth to him after eighteen hours of striving. If I have to face up to the whole world and its condemnation, still I will stand with my head held high, and hold fast to my children. There is no force in this world, you, the law, anything, that can force me to give up my children."

Turning to go, Madame glanced around the room, allowing her eyes to linger longest on the thick stack of papers on Mom's small desk. "You'll see things my way," she said in a soft cat's purr. "I pity you Catherine, as I pity your brother. I pity Bart too, savage as the little monster is. I pity everyone in your household, for all will be hurt. But I won't let my compassion for you, and my understanding of what made you the way you are, hold back my hand. Jory will be safe with me, with my name, not yours."

"GET OUT!" screamed Mom, who had lost all control. She picked up a vase with flowers and hurled it at Madame's head! "YOU RUINED YOUR SON'S LIFE AND NOW YOU WANT TO RUIN JORY! YOU WANT HIM TO BELIEVE THERE IS NO LIFE BUT IN THE BALLET, DANCING, DANCING—BUT I AM LIVING! I WAS A DANCER, AND STILL I AM SURVIVING!"

Madame looked around the room again, as if she too would like to hurl some object, and slowly she bent over to pick up the broken vase at her feet. "I gave you this. How ironic that you would hurl it at me." Something brittle and hard seemed to crack as she looked at Mom with softness, and she spoke with rare humility. "When Julian was a boy, I tried to do for him what was best, just as you try to do for yours what is best ... and if my judgment was wrong, it was done with the best of intentions."

"Isn't everything?" said Mom with bitterness. "Always the intentions are so right, so reasonable—and in the end even the excuses ride the waves of indignation like that fabled straw everyone tries to grasp to keep from drowning. It seems all my life I've been grasping for straws that don't exist. I tell myself each night, before I climb into bed with my brother, that this is the reason I was born, and for every wrong I have done I have consoled myself by saying I have balanced the scales with the right decisions. I have finally given my brother the only woman he can love, the wife he so desperately needed. I have made him happy—and if that is wrong in your eyes, and in the eyes of the world, I don't give a damn. I don't give a damn what the world thinks!"

My grandmother just stood there, with conflicting emotions torturing her aged face. I could tell she, too, was hurting. I watched her thin, heavily veined hand reach to touch my mother's hair, but she drew it away and kept her eyes blank and her voice under control: "Again I say, I pity you, Catherine. I pity all of you, but most of all I pity Jory, for he is the one with the most to lose."

Quickly I backed away and hid as she hurled herself out of Mom's bedroom and strode down the back hall, bypassing Bart, who stabbed at her with his unsheathed knife.

"Witch, old black witch!" he snarled, pulling back his upper lip in a frightful way. "I hope you never come back, never, never!"

I was miserable enough now to want a hole to crawl into and die. *My mother was living with her brother.* The woman I'd loved and respected all my life was worse than any mother I'd ever heard of. None of my friends would believe, but when they did, I'd be so shamed, ridiculed, I'd never be able to face them. Then it hit me. Dad was my real uncle. Not just Bart's but mine too. Oh, God, what did I do now? Where did I run? It was not a platonic brother-sister relationship, a fake marriage for appearances sake, it was incest. They were lovers. I knew! I'd seen!

Suddenly everything was too sordid, too ugly, too shocking. Why had they allowed their love to start? Why hadn't they stopped it from happening?

I wanted to get up and go and ask, but I couldn't bear to look at Mom, or Dad either when he came home. In my room I fell on my bed, with the locked door making me feel safer. When I was called to dinner I said I wasn't hungry. Me, who was always starving. Mom came to the closed door and pleaded: "Jory, did you overhear anything your grandmother said to me?"

"No, Mother," I answered stiffly. "I think I'm coming down with a cold, that's all. I'll feel fine in the morning, just fine." I had to say something to explain why my voice was husky.

Somewhere in all those tears I shed I lost the boy I was earlier today. Now I had to become a man. I felt old, cold, like nothing mattered very much anymore, and for the first time I knew why Bart was so confused and peculiar acting—he must know too.

* * *

I sneaked to watch Mom writing in her fine blue-leather journal, and when I had the chance, I stole into her room and read every word she'd written, as dishonest as that was. I was becoming just like Bart. But I had to know.

Madame Marisha visited today and brought with her all the nightmares that haunt my days. I have other nightmares for sleeping. When she was gone I felt panic throbbing so loud my heart sounded like a jungle drum beating out the rhythm of the last battle. I wanted to run and hide as we used to hide when we were locked away in Foxworth Hall. I ran to Chris when he came home, and clung, clung, unable to tell him anything. He didn't notice my desperation. He was tired from a long exhausting day.

Then he kissed me, and was off for his evening rounds, and I sat alone in my room, both of my sons silent and locked behind their bedroom doors. Do they know that soon our world is coming to an end?

Should I have let Madame take Jory and keep him safe from the scandal and humiliation? Was I selfish to want to hold fast to him? And Bart, what about Bart? And what would happen to Cindy if our secret were revealed?

Suddenly I felt I was back in Charlottesville, with Chris and Carrie, and again we were on our way to Sarasota. My memory seemed like a movie as that huge black woman struggled to board the slow bus with all her bags and bundles. Henrietta Beech. Dear, dear Henny. It's been so long since I last thought of her. Just to remember her broad beaming smile, her kind eyes, her gentle hands and a certain peace steals over me, like she is taking me again to Paul, who would save us all.

But who will save us now?

* * *

Tears were in my eyes when I put her journal away. I stole into Bart's room and found him sitting on the floor, in the dark, hunched over like an old man. "Bart, go to bed," I said. But he didn't get up. He seemed not to hear me.

The Gates of Hell



Knew it, just knew it. Jory had to spy and check up on what deviltry I was up to. Pretended not to notice. Soon as his room was dark, I pulled out the last pages of Momma's story. Knew it was the end for she'd written her initials and address near the bottom of the page.

Didn't know why I was crying. Malcolm wouldn't feel pity for her and my daddy. Now I'd have to grow tough, mean, pretend nothing could hurt me nearly as much as it hurt others.

Morning came and I went into the kitchen where Momma was helping Emma do little housekeeping chores, making cookie dough, talking about cakes. The woman thought evil could go on unnoticed forever. Unpunished forever. She should know better.

I sat in my corner, hunched over on the floor, my knees pulled up under my chin, my shins wrapped with my arms. Bony arms. Getting skinnier by the day. I stared at Momma, at Daddy, hoping to look into their minds and find out what they really thought of me, of themselves and what they were doing. I closed my eyes. Behind my lids I saw Momma dancing like she used to before she hurt her knee. Last summer, not so long after I came home from the hospital and I had trouble falling asleep, I'd stumbled into the kitchen to rob the fridge while nobody could see. I wanted them all to worry and think about me starving to death. But before I could gobble down all the cold chicken legs, Momma had danced into the family room wearing a little white tutu with hardly any top, and Daddy had trailed along behind. He didn't even see me. Couldn't see anybody but her.

She'd looked pretty in that costume, whirling around, always smiling and flirting with the man who stood in the shadows watching her. She teased him by tugging at his tie,

pulling him out into the center of the room, forcing him to turn around and around, and trying to make him dance that ballet stuff. But he'd grabbed her in his arms and pressed his lips down on hers. I'd heard the sound, wet and mushy. Then her arms tightened around his neck. I stared to see him unhooking all those little dark things that held her tutu on! It slipped and fell to the floor at her feet, and she was wearing nothing but white leotards that he soon tugged off. Naked. He made her naked. Next he lifted her in his arms, and while her lips were still pressed to his, he carried her off to their room—and all the time he'd been her brother.

Oh, no wonder John Amos said they had to be punished. No wonder. Whore! Bitch! Sinners with my own blood! They wouldn't get away with this. They'd have to *burn, burn*—burn like my daddy, like my real daddy named Bartholomew Winslow.

I read all her story. I know how ugly and mean some mothers could be. Hiding her four children, making them stay upstairs in one room, forcing them to play in a hot miserable attic that was freezing in the winters. All those years locked up, whipped too, and starved—and tar in my mother's beautiful golden hair. I hated Malcolm, who'd done so many wicked things to his own grandchildren. I hated that old lady next door who put arsenic on their sugared doughnuts. What kind of crazy nut was she? Had she put poison on my ice cream, my cake and cookies too? I shivered and felt queasy in my stomach. Why hadn't the police locked her up until they dragged her to the electric chair to burn, burn?

No, whispered a sly voice in my head, they don't let pretty ladies die in electric chairs when clever lawyers can call killers insane. They were locked in pretty palaces tucked away in green hills. That crazy woman was the same one my daddy had to visit each summer. The mother of my momma too. Oh, the sins of my momma and daddy piled clear up to the sky. Certainly God was gonna punish them now—and if he didn't, Malcolm would see that I did.

Went to bed that night and tried to sleep. But I kept thinking. Daddy was really Momma's brother—and that made

him really my uncle, and Jory's uncle. Oh, Momma, you are not the saint or angel Jory thinks you are. You tell him not to do this, and not to do that with Melodie, and all the time you keep going into the bedroom with your brother and closing the door. Telling us never to enter when that door was shut without knocking first. Shame, shame! Privacy, always needing privacy to do what brother and sister should never do. Incest!

Wicked, both of them, just as wicked as I was sometimes. Just as wicked as Jory wanted to be with Melodie, with other girls—doing all the shameful things Eve did with Adam after she bit into the apple. Doing those horrible things the boys whispered about in the restrooms. Didn't want to live with them no more. Didn't want to love Momma or her brother.

Jory knew too. I knew Jory knew too—he was gonna go crazy like Momma thought I was. But I was finally gaining sense, good sense, like Malcolm's. The children of incestuous parents deserved to suffer as I was being made to suffer, as Jory was suffering. Cindy has to suffer too, even if she was too young and dumb to know big words like “incest.”

Yet, yet, why did I keep praying for God not to let tomorrow come? What was I gonna do tomorrow? Why did I want to die tonight, and save myself from doing even worse than “incest”?

Another breakfast to eat. Hated food that tasted nasty. Stared down at the tablecloth that would soon be soiled when I accidentally knocked something over. Jory looked as lost as I felt.

Days came, days went, and nobody was happy. Dad walked about looking sick. I guessed he knew we knew, and Momma knew too. Now neither one of them could meet our eyes or answer Jory's questions. I never asked any. I heard Momma one day rapping on Jory's locked bedroom door. “Jory, please let me in. I know you overheard when Madame M. was here—let me try to explain how it was. When you understand you won't hate us.”

Yes he would. I'd read that damn book. Wasn't fair for life to cheat us by not giving us honorable parents.

Thanksgiving Day, and ole hateful ugly Madame M. showed up when she should never have had the nerve to accept any invitation. Momma shouldn't have given her one. I thought she was gloating when she watched Dad carve the turkey and not once did he smile, and then she was looking at Momma, whose eyes were red and swollen. Crying, she'd been crying. Served her right. Didn't like turkey anyway, wasn't nearly as good as chicken. Daddy asked me what meat I liked, dark or white. I scowled, not answering, thinking his voice was so husky he must have a cold, but he didn't cough or sneeze, and his eyes didn't look weak like mine when I had a cold. And Daddy was never sick.

Only Emma was happy, and Cindy, hateful Cindy.

"Come, come," said Emma with a big cheerful smile that wouldn't do any good, "it's time for rejoicing!—for giving thanks for our many blessings, including having a new daughter to sit at our table."

Revolting to hear that.

Silently Dad picked up his carving knife and fork again, no smiles, and even I stared at him for forgetting to give me the thigh. I looked at Momma, who seemed upset though I could tell she was trying to pretend everything was still all right. She ate a bite or two of her meal, then jumped up and ran from the dining room. Down the back hall I heard her bedroom door slam. Daddy excused himself, saying he had to go and check on her.

"Good Lord, what's wrong with everybody?" asked Emma while ole Madame Marisha sat on silently, looking glum too. She was part of it all. I glared at her, hating her, hating my own grandmother even more—hating everybody and Cindy too, and all the time thinking maybe Emma had done some evil too by keeping her mouth shut and letting all this sinning go on under her long nose. Jory tried to laugh and smile, teasing Cindy to make her laugh and eat. But I knew he was bleeding deep down in his heart, just as I was bleeding, crying

for my real daddy who died in that fire. And maybe Jory was crying for his real daddy, whom Momma hadn't loved nearly enough because all the time she had a brother who loved her too much.

I wished I hadn't found out. Why did Momma have to go and write that book? I wouldn't really have believed anything John Amos told me about her, for I'd thought he was a liar, a pretender, like me. Now I knew he was the only truthful person in the whole world, the only one who respected me enough to tell the truth.

Sobbing, I got up and left the table, glancing at Cindy, who was sitting on Jory's lap and laughing as she played with some little toy he'd given her. Never gave *me* anything. Nobody but a lying-black-witch-grandmother who didn't count gave me gifts ... nobody.

Then, there came a Sunday when Momma didn't seem to feel so "wretched," maybe because she thought Madame M. was gonna leave us alone, and maybe even go back East where she belonged. I knew then Momma could pretend too, like me, like she and Daddy pretended in their marriage game.

I hid in the shadows near her open bedroom door and watched her go down on her knees in prayer. Silent prayers. Wondered if God ever listened.

Back in the family room I crouched in my corner and began to light matches one by one, holding the flames so close to my face I could feel the heat. How awful it was gonna be to be purified and redeemed by fire. How awful it had been when my real daddy's soul went up in black smoke. And I was just a tiny thing then, hiding in my momma's womb, called an "embryo" and not Bart, and maybe I'd even been a girl then too, worst of all.

Wish Daddy wouldn't tell me so much about things I didn't want to understand.

My head began to ache. Made my hand that held the match shake so much I dropped the match. Quickly I had to snuff it out before someone smelled the carpet burning. They'd blame

me, like they always blamed me, not even knowing Jory was outside doing something perhaps just as bad.

What was it John Amos kept saying? “Your mother made all the bad things happen. Every one of the bad things was her fault—that’s the way of women, especially beautiful women. Evil through and through, tricky, sinful beautiful women, out to steal from men.”

Yeah, I thought, my momma, my grandmother, all tricky beautiful sinful women. Telling me lies, hiding from me who she really was, showing me her portrait when she was young and beautiful, seducing my real father when he was too young for her anyway. My head ached more. Darn dratted Momma had done the same thing to my real daddy.

I sighed, thinking I’d better get on with my own business of being the angel of the Lord, sent to act in Malcolm’s stead. After all, I was his great-grandson, and getting almost as smart as him. Acted like Malcolm more and more, making my bones feel tired; making my muscles sore and aching, getting the true feel of being old like Malcolm had been when he was wisest. Though it did get painful to make my heart throb so fast. Disgusted with all women, all. Had to fix them all, everyone. Momma thought I didn’t know, thought only Jory knew ... but I’d been there too when old Madame Marisha shrilled out loud enough for everyone to hear and I’d read her book.

Head hurt worse. Didn’t know who I was anymore. Malcolm? Bart? Yeah, was Malcolm now, bad heart, weak legs, thinning hair, but so damned clever and wise.

Stupid daughter, hiding her four children on the second floor and thinking I wouldn’t find out sooner or later. Fool. She should have known John would tell me everything. She should have known so many things she ignored, or forgot. So, she thinks I’m going to die soon, and I’ll never climb the stairs, but why should I when John will do that for me. Spy, I told John, spy on my daughter, see what she does when she’s out of my sight. She thinks I’m going to die soon, John, and I’ll change my will and write her back in, but I’ll have the last laugh. She’s not going to inherit all my hard-earned money. Jingle, jingle, jingle, hear the money in my pockets, like

music, the best kind of music. Never too old to outsmart all of them, never too old—and I'll win as I always win in the end.

Shuffling my feet along, I headed for their bedroom which smelled of their evil acts of love. I paused just outside their closed door. Inside I felt like a little boy who was quietly sobbing, but I had to be Malcolm—the stronger, older, wiser part that was me. Where were the blue-misted mountains? This wasn't a great house sitting high on a hillside. Where were the servants, the grand ballroom, the winging staircases?

Confused, so confused. Head ached worse. Knee began to throb. Back pained, heart was going to have an attack.

“Straighten up there, Bart,” said that man who was really my uncle. Scared me. Made me jump and grow more confused. “You're too young to be hobbling around like an old man, Bart. And your knee is just fine.” He gave me a friendly pat on my head and opened the door to his bedroom, where I could see my mother was waiting for him in the bed, her eyes wide open and staring up at the ceiling. Was she crying? Had he just come home from those hateful hospitals with all their germs?

“I hate you!” I whispered fiercely, trying to stab him with the glare of my eyes. “You think you are safe, don't you? You think a doctor can't be punished—but God has sent the black angel of his wrath to see that you and your sister are punished for the evil you have done!”

He froze on the spot and stared at me as if he'd never seen me before. Defiantly I glared back. He closed the door to his bedroom and led me down the hall so *she* wouldn't hear. “Bart, you go to visit your grandmother every day, don't you?” His face looked troubled, but he kept his voice soft and kind. “You have to learn not to believe everything you hear. Sometimes people tell lies.”

“Devil's spawn!” I hissed. “Seed planted in the wrong soil to create Devil's issue.”

This time he grasped my arm tightly it hurt, and he shook me. “Never let me hear you say that again! You are never to mention any of this to your mother. If you do, I'll burn your

bottom so hard you may never sit down again. And the next time you see that woman next door, you remind her that it was she who planted all the seeds and started the flowers growing. Watch her face when you speak ... and then guess who is the evil one.”

I shrank back, didn't want to hear what he had to say. I ran off, bumping into a hall table, upsetting an expensive lamp that toppled to the floor.

In my room I fell on my bed, shaking all over, panting and gasping for breath. In my chest was that awful throbbing pain that made iron bands tighten about me, squeezing me, wanting to shut off my air.

Felt like toothpaste being squeezed from the bottom, then I was rolled up tight as a coil. Painfully I rolled over on my back and stared up at the ceiling as I started to cry. Huge fat tears slid off my face to wet my pillow. If I wet the bed for any other reason I'd get spanked for ten years old was too old for such baby-doings.

Did I want to be ten, or eighty? Who was making me be so old? God? Was it those children hiding in the attic, laughing, laughing, making the best out of the worst that was driving me to prove Malcolm was smarter and they'd never get away even after he was put in the ground.

Momma's gone and left me.

Left me for good this time.

Momma's gone and left me,

Now I don't know how to end what I've begun ...

Fell asleep and tossed around. The little boy kept right on crying as the old man hurled him in the trashcan so soon I'd be dumped outside the city limits—fit only for burning.

For sinners of sinners, those born of incest, they had to be punished too, even me, even me who was dying in the trashcan.

Rage of the Righteous



The rain came down like bullets fired by God. I stood at the back windows and watched the rain batter the faces of those marble statues, punishing them for being naked and sinful. I waited for Jory to come home and look for me.

Bad. We were both bad from living with parents who weren't supposed to be parents.

Behind me Momma came in from a shopping spree, all rosy-cheeked and laughing, shaking the rain from her hair, greeting Emma like everything was okay. She dumped her parcels in a chair, took off her coat, and said she felt she might be catching a cold.

"I hate it when it rains, Emma. Hello, Bart—I didn't see you there until now. How've you been? Lonesome for me?"

Wouldn't answer. Didn't have to talk to her now. Didn't have to be polite, nice, or even clean. Could do anything I wanted. They did. God's rules didn't mean anything to them. Meant nothing now to me either.

"Bart, it's going to be so nice this Christmas," said Momma, not looking at me but at Cindy, who needed more new clothes. "This will be our first Christmas with Cindy. The best kind of families always have children of both sexes, and in that way boys can learn about girls, and vice versa." She hugged Cindy closer. "Cindy, you just don't know how lucky you are to have two wonderful older brothers who will absolutely adore you as you grow up into a real beauty—if they don't adore you already."

Boy, if she only knew. But like Malcolm had said, beautiful women were dumb. I looked into the kitchen at Emma, who was not beautiful and never could have been. Was she wiser? Did she see through me?

Emma's eyes lifted and met mine. I shivered. Yes, drab women were smarter. They knew the world wasn't beautiful just because they had hold of beauty for a while.

"Bart, you haven't told me what you want Santa Claus to bring you."

I stared hard at her. She knew what I wanted most. "A pony!" I said. I took out the pocketknife Jory had given me and began to pare my nails. That made Momma stare at me, then her eyes moved to Cindy's short hair that was just beginning to look pretty again.

"Bart, put that knife away. It makes me nervous. You might accidently cut yourself." She sneezed then, then sneezed again and again. Always her sneezes came in threes. She pulled tissues from her purse to wipe her nose, then blow it. Contaminating my nice clean air with her filthy cold germs.

Jory didn't come home until way after dark, soaked and miserable-looking as he stalked into his room and slammed his door. I grinned as I saw Momma frown. So, now her darling didn't love her either. That's what came of doing wrong.

Still the rain came down. She looked at me, her eyes large, her face pale, her hair a tangle all around her face, and I knew some men would think her beautiful. I yanked a hair from my head and held one end between my teeth as I pulled with one hand to stretch it taut. Easily my knife sliced it in two. "Good knife," I said, "sharp as a razor for shaving. Good for cutting off legs, arms, hair ..." I grinned as she looked scared. Powerful. I felt so powerful. John Amos was right. Women were only timid, fearful imitations of men.

Rain came down harder. The wind blew it around the house and made howling noises. Cold outside, dark and cold. All night it rained, next morning it was still coming down. Emma drove away just because it was Thursday and she couldn't miss a visit with a friend. "You take it easy now, ma'am," she said to Momma in the garage. "You don't look well. Just because you don't have a fever doesn't mean you won't come down with something. Bart—you behave yourself and don't make trouble for your mother."

I left the garage and went into the kitchen, and somehow or other my arm that was really a plane wing knocked several breakfast dishes to the floor. I saw my bowl of cereal with raisins, little bugs on a creamy sea ...

“Bart, you did that deliberately!”

“Yes, Momma, you always say I do everything on purpose. This time I let you see how right you are.” I picked up my glass of milk, hardly touched, and hurled it at her face. It missed her by inches, for she was quick to dodge.

“Bart, how dare you do that. When your father comes home I’m going to tell him, and he’ll punish you severely.”

Yeah, already I knew what he’d do. He’d spank my behind, give me a lecture on obedience and having respect for my mother. And his spanking wouldn’t hurt. His lecture wouldn’t be heard. I could tune him out and Malcolm in.

“Why don’t you spank me, Momma? Come on ... let me see what *you* can do to hurt me.” I held my knife in position, ready to jab it if she dared to move closer.

Was she going to faint? “Bart, how can you act so ugly when you know I don’t feel well today. You promised your father you would behave. What have I done to make you dislike me so much?”

I grinned meaningfully.

“Where did you get that knife? That’s not the knife Jory gave you.”

“The old lady next door gave it to me. She give me everything I ask for. If I told her I wanted a gun, a sword, she’d get them, for she’s like you are—weak, so eager to please me, when there isn’t a woman alive who will ever please me.”

Real terror was in her eyes now. She moved closer to Cindy, who was still in her highchair, making a big mess with her graham cracker and her glass of milk, dipping in the cracker until it was mushy, then trying to rush it into her mouth before the mushy part fell off. And *she* wasn’t scolded.

“Bart, go to your room this moment. Shut and lock the door from the inside, and I’ll lock it from the outside. I don’t want to see you until your father is home. And since you didn’t think enough of your breakfast to eat it, then you don’t deserve any lunch.”

“You can’t tell me what to do. If you dare, I’ll tell the world what you and ‘your husband’ are doing. Brother and sister living together. Living in sin. Fornicating!” (A good “Malcolm” word.)

Staggering, she raised her hands to her face, wiped at her running nose again, stuffed the tissues in her pants pocket, then picked up Cindy.

“What yah gonna do, harlot? Use Cindy for a shield? It won’t work, won’t work, I’ll get the both of you ... And the police can’t touch me. I’m only ten years old, only ten, only ten, only ten, only ten ...” and on and on I kept saying that like I was a needle stuck in the same groove.

In my ears was John Amos’s voice, telling me what to do. I spoke as in a dream: “Once long ago there was a man in London called Jack the Ripper, and he killed prostitutes. I kill strumpets too, and bad sisters who don’t know right from wrong. Momma, I’m going to show you how God wants you to be punished for committing incest.”

Trembling and looking weak as a white rabbit, too scared to move, she stood with Cindy held in her arms, and waited as I stalked her ... closer, closer, jabbing with my knife.

“Bart,” she said, her voice stronger, more under control, “I don’t know who has been telling you stories, but if you harm me or Cindy, God will have his revenge on you—even if the police don’t lock you up, or put you in the electric chair.”

Threats. Empty threats. John Amos had already told me a boy my age could do anything he wanted and the police couldn’t do a thing to stop or punish him.

“Is that man you live with your brother? Is he?” I yelled. “Tell me a lie and you’ll both die.”

“Bart, calm down. Don’t you know it will soon be Christmas? You don’t want to be put away and miss all the toys Santa Claus will put under the tree for you.”

“No Santa Claus!” I shrieked, even more furious—did she think I believed in that nonsense?

“You used to love me. All your life you have held back telling me so in words, but I could see it in your eyes. Bart, what has changed you? What have I done to make you hate me? Tell me so I can change, so I can be better.”

Look at that, trying to win me moments before her death ... and her redemption. God would feel pity for her when she was butchered, humiliated in every way possible.

Squinted my eyes and raised my razor-sharp blade that my grandmother had not given me—it had been a gift from John Amos, given shortly after that old witch Marisha came.

“I am the dark angel of the Lord,” I said in my quivering old voice, “and I am here to deal out justice, for mankind has not yet discovered your sins.”

Swiftly she moved Cindy and turned her body so the little girl wouldn’t be injured when I thrust. Then, while I was watching what she was doing, her right leg shot out and caught my wrist with a hard kick. The knife went flying. I ran to get it, but she moved quicker and kicked the knife under the counter. I threw myself down to feel for it, and in that time she must have put Cindy on the floor, for suddenly she was on top of me, twisting my arm behind me. With a handful of my hair in her other hand, she made me stand up.

“Now we’ll see who is boss, and who will be punished.” She shoved and dragged me, and never released my arm or my hair, as she forced me into my room and threw me on the floor. Quicker than I could scramble to my feet, she slammed the door and I heard the key turn. I was locked in.

“You whore, let me out. You let me out or I’ll set this house on fire. And we’ll burn, all burn, burn.”

I heard her raspy breathing as she panted, leaning on my closed bedroom door. I tried to find the stash of matches and

candles I'd stored in my room. Gone. All my matches, all my candles, even the cigarette lighter I'd stolen from John Amos.

"Thief!" I roared. "Nothing in this house but thieves, cheats, whores, and liars! All of you after my money too! You think I'll die today, tomorrow, next week, or next month—but I'll live to see you dead, Momma! I'll live to see every last one of the attic mice dead!"

Down the hall she sped. I heard the clickity-clack of her satin mules. I'd scared myself; now I didn't know what to do. Hadn't John Amos told me to wait until Christmas night, so everything would coincide with the other fire in Foxworth Hall. Do it the same way, only differently.

"Momma," I whispered, down on my knees and crying, "I didn't mean none of that mean stuff. Momma, please don't go away and leave me alone. Don't like to be alone. Don't like what's happening to me, Momma. Why did you have to go and pretend you were married to your brother? Why couldn't you just have lived with him and us, and been decent?" I sobbed, afraid of what I could be when I felt mean.

She didn't need to lock the door when she had Cindy with her, did she? Never could she trust me to do the right thing. But that must be because she couldn't help herself either, no more than me. She was born bad and beautiful, and only through death could God redeem her sinful soul. I sighed and got up to do what I could to save her from the mess she'd made of her life, and ours. "Momma!" I yelled, "unlock my door! I'll kill myself if you don't! I know all about you now, what you and your brother are doing—the people next door told me everything about your childhood. And your book told me the rest. Unlock my door, if you don't want to come in and see me dead."

She came to my door and unlocked it, staring down in my face, even as she wiped her nose and ran her hand through her hair. "What do you mean the people next door told you everything? Who are the people next door?"

"You'll find out when you see her," I said smugly, all of a sudden mean again. Drat that Cindy she had to hold on to all

the time. Was me she gave birth to, not Cindy. “There’s an old man over there too, he knows about you and your attic days. Just go over and talk to them, Momma, and you won’t feel so happy to have a daughter anymore.”

Her mouth gaped open as a wild look of horror came to her blue eyes and made them look dark, dark. “Bart, please don’t tell me lies.”

“Never tell lies, not like you do,” I said, watching as she began to tremble so much she almost dropped Cindy. Pity she didn’t. But it wouldn’t hurt if she just fell to the carpeted floor.

“Now you stay here and wait for me,” she said as she headed for the coat closet. “For once in your life do as I say. Sit down and watch TV—eat all the candy you want—but stay in this house and out of the rain.”

She was going next door. I felt panicky inside, afraid she wouldn’t come back. Afraid she wouldn’t be saved, afraid maybe after all, this wasn’t a game John Amos was playing, not a game after all. But I couldn’t speak. For God was on the side of John Amos—he’d have to be since *he* wasn’t sinning.

Dressed in her warmest white winter coat, wearing white boots, Momma picked up Cindy, who was dressed warmly too. “Be a good boy, Bart, and remember always I love you. I’ll be back in less than ten minutes, though heaven only knows what that woman in black can know about me.”

I flicked a quick shamed glance at her pale, worried face. Momma was gonna crack up when she met my grandmother, who was her own mother. Momma was gonna end up in a straightjacket and I’d never see her again.

Why wasn’t I glad that already God was punishing her, beginning her redemption? My head ached again. My stomach felt queasy. Legs didn’t want to obey, but had a leaden weight of their own that knew their mind. Pulling me along with them to the coat closet as Momma slammed the front door behind her.

Momma, my soul was crying, don’t go and leave me alone. Don’t like to be alone. Nobody will love me but you, Momma,

nobody will. Please don't go over there—don't let John Amos see you. Shouldn't have said anything. Should have known you wouldn't stay here where it was safe. I pulled on my coat and raced to the front windows to watch her carrying Cindy into the wind and cold rain. Just as if she, a mere woman, could face up to God and his black wrath.

Soon as she was out of sight I slipped outside and began to follow her. Did this new coat mean she really did love me? No, said the wise old man in my brain, didn't mean anything. Gifts, toys, games, and clothes were easy things to give—things that all parents gave their children even when they were about to feed them arsenic on sugared doughnuts. Parents held back what was most important, security.

I sighed wearily, hoping someday, somewhere, I'd find the mother who would stay forever, the mother who was right for me—who would always understand I was doing the best I could.

Outside, the wind blew my slicker against my body and drove the rain into my face. About ten yards ahead I could see Momma was having a rough time attempting to hold Cindy, who was trying to wiggle free and run back home as she screamed: "Don't like rain! Take me home! Momma, don't wanna go!"

Trying to comfort her while she kept her footing and at the same time trying to keep the hood over her hair, she finally gave up efforts to keep herself dry and settled for keeping Cindy as dry as possible. Soon her hair was pasted down flat to her head, as flat to her head, as flat as my hair was by now, for never never would I slip a hood over my head—made me scared to look in a mirror.

Momma slipped on the mud that was being washed down from the hills, and she almost lost her footing. But she caught herself and rebalanced. Cindy screamed and beat at her face with small fists. "HOME! I WANT HOME!"

Ran fast, for she wasn't looking backward. All her concentration was on the winding road ahead. "Stop fighting me, Cindy!"

High walls. Iron pickets. Strong gates. Magic boxes to speak into. Small voice coming back—and hear the wind blow. Privacy didn't mean nothing to God and the wind, not nothing at all.

Heard my momma's voice as she shouted to be heard above the shriek of the wind and rain: "This is Catherine Sheffield. I live next door and Bart is my son. I want to come in and talk to the lady of the house."

Silence, only the wind.

Then my momma was calling out again: "I want to see her, and if I have to climb this fence I'll do just that. I'm coming in, one way or another—so open the gates and save me the trouble."

I stood back and waited, gasping as if my heart truly did hurt. Slowly, slowly, the wide black iron gates swung open.

For a moment I wanted to shriek out, *NO! Don't walk into a trap, Momma!* But I really didn't know if there was a trap at all. I was just afraid that, between John Amos and the Malcolm that was inside of me, nothing good would come of Momma's venture into my grandmother's house. Quickly I ducked inside the gates just before they clanged softly closed. Sounded like prison doors.

She trudged on ahead, all the while Cindy was screaming and crying. By the time they reached the door both seemed soaked to the skin, for I was, and I'd had two hands to hold my slicker together.

Up the stairs Momma stumbled, clasping Cindy, who was still trying to kick free. She lifted the loose jaw of the brass lion's head and banged loud.

John Amos had been expecting her, for he swung one side of the double doors open immediately and bowed very low, as if admitting a queen. Ran, ran then as fast as I could so I wouldn't miss a thing. Quickly into the side door, and down the corridor to the dumbwaiter—hoping that she'd be in that room, for behind the potted palms was not such a secure place. Jory had found me there once, and it could happen again.

I crawled into the dumbwaiter after I dropped my coat on the floor, then slid open the door just a slot. Momma was probably still in the foyer taking off her wet coat and muddy white boots.

Then she appeared in the doorway, minus her coat and boots. I hadn't even had the time to check and see if my grandmother was in her rocking chair—but she was there all right.

Stiffly she rose, facing my momma, hiding her trembling hands behind her back, the veil hiding most of her face as it hid all of her hair.

Something small, weak, and young inside of me wanted to cry as I saw Momma step into “her” room, still carrying Cindy, only Cindy's outer clothes had been taken off. She was completely dry, while Momma's hair stuck to her face and head like strings. Her flushed face looked so feverish I again wanted to cry. What if God struck her dead this second? What if death by hellfires was what He really wanted?

“I'm sorry to burst in on you like this,” said my momma. I'd thought she'd pitch right into her. “But I must have a few answers to my questions. Who are you? What is it you tell my youngest son? He's told me terrible things he claims you told him. I don't know you, and you don't know me, so what can you tell him but lies?”

So far my grandmother hadn't said a word. She kept staring at Momma, then at Cindy.

My grandmother gestured toward a chair, then inclined her head as if to say she was sorry. Why didn't she speak?

“What a lovely room,” said Momma, glancing around at all the fine furniture. There was a troubled look in her eyes, even her smile seemed forced. She put Cindy on her feet and tried to hold on to her hand, but Cindy wanted to explore and see all the pretty things.

“I'm not going to stay any longer than necessary,” Momma went on, keeping an eye on Cindy, who had to touch everything. “I have a severe cold and want to be home in bed,

but I must find out just what you have been telling my son so he comes home and says terrible things. And doesn't respect me as his mother. When you can explain, Cindy and I will leave."

Grandmother nodded, keeping her eyes lowered, like she truly was some Arab woman. I guessed from the odd way Momma kept looking at her she was thinking this was a foreigner of some kind who didn't understand our good English.

Momma sat down uninvited near the fire, as Cindy came to perch on the raised hearth near her legs.

"This is an isolated area, so when Bart comes home and tells me the lady next door has told him this and that, I knew it had to be you. Who are you? Why are you trying to turn my son against me? What have I ever done to you?" Her questions went on and on, for the woman in black wouldn't speak. Momma leaned forward to peer more closely at Grandmother.

Was Momma suspicious already? Was she so smart she could tell despite the disguise of the black veil, the long loose black dress? "Come now, I've given you my name. Be courteous enough to tell me yours."

No answer, just a shy nod of the black veiled head.

"Oh, I think I understand," said Momma with a perplexed frown. "You must not speak English."

The woman shook her head again. Momma's frown deepened. "I truly don't understand. You seem to understand what I say, yet you don't answer. You can't be mute or you wouldn't have been able to tell my son so many lies."

Time was ticking away loudly. Never heard the clock on the marble mantle tick so loud before. My granny just rocked on and on in her chair, like she'd never speak or raise her head.

Momma was beginning to be annoyed. Suddenly Cindy jumped up and raced to pick up a porcelain kitty. "Cindy, put that down."

Obedying reluctantly, Cindy carefully replaced the cat on the marble table. The minute the cat was out of her hands, Cindy

looked around for something else to do. She spied the archway to the next room and ran that way. Jumping to her feet, Momma hurried to prevent Cindy from roaming. Cindy had a way, like me, of wanting to examine everything—though she didn't drop things as often as I did.

“Don't go in there!” cried out my grandmother, as she too stood up.

As if stunned, my mother slowly turned around, Cindy forgotten. Her blue eyes widened and the color drained from her face as she kept staring at the woman in black who couldn't keep her nervous hands from straying up to the neckline of her black dress. Soon she had the rope of pearls and was twisting them between her fingers.

“Your voice, I have heard it before.”

Grandmother didn't speak.

“Those rings on your fingers, I've seen them before. Where did you get those rings?”

Helplessly my grandmother shrugged and quickly released the pearls, which dropped down out of sight under her black robe. “Pawn shop,” she said in a strange, raspy, foreign way. “Bargain.”

Momma's eyes narrowed as she continued to stare at the woman who wasn't a stranger. I sat breathless, wondering what would happen when she knew. Oh, Momma would find out. I knew my mother couldn't be so easily fooled.

As if her knees were suddenly weak, Momma sank down on the nearest chair, unmindful that her clothes were still wet, unmindful that Cindy had wandered into the other room.

“You do understand a little English, I see,” she said in a quiet slow way. “The moment I walked into this room, it was as if the clock had been turned backward, and I was a child again. My mother had the same taste in furnishings, the same choice of colors. I look at your brocade chairs, your cut velvet ones, the clock on your mantelpiece, and all I can think of is how very much my mother would have approved of this room.

Even those rings on your fingers look like the rings she used to wear. You found them in a pawn shop?”

“Many women like this type of room ... and jewelry,” said that lady in black.

“You have a strange voice ... Mrs... .?”

Another shrug from the black figure.

Momma got up again and went into the other room to fetch Cindy. I held my breath. The portrait was in there. She’d see it. But she must not have looked around, for in another second she was back, pulling Cindy and standing close to the fireplace, keeping a tight hold on Cindy’s hand.

“What a remarkable home you have. If I closed my eyes I could swear I was looking at Foxworth Hall as I saw it from the balcony.”

Dark, dark were the eyes of my grandmother.

“Are you wearing pearls? I thought I saw pearls when you were fiddling around your neck. Those rings are so beautiful. You show your rings, why not your pearls?”

Again another shrug from Grandmother.

Dragging Cindy along with her, Momma stepped closer to the woman I didn’t want to think of as my grandmother anymore. “As I stand here all sorts of memories come flooding back,” said Momma. “I remember a Christmas night when Foxworth Hall burned to the ground. The night was cold and snowy, yet it lit up like the Fourth of July. I yanked all the rings from my fingers and hurled the diamond and emerald jewelry into the deep snow. I thought no one would ever find it—but Madame, you are wearing the emerald ring I threw in the snow! Later Chris picked up all that jewelry because it belonged to *his* mother! *His precious mother!*”

“I am sick too. Go away,” whispered that forlorn figure in black, standing in the middle of her room, avoiding the rocking chair that might trap her.

But she was already trapped.

“YOU!” cried my mother. “I should have known! There is no other rope necklace of pearls with a diamond butterfly clasp except yours.

“Of course you are sick!” screamed my mother. “What else could you be but sick! I know who you are. Now everything makes sense. How dare you come into my life again. After all you have done to us, you come back again to do more. I hate you. I hate you for everything you have done, but I’ve never had the chance to pay you back. Taking Bart from you wasn’t enough. Now I have the chance to do more.”

Releasing Cindy’s hand, she lunged forward and caught hold of my grandmother, who tried to back away and fight her off. But my mother was stronger. Breathless and excited I watched the two women pull at one another.

My grandmother cringed away from the fierce attack. She didn’t seem to know what to do. Then Cindy let out a howl of fear, and began to cry. “Mommy, let’s go home.”

The door opened and John Amos shambled inside the room. As my mother prepared another attack, he reached out to lay a large knobby hand on my grandmother’s shoulder. I’d never seen him touch her before.

“Mrs. Sheffield,” he began in his whiny-hissy voice, “you were graciously admitted into this house, and now you try to take advantage of my wife, who has not been well for several years. I am John Amos Jackson, and this is my wife, Mrs. Jackson.”

Stunned, Momma could only stare.

“John Amos Jackson,” repeated my mother slowly, savoring the name. “I’ve heard that name before. Why, just yesterday I was rereading my manuscript, and I had to think of a way to change that name slightly. You are the John Amos Jackson who once was a butler in Foxworth Hall! I remember your bald head and how it shone under the chandeliers.” She swiveled about and reached for Cindy’s hand, or so I thought. But instead she snatched the veil from my grandmother’s face.

“Mother!” she screamed. “I should have known months ago it was you. From the moment I entered this house I sensed your presence, your perfume, the colors, the choice of furniture. You had sense enough to cover your face and body in black, but you were stupid enough to wear your jewelry. Dumb, always so damned dumb! Is it insanity, or is it stupidity that makes you think I could forget your perfume, your jewelry?” She laughed, wild and hysterically, spinning around and around so John Amos, who was trying to prevent what she might do, was stumbling, clumsily trying to grab hold of her before she could attack again.

Look at her—she was dancing! All around my grandmother she whirled, flicking out her hand to slap at her—and even as she whipped her legs around, she screamed: “I should have known it was you. Ever since you moved in Bart has been acting crazy. You couldn’t leave us alone, could you? You had to come here and try and ruin what Chris and I have found together—the first time we’ve been happy. And now you’ve ruined it. You’ve managed to drive Bart insane so he’ll have to be put away like you were. Oh, how I hate you for that. How I hate you for so many reasons. Cory, Carrie, and now Bart—is there no end to what you can do to hurt us?” She kicked and hooked her foot behind my grandmother’s knee and threw her off balance, and the moment my grandmother spilled to the floor in a heap of black rags, my mother was on top of her, ripping at that rope of pearls with its diamond butterfly clasp.

Using both her hands, she forced the knotted string to part, and the pearls scattered all over the Oriental rug that silently swallowed them up.

John Amos roughly seized hold of my momma, and pulled her to her feet. He held her and shook her until Momma’s head rolled. “Pick up the pearls, Mrs. Sheffield,” he ordered in a hard, mean voice that was suddenly very strong. I was surprised that he would handle my mother so cruelly. I knew what Jory would do—he’d run to fight John Amos and save Momma. But me, I didn’t know if I should. God was up there wanting Momma to suffer for her sins, and if I saved her, what would God do to me? Besides, Jory was bigger. And Daddy

was always saying everything happened for the best—so this was meant to be, despite the miserable way I felt.

But Momma didn't need my help after all. She threw back her head and butted her skull squarely against his false teeth. I heard them crack as she whirled free. Then he went after her with more determination. He was gonna kill her, and be the agent of God's wrath himself!

Quicker than I could move, Momma's knee came up and caught him squarely in the groin. John Amos screamed, doubled over, clutching at himself as he fell to the floor and rolled about moaning: "Damn you to hell!"

"Damn *you* to hell, John Amos Jackson!" my momma screamed back. "Don't you ever touch me again, or I will dig out your eyes."

By this time my grandmother had gained her feet, and she stood in the center of the room swaying unsteadily as she tried to fit the torn veil over her face again. That's when my mother's slap caught her cheek, so Grandmother fell backward into her rocker. "Damn you to hell too, Corrine Foxworth! I hoped never to see your face again. I hoped you'd die in that 'rest home' and spare me the agony of looking at you again, and hearing that voice that I used to love. But I've never been lucky. I should have known you wouldn't be considerate enough to die and leave me and Chris alone. You are like your father, clinging desperately to a life not worth living."

Oh, I hadn't known before my mother had such a terrible temper. She was just like me. I felt shocked, scared as I watched my mother tackle my old grandmother so her chair tipped over and both of them fell to the floor, rolling over and over as John Amos groaned, maybe never to recover. In a few moments Momma was sitting on top of my grandmother, ripping off all those glittering, expensive rings. Weakly my grandmother tried to defend herself and her jewelry.

"Please, Cathy, don't do this to me," she pleaded.

"*You!* How I've longed to see you on the floor, pleading with me as you are. I was wrong a moment ago—this is my lucky day. My chance to have my revenge again for all you've

done. You watch and see what I do to your precious rings.” She raised her arm, and with one wild gesture she hurled all those rings into the roaring fire. “There, there! It’s done!” cried my momma. “What should have been done long ago on the night Bart died.”

With a gloating expression she ran to pick up Cindy; ran to the foyer closet to yank on Cindy’s coat, and then reached for her own coat and boots she’d pulled off.

John Amos had picked himself off the floor, muttering to himself about Devil’s issue that should have died when she was caged and helpless. “Damned hellcat should have been slaughtered before she could create more Devil’s issue!”

I heard.

Maybe Momma didn’t.

I moved out of the dumbwaiter unseen by my grandmother, who was crying as she sat on the floor in a broken heap.

Momma had on her boots now, her white coat, though she was shivering as she came to the door and looked in on the woman still on the floor. “What did you say, John Amos Jackson? Did I hear you call me a hellcat, Devil’s issue? Say that again to my face! Go on, say it to me now! Now that I’m an adult and not a frightened child anymore. Now that my legs and arms are strong and yours are weak. Don’t think you can do away with me so easily now—for I’m not old, and I’m not weak, and I’m not scared anymore.”

He headed her way, holding in his hand a poker he must have taken from the fireplace. She laughed, seeming to think he was a fool and an easy enemy. Quickly she dodged, then shot out her good leg and kicked his bottom hard so he fell prone his face, screaming out his rage as he fell.

I was screaming too. This was wrong! This was not the way John Amos and I had planned for God to have his revenge. He wasn’t supposed to hurt her.

Momma saw me then. Her blue eyes widened, her face paled, and she seemed to crumple. “Bart.”

I whispered, “John Amos told me all the things I had to do.”

She whirled on my grandmother. “Look what you have done. You have turned my own son against me. And all the time you get by with everything, even murder. You poisoned Cory, poisoned Carrie’s mind so she had to kill herself, killed Bart Winslow when you sent him back into the fire to save the life of a wretched old woman who didn’t deserve to live—and now you poison the mind of my son against me. And you escaped justice by pleading insanity. You weren’t insane when you set fire to Foxworth Hall. That was the first clever stunt you pulled in your life but this is my time for revenge.” And with those words she raced to the fireplace, picked up the small shovel for ashes, pushed aside the firescreen, and began to pull red hot coals from the fire onto the Oriental rug.

As the rug began to smoke, she called to me, “Bart, put on your coat, we’re going home, and we’ll move so far away she’ll never find us, never!”

I screamed. My grandmother screamed. But my mother was so busy buttoning up Cindy’s coat she didn’t see that John Amos had the poker in his hand again. As I froze, my lips parted to scream a warning again—the poker came down on her head. She slumped quietly to the floor like a rag doll.

“You fool!” cried my grandmother. “You may have killed her!”

Things were happening too fast. Everything was going wrong. Momma wasn’t supposed to be hurt. I wanted to say this, but the face of John Amos was twisted, his lips snarled as he advanced on my grandmother.

“Cathy, Cathy,” she pleaded, down on her knees and cradling my mother’s head, “please don’t die. I love you. I’ve always loved you. I never meant for any of you to die. I nev—”

The whack was so hard she slumped over the body of my mother. Rage was in my head. Cindy was screaming. “John Amos!” I yelled. “That wasn’t in God’s plan!”

He turned, smiling and confident. “Yes, it was, Bart. God spoke to me last night and told me what to do. Didn’t you hear your mother say she was going far-far away? She wouldn’t take a bothersome boy like you with her, would she? Wouldn’t she put you away first in some institution? Then she’d go, and never would you see her again, Bart. Just like your great-grandfather, you’d be abandoned forever. Just like your grandmother you’d be locked up, and you’d never see her again either! That’s the cruel way life treats those who try to do their best. And it’s me, only me who is trying to take care of you and see you escape confinement worse than prison.”

Prison, prison, so much like poison.

“Bart, are you listening? Have you heard? Do you understand I’m doing what I can to save both of them for you?”

I started at him; didn’t really understand anything. “Yes, Bart, instead of one. You will have two souvenirs.”

Didn’t know what or who to believe. I stared down at the two women on the floor, my momma, my grandmother who had fallen crosswise over the slight body of my momma. It came over me in an overwhelming flood—I loved those two women. I loved them more than I’d known I had. Wouldn’t want to stay alive if I lost one, much less two. Were they as evil as John Amos had said? Would God punish me if I kept them from being “redeemed” by fire?

And there he was in front of me, John Amos the only one who had been fully honest with me from the beginning, telling me from the start who my real daddy was, who my real grandmother was, who Malcolm the wise and clever was.

I looked into his small narrow eyes for instructions. God was behind John Amos or else he wouldn’t have lived to be so old.

He smiled and chucked me under the chin, and I shivered. Didn’t like people to touch me when I couldn’t even feel the touch.

“Now listen to me carefully, Bart. First you are to take Cindy home. Then you make her swear not to tell anything or you will cut out her little pink tongue. Can you make her promise?”

Numbly I nodded. Had to make Cindy promise.

“You won’t hurt my momma and my grandmomma?”

“Of course not, Bart. I’ll just put them away where they’ll be safe. You can see them whenever you want. But not one word to that man who calls himself your father. *Not one word.* Remember he, too, will take you away from your home and have you locked up. He thinks you’re crazy too. Don’t you know that’s why they keep taking you to shrinks?”

I swallowed; my throat hurt. Didn’t know what to do.

John Amos knew. “Now, you go home with Cindy, keep the brat quiet, lock yourself in your room, play dumb, know nothing. And remember ... you threaten that kid sister so horribly she’ll be scared to let out a squeak.”

“She’s not my kid sister,” I whispered weakly.

“What’s the difference?” he snarled irritably. “You just do as I say. Follow instructions, as God wants men to believe in him unquestioningly—and never let out to your brother or your father that you know his secret, or that you have any idea where your mother went. Play dumb. You should be good at that.”

What did he mean? Was he making fun of me?

I knitted my brows and turned on my brows and turned on my best glower, and imitated Malcolm. “You hear this, John Amos. The day you can outsmart me will be the day the earth sits on the head of a pin, and I swallow it. So don’t you mock me, and think I’m dumb ... for in the end, I’ll win. I’ll always win, dead or alive.”

Power swelled up huge within me. Never felt so stuffed full of brains. I looked down at the two women I loved. Yes, God had planned for it to happen this way, give me two mothers to keep forever as my own ... and I’d never be lonely again.

* * *

“Now, you keep your mouth shut, and don’t tell Daddy or Jory one word or I’ll cut out your tongue,” I said to Cindy when we were home and in our kitchen together. “Do you want your tongue cut out?”

Her small face was wet with rain and tears, streaked with dirt too. Her lips gaped and her eyes bulged, and whimpering like a baby, she allowed me to put on her pajamas and put her in bed. I kept my eyes closed all the time so none of her girl’s body would shame me into hating her more.

Where's Momma?



There was somebody I had to tell off. Somebody who seemed to have started a tornado that was going on forever and ruining our lives. Dad and I had talked about it a lot, but things were still very tense and I was so confused. Why did she have to come and start all this? Finally I could hold in my anger no longer, and as soon as ballet class was over, I raced to Madame's office.

"I hate you, Madame, for all the mean things you said to my mom. Everything's been terrible ever since that day. You leave her alone from now on, or I'll go and never come back to see you. Did you fly all the way here just to make her sick? She can't dance now, and that's bad enough. If you don't stop causing so much trouble, I'll quit dancing too. I'll run away and you'll never see me again. For in ruining my parents lives, you have managed to ruin not only theirs, but mine and Bart's too."

She paled and looked very old. "You sound so very much like your father. Julian used to blaze his dark eyes at me in the same way."

"I used to love you."

"Used to love me ... ?"

"Yes, used to. When I thought you cared about me, about my parents, then I believed that dancing was the most wonderful thing in the world. Now I don't believe."

She looked stricken, as if I'd stabbed her in her heart. She reeled back against the wall and would have fallen if I hadn't stepped forward to support her. "Jory, please," she gasped, "don't ever run away. Don't stop dancing. If you do, then my life has been meaningless and Georges will have lived for

nothing, and Julian too. Don't take everything from those I have loved and lost."

I couldn't speak, I was so confused. So I ran, ran like Bart always ran when things got too heavy.

Behind me Melodie called out: "Jory, where are you going in such a hurry? We were going to have a soda together."

I ran on. I didn't care anymore about anyone or anything. My life was all screwed up. My parents weren't married. How could they be? What minister or judge would marry a brother and his sister?

Once I hit the sidewalk I slowed down, then went on to a public park where I sat down on a green bench. On and on I sat, staring down at my feet. A dancer's feet. Strong, tough with calluses, ready for the professional stage. What would I do now when I grew up? I didn't really want to be a doctor, though I'd said that a few times just to please the man I loved as a father. What a joke. Why should I try and lie to myself—there was no life for me without dancing. When I punished Madame, my mother, my stepdad who was really only my uncle, I punished myself even worse.

I stood up and looked around at all the old people sitting lonely in the park, wondering if one day I'd be like them, and I thought, No. I'll know when to say I made a mistake. When to say I'm sorry.

* * *

Madame M. was in her office, her head bowed down into her thin hands when I opened the door quietly and stepped inside her office. I must have made some noise, for she looked up and I saw tears in her eyes. Joy flooded them when she saw me, but she didn't mention all that had happened half an hour ago.

"I have a gift for your mother," she said in her naturally shrill voice. She slid open a desk drawer and withdrew a gold box bound with red satin ribbon. "For Catherine," she said stiffly, not meeting my eyes. "You are right about everything. I was ready to take you from your mother and father because I

felt I was doing the right thing for you. I see now I was doing what I wanted for myself, not for you. Sons belongs with their mothers, not their grandmothers.” She smiled bitterly as she looked at the pretty gold box. “Lady Godiva candy. The kind your mother was nuts about when she lived in New York and was with Madame Zolta’s company. Then she couldn’t eat chocolates for fear of adding weight—though she was the kind of dancer who burned off more calories than most when she danced—still I allowed her only one piece of candy a week. Now that she won’t dance again, she can indulge to her heart’s desire.”

That was Bart’s phrase.

“Mom has an awful cold,” I explained just as stiffly as she had. “Thank you for the candy and what you just said. I know Mom will feel better knowing you won’t try and take me away from her.” I grinned then and kissed her dry cheek. “Besides, don’t you realize there is enough of me to share? If you aren’t stingy, she won’t be. Mom is wonderful. Not once has she ever told me you and she had any difficulties.” I settled down in her single office chair and crossed my legs. “Madame, I’m scared. Things are going crazy in our house. Bart acts weirder each day. Mom is sick with that cold; Dad seems so unhappy. Clover is dead. Emma doesn’t smile anymore. Christmas is coming and nothing is being done about it. If this keeps up, I think I’ll crack up myself.”

“Hah!” she snorted, back to her old self. “Life is always like that—twenty minutes of misery for every two seconds of joy. So, be everlastingly grateful for those rare two seconds and appreciate; appreciate what good you can find, no matter what the cost.”

My smiles were false. Underneath I was truly depressed. Her cynical words didn’t really help. “Does it have to be that way?” I asked.

“Jory,” she said, thrusting her old pastry-dough face closer to mine, “think about this. If there were no shadows, how could we see the sunlight?”

I sat there in her gloomy office and allowed this kind of sour philosophy to give me some peace. “Okay, I get your meaning, Madame. And if you can’t say you are sorry, then I can.”

She whispered as if it hurt, “I’m sorry too.”

I hugged her close, and we had come to some sort of compromise.

* * *

All the way home I held the gold box of chocolates on my lap, dying to open it. “Dad,” I began falteringly, “Madame is sending Mom this candy as a reconciliation gift, I guess.”

He threw me a glance and a smile. “That’s nice.”

“I think it’s terribly strange Mom is staying sick with that cold for so long. She’s never been sick more than a day or two. Don’t you think she looks very tired?”

“It’s that writing, that damned writing,” he grouched, watching the heavy traffic, turning on the windshield wipers, leaning forward to peer more closely at the traffic signal to the right. “I wish it would stop raining. Rain always bothers her. Then she’s up till four in the morning, next day up at dawn to scribble on legal pads, afraid to use the typewriter for fear of waking me. When the candle is burned at both ends something has to give—and that’s her health. First that fall, now this cold.” He gave me another sideways glance. “Then there’s Bart and his problems, and you and yours. Jory, you know our secret now. Your mother and I have talked it over, and you and I have talked about it for hours and hours. Can you forgive us? Haven’t I managed to help you understand?”

I bowed my head and felt ashamed. “I’m trying to understand.”

“Trying? Is it that difficult? Haven’t I told you how it was with us, up there, all four of us in one room, growing up, finding out in our adolescence that we had only each other ...”

“But, Dad. When you ran away and found a new home with Dr. Paul, couldn’t you have found someone else? Why did it have to be her?”

Sighing, he set his lips. “I thought I explained to you how I felt then about women. Your mother was there when I needed her. Our own mother had betrayed us. When you’re young you fix very strong ideas in your mind. I’m sorry if you’ve been hurt by my inability to love anyone but her.”

What was there for me to say? I couldn’t understand. The world was full of beautiful young women, thousands, millions. Then I thought of Melodie. If she were to die could I go out and find another? I thought and thought about that as Dad turned silent and his lips stayed in that grim line, and the rain came down, down, driving hard. It was as if he could read my mind. For yes, if ever I was so unfortunate to lose Melodie, if she moved away and I never saw her again, I’d go on living, and eventually I’d find another to take her place. Anything was better than—

“Jory, I know what you’re thinking. I’ve had years and years to think about why it had to be my sister and no one else. Perhaps it was because I’d lost faith in all women because of what our mother was doing to us and only my sister could give me comfort. She was the one who kept me from falling apart during those long years of deprivations. She was the one who made of that one room a whole house. She was a mother to Cory and Carrie. She made that room seem a home, making the table pretty, making the beds, scrubbing clothes in the bathroom tub, hanging them in the attic to dry, but more than anything, it was the way she danced in the attic that made me love her, and put her in my heart forever. For it seemed as I stood in the shadows and watched her, she was dancing only for me. I thought she was making me the prince of her dreams, as I made her the princess of mine. I was romantic then, even more so than she. Your mother is made of different stuff than most women, Jory. She could live on hate and still flourish, I couldn’t. I had to have love or die. When we escaped Foxworth Hall, she flirted with Paul, wanting him to take her from me. She married your father when Paul’s sister, Amanda, told her a lie. She was a good wife to your father, but after he was killed she ran to the mountains of Virginia to complete her plans for revenge, which included stealing her mother’s second husband. As you have found out, Bart is the son of my

mother's husband, and not the son of Paul as we told you and told him. We had to tell lies then, to protect you. Then, after your mother married Paul, and he died, she came to me. During all those years I waited, I somehow knew eventually she'd be mine as long as I held fast to my faith, and kept the flame of my first love burning. It was so easy for her to love other men. It was impossible for me to find any woman who could compare. She took me for her own when I was about your age, Jory. Be careful whom you love first, for that is the girl you will never forget."

I let out a long withheld breath, thinking that life was not at all like fairy tale ballets or TV soap operas. Love did not come and go with the seasons as I'd kinda hoped it would.

The drive home seemed to take forever. Dad was forced to drive very slowly and carefully. From time to time he flicked his eyes to the dashboard clock. I stared out of the windows. Everywhere there were Christmas decorations. Through picture windows I saw gaily lit Christmas trees. Longingly I stared at the windows we passed, seeing everything in that smeamy way that made scenes ten times more romantic in the rain. I wished it was last year. I wished we had the happiness that had seemed so permanent then. I wished that old woman next door had never come into our lives and messed up what I thought was perfect. I wished too that Madame M. had never flown here to snoop in their lives, and reveal all their secrets better left hidden. Worst of all, those two women had destroyed the pride I had for my parents. Try as I might, I still resented what they were doing, what they had done, risking scandal, risking ruining my life and Bart's, Cindy's too, and all because one man couldn't find another woman to love. And that one woman must have done something to keep him faithful and hoping.

"Jory," began Dad as he turned into our driveway, "from time to time I hear your mother complain about chapters she's misplaced. Your mother isn't the kind of woman to be careless in any important work project. I'm presuming you've been slipping her completed chapters out of her desk drawer and reading them ..."

Should I tell him the truth?

Bart was the one who first stole pages from her script. And yet my sense of morality hadn't kept me from reading them too. Though as yet I hadn't read to the end. For some reason I couldn't force myself to read beyond the time when first a brother betrayed his sister by forcing himself upon her. That this man beside me could rape his own sister when she was only fifteen was beyond my comprehension, beyond my ability to sympathize no matter how desperate his need had been, or what the circumstances had been to drive him to commit such an unholy act. And certainly she shouldn't tell the whole world.

"Jory, have I lost you?"

I slowly turned my eyes his way, feeling sick and weak inside, wanting to hide from the torment I plainly saw on his face. Yet I couldn't say yes—or no.

"I guess you don't need to answer," said Dad in a tight way. "Your silence gives your answer, and I'm sorry. I love you as my own son, and I hoped you loved me enough to understand. We were going to tell you when we thought you were old enough to empathize with us. Cathy should have locked her first drafts in a drawer and not trusted two sons to remain uninterested."

"It's fiction, isn't it?" I asked hopefully. "Sure, I know it is. No mother could do that to her own children ..." and I threw open the passenger door and was racing to the house before he could answer.

My lips parted to call out to Mom. Then I shut my mouth and said nothing. It was easier for me to avoid her.

Usually when I came home I dashed out into the garden and ran around, doing practice leaps and positions, and on rainy days like this, I spent more time at the barre. Today I threw myself in front of the television set in the family room, pushed the remote control button, and lost myself in a silly but entertaining soap opera.

"Cathy!" called Dad as he came in, "where are you?"

Why hadn't he sung out, "Come greet me with kisses if you love me?" Did he feel silly, guilty saying that now that he knew we knew where that line came from?

"Have you said hello to your mother?" he asked as he came in.

"Haven't seen her."

"Where's Bart?"

"Haven't looked for him."

He threw me a pleading look, then went on into the bedroom he shared with his "wife."

"Cathy, Cathy," I could hear him calling, "where are you?"

A few seconds later he was in the kitchen behind me, checking there—and not finding her. He began to race around from room to room, and finally banged on Bart's locked door. "Bart, are you in there?"

First a long silence, then came a reluctant, surly reply, "Yeah, I'm in here. Where else would I be with the door locked?"

"Then unlock it and come out."

"Momma locked me in from the outside so I *can't* come out."

I sat on, immersing myself in the show, keeping myself detached, wondering how I was going to survive and grow up normally when I felt so unhappy.

Dad was the type to have duplicate keys to everything, and soon Bart was out and undergoing a third degree. "What did you do to cause your mother to lock you up and then go away?"

"Didn't do nothin!"

"You must have done something that made her furious."

Bart grinned at him slyly, saying nothing. I looked their way feeling anxious and scared.

“Bart, if you have done anything to harm your mother, you won’t get out of this lightly. I mean that.”

“Wouldn’t do nothing to hurt her,” said Bart irritably. “She’s the one always hurtin me. She don’t love me, only Cindy.”

“Cindy,” said Dad, suddenly remembering the little girl, and away he strode to her pretty room. He showed up minutes later with her.

“Where is your mother, Bart?”

“How do I know? She locked me up.”

Despite myself, I was losing my ability to stay uninvolved. “Dad, Mom left her car in the garage a few days ago, and Madame drove us home the rest of the way, so she couldn’t have gone far.”

“I know. She told me—something wrong with her brakes.” He threw Bart a long scrutinizing look. “Bart, are you sure you don’t know where your mother is?”

“Can’t look through solid doors.”

“Did she tell you where she was going?”

“Nobody ever tells me nothin.”

Suddenly Cindy piped up: “Mommy went out in rain ... rain got us all wet ...”

Bart whirled around to stab her with his glare. She froze and began to tremble.

Smiling, Dad picked up Cindy again and sat down to hold her on his lap. “Cindy, you’re a lifesaver. Now, think back carefully and tell me where Mommy went.”

Trembling more, she sat staring at Bart and unable to speak.

“Please, Cindy, look at me, not Bart. I’m here, I’ll take care of you. Bart can’t hurt you when I’m here. Bart, stop scowling at your sister.”

“Cindy ran out in the rain, Daddy, and Momma had to chase outside and catch her, and then she came in dripping

water, and coughing, and I said something, and she got mad at me and shoved me in my room and slammed the door.”

“Well, I guess that explains Cindy’s tangled hair,” said Dad. But he didn’t look relieved. He put Cindy on her feet and began to make a series of phone calls to all Mom’s friends, and Madame Marisha. My grandmother said she’d drive right over.

Then he was talking to Emma, who couldn’t return until tomorrow because of the storm. I thought of my grandmother on the road, trying to drive here in the downpour. Even in perfect weather, she wasn’t what I’d call a safe driver.

“Dad, let’s check all the rooms, even the attic,” I said, jumping up and running toward the linen closet. “She may have gone up there to dance like she does sometimes, and accidentally locked herself in, or fallen asleep on one of those beds ... or something.” I concluded this lamely, thinking he was looking at me in an odd way.

When Dad started to follow me up the attic stairs, Cindy let out a loud wail of fright. Quickly he returned to the hall and picked her up as if to take her with us. Bart pulled out a new pocketknife and began to whittle on a long tree branch. It seemed he was going to skin off all the tree bark and make a smooth switch. Cindy couldn’t take her eyes off of that knife or switch.

Dad, Cindy, and me looked all over our house, in the attic, in the closets, under the beds, everywhere. Mom was nowhere to be found. “It’s just not like Cathy to do anything like this,” Dad said worriedly. “Especially I know she wouldn’t leave Cindy alone with Bart. Something is very wrong.”

Yeah, I thought, if there was a fish in the house, it was watching us and whittling away on a limb that should be used on his bare bottom.

“Dad,” I whispered as he stood in the middle of his bedroom again, looking around with bleak eyes, “why don’t we presume Bart knows where she’s gone? He’s not the most honest kid ever born. You know how crazy he’s been acting lately.”

We set off together, Dad still carrying Cindy, and hunted now for Bart. Now we couldn't find *him*. He was gone.

Dad and I stared at each other. He shook his head.

I stared around, knowing Bart had to be hiding behind a chair, or was crouched down low in some corner that was dim, or perhaps out in the rain, acting like an animal.

But the storm was getting worse. His cave in the hedges wouldn't keep him dry. Even Bart had more sense than to stay out in the cold and wet.

My thoughts in a turmoil, I felt wild inside, like the storm. I hadn't done anything to deserve all this trouble—yet I was in the midst of it, suffering along with Dad, with Mom, with Cindy ... and maybe Bart, too.

“Are you hating me now, Jory?” asked Dad, looking at me squarely. “Are wheels churning in your head saying your mother and I brought this all on ourselves and we deserve to pay the price? Are you thinking you shouldn't have to pay any price? If that's what you're thinking, I'm thinking the same thing. Maybe your mother's life would have turned out better, and yours and Bart's too, if I had gone away and left her to live in Paul's home until she found another man. But I still loved her. I love her now, tomorrow and forever. God help me for not being able to think about life without her.”

Dully I turned away. So that was what everlasting burning love was like, destroying everything that got in its way.

On my bed I lay down and sobbed.

Finally, I sat I up and wondered again where Mom was. For the first time it really hit me—she might be in danger. She wouldn't leave Dad. Something terrible must have happened or she'd be here, setting the table as she did every Thursday when Emma had her day off. Thursdays were very special to them for reasons I was just beginning to understand.

Thursday, the day the maids of Foxworth Hall went into the city. Thursday, the day Mom and Dad could climb out the attic dormer window and lie on the roof and talk, and as they

talked, as they looked at each other in their high and lonely place, they fell mindlessly, uncontrollably in love.

For now I knew why Mom had married one man after another. Trying always to escape the sinful love she felt too.

I got up. Decided. It was up to me find Bart.

When I found Bart, I'd find my mother.

My Attic Souvenirs



In the huge kitchen of the mansion John Amos had everything under control. The maids and cook were scurrying about. “Madame had to leave early,” he told them. “Now you are to pack up what clothes she’ll need for her trip to Hawaii, and be quick about it. Lottie, I want you to drive her bags to the airport and put them on the plane. Don’t just stand there and stare at me with your blank face looking so stupid. You understand English. Do as I say!”

Boy, he could act mean when he wanted to. They scattered like scared birds, one this way, one that, and then we were alone and he was grinning at me with his cracked teeth. “How did your end go?”

Just like the movies, him and me. I swallowed over some lump that stayed in my throat and wouldn’t go away. “They don’t know where Momma is. They’re worried, and keep asking, where is she?”

“Never mind about them,” he said in his funny old voice that made me wonder why God had chosen him for such a special job, “I’ll take care of everything until God sends his signal that your mother and grandmother have been redeemed, and saved from hellfires. You just go home and keep quiet.”

Fire in my mind, growing bigger, hotter. “You told me my momma would be my attic souvenir. And now you won’t even tell me where you put her. I’ve looked in the attic and they’re not up there. You tell me where they are, or I’ll go home and tell my daddy what you’ve done.”

“What I’ve done?” he asked with a curling sneer. “It’s what you have done, Bart Winslow Sheffield. Do you think for one moment, with your violent psychiatric history that you can be believed and not blamed? The law will take you and find you guilty, and you will be locked away.”

When he saw the red Malcolm anger in my eyes he tried to smile. “Come now, Bart, I was only testing you, trying to see if you’d break and lose your courage. But you’re strong and full of the righteous power, the same as your great-grandfather, Malcolm. Every power he had you have. And now is your chance to use those powers. For now you’ll be in charge of the adults—your mother and grandmother. You will control their lives, and feed them—if you will—or let them starve if you are so inclined. But you have to be careful. You must keep them a secret until ... well, remember always your father and brother will be suspicious, and they may betray you if you give them the least hint of what you’re up to.”

People always suspected me. If something was broken it was always my fault. If the toilet stopped up and overflowed it was always because I’d thrown down too much paper. If Momma lost her jewelry, that was my fault too. Whatever bad thing happened in our house, they said it was my fault. I’d show ’em now how wrong it was for them not to love me.

“Bread and water,” I said. “Bread and water is good enough for women who are unfaithful to husbands and sons.”

“Fine, fine,” mumbled John Amos.

Down, down the narrow cellar steps John Amos led me, carrying a small flashlight. Made eerie shadows on the walls, felt clammy. Long time ago when this house belonged to Jory and me we’d found every nook, every cranny. But this was where ghosts lived, where I’d never felt comfortable, so I stayed close at the heels of John Amos, terrified if he moved more than a yard ahead of me. “They’ll look down here,” I whispered, scared of waking up things that might be sleeping.

“No, they won’t look where I have them hid,” answered John Amos. He chortled. “Your father will be sure they are in the attic, and why not? That would be the perfect revenge. But they’ll never-never find the snug little cage the workmen made when they put up a new brick wall to reinforce the wine cellar.”

Wine cellar. Didn’t sound nearly as good as the attic. Wasn’t nearly as scary, but it was very cold and dark down

here.

John Amos began brushing away spiderwebs, then he shoved old furniture aside, and finally came to a board door that was very hard to open. “Now you go in and peek through the little door at the bottom of that door over there,” he said. “We used to have a stray kitten your grandmother took in, but it disappeared shortly after you started coming over here. She had me cut this little door in the larger one so the cat could come and go when it wanted to.”

With the flashlight held beneath his chin he looked like something dead and dug up. Didn’t trust him not to slam the door shut behind me, and I’d never be able to wiggle through that little kitty door.

“No. You go in the wine cellar first,” I ordered like Malcolm would. For a moment he didn’t move. Maybe he thought I might slam the door behind him. Then he gave me a long look before he went slowly into the wine cellar. He put the flashlight on one of the wine racks while he tugged and tugged at the back rack holding many bottles of dusty ole wine bottles.

Finally it creaked open. Smelled bad in there. I held my nose and stared, and then stared some more. John Amos held his flashlight high so I could see the two women prisoners better.

Oh, oh. Momma, Grandmother—how pitiful my momma looked, lying on the damp concrete with her head held on my grandmother’s lap. Both of them raised their hands to shield their eyes from the bright light come so suddenly into their dark evil cell. I could barely see, it was so dim.

“Who is it?” asked my momma weakly. “Chris, is that you? Have you found us?”

Was my momma blind now? How could she think John Amos was my daddy? If my momma went blind and crazy too, would God think that enough punishment?

My grandmother spoke up. “John, I know that’s you. You let us out of here this minute. Do you hear me—let us out

immediately.”

John Amos laughed.

I didn't know what to do, but Malcolm came in my brain and told me. “You give me the key, John Amos,” I ordered sternly. “You go up the stairs and let *me* give the prisoners their bread and water.”

Wonder why he obeyed? Did he really think I was as strong as Malcolm? I watched until he was out of sight, then I ran to bolt another door so he couldn't sneak up behind me.

Feeling more like Malcolm than like Bart, I crept on my hands and knees, shoving along the silver tray with its half loaf of bread, and its silver pitcher of water. It didn't seem to me funny to be serving prison meals from a silver tray, for that's the way my grandmother always did things, elegantly.

Big door was shut now. It appeared only another of the wine shelves full of dusty old bottles. Flat on my stomach I reached under the lower shelf and opened the little door that would swing inward or outward—wonder why the kitten liked it back in the darkest part?

“Bread, water,” I said in a hard gruff voice and quickly shoved in the tray. I slammed the little door shut and picked up a brick to wedge it so they couldn't see me if they pushed.

I stayed to spy on them. I heard my mother moaning, and crying out for Chris. Then she surprised me. “Momma, where has Momma gone, Chris? It's been so long since she visited us, months, months, and the twins don't grow.”

“Cathy, Cathy, my poor darling, stop thinking about the past,” said my grandmother. “Please hold on, eat and drink to keep up your strength. Chris will come to save us both.”

“Cory, stop playing that same tune over and over. I'm so tired of your lyrics. Why do you write such sad songs? The night will end, it will. Chris, tell Cory the day will begin soon.”

I heard sobs then. From my grandmother?

“Oh, my God!” she cried. “Is this the way it’s going to end? Can’t I do anything right? This time I was so sure I could work it out. Please, God, don’t let me fail all of them, please.” I listened to her pray out loud. Praying for my mother to get well, for her son to come and find them before it was too late. Over and over she said the same words as my mother asked crazy questions.

I sat and listened for a long time. Legs got cramped and uncomfortable, got old and weary inside, like I was locked up in there with them, crazy too, hungry, hurting, dying.

“Goin now,” I said in a whisper. “Don’t like this place.”

* * *

Nobody was home and it was dark. Now I could run to the refrigerator and steal the food. I was stuffing in another ham slice when Madame Marisha opened the door from the garage and stalked into the kitchen. “Good evening, Bart,” she said, “Where’s your father and Jory?”

I shrugged. Nobody told me nothin. Didn’t know why Daddy and Jory would go off and leave Cindy alone with me. Then Emma was calling out from another room. “Hello, Madame Marisha. Dr. Sheffield told me you were due here any moment. I’m sorry you went to so much trouble. Once I knew Cathy had disappeared, I couldn’t stay away. I have to know what’s happened to her, and she was so sick, so feverish, I should have known better than to leave her.” Then Emma saw me. “Bart! You wicked little boy. How dare you add to your father’s worries by disappearing too. You are a bad boy, and I’ll bet my life you know something about where your mother is!”

Both old women glared at me. Hating me with their mean-mean eyes. I ran. Ran from knowing soon I’d be crying and I couldn’t let anybody see me cry—now that I had to act just like Malcolm—the heartless.

The Search



The night was not fit for man nor beast. It was raining like when Noah was building his ark. The wind howled and shrieked and was trying to tell us something, like wild music that would destroy your brain. I kept pace with Dad, though that wasn't easy since I'd yet to grow legs as long as his. His hands were balled into fists. I fisted mine too, ready to do battle beside him when the need arose.

"Jory," said Dad, striding on without pausing, "how often does Bart come over here?" We'd reached the black iron gates by this time, then he leaned to speak into the box which sent his voice into the house.

"I don't know," I said miserably. "Bart used to trust me, but now he doesn't tell me what he does anymore."

Slowly, slowly, the black gates swung open. They seemed like black skeleton hands welcoming us into our graves. I shivered, thinking I was getting as morbid as Bart. I had to run then to keep up with Dad. "I've got to say something," I yelled so I could be heard above the wind. "When I first found out you are Mom's brother and our own uncle, I thought I hated you and her, too. I thought I could never forgive either one of you for making me so ashamed, so disappointed. I thought I'd dry up inside and never love or trust anyone again. But now that Mom's gone I know I'll always love her and you. I can't hate either one of you, even if I want to."

In the hard driving rain, in the dark, he turned to clasp me against his chest, his hand pressing my head against his heart. I think I heard him sob. "Jory, you don't know how much I've longed to hear you say you don't hate me or your mother. I always hoped you'd understand when we told you—and we were going to tell you when you were older. We thought, perhaps foolishly, that we needed to wait a few more years, but

now that you have found out on your own, and you can still love us, maybe later on you will come to understand.”

I drew closer to Dad as we continued on our way to the shadowy mansion. I felt a new bond had developed between us that was stronger than what we’d had before. In a way he was more my father, because he had much of my own kind of blood. Blood of my blood, I thought, my own uncle and Bart’s, though I’d always thought he was Bart’s uncle, and that had made me a little jealous. Now I could lay claim to him too. But why hadn’t they realized I was mature for my age, and I would have understood when they told me Mom had an affair with Bart’s father ... I would have ... I think.

We reached the steps. Before Dad could bang on the door-knocker, the left side of the double doors swung open and there stood that butler, John Amos Jackson. “I’m packing,” he said in way of greeting, scowled up and ugly-looking, “and my wife has gone to Hawaii. I have a million things to take care of here without entertaining the neighbors. I plan to join her as soon as I’m done here.”

“Your wife?” bellowed Dad, his astonishment so clear it slapped me too.

Something smug came and went in the butler’s watery eyes. “Yes, Dr. Christopher Sheffield, Mrs. Winslow is now married to me.”

I thought Dad would fall from shock. “I want to see her. And I don’t believe you. She’d be out of her mind to marry you.”

“I don’t lie,” said that grim, ugly butler. “And she is out of her mind. Some women can’t live without a man to run their affairs, and that’s what I am—someone to lean on.”

“I don’t believe you,” stormed my dad. “Where is she? Where is my wife? Have you seen her?”

The butler smiled. “Your wife, sir? I have enough to do keeping up with my own wife without looking out for yours. Yesterday my wife railed about this terrible weather and took off with one of our maids. She told me to join her later, after

I'd arranged to close up this house. And after all the trouble and expense she went to having this place redecorated and refurbished—now she wants to move.”

Dad stood staring at John Amos Jackson. I thought we'd leave then, but Dad seemed rooted. “You know who I am, don't you, John? Don't deny it. I see it in your eyes. You are the butler who made love to the maid Livvie while I lay on the floor behind the sofa and heard you tell her about the arsenic on the sugared doughnuts meant to kill the attic mice.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” denied the butler, while I looked from him back to Dad. Oh, I should have finished every page of Mom's manuscript. Things were even more complicated than I'd realized.

“John, perhaps you are married to my mother and perhaps you are lying. Regardless, I think you know what has happened to my wife, and now I'm concerned about my mother as well. So, get out of my way. I'm going to search this house from top to bottom.”

The butler paled. “You can't come over here and tell me what to do,” he muttered indistinctly, “I could call the police ...”

“But you won't, and if you want to, go ahead, call them. I am going to search now, John. There's nothing you can do to stop me.”

The old butler shuffled away, shrugging helplessly. “Go on then, have your way, but you won't find anything.”

Together Dad and I searched. I knew the house much better than he did, all the closets, the secret places. Dad kept saying the attic was where they would be. But when we were up there and looking, there was nothing but junk and dusty clutter.

Again we returned to the parlor where the woman he called Mother had her hard wooden rocker which I sat in and found quite uncomfortable. Restlessly Dad prowled the room, then paused in the archway that led to the adjacent room, that parlor where the huge oil portrait hung. “If Cathy came over here she

would have seen that, and she could have come if Bart told her something.”

Rocking back and forth in the chair, I made it “walk” a little closer to the fire that was guttering out. Something crunched beneath one of the rockers. Dad heard the sound and bent to pick up an object. It was a pearl.

He tested it between his teeth and smiled bitterly. “My mother’s string of pearls with a butterfly clasp. She always wore them, just as our grandmother always wore her diamond brooch. I don’t believe my mother would go anywhere without those pearls.”

Another hour of searching the house, and questioning the Mexican maid and cook who did not understand English very well, and both he and I were frustrated. “I’ll be back, John Amos Jackson,” said Dad as he opened the front door, “and the next time I’ll have the police with me.”

“Have it your way, Doctor,” said the butler with a tight malicious smile.

“Dad, we can’t notify the police—can we?”

“We will if we have to. But let’s wait at least until tomorrow. He wouldn’t dare harm Cathy or my mother, or he’d land up behind bars.”

“Dad, I’ll bet Bart knows what is going on. He and John Amos are very thick.”

I explained then how Bart was always talking to himself whenever he believed he was alone. He talked in his sleep too, and when he stalked around playing pretend games. It seemed the most important part of Bart’s life was spent alone, talking to himself.

“All right, Jory, I understand what you’re saying. I have an idea I hope works. This may well be the most important part you’ve ever played, so pay attention. Tomorrow morning you are only to pretend to go to school. I’ll let you out as soon as we turn the corner onto the highway. You run back home and make sure Bart doesn’t see you. I’ll try to find out if my

mother really flew to Hawaii, and if she really married that horrible old man.”

Whispering Voices



Questions, questions, all they did was ask me questions.

Didn't know nothing, nothing. Wasn't guilty, wasn't. Why ask me? Crazy kids didn't give straight answers. "Momma's gone 'cause she always hated me, even when I was a little baby."

That night whores, harlots, and strumpets came to dance in my head. Woke up. Heard the rain beating on the roof. Heard the wind blowing at my window.

Fell asleep again and dreamed I was like Aunt Carrie who didn't grow tall enough. Dreamed I prayed and prayed and one day God let me grow so tall my head touched the sky. Looked down and saw all the little people running around like ants, afraid of me. I laughed and stepped in the ocean, making tidal waves rise up and wash over the tall cities. More pipsqueak screams. All the people I didn't squash were drowned. Sat in the ocean then that came to my waist and cried. My tears were so huge they made the ocean rise up again—and all I could see all around me was my reflection, and how handsome I was now. Now that there wasn't a girl or woman left alive to love and admire me, I was handsome, tall, and strong.

I told John Amos about my dreams. He nodded his head and told me he used to dream when he was young about girls and how much he could love them, if only they wouldn't see how long his nose was. "I had other attributes I couldn't show them, but they never gave me a chance, never a chance."

* * *

Next morning Jory left with Daddy. Easy to slip away from Emma and Madame Marisha, for they had to fool around with Cindy so much. But it gave me the chance to steal into the mansion next door. I sneaked around to find John Amos. He

was packing all the beautiful lamps, paintings, and other valuables in boxes. “The silver should be wrapped in tarnish-proof papers,” he said to one of the maids, “and be careful with that china and crystal. When the movers show up, have them put in the best furniture first, for I may be busy elsewhere.”

The prettiest maid was young, and she frowned. “Mr. Jackson, why we go? Thought Madame liked it here. She never say we moving.”

“Your mistress is a woman of changing moods—it’s that nutty boy next door. That little one who keeps coming over here. He’s gotten to be a real nuisance. He killed the dog she gave him. I suppose none of you know that?”

I stared in the room and saw the maid’s lips part in horror. “No ... thought the dog went over to boy’s home ...”

“The brat is dangerous! That’s why Madame has to move—he’s threatened her life more than one time. He’s under the care of a psychiatrist.”

They looked from one to the other and made circles above their heads. Mad! Mad as hell at John Amos, telling lies about me.

Waited until he was alone, sitting at the fancy desk where my grandmother kept her checkbook. He jumped when I came in. “Bart, I wish you wouldn’t sneak around like that. Make some noise when you enter, clear your throat, cough ... do something to announce you are there.”

“I heard what you told the maids. I’m not crazy!”

“Of course you’re not,” he said, his S’s hissing as always. “But I do have to tell them something, don’t I? Otherwise they might become suspicious. As it is, they think your grandmother has gone on a trip to Hawaii ...”

I felt sick inside, standing there, toeing in my sneakers, and staring down at them. “John Amos ... can I give my momma and granny sandwiches to eat today?”

“No. They can’t be hungry already.”

Knew he would say that.

He forgot me then. He was reading over her bankbooks, her savings accounts, her receipts and giggling to himself. He found a little key and opened a tiny drawer way back behind another door. “Stupid woman, thought I didn’t notice where she hid her key ...”

I left him having his fun with my granny’s things, and I stole down to where my caged mice were. Made me feel better to think of them as only mice.

My momma was groaning, half crying from the cold as I peeked inside and saw they had the little stub of candle lit. I’d shoved in the candle along with some matches so I could see what they were doing. Momma looked little and white, and still my granny held her head in her lap, and wiped her face with a rag she must have torn from her slip, for it had lace on one ragged edge.

“Cathy my love, my only daughter left, please listen to me. I have to speak now for I may never have another chance. Yes, I made mistakes. Yes, I allowed my father to torment me until I didn’t know right from wrong, or which way to turn. Yes, I put arsenic on your sugared doughnuts thinking each one of you would get only a little sick, then I could slip you out one by one. I didn’t want one of you to die. I swear I loved you, all four of you. I carried Cory out to my car where he breathed his last breath just as I laid him on the backseat and covered him with two blankets. I panicked. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t go to the police, and I was so ashamed, so guilty.”

She shook my mother, while I trembled too.

“Cathy, my daughter, please wake up and listen,” she pleaded. Momma had awakened and seemed to be trying to focus her eyes. “Darling, I don’t think Bart killed the dog I gave him. He loved Apple. I think John did that hoping Bart would be blamed and considered crazy and dangerous so the police would put the blame on Bart when you and I disappeared. I think John strangled Jory’s little pet poodle too, and killed my kitten as well.

“Bart is a very lonely, confused little boy, Cathy, but he’s not dangerous. He likes to pretend he is, and in that way he can feel like he’s going to be a powerful man. But it’s John who is dangerous. He hates me. I didn’t know until a few years ago that if I hadn’t returned to Foxworth Hall after your father died, John would have inherited all the Foxworth fortune. My father trusted John as he trusted no one else, perhaps because they were so much alike. But when I came back, he forgot John. He wrote John out of his will and put me back in as his sole heir. Cathy, are you listening?”

“Momma, is that you, Momma?” asked my mother in a small voice that sounded like a child in trouble. “Momma, why don’t you look at the twins when you come in to see us? Why don’t you notice that they don’t grow as they should? Are you deliberately *not* seeing?—just ignoring them so you won’t feel guilty and ashamed?”

“Oh, Cathy!” cried Grandmother, “if only you knew how much it hurts to hear you say those things after all these years. Did I hurt you so deeply you can never heal, you and Chris, too? It’s no wonder you and your brother—I’m sorry, so sorry I could die.” But in a moment or so she pulled herself together and went on with what she called a “desperate urgency.”

“Even if you are delirious and can’t fully understand now, I must speak, or I may not live to tell you everything. When John Amos was a young man, about twenty-five, he lusted after me, though I was only ten. He’d hide in corners and spy on me, then hurry to my father and make the worst of innocent deeds on my part. I couldn’t tell my parents that John told lies for they never believed me—they believed him. They refused to recognize a young girl is often preyed upon by older men, even older relatives. John was third cousin to my mother, the only member of her family my father could stand. I think my father put it in his head after my older two brothers died, that if ever I fell out of his favor, John would benefit. That was my father’s way of extracting the most out of everyone—dangling his sugar plums that would vanish when reached for. John wanted my mother’s wealth too. They encouraged him to think he might inherit. They thought him a saint. He wore a pious look all the time, he acted godly, and all the while he was

seducing every pretty young maid who ever came into Foxworth Hall. And my parents never suspected. They couldn't see any evil but what their children did. Can you understand now why John hates me? Why he hated my children, too? He would have been the beneficiary if I had stayed in Gladstone.

“One day I heard him in the back hall whispering to Bart, your son, that I used my ‘feminine wiles’ to cajole my father into disinheriting the only man who was his friend, his best confidant.”

Grandmother began to cry then. I shriveled up tight, hurting deep inside from all I was finding out. Malcolm, were you evil too? Who was I to trust now? Was John Amos just as conniving with his “masculine wiles” as my granny was with her feminine ones? Was everybody just as wicked as my granny and momma? Was God on my side, on her side, or John's?

“Momma, are you still there, Momma?”

“Yes, darling, I'm still here. I'll stay and take care of you as I never took care of you before. This time I'll be the mother I should have been before. This time I'll save you and Chris.”

“Who are you?” demanded my mother, bolting up again and shoving my grandmother away. “Oh!” she screamed, “it's you! You weren't satisfied just to kill Cory and Carrie, now you've come back to kill me, too. Then you'll have Chris all to yourself, all yours, all yours,” she broke then and cried; then she began to scream like she was crazy, shrieking out over and over again how much she hated her mother. “Why don't you die, Corrine Foxworth—why don't you die?”

Went away. Couldn't stand anymore of that. They were both evil.

But why was this hurting so much?

Detective



Just as Dad and I had planned, early the next morning Dad drove me off toward school, then he let me out on the road that led to our house. “Now, take it easy, Jory. Don’t do anything that will endanger your life, and don’t let Bart or that butler know what you’re up to—they could be dangerous, remember that.” He hugged me close, as if afraid I might be foolhardy. “Listen carefully to me now. I’m going to see Bart’s psychiatrist this morning so I can tell him what has happened. Then I’m checking the airports to see if my mother has flown anywhere, though God knows that’s not likely. But for both women to disappear in the same day is just too much of a coincidence.”

I had to say it. As much as I dreaded hearing the words come from my own lips, I had to speak. “Dad, have you considered that Bart might have ... well, you know. Clover was strangled with wire. Apple was starved and then stabbed with a pitchfork. Who knows what he might do next?”

He patted my shoulder. “Yes, of course I’ve thought of that. But I can’t picture Bart overcoming your mother. She’s very strong even if she does have a cold. That’s what worries me most, Jory. She had a temperature of one hundred, and fevers do make a person weaker. I should have stayed home to take care of her. A woman is a fool to marry a doctor,” he concluded bitterly, as if he’d forgotten I was there. And all the while his motor was purring softly. He bowed his head down on his hands that held the steering wheel.

“Dad ... you go on and do what you can to check the airlines. I’ll handle everything here.” And I added with a big burst of overconfidence, “And remember—Madame M. is here. And you know how she is. Bart won’t pull anything with her around.”

Smiling, as if I'd given him the assurance he needed, he waved good-bye, and drove off, leaving me standing there and wondering just what to do. The fierce rain of yesterday had dwindled to a slow drizzle that was miserable and cold, but not wild.

Home again, and I was hiding behind the shrubbery all wet and dripping, as Bart sat in the kitchen and refused to eat his breakfast. "Hate everything you cook," he said sullenly. It was surprising to hear his voice coming to me so clearly. Then I smiled, not feeling spooked as I had before. It was the intercom system, left on. Often delivery men came to our back door rather than use the special drive that circled the front. Our breakfast nook wasn't too far from the panel on the wall with dozens of buttons. I remembered when our house was being constructed how Mom had wanted "music in every room—so housework won't seem such a bore." Then came Madame's strident voice. "Bart, what's wrong with your cereal?"

"Don't like cereal with raisins."

"Then don't eat the raisins."

"They get in the way."

"Nonsense. If you don't eat breakfast, then you won't eat lunch either. And if you don't eat lunch, there will be no dinner—and one ten-year-old boy is going to bed very hungry!"

"You can't starve me to death!" Bart shrieked. "This is my house! You don't belong here! You get out!"

"I will NOT get out. I am staying until your mother returns safely. And don't you dare raise your voice to me again or I might turn you over my knee and paddle your behind until you scream for mercy!"

"It won't hurt," he jeered—and it wouldn't. Spankings never bothered Bart who had skin with no surface nerve endings.

"Thank you for telling me," said Madame with great aplomb. "I will then think of a better punishment—such as keeping you indoors, locked in your room."

By this time I was peering in a window. There sat Bart with a secret smile on his face.

“Emma,” ordered Madame, “take Bart’s plate away, take his bowl, his orange juice too. Bart—go straight to your room and don’t let me hear another word out of you until you can come to this table and eat your meals without complaints.”

“Witch, old black witch come to live in our house,” Bart chanted as he ambled away. But he didn’t go to his room. He bolted out of the garage door when Madame wasn’t looking, and from there he headed toward the garden wall, and the old oak tree he could climb to take him over the wall.

I ran as fast as I could, following him. But once I was inside the mansion I lost sight of him. Where had Bart gone? I stared right and left, looked behind me, turned around slowly. Had he disappeared up the stairs or down into the cellar? I hated this house with its maze of long corridors, with so many niches between the walls where Mom could be hidden. Usually a builder used the leftover spaces to make closets or put in shelves. But this one, I knew for a fact, had secret doors, only I’d already searched all the secret rooms. Useless to look in them again.

Suddenly I heard a footfall. Bart was right behind me. He looked right through me, his eyes glazed as he stared bleakly at nothing. I couldn’t believe he didn’t see me.

I followed silently, believing he’d take me to where Mom and her mother were hidden. Unfortunately, he headed for home. Sickened, disheartened, I trailed along behind, feeling I’d betrayed my father and failed him.

Lunchtime and Dad came home tired and distressed-looking. “Any luck, Jory?”

“No. How about you?”

“None. My mother did not fly to Hawaii. I checked with all the airlines. Jory, both Cathy and my mother must be inside that house next door.”

I had an idea. “Dad, why don’t you have a long talk with Bart? Don’t jump on him, or condemn him, just say nice

things. Praise him for being nice to Cindy, tell him how much you care about him. I know he's behind this for he keeps mumbling about the Lord and being His dark angel of revenge."

Dad couldn't find any words to say as he digested my information. Then silently, he set off to find Bart and do what he could to make an unwanted little boy feel needed—if it wasn't already too late.

The Last Supper



Later I went down to the cellar again with John Amos. “Corrine,” John Amos called softly as he bent over stiffly. Clumsy like me, he got down on his knees and peered through the small kitty door he opened. “I want you and your daughter to know this is your last meal, so I made it a good one.” He lifted the lid of the silver teapot and spat inside, then poured the steaming hot liquid into fine china cups. “One for you, one for you daughter,” he said. He shoved one cup and saucer inside the kitty door, then the other set. Next he picked up a plate of sandwiches which looked stale and kinda dirty, then managed to drop the plate on the filthy cellar floor.

He picked up the little triangles and wiped them off against his trouser leg, shoved the meat that had fallen out back in, then put the plate of coal-dusted food in through the kitty door. “Here you are, Corrine Foxworth,” snarled John Amos in his hissy voice. “I hope you find these dainty sandwiches to your liking, you bitch! I took your word when you married me, truly believing you’d be my wife—and though you have never been my wife in the way I’d hoped, still I will inherit what is rightfully mine. Finally I have managed to destroy you and yours—just as Malcolm wanted to kill all your Devil’s issue.”

Did he have to hate my granny so much? Maybe she wasn’t to blame, like me who sometimes did bad things and couldn’t help it. Why was everybody doing bad things to everybody else and calling the excuse “inheritance”?

“You flaunted your beauty before me!” screamed out an enraged old man, “tormenting me when you were a child—teasing me when you were an adolescent, thinking you could have your fun and I could never harm you. Then when you married your half uncle and came back to disinherit me, you treated me like I wasn’t even there—just another piece of

furniture to ignore. Well, are you arrogant now, Corrine Foxworth? Do you feel haughty sitting in your own filth, holding your dying daughter's head on your filthy lap? I have made you crawl at last, haven't I? I have beaten you at our game, stolen Bart's affection from you, made him mistrust you and trust me. You can't use your charm and feminine wiles now. It's too late. I hate you now, Corrine Foxworth. For every woman I have fantasized was you, I have paid, but no longer. I have won, and though I am seventy-three now, I will live on at least another five or six years in luxury enough to make up for all the years I've suffered at your hands."

My grandmother was sobbing quietly. I was crying too, wondering again who was right, him or her?

John Amos was saying terrible things. Nasty evil bad words that little boys wrote on bathroom walls. Grown up old men shouldn't talk like that, and in front of my grandmother and my momma.

"John!" yelled Grandmother, "haven't you done enough? Let us out, and I'll be your wife in the way you want, but please do not punish my daughter more. She's very sick. She needs to be in a hospital. The police will call this murder if you let her die and me too."

John Amos just laughed and walked heavily back up the stairs.

I couldn't move. I was frozen, so confused I didn't know who was good and who was bad.

"Bart!" screamed my grandmother. "Run fast to your father and tell him where we are! *Run, run!*"

Bleary-eyed, I just stood there. Didn't know what to do. "Please, Bart," she begged. "Go tell your father where we are."

Malcolm—was that him over in the corner, his ghost face frowning at me? Passed my smutty hand over my blurry eyes. Dark, so dark. I pretended to leave, but I snuck back. I wanted to hear more of the truth.

Out of the darkness came my mother's thin voice screaming at that old woman who was her mother, my grandmother.

"Oh, yes, Mother. I understood everything you said. We didn't stand a chance no matter who died and who didn't die when you took us into Foxworth Hall and locked us away. Now, years later, we will die just because that crazy old butler didn't inherit the money he expected, promised to him years ago by a dead man—and if you believe any of that—you are just as crazy as he is."

"Cathy. Don't deny the truth because you hate me so much. I'm telling you the truth. Can't you see how John has used your son, the son of my Bart. Don't you see how perfect his revenge is?—to use the son of the man he hated, the man he felt took his place, when it could have been him who married me if my father could have forced me to do it. Oh, you don't know how Father tried to tell me I owed it to John to marry him, and allow him to have half of his fortune—he didn't guess, or maybe he did, that John wanted it all. And when you and I die, it won't be John who is found guilty—it will be Bart. It's John who killed Clover, then Apple. It's John who dreams of having Malcolm's power, Malcolm's wealth. It's not my imagination when I hear him mumbling to himself incessantly."

"Like Bart," mumbled Momma, so funny sounding. "Bart's always pretending he's old and feeble, but powerful and rich. Poor Bart. What about Jory—has he got Jory? Where is Jory?"

Why did she pity me and not Jory? Got up and left.

Was I crazy too—like him? Was I a killer at heart—like him? Didn't know nothing about myself. Was foggy-minded, hazy seeing, but I did manage to move my heavy legs and somehow I climbed up all those old stairs.

Waiting



He was the only father I could remember well, and I loved him even more in that relationship. He held out his hand and told me what we had to do, and I followed, as I would have followed blindly anywhere he led. For out of every terrible situation something good had to come, and I knew now how much he meant to me.

With Dad leading the way, we went once more to the house next door. We hadn't seen Bart all afternoon. How stupid of me to let him outsmart me, and sneak away when I had my head turned, watching some cute thing Cindy did as she tried to dance like me.

Mom had been missing a full twenty-four hours.

That old butler let us in, standing back to scowl at us.

"My mother has not flown to Hawaii," stated Dad, his blue eyes hard and cold.

"So? She is not an organized woman. She may have gone on to visit friends for the holidays. She has no friends here."

"You smoke expensive cigarettes," said my father dryly. "I remember that night when I was seventeen lying behind the sofa while you and Livvie the maid were there ... and you smoked the same cigarettes—French?"

"Right," said John Amos Jackson with a sneering grin. "Old Malcolm Neal Foxworth's tastes gave me the habit ..."

"You pattern yourself after my grandfather, don't you?"

"Do I?"

"Yes, I believe you do. When I checked this house the last time, I opened a closet full of expensive men's clothes—yours?"

“I am married to Corrine Foxworth. She is my wife.”

“How did you blackmail her to marry you?”

Again the old man smiled. “Some women have to have a man in the house or they don’t feel safe. She married me for a companion. As you can see, she treats me like a servant still.”

“I think not,” said my father with his narrowed eyes sweeping over the butler who was wearing a new suit. “I think you were thinking of your future when, or if, my mother should die.”

“How interesting,” replied John Amos Jackson, grinding out his stub of quickly smoked cigarette. “I’ve made my departure plans. I’m flying back to Virginia where I expect my wife will join me when she becomes tiresome to her hosts. Her daughter ruined her socially in Virginia years ago, which you must know, but still she will go there.”

“Why?”

John Amos Jackson grinned widely. “She is having Foxworth Hall reconstructed, Dr. Sheffield. From out of the ashes, Foxworth Hall shall rise again—like the fabled Phoenix!”

Dad faltered, still staring at the cigarette. “Foxworth Hall,” he said in a haunted voice, “how far along is it?”

“Almost finished,” answered John Amos Jackson smugly. “Soon I shall reign as king where Malcolm ruled, and his arrogant beautiful daughter will reign at my side.” He laughed crazily, seeming to enjoy my father’s discomfort. “She’ll have her facial scars reconstructed, her face lifted again. She’ll color her hair and make it blonde again, and she’ll sit at the foot of my dining table. Behind me will stand one of my own cousins, where I used to stand. It will all be as it was before, except this time I shall be the lord and master.”

Wheels were churning in Dad’s head. “You will never rule anywhere but in prison,” he said before he turned and left.

“Dad,” I said when we were home, “did you believe what that butler told us?”

“I don’t know yet. I do know he’s more clever than I thought. When I was a boy in Foxworth Hall looking down on his bald head, I never suspected he had any power. He seemed just another servant. However, I can see now he laid his plan a long time ago and is now fulfilling his schedule for revenge.”

“For revenge?”

“Jory, can’t you see that man is insane? You have told me that Bart imitates a man he calls Malcolm who has been dead for years. But the man Bart is really imitating is John Amos Jackson, who is himself imitating my grandfather. Malcolm Foxworth, dead and gone, but still influencing our lives.”

“How do you know? Did you ever see your grandfather?”

“I saw him one time only, Jory,” he said in a sad reflective way. “I was fourteen, your age. Your mother and I hid in a huge chest on the second floor and looked down in the ballroom, and Malcolm Foxworth was in a wheelchair. He was a far distance away, and I never heard his voice. But our mother used to come to us with descriptions of how he talked about sin and hell, quoting from the Bible, talking about Hell and Judgment Day.”

Night came. We turned on all the lights hoping that would light Mom home and Bart too. Emma and Madame put Cindy to bed early. Emma went from Cindy’s room back into the kitchen, but Madame came into the family room and slouched in a chair across from Dad. Just about that time Bart came in the door and crouched down in a corner. “Where have you been so long?” asked Dad, sitting up straighter and fixing Bart with a strange long look. Madame M. riveted her dark ebony eyes on Bart too. Bart ignored them, and continued to make shadow pictures on the wall by holding his hands in contorted positions.

The TV set behind me was turned on though no one was watching. A choir of boys were singing Christmas carols. I felt exhausted from trying to follow Bart around all day. Exhausted more from worrying about Mom, to say nothing about what would happen to all of us ...

I decided I had to escape by going to bed, and rose to say good night, but Madame put her finger before her lips and gestured to Dad so he too would pay attention to what Bart was muttering to himself as he made the eerie picture of an old man talking to a child.

“Bad things happen to those who defy the laws of God.” he crooned in a hypnotizing way. “Bad people who don’t go to church on Sundays, who don’t take their children, who commit incestuous acts, will all go to hell and burn over the everlasting fires as demons torment their eternal souls. Bad people can be redeemed only by fire, saved from hell and the Devil and his pitchfork only by fire, fire.”

Weird, really weird.

Dad could control his impatience and rage no longer.

“Bart! Who told you all that hocus-pocus?”

My brother jerked upright, his dark brown eyes went blank. “Speak when spoken to, said the wise man to the innocent child. The child says in return, unholy people who commit sins will come to a fiery end.”

“Who told you that?”

“Old man from his grave. Old man like me better than Jory, who does sinful dancing. Old man hates dancers. Old man says only I am fit to rule in his place.”

Dad was listening intently. I was remembering what Bart’s shrink had advised. “Play along with the boy; pretend to believe everything he says, no matter how ridiculous. Remember he’s only ten and at that age a child can believe in almost anything, so let him express himself in the only safe way he’s found so far. When the ‘old man’ speaks, you are hearing your son speaking of what bothers him most.”

“Bart,” said Dad, “listen to me carefully. If your mother didn’t know how to swim, and she was drowning, and I was there but looking the other way—would you tell me so I could jump in and save her?”

Any son should have said yes immediately, but Bart considered this heavily, frowning, weighing his answer when

it should have come spontaneously.

Finally he answered. “You wouldn’t have to do anything to save Momma from drowning, Daddy, if Momma was pure and without sin. God would save her.”

Judgment Day



Nobody understood me and what I was trying to do. Wasn't no good trying to explain. Had to do it all on my own. I slipped away from Daddy, from Jory, from all those people who saw me as bad and unnecessary in their lives. I had come, and I could go, and it would make no difference to anyone. They didn't know I was trying to help right all the wrongs they'd done before I was even born, and all those done after I was born.

Sin. The world was full of sin and sinners.

Wasn't my fault if Momma had to be punished. Though it did worry me some why God didn't want Daddy included in the punishment.

John Amos had told me that men were meant for better things. Heroic things like going off to war and doing brave deeds. No matter if legs and arms were shot off—was a far-far better way to suffer than what God had in mind for women.

Got to thinking hard on the subject. What if the pearly gates of heaven didn't open to receive my momma's purified soul? "Go forth and sin no more" I'd say if I were God. I stamped my golden staff on heaven's golden floor and struck a huge boulder far below so it split wide open and I could write on it my twenty commandments. (Ten weren't enough.) Wonder how I could split open the Pacific and let all the righteous escape the heathens that were on their heels?

Gee, thinking like this made me feel bad in my head, in my legs, and it made my hands and feet cold. *Momma, why did you have to be bad? Why did you have to go and live with your brother and put the burden of your death on me?*

Jory was outside my door. Spying on me. Knew it was him. Was always him sneaking around, trying to find out what I was

up to. I'd ignore him and concentrate on my momma's last hours. She and Grandmother oughta have good food for their last meal. Every prisoner had her favorite meal before the end. Had to do right by my momma and grandmother. What did they like to eat most? I like sandwiches best, so maybe they did too. Sandwiches, pie and ice cream should be just fine. Just as soon as everyone was in bed, I'd slip their last meal over to them.

Black night came. All the lights were turned off. Soon everything was very, very quiet. What was that? Was it snoring I heard across the hall, in the guest room next to Jory's room? Old Madame Marisha snored. Disgusting.

I slapped turkey between slabs of Emma's homemade cheese bread. With two slices of cherry pie and a quart of ice cream in my sack, I made my way to the white whale of a house, moving as quiet as a mouse.

Down, down, down all the steep stairs into the cellar where rats, mice, and spiders roamed, and two women were moaning and groaning and calling for me. Made me feel important. I lifted the kitty door that was under the wine shelves and shoved in the sack with all the goodies.

The light from the candle stub I'd given them was very dim, flickering, showing forms that didn't seem solid at all. My grandmother was trying to calm my mother who raged on and on: "Take your hands off of me, Mrs. Winslow. For a while I felt like a child again, and I was glad you were with me in the dark, but now I remember. How much are you paying that butler to do this to me? Why are *you* here?"

"Cathy, Cathy, John hit me over the head, just like he did you. He hates me, too. Didn't you hear all I explained?"

"Yes, I heard. It was like a bad dream, all the same things Chris used to say to me, trying to explain why you acted as you did. Even though he pretends to hate you, underneath it all, I've always known he still loved you, despite all you did. He kept a little of his faith in you ... but he's stupid in his loyalty to women. First you, now me."

I was glad I knew so many big words, so some day I could write in my own journal and tell everyone how I saved my momma from hellfires.

I could see straw in Momma's hair which wasn't so pretty now. Same old straw that once was in the barn where Apple stayed. They hadn't even thanked me for making their prison softer and warmer with that hay—had shoved it all in while they were both sleeping.

“Cathy, don't you really love your brother? Have you just used him?”

My momma seemed almost crazy as she struck out at my grandmother. “Yes, I love him! You made me love him. It was your fault and now we have to live ashamed and guilty. Afraid any day our children will find out. And now they have, because of you!”

“Because of John,” whispered Grandmother. “I only came here to help, to be near you, to share, just a little in your lives. But stop feeling guilty, make it my shame and my guilt. I accept it as mine, all mine. You are right. You have always been right in your judgment of me, Cathy. I'm weak, foolish, and manage always to make the wrong decisions. I think they're right when I make them, but never do they prove anything but wrong.”

Momma quieted down. She sank back on her heels and stared at her mother. “Your face, why did you dig at your face?”

My grandmother bowed her head. She seemed to have aged ten years in one long-long day. “I wanted to die after Bart died. I wanted to destroy my beauty so no man would ever want me again. I didn't want to look in a mirror and see you staring back at me, for I hated you too for a long time. It was Chris who came each summer and talked to me about you, who made me see your side of your affair with my husband. He told me you really loved Bart, that you should have had Bart's child aborted for your own health, but you wouldn't have it done. You wanted to keep his baby. Cathy, thank you

for doing that. Thank you for giving me another Bart, for he is mine as Jory will never be.”

Oh, they both loved me! Momma had risked her health to give me life. Grandmother had stopped hating Momma on account of me. I wasn't nearly as bad as I thought.

“Cathy, please forgive me,” pleaded my granny. “Say it, please say it at least once. I need so to hear you say it. It was Christopher who loved me, who defended me, but it was you who kept me awake at nights, tormenting me even on my honey moon with Bart—it is your face, the faces of the twins that haunt me still. Christopher will always be mine—and yours, but give me back my daughter.”

My mother screamed. Loud, shrill, crazy, she screamed over and over. She lunged at my grandmother and pounded her with her fists. “*No!* I can never say what you want!” She knocked the candle and it turned over and the hay caught on fire. Old newspaper they'd used to keep warm soon was ablaze, and my grandmother and mother were beating at the flames with their bare hands, trying to put it out.

“Bart!” screamed my grandmother, “if you're out there listening to us, run for help! Call the fire department! Tell your father! Do something quick, Bart, or your mother will die in this blaze—and God will never forgive you if you help John Amos kill us!”

What? Was I helping John Amos or God?

I ran like mad up the cellar stairs and out into the garage where John Amos was putting his bags in the last one of the black limousines. The other was gone, driving the maids to safety.

He slammed down the trunk of the car, turned to me with a wide grin, and said, “Well, tonight is the night. At twelve o'clock sharp—remember that. Trip slowly down the stairs and into their place and light the string.”

“That smelly string?”

“Yes. It's soaked in gasoline.”

“I didn’t like the smell, so I threw it away. Didn’t want their last meal to be eaten in a smelly place.”

“What are you talking about? Have you been feeding them?” He whirled as if to hit me and then out of nowhere Jory sprang upon John Amos. The old man fell on his back, with Jory astride, and then Daddy raced into the garage.

“Bart ... we watched you make sandwiches and slice the pie—and take the ice cream—now where is your mother and your grandmother?”

Didn’t know what to do.

“Dad!” yelled Jory, “I smell smoke!”

“Where are they, Bart?”

John Amos yelled out at Daddy, “Take that crazy kid away from here—him and his matches! He’s started a fire. Him and his crazy stunts, like killing that dear little puppy who loved him so much. It’s no wonder Corrine panicked and ran without telling me where she was going.” He cried real tears and wiped at his runny nose. “Oh, God ... I wish to heaven we’d never come here to live. I told Corrine no good would come of this.”

Lies! He was telling lies on me! Wasn’t none of that true!

“You did it all! You are the crazy man, John Amos!” and like Malcolm would, I ran over to kick at him. “Die, John Amos! Die and be redeemed through death!”

My arms were caught and I was lifted away. Daddy had me in his arms and was trying to calm me. “Your mother ... where is your mother? Where is the fire?”

A red haze was in my eyes, but I reached in my pants pocket and gave my daddy the key. “In the wine cellar,” I said dully, “waiting for the fire to end them like they ended Foxworth Hall. Malcolm wanted it that way—all the little attic mice to burn and stop reproducing contaminated seed.”

Far away from my body I was standing, watching the stunned terror in Daddy’s eyes as he tried to delve into my

eyes ... but I knew they were blank—for I wasn't there. Didn't know where I was. Didn't care.

Redemption



Fire. The mansion was on fire.

I straddled John Amos, who fought me off—or tried to, but soon he knew who had the best of the battle. “You can’t get away, old man. You’ve poisoned my brother’s mind, made him think awful things. I hope to God you rot in some jail cell for the rest of your life for what you’ve done.”

While John Amos and I had at it, Dad sped off to find Mom and his mother, with Bart at his heels screaming out how he could get to the wine cellar.

“Get off me, boy!” yelled John Amos Jackson. “That brother of yours is crazy-dangerous! He starved that poor puppy then stabbed him with a pitchfork. Is that the act of a sane child?”

“Why didn’t you stop him if you saw him do all that?”

“Why, why ... ,” sputtered the old man, “he would have turned on me like a wild beast. The boy is insane like his grandmother. Why it was my own wife who saw him dig up the skeleton of her pet kitten. Ask her, go on, ask her.”

Some of what he said was getting to me. Bart was irrational. Yet, yet—was he a killer? “Bart talks in his sleep, old man. He repeats everything he hears during the day like a parrot. He quotes from the Bible and pronounces words he wouldn’t be able to if someone like you wasn’t coaching him.”

“You fool boy! He doesn’t know who he is! Can’t you see that? He thinks he is his great-grandfather Malcolm Foxworth ... and like Malcolm he’s driven to kill every last living member of the Foxworth clan!”

At that moment I saw my father stumble into the garage carrying my mother in his arms, with his mother, dirty and in

rags, following behind. I jumped up and ran. “Mom, oh Mom!” I cried, overjoyed to see she was still alive. But she looked dreadful, dirty, pale, and thin ... but alive, thank God!

She was conscious. “Where’s Bart?” she whispered.

With that question she lost consciousness and slumped in Dad’s arms. While looking around for Bart, I noticed that John Amos Jackson was no longer to be seen. “Dad,” I said to draw his attention, and just then out of the dim shadows of the garage, the butler appeared with a heavy shovel. He brought that shovel down hard on top of Dad’s head. Silently, without a groan, Dad slumped to the floor with Mom still in his arms. Again that butler raised the shovel as if to kill Dad—and maybe Mom, too. I ran, and I kicked with my right leg as I’d never kicked before. The shovel went spinning away, and as John Amos Jackson whirled to face me, I let him have it with my left foot square in his stomach. He groaned and slumped over.

But Bart—where was Bart?

“Jory,” called the mother of my parents, “get your parents out of this garage as quickly as you can! Pull them so far away they won’t be hurt if the garage blows when the fire reaches the gasoline in here. *Hurry!*” I started to object, but she took care of that. “I’ll find Bart. You just keep my son and daughter safe.”

It was easy to pick up Mom and run with her to a safe place and lay her down, but not so easy to drag Dad by his shoulders to lie beside her under a tree—still I managed. The house now smoked from several windows. My brother was in there—and my grandmother, too.

John Amos Jackson had recovered and he too rushed inside the burning house. In the kitchen I saw John Amos struggling with my grandmother. He was battering her face with slaps. I ran to rescue her though the smoke was in my eyes. “You’ll never get away with this, John!” she yelled as he tried to choke her. I fell over a chair that had been turned over, and jumped to my feet just in time to see her bring down a heavy Venetian

glass ashtray so it struck him on his temple. He slumped to the floor like a bird shot down from a rifle.

That's when I saw Bart. He was in the parlor trying to lug that huge portrait to safety. "Momma," he was sobbing, "gotta save Momma. Momma, I'm gonna get you out of here, don't you fear, 'cause I'm just as brave as Jory, just as brave ... can't let you burn. John Amos was lying, he doesn't know what God wants, doesn't know ..."

"Bart," crooned my grandmother. Her voice was so like my Mom's. "I'm here. You can save me—not just the portrait." She stepped forward, limping badly, and I guessed she'd tripped and sprained her ankle, for at each step she grimaced. "Please, darling, you and I have to leave the house."

He shook his head. "Gotta save Momma! You're not my momma!"

"But *I* am," said another voice in another doorway. My eyes widened to see my mother standing there, clinging weakly to the doorframe as she pleaded with Bart. "Darling, let go of the portrait and all of us will leave this house." Bart looked from her to his grandmother, still clinging to the huge heavy portrait that he could never have the strength to drag from the house. "Gonna save my momma, even if she hates me," muttered Bart to himself as he tugged at the huge heavy portrait. "Don't care no more if she loves Jory and Cindy better. Gotta do one good thing and then everybody will know I'm not bad, and not crazy."

Mom ran to him and covered his small dirty face with kisses, as all around us the room filled with smoke.

"Jory!" called my grandmother, "call the fire department! Take Bart out of here, and I'll lead your mother out."

But Mom didn't want to go; she seemed oblivious of the danger of staying in a smoke-filled house, with fire underneath. Even as I dialed 0 for the operator and told her what was going on, then gave her the address, Mom was down on her knees hugging Bart close. "Bart, my sweetheart, if you can't accept Cindy as your sister and live happily with her, I'll send her away."

His grip loosened on the portrait as his eyes grew wider. “No you won’t ...”

“Yes, I swear I will. You are my son, born from my love for your father ...”

“You loved my real daddy?” he asked unbelievably. “You really did love him, even if you seduced and killed him?”

I groaned, then ran to seize hold of Bart. “Come on, let’s get out of here while we have the chance.”

“Bart, you go with Jory,” called my grandmother, “and I’ll take care of my daughter.”

There was the side door Bart used to sneak inside the house, and I dragged him toward that, looking back to see Mom was being pulled along by her mother. Mom seemed on the verge of fainting, so my grandmother almost had to carry her.

As I ran from the house, forcing Bart to join Dad under the tree where I’d left him, I saw Mom had sagged in her mother’s arms. When she did, both women tumbled over backward, and for a moment the smoke obscured them.

“Oh, my God, is Cathy still in that house?” asked Dad, still wiping at the blood which wouldn’t stop flowing from the deep gash on the side of his head.

“Momma’s gonna die, I know it!” cried Bart, racing toward the house and forcing me to run after him. I hurled myself forward and brought him down with a tackle. He fought me like a madman. “Momma, gotta save Momma! Jory, let me, please let me!”

“You don’t have to. Her mother is going to save her,” I said, looking over my shoulder as I held him down and prevented him from entering that house of fire again.

Suddenly Emma and Madame Marisha were in the yard, holding on to me, to Bart, hurrying us both toward Dad, who had managed to stand. Blindly, with his hands groping before him he was headed toward the house, crying out, “Cathy, where are you? Come out of that house! Cathy, I’m coming!”

That's when Momma was shoved violently through one of the French doors that opened onto the patio.

I ran forward to lift her up and carry her to Dad. "Neither one of you has to die," I said with a sob in my throat. "Your mother has saved at least one of her children."

But cries and screams were in the air. My grandmother's black clothes were on fire! I saw her as one sees a nightmare, trying to beat out the flames.

"Fall down and roll on the ground!" roared Dad, releasing my mom so quickly she fell. He ran toward his mother, seized her up and rolled her on the ground. She was gasping and choking as he slapped out the fire. One long wild look of terror she gave him before some kind of peace came over her face—and stayed there. Why did that expression just stay there? Dad cried out, then leaned to put his ear to her chest. "Momma," he sobbed, "please don't be dead before I've had the chance to say what I must ... Momma, don't be dead ..."

But she was dead. Even I could tell that from the glazed way her eyes kept staring up at a starry winter night sky.

"Her heart," said Dad with a dazed look. "Just like her father had ... it seemed her heart was about to jump from her chest as I rolled her about. And now she's dead. But she died saving her daughter."

Jory



All the shadows that clouded my youthful days, all the questions and the doubts I'd been afraid to speak about, all have been cleared away now, like cobwebs from the corners.

I thought when we came back from the funeral of our grandmother that life would go on as usual and nothing much would be changed.

Some things have changed. Some weight lifted from Bart's shoulders and he became again the quiet, meek, little boy who couldn't really like himself very much. His psychiatrist said he would grow out of that gradually, with enough love given him, and enough friends his own age to play with.

Even as I write this I can look through the open window and see Bart playing with the Shetland pony our parents gave him for Christmas. At last he had his "heart's desire."

I watch him often, the way he looks at the pony, the way he stares at the St. Bernard puppy my daddy gave him too. Then he turns his head and stares over at the ruins of the mansion. He never speaks of her, the grandmother of our lost summer. We never speak the name of John Amos Jackson, nor mention Apple or Clover. We can't risk the health and happiness of one unstable little boy trying to find his way in a world that isn't always like a fairy tale.

We passed a true Arab woman on the street the other day. Bart turned around to stare after her, wistful longing in his dark-dark eyes. I know now that whatever else she was, Bart loved her—so she couldn't have been as awful as I think when I read Mom's book. She made Bart love her, even as John Amos took a vulnerable child and warped him.

And so John Amos got what he deserved, and, like my grandmother, he too lies dead in his grave, way back in

Virginia, the home of his ancestors who settled in what history books call “The Lost Colony.” All his plotting and scheming was for nothing. If, wherever he is, he can think, I wonder what he thinks and feels knowing what was in the will my grandmother left. Did he turn over in his grave when the lawyer told us that our grandmother had left the entire Foxworth estate to Jory Janus Marquet, Bartholomew Scott Winslow Sheffield, and surprisingly enough, Cynthia Jane Nickols too would get her share. And none of us were legally her blood kin—*legally*. All that money held in trust for us, until we reach the age of twenty-five. All held in trust, my father and mother the administrators.

We could live in splendor if we chose, or if my parents chose, but we live on in the same redwood house with the marble statues out back, and every year the garden grows more lush.

Bart keeps himself exceptionally clean now. He will not lie down to sleep at night until his room is in complete order, everything precisely placed. My parents look at each other when he insists on doing this, and I see fear in their eyes, making me wonder if Malcolm Neal Foxworth was exceptionally clean and neat.

Bart laid down the law to my mother and father one morning soon after Christmas had come and gone, and he had his pony: “If you are to keep Cindy then you can no longer live together as man and wife and contaminate my life with your sinning. You *have* to sleep in my room, Daddy, and Momma *has* to sleep alone for the rest of her life.”

Neither one of my parents said anything, they just looked at him until he flushed and turned away, murmuring, “I’m sorry ... I’m not Malcolm, am I? I’m just me, nobody much.”

* * *

Bart is a true Foxworth over and over, for he will rule again, so he says, in the new Foxworth Hall that he will build. “And you can dance your head off until you are forty,” he yelled at me when he was angry because I petted his new pony, “but you won’t be as rich as I’ll be! At forty, I’ll be able to buy and

sell you ten times over, for dancing legs won't matter when you grow old, and brains count more, a million times more!"

"I'll be the greatest actor the world had ever known!" he stated arrogantly, turning from meek to aggressive just because he was holding that red journal book in his hands. "And when I'm done with the stage and screen, I'll turn my talent to the business world, and everybody who didn't respect me as an actor will stand up and applaud my genius for making money."

Acting, that's all he was doing again, for he was only a little boy who seldom spoke except to himself. And yet, sometimes when I lie awake at night, thinking about all that happened before he and I were born, there must be some reason for all that went before. Out of the ruins should come the roses, right? I worry about all the women Bart would step on to get his way. Would he be as ruthless as our great-grandfather just to obtain an even greater fortune? And how many would suffer because of one eventful summer, fall, and winter in the year I was fourteen?

I'll take him by the hand tomorrow, and lead him out into the garden, and together we'll stand before the copy of Rodin's "The Kiss" and maybe then he'll realize that God planned for men and women to love in a physical way, and it's not sinful, only natural.

I pray that someday Bart will see life my way—that love—no matter what its form, or how it comes wrapped, is worth the price, no matter how high.

Between the choice of love or money I'll take love. But first comes dancing. And when Bart is old and gray and he sits in Foxworth Hall counting his billions, I'll sit with my wife and family content with the happy memories of how it used to be when I was young, graceful, handsome, on stage with the fogs in my eyes, the sound of applause in my ears, and I'll know I fulfilled my destiny.

I, Jory Janus Marquet, will carry on the family tradition.

Bart



They don't know or understand me any more than they did before. Jory looks at me with pity, like I'm different from the rest of the human race. He feels sorry that I don't like his kind of music, or any kind of music, and colors don't paint pictures in my brain or make music in the air. He thinks I will never find joy in anything. But I'll find a way to enjoy. I'll know the future that is right for me, for that was the true reason God sent my grandmother and John Amos and Malcolm to me, like the fates come to lead the way. They came to show me how to save my parents from the everlasting fires of hell.

I watch my momma and daddy night and day, and sneak into their room at night, fearing to catch them doing something wicked. But they only sleep in each other's arms, and to my relief her eyes don't move rapidly behind her closed lids. She doesn't have nightmares anymore. I see my daddy's eyes at the breakfast table, looking bluer than ever for he has let go of his stranglehold on his sister.

I have saved them.

So, Jory pities me. But one day when we're both older, wiser, and I have found the right words, I'll tell him something Malcolm wrote in his book—there has to be darkness if there is to be light.

Epilogue



I remember so much of what went on before we flew to Greenglenna to bury my mother beside her second husband. It was Bart who insisted that his grandmother had to lie in eternal sleep beside his father, his real father, Bartholomew Winslow. We cried, all of us, even Emma and Madame Marisha, and I never hoped to see the day when Madame would cry for a member of my family.

When the first clod of damp earth struck her coffin in its grave, it took me back to when I was twelve years old and Daddy was in his grave, and Momma was holding fast to my hand, and to Chris's, and each twin held on to an older brother or sister. And only when I heard the dirt hit her mahogany casket did I cry out something I'd withheld for so long—too long. It came from the depths of me, tearing away the years and making me a child again, and needing, so needing to hold on to my parents. "Momma, I forgive you! I forgive you! I still love you! Can you hear me now where you are? God, please let her know I forgive her." I sobbed then and fell into my brother's arms. I would have said more to her on her burial day, but Bart was there, glaring his dark eyes at me, commanding me to be strong, to let go of the man I loved. But how could I, when to do so would destroy him?

* * *

We still live in the house next to the ruins of the mansion where my mother died in her efforts to save my life, but it's not like it used to be before she came with her evil butler who filled Bart's head with his crazy beliefs and gave Bart that journal of Malcolm Foxworth. I love Bart, God knows I love him, but when I see those dark merciless eyes in the shadows, I cringe and wonder why I needed revenge so much when I had Chris to save me.

Last night Jory and Melodie danced an astonishingly beautiful performance of “Romeo and Juliet.” I trembled to see Bart cynically smiling, as if he’d lived a century or more and he’d seen all this happen before, and it would be him who got everything he wanted in the end, as Bart has always found a way to make himself the center of attention.

He steals into our bedroom at night, having taught himself how to pick locks, and stares down at Chris and me, while I feign sleep, holding still, breathless, until he is gone, so terribly afraid that the evil that lived in Malcolm will live again in my youngest son. And sooner or later history will repeat itself.

“Today the mail brought a letter from my literary agent,” I whispered to Madame M. while Jory and Melodie changed from costumes to street clothes. “She’s found a publisher who’s made me an offer on my book, the first one. It’s not a fortune, but I’m going to accept.”

Madame gave me another of those long speculative looks that had once made me feel very uneasy and vulnerable, as if she could see through me. “Yes, Catherine, you will do what you must regardless of the consequences or the protests I make, or anyone makes.”

I knew who she meant, for he glared at me, telling me I should keep my secrets to myself and not let the whole world know. But Bart cannot rule my every action.

“You will be rich and famous in a different way than I expected when you were fifteen,” continued Madame, who was now my dearest confidant, “for everything can come to those who have the desire, the drive, the dedication, and the determination.”

I smiled uneasily, afraid to look at Bart again, but fixed my eyes on my eldest son who was the star of the evening. I knew for a certainty that when my books were published, and all the skeletons were out of the Foxworth closets, I’d lay the shade and thwart the ghost of Malcolm Neal Foxworth, and never, never would he rise up to rule over me again.

Nervously my hands fluttered up to my throat to feel for those invisible pearls that used to adorn my mother's throat, but never mine, never mine. I said again to myself that it wouldn't hurt to give it a try. Evil did thrive in the dark shadows of lies. Evil could not possibly survive in the full bright light of unstinting truth, as incredible as it may seem to some who won't believe.

Shivering, I moved a bit farther from Bart, nearer to Chris who put his arm about my shoulders, as my arm encircled his waist, and I was safe, safe. Now I could look at Bart and smile; now I could reach for Cindy's hand, and try to reach for Bart's ...

But he drew away, refusing to join the chain I would form of our family, one for all, and all for one.

I'd like to conclude by saying I don't cry anymore at night, that I don't have nightmares in which I see my grandmother climbing the stairs to try and witness evil deeds we didn't do. I want to write that I can only be grateful that from all the thorny stems the attic flowers managed to grow and produced at least a few roses, real roses, the kind that blossom in the sun.

I'd like to conclude with that. But I can't. Nevertheless, I've grown old enough and wise enough to accept what gold coins are offered, and never, never will I turn over anything that glitters to look for the tarnish.

Seek and you shall find.

* * *

For some reason I glanced up then. Bart was sitting in a shadowy corner again, holding in his hands a red volume that appeared to be covered in leather with gold tooling. Silently he read, his lips moving as he mouthed the words of a great-grandfather he'd never seen.

I shivered. For Malcolm's journal had burned in the fire. The book Bart held was a cheap imitation of leather and every page was blank.

Not that it mattered.

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BOOK ONE



Foxworth Hall



And so it came to pass the summer when I was fifty-two and Chris was fifty-four that our mother's promise of riches, made long ago when I was twelve and Chris was fourteen, was at last realized.

We both stood and stared at that huge, intimidating house I'd never expected to see again. Even though it was not an exact duplicate of the original Foxworth Hall, still I quivered inside. What a price both Chris and I had paid to stand where we were now, temporary rulers over this mammoth house that should have been left in charred ruins. Once, long ago, I'd believed he and I would live in this house like a princess and prince, and between us we'd have the golden touch of King Midas, only with more control.

I no longer believed in fairy tales.

As vividly as if it had happened only yesterday, I remembered that chill summer night full of mystical moonlight and magical stars in a black velvet sky when we'd first approached this place, expecting only the best to happen. We had found only the worst.

At that time Chris and I had been so young, innocent, and trusting, believing in our mother, loving her, believing as she led us and our five-year-old twin brother and sister through the dark and somehow scary night, to that huge house called Foxworth Hall, that all our future days would be colored green for wealth and yellow for happiness.

What blind faith we'd had when we tagged along behind.

Locked away in that dim and dreary upstairs room, playing in that dusty, musty attic, we'd sustained ourselves by our belief in our mother's promises that someday Foxworth Hall and all its fabulous riches would be ours. However, despite all

her promises, a cruel and heartless old grandfather with a bad but tenacious heart refused to stop beating in order to let four young and hopeful hearts live, and so we'd waited, and waited, until more than three long-long years passed, and Momma failed to keep her promise.

And not until the day *she* died—and her will was read—did Foxworth Hall fall under our control. She had left the mansion to Bart, her favorite grandson, my child by her own second husband, but until he was twenty-five, the estate was held in trust by Chris.

Foxworth Hall had been ordered reconstructed before she moved to California to find us, but it wasn't until after her death that the final touches were completed on the new Foxworth Hall.

For fifteen years the house stood empty, overseen by caretakers, legally supervised by a staff of attorneys who had either written or called Chris long distance to discuss with him the problems that arose. A waiting mansion, grieving, perhaps, waiting for the day when Bart decided he'd go there to live, as we'd always presumed one day he'd do. Now he was offering this house to us for a short while, to be our own until he arrived and took over.

There was always a catch in every lure offered, whispered my ever-suspicious mind. I felt the lure now, reaching out to ensnare us again. Had Chris and I traveled such a long road only to come full circle, back to the beginning?

What would be the catch this time?

No, no, I kept telling myself, my suspicious, ever-doubting nature was getting the better of me. We had the gold without the tarnish ... we did! We *did* have to realize our just rewards some day. The night was over—our day had finally come, and we were now standing in the full sunlight of dreams come true.

To actually be here, planning to live in that restored home, put sudden familiar gall in my mouth. All my pleasure vanished. I was actually realizing a nightmare that wouldn't vanish when I opened my eyes.

I threw off the feeling, smiled at Chris, squeezed his fingers, and stared at the restored Foxworth Hall, risen from the ashes of the old, to confront and confound us again with its majesty, its formidable size, its sense of abiding evil, its myriad windows with their black shutters like heavy lids over stony dark eyes. It loomed high and wide, spreading over several acres in magnificent but intimidating grandeur. It was larger than most hotels, formed in the shape of a giant T, only crossed on each end to give it an enormous center section, with wings jutting off north and south, east and west.

It was constructed of rosy pink bricks. The many black shutters matched the roof of slate. Four impressive white Corinthian columns supported a gracious front portico. A sunburst of stained glass was over the black double front doors. Huge brass escutcheon plates decorated the doors and made what could have been plain rather elegant and less somber.

This might have cheered me if the sun hadn't suddenly taken a fugitive position behind a passing dark cloud. I glanced upward at a sky turned stormy and foreboding, heralding rain and wind. The trees in the surrounding forest began to sway so that birds took alarmed flight and screeched as they flew for cover. The green lawns so immaculately kept were quickly littered with broken twigs and falling leaves, and the blooming flowers in geometrically laid-out beds were lashed to the ground unmercifully.

I trembled and thought: *Tell me again, Christopher Doll, that it's going to work out fine. Tell me again, for I don't really believe now that the sun has gone and the storm is drawing nearer.*

He glanced upward, too, sensing my growing anxiety, my unwillingness to go through with this, despite my promise to Bart, my second son. Seven years ago his psychiatrists had told us their treatment was successful and that Bart was quite normal and could live out his life without needing therapy on a regular basis.

To give me comfort Chris's arm lifted to encircle my shoulders. His lips lowered to brush my cheek. "It's going to

work out for all of us. I know it will. We're no longer the Dresden dolls trapped in an upstairs room, dependent on our elders to do the right thing. Now we're the adults, in control of our lives. Until Bart reaches the stated age of inheritance, you and I are the owners. Dr. and Mrs. Christopher Sheffield from Marin County, California, and no one will know us as brother and sister. They won't suspect that we are truly descendants of the Foxworths. We have left all troubles behind us. Cathy, this is our chance. Here, in this house, we can undo all the harm done to us and to our children, especially Bart. We'll rule not with steel wills and iron fists, as was Malcolm's way, but with love, compassion, and understanding."

Because Chris had his arm about me, holding me tight against his side, I gained strength enough to look at the house in a new light. It was beautiful. For Bart's sake we'd stay until his twenty-fifth birthday, and then Chris and I would take Cindy with us and fly to Hawaii, where we'd always wanted to live out our lives, near the sea and white beaches. Yes, that's the way it was supposed to be. The way it had to be. Smiling, I turned to Chris. "You're right. I am not afraid of this house, or any house." He chuckled and lowered his arm to my waist, pressuring me forward.

* * *

Soon after finishing high school, my first son Jory had flown to New York City to join his grandmother, Madame Marisha. There, in her ballet company, he'd soon been noticed by the critics and was given leading roles. His childhood sweetheart, Melodie, had flown east to join Jory.

At the age of twenty, my Jory had married Melodie, who was only a year younger. The pair of them had struggled and worked to reach the top. They were now the most notable ballet team in the country, a team of perfect, beautiful coordination, as if they could reach each other's mind and signal with a flash of their eyes. For five years they'd been riding the crest of success. Every performance brought rave reviews from the critics and from the public. Television exposure had given them a larger audience than they could ever have gained by personal appearances alone.

Madame Marisha had died in her sleep two years ago, though we could console ourselves by knowing she'd lived to be eighty-seven and had worked up until the very day she passed away.

Around the age of seventeen, my second son Bart had transformed almost magically from a backward student into the most brilliant one in his school. By that time Jory had flown on to New York. I had thought at the time that Jory's absence had brought Bart out of his shell and made him interested in learning. Just two days ago, he had graduated from Harvard Law School, the valedictorian of his class.

Chris and I had joined Melodie and Jory in Boston, and in the huge auditorium of Harvard Law School we'd watched Bart receive his law degree. Only Cindy, our adopted daughter, was not there. She was at her best friend's house in South Carolina. It had given me new pain to know that Bart could not let go of his envy of a girl who'd done her best to win his approval—especially when he'd done nothing to win hers. It gave me additional pain to know that Cindy couldn't let go of her dislike of Bart long enough to help him celebrate.

"No!" she'd shouted over the telephone, "I don't care if he did send me an invitation! It's just his way of showing off. He can put ten degrees behind his name and I still won't admire or like him—not after all he did to me. Explain to Jory and Melodie why, so their feelings won't be hurt. But you won't have to explain to Bart. He'll know."

I'd sat between Chris and Jory and stared, amazed that a son who was so reticent at home, so moody and unwilling to communicate, could rise to the top of his class and be named valedictorian. His impassioned words created a mesmerizing spell. I glanced at Chris, who looked proud enough to burst before he grinned at me.

"Wow, who would have guessed? He's terrific, Cathy. Aren't you proud? I know I am."

Yes, yes, of course, I was very proud to see Bart up there. Still, I knew the Bart behind the podium was not the Bart we

all knew at home. Maybe he *was* safe now. Completely normal—his doctors had said so.

To my way of thinking, there were many small indications that Bart had not changed as dramatically as his doctors thought. He'd said just before we parted, "You must be there, Mother, when I come into my own." Not a word about Chris being there with me. "It's important to me that *you* be there."

Always he had to force himself to speak Chris's name. "We'll invite Jory and his wife down, too, and, of course, Cindy." He'd grimaced just to say her name. It was beyond me how anyone could dislike a girl as pretty and sweet as our beloved adopted daughter. I couldn't have loved Cindy more if she'd been flesh of my flesh, and blood of my Christopher Doll. In a way, since she'd come to us at the age of two, she was our child, the only one we could claim as truly belonging to both of us.

Cindy was sixteen now, and much more voluptuous than I'd been at her age. But Cindy hadn't been as deprived as I. Her vitamins had come from fresh air and sunshine, both of which had been denied four imprisoned children. Good food and exercise ... she'd had the best. We'd had the worst.

Chris asked if we were going to stay out here all day and wait for pelting rain to drench us both before we went inside. He tugged me forward, urging me on with his cheerful confidence.

Gradually, step by slow step, as the thunder began to crash and swiftly come closer, with the swollen, heavy sky zigzagging with frightening electrical bolts, we approached the grand portico of Foxworth Hall.

I began to notice details I'd missed before. The portico floor was made of mosaic tiles in three shades of red intricately laid to form a sunburst pattern that matched the glass sunburst over the double front doors. I looked at those sunburst windows and rejoiced. They hadn't been here before. Perhaps it was just as Chris had predicted. It wouldn't be the same, just as no two snowflakes were the same.

Then I was frowning, for to all intents and purposes, who ever saw the differences in falling snowflakes?

“Stop looking for something to steal the pleasure from this day, Catherine. I see it on your face, in your eyes. I vow on my word of honor that we will leave this house as soon as Bart has his party and fly on to Hawaii. If a hurricane comes and blows a tidal wave over our home once we’re there, it will be because you expect that to happen.”

He made me laugh. “Don’t forget the volcano,” I said with a small giggle. “It could hurl hot lava at us.” He grinned and playfully spanked my bottom.

“Quit! Please, please. August tenth will see us on our plane—but a hundred to one you’ll worry about Jory, about Bart, and wonder what he’s doing all alone in this house.”

That’s when I remembered something forgotten until now. Waiting inside Foxworth Hall was the surprise Bart had promised would be there. How strangely he’d looked when he’d said that.

“Mother, it will blow your mind when you see—” He’d paused, smiled, and looked uneasy. “I’ve flown down there each summer just to check things over and see that the house wasn’t being neglected and left to mold and decay. I gave orders to interior decorators to make it look exactly as it used to, except for my office. I want that modern, with all the electronic conveniences I’ll need. But ... if you want, you can do a few things to make it cozy.”

Cozy? How could a house such as this ever be cozy? I knew what it felt like to be enclosed inside, swallowed, trapped forever. I shivered as I heard the click of my high heels beside the dull thuds of Chris’s shoes as we neared the black doors with their escutcheons made decorative with heraldic shields. I wondered if Bart had looked up the Foxworth ancestry and found the titles of aristocracy and the coats of arms he desperately wanted and seemed to need. On each black door were heavy brass knockers, and in between the doors a small, almost unnoticeable button to ring a bell somewhere inside.

“I’m sure this house is full of modern gadgets that would shock genuine historical Virginia homes,” whispered Chris.

No doubt Chris was right.

Bart was in love with the past, but even more infatuated with the future. Not an electronic gadget came out that he didn’t buy.

Chris reached into his pocket for the door key Bart had given to me just before we flew from Boston. Chris smiled my way before he inserted the large brass key. Before he could complete the turning action, the door swung silently open.

Startled, I took a step backward.

Chris pulled me forward again, speaking politely to the old man who invitingly gestured us inside.

“Come in,” he said in a weak but raspy voice as he quickly looked us over. “Your son called and told me to expect you. I’m the hired help—so to speak.”

I stared at the lean old man who was bent forward so that his head projected unbecomingly, making him seem to be climbing hills even while standing on a flat surface. His hair was faded, not gray and not blond. His eyes were a watery pale blue, his cheeks gaunt, his eyes hollowed out, as if he’d suffered greatly for many, many years. There was something about him ... something familiar.

My leaden legs didn’t want to move. The fierce wind whipped my white, full-skirted summer dress high enough to show my thighs as I put one foot inside the grand entrance foyer of the Phoenix called Foxworth Hall.

Chris stayed close at my side. He released my hand to put his arm around my shoulders. “Dr. and Mrs. Christopher Sheffield,” he introduced us in his kindly way, “and you?”

The wizened old man seemed reluctant to put out his right hand and shake Chris’s strong, tanned one. His thin old lips wore a cynical, crooked smile that duplicated the cock of one bushy eyebrow. “My pleasure to meet you, Dr. Sheffield.”

I couldn't take my eyes off that bent old man with his watery blue eyes. Something about his smile, his thinning hair with broad streaks of silver, those eyes with startling dark lashes. Daddy!

He looked as our father might have looked if he'd lived to be as old as this man before us—and had suffered through every torment known to mankind.

My daddy, my beloved handsome father who'd been the joy of my youth. How I'd prayed to see him again some day.

The stringy old hand was grasped firmly by Chris, and only then did the old man tell us who he was. "Your long-lost uncle who was, ostensibly, lost in the Swiss Alps fifty-seven years ago."

Joel Foxworth



Quickly Chris said all the right words to cover the shock that obviously showed on both our faces. “You’ve startled my wife,” he politely explained. “You see, her maiden name was Foxworth ... and she has believed until now that all her maternal family was dead.”

Several small, crooked smiles fled like shadows on “Uncle Joel’s” face before he pasted on the benign, pious look of the sublimely pure in heart. “I understand,” said the old man in his whispery voice that sounded like a faint wind rustling unpleasantly in dead, fallen leaves.

Deep in Joel’s watery cerulean eyes lingered shadows, dark, troubled shadows. I knew without speaking that Chris would tell me my imagination was working overtime again.

No shadows, no shadows, no shadows... but those I created myself.

To lift myself above my suspicions of this old man who claimed to be one of my mother’s two older and dead brothers, I gazed with interest around the foyer that had often been used as a ballroom. I heard the wind pick up velocity as the thunderclaps drew ever closer and closer together, indicating the storm was almost directly overhead.

Oh, sigh for the day when I’d been twelve and stared out at the rain, wanting to dance in this ballroom with the man who was my mother’s second husband and would later be the father of my second son, Bart.

Sigh for all that I’d been then, so young and full of faith, so hopeful that the world was a beautiful and benign place.

What had seemed to me impressive as a child should have shrunk in comparison to all I’d seen, since Chris and I had traveled all over Europe and had been to Asia, Egypt, and

India. Even so, this foyer seemed to me twice as elegant and impressive as it had when I was twelve.

Oh, the pity of that, to still be overwhelmed! I gazed with reluctant awe, a strange aching beginning in my heart, making it thud louder, making my blood race fast and hot. I stared at the three chandeliers of crystal and gold that held real candles. Each was fully fifteen feet in diameter, with seven tiers of candles. How many tiers had there been before? Five? Three? I couldn't remember. I stared at the huge mirrors with gold frames that lined the foyer, reflecting the elegant Louis XIV furniture where those who didn't dance could sit and watch and converse.

It wasn't supposed to be this way! Things remembered never lived up to expectations—why was this second Foxworth Hall overwhelming me even more than the original?

Then I saw something else—something I didn't expect to see.

Those dual curving staircases, one on the right, the other on the left of the vast expanse of red and white checkered marble. Weren't they the same stairs? Refurbished, but the same? Hadn't I watched the fire that had burned Foxworth Hall until it was only red embers and smoke? All eight of the chimneys had stood; so had the marble staircases. The intricately designed banisters and rosewood railing must have burned and been replaced. I swallowed over the hard lump that lodged in my throat. I'd wanted the house to be new, all new ... nothing left of the old.

Joel was watching me, telling me my face revealed more than Chris's. When our eyes locked, he quickly looked away before he gestured that we were to follow him. Joel showed us through all the beautiful first-floor rooms as I remained numb and speechless, and Chris asked all the questions, before at last we settled down in one of the salons and Joel began telling his own story.

Along the way he'd paused in the enormous kitchen long enough to put together a snack for our lunch. Refusing Chris's offer to help, he had carried in a tray with tea and dainty

sandwiches. My appetite was small, but as was to be expected, Chris was ravenous and in a few minutes had dispatched six of the tiny sandwiches and was reaching for another as Joel poured him a second cup of tea. I ate but one of the miniature tasteless sandwiches and sipped twice from the tea, which was steaming hot and very strong, expectantly anticipating the tale Joel would tell.

His voice was frail, with those gritty undertones that made it seem he had a cold and speaking was difficult. Yet soon I forgot the unpleasant sound of his voice as he began to relate so much of what I'd always wanted to know about our grandparents and our mother when she was a child. In no time at all it became clear that he'd hated his father very much, and only then could I begin to warm up to him.

“You called your father by his Christian name?” My first question since he'd begun his story, my voice an intimidated whisper, as if Malcolm himself might be hovering somewhere within hearing.

His thin lips moved to twist into a grotesque mockery of a smile. “Of course. My brother Mel was four years older than I, and we'd always referred to our father by his given name, but never in his presence. We didn't have that kind of nerve. Calling him Daddy seemed ridiculous. We couldn't call him Father because he wasn't a real father. ‘Dad’ would have indicated a warm relationship, which we didn't have and didn't want. When we had to, we called him Father. In fact, we both tried not to be seen or heard by him. We'd disappear when he was due home. He had an office in town from which he conducted most of his business and another office here. He was always working, seated behind a massive desk that was to us a barrier. Even when he was home, he managed to keep himself remote, untouchable. He was never idle, always jumping up to take long distance calls in his office so we couldn't overhear his business transactions. He seldom talked to our mother. She didn't seem to mind. On rare occasions we'd seen him holding our baby sister on his lap, and we'd hide and watch, with strange yearnings in our chests.

“We’d talk about it afterward, wondering why we’d feel jealous of Corrine, when Corrine was often just as severely punished as we were. But always our father was sorry when he punished *her*. To make up for some humiliation, some beating, or being locked in the attic, which was one of his favorite ways to punish us, he’d bring Corrine a costly piece of jewelry, or an expensive doll or toy. She had everything any little girl could desire—but if she did one wrong thing, he took from her what she loved most and gave it to the church he patronized. She’d cry and try to win back his affection, but he could turn against her as easily as he could turn toward her.

“When Mel and I tried to win gifts of consolation from him, he’d turn his back and tell us to act like men, not children. Mel and I used to think your mother knew how to work our father very well to get what she wanted. We didn’t know how to act sweet, or how to be beguiling, or demure.”

Behind my eyes I could see my mother as a child, running through this beautiful but sinister home, growing accustomed to having everything lavish and expensive, so that later on when she married Daddy, who had earned a modest salary, she still didn’t think about how much she paid for anything.

I sat there with wide eyes as Joel went on. “Corrine and our mother didn’t like each other. As we grew up, we recognized the fact that our mother was jealous of her own daughter’s beauty, and the many charms that enabled her to twist any man around her fingers. Corrine was exceptionally beautiful. Even as her brothers we could sense the power she would be able to wield one day.” Joel spread his thin, pale hands on his legs. His hands were gnarled and knotted, but somehow they still maintained a remnant of elegance, perhaps because he used them gracefully, or perhaps because they were so pale. “Look around at all this grandeur and beauty—and picture a household of tormented people, all struggling to be free of the chains Malcolm put on us. Even our mother, who’d inherited a fortune from her own parents, was kept under stringent control.

“Mel escaped the banking business, which he hated and had been forced into by Malcolm, by jumping onto his motorcycle

and racing away into the mountains, where he'd stay in a log cabin he and I had constructed together. We would invite our girlfriends there, and we did everything we knew our father would disapprove of deliberately, out of defiance for his absolute authority.

“One terrible summer day Mel went over a precipice; they had to dig his body out of the ravine. He was only twenty-one. I was seventeen. I felt half dead myself, so empty and alone with my brother gone. My father came to me after Mel's funeral and said I'd have to take the place of my older brother and work in one of his banks to learn about the financial world. He might as well have told me I'd have to cut off my hands and feet. I ran away that very night.”

All about us the huge house seemed to wait, very quiet, too quiet. The storm outside seemed to hold its breath as well, although I could glimpse the leaden gray sky growing more and more swollen and turgid. I moved slightly closer to Chris on the elegant sofa. Across from us in a wing-back chair, Joel sat silently, as if caught in melancholy memories, and Chris and I no longer existed for him.

“Where did you go?” asked Chris, putting down his teacup and leaning back before he crossed his legs. His hand reached for mine. “It must have been difficult for a boy of seventeen on his own ...”

Joel jerked back to the present, seeming startled to find himself back in his hated childhood home. “It wasn't easy. I didn't know how to do anything practical, but at music I was very talented. I caught a freight steamer and worked as a deckhand to pay my way over to France. For the first time in my life I had calluses on my hands. Once I was in France, I found a job in a nightclub and earned a few francs a week. Soon I grew tired of the long hours and moved on to Switzerland, thinking I'd see all the world and never return home. I found another job as a nightclub musician in a small Swiss inn near the Italian border and soon was joining skiing parties into the Alps. I'd spend most of my free time skiing, and in the summer, hiking or bicycling. One day good friends asked me to join them on a rather risky trip, to downhill ski

from a very high peak. I was about nineteen then, and the four others ahead were laughing and yelling at each other and didn't notice when I lost control and went tumbling headlong into a deep ice crevice. I broke my leg in the fall. I lay down there a day and a half, partly in shock, when two monks traveling on donkeys heard my weak cries for help. They knew how to get me out—but I don't remember much about that, for I was weak with hunger and half out of my mind from pain. When I came to, I was in their monastery, and smooth, bland faces were smiling at me. Their monastery was on the Italian side of the Alps, and I didn't know a word of Italian. They taught me their Latin as my broken leg healed, and then they used my slight artistic talent to help them paint wall murals and decorate handwritten scripts with religious illustrations. Sometimes I played their organ. By the time my leg was healed so I could walk, I found I liked their quiet life, the artwork they gave me to do, the music I played at dawn and sunset, the silent routine of their uneventful days of prayers and work and self-denial. I stayed on and eventually became one of them. In that monastery, high in the mountains, I finally found peace.”

His story was over. He sat looking at Chris, then turned his pale but burning eyes on me.

Startled by his penetrating gaze, I tried not to shrink away and show the revulsion I couldn't help feeling. I didn't like him, even though he faintly resembled the father I'd loved so well, and certainly I had no reason to dislike him. I suspected it was my own anxiety and fear that he'd know that Chris was really my brother and not my husband. Had Bart told him our story? Did he see how Chris resembled the Foxworths? I couldn't really tell. He was smiling at me, using his own kind of failing charm to win me over. Already he was wise enough to know it wouldn't be Chris he had to convince ...

“Why did you come back?” asked Chris.

Again Joel tried to smile. “One day an American journalist came to the monastery to write a feature story about what it was like to be a monk in today's modern world. Since I was the only one there who spoke English, they used me to

represent all of them. I casually asked if he'd ever heard of the Fox-worths of Virginia. He had, since Malcolm had made a huge fortune and was often involved in politics, and only then did I learn of his death, and that of my mother. Once the journalist had gone, I couldn't stop thinking about this house and my sister. Years can easily blend one into the other when all days are alike, and calendars weren't kept in sight. Finally came a day when I resolved that I wanted to go home again and talk to my sister and get to know her. The journalist hadn't mentioned if she had married. It wasn't until after I came to the village, almost a year ago, and settled into a motel that I heard of how the original house had burned one Christmas night and my sister had been put away in a mental rest home, and all that tremendous fortune had been left to her. It wasn't until Bart came that summer that I learned the rest—how my sister died, how he inherited.”

His eyes lowered modestly. “Bart is a very remarkable young man; I enjoy his company. Before he came, I used to spend a lot of my time up here, talking to the caretaker. He told me about Bart and his many visits to talk to the builders and decorators, how he had expressed his desire to make this new house look exactly like the old one. I made it my business to be here when Bart came the next time. We met, I told him who I was, and he seemed overjoyed ... and that's the whole of it.”

Really? I stared at him hard. Had he come back thinking he'd have his share of the fortune Malcolm had left? Could he break my mother's will and take away a good portion for himself? If he could, I wondered why Bart wasn't very upset to know he was still alive.

I didn't put any of my thoughts into words, just sat on, as Joel fell into a long, moody silence. Chris stood up. “It's been a full day for us, Joel, and my wife is very tired. Could you show us to the rooms we are to use so we can rest and refresh ourselves?”

Instantly Joel was on his feet, apologizing for being a poor host, and then he was leading the way to the stairs.

“I will be happy to see Bart again. He was very generous to offer me a room in this house. However, all these rooms remind me too much of my parents. My room is over the garage, near the servants’ quarters.”

Just then the telephone rang. Joel handed me the telephone. “It’s your older son calling from New York,” he said in that stiff, gritty voice. “You can use the phone in the first salon if both of you want to talk to him.”

Chris hurried to pick up another phone as I greeted Jory. His happy voice dispelled some of the gloom and depression I was already feeling. “Mom, Dad, I’ve managed to cancel a few commitments, and Mel and I are free to fly down and be with you. We’re both tired and need a vacation. Besides, we’d like to get a look at that house we’ve heard so much about. Is it really like the original?”

Oh, yes, only too much so. I was filled with joy that Jory and Melodie were coming to join us, and when Cindy and Bart arrived, too, we’d be a complete family again, all living under the same roof—something I hadn’t known in a long time.

“No, of course I don’t mind giving up performing for a while,” he said cheerfully in answer to my question. “I’m tired. Even my bones feel weak with fatigue. We both need a good rest ... and we have some news for you.”

He’d say nothing more.

We hung up, and Chris and I smiled at each other. Joel had retreated to give us privacy, and now he reappeared, tottering uncertainly around a jutting French table with a huge marble urn filled with a dried flower arrangement, speaking of the suite of rooms Bart had planned for my use. He glanced at me, then at Chris before he added, “And for you as well, Dr. Sheffield.”

Joel swiveled his watery eyes to study my expression, seeming to find something there that pleased him.

Linking my arm with Chris’s, I bravely faced the stairs that would take us up, up, and back to that second floor where it had all begun, this wonderful, sinful love that Chris and I had

found in the dusty, decaying attic gloom, in a dark place full of junk and old furniture, with paper flowers on the wall and broken promises at our feet.

Memories



Midway up the stairs I paused to look down, wanting to see something that might have slipped my notice before. Even as Joel had told us his story, and we'd eaten our sparse lunch, I'd stared at everything I'd seen but twice before, and never had I seen enough. From the room where we'd been, I could easily look into the foyer with its myriad mirrors and fine French furniture placed stiffly in small groupings that tried unsuccessfully to be intimate. The marble floor gleamed like glass from many polishings. I felt the overwhelming desire to dance, dance, and pirouette until I blindly fell ...

Chris grew impatient as I lingered and tugged me upward until at last we were in the grand rotunda and again I was staring down into the ballroom-foyer.

"Cathy, are you lost in memories?" whispered Chris, somewhat crossly. "Isn't it time we both forget the past and move on? Come, I know you must be very tired."

Memories ... they came at me fast and furious. Cory, Carrie, Bartholomew Winslow—I sensed them all around me, whispering, whispering. I glanced again at Joel, who'd told us he didn't want us to call him Uncle Joel. He was saving that distinguished title for my children.

He must look as Malcolm did, only his eyes were softer, less piercing than those we'd seen in that huge, lifesize portrait of him in the "trophy" room. I told myself that not all blue eyes were cruel and heartless. Certainly I should know that better than anyone.

Openly studying the aged face before me, I could still see the remnants of the younger man he'd once been. A man who must have had flaxen blond hair and a face very much like my father's—and his son's. Because of this I relaxed and forced

myself to step forward and embrace him. “Welcome home, Joel.”

His frail old body in my arms felt brittle and cold. His cheek was dry as my lips barely managed a kiss there. He shrank from me as if contaminated by my touch, or perhaps he was afraid of women. I jerked away, regretting now that I’d made an attempt to be warm and friendly. Touching was something no Foxworth was supposed to do unless there was a marriage certificate first. Nervously my eyes fled to meet Chris’s. Calm down, his eyes were saying, it’s going to be all right.

“My wife is very tired,” reminded Chris softly. “We’ve had a very busy schedule what with seeing our youngest son graduate, and all the parties, and then this trip ...”

Joel finally broke the long, stiff silence that kept us standing uncomfortably in the dim upstairs rotunda and mentioned that Bart would be hiring servants. Already he’d called an employment agency, and, in fact, had even said we could screen people for him. He mumbled so inaudibly that I didn’t catch half of what he said, especially when my mind was so busy with speculations as I stared off toward the northern wing and that isolated end room where we’d been locked up. Would it still be the same? Had Bart ordered two double beds put in there, with all that clutter of dark, massive, antique furniture? I hoped and prayed not.

Suddenly from Joel came words I wasn’t prepared for. “You look like your mother, Catherine.”

I stared at him blankly, resenting what he must have considered a compliment.

He kept standing there, as if waiting for some silent summons, looking from me to Chris, and then back to me before he nodded and turned to lead the way to our room. The sun that had shone so brilliantly for our arrival was a forgotten memory as the rain began to pelt down with the hard, steady drive of bullets on the slate roof. The thunder rolled and crashed overhead, and lightning split the sky, crackling every

few seconds, sending me into Chris's arms as I cringed back from what seemed to me the wrath of God.

Rivulets of water ran on the windowpanes, sluiced down from the roof into drains that soon would flood the gardens and erase all that was alive and beautiful. I sighed and felt miserable to be back here where I felt young and terribly vulnerable again.

"Yes, yes," Joel muttered as if to himself, "just like Corrine." His eyes scanned me critically once more, and then he was bowing his head and reflecting so long five minutes could have passed. Or five seconds.

"We have to unpack," Chris said more forcefully. "My wife is exhausted. She needs a bath, then a nap, for traveling always makes her feel tired and dirty." I wondered why he bothered to explain.

Instantly Joel pulled himself back from where he'd been. Maybe monks often just stood with bowed heads and prayed, and lost themselves in silent worship, and that was all it meant. I didn't know anything at all about monasteries and the kind of lives monks lived.

Slow, shuffling feet were at last leading us down a long hall. He made another turn, and to my distress and dismay he headed toward the southern wing where once our mother had lived in sumptuous rooms. I'd longed to sleep in her glorious swan bed, sit at her long, long dressing table, bathe in her black marble sunken tub with mirrors overhead and all around.

Joel paused before the double doors above two wide, carpeted steps that curved outward in half-moons. He smiled in a slow, peculiar way. "Your mother's wing," he said shortly.

I paused and shivered outside those too familiar double doors. Helplessly I looked back at Chris. The rain had calmed to a steady staccato drumming. Joel opened one side of the doors and stepped into the bedroom, giving Chris the chance to whisper to me, "To him we are only husband and wife, Cathy—that's all he knows."

Tears were in my eyes as I stepped into that bedroom—and then I was staring bug-eyed at what I'd thought burned in the fire. The bed! The swan bed with the fancy rosy bed curtains held back gracefully by the tips of wing feathers made into curling fingers. That graceful swan head had the same twist of its neck, the same kind of watchful but sleepy red ruby eye half open to guard the occupants of the bed.

I stared disbelievingly. Sleep in that bed? The bed where my mother had been held in the arms of Bartholomew Winslow—her second husband? The same man I'd stolen from her to father my son Bart? The man who still haunted my dreams and filled me with guilt. No! I couldn't sleep in that bed! Not ever.

Once I'd longed to sleep in that swan bed with Bartholomew Winslow. How young and foolish I'd been then, thinking material things really did bring happiness, and having him for my own would be all I'd ever want.

“Isn't that bed a marvel?” asked Joel from behind me. “Bart went to a great deal of trouble to find artisans who'd handcarve the headboard in the form of a swan. They looked at him, so he said, as if he were crazy. But he found some old men who were delighted to be doing something they found uniquely creative, and financially rewarding. It seems Bart has detailed descriptions of how the swan should have its head turned. One sleepy eye set with a ruby. Fingertip feathers to hold back filmy bed curtains. Oh, the flurry he made when they didn't do it right the first time. And then the little swan bed at the foot, he wanted that, too. For you, Catherine, for you.”

Chris spoke, his voice hard. “Joel, just what has Bart told you?” He stepped beside me and encircled my shoulders with the comfort of his arm, protecting me from Joel, from everything. With him I'd live in a thatched hut, a tent, a cave. He gave me strength.

The old man's smile was faint and sardonic as he took notice of Chris's protective attitude. “Bart confided all his family history to me. You see, he's always needed an older man to talk to.”

He paused meaningfully, glancing at Chris, who couldn't fail to catch the implication. Despite his control I saw him wince. Joel seemed satisfied enough to continue. "Bart told me about how his mother and her brothers and a sister were locked away for more than three years. He told me that his mother took her sister, Carrie, the twin left alive, and ran off to South Carolina, and you, Catherine, took years and years to find just the right husband to suit your needs best—and that's why you are now married to ... Dr. Christopher Sheffield."

There were so many innuendoes in his words, so much he left unsaid. Enough to make me shiver with sudden cold.

* * *

Joel finally left the room and closed the door softly behind him. Only then could Chris give me the reassurance I had to have if I was to stay here for even one night. He kissed me, held me, stroked my back, my hair, soothed me until I could turn around and look at everything Bart had done to make this suite of rooms just as luxurious as they'd been before. "It's only a bed, a reproduction of the original," Chris said softly, his eyes warm and understanding. "Our mother has not lain on this bed, darling. Bart read your scripts, remember that. What's here is here because you constructed the pattern for him to follow. You described that swan bed in such exquisite detail that he must have believed you wanted rooms just like our mother used to have. Maybe unconsciously you still do, and he knows that. Forgive us both for misunderstanding if I'm wrong. Think only that he wanted to please you and went to a great deal of trouble and expense to decorate this room as it used to be."

Numbly I shook my head, denying I'd ever wanted what she had. He didn't believe me. "Your wishes, Catherine! Your desire to have everything she did! I know it. Your sons know it. So don't blame any of us for being able to interpret your desires even when you cover them with clever subterfuges."

I wanted to hate him for knowing me so well. Yet my arms went around him. My face pressed against his shirtfront as I trembled and tried to hide the truth, even from myself. "Chris, don't be harsh with me," I sobbed. "It came as such a surprise

to see these rooms, almost as they used to be when we came here to steal from her ... and her husband ...”

He held me hard against him. “What do you really feel about Joel?” I asked.

Considering thoughtfully before he answered, Chris spoke. “I like him, Cathy. He seems sincere and overjoyed that we’re willing to let him stay on here.”

“You told him he could stay?” I whispered.

“Sure, why not? We’ll be leaving soon after Bart has that twenty-fifth birthday when he ‘comes into his own.’ And just think of the wonderful opportunity we’ll have to learn more about the Foxworths. Joel can tell us more about our mother when she was young, and what life was like for all of them, and perhaps when we know the details, we will be able to understand how she could betray us, and why the grandfather wanted us dead. There has to be an awful truth hidden back in the past to warp Malcolm’s brain so he could override our mother’s natural instincts to keep her own children alive.”

In my opinion Joel had said enough downstairs. I didn’t want to know more. Malcolm Foxworth had been one of those strange humans born without conscience, unable to feel remorse for any wrong thing he did. There was no explaining him, and no way to understand.

Appealingly Chris gazed into my eyes, making his heart and soul vulnerable for my scorn to injure. “I’d like to hear about our mother’s youth, Cathy, so I can understand what made her the way she turned out to be. She wounded us so deeply I feel neither one of us will ever recover until we do understand. I have forgiven her, but I can’t forget. I want to understand so I can help *you* to forgive her ...”

“Will that help?” I asked sarcastically. “It’s too late for understanding or forgiving our mother, and, to be honest, I don’t want to find understanding—for if I do, I might have to forgive her.”

His arms dropped stiffly to his sides. Turning, he strode away from me. “I’m going out for our luggage now. Take a

bath, and by the time you're finished I'll have everything unpacked." At the doorway he paused, not turning to look my way. "Try, really try, to use this as an opportunity to make peace with Bart. He's not beyond restoration, Cathy. You heard him behind the podium. That young man has a remarkable ability for oratory. His words make good sense. He's a leader now, Cathy, when he used to be so shy and introverted. We can count it a blessing that at last Bart has come out of his shell."

Humbly I bowed my head. "Yes, I'll do what I can. Forgive me, Chris, for being unreasonably strong-willed—again."

He smiled and left.

In "her" bath that joined a magnificent dressing room, I slowly disrobed while the black marble sunken tub filled. All about me were gold-framed mirrors to reflect back my nudity. I was proud of my figure, still slim and firm, and my breasts that didn't sag. Stripped of everything, I lifted my arms to take out the few hairpins still left. *Déjà vu*-like, I pictured my mother as she must have stood, doing this same thing while she thought of her second and younger husband. Had she wondered where he was on the nights he spent with me? Had she known just who Bart's mistress was before my revelations at the Christmas party? Oh, I hoped she had!

* * *

An unremarkable dinner came and went.

Two hours later I was in the swan bed that had given me many daydreams, watching Chris undress. True to his word, he'd unpacked everything, hung my clothes as well as his own and stowed our underwear in the bureau. Now he looked tired, slightly unhappy. "Joel told me there will be servants coming for interviews tomorrow. I hope you feel up to that."

Startled, I sat up. "But I thought Bart would do his own hiring."

"No, he's leaving that up to you."

"Oh."

Chris hung his suit on the brass valet, again making me think of how much that valet seemed the same one Bart's father had used when he lived here—or in that other Foxworth Hall. Haunted, that's what I was. Stark naked, Chris headed for the "his" bath. "I'll take a quick shower and join you shortly. Don't fall asleep until I'm through."

I lay in the semidarkness and stared around me, feeling strangely out of myself. In and out of my mother I flitted, sensing four children in a locked room overhead in the attic. Feeling the panic and guilt that surely must have been hers while that mean old father below lived on and on, threatening even when he was out of sight. Born bad, wicked, evil. It seemed I heard a whispery voice saying this over and over again. I closed my eyes and tried to stop this craziness. I didn't hear any voices. I didn't hear ballet music playing, I didn't. I couldn't smell the dry, musty scent of the attic. I couldn't. I was fifty-two years old, not twelve, thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen.

All the old odors were gone. I smelled only new paint, new wood, freshly applied wallpaper and fabric. New carpets, new scatter rugs, new furniture. Everything new but for the fancy antiques on the first floor. Not the real Foxworth Hall, only an imitation. Yet, why had Joel come back if he liked being a monk so much? Certainly he couldn't want all that money when he'd grown accustomed to monastery austerity. There must be some good reason he was here other than just wanting to see what remained of his family. When the villagers must have told him our mother was dead, still he'd stayed. Waiting his chance to meet Bart? What had he found in Bart that kept him staying on? Even allowing Bart to put him to use as a butler until we had a real one. Then I sighed. Why was I making such a mystery of this when a fortune was involved. Always it seemed money was the reason for doing anything and everything.

Fatigue closed my eyes. I fought off sleep. I needed this time to think of tomorrow, of this uncle come from nowhere. Had we finally gained all that Momma had promised, only to lose it to Joel? If he didn't try to break Momma's will, and we managed to keep what we had, would it carry a price?

In the morning Chris and I descended the right side of the dual staircase, feeling we had at long last come into “our own” and we were finally in control of our lives. He caught my hand and squeezed it, sensing from my expression that this house no longer intimidated me.

We found Joel in the kitchen busily preparing breakfast. He wore a long white apron and cocked on his head was a tall chef’s cap. Somehow it looked ludicrous on such a frail, tall, old man. Only fat men should be chefs, I thought, even as I felt grateful to have him take on a chore I’d never really liked.

“I hope you like Eggs Benedict,” said Joel without glancing our way. To my surprise, his Eggs Benedict were wonderful. Chris had two servings. Then Joel was showing us rooms not yet decorated. He smiled at me crookedly. “Bart told me you like informal rooms with comfortable furniture, and he wants you to make these empty rooms cozy, in your own inimitable style.”

Was he mocking me? He knew Chris and I were here only for a visit. Then I realized perhaps Bart might want me to help with the decorating and was reluctant to say so himself.

When I asked Chris if Joel could break our mother’s will and take from Bart the money he felt so necessary for his self-esteem, Chris shook his head, admitting he really didn’t know all the ins and outs of legal ramifications when a “dead” heir came back to life.

“Bart could give Joel enough money to see him through the few years he has left,” I said, wracking my brain to remember every word of my mother’s last will and testament. No mention of her older brothers, whom she’d believed dead.

When I came back from my thoughts, Joel was in the kitchen again, having found what he wanted in the pantry stocked with enough to feed a hotel. He spoke in reply to a question Chris had asked and I hadn’t heard. His voice was somber. “Of course, the house isn’t exactly the same, for no one uses wooden pegs for nails anymore. I put all the old furniture in my quarters. I don’t *really* belong, so I’m going to stay in the servants’ quarters over the garage.”

“I’ve already said you shouldn’t do that,” said Chris with a frown. “It just wouldn’t be right to let a family member live in such frugal style.” Already we’d seen the huge garage, and the servants’ quarters above could hardly be called frugal, just small.

Let him! I wanted to shout, but I said nothing.

Before I knew what was happening, Chris had Joel established on the second floor in the western wing. I sighed, somehow regretful that Joel would be under the same roof with us. But it would be all right; as soon as our curiosity was satisfied and Bart celebrated his birthday, we’d leave with Cindy for Hawaii.

In the library around two in the afternoon, Chris and I settled down to interview the man and woman who came with excellent references. There wasn’t any fault I could find, except something furtive in both pairs of eyes. Uneasily I fidgeted from the way they looked so knowingly at both of us. “Sorry,” said Chris, catching the slight negative gesture I made, “but we’ve already decided on another couple.”

Husband and wife stood up to go. The woman turned in the doorway to give me a long, meaningful look. “I live in the village, *Mrs. Sheffield*,” she said coldly. “Been there only five years, but we’ve heard a *great* deal about the Foxworths who live on the hill.”

What she said made me turn my head away.

“Yes, I’m sure you have,” said Chris dryly.

The woman snorted before she slammed the door behind them.

Next came a tall, aristocratic man with upright military bearing, immaculately dressed down to the slightest detail. He strode in and politely waited until Chris asked him to sit down.

“My name is Trevor Mainstream Majors,” he said in his brisk British style. “I was born in Liverpool fifty-nine years ago. I was married in London when I was twenty-six, and my wife passed away three years ago, and my two sons live in

North Carolina ... so I am here hoping I can work in Virginia and visit my sons on my days off.”

“Where did you work after you left the Johnstons?” asked Chris, looking down at the man’s resume. “You seem to have excellent references until one year ago.”

By this time Chris had invited the Englishman to seat himself. Trevor Majors shifted his long legs and adjusted his tie before he replied politely, “I worked for the Millersons, who moved away from the Hill about six months ago.”

Silence. I’d heard my mother mention the Millersons many times. My heart began to beat more rapidly. “How long did you work for the Millersons?” asked Chris in a friendly way, as if he had no fears, even after having caught my look of anxiety.

“Not long, sir. They had five of their own children there, and nephews and nieces were always showing up, plus friends who stayed over for visits. I was their only servant. I did the cooking, the housework, the laundry, the chauffeuring, and it’s an Englishman’s pride and joy to do the gardening. What with chauffeuring the five children back and forth to school, dancing classes, sporting events, flicks, and such, I spent so much time on the road I seldom had the chance to prepare a decent meal. One day Mister Millerson complained I’d failed to mow the lawn and hadn’t weeded the garden, and he hadn’t eaten a good meal at home in two weeks. He snapped at me harshly because his dinner was late. Sir, that was rather much, when his wife had ordered me out on the road, kept me waiting while she shopped, sent me to pick up the children from the movies ... and then I was supposed to have dinner on time. I told Mr. Millerson I wasn’t a robot able to do everything, and all at once—and I quit. He was so angry he threatened he’d never give me a good reference. But if you wait a few days, he may cool down enough to realize I did the best I could under difficult circumstances.”

I sighed, looked at Chris and made a furtive signal. This man was perfect. Chris didn’t even look my way. “I think you will work out fine, Mister Majors. We’ll hire you for a trial

period of one month, and if at that time we find you unsatisfactory, we will terminate our employment agreement.”

Chris looked at me. “That is, if my wife agrees ...”

Silently I stood and nodded. We did need servants. I didn’t intend to spend my vacation dusting and cleaning a huge house.

“Sir, my lady, if you will, just call me Trevor. It will be my honor and pleasure to serve in this grand house.” He’d jumped to his feet the moment I stood, and then, as Chris rose, he and Chris shook hands. “My pleasure indeed,” he said as he smiled at us both approvingly.

In three days we hired three servants. It was easy enough when Bart was highly overpaying them.

The evening of our fifth full day here, I stood beside Chris on the balcony, staring at the mountains all around us, gazing up at that same old moon that used to look down on us as we lay on the roof of the old Foxworth Hall. That single great eye of God I’d believed when I was fifteen. Other places had given me romantic moons, beautiful moonlight to take away my fears and guilts. Here I felt the moon was a harsh investigator, ready to condemn us again, and then again and again.

“It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it?” asked Chris with his arm about my waist. “I like this balcony that Bart added to our suite of rooms. It doesn’t distract from the outside appearance since it’s on the side, and just look at the view it gives us of the mountains.”

The blue-misted mountains had always represented to me a jagged fence to keep us forever trapped as prisoners of hope. Even now I saw their soft rounded tops as a barrier between me and freedom. *God, if you’re up there, help me through the next few weeks.*

* * *

Near noon the next day, Chris and I, with Joel, stood on the front portico, watching the low-slung red Jaguar speeding up the steeply spiraling road that led to Foxworth Hall.

Bart drove with reckless, daredevil speed, as if challenging death to take him. I grew weak just watching the way he whipped around the dangerous curves.

“God knows he should have better sense,” Chris grumbled. “He’s always been accident prone—and look at the way he drives, as if he’s got a hold on immortality.”

“There are some who do,” said Joel enigmatically.

I threw him a wondering glance, then looked again at that small red car that had cost a small fortune. Every year Bart bought a new car, never any color but red; he’d tried all the luxury cars to find which he liked best. This one was his favorite so far, he’d informed us in a brief letter.

Squealing to a stop, he burned rubber and spoiled the perfection of the curving drive with long black streaks. Waving first, Bart threw off his sunglasses, shook his head to bring his dark tumbled locks back into order, ignored the door, and jumped from his convertible, pulling off driving gloves and tossing them carelessly onto the seat. Racing up the steps, he seized me up in his strong arms and planted several kisses on my cheeks. I was stunned with the warmth of his greeting. Eagerly I responded. The moment my lips touched his cheek he put me down and shoved me away as if he tired of me very rapidly.

He stood in full sunlight, six feet three, brilliant intelligence and strength in his dark brown eyes, his shoulders broad, his well-muscled body tapering down to slim hips and long legs. He was so handsome in his casual white sports outfit. “You’re looking great, Mother, just great.” His dark eyes swept over me from heels to hair. “Thanks for wearing that red dress ... it’s my favorite color.”

I reached for Chris’s hand. “Thank you, Bart, I wore this dress just for you.” Now he could say something nice to Chris, I hoped. I waited for that. Instead, Bart ignored Chris and turned to Joel.

“Hi, Uncle Joel. Isn’t my mother just as beautiful as I said?”

Chris's hand clenched mine so hard it hurt. Always Bart found a way to insult the only father he could remember.

"Yes, Bart, your mother is very beautiful," said Joel in that whispery, raspy voice. "In fact, she's exactly the way I would imagine my sister Corrine looked at her age."

"Bart, say hello to your—" and here I faltered. I wanted to say *Father* but I knew Bart would deny that rudely. So I said *Chris*. Turning his dark and sometimes savage eyes briefly to stare at Chris, Bart bit out a harsh hello. "You don't ever age either, do you?" he said in an accusatory tone.

"I'm sorry about that, Bart," answered Chris evenly. "But time will do its job eventually."

"Let's hope so."

I could have slapped Bart.

Turning around, Bart ignored both Chris and me and surveyed the lawns, the house, the luxurious flower beds, the lush shrubbery, the garden paths, the birdbaths, and other statuary, and smiled with an owner's pride. "It's grand, really grand. Just as I hoped it would be. I've looked the world over and no mansion can compare with Foxworth Hall."

His dark eyes moved to clash with mine. "I know what you're thinking, Mother, I know this isn't truly the best house yet, but one day it will be. I intend to build, and add new wings, and one day this house will outshine every palace in Europe. I'm going to concentrate my energies on making Foxworth Hall truly an historic landmark."

"Who will you impress when you accomplish that?" asked Chris. "The world no longer tolerates great houses and great wealth, or respects those who gain it by inheritance."

Oh, damn it! Chris so seldom said anything tactless or rude. Why had he said what he did? Bart's face flamed beneath his deep bronze tan. "I intend to increase my fortune with my own efforts!" Bart flared, stepping closer to Chris. Because he was so lean, and Chris had put on weight, especially in the chest, he appeared to tower over Chris. I watched the man I thought of as my husband stare challengingly into my son's eyes.

“I’ve been doing that for you,” said Chris.

To my surprise, Bart seemed pleased. “You mean as trustee you have increased my share of the inheritance?”

“Yes, it was easy enough,” said Chris laconically. “Money makes money, and the investments I made for you have paid off handsomely.”

“Ten to one I could have done better.”

Chris smiled ironically. “I could have predicted you’d thank me like that.”

From one to the other I looked, feeling sorry for both of them. Chris was a mature man who knew who and what he was, and he could ride along on that confidence with ease, while Bart was still struggling to find himself and his place in the world.

My son, my son, when will you learn humility, gratitude? Many a night I’d seen Chris working over figures, trying to decide on the best investments, as if he knew that sooner or later Bart would accuse him of poor financial judgment.

“You’ll have your chance to prove yourself soon enough,” Chris responded. He turned to me. “Let’s take a walk, Cathy, down to the lake.”

“Wait a minute,” called Bart, appearing furious that we’d leave when he’d just come home. I was torn between wanting to escape with Chris and the desire to please my son. “Where’s Cindy?”

“She’ll be coming soon,” I called back. “Right now Cindy is visiting a girlfriend’s home. You might be interested to learn that Jory is going to bring Melodie here for a vacation.”

Bart just stood there staring at me, perhaps appalled with the idea, and then came that strange excitement to replace all other emotions on his handsome, tanned face. “Bart,” I said, resisting Chris’s desire to hurry me away from a known source of trouble, “the house is truly beautiful. All that you’ve done to change it has been a wonderful improvement.”

Again he appeared surprised. “Mother, you mean it’s not exactly the same? I thought it was ...”

“Oh, no, Bart. The balcony outside our suite of rooms wasn’t there before.”

Bart whirled on his great-uncle. “You told me it was!” he shouted.

Smiling sardonically, Joel stepped forward. “Bart, my son, I didn’t lie. I never lie. The original Hall did have that balcony. My father’s mother ordered it put there. And by using that balcony, she was able to sneak in her lover without the servants seeing. Later she ran off with that lover without waking her husband, who kept their bedroom door locked and the key hidden. Malcolm ordered the balcony torn down when he was the owner ... but it does add a certain kind of charm to that side of the house.”

Satisfied, Bart turned again to Chris and me. “See, Mother, you don’t know anything at all about this house. Uncle Joel is the expert. He’s described to me in great detail all the furniture, the paintings, and, in the end, I’ll have not only the same, but better than the original.”

Bart hadn’t changed. He was still obsessed, still wanting to be a carbon copy of Malcolm Foxworth, if not in looks, in personality and in determination to be the richest man in the world, no matter what he did to gain that title.

My Second Son



Not long after Bart arrived home, he began making elaborate plans for his upcoming birthday party. Apparently, to my surprise and delight, he'd made many friends in Virginia during the summer vacations he'd spent here. It used to hurt that he spent such a few of his vacation days with us in California, where I had considered he belonged. But now it seemed he knew people we'd never heard of, and had met young men and women in college that he intended to invite down to help him celebrate.

I'd only spent a few days at Foxworth Hall and already the monotony of days with nothing to do but eat, sleep, read, look at TV, and roam the gardens and woods had me on edge and eager to escape as soon as possible. The deep silence of the mountainside gripped me in its spell of isolation and despair. The silence wore on my nerves. I wanted to hear voices, many voices, hear the telephone ring, have people drop in and say hello, and nobody did. There was a group of local society members that had known the Fox-worths well, and this was the very group Chris and I had to avoid. There were old friends in New York and California that I wanted to call and invite to Bart's party, but I didn't dare without Bart's approval. Restlessly I prowled the grand rooms alone, and sometimes with Chris. He and I walked the gardens, strolled through the woods, quiet sometimes, garrulous others.

He had his old hobby of watercoloring to begin again, and that kept him busy, but I wasn't supposed to dance anymore. Nevertheless I did my ballet exercises every day of my life just to keep myself slim and supple, and willingly enough I'd pose when he asked me to do that. Joel came upon me once as I held on to a chair in our sitting room, exercising in red leotards. I heard his gasp from the open doorway and turned to

find him staring at me as if I were naked. “What’s wrong?” I asked worriedly. “Has something terrible happened?”

He threw his thin, long, pale hands wide, his face expressive as he scanned over my body with contempt.

“Aren’t you a little old to try to be seductive?”

“Have you ever heard of exercise, Joel?” I asked impatiently. “You don’t have to enter this wing. Just stay away from our rooms and your eyes won’t be so scandalized.”

“You are disrespectful to someone older and wiser,” he said sharply.

“If I am, I apologize. But your words and your expression offend me. If there is to be peace in this house during our visit, stay away from me, Joel, while I am in my own wing. This huge house has more than enough space to give us all privacy without closing the doors.”

He stiffly turned away, but not before I’d seen the indignation in his eyes. I hurried to stare after him, wondering if I could be mistaken, and he was only a harmless old man who couldn’t mind his own business. But I didn’t call out to apologize. Instead I took off my leotards, put on shorts and a top, and with thoughts of Jory and his wife coming soon comforting me, I went to find Chris. I hesitated outside Bart’s office door and listened to him talking to the caterer, planning for a minimum of two hundred guests. Just listening to him made me feel numb inside. *Oh, Bart, you don’t realize some won’t come, and if they do, Lord help us all.*

As I continued to stand there, I heard him name several of his invited guests, and they were not all from this country. Many were notables from Europe that he’d met on his tours. Throughout his college days he’d been tireless in his efforts to see the world and to meet important people, people who ruled and dominated either with political power, brains, or financial wizardry. I thought his restlessness was due to his inability to be happy in one place, and he was always longing for the next greener, farther field.

“They’ll all come,” he said to the party on the other end of the line. “When they read my invitation, they won’t be able to decline.”

He hung up, then swung his chair about to face me. “Mother! Are you eavesdropping?”

“It’s a habit I caught from you, my darling.”

He scowled.

“Bart, why don’t you just make your party a family affair? Or invite just your best friends. The villagers around here won’t want to come. According to the tales my mother used to tell us, they have always disliked the Foxworths, who had too much when they had too little. The Fox-worths came and went while the villagers had to stay. And please don’t include the local society, even if Joel has told you they are his friends, and therefore yours and ours.”

“Afraid that your sins will be found out, Mother?” he asked without mercy. I was accustomed to this, but nevertheless I recoiled inwardly. Was it so terrible that Chris and I lived together as man and wife? Weren’t the newspapers full of much worse crimes than ours?

“Oh, come, Mother, don’t look like that. Let’s be happy for a change.” His bronzed face took on a cheerful, excited look, as if nothing I said would daunt his excitement. “Mother, be excited for me, please. I’m ordering the best of everything. When the word spreads around, and it will because my caterer is the best in Virginia, and he loves to boast, no one will be able to resist coming to my party. They’ll hear I’m sending to New York and to Hollywood for entertainers, and what’s more, I’m sure everyone will want to see Jory and Melodie dance.”

Surprise and happiness filled me. “Have you asked them?”

“No, but how can my own brother and sister-in-law refuse? You see, Mother, I’m planning to hold my party outdoors in the garden, in the moonlight. The lawns will be all lit up with golden globes. I’m having fountains put everywhere, and colored lights will play upon the sprinkling water. There’ll be

imported champagne by the crates, and every other liquor you can name. The food will be the best. I'm having a theater constructed in the midst of a wonderworld of fantasy where tables will be covered with beautiful cloths of every color. Color upon color. Flowers will be banked all over. I'll show the world just what a Foxworth can do."

On and on he enthused.

When I left his office and found Chris talking to one of the gardeners, I felt happy, reassured. Perhaps this was going to be the summer when Bart found himself, at last.

It would be as Chris had always predicted: Bart would not only inherit a fortune, he would inherit his sense of pride and worth and find himself ... and pray God he found the right self.

Two days later I was in his office again, seated in one of his luxurious, deep, leather chairs, amazed to see how much he'd accomplished in his short time home. Apparently all this special extra office equipment had been ready and waiting to be installed the moment he was here to direct the placement. The small bedroom beyond the library he used for his office, where our detested grandfather had lived until he died, had been converted into a room of filing cabinets. The room where our grandfather's nurses had stayed became an office for Bart's secretary when or if he ever found one who met his stiff requirements. A computer dominated one long, curving desk, with its two printers that typed out different letters even as Bart and I conversed. It had surprised me to see him typing faster than I could. The drumming of the printers was muffled by heavy Plexiglas covers.

Proudly he showed me how he could keep in touch with the world while staying at home, just by pushing buttons and joining up with a program called "The Source." Only then did I learn that one summer he'd taken two months of computer programming. "And, Mother, I can execute my buy and sell orders and avail myself of expert technical and fundamental data just by using this computer. I'll occupy my time that way until I open my own law firm." For a moment he looked reflective, even doubtful. I still believed that he'd gone to

Harvard just because his father had. Law held no real interest for him at all; he was only interested in making money, and then more money.

“Don’t you have sufficient money already, Bart? What is it you can’t buy?”

Something boyishly wistful and sweet visited his dark eyes. “Respect, Mother. I don’t have any talent, like you, like Jory. I can’t dance. I can’t draw a decent representation of a flower, much less draw the human form.” He was referring indirectly to Chris and his painting hobby. “When I visit an art museum, I’m baffled by everyone’s awe. I don’t see anything wonderful about the ‘Mona Lisa.’ I see only a bland-faced, rather plain-looking woman who couldn’t have been exciting. I don’t appreciate classical music, any kind of music ... and I’ve been told I have a rather good singing voice. I used to try and sing when I was a kid. Goofy kind of kid, wasn’t I? Must have given you a million laughs.” He grinned appealingly, then spread his arms supplicatingly. “I have no artistic talents, and so I fall back upon the kind of figures I can readily understand, those representing dollars and cents. I look around in museums, and the only things I see to admire are jewels.”

Sparkle came to his dark eyes. “The glitter and gleam of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, pearls ... all that I can appreciate. Gold, mountains of gold—that I can understand. I see the beauty in gold, silver, copper, and oil. Do you know I visited Washington just to watch gold minted into coins? I felt a certain kind of elation, as if one day all that gold would be mine.”

Admiration faded and pity for him flooded me. “What about women, Bart? What about love? A family? Good friends? Children? Don’t you hope to fall in love and marry?”

He stared at me blankly for a moment or so, drumming his strong, square-nailed fingertips on his desktop before he got up to stand before a wide wall of windows, staring out at the gardens and beyond them the blue-misted mountains. “I’ve experienced sex, Mother. I didn’t expect to enjoy it, but I did. I felt my body betrayed my will. But I’ve never been in love. I can’t imagine how it would be to devote myself to one woman

when so many are beautiful and only too willing. I see a beautiful girl walk by, I turn and stare, only to find her turning and staring back at me. It's so easy to get them into my bed. No challenge at all." He paused and turned his head to look at me. "I use women, Mother, and sometimes I'm ashamed of myself. I take them, discard them, and even pretend I don't know them when I meet them again. They all end up hating me."

He met my wide eyes with watchful challenge. "Aren't you shocked?" he asked pleasantly. "Or am I just the churlish type you always expected?"

I swallowed, hoping this time I could say the right thing. In the past it seemed I'd never said anything right. I doubted anyone could say words that would change Bart from what he was, and what he wanted to be ... if he even knew. "I suspect you are a product of your times," I began in a soft voice, without recriminations. "I almost pity your generation for missing out on the most beautiful aspect of falling in love. Where is the romance in your kind of taking, Bart? What do you give to the women you go to bed with? Don't you know it takes time to build a loving, lasting relationship? It doesn't happen overnight. One-night stands don't form commitments. You can look at a beautiful body and desire that body, but that's not love."

His burning eyes showed such intensity and interest I was encouraged to go on, especially when he asked, "How do you explain love?"

It was a trap he baited, knowing the loves of my life had all been ill-fated. Still I answered, hoping to save him from all the mistakes he was sure to make. "I don't explain love, Bart. I don't think anyone can. It grows from day to day from having contact with that other person who understands your needs, and you understand theirs. It starts with a faltering flutter that touches your heart and makes you vulnerable to everything beautiful. You see beauty where before you'd seen ugliness. You feel glowing inside, so happy without knowing why. You appreciate what before you'd ignored. Your eyes meet with the eyes of the one you love, and you see reflected in them your

own feelings, your own hopes and desires, and you're happy just to be with that person. Even when you don't touch, you still feel the warmth of being with that one person who fills all your thoughts. Then one day you do touch. Perhaps his hand, or her hand, and it feels good. It doesn't even have to be an intimate touch. An excitement begins to grow, so you want to be with that person, not to have sex ... just to be with them and gradually grow toward one another. You share your life in words before you share your body. Only then do you start seriously thinking about having sex with that person. You begin to dream about it. Still you put it off, waiting, waiting for the right moment. You want this love to stay, to never end. So you go slowly, slowly toward the ultimate experience of your life. Day by day, minute by minute, second by second, and from moment to moment you anticipate that one person, knowing you won't be disappointed, knowing that person will be faithful, dependable ... even when she's out of sight, or you're out of sight. There's trust, contentment, peace, happiness when you have genuine love. To be in love is like turning on a light in a dark room. All of a sudden everything becomes bright and visible. You're never alone because she loves you, and you love her."

I paused for breath, saw his continued interest that gave me the courage to go on. "I want that for you, Bart. More than all the billions of tons of gold in the world, more than all the jewels in vaults, I want you to find a wonderful girl to love. Forget money. You have enough. Look around, open your eyes and discover the joys of living, and forget your pursuit of money."

Musingly, he said, "So that's the way women feel about love and sex. I always wondered. It's not a man's kind of feeling, I do know that ... still, what you said is interesting."

He turned away before he went on. "Truthfully, I don't know just what I want out of life but more money. They tell me I'll make an excellent attorney because I know how to debate. Yet I can't decide what branch of law I want. I don't want to be a criminal lawyer like my father was, for I'd often have to defend those I know were guilty. I couldn't do that. I think corporate law would be a bore. I've thought about

politics, and this is the area I find most exciting, but I've got my damned psychological background to mar my record ... so how can I go into politics?"

Rising from behind his desk, he stepped close enough to catch my hand in his. "I like what you're telling me. Tell me more about your loves, about which man you loved best. Was it Julian, your first husband? Or was it that wonderful doctor named Paul? I think I would have loved him if I could remember him. He married you to give me his name. I wish I could see him in my memory, like Jory can, but I can't. Jory remembers him well. He even remembers seeing my father." His manner turned very intense as he leaned to lock his eyes with mine. "Tell me that you loved my father best. Say *he* was the one and only man who really seized your heart. Don't tell me you only used him for your revenge against your mother! Don't tell me that you used his love to escape from the love of your own brother."

I couldn't speak.

His brooding, morose, dark eyes studied me. "Don't you realize yet that you and your brother have always managed with your incestuous relationship to ruin and contaminate my life? I used to hope and pray someday you'd leave him, but it never happens. I've adjusted to the fact that the two of you are obsessed with one another and perhaps enjoy your relationship more because it is against the will of God."

Snared again! I rose to my feet, knowing he'd used his sweet voice to beguile me into his trap.

"Yes, I loved your father, Bart, don't you ever doubt that. I admit I wanted revenge for all that our mother had done to us, so I went after my stepfather. Then, when I had him, and I knew I loved him, and he loved me, I felt I'd trapped myself as well as him. He couldn't marry me. He loved me in one way—and my mother in another way. He was torn between us. I decided to end his indecision by becoming pregnant. Even then he was undecided. Only on the night when he believed my story of being imprisoned by his own wife did he turn against her and say he'd marry me. I thought her money would bind him to her forever, but he would have married me."

I rose to leave. Not a word did Bart say to give me a hint as to his thoughts. At the door I turned to look back at him. He was seated again in his desk chair, his elbows on the blotter, his hands cradling his bowed head. “Do you think anyone will ever love me for myself and not for my money, Mother?”

My heart skipped a beat.

“Yes, Bart. But you won’t find a girl around here who doesn’t know you’re very wealthy. Why don’t you go away? Settle in the Northeast or in the West. Then when you find a girl she won’t know you are rich, especially if you work as an ordinary lawyer ...”

He looked up then. “I’ve already had my surname changed legally, Mother.”

Dread filled me, and I didn’t really need to ask, “What is your last name now?”

“Foxworth,” he said, confirming my suspicion. “After all, I can’t be a Winslow when my father was not your husband. And to keep Sheffield is deceitful. Paul wasn’t my father, nor was your brother, thank God.”

I shivered and turned icy with apprehension. This was the first step ... turning himself into another Malcolm, what I’d feared most. “I wish you’d chosen Winslow for your surname, Bart. That would have pleased your dead father.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” he said dryly. “And I did consider that seriously. But in choosing Winslow, I would forfeit my legitimate right to the Foxworth name. It’s a good name, Mother, a name respected by everyone except those villagers, who don’t count anyway. I feel Foxworth Hall truly belongs to me without contamination, without guilt.” His eyes took on a brilliant, happy glow. “You see, and Uncle Joel agrees, not everyone hates me and thinks I am less than Jory.” He paused to watch my reaction. I tried to show nothing. He seemed disappointed. “Leave, Mother. I’ve got a long day of work ahead of me.”

I risked his anger by lingering long enough to say, “While you’re shut away in this office, Bart, I want you to keep

remembering your family loves you very much, and all of us want what's best for you. If more money will make you feel better about yourself, then make yourself the richest man in the world. Just find happiness, that's all we want for you. Find your niche, just where you fit, that's the most important thing."

Closing his office door behind me, I was headed for the stairs when I almost bumped into Joel. A guilty look flashed momentarily through the blue of his watery eyes. I guessed he'd been listening to Bart and me. But hadn't I done the same thing inadvertently? "I'm sorry I didn't see you in the shadows, Joel."

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop," he said with a peculiar look. "Those who expect to hear evil will not be disappointed," and away he scurried like an old church mouse, lean from lack of enough fuel to feed his appetite for making trouble. He made me feel guilty, ashamed. Suspicious, always so damned suspicious of anyone named Foxworth.

Not that I didn't have just cause.

My First Son



Six days before the party, Jory and Melodie flew into a local airport. Chris and I were there to meet them with the kind of enthusiasm you saved for those you hadn't seen for years, and we'd parted less than ten days ago. Jory was immediately chagrined because Bart hadn't come along to welcome them to his fabulous new home.

"He's busy in the gardens, Jory, Melodie, and asked us to give you his apologies" (although he hadn't). Both looked at me as if they knew differently. Quickly I went into details of how Bart was supervising hordes of workmen come to change our lawns into paradise, or something as near that as possible.

Jory smiled to hear of such an ostentatious party; he preferred small, intimate parties where everyone knew each other. He said pleasantly enough, "Nothing new under the sun. Bart's always too busy when it comes to me and my wife."

I stared up into his face so like that of my adolescent first husband, Julian, who had also been my dancing partner. The husband whose memory still hurt and filled me with that same old tormenting guilt. Guilt that I tried to erase by loving his son best. "Every time I see you you look more like your father."

We were seated side by side, as Melodie sat beside Chris, and occasionally said a few words to him. Jory laughed and put his arms about me, inclining his dark, handsome head to brush my cheek with his warm lips. "Mom ... you say that each and every time you see me. When am I going to reach the zenith of being my father?"

Laughing, too, I released him and settled back to cross my legs and stare out at the beautiful countryside. The rolling hills, the misty mountains with the tops hidden in the clouds. Near Heaven, I kept thinking. I had to force my attention back

to Jory, who had so many virtues Julian had never possessed, could never have possessed. Jory was more like Chris in personality than like Julian, although that, too, filled me with guilt, with shame, for it could have been different between Julian and I—but for Chris.

At the age of twenty-nine, Jory was a wonderfully handsome man, with long, strong, beautiful legs and firm, round buttocks that made all the women stare when he danced onto stage wearing tights. His thick hair was blue-black and curly, but not frizzy; his lips exceptionally red and sensuously shaped; his nose a perfect slope with nostrils that could flare wide with anger or passion. He had a hot temper he'd learned to control a long time ago, mostly because of all the control it took for him to tolerate Bart. Jory's inner beauty radiated from him with an electric force, a *joie de vivre*. His beauty was more than mere handsomeness; he had the added strength of a certain spiritual quality and was like Chris in his cheerful optimism, his faith that all that happened in his life had to be for the best.

Jory wore his success with grace, with touching humility and dignity, displaying none of the arrogance that had been Julian's even when he had performed poorly.

So far Melodie had said very little, as if she contained volumes of secrets she was dying to spill out, but for some reason was holding back, awaiting her opportunity to be center stage. Customarily my daughter-in-law and I were very good friends. Countless times she twisted around in the front seat to smile back at me happily. "Stop teasing," I admonished. "What's this good news you have to tell us?"

Again came that taut look on her face as she flicked her eyes to Jory, making her appear a locked gold purse about to burst if she didn't tell us soon. "Is Cindy there yet?" she asked.

When I said no, Melodie turned again to face the windshield. Jory winked. "We're going to keep you in suspense a while longer, so everyone can enjoy our surprise to its full extent. Besides, right now Dad's so intent on seeing we reach that house safely that he couldn't give our secret the appreciation it needs."

After an hour's ride we were turning onto our private road, which spiraled up the mountain, with deep ravines or precipices always on one side, forcing Chris to drive even more carefully.

Once we were in the house and I'd shown them around downstairs, and they had exclaimed and oh'ed and ah'ed, Melodie came flying into my arms, ducking her head shyly down on my shoulder, for she was inches taller than I. "Go on, darling," encouraged Jory softly.

Quickly she released me and threw a proud smile at Jory, who smiled back at her reassuringly. Then she was spilling out the contents of that bulging gold purse.

"Cathy, I wanted to wait for Cindy and tell you all at once, but I'm so happy I'm bursting. I'm pregnant! You just don't know how thrilled I am when I've been wanting this baby ever since the first year Jory and I married. I'm a little over two months along. Our baby is due in early January."

Stunned, I could only stare at her before I glanced at Jory, who had told me many times he didn't want to begin a family until he'd had ten years at the top. Still, he stood there smiling and looking as proud as any man would at this instant, as if he were accepting this unexpected and unplanned child very well.

That was enough to make me overjoyed. "Oh, Melodie, Jory, I'm so thrilled for you both. A baby! I'm going to be a grandmother." Then I sobered. Did I want to be a grandmother? Chris was slapping Jory on the back as if he were the first man ever to impregnate his wife; then he was embracing Melodie and asking questions about how she felt and if she was experiencing morning sickness—just like the doctor he was.

Because he was seeing something I wasn't, I looked at her more closely. She had shadows beneath hollowed eyes, and was much too thin to be pregnant. However, there was nothing that could steal from Melodie her classical type of cool blond beauty. She moved with grace, appearing regal even when she just picked up a magazine and flipped through it—as she was doing now. I was baffled. "What's wrong, Melodie?"

“Nothing,” she said, gone stiff for no apparent reason, telling me instead that everything was wrong.

My eyes met briefly with Jory’s. He nodded, indicating he’d tell me later what was bothering Melodie.

All the way back to Foxworth Hall I’d been dreading the meeting between Bart and his older brother, fearing there would be an ugly scene to start everything out wrong. I strode to a window overlooking a side lawn and saw that Bart was on the racket ball court, playing by himself with the same kind of intensity to win, as though he had a partner to batter down to defeat. “Bart!” I called, opening a French door, “your brother and his wife are here.”

“Be there in a sec,” he called back, and continued to play.

“Where are all the workers?” asked Jory, looking around at the spacious gardens empty now of anyone but Bart. I explained most left about four, wanting to drive home before they were caught in the late evening traffic.

Finally Bart threw down his racket and sauntered our way, a broad, welcoming smile on his face. We all stepped onto a side terrace covered with multicolored flagstones and decorated with many live plants and pretty patio furniture with colorful umbrellas to shield us from the sun. Melodie seemed to pull in her breath and straighten her spine as she moved closer to Jory. She didn’t need his protection this time. Bart’s steps picked up until eventually he was running, and Jory was speeding to greet him. My heart could have burst ... brothers, at last! Like they had been when both were very young. They pounded each other on the back, ruffled each other’s hair, and then Bart was pumping Jory’s hand up and down, slapping him on the shoulder again, the way men often do. He turned to look Melodie over.

All his enthusiasm died. “Hi, Melodie,” he said briefly, then went on to congratulate Jory for their successes on stage and the adulation they received. “Proud of you both,” he said with a strange smile.

“We’ve got news for you, brother,” said Jory. “You are now looking at the happiest husband and wife in the world, for

we're going to be parents come January."

Bart gazed at Melodie, who avoided meeting his eyes. She half turned toward Jory, with the sun behind her turning her honey-blond hair fiery red near her scalp, making a golden haze of the outer strands, so it almost seemed she was sporting a golden halo. Madonna pure she stood in profile as if poised for flight. The grace of her long neck, the gentle slope of her small nose, the fullness of her pouting rosy lips gave her the kind of ethereal beauty that had helped to make her one of the most beautiful and admired ballerinas in America.

"Pregnancy becomes you, Melodie," Bart said softly, ignoring what Jory was telling him about cancelling one year of bookings so he could be with Melodie throughout her pregnancy and help after the baby was born in all kinds of husbandly ways.

Bart stared toward the French door where Joel stood silently watching our family reunion. I resented his being there; then, ashamed, I gestured him forward even as Bart called out, "Come, let me introduce you to my brother and his wife."

Advancing slowly, Joel shuffled along the flagstones, making each step whisper. Gravely he greeted Jory and Melodie after Bart's introduction, not extending his hand to be shaken. "I hear that you are a dancer," he said to Jory.

"Yes ... I've worked all my life to be called that."

Joel turned and left without another word to anyone.

"Just who is that weird old man?" asked Jory. "Mom, I thought you told us that both your maternal uncles died in accidents when they were very young."

I shrugged and let Bart explain.

* * *

In no time at all, we had Jory and his wife established in a very rich-looking suite with heavy red velvet draperies, red carpet, and dark paneled walls that made the suite exceedingly masculine. Melodie took a look around, wrinkling her nose a

bit in distaste. “Rich ... nice ... really,” she said with heavy effort.

Jory laughed. “Honey, we can’t always expect white walls with blue carpet, can we? I like this room, Bart. It looks like your kind of bedroom—classy.”

Bart wasn’t listening to Jory. He still had his eyes glued on Melodie, who glided from one piece of furniture to another, running her long, graceful fingers over the slick, polished tops before she glanced into the adjacent sitting room and then went on into the magnificent bath with an old-fashioned walnut tub lined with pewter. She laughed to see the tub. “Oh, I’m going to enjoy that. Look at the depth—water right up to your chin if you want it that way.”

“Fair women look so dramatic in dark settings,” said Bart almost without realizing he’d spoken. No one said a word, not even Jory, who gave him a hard look.

In that bath was also a walk-in shower and a lovely dressing table of the same walnut with a three-winged gold-framed mirror, so the occupant seated on the velvet-covered stool could see herself from every angle.

* * *

We dined early and sat outside on a terrace in the twilight hours. Joel didn’t join us, and for that I was grateful. Bart had little to say, but he couldn’t keep his eyes off Melodie in her frail blue dress that molded to every delicate curve of thigh, hip, waist, and bust. I felt a sinking sensation to see him studying her so closely, with desire written clearly in those dark, blistering eyes.

At the breakfast table on the terrace outside the dining room, the daisies were yellow. We had hope how. We could look at yellow and not fear we’d never see sunlight again.

Chris was laughing at something funny Jory had just reported, while Bart only smiled, still keeping his eyes on Melodie, who picked at her breakfast without appetite. “Everything I eat comes up sooner or later,” she explained with a small look of embarrassment. “It’s not the food, it’s me.

I'm supposed to eat slowly and not think about losing the meal ... but that's all I'm thinking of." Just beyond her shoulder, in the shadows of a giant live palm planted in a huge clay pot, Joel had his gaze riveted also on Melodie, studying her profile. Then he was looking at Jory, narrowing his eyes again.

"Joel," I called, "step forward and join us for breakfast."

He advanced reluctantly, cautiously, whispering his soft-soled shoes over the flagstones, holding his arms crosswise over his chest, as if he wore an invisible coarse, brown, homespun monk's habit, and his hands were tucked neatly out of sight up the wide sleeves. He seemed a judge sent to weigh us in for Heaven's pearly gates. His voice was slight and polite as he greeted Jory and Melodie, nodding in answer to their questions that plied him for information on what it was like to live as a monk. "I couldn't bear life without women," said Jory, "without music and lots of different types of people all around. I get a little from this person, something else from another. It takes hundreds of friends to keep me happy. Already I'm missing those in our ballet company."

"It takes all kinds to make the world go round," said Joel, "and the Lord giveth before he taketh away." Then he ambled off, his head bowed low, as if he whispered prayers and fingered a rosary. "The Lord must have known what he was doing when he made each of us so different," I heard him murmur.

Jory swiveled about in his chair to stare after Joel. "So that's our great uncle, who we presumed died in a skiing accident. Mom, wouldn't it be odd if the other brother turned up as well?"

Jumping to his feet, Bart's face flamed furious. "Don't be ridiculous! Malcolm's eldest son died when his motorcycle went over a precipice, and they found his body and buried it. It's in the family cemetery that I've visited often. According to Uncle Joel, his father sent detectives looking for his lost second son, and that's one reason my uncle had to stay hidden in that monastery, until eventually he grew used to it and began to fear life on the outside." He flicked his eyes at me, as

if to recognize the fact that we, too, as children, had grown accustomed to our imprisoned life, fearing the outside.

“He says when you are isolated for long periods, you begin to see people as they really are—as if distance gives you better perspective.”

Chris and I met eyes. Yes, we knew about isolation. Standing, Chris gestured to Jory and offered to show him around. “Bart’s planning horse stables, so he can have fox hunts like Malcolm used to have. Perhaps one day we may even want to join in that kind of sport.”

“Sport?” queried Melodie, rising gracefully and hurrying to catch up with Jory. “I don’t call a pack of hungry hounds chasing a cute little harmless fox a true sport—it’s barbaric, that’s what!”

“That’s the trouble with those in the ballet—too sensitive for the real world,” Bart retorted before he stalked off in a different direction.

* * *

Later on in the afternoon, I found Chris in the foyer watching Jory work out before the mirrors, using a chair for a barre. The two men shared the kind of relationship I hoped would develop one day between Chris and Bart. Father and son, both admiring and respecting the other. My arms crossed over my breasts to hug myself. I was so happy to have all my family together, or at least it would be when Cindy arrived. And the expected baby would be more cement to bind us together ...

Jory had warmed up enough and began to dance to *The Firebird* music. Whirling so fast he was a dazzling blur, whipping his legs, leaping into the air, bounding to land as light as a feather so you didn’t hear his feet hit the floor. His muscles rippled as he *jetéed* again and again, spreading his legs so his outstretched arms allowed his fingertips to touch his toes. I filled with excitement, watching him perform, knowing he was showing off for our benefit.

“Would you look at those *jetés*?” said Chris when he caught sight of me. “Why, he clears the floor by twelve feet or more. I

don't believe what I'm seeing!"

"Ten feet, not twelve," corrected Jory as he whirled by, spinning, spinning, covering the immense space of the foyer in mere seconds. Then he fell breathlessly down on a quilted floor mat put there so he'd have a place to rest without his body sweat fading the delicate and fancy chair coverings. "Damned hard floor if I fall ... ," he gasped as he lay back and rested on his elbows.

"And the spread of his legs when he leaps, it's unbelievable he can be so supple at his age."

"Dad, I'm only twenty-nine, not thirty-nine!" protested Jory, who had a thing about growing older and losing the spotlight to a younger *danseur*. "I've got at least eleven good years ahead before I begin to slide."

I knew exactly what he was thinking as he sprawled there on the mat, looking so much like Julian. It was as if I were twenty or so again. The muscles of all male dancers approaching forty began to harden and become brittle so that their once magnificent bodies weren't as attractive to the audience any longer. Off with the old, on with the new ... the fear of all performers, although ballerinas with their layer of fat under their skin could hold on longer. Falling on the mat beside Jory, I sat cross-legged in my pink slacks.

"Jory, you are going to last longer than most *danseurs*, so stop worrying. It's a long and glamorous road you have to travel to reach forty, and who knows, maybe you'll be fifty before you retire."

"Yeah, sure," he said, tucking his hands behind his curly head and staring up at the distant ceiling. "Fourteenth in a long line of dancers has to be the lucky number, doesn't it?"

How many times had I heard him say he couldn't live without dancing? Since he was a small boy of two, I'd put his feet on the road to where he was now.

Down the stairs Melodie glided, looking beautiful and fresh from a recent bath and shampoo, seeming a fragile spring flower in her blue leotards. "Jory, my doctor said I could keep

on with light practice, and I want to dance as long as possible to keep my muscles supple and long ... so dance with me, lover. Dance and dance, and then let's dance some more."

Instantly Jory bounded to his feet and whirled to the foot of the stairs, where he fell upon one knee in the romantic position of a prince seeing the princess of his dreams. "My pleasure, my lady ..." and swinging her off her feet, he whirled with her in his arms before he put her down with the skilled practice and grace that made her seem to have the weight of a feather. They whirled around, always dancing for the other, as once Julian and I had danced for the pure delight of being young, alive, and able. Tears came to my eyes as I stood beside Chris and watched them.

Sensing my thoughts, Chris put his arm about my shoulder and drew me closer. "They're beautiful together, aren't they? Made for each other, I would say. If I squint my eyes and see them hazily, I see you dancing with Julian ... only you were far prettier, Catherine, far prettier ..."

Behind us Bart snorted.

Whipping around, I saw Joel had trailed behind Bart like a well-trained puppy and at his heel he stopped, his head low, his hands still tucked up those invisible brown homespun sleeves. "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away," mumbled Joel again.

Why the devil did he keep saying that?

Uneasily I looked from Joel to Bart and found his admiring gaze again riveted on Melodie, who was in arabesque position, waiting for Jory to sweep her up in his arms. I didn't like what I saw in Bart's dark, envious look, the desire that burned hotter by the hour. The world was full of unmarried women—he didn't need Melodie, his brother's wife!

Wildly Bart applauded as their dance ended and both were gazing transfixed at each other, forgetting we were there. "You've got to dance like that at my birthday party! Jory, say that you and Melodie will."

Reluctantly Jory turned his head to smile at Bart. “Why, if you want me, of course, but not Mel. Her doctor will allow a little mild dancing and practicing, like we just did, but not that strenuous kind needed for a professional performance, and I know you’ll want only the best.”

“But I want Melodie, too,” protested Bart. He smiled charmingly at his brother’s wife. “Please, for my birthday, Melodie, just this one time ... and you’re not so far along anyone will notice your condition.”

Appearing uncertain, Melodie stared at Bart. “I don’t think I should,” she said lamely. “I want our baby to be healthy. I can’t risk losing it.”

Bart tried to persuade her, and might have, but Jory put a brisk end to the debate. “Now, listen, Bart, I told our agent Mel’s doctor didn’t want her to perform, and if she does, he might get wind of it and we could be sued. Besides, she’s very fatigued. The kind of easy fun dancing you just witnessed is not the kind we do when we’re serious. A professional performance demands hours and hours of warm-ups and practice and rehearsal. Don’t plead, it’s embarrassing. When Cindy comes she can dance with me.”

“No!” Bart snarled, frowning now and losing all his charm. “She can’t dance like Melodie.”

No, she couldn’t. Cindy wasn’t a professional, but she did well enough when she wanted to. Jory and I had trained her since she was two.

Several feet behind Bart, like a skinny dark shadow, Joel’s hands came out of wide sleeves and templed beneath his bowed head. He had his eyes closed, as if again in prayer. How irritating to have him around all the time.

Deliberately I turned my thoughts from him to Cindy. I couldn’t wait to see her again. Couldn’t wait to hear her breathless girlish chatter that told of proms and dates and the boys she knew. All the things that brought back to me my own youth, and my own desires to have what Cindy was experiencing.

In the rosy glow of the evening sunset, I stood unobserved in the shadows of a great arch overhead and watched Jory again dancing with Melodie in the huge foyer. Again in leotards, this time violet ones, with the filmy tunic to flutter enticingly, Melodie had bound violet satin ribbons under her small, firm breasts. She appeared a princess dancing with her lover. Oh, the passion Jory and Melodie had between them stirred a wistful longing in my own loins. To be young again like them ... to have the chance to do it all over ... do it right the second time around ...

Suddenly I was aware that Bart was in another alcove, as if he'd waited to spy ... or, more generously, watch as I watched. And he was the one who didn't like ballet and didn't care for beautiful music. He leaned casually against a door frame, his arms folded over his chest. But the burning dark eyes that followed Melodie weren't casual. They were full of the desire I'd seen before. My heart skipped.

When had Bart ever not wanted what belonged to Jory?

The music soared. Jory and Melodie had forgotten they might be observed and became so involved in what they were doing that they danced on and on, wildly passionate, entranced with each other, until Melodie ran to leap into his outstretched arms. Even as she did her lips pressed down on his. Parting lips that met again and again. Hands that roamed to seek out all the secret places. I was as much caught up in their lovemaking as Bart, unable to back away. Their kisses seemed to devour one another. In the heat of kindled desire, they fell to the floor and rolled onto the mat. Even as I strode toward Bart, I heard their heavy breathing, growing louder.

"Come, Bart, it's not right to stand and watch when the dancing is over."

He jumped as if my touch on his arm burned. The yearning in his eyes both hurt and frightened me.

"They should learn to control themselves when they're guests in my home," he said in a gruff voice, not taking his eyes off the forgetful pair rolling about on the mat, arms and legs entwined, sweaty hair wet and clinging as they kissed.

I yanked Bart into the music room and softly closed the door behind us. This was not a room I favored. It had been decorated to please Bart's very masculine taste. There was a grand piano that no one ever played, although I'd seen Joel finger it once or twice, then snatch his hands away as if the ivory keys singed him with sin. But the piano lured him so often he just stood staring at it, his fingers flexing and unflexing.

Bart strode toward a cabinet that opened to reveal a lighted bar. He reached for a crystal decanter to pour himself a stiff scotch. No water or ice. In one gulp he downed it. Then he was looking at me in a guilty fashion. "Nine years of marriage. Still they aren't tired of one another. What is it that you and Chris have that Jory has captured and I haven't?"

I flushed before my head bowed low. "I didn't know you drank alone."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, dear Mother." He poured a second scotch, I heard the slow gurgle of the fluid without looking up. "Even Malcolm had a drink once in a while."

Curiosity filled me. "Do you still think about Malcolm?"

He fell into a chair, crossed his legs by placing one ankle on the opposite knee. I looked away, thinking that once my second son had the most irritating ways of putting his feet on anything available, ruining many a good chair with his muddy boots, and bedspreads suffered early deaths. Then my eyes went back to his shoes. How did he keep the soles so clean, so they appeared never to have walked on anything but velvet?

Bit by bit Bart had lost all his messy ways on the way toward manhood. "Why do you stare at my shoes, Mother?"

"They're very handsome."

"Do you really think so?" He gazed down at them indifferently. "They cost six hundred bucks, and I paid another hundred to have the soles treated so they'll never show scuff marks or dirt. It's the 'in' thing to do, you know. Wear shoes with clean soles."

I frowned. What psychological message did that impart?
“The tops will wear out before the soles do.”

“So what?”

I had to agree. What did money mean to any of us now? We had more than we could possibly spend.

“When the tops wear, I’ll throw them out and buy a new pair.”

“Then why bother to have the soles treated?”

“Mother, really,” he said crossly. “I like everything to keep its new appearance until I’m ready to discard it—I’m going to hate looking at Melodie when she’s bulging in the middle like some breeding cow ...”

“I’ll be happy the day she shows, then perhaps you can move your eyes away from her.”

He lit a cigarette, met my eyes calmly. “I bet I could easily take her away from Jory.”

“How dare you say such a thing?” I cried angrily.

“She never looks at me, have you noticed? I don’t think she wants to see that I’m better-looking than Jory now, and taller, and smarter, and a hundred times richer.”

Our eye contact held. I swallowed nervously, plucked invisible lint from my clothes. “Cindy’s coming tomorrow.”

He shut his eyes briefly, gripped the arms of his chair harder, but otherwise showed no expression. “I disapprove of that girl,” he finally managed.

“I hope you won’t be unkind to her while she’s here. Can’t you remember the way she used to tag around, adoring you? She loved you before you turned her against you. She’d still adore you if you’d stopped teasing her so unmercifully. Bart ... aren’t you sorry for all the ugly things you said and did to your sister?”

“She’s *not* my sister.”

“She is, Bart, she is!”

“Oh, God, Mother, I’ll never think of Cindy as my sister. She’s adopted, not truly one of us. I’ve read a few of those letters she writes to you. Can’t you see what she is? Or do you only read what she says, and not what she means? How can any girl be that popular and not be giving out?”

I jumped to my feet. “What’s wrong with you, Bart?” I yelled. “You deny Chris as your father, Cindy as your sister, Jory as your brother. Don’t you need to have anyone but yourself—and that hateful old man who trails you about?”

“I’ve got a little of you, don’t I, Mother?” he said, narrowing his eyes to sinister slots. “And I’ve got my Uncle Joel, who is a very interesting man, who is, at this moment, praying for all our souls.”

A red flag waved in my face. I flamed with instant anger. “You’re an idiot if you prefer that creepy old man to the only father you’ve ever had!” I tried to keep my emotions under control but failed, as I’d always failed when it came to Bart and control. “Have you forgotten all the many kind deeds Chris has done for you? Is still doing for you?”

Bart leaned forward, piercing me with his diamond-hard glare. “But for Chris I would have had a happy life. With you married to my real father, I could have been the perfect son! Far more perfect than Jory. Maybe I’m like *you*, Mother. Maybe I need *my* revenge more than I need anything else.”

“Why do *you* need revenge?” Surprise was in my voice, a certain kind of hopelessness. “No one has done to you what was done to me.”

He leaned forward, very intense as he bit out, “You think because you gave me all the necessary things, all the clothes I needed, all the food I could eat, and a house to shelter me, you made yourself believe that was enough, but it wasn’t. I knew you saved the best of your love for Jory. Then, after Cindy came, you gave your second best to her. You had nothing left to give me but pity—and *I hate you for pitying me!*”

Sudden nausea almost made me gag. I was glad I had the chair beneath me. “Bart,” I began, struggling not to cry and show the very kind of weakness he’d despise, “perhaps once I

did pity you for being clumsy, for being unconfident. Most of all, I was sorry you hurt yourself so often. But how can I pity you now? You're very handsome, intelligent, and when you want to be, extremely charming as well. What reason do I have now for pitying you?"

"That's what bothers me," he said in a low voice. "You make me look at myself in the mirror, wondering what it is you see. I've come to the conclusion that you just don't like me. You don't trust me, don't believe in me. I see in your eyes right now that you don't believe I'm completely sane." Suddenly his eyes, which had half-closed, opened wide. He stared penetratingly into my eyes, which had always been easy to read. He laughed short and hard. "It's there, dear Mother, that suspicion, that same fear. I can read your mind, don't think I can't. You think someday I'll do something to betray you and your brother, when I've had chances enough to do exactly that and I've done nothing. I've kept your sins to myself.

"Why not be honest and say now you didn't love your mother's second husband. Say truthfully you only used him as the instrument of your revenge. You went after him, got him, conceived me, then he was dead. True to the kind of woman you are, you then headed straight back to that poor doctor in South Carolina, who no doubt believed in you and loved you beyond reason. Did he realize you married him just as a means to give your bastard child a name? Did he know you used him to escape Chris? See how much thought I've given to your motivations? And now I've come to another conclusion: You see a lot of Chris in Jory—and that's what you love! You look at me and see Malcolm, and although my face and physique may resemble that of my true father, you ignore that and see what you want to in my eyes. In my eyes you think you see the soul of Malcolm. Now tell me that I've presumed wrongly! Go on, tell me I'm not speaking the truth."

My lips parted to deny every word, but nothing came out.

I panicked inside, wanting to run to him and pull his head against my breast, as I so often comforted Jory, but I couldn't make my feet move in Bart's direction. I truthfully did fear

him. As he was now, fiercely intense and cold and hard, I was afraid of him, and fear made my love turn to dislike.

He waited for me to speak, to deny his charges, and in the end, I did the worst thing possible—I ran from the room.

On my bed I threw myself down and cried. Every word he'd said was true! I hadn't known Bart could read me like an open book. Now I was terrified of what he might do someday to destroy not only Chris and me, but Cindy, Jory, and Melodie.

Cindy



Around eleven the next day, Cindy arrived in a taxi, running into the house like a fresh, invigorating, spring breeze. She hurled herself into my arms, reeking of some exotic perfume I thought too sophisticated for a girl of sixteen, an opinion I knew I'd better keep to myself.

“Oh, Momma,” she cried, kissing and hugging me repeatedly, “it’s so good to see you again!” Her lavishings of affection left me quite breathless as I eagerly responded. All the while, even as we embraced, she managed to stare around at the grand rooms with all their elegant furnishings. Holding to my hand, she pulled me from one room to another, gasping and exclaiming at the beauty of everything so fine and rich.

“Where’s Dad?” she asked. I explained that Chris had driven into Charlottesville to turn in his rented car for a more luxurious model.

“Darling, he hoped to be back before you reached here. Something must have slowed him down. Be patient, and in a second or two he’ll stroll in the door and welcome you.”

Satisfied, she again exclaimed, “Momma, wow! What a house! You didn’t tell me it would be like this. You made me think the new Foxworth Hall would be just as ugly and scary as the first.”

To me, Foxworth Hall would always be ugly and scary, yet it was thrilling to watch Cindy’s excitement flow over. She was taller than I, her young breasts ripe and full, her waist very slender so it emphasized the gentle swell of her beautifully formed hips with the flat belly, while her buttocks filled out the back of her jeans delightfully. Looking at her figure sideways, I had to compare her to a burgeoning flower, so tender, so frail appearing, and yet she had exceptional endurance.

Her full and heavy long golden hair was casually styled. It blew wild in the wind as we went out to watch Jory and Bart fighting it out on the new tennis courts. “Oh, gosh, Momma, you do have two beautiful sons,” she whispered as she stared at their bronzed, strong bodies. “I never thought Bart would grow up to be just as handsome as Jory, not when he was such an ugly little brute.”

Amazed, I stared at her. Bart had been too thin, always with scabs and scars on his legs, and his dark hair had never been tidy, but he’d been a good-looking little boy, certainly not ugly-looking—only ugly acting. And once upon a time, Cindy had worshipped Bart. A knife twisted in my heart as I realized so much of what Bart had said last night was true. I *had* put Cindy ahead of him. I had thought she was perfect and incapable of doing wrong, and still did.

“Do try to be kind and thoughtful to Bart,” I whispered, seeing Joel coming our way.

“Who’s that funny-looking old man?” asked Cindy, turning to stare at Joel as he bent stiffly to pull up a few weeds. “Don’t tell me Bart has hired somebody like him for a gardener—why, he can hardly straighten up once he’s crooked.”

Before I could answer, Joel was upon us, smiling as broadly as his false teeth would allow. “Why, you must be Cindy, the one Bart talks about all the time,” he said with some faint leftover charm, taking Cindy’s reluctantly offered hand and putting it to his thin, crooked lips.

I could tell she wanted to yank her hand away, yet she tolerated the touch of his lips. The sun through Joel’s almost white hair still streaked with Foxworth gold made it seem terribly thin. Suddenly I realized I hadn’t told Cindy about Joel and hastened to introduce them. She seemed fascinated once she knew who he was. “You really mean you knew that hateful old Grandfather Malcolm? You are really *his* son? Why, you must be really ancient ...”

“Cindy, that’s not tactful ...”

“I’m sorry, Uncle Joel. It’s just when I hear my mom and dad talk of their youth, it seems a million years ago.” She

laughed charmingly, smiling apologetically at Joel. “You know something, you look a lot like my dad in some ways. When he’s really old, no doubt he’ll grow to look like you.”

Joel turned his eyes toward Chris, who’d just driven up and was even now stepping out of a beautiful new blue Cadillac with his arms full of packages. He’d picked up gifts I’d had engraved for Bart’s birthday. For his birthday, I’d gone all out and given him only the best, as he would expect: an attaché case of the finest leather, with combination locks, for Chris to give him. Eighteen-karat gold cufflinks with his initials in diamonds and a matching gold cigarette case, also monogrammed in diamonds—the gem Bart respected most, from me. His father had carried such a cigarette case, given to him by my mother.

Dropping the packages onto a lawn chair, Chris held his arms open. Cindy hurled herself into his welcoming embrace. She covered his face with a rain of small kisses, leaving her lip marks all over his face. Staring up into his face, she pleaded. “This is going to be the best summer of my life. Daddy, can’t we stay here until school starts in the fall, so I can know what it’s like to live in a real mansion, with all those beautiful rooms and fancy bathrooms? I already know which one I want, the one with all those pink and white and gold girlish things. He knows I just adore pink, really love pink, and already I adore and love this house! Just love it, love it!”

A shadow flickered through Chris’s eyes as he released her and turned to look at me. “We’ll have to talk that over, Cindy. As you know, your mother and I are here just to help Bart celebrate his twenty-fifth birthday.”

I looked over toward where Bart smashed the tennis ball with such force it’s a wonder it didn’t burst. Running like a streak of white light, Jory slammed the yellow ball back to Bart, who ran just as fast to swoop and cleverly whack it back with just as much force. Both were hot and sweaty, their faces reddening from the exercise and the hot sun. “Jory, Bart,” I called, “Cindy’s here. Come to say hello.”

Instantly Jory turned his head to smile, causing him to miss the next yellow ball that came hurtling his way. He failed to

return it, and Bart whooped for joy. He jumped up and down, hurled down his expensive racket, shouting, "I win!"

"You win by default," said Jory, throwing down his racket as well. He ran our way, his face all smiles. He threw back at Bart, "Default winning doesn't count."

"It does so count!" bellowed Bart. "What the hell do we care whether or not Cindy's here? You just used that to quit before my score topped yours."

"Have it your way," answered Jory. In a moment he was swinging Cindy off her feet, whirling her around and around, making her blue skirt fly and reveal skimpy bikini panties. It amused me to see that Cindy still dressed from the skin out in one color.

Melodie rose from a marble garden seat where she'd been watching the tennis game, until now half hidden by high shrubbery. I saw her lips tighten as she observed Cindy's too affectionate greeting.

"Like mother like daughter," mumbled Bart from behind me.

Cindy approached Bart warily, with so much decorum she didn't seem like the same girl who had kissed Jory. "Hello, brother Bart. You're looking very fit."

Bart stared at her as if he'd never seen her before. It had been two years, and at fourteen, Cindy had still worn her hair in pigtails, or ponytails, and she had braces on her teeth. Now her gleaming white teeth were perfectly spaced. Her hair was a loose-flowing mass of molten gold. There wasn't a girl in the skin magazines that had a better figure or more perfect complexion, and only too unhappily I realized that Cindy knew she looked sensational in her tight blue and white tennis dress.

Bart's dark eyes lingered on her ripe, unfettered breasts that jiggled when she walked, their peaks jutting out clearly. His eyes measured her hand-span waist before he stared at her pelvic area; then he lowered his eyes to take in very pretty

long legs that ended in white sandals. Her toenails were painted bright red to match her fingernails and lipstick.

She was breathtakingly lovely in a sweet, fresh, and innocent way that strove unsuccessfully to appear sophisticated. I didn't believe for a moment that that long, intense look she gave Bart meant what apparently he took it to mean.

"You're not my type," he said scornfully, turning away. When he did, he stared long and meaningfully at Melodie. Then again he turned to Cindy. "You have a certain cheap quality, despite all your expensive clothes—you don't possess nobility."

It hurt to hear him deliberately try and squelch Cindy's youthful pride. Her radiant expression faded. Like a tender flower without the admiration of rain to nourish her faith in herself, she wilted before me as she turned into Chris's waiting arms.

"Apologize, Bart," ordered Chris. I cringed, knowing Bart would never apologize.

Bart curled his lips, his scorn so apparent, even as he acted indignant and angry. His lips parted to insult Chris as he'd done so many times, but then he glanced at Melodie, who'd turned to look at him in a detached, curious way. A deep flush heated Bart's face. "I'll apologize when she learns how to dress and act like a lady."

"Apologize *now*, Bart," ordered Chris.

"Don't make demands, *Christopher*," said Bart, looking Chris meaningfully in the eyes. "You're in a very vulnerable position. You and my mother. You're not a Sheffield, not a Foxworth—or at least you can't let it be known you're a Foxworth. So just what are you that counts? The world is full of doctors, too many doctors—and younger and more knowledgeable ones than you are."

Chris stood taller. "My ignorance about medicine has saved your life more than once, Bart. And the lives of many others. Perhaps one day you'll recognize that fact. You've never said

thank you for anything I've done for you. I'm waiting for that day."

Bart paled, I suspected not so much from what Chris had just said. I thought he was embarrassed because Melodie was watching and listening. "Thank you, *Uncle Chris*," he said sarcastically.

How mocking and insincere his words and his tone of voice. I watched the two men in silent challenge, seeing Chris wince from the way Bart put stress on "Uncle." Then, for no reason at all, I glanced at Joel.

He'd moved closer to pause just behind Melodie, and on his face was the kindest, most benign smile. But in his eyes lurked something darker. I moved to stand beside Chris, just as Jory lined up with him on the other side.

My lips parted to add a long list of things Bart should thank Chris for, when suddenly Bart was striding toward Melodie, ignoring Cindy. "Have I told you the theme of my party? The dance I've chosen for you and Jory? It's going to cause a sensation."

Melodie stood up. She stared Bart straight in his eyes with open contempt. "I'm not going to dance for your birthday guests. I think Jory has explained to you more than once that I'm doing everything I can to see I have a healthy baby—and that doesn't include dancing for your amusement and that of people I don't even know."

Her voice was cold. Dislike for Bart glared from her dark blue eyes.

She left, taking Jory with her, leaving the rest of us to follow. Joel tagged along at the very end like a tail that didn't know how to wag.

Quick to recover from all wounds, as always she'd rebounded from Bart's rebuffs, Cindy gushed happily about the expected baby that would make her an aunt. "How wonderful! I can hardly wait. It's going to be one beautiful baby, I know, when it has parents like Jory and Melodie, and grandparents like you and Dad."

Cindy's delightful presence made up for so much of Bart's hatefulness. I hugged her close and she snuggled down on the loveseat in my private sitting room and began to spill out all the details of her life. I listened eagerly, fascinated by a daughter who was making up for all the excitement Carrie and I had missed out on.

* * *

Each morning Chris and I were up early to enjoy the beauty of the cool mountain mornings, with the perfume of roses and other flowers drifting to delight our nostrils. Cardinals scarlet as flames flew everywhere while bluejays shrieked and purple martins searched the grass for insects. It surprised me to see dozens of birdhouses to accommodate wrens, martins and other species, and fabulous birdbaths and rock garden pools where the birds had a merry time taking quick, fluttery baths. We ate on one terrace or another to enjoy different views, talking often of all this that had been denied us when we were young and would have been appreciated even more than it was now. Sad, so sad to think of our little twins and how they had cried to go outside, outside, and the only playground they had was the attic garden we made for them out of paper and cardboard. And this had been there then, unused, unenjoyed, when two little five-years-olds would have been in seventh heaven to have had just a little of what we could enjoy daily now.

Cindy liked to sleep late, as did Jory and especially Melodie, who complained a great deal about nausea and fatigue. As early as seven-thirty Chris and I watched workmen and party decorators drive up. Caterers came to prepare for the party, and interior designers arrived to complete the appointments in some of the unfinished rooms, but not one neighbor dropped in to welcome us. Bart's private phone rang often, but the telephones on the other lines hardly rang at all. We sat at the top of the world, or so it seemed, all by ourselves, and in some ways it was nice, in other ways it was a little frightening.

In the distance, faint and hazy, we could faintly see two church steeples. When the nights were still and without wind,

we could faintly hear them chime away the hours. I knew one had been patronized by Malcolm when he lived, and about a mile away was the cemetery where he and our grandmother were buried side by side, with elaborate headstones and guardian angels put there by our mother.

I filled my days with playing tennis with Chris, with Jory, sometimes with Bart, and that's when he really seemed to like me most. "You surprise me, Mother!" he yelled over the net, slamming that yellow ball so hard it almost went through my racket. Somehow I managed to race to hit it back, and then my troublesome knee started hurting and I had to quit. Bart complained I was using that knee as an excuse to abandon play with him.

"You find any reason to stay away from me," he yelled as if Chris's words meant nothing. "Your knee doesn't hurt ... or you'd be limping."

I did limp as I climbed the stairs, but Bart wasn't around to notice this. I soaked in a tub of hot water for an hour to take away the pain. Chris came in to tell me I was doing it wrong again. "Ice, Catherine, ice! You only inflame your knee more when you sit in hot water. Now get out while I fill a bag with crushed ice, and keep it on your knee for twenty minutes." He kissed me to take the sting from his words. "See you later," he said, hurrying back to the tennis courts to take on Jory, while Bart left with Joel in tow. All this I could see from our bedroom balcony while I sat with that ice bag held to my knee, and soon enough the cold worked, chasing away the throbbing hot pain.

I was beginning a layette for Jory's expected baby. This demanded many shopping sprees for yarns, needles, crochet hooks, for visiting adorable baby shops. Often we drove into Charlottesville with Cindy and Chris to shop, and twice we made the longer drive to Richmond and shopped there, went to the movies, and stayed overnight. Sometimes Jory and Melodie went with us, but not as often as I would have liked. Already Foxworth Hall's charm was palling.

But if it palled for me, for Jory and Melodie, it worked its charm on Cindy, who adored her room, her fancy French

furniture, her ultrafeminine bath with its pink decor enhanced with gold and mossy pale green. Hugging herself, she danced around. “So he doesn’t like me,” she laughed, spinning around before the many mirrors, “and yet he decorates a room exactly the way I’d want. Oh, Momma, how can either of us understand Bart?”

Who could answer that?

Preparations



As Bart's twenty-fifth birthday approached, a kind of feverish insanity descended on the Hall. Different kinds of decorators came to measure our lawns, our patios, our terraces. In groups they whispered, made lists, sketches, tried different colors for the tablecloths, talked in huddles to Bart, discussed the theme of the dance, and made their secret plans. Bart still refused to reveal the theme—at least to the members of his family. Secrets didn't sit well with anyone but Bart. The rest of us became a close-knit family that Bart didn't want to join.

Workmen with wood and paint and other construction materials began to build what appeared to be a stage and platforms for the orchestra. I heard Bart brag to one of his entourage that he was hiring opera stars, very famous ones.

Whenever I was outdoors, and I stayed outside as much as possible, I stared at the blue-misted mountains all around us and wondered if they remembered two of the attic mice shut upstairs for almost four years. I wondered if ever again they'd transform an ordinary little girl into someone full of fanciful dreams she had to make come true. And I had made a few come true, even if I'd failed more than once to keep husbands alive. I wiped away two tears and met Chris's still loving gaze and felt that old familiar sadness wash over me. How sane Bart could have been if only Chris hadn't loved me—and I hadn't loved him.

Blame the wind or stars of fate—but I still blamed my mother.

Despite our dire anticipations of what lay ahead, I couldn't help but feel happier than I'd felt in some time, just watching all the excitement in the gardens that gradually turned into something straight from a movie set. I gasped to see what Bart wanted done.

It was a biblical scene!

“*Samson and Delilah*,” Bart said flatly when I asked, all his enthusiasm squelched because Melodie kept refusing to dance the role he wanted. “Often I’ve heard Jory say he loved the chance to produce his own productions, and he does love that role most of all.”

Pivoting about, Melodie headed for the house without answering, her face pale with anger.

Again, I should have known. What other theme would capture Bart’s fancy as much?

Cindy ran to throw her arms about Jory. “Jory, let me dance the role of Delilah, I can! I just know I can.”

“I don’t want your amateurish attempts!” shouted Bart.

Ignoring him, Cindy tugged pleadingly on both of Jory’s hands. “Please, please, Jory. I’d love to do it. I’ve kept up my ballet classes, so I won’t be stiff and awkward and make you look unskilled, and between now and then you can help me gain better timing. I’ll rehearse morning, night, and noon!”

“There’s not enough time to rehearse when the performance is two days away,” complained Jory, throwing Bart a hard, angry look. “Good lord, Bart, why didn’t you tell me before? Do you think just because I choreographed that particular ballet that I can remember all the difficult routines? A role like that needs weeks of rehearsing, and you wait until the last moment! Why?”

“Cindy’s lying,” said Bart, looking longingly at the door through which Melodie had disappeared. “She was too lazy to keep up her classes before, so why should she when Mother’s not there to force her?”

“I have! I have!” cried Cindy with great excitement and pride, when I knew she hated violent exercises. Before the age of six, she’d loved the pretty tutus, the cute little satin slippers, the little sparkling tiaras of fake jewels, and the fantasy of the fanciful productions had put her in a spell of beauty I’d once believed she’d never abandon. But Bart had ridiculed her performances just one too many times, and she’d let him

convince her she was hopelessly inadequate. She'd been about twelve when he stole her pleasure in the ballet. From then on she'd never gone to classes. Therefore I was doubly amazed to hear she'd never really given up on the dance, only on allowing Bart see her perform.

She turned to me, as if pleading for her life. "Really, I am telling the truth! Once I was in the private girl's school, and Bart wasn't around to ridicule me, I started again and ever since have kept up my ballet classes, and I tap dance as well."

"Well," said Jory, apparently impressed, giving Bart another hard look, "we can devote what time we have left to practicing, but you were extremely unthinking to believe we wouldn't need to practice for weeks, Bart. I don't expect to have much difficulty myself since it's a familiar role—but Cindy, you've not even seen that particular ballet."

Rudely interrupting, Bart asked with great excitement, "Do you have the lenses, the white lenses? Can you really see through them? I saw you and Melodie in New York about a year ago, and from the orchestra you really did look blind."

Frowning at his unexpected question, Jory studied Bart seriously. "Yes ... I have the contacts with me," he said slowly. "Everywhere I go someone asks me to dance the role of Samson, so I take the lenses. I didn't know you appreciated ballet so much."

Laughing, Bart slapped Jory on the back as if they'd never had a disagreement. Jory staggered from the strength of that blow. "Most ballets are stupid bores, but this particular one catches my fancy. Samson was a great hero and I admire him. And you, my brother, perform extraordinarily well as Samson. Why, you even look just as powerful. I guess that's the only ballet that has ever thrilled me."

I wasn't listening to Bart. I was staring at Joel, who leaned forward. Muscles near his thin lips worked almost spasmodically, hovering near a smirk or a laugh, I couldn't tell which. All of a sudden I didn't want Jory and Cindy to dance in that particular ballet, which included very brutal scenes. And it had been Bart's idea years and years ago ... hadn't he

been the one to suggest that the opera would provide the music for what he considered would make the most sensational ballet of all?

All through the night I thought and I thought of how to stop Bart from wanting that particular production.

He'd never been easy to stop as a boy.

As a man ... I didn't know if I had a chance. But I was going to give it a try.

The very next morning I was up early and running out into the yard to catch Bart before he drove off. He listened to me with impatience, refusing to change the theme of his party. "I can't now, even if I wanted to. I've had the costumes designed and they are almost finished, as are the sets and flats. If I cancel anything it will be too late to plan another ballet. Besides, Jory doesn't mind, why should you?"

How could I tell him that some small, intuitive voice was warning me not to let this particular ballet be performed near the place of our confinement—with Malcolm and his wife in the ground not so far away the music wouldn't fill their dead ears.

* * *

Jory and Cindy practiced and rehearsed night and day, both catching a certain excitement as they worked together and Jory found out that Cindy was good; certainly she wouldn't perform as well as Melodie would have, but she'd dance more than adequately, and she was so lovely with her hair bound up in classical ballerina style.

The morning of Bart's birthday dawned bright and clear, heralding a perfect summer day without rain or clouds.

I was up early with Chris, strolling in the gardens before breakfast, enjoying the perfume of roses that seemed to herald a beautiful, perfect birthday for Bart. He'd always wanted birthday parties, like the ones we threw for Jory and Cindy, yet when they came around, he somehow managed to antagonize every guest so that many left early, and usually in a huff.

He was a man now, I kept telling myself, and this time it would be different. Chris was saying that to me, as if we had some sort of telepathy, both with the same thoughts.

“He’s coming into his own,” I said. “Isn’t it odd how he’s hung on to that childish expression, Chris? Will the attorneys read the will again after the party?”

Smiling and happy-looking, Chris shook his head. “No, darling, we’ll all be too tired. The reading is set for the next day.” A shadow came to darken his expression. “I can’t remember anything in that will that would spoil Bart’s birthday, can you?”

No, I couldn’t, but at the time of our mother’s will reading, I’d been too upset, crying, half hearing, not really caring if none of us inherited the Foxworth fortune that seemed to come with its own curse.

“There’s something Bart’s attorneys aren’t telling me, Cathy ... something they say indicates I must not have clearly understood at the time when our mother’s will was read shortly after her death. Now they don’t want to speak of it because Bart has demanded that I not be included in any legal discussions. They look at him as if he scares or intimidates them. It surprises me to see middle-aged men with years of experience yield under his pressure, as if they want to keep his good will, and mine be damned. It annoys me, and then I ask myself, what the hell do I care? Soon we’ll be leaving and making a new home for ourselves, and Bart can take his fortune and rule with it ...”

My arms went about him, angry because Bart refused to give him the credit he deserved for handling that vast fortune for so many years, and doing a darn good job of it, too, despite his medical practice that stole so much of his time.

“How many millions will he inherit?” I asked. “Twenty, fifty, more? One billion, two, three—more?”

Chris laughed. “Oh, Catherine, you never grow up. You always exaggerate. To be honest, it’s difficult to calculate the net worth of all those holdings when they are scattered into so many areas of investments. However, he should be pleased

when his attorneys give a rough estimate ... it's more than enough for ten greedy young men.”

In the foyer we paused to watch Jory rehearsing with Cindy, both hot and sweaty from all their efforts. Other dancers who'd be in the ballet were with them, standing around idly, either watching Jory and Cindy or staring around at what they could see of the fabulous house. Cindy was doing exceptionally well, and that truly surprised me; imagine keeping up her ballet classes and not telling me. She must have used some of her allowance meant for clothes and cosmetics and other trivial things she was always needing.

One of the older dancers strolled over to me, smiling as she spoke of seeing me dance a few times in New York. “Your son is very much like his father,” she went on, glancing back at Jory, who was whipping himself up into such a passion I wondered if he'd have any energy left for tonight's performance. “Maybe I shouldn't say this, but he's ten times better. I was only about twelve when you and Julian Marquet danced in *The Sleeping Beauty*, but it was the inspiration that gave me the desire to become a dancer myself. Thank you for giving us another wonderful dancer like Jory Marquet.”

What she said filled me with happiness. My marriage to Julian hadn't been a total failure when it had produced Jory. Now I had to believe Bartholomew Winslow's son would eventually fill me with just as much pride as I felt right now.

The rehearsal over, Cindy came to me, quite out of breath. “Mom, how did I do, okay?” Her eager face waited for my approval.

“You did beautifully, Cindy, really you did. Now, if you just remember to feel the music ... keep the timing, you will turn in a remarkable performance for a novice.”

She grinned at me. “Always the instructor, huh, Mom? I suspect I'm not nearly as good as you want me to believe, but I'm going to give this performance my everything, and if I fail, it won't be because I didn't try.”

Jory was surrounded by admirers, while Melodie sat quietly on a love seat beside Bart. They didn't appear to be

conversing, nor did they seem friendly. Yet, seeing them on that lovely small seat for two, I felt somehow uneasy. Tugging Chris forward, we moved closer to the pair on the love seat. “Happy birthday, Bart,” I said cheerfully. He looked up and smiled with genuine charm.

“I told you it was going to be a great day, with sun and no rain.”

“Yes, you told us.”

“Can we all eat now?” he asked, standing and reaching for Melodie’s hand. She ignored him and stood without assistance. “I’m starving!” Bart went on, looking only a little crestfallen from another of her rebuffs. “Those little Continental morning snacks just don’t satisfy me.”

We made a happy assembly at the luncheon table, all but Joel, who sat at his own small, round table on the terrace, apart from the rest of us. It was his claim that we were too rowdy and ate too much, insulting his monkish tastes, which dictated a serious attitude toward food and long prayers before and after eating. Even Bart grew annoyed with Joel when he became too pious, and especially on this day his impatience showed. “Uncle Joel, do you have to sit there all by yourself? Come, join the family group and wish me a happy birthday.”

Joel shook his head. “The Lord scorns ostentatious displays of wealth and vanity. I disapprove of this party. You could show your gratitude to be alive in a better way, by contributing to charities.”

“What have charities done for me? This is my time to shine, Uncle, and even if dear old dead Malcolm flips over in his grave, I’m having the time of my life tonight!”

I was flooded with delight. Quickly I leaned to kiss him. “I love to see you like this, Bart. This *is* your day ... and the gifts we have for you are going to open your eyes wide.”

“Hope so,” he said, all smiles. “I see they’re heaping up on the gift table. We’ll open them soon after the guests are here, so we can get on to the entertainment.”

Across from where I sat, Jory was staring into Melodie's eyes with concern. "Honey, are you feeling all right?"

"Yes," she whispered, "except I'd like to be dancing the role of Delilah. It feels strange watching you dance with someone else."

"After the baby comes, we'll dance together again," he said before he kissed her. Her eyes clung worshipfully to him as he got up to practice again with Cindy.

That's when Bart lost his happy expression.

* * *

Delivery men were constantly at the door bringing Bart more gifts. Many of his fraternity brothers from Harvard were coming with their girlfriends or wives. Those who couldn't make it were sending presents. Bart came and went, almost on the run, checking on every aspect of the party. Bouquets of flowers arrived by the dozens. The caterers filled the kitchen, so I felt an intruder when I wanted to prepare my own kind of midday snack. Then Bart had me by the arm and was pulling me through all the rooms that were overflowing with flowers. "Do you think my friends will be impressed?" he asked worriedly. "You know, I think I might have done a bit too much bragging when I was in school. They'll expect a mansion beyond compare."

I took another look around. There was something about a house ready for a party that made it especially beautiful, and Foxworth Hall was not only festive but spectacular with all its fresh flowers to give it warmth and grace, as well as beauty. All the crystal sparkled, the silver gleamed, the copper glowed ... oh, yes, this house could rival the very best.

"Darling, stop fretting. You can't out-best everyone in the world. This is a truly beautiful house, and your decorators have done a marvelous job. Your friends will be impressed, don't you doubt that for one second. The caretakers did keep it well over the years, and gave all the gardens a chance to become well established."

He wasn't listening, just staring beyond me, frowning slightly. "You know, Mother," he said in a low voice, "I'm going to rattle around here after you and your brother go, and Melodie and Jory leave. It's a good thing I've got my Uncle Joel, who will stay on until he dies."

I heard this with a sinking heart.

Cindy's name wasn't mentioned, for obviously he'd never miss her. "Do you really like Joel that much, Bart? This morning he seemed to irk you with his monkish ways."

Clouds shadowed his already dark eyes, made grave his handsome face. "My uncle is helping me find myself, Mother, and if sometimes he annoys me, it's because I'm still so uncertain about my future. He can't help his habits formed over all those years living with monks who weren't allowed to speak, only pray out loud and sing at services. He's told me a bit about how it was, and it must have been very grim and lonely ... yet he says he found peace there, and belief in God and everlasting life."

My arm dropped from his waist. He could have turned to Chris and found everything he needed—peace, security, and the faith that had sustained Chris throughout life. Bart had blind eyes when it came to seeing the goodness in a man who'd tried so hard to make a son out of Bart.

But my relationship with my brother condemned him, blinded Bart to anything but that.

Sadly I left Bart and climbed the stairs to find Chris on the balcony staring down at the workers in the yard. I joined him there, feeling the sun hot on my head. Silently we watched all that bustle of activity, while I prayed this house was finally going to give us something other than misery.

We napped for two hours, then ate a small dinner before all of us hurried back up to dress for the party. I went again out onto the balcony that gave Chris and me so much pleasure. Below me spread the birthday fairyland. The colors of the fading day filled the heavens with deep rose and violet, streaked it with magenta and orange, and sleepy birds flew like dark tears toward their nests. Cardinals were making their little

beeping sounds, not chirps or cheeps but more like electronic, metallic bleeps. When Chris stepped up beside me, damp and fresh from his shower, we didn't speak or feel the need to; we just embraced, looking downward, before we finally turned away and went inside.

Bart, the child of my revenge, was coming into his own. I held fast to my hopes—wanting a party that turned out well and gave him the assurance he needed that he had friends and was well liked. I held off my fears and told myself over and over again that it was Bart's just due, and ours, too.

Maybe Bart would be satisfied tomorrow when the will was reread. Maybe, just maybe ... I wanted the best for him, wanted fate to make up for so many things.

Behind me Chris moved in our dressing room, stepping into his tux trousers, stuffing in his shirttails, tying his own bow tie, then asking me to do it all over again. "Make the ends even." Gladly I retied it for him. He brushed his beautiful blond hair that was just a bit darker in back than it had been when he was forty. Each decade both darkened the blond and brought a touch more of silver in both our heads of hair. Easily I could keep mine colored, but Chris refused to do that. Fair hair had a lot to do with the way I thought about myself. My face was still pretty. I was both mature and young-looking.

Chris's reflection moved closer to my dressing table, hovering over my shoulders. His hands, so familiar to me now, moved to slip inside my bodice and cup my breasts before his lips pressed on my neck. "I love you. God knows what I would do if I didn't have you."

Why was he always saying that?

As if he expected one day I'd leave or die before he did. "Darling, you'd live, that's what. You're important to society, I'm not."

"You're the one who keeps me going," he whispered in a hoarse voice. "Without you I wouldn't know how to continue on—but without me, you'd go on and probably marry again."

I saw his eyes, his blue eyes wistfully waiting.

“I’ve had three husbands and one lover, and that’s enough for any one woman. If I am so unlucky as to lose you first, I’ll sit day by day before a window, staring out and remembering how it used to be with you.”

His eyes turned softer, meeting and locking with mine as I went on. “You look so beautiful, Chris. You’ll make your sons envious.”

“Beautiful? Isn’t that an adjective used to describe females?”

“No. there’s a difference between handsome and beautiful. Some men can look handsome, but not radiate inner beauty—like you do. You, my love, are *beautiful*—inside and out.”

Again his blue eyes lit up. “Thank you very much. And may I say that I find you ten times as beautiful as you find me.”

“My sons will be jealous when they behold the beauty of my Christopher Doll.”

“Yes, of course,” he answered with a wry grin. “*Your* sons see much to envy in me.”

“Chris, you know Jory loves you. Someday Bart’s going to find out he loves you, too.”

“Someday my ship will come ... ,” he sang lightly.

“It’s his ship too, Chris. Bart is at last coming into his own. And with that fortune in his control, rather than yours, he’ll relax, find himself, and turn to you as the best father he could have had.”

Reflectively he smiled, a small smile of sadness. “To be honest, darling, I’ll be happy when Bart has his money and I’m out of the picture. It’s no easy chore handling all that money, though I could have hired a money manager to do it for me. As trustee, I guess I wanted to prove myself to Bart, that I’m more than just a doctor, since that never seemed enough for him.”

What could I say? Nothing Chris did seemed to change the way Bart felt about him. Because of that one thing he couldn’t

change—he was my brother—Bart would never accept him as his father.

“What are you thinking, my love, that’s ugly, and making you frown?”

“Nothing much,” I answered, then I stood. The silky white of my clinging Grecian-styled dress felt whispery and sensuous against my bare skin. My hair had a single long curl to drape over my shoulder, the rest of it piled high on the crown of my head. Holding it in place was a diamond hair clip, the only jewelry I wore but for my wedding rings.

In the middle of the bedroom we shared, Chris and I reached for each other. There we stood, wrapped in each other’s arms, holding fast to the only security we ever had that lasted: each other. All about us the house felt so quiet. We could have been lost and alone in eternity.

“All right, spill it out,” said Chris after long minutes passed. “I can always tell when you’re worried.”

“I wish things could be different between you and Bart, that’s all,” I replied in an offhand way, not wanting to spoil this evening.

“I feel my relationship with Jory and Cindy more than makes up for Bart’s antagonism. And, more importantly, I genuinely sense Bart *does not* hate me. There are times when I feel he wants to reach out to me, but there’s that shame, that knowledge of our true relationship that holds him as if bound by chains of steel. He wants guidance but is ashamed to ask for it. He wants a father, a real father. His psychiatrists have always told us that. He looks at me, finds me sadly lacking ... so he looks elsewhere. First it was Malcolm, his great-grandfather, already dead in his grave. Then it was John Amos, and John failed him, too. Now he turns to Joel, fearfully suspecting that he, too, may have his flaws. Yes, I can tell at times he doesn’t really trust his great-uncle. And because he can think like this, Bart is not beyond saving, Cathy. We still have time to reach him—for we’re alive and he’s alive.”

“Yes, yes! I know, I know. While there’s life there’s always hope. Say it again, and then again. And if you say it often enough, maybe the day will come when Bart says to you, ‘Yes, I love you. Yes, you’ve done your best. Yes, you are the father I’ve been looking for all my life’—and wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

His head bowed into my hair. “Don’t sound so bitter. That day will come, Cathy. As surely as you and I love each other—and our three children—that day will come.”

I knew I’d do anything that was necessary to see that one day Bart would speak genuine words of love to his father! I’d live forever to see the day when Bart not only accepted Chris and said he loved him and admired him and thanked him, I’d also live to see him a real brother to Jory again ... and a brother to Cindy.

Minutes later we were at the head of the stairs, starting to descend and join Jory and Melodie, whom we could see near the newel post at the bottom. Melodie wore a simple black gown that draped from black shoestring straps. Her only jewelry was a string of gleaming pearls.

Upon hearing the clatter of my high-heeled silver slippers on the marble, Bart stepped into view wearing his custom-tailored tux. My breath caught. He could have been his father when I’d seen him the first time.

His mustache—that small amount of fuzz first seen seven days ago—had grown thicker. He looked happy, and that was enough to make him look even more handsome. His dark eyes were full of admiration as he saw my dress, my hair, smelled my perfume. “Mother!” he cried, “you look stunning! You bought that lovely white dress especially for my party, didn’t you?” Laughing, I said yes, of course, I couldn’t wear anything old to a party such as this.

We all had compliments for each other, except Bart didn’t say anything at all to Chris, although I saw him surreptitiously glancing at him, as if Chris’s steadfast good looks kept taking him by surprise. Melodie and Jory, Chris and I, with Bart and

Joel, formed a circle at the bottom of the stairs, all of us but Joel trying to talk at the same time. Then ...

“Momma, Daddy!” called Cindy, running down the stairs toward us and holding up her long flame-red dress so she wouldn’t trip. I turned to stare at her disbelievingly.

I didn’t know where Cindy had found the shocking red dress she wore. It seemed the kind a hooker would wear to display her charms. I filled with such sickening dread of Bart’s reaction that all my former happiness flowed like stale wine down into my slippers and disappeared through the floor. The thing she wore clung like a coat of scarlet paint, the neckline plunged almost to her waist, and obviously she wore nothing underneath. The peaks of her jutting breasts were too obvious; and when she moved she jiggled embarrassingly. The clinging satin sheath was cut on the bias, and clung... oh, it did cling. There wasn’t a bulge or a ripple to betray an ounce of fat, only a superb young body she wanted to display.

“Cindy, go back to your room,” I whispered, “and put on that blue dress you promised to wear. You’re sixteen, not thirty.”

“Oh, Momma, don’t be so stodgy. Times have changed. Nudity is in, Momma, IN. And compared to some I could have chosen, this dress is modest, absolutely prudish.”

Just one glance at Bart told me he didn’t think Cindy’s gown was modest. He stood as if dumbstruck until this very moment, with his face flame red, his dark eyes bulging as he stared at her mincing around, because the skirt was so tight she could hardly move her legs.

Bart stared at us, looked again at Cindy. Bart’s rage was so furious he couldn’t speak. In those few seconds I had to think quickly of how to appease him. “Cindy, please, run back and change into something decent.”

Cindy had her eyes fixed on Bart. Obviously she was challenging him to do something to stop her. She seemed to be enjoying his reaction, his bulging eyes, his gaping lips that showed his indignation and shock. She made more of a show of herself by sashaying around like a prancing pony in heat,

swishing those hips in an undulating, provocative way. Joel moved next to Bart, his watery blue eyes cold and scornful as he looked Cindy up and down, and then his eyes lifted to meet mine. *See, see what you have raised*, he said mutely.

“Cindy, do you hear your mother?” Chris bellowed. “Do as she says! Immediately!”

Appearing shocked, Cindy froze, staring at him with defiance as she flushed and stood her ground.

“Please, Cindy,” I added, “do as your father says. The other dress is very pretty and appropriate. What you have on is vulgar.”

“I am old enough to choose what I want to wear.” she said in a quivery voice, refusing to move. “Bart likes red, so I wear red!”

Melodie stared at Cindy, glanced helplessly up at me, and tried to smile. Jory appeared amused, as if this were all a joke.

Cindy had by this time finished her burlesque performance. She looked somewhat crestfallen as she paused before Jory, staring up at him expectantly. “You look absolutely divine, Jory—and you, too, Melodie.”

Obviously Jory didn’t know what to say or where to look, so he looked away, then looked back. A slow blush rose from the neckline of his tucked formal shirt. “And you look like ... Marilyn Monroe ...”

Bart’s dark head snapped around. His fiery gaze raked over Cindy again. His face flamed even redder so it seemed he might go up in smoke. He exploded, all control vanished. “You go straight back to your room and put on something decent! INSTANTLY! MOVE before you get what you deserve! I won’t have anyone in my home dressing like a whore!”

“Get lost, you creep!” she snapped back.

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?” he yelled.

“I said, GET LOST, CREEP! I will wear exactly what I have on!” I saw her tremble. But for once Bart was right.

“Cindy, why? You know that dress is wrong, and everyone is right to be shocked. Now, do what’s expected, go upstairs and change. Don’t create more distress than you already have—for you do look like a street prostitute, and certainly you must know that. Usually you have very good taste. Why did you select that thing?”

“Momma!” she wailed, “you’re making me feel bad!”

Bart stepped toward her, his expression very threatening. Instantly Melodie moved between them, spreading her slender white arms before she turned pleadingly to Bart. “Can’t you see she’s only doing this to annoy you? Stay calm, or else you will give Cindy exactly the satisfaction she wants.”

Turning, she said to Cindy in a cool but authoritative voice, “Cindy, you have achieved the shock effects you wanted. So why don’t you go back upstairs and put on that pretty blue dress you started to wear in the first place?”

Bart ignored both Chris and me as he strode to seize Cindy, but she pranced away out of his reach, turning to teasingly mock him for being slow and not as agile as she was, even hobbled as she was in that slim, straight, tight skirt. I could have slapped Cindy when I heard her say silkily, “Bart, darling, I was so sure you’d love this scarlet gown ... since you think I’m a cheap, trashy thing, anyway, I’m just living up to your expectations—and playing the role you wrote for me.”

In one flashing bound he reached her. His open palm slammed against her cheek.

The pain in his hard slap rocked Cindy backward so that she sat down very hard on the second stair step. I heard the skirt of her red gown rip down the midback seam. Moving quickly, I hurried to help her up. Tears came to Cindy’s eyes.

Hurriedly standing, Cindy backed up the stairs, struggling to maintain dignity. “You are a creep, brother Bart. A weird pervert who doesn’t know what the real world is about. I bet you’re a virgin, or else gay!”

The rage on Bart’s face sent her scurrying up the stairs in a hurry. I moved to prevent Bart from following Cindy, but he

was too quick.

Ruthlessly he shoved me aside, so I, too, almost fell. Crying like a chastised child, Cindy disappeared with Bart close at her heels.

In a distant hall, I faintly heard Bart shout, “How dare you try to embarrass me? You’re the trashy one I’ve had to protect from all the dirty stories I hear about you. I used to think they lied. Now you’ve proved yourself exactly what they said you were! As soon as this party is over, I don’t ever want to see you again!”

“AS IF I WANT TO SEE YOU!” she screamed. “I HATE YOU, BART! HATE YOU!”

I heard her scream, the wailing cries ... I started to head up the stairs while Chris tried to restrain me. Tugging free, I had climbed five steps when Bart appeared with a satisfied smirk on his handsome but momentarily evil face. He whispered as he passed, “I just gave her what you never did—a thorough spanking. If she can sit for a week comfortably, she’s got an ass made of iron.”

I glanced backward in time to see Joel scowl at the use of that word.

Ignoring Joel for a change, smiling like the perfect host, Bart arranged us into a receiving line, and soon guests began to arrive. Bart introduced all of us to people I hadn’t known he knew. I was amazed at the style he showed, the poise, the ease with which he handled everyone and made them welcome. His college chums came flocking in, as if to see all that he’d told them about. If Cindy hadn’t put on that horrible dress, I could have really felt proud of Bart. As it was, I was baffled, believing Bart could be anything that suited his purpose.

Right now he was set on charming everyone. And he succeeded, even more than Jory, who obviously and wisely intended to take a backseat and allow Bart to shine. Melodie stayed close at her husband’s side, clinging to his hand, his arm, looking pale, unhappy. I was so absorbed in watching Bart perform that I was startled when someone tugged on my arm. It was Cindy, wearing the modest little blue silk sheath

I'd chosen for her. She looked sweet-sixteen-and-never-been-kissed. I scolded, "Really, Cindy, you can't blame Bart. This time you deserved a spanking."

She choked out, "Damn him to hell! I'll show him! I'll dance ten times better than Melodie has ever danced! I'll make every man at this party want me tonight, despite this deadly mousey gown you chose."

"You don't mean that, Cindy."

Softening, she fell into my arms. "No, Momma, I don't mean that."

Bart saw Cindy with me, raked his eyes over her girlish gown, smiled sarcastically, and then came our way.

Cindy stood taller.

"Now, listen, Cindy. You'll put on your costume when the time comes and forget anything happened between us. You'll perform your part to perfection—okay?"

Playfully he pinched her cheek. So playfully his pinch left a deep red indentation on her face. She squealed and kicked out. Her high heel dug into his shin. He yelped and slapped her.

"Bart!" I hissed, "stop! Don't you hurt her again! You've done enough for one night!"

Chris yanked Bart away from Cindy. "Now, I've had enough of this idiocy," he said angrily, and Chris seldom angered. "You've invited to this party some of the most important people in Virginia—now show them you know how to behave."

Pulling roughly away from Chris, Bart glared at him, then strode away, very fast, without a comment. I smiled at Chris, and with him beside me, we headed for the gardens. Jory and Melodie took Cindy and began introducing her to some of the young people who'd come with their parents. There were many there that Bart had met through Jory and Melodie, who had hordes of friends and fans.

I could only hope for the best.

Samson and Delilah



Golden globes everywhere lit up the night, and the moon rode high in a cloudless, starry sky. Out on the lawn were dozens of buffet tables butted together to form a huge U. On these tables food was placed in large silver dishes. A fountain sprayed imported champagne into the air, then trickled it into layered pools that ran into tiny spigots. On the middle table was a huge ice sculpture of Foxworth Hall.

Besides the main tables laden with all that money could buy were dozens of small round and square individual tables covered with brilliant cloths—green over rose, turquoise over violet, yellow over orange, and other striking combinations. The tablecloths were kept from blowing by heavy garlands of flowers festooned around them.

Although Chris and I had been introduced in the receiving line, it seemed to me most of Bart's guests made it a point not to talk to us. I looked at Chris just as he looked at me. "What's going on?" he asked in a low whisper.

"The older guests are not talking to Bart, either," I answered. "Look, Chris, they've come just to drink, eat, and enjoy themselves, and they don't give a damn about Bart, or any of us. They are just here so he can dine and wine them."

"I wouldn't say that," Chris replied. "Everyone makes it a point to speak to Jory and Melodie. Some are even talking to Joel. Doesn't he look a fine and elegant gentleman tonight?"

Never would it cease to amaze me the way Chris could find something to admire in everyone.

Joel looked like a funeral director as he moved solemnly from one group to another. He didn't carry a glass like everyone else. He didn't partake of the refreshments that piled the buffet tables in such a breathtaking array. I nibbled daintily

on a cracker spread with goose liver pâté and looked around for Cindy. She was in the center of five young men, very much the belle of the ball. Even her demure blue dress didn't keep her from looking very seductive—now that she'd shoved the shoulder ruffle down to bare the top half of her bosom.

“She looks like you used to,” said Chris, also watching Cindy. “Except you had a more ethereal quality, as if your two feet were never firmly on the ground, and never would you stop believing miracles could happen.” He paused and looked at me in that special way that kept my love for him always alive and thriving. “Yes, love,” he whispered, “miracles can happen, even here.”

Every wife or husband seemed to be trying to score with any member of the opposite sex besides their spouses. Only Chris and I stuck together. Jory had disappeared, and now Melodie was standing with Bart. He was saying something to her that had her eyes blazing hot. She turned to hurry away, but he seized hold of her arm and yanked her back. She snatched her arm away, only to have him seize it again, and ruthlessly he pulled her into his embrace. They began to dance, with Melodie determinedly keeping him from crushing her against him.

I started to go to them, but Chris caught my arm to restrain me. “Let Melodie handle him. You'd only make him furious.”

Sighing, I watched the small conflict between Bart and his brother's wife and saw to my amazement that he won, for she relaxed and finally seemed to enjoy the dance that soon ended. Then he was leading her from group to group, as if she were his wife and not Jory's.

I'd tasted only a little of this and that when a very beautiful woman stepped forward, smiling first at Chris, then at me. “Aren't you Corrine Foxworth's daughter, the one who came to that Christmas night party and—”

Abruptly I cut her short. “If you'll excuse me, I have a few duties to perform,” I said, hurrying away and keeping fast hold of Christopher. The woman ran behind us. “But Mrs. Sheffield ...”

I was spared the need to answer by the blast of many trumpets. The entertainment began as Bart's guests seated themselves with plates of food and drinks. Bart and Melodie came to join us, while Cindy and Jory ran to warm up in practice outfits before they changed into elaborate costumes.

Soon the professional entertainers had me laughing along with everyone else.

What a wonderful party! I glanced often at Chris, at Bart and Melodie, who sat near us. The summer night was perfect. The mountains all around enclosed us in a friendly romantic ring, and I was again amazed that I could see them as anything but formidable barriers to keep freedom forever out of reach. I was happy to see Melodie laughing and, most of all, happy to see Bart really having a good time. He shifted his chair closer to mine. "Would you say my party is a success, Mother?"

"Yes, oh, indeed, yes, Bart, you've outdone anything I've ever attended. It's a marvelous party. The evening is breathtakingly beautiful, with the stars and moon overhead, and all your colored lights. When does the ballet begin?"

He smiled and put his arm lovingly about my shoulders. His voice was tender with understanding when he asked, "Nothing for you equals the ballet, does it? And you won't be disappointed. You just wait to see if New York or London can equal my production of *Samson and Delilah*."

Jory had danced the role only three times before, but each time his performances had brought such acclaim it was no wonder Bart was fascinated with the role. The musicians in black sat down, reached for new music sheets, and started tuning their instruments.

A few yards away, Joel stood stiffly, a hateful, disapproving look on his face, as if he reflected all that his father's ghost might be feeling to see this extravagant waste of good money.

"Bart, you're twenty-five today, happy birthday! I remember clearly when a nurse laid you in my arms the first time. I had a terrible time giving birth to you, and the doctors kept coming to say I had to make a choice, your life or mine. I chose yours. But I made it, and was blessed with a second son

... the very image of his father. You were crying, your small hands balled into fists as you flailed the air. Your feet kicked free of the blanket, but the minute you felt my body heat against yours, held close to my heart, you stopped crying. Your eyes, closed until then, parted into slits. You seemed to see me before you fell asleep.”

“I’m sure you thought Jory was a prettier baby,” he said with sarcasm, but his eyes were tender, as if he liked hearing of himself as a baby.

Melodie was regarding me with the strangest expression. I wished she weren’t so near. “You had your own kind of beauty, Bart, your own personality, right from the start. You wanted me with you night and day. I’d put you in your crib, you’d cry. I’d pick you up, you’d stop crying.”

“In other words I was a great big nuisance.”

“I never thought that, Bart. I loved you from the day I conceived you. I loved you more when you smiled. Yours was such a faltering first smile, as if it hurt your face.”

It seemed for a moment I’d touched him. His hand reached for mine, and mine reached for his. But at that moment the overture to *Samson and Delilah* began, and this moment of sweetness between my second son and me was lost in the excited murmur of surprise as Bart’s guests looked at the program and saw that Jory Janus Marquet was going to dance his most famous role, and his sister, Cynthia Sheffield, would play the role of Delilah. Many people looked at Melodie with curiosity, wondering why she wasn’t dancing Delilah.

As always, when a ballet began, I was lost to the real world, drifting somewhere on a cloud and feeling so much it was painful, beautiful, and I was transported to another world.

The curtain lifted to show the inside of a colorful silken tent set against a backdrop representing a starry night in the desert. Stuffed but real-looking camels were there, palm trees swayed gently. On stage was Cindy, dressed in a diaphanous costume that clearly showed her slender but ripe figure. She wore a dark wig, cleverly bound around her head with jeweled bands. She began a seductive, undulating dance, enticing Samson,

who lingered just off stage. When Jory came on, the birthday guests stood and gave him a resounding ovation.

He stood waiting until the applause ended, then began his dance. He wore nothing but a lion-skin loincloth held up by a strap that crossed his well-muscled broad chest. His skin, well tanned, appeared oiled. His hair was long and black and perfectly straight; muscles rippled as he whirled, *jetéed*, duplicating Delilah's steps only more violently, as if he mocked her womanly weakness and delighted in his own agile, masculine strength. The power it took to portray Samson made my spine shiver. He looked so right for the role, danced so well, I shivered again, not from cold but from the pure beauty of seeing my son up there, dancing as if God had gifted him with superhuman style and grace.

Then, as it inevitably had to be, Delilah's beguiling dance of seduction wore down his resistance, and Samson succumbed to the loveliness of Delilah, who let down her dark tresses and slowly began to undress ... veil by veil she let fall before Samson fell upon her and bore her back onto the pile of animal skins ... and the stage darkened just before the curtain dropped.

Applause thundered as the curtain came down. I noticed a certain look on Melodie's pale face—was that envy? Was she wishing now she'd danced Delilah?

"You would have made the best Delilah," whispered Bart softly, his lips brushing the wisps of hair that curled above her pearl-studded ear. "Cindy can't compare ..."

"You do her an injustice, Bart," answered Melodie. "When you consider her lack of rehearsal time, she's performed beautifully. Jory told me he was surprised how good she is." Melodie leaned forward to address me. "Cathy, I'm sure Cindy has put in hours and hours of general practice, or else she wouldn't dance as well as she is."

Since the first act of the ballet had gone so well, I leaned back against Chris, who had his arm about me, and relaxed. "I feel so proud, Chris. Bart is behaving beautifully. Jory is the

most accomplished *danseur* I've ever seen. I'm amazed how well Cindy is doing."

"Jory was born to dance," said Chris. "If *he'd* been raised by monks, still he would have danced. But I do remember a rebellious little girl who hated to stretch her muscles and make them hurt."

We laughed in the way long-married couples do, intimate laughter, expressing more than what we said.

The curtain rose again.

While Samson slept on the colorful couch he and Delilah had shared, she cautiously eased off, drew on a lovely garment of frail silk, then stole quietly to the opening of the tent and beckoned inside a group of six warriors previously hidden. All bore shields and swords. Already Delilah had shorn Samson's head of his long dark hair. She held it up triumphantly, giving the timid soldiers confidence.

Startled awake, Samson jumped from the bed, *jetéed* high into the air and tried to lift his weapon. What was left of his long hair was short and stubby. His sword seemed too heavy. He screamed silently on finding all his strength gone. His despair was made visual as he whirled in frustration, beating his brow with brutal fists for believing in love and Delilah; then he fell to writhe on the ground, twisting about, glaring at Delilah, who tormented him with her wild laughter. He rushed for her, but the six soldiers sprang upon Samson and brought him down. They bound him with chains and ropes as he struggled mightily to free himself.

And all the time, off stage, the most famous tenor from the Metropolitan Opera sang his pleading song of love to Delilah, asking why she had betrayed him. Tears flowed down my face to see my son lashed and whipped before he was hauled to his feet and the soldiers began their dance of torture while Delilah watched.

Even knowing all this horror was feigned, I cringed against Chris when the branding iron, heated white hot, was moved ever closer to Samson's bulging eyes. The set darkened. Only the white-hot iron lit up the stage—and the ghostly shine on

Samson's near nude body. The last sound was Samson's scream of agony.

The second act curtain lowered. Again, there was wild applause, and cheers of "Bravo! Bravo!"

Between acts people chatted, got up for more drinks, to fill their plates again, but I sat beside Chris almost frozen with dread that I couldn't explain.

Beside Bart, Melodie sat as tense as I, her eyes closed and waiting.

Third act time.

Bart shifted his chair closer to Melodie. "I hate this ballet," she murmured. "It always frightens me, the brutality of it. The blood seems so real, too real. The wounds make me feel sick. Fairy tales suit me better."

"Everything will be fine," soothed Bart, putting his arm over her shoulders. Immediately Melodie jumped to her feet, and from then on she refused to sit.

The crimson curtain rose. Now we were staring at the representation of a heathen temple. Huge thick columns made of papier-mâché towered toward heaven. The vulgar squatting heathen god crouched overhead, cross-legged and center stage, with his cruel eyes gazing evilly downward. He was supported by two main columns reached by a short flight of steps.

The musical cue for the third and final act started.

Dancers represented the crowd that would watch Samson tortured before the priests of the temple danced onto stage, each doing his or her own special solo performance before settling into seats. Then dwarfs tugged on chains that dragged Samson onto the stage. Worn and weary-looking, blood streaking from many simulated wounds, Samson stumbled blindly in circles as the dwarfs meanly confused him, tripped him so he fell, only to struggle upward and be tripped again. I leaned forward anxiously. Chris's hand stayed on my shoulder, trying to calm me.

Could Jory really see through those nearly opaque lenses that made him look truly sightless? Why couldn't Bart have

been satisfied with only a blindfold? But Jory had claimed Bart was right. The lenses were much more effective.

High expectancy was in the air.

Bart turned his eyes on Melodie, as inch by inch Joel was making his way closer, as if he wanted to position himself so he could watch our faces.

Samson had difficulty walking with the chains that manacled his powerful ankles together, dragging behind him a great ball of fake iron. Running and jumping beside him were the dozen dwarfs who jabbed at his strong legs with small swords, tiny lances. (The dwarfs were really children, costumed to look grotesque.) Jory hefted his fake chains, making them seem very heavy, making himself seem weary enough to drop. His wrists also wore what seemed to be iron manacles.

As he stumbled around the arena, turning in blind circles, trying to feel his way along, the lilting, heartrending music played. Stage right, in her own small blue spotlight, the opera star began to sing that most famous aria of all from *Samson and Delilah*:

“My heart at thy sweet voice ...”

Blind and tormented from whip lashings weeping blood, Jory began a slow, mesmerizing dance of torment and loss of faith in love, his renewed credence in God restored, using the fake iron chains as part of his action. I'd never seen such a heartbreaking performance.

Blindly, agonizingly, Samson's ordeal of searching for Delilah while she dodged just out of his reach tore at my heart, as if this entire thing was real and not just a performance, so real every person in the audience forgot to eat, to drink, to whisper to a partner.

Delilah wore an even more revealing costume of green. The jewels sparkled as if they were real diamonds and emeralds, and when I peered through opera glasses, I saw to my dismay that they were part of the Foxworth legacy, glittering and shining enough to lend Delilah the appearance of wearing

more than she actually did. And just a few hours ago Bart had blasted Cindy with his anger for wearing more than she did now.

Flitting around the temple, Delilah hid herself behind a fake marble column. Samson's outstretched hands pleaded for her help, even as the tenor screamed out his agony of betrayal. I quickly glanced at Bart. He was leaning forward, watching with such intensity it seemed nothing in the world interested him more than this play of agony he'd wanted between brother and sister.

Again I was filled with apprehension. The air seemed fraught with danger.

Higher and higher rose the pitch of the soprano. Samson began to shamble blindly toward his goal—the twin columns he meant to shove apart and bring down the heathen temple.

Overhead the giant obscene god grinned maliciously.

And that song of love made it a thousand times more painful.

As Samson was making his way up the shallow steps, on the temple floor Delilah writhed in apparent regret and agony to see her lover so cruelly treated. Several guards headed to capture her, and no doubt they would treat her as they had Samson. Even so, she began to crawl toward Samson, keeping her body low to the floor and just beneath the chains he lashed about so furiously. Now she grabbed his ankle, looking up at him pleadingly. It seemed he would beat her with his chains, but he hesitated, staring blindly downward before his manacled hand reached tenderly to stroke her long dark hair, to listen to words she mouthed but we couldn't hear.

With calculated thought for drama, with renewed faith in his love and his God, Jory lifted his arms, bulging his biceps, and broke his chains!

The audience gasped at the passion Jory put into the act.

He spun around wildly, lashing the separated chains that dangled from his wrist manacles, trying blindly to strike, apparently, anyone. Delilah jumped up to dodge the brutal

chains that felled two guards and one dwarf. She made her attempts to get away a dance of such excitement everyone at the party was held in thrall, totally quiet as bit by bit, Delilah cleverly led her blind lover to the exact position he needed, between the two huge columns that supported the temple's god. Dodging, provoking Samson more and more with taunting, silent gestures even as the song declared her undying love for him. All meant to deceive the priests and the bloodthirsty crowd that wanted to see Samson dead.

All around the arena people were leaning forward, straining to see the grace and beauty of one of the world's most famous *premier danseurs*.

Jory was performing astonishing *jetés*, lashing himself up into a terrible frenzy before he finally put one hand on a fake marble pillar; and then with more dramatic import, he had the other braced too.

On the floor, Delilah kissed his feet before she mocked him, tormented him with words she couldn't speak. Tricking the heathen crowd, while he knew she truly loved him and had betrayed him out of jealous spite and greed. With heaving, impressive motions Samson began to labor to bring down the entire temple by pushing against the columns! The tenor's voice called upon God to help him shove down the blasphemous god.

Again the soprano sang, tenderly seducing Samson into believing he couldn't do the impossible.

The last beseeching note died as with a mighty heave, perspiration streaming down his face, dripping onto his oiled body already streaked with red, he glistened in a ghastly way. His blind white eyes shone.

Delilah screamed.

The cue.

With a mighty and terrifying effort, Jory raised his hands again and began with greater effort to shove against the "stone" columns. My heart was in my throat as I watched those papier-mâché columns begin to bulge. As God restored

Samson's strength, down would crash the temple, killing everyone!

Stagehands had cleverly arranged a large amount of cardboard backed by clanging junk to clatter down and make frightful noises. They faked thunder by rippling long rectangles of thin metal, as if God would wreak his vengeance in a personal way. Strangely enough, as the lights turned red, and the records of people screaming began to sound, Cindy was to tell me later, she thought she felt something hard brush her shoulder.

Just before the curtain lowered, I saw Jory fall from a huge false boulder that struck him on his back and head.

He sprawled face down on the floor, blood spurting from his cuts! Horrified to realize that sand didn't pour harmlessly out of the broken and tumbled columns, I jumped to my feet and began to scream. Instantly Chris was up and running toward the stage.

My knees buckled beneath me. I sank to the grass, still seeing the terrible vision of Jory flat on his face with the column smashed down on his lower back.

A second column crashed down on his legs.

The curtain was down now.

Applause thundered. I tried to rise and reach Jory, but my leg wouldn't hold me. Someone caught my elbow and half lifted me. I glanced and saw that it was Bart. Soon I was on the stage, staring down at the broken body of my first son.

I couldn't believe what I saw. Not my Jory, my dancing Jory. Not the little boy who'd asked when he was three, "*Am I dancing, Momma?*"

"Yes, Jory, you are dancing."

"Am I good, Momma?"

"No, Jory ... you are wonderful!"

Not my Jory, who'd excelled at everything physical, beautiful and heartfelt. Not my Jory ... my Julian's son.

“Jory, Jory,” I cried, falling upon my knees by his side, seeing Cindy through my tears, crying, too. He should be rising by this time. He lay sprawled ... and bloody. The “fake” blood I felt was sticky, warm. It smelled like real blood. “Jory ... you’re not really hurt ... Jory... ?”

Nothing. Not a sound, not a movement.

In my peripheral vision I saw Melodie as through the wrong end of a telescope, hurrying our way, her face so pale she and her black gown seemed darker than the night. “He’s hurt. Really hurt.” Somebody said that. Me?

“No! Don’t move him. Call for an ambulance.”

“Someone already has—his father, I think.”

“Jory, Jory ... you can’t be hurt.” Melodie’s cry as she ran forward. Bart tried to hold her back. She began to scream when she saw the blood. “Jory, don’t die, please don’t die!” she sobbed over and over again.

I knew how she felt. As soon as the curtain was down, every dancer after “dying” on stage jumped up immediately ... and Jory wasn’t doing that.

Cries came from everywhere. The scent of blood was all around us. And I was staring at Bart, who had wanted this particular opera to be made into a ballet. Why this role for Jory? Why, Bart, why? Had he planned for the accident weeks ago?

How had Bart staged it? I picked up a handful of sand and found it wet. I glared at Bart, who stared down at Jory’s sprawled body, wet from sweat, sticky from blood, gritty from sand. Bart had eyes only for Jory as two attendants from the ambulance lifted him carefully upon a stretcher and placed him in the back of the white ambulance.

Running forward, I shoved my way to where I could look inside the ambulance. “Will he live?” I asked the young doctor who was feeling Jory’s pulse. Chris was nowhere in sight.

The doctor smiled. “Yes, he’ll live. He’s young and he’s strong, but it’s my calculated guess it will be a long time before he dances again.”

And Jory had said ten million times that he couldn't live without dancing.

When the Party Is Over



I crowded into the ambulance beside Jory, and soon Chris was at my side, both of us crouching over Jory's still form strapped to the stretcher. He was unconscious, one side of his face very badly bruised and battered, and blood ran from many small wounds. I couldn't bear to look at his injuries, which overwhelmed me, much less concentrate on those horrible marks I'd seen on his back ...

Closing my eyes, I turned my head to see the bright lights of Foxworth Hall like fireflies on the mountain. Later I was to hear from Cindy that at first all the guests had been appalled, not knowing what to do or how to act, but Bart had rushed in to tell them Jory was only slightly injured and would be fully recovered in a few days.

Up front, seated with the driver and an attendant, was Melodie in her black formal, glancing back from time to time and asking if Jory had come around yet. "Chris, will he live?" she asked in a voice thin with anxiety.

"Of course he'll live," said Chris, feverishly working over Jory, ruining his new tux with the blood. "He's not bleeding now, I've stopped that." He turned to the intern and asked for more dressings.

The screaming of the siren rattled my nerves, made me afraid soon all of us would be dead. How could I have deceived myself into believing Foxworth Hall would ever offer us anything but grief? I began to pray, closing my eyes and saying the same words over and over again. *Don't let Jory die, God, please don't take him. He's too young, he hasn't lived long enough. His unborn child needs him.* Only after I'd kept this up for several miles did I remember that I'd said almost the same prayers for Julian—and Julian had died.

By this time Melodie was hysterical. The intern started to inject her with some drug, but quickly I stopped him. “No! She’s pregnant and that would harm her child.” I leaned forward and hissed at Melodie, “Stop screaming! You’re not helping Jory, or your baby.” She screamed louder, turning to beat at me with small but strong fists.

“I wish we’d never come ... I told him it was a mistake, coming to that house, the worst mistake of our lives, and now he’s paying, paying, paying ...” On and on saying that until finally her voice went, and Jory was opening his eyes and grinning at us.

“Hi,” he said weakly. “Seems Samson didn’t die after all.”

I sobbed in relief. Chris smiled and bathed Jory’s head cuts with some solution. “You’re going to be fine, son, just fine. Just hold on to that.”

Jory closed his eyes before he murmured in a weak way, “Was the performance good?”

“Cathy, you tell him what you think,” Chris suggested in the calmest voice.

“You were incredible, darling,” I said, leaning to kiss his pale face smeared with makeup.

“Tell Mel not to worry,” he whispered as if he heard her crying; then he drifted into sleep from the sedative Chris injected into his arm.

* * *

We paced the hospital waiting room outside of the operating theater. Melodie was by this time a limp rag, sagging from fear, her eyes wide and staring. “Same as his father ... same as his father,” repeating the same words over so much I thought she was drilling that notion into her head—and into mine. I, too, could have screamed from the agony of believing Jory might die. More to keep her quiet than anything else, I took her into my arms and smothered her face against my breasts, soothing her with motherly words of assurance when I didn’t feel confident about anything. We were, again, caught in the merciless clutches of Foxworths. How could I have been so

happy earlier in the day? Where had my intuition fled? Bart had come into his own, and in so doing he had taken from Jory what belonged to him, the most valuable possession he had—his good health and his strong, agile body.

Hours later, five surgeons wearing green brought out my firstborn son from the operating theater. Jory was covered to his chin with blankets. All his summer tan had disappeared, leaving him as pale as his father had liked to keep *his* complexion. His dark curly hair seemed wet. Bruises were under his closed eyes.

“He’ll be all right now, won’t he?” asked Melodie, jumping up to hurry after the stretcher rolling fast toward an elevator. “He will recover and be as good as new, won’t he?”

Desperation made her voice high and shrill.

No one said a word.

They lifted Jory off the stretcher by using the sheet, carefully deposited him on his bed, then chased all of us out but Chris. In the hall outside I held Melodie and waited, waited.

* * *

Melodie and I went back to Foxworth Hall toward dawn, when Jory’s condition seemed stable enough for me to relax a little. Chris stayed on, sleeping in some little room used by the interns on duty.

I had wanted to stay as well, but Melodie grew ever more hysterical, hating the way Jory slept, hating the medicinal smell of the hospital corridors; hating the nurses who scurried in and out of his room with trays of instruments and bottles; hating the doctors who wouldn’t give her, or me, a straight answer.

A taxi drove us both back to the Hall, where a light had been left burning near the front doors. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, flushing the sky with frail pink. Little birds woke up and fluttered tentative fledgling wings, while their parents sang or chirped their territorial rights before they flew away to find food. I supported Melodie up the

stairs and into the house. She was by this time so deeply detached from reality that she staggered and seemed drunk.

Up one side of the dual staircase carefully, slowly, with my arm about her waist, thinking every second of the baby she was carrying and the effect this night might have on him or her. In the bedroom she shared with Jory she couldn't manage to undress, her hands trembled so badly. I helped, then slipped a nightgown over her head, tucked her into the bed and turned out the light. "I'll stay if you want," I said, as she lay there bleak and hopeless-looking. She wanted me to stay, wanted to talk about Jory and the doctors who wouldn't give us any encouragement. "Why do they do that?" she cried.

How could I tell her how doctors protected themselves with silence until they were sure of their facts? I covered for all Jory's doctors, telling Melodie that Jory had to be all right or they would have wanted her to stay on.

Finally she drifted into restless sleep, fretting and tossing, calling Jory's name, waking up often to jerk back to awareness and cry all over again. Her anguish was painful to see and hear, and I was left feeling as wrung out as she was.

An hour later, much to my relief, she sank into deep sleep, as if even she knew she had to escape that way.

I had a few minutes of sleep myself before Cindy barged into my room and perched anxiously on my bed, waiting for me to wake up. The very sinking of the mattress when she sat opened my eyes. I saw her face, opened my arms, and held her while she cried. "He is going to be all right, Momma?"

"Darling, your father is there with him. Jory had to have immediate surgery. He's in a private room now, asleep and resting comfortably. Chris will be there when he wakes up. I'm going to eat a quick breakfast and then drive to the city to be there too. I want you to stay here with Melodie—"

Already I'd decided that Melodie was much too hysterical to go to the hospital with me.

Instantly Cindy protested, saying she wanted to go and see Jory herself. I shook my head, insisting she stay. "Melodie is

his wife, darling, and she is taking this very hard, and in her condition she shouldn't go back to the hospital until we know the truth about Jory. I've never seen a woman carry on so much about being in a hospital. She seems to think they are as bad as funeral homes. Now stay, and say anything to keep her calm, wait on her, see that she eats and drinks. Give her the peace she is seeking desperately now ... and I'll telephone when I know something."

Melodie, when I peeked in a few minutes later, was so deeply asleep I knew I'd made the right decision. "Explain to her why I didn't wait for her to wake up, Cindy, lest she think I'm taking her place ..."

I drove very fast toward the hospital.

Because Chris was a doctor, I'd spent a great deal of my life going to and from hospitals, letting him off, picking him up, visiting friends, meeting a few patients he particularly favored. We'd taken Jory to the best hospital in our area. The corridors were broad to allow the passing and turning of stretchers, the windows were wide, with plants hanging. Every modern diagnostic aid was there, despite the expense. But the room where Jory slept on and on was tiny, so tiny, as were all the rooms. The single window was so recessed it was difficult to look outside, and when I did, I saw nothing but the entranceway to the hospital and, farther away, another wing.

Chris was still sleeping, though a nurse told me he'd been in to check on Jory five times during the night. "He's really a devoted father, Mrs. Sheffield."

I turned to stare down at Jory, who now wore a heavy cast on his body with a window through which his incision could be viewed and treated, if necessary. I kept staring at his legs, wondering why they didn't twitch, bend, move—they weren't enclosed in the cast.

Suddenly an arm slipped around my waist and warm lips brushed the nape of my neck.

"Didn't I order you not to come back until I called?"

Relief immediately flooded me. Chris was here. “Chris, how can I stay away? I’ve got to know what’s wrong, or I can’t sleep. Tell me the truth, now that Melodie isn’t here to scream and faint.”

He sighed and bowed his head. Only then did I see how exhausted he looked, still wearing his rumpled and soiled tux. “It’s not good news, Cathy. I’d rather not go into details until I’ve talked again with his physicians and surgeon.”

“Don’t you pull that old trick on me! I want to know! I’m not one of your patients who thinks doctors are gods on pedestals and I can’t ask questions. Is Jory’s back broken? Was his spinal cord injured? Will he walk again? Why doesn’t he move his legs?”

First he pulled me out into the hall, in case Jory was awake but had his eyes closed. Softly he closed the door behind him and then led me into a tiny cubicle where only doctors were allowed. He sat me down, standing to tower above me, and made me realize I was about to hear very serious news. Only then did he speak. “Jory’s spine was broken, Cathy. You guessed correctly. It’s a lower lumbar fracture, so we can be grateful his injury wasn’t higher. He will have full use of his arms and will eventually gain control over his bladder and intestinal functions, but right now they are in shock, so to speak, and tubes and bags will function until he regains the feeling of when he has to go.”

He paused, but I wasn’t letting him off that easily. “The spinal cord? Tell me that it wasn’t crushed.”

“No, not crushed, but damaged,” he said reluctantly. “It is bruised severely enough to keep his legs paralyzed.”

I froze. Oh, no! Not Jory! I cried out, with no more control than Melodie. “He’ll never walk again?” I whispered, feeling myself go pale and weak and slightly light-headed. When next I opened my eyes, Chris was on his knees by my side, gripping both my hands hard.

“Hold on ... he’s alive, and that’s what counts. He won’t die—but he’ll never walk again.”

Sinking, I was drowning, drowning, going under again in that same old familiar pool of hopeless despair. The same little sparkling swanhead fish rushed to nibble on my brain, taking bits out of my soul. “And that means he’ll never dance again ... never walk, never dance ... Chris, what will this do to him?”

He drew me into his embrace and bowed his head into my hair, his breath stirring it as he spoke in a choked way. “He’ll survive, darling. Isn’t that what all of us do when tragedy comes into our lives? We take it, grin and bear it, and make the best of what we have left. We forget what we had yesterday and concentrate on what we have today, and when we can teach Jory how to accept what has happened, we will have our son back again—disabled, but alive, intelligent, organically healthy.”

I was jerking with sobs as he talked on. His hands ran up and down my back, his lips brushed over my eyes, my lips, finding ways to calm me.

“We’ve got to be strong for him, darling. Cry all you want now, for you can’t cry when he opens his eyes and sees you. You can’t show pity. You can’t be too sympathetic. When he wakes up, he’s going to look into your eyes, and he’s going to read your mind. Whatever fears or pity that you show on your face or in your eyes is going to determine how he looks and feels about his handicap. He’s going to be devastated, we both know that. He’ll want to die. He’ll think about his father and how Julian escaped his plight, we have to keep that in mind as well. We’ll have to talk to Cindy and Bart and explain to them the roles they’ll play in his recovery. We have to form a strong family unit to see him through this ordeal, for it’s going to be rough, Cathy, very rough.”

I nodded, trying to control my flow of tears, feeling I was inside Jory, knowing every tormented moment he had ahead was going to tear me apart, too.

Chris went on while he kept his arms about me for support. “Jory’s constructed his entire life around dancing, and he will never dance again. No, don’t look at me with that hope. *NEVER AGAIN!* There is some possibility someday he’ll have

enough strength to get up on his feet and pull himself around on crutches ... but he'll never walk normally. Accept that, Cathy.

“We have to convince him that his handicap doesn't matter, that he's the same person he was before. And, most importantly, we have to convince ourselves that he's just as manly, just as human ... for many families change when a member becomes disabled. They either become too sympathetic, or they become alienated, as if the handicap changes the person they used to love and know. We have to keep to middle ground and help Jory find the strength to see this through.”

I heard a little of what he said.

Crippled! My Jory was crippled. A paraplegic. I shook my head, disbelieving that fate would keep him that way. Tears fell like rain upon Chris's soiled, ruffled, dress shirt. How would Jory live when he found out he was going to spend the rest of his life confined to a wheelchair?

Cruel Fate



The sun was noon high and still Jory hadn't opened his eyes. Chris decided we both needed a hearty meal, and hospital food was always seasonless sawdust or shoe leather. "Try to nap while I'm gone, and hold on to your control. If he awakens, try not to panic, keep your cool and smile, smile, smile. He'll be fuzzy-minded and won't be fully cognizant. I'll try to hurry back ..."

I'd never sleep; I was too busy planning on how to act when Jory eventually woke up long enough to start asking questions. Chris had no sooner closed the door behind him than Jory stirred, turned his head, and weakly smiled at me. "Hey, you been there all night? Or two nights? When was it?"

"Last night," I whispered hoarsely, hoping he wouldn't notice my throaty voice. "You've been sleeping for hours and hours."

"You look exhausted," he said weakly, touchingly showing more concern for me than for himself. "Why don't you go back to the Hall and sleep? I'm okay. I've fallen before, and, like before, in a few days I'll be whirling all over that house again. Where's my wife?"

Why wasn't he noticing the cast that bulged out his chest? Then I saw his eyes were unfocused and he hadn't fully pulled out of the sedatives given him to ease the pain. Good ... if only he wouldn't start asking questions I wanted Chris to answer.

Sleepily he closed his eyes and dozed off, but ten minutes later he was again awake and asking questions. "Mom, I feel strange. Never felt like this before. Can't say I like the way I feel. Why this cast? Did I break something?"

“The temple papier-mâché columns fell,” I weakly explained. “Knocked you out. What a way to end the ballet—too real.”

“Did I bring down the house—or the sky?” he quipped, his eyes opening and brightening as the sedative I’d hoped would keep him hazy wore off. “Cindy was great, wasn’t she? You know, each time I see her, she’s more beautiful. And she’s really a very good dancer. She’s like you, Mom, improving with age.”

I sat on my hands to keep them from twisting in the betraying way my mother used to use her hands. I smiled, got up to pour a glass of water. “Doctor’s orders. You’ve got to drink a lot.”

He sipped as I supported his head. It was so strange to see him helpless, when he’d never been bedridden. His colds had come and gone in a matter of days, and not once had he missed a day in school or ballet class, except in order to visit Bart in the hospital after one of his many accidents that never left him permanently damaged. Jory had sprained his ankles dozens of times, torn ligaments, fallen, gotten up, but he’d never had a serious injury until now. All dancers spent some time tending small injuries, and sometimes even larger ones, but a broken back, a damaged spinal cord—it was every dancer’s most dreaded nightmare.

Again he dozed off, but before long he had his eyes open and was asking questions about himself. Perched on the side of his bed, I rattled on and on nonsensically, praying that Chris would come back. A pretty nurse came in with Jory’s lunch tray, all liquids. That gave me something to do. I fiddled with a half-pint milk carton, opened yogurt, poured milk and orange juice, tucked a napkin under his chin, and began with the strawberry yogurt. Immediately he gagged and made a face. He shoved my hands away, saying he could feed himself, but he didn’t have an appetite.

Once I had the tray out of the way, I hoped he’d fall asleep. Instead he lay there staring at me, his eyes lucid. “Can you tell me now why I feel so weak? Why I can’t eat? Why I can’t move my legs?”

“Your father has gone out to bring in food for the two of us, snack food that’s not good for you, but it will be tastier than what we can eat in the cafeteria downstairs. Let him tell you. He knows all the technical terms that I don’t.”

“Mom, I wouldn’t understand technical terms. Tell me in your own layman’s words—why can’t I feel or move my legs?”

His dark sapphire eyes riveted on me. “Mom, I’m not a coward. I can take whatever you have to say. Now spill it out, or else I’m going to presume my back is broken and my legs are paralyzed and I’m never going to walk again.”

My heart quickened as my head lowered. He’d said all this in a jocular way, as if none of it could possibly be true ... and he’d stated his condition exactly.

Desperation came to his eyes as I faltered, trying to find just the right words, and even the right ones would rip out his heart. Just then Chris strode in the door, carrying a paper sack with cheeseburgers. “Well,” he said brightly, throwing Jory a pleased smile, “look who’s awake and talking.” He took out a burger and handed it to me. “Sorry, Jory, you can’t have anything solid for a few days due to your operation. Cathy, eat that thing while it’s still hot,” he ordered, sitting down himself and immediately unwrapping his burger. I saw he’d bought two super ones for himself. He bit into it with relish before he brought out the cola drinks. “Didn’t have the lime you wanted, Cathy. It’s Pepsi.”

“It’s cold, with lots of ice, that’s all I want.”

Jory watched us narrowly as we ate. I forced down the cheeseburger, knowing he was suspicious. Chris did an admirable job of eating two burgers and one cardboard dish of French fries while I managed to eat only half of my burger, and didn’t touch the greasy potatoes. Chris balled up his napkin and tossed it in a can, along with our other trash.

By this time Jory’s lids were growing heavy. He was struggling hard to stay awake. “Dad ... are you going to tell me now?”

“Yes, anything you want to know.” Chris moved to sit on Jory’s bed and placed his strong hand on top of Jory’s. Jory blinked back sleep.

“Dad, I’m not feeling anything below my waist. All the time you and Mom ate, I was trying to wiggle my toes and I couldn’t. If I’ve broken my back, and that’s why I’m in this cast, I want to know the truth, all of it.”

“I intend to tell you all the truth,” said Chris staunchly.

“Is my spine broken?”

“Yes.”

“Are my legs paralyzed?”

“Yes.”

Jory blinked, looked stunned, gathered his strength for one last question. “Will I dance again?”

“No.”

Jory closed his eyes, tightened his lips into a thin line and lay perfectly still.

I stepped closer to lean above him, and tenderly I brushed back the dark curls fallen over his brow. “Darling, I know you’re devastated. It wasn’t easy for your father to tell you the truth, but you have to know. You’re not alone in this. We’re all involved. We’re here to see you through, to do everything we can. You’ll adjust. Time will heal your body so you won’t feel pain, and eventually you’ll accept what can’t be helped. We love you. Melodie loves you. And you’ll be a father come this very January. You reached the top of your profession and have been there five years ... that’s more than most people accomplish in a lifetime.”

Briefly he met my eyes. His were full of bitterness, anger, frustration, a rage so terrible I had to turn away. It was all over him, his fierce resentment at having been cheated and stolen from before he’d had enough.

When I looked again, his eyes were closed. Chris had his fingers on his pulse. “Jory, I know you’re not sleeping. I’m going to give you another sedative so you can really sleep, and

when you wake up, you are going to think about how important you are to a great many people. You're not going to feel sorry for yourself and allow yourself to wallow in bitterness. There are people walking the streets today who will never experience what you've already had. They haven't traveled the world over and heard the thundering applause and cries of 'bravo, bravo!' They'll never know the heights that were yours and can be yours again in some other field of artistic endeavor. Your world has not stopped, son, you've only stumbled. The road to achievement is still ahead and wide open, only you'll have to roll along that road instead of run or dance; but you'll achieve again, for it's in you to always win. You will just find another craft, another career, and with your family you will find happiness. Isn't that what life is all about when you come down to the basics? We want someone to love us, to need us, to share our lives ... and you have all of that."

My son didn't open his eyes, didn't respond. He only lay there as still as if death had already claimed him.

Inside I was screaming, for Julian had reacted in the very same way! Jory was closing us out, locking himself in the narrow, tight cage of his mind that refused life without walking and dancing.

Silently Chris readied a hypodermic needle before he swabbed at Jory's arm, then released the fluid steadily into his arm. "Sleep, my son. When you wake up, your wife will be here. You'll have to be brave for her sake."

I thought I saw Jory shudder.

We left him deeply asleep, in the care of a private-duty nurse instructed to never leave him alone. Chris drove us back to Foxworth Hall so he could shower and shave, take a nap, put on fresh clothes before he drove back to be with Jory. We expected Melodie to return with us.

Her blue eyes went terror stricken and stark when Chris told her as kindly as possible Jory's condition.

She uttered a small cry and clutched at her abdomen. "You mean ... never dance? Never walk?" she whispered, as if her

voice were failing her. “There must be something you can do to help him.”

Chris soon dashed that hope. “No, Melodie. When the spinal cord is injured, it prevents the legs from receiving the messages from the brain. Jory can will his legs to move, but they won’t receive the message. You have to accept him as he is now, and do everything you can to help him survive what is probably the most traumatic event he will ever have to face.”

She jumped to her feet, crying out pitifully, “But he won’t be the same! You just said he’s refusing to talk—I can’t go there and pretend it doesn’t matter when it does! What will he do? What will *I* do? Where will we go, and how will he survive without walking and dancing? What kind of father will he make now that he has to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair?”

Standing, Chris spoke firmly. “Melodie, this is no time for you to panic and throw hysterical tantrums. You have to be strong, not weak. I realize you are suffering, too, but you have to show him a bright, smiling face that will give him the assurance that he hasn’t lost the wife he loves. You don’t marry just for the good times, but for the bad times as well. You’ll bathe, dress, put on your makeup, style your hair, and go to him and hold him in your arms as best you can, and kiss him and make him believe he has a future worth staying alive for.”

“BUT HE DOESN’T!” she yelled. “HE DOESN’T!”

Then, breaking, she was crying bitter tears. “I didn’t mean that ... I love him, I do ... but don’t make me go and see him lying like that so still and quiet. I can’t stand to see him until he’s smiling and accepting, and then maybe I can face up to what he’s become ... maybe I can ...”

I disliked her for showing such spineless hysteria and failing Jory when he needed her most. Stepping to Chris’s side, I linked my arm through his. “Melodie, do you think for one moment that you are the first wife and expectant mother to suddenly find the world crashing down on your head? You’re

not. I was expecting Jory when his father was in a fatal auto accident. Just be grateful Jory is alive.”

She sank in a crumpled heap on a chair and bowed her head into her hands and cried for long minutes before she looked up, her eyes darker and more bleak than before. “Perhaps death is what he’d prefer—have you thought of that?”

It was the thought that tormented my hours, that Jory would do something to end his life, as Julian had done.

I wouldn’t let it happen. Not again. “Then stay here and cry,” I said with unintentional hardness. “But I’m not going to leave my son alone to fight this out by himself. I’m going to stay with him night and day to see that he doesn’t give up hope. But you keep this in mind, Melodie: You are carrying his child, and that makes you the most important person in his life—and important in mine, too. He needs you and your support. I’m sorry if I sound harsh, but I have to think first of him ... why can’t you?”

Speechless, she stared up at me, her lovely face stricken, tears streaking her cheeks. “Tell him I’ll come soon ... tell him that,” she whispered hoarsely.

We told him that.

He kept his eyes closed, his lips glued together. There were ways of telling he wasn’t asleep, only shutting us out.

* * *

Jory refused to eat until tubes were put in his arms to feed him intravenously. Summer days came and went; long days that were full and mostly sad. Some hours gave me faint pleasures when I was with Chris and Cindy, but few gave me hope.

If only, if only were the words that started off my mornings, as they finished off my nights. If only I could live my life all over again, then, perhaps, I could save Jory, Chris, Cindy, Melodie, myself—and even Bart. If only.

If only he hadn’t danced that role—

I tried everything, as Chris and Cindy did, to pull Jory back from that terribly lonely place where he’d taken himself. For

the first time in my life I couldn't reach him, couldn't ease his sorrow.

He'd lost what mattered most to him, the use of his dancing legs. With his legs he'd soon lose his wonderfully powerful and skilled body. I couldn't look at those beautifully shaped strong legs lying so still beneath the sheet, so damned useless.

Had the grandmother been right when she said we were cursed, born for failure and pain? Had she programmed us for tragedy to steal the fruit of our successes?

Had Chris and I achieved anything of real value when our son lay as if dead, and our second son refused to visit Jory but once?

Bart had stood and stared down at Jory lying helpless and still with his eyes closed, his arms straight down at his sides. "Oh, my God," he'd whispered before he hurried from the tiny room.

Never could I convince him to visit again. "Mother, he doesn't know I'm there, so what's the good? I can't bear to see him like that. I'm sorry, really sorry ... but I can't help."

I stared at him, wondering if I had wanted to help *him* so much I'd risked the life of my beloved Jory.

That's when I began to tell myself that I wasn't going to believe he'd never walk, never dance again. This was a nightmare to be endured, but eventually we'd awaken and Jory would be whole again, just as he'd been.

I told Chris my plan to convince Jory he could and he would walk again, even if he never danced.

"Cathy, you can't give him false hope," warned Chris, looking terribly distressed. "All you can do now is help him accept what can't be changed. Give him your kind of strength. Help him—but don't lead him down false trails that will bring him only disappointment. I know it will be difficult. I'm in hell, too, just as much as you are. But remember, our hell is nothing compared to his. We can sympathize and feel dreadfully sorry, but we're not inside his skin. We're not suffering his loss—he's all alone in that. Facing up to agony

you and I can't even begin to understand. All we can do is be here when he decides to pull out of his protective shell. Be here to give him the confidence he needs to go on ... for damned if Melodie is giving him anything!"

That was something almost as awful as Jory's injury ... that his own wife would shun him now as if he were a leper. Both Chris and I pleaded with her to come with us, even if she said nothing but hello, I love you, *she had to come*.

"What can I say that you haven't already said?" she screamed. "He doesn't want me to come and see him like that! I know him better than either of you do. If he wanted to see me, he'd say he did. Besides, I'm afraid to go, afraid I'll cry and say all the wrong things, and even if I stay quiet, he might open his eyes and see something on my face that would make him feel worse, and I don't want to be responsible for what might happen then. Stop insisting! Wait until he wants me to visit ... and then, maybe, I can find the courage I need."

She flew away from Chris and me as if we carried with us some plague that might contaminate *her* dream that this nightmare would end happily.

Standing in the hall outside our rooms was Bart, staring after Melodie with his heart in his eyes. He turned to glare at me.

"Why *don't* you leave her alone? I've been to see him, and it tore me all apart. Certainly in her condition she needs to find some security, even if it's only in her dreams. She sleeps a great deal, you know. While you stay with him, she cries, walks as if in a dream, with her eyes unfocused. She half eats. I have to plead with her to swallow, to drink. She stares at me, and obeys like a child. Sometimes I have to spoon the food into her mouth, hold the glass for her to sip. Mother, Melodie is in shock—and all you think about is your precious Jory, not caring what you do to her!"

Sorry now, I hurried to her side and held her in my arms. "It's all right. I understand now. Bart has explained how you can't accept this yet ... but try, Melodie, please try. Even if he

doesn't open his eyes and speak, he's aware of what's going on, and who comes to see him and who doesn't."

Her head was on my shoulder. "Cathy ... I am trying. Just give me time."

The next morning Cindy came into our bedroom without knocking, causing Chris to frown. She should have known better. But I had to forgive her after seeing her pale face and frightened expression. "Momma ... Daddy, I've just got to tell you something, and yet I don't know if I should. Or if it really means anything."

I was distracted from her words by the outfit she wore: a white bikini so brief it was barely there. The swimming pool Bart had ordered was now complete and this was the first day it was ready. Jory's tragic accident was not going to inhibit Bart's style of living.

"Cindy, I wish you would wear those beach coverups at the poolside. And that suit is much too skimpy."

She appeared startled, crestfallen and hurt because I criticized her suit. Glancing down at herself briefly, she shrugged indifferently. "Holy Christ, Momma! Some friends of mine wear string bikinis—you should see those if you think this one is immodest. Some of my friends wear nothing at all ..." Her large blue eyes studied mine seriously.

Chris tossed her a towel, which she wrapped around herself. "Momma, I've got to say I don't like the way you make me feel, somehow dirty, like Bart makes me feel—when I came to tell you something I overheard Bart talking about."

"Go on, Cindy," urged Chris.

"Bart was on the telephone. He'd left his door ajar. I heard him talking to an insurance agency." She paused, sat down on our unmade bed and lowered her head before she spoke again. Her soft, silky hair hid her expression. "Mom, Dad, it seems Bart took out some kind of special 'party' insurance in case any of his guests were injured."

"Why, that's not at all unusual," said Chris. "The house is covered by homeowner's insurance ... but with two hundred

guests, he needed plenty of extra insurance that night.”

Cindy’s head jerked upward. She stared at her father, then at me. A sigh escaped her lips. “I guess it’s okay then. I just thought maybe ... maybe ...”

“Maybe what?” I asked sharply.

“Momma, you picked up a handful of that sand that spilled from the columns when they broke. Wasn’t the sand supposed to be dry? It wasn’t dry. Someone made it wet—and that made it heavier. The sand didn’t come pouring out like it was supposed to. It made those columns stand upright—and the sand clumped down on Jory like cement. Otherwise Jory wouldn’t have been hurt so severely.”

“I knew about the insurance,” said Chris dully, refusing to meet my eyes. “I didn’t know about the wet sand.”

Neither Chris nor I could find words to defend Bart. Still, surely, surely he wouldn’t want to injure Jory—or kill him? At some point in our lives, we had to believe in Bart, give him the benefit of doubt.

Chris paced our bedroom, his brow deeply wrinkled as he explained one of the stage crew could have put water on the sand, hoping to make the columns steadier. It didn’t have to be Bart’s order he was following.

All three of us descended the stairs solemnly, finding Bart outside on the morning terrace with Melodie. With the mountains in the distance, the woods before them, the gardens lush with blooming flowers, the setting was beautifully romantic. Sunlight filtered through the lacy leaves of the fruit trees, slipped under the brightly striped umbrella that was supposed to shield the occupants seated at the white wrought-iron table.

Melodie, to my surprise, was smiling as her eyes lingered on the strong lines of Bart’s face. “Bart, your parents don’t understand why I can’t bring myself to go and see Jory in the hospital. I see your mother looking at me resentfully. I’m disappointing her, disappointing myself. I’m a coward about illnesses. Always have been. But I know what’s going on. I

know Jory lies on that bed, staring up at the ceiling, refusing to talk. I know what he's thinking. He's lost not only the use of his legs, but all the goals he's set for himself. He's thinking of his father and the way he died. He's trying to withdraw from the world by making himself into a nothing thing that we won't miss when one day he kills himself just like his father did."

Bart quickly looked at her disapprovingly. "Melodie, you don't know my brother. Jory would never kill himself. Maybe he does feel lost now, but he'll come around."

"How can he?" she wailed. "He's lost the most important thing in his life. Our marriage was based not only on our love for each other, but on our mutual careers. Each day I tell myself that I can go to him, and smile, and give him what he needs. Then I pause, flounder, and wonder what can I say. I'm not good with words like your mother. I can't smile and be optimistic like his father—"

"Chris is not Jory's father," stated Bart flatly.

"Oh, to Jory Chris is his father. At least the one who counts most. He loves Chris, Bart, respects and admires him, and forgives him for what you call his sins." She went on while we three hung back, waiting to hear more of why she was acting as she was.

And all we heard was a concluding statement. "I'm ashamed to say it, but I can't go and see him like he is."

"Then what are you going to do?" asked Bart in a cynical way. He sipped his coffee while staring directly into her eyes. If he'd turn his head just a little, he'd see the three of us watching and listening, and learning so much.

Her answer was an anguished wail. "I don't know! I'm coming apart inside! I hate waking up and knowing that Jory will never be a real husband to me again. If you don't mind, I'm going to move into the room across the hall that doesn't hold so many painful memories of what we used to share. Your mother doesn't realize that I'm just as lost as he is, and I'm having his baby!"

Her sobs started then. Bowing her head, she put it down on the arms she folded on the table. “Someone has to think of me, help *me* ... someone ...”

“I’ll help,” said Bard softly, laying his tanned hand on her shoulder. His right hand set the coffee aside and lightly he brushed that hand over her spill of flowing hair. “Whenever you need me, if only for a shoulder to cry on, I’ll be there, anytime.”

If I’d heard Bart speak as compassionately before to anyone but Melodie, my heart would have jumped for joy. As it was, it plunged. Jory needed his wife—not Bart!

I stepped forward into the sunlight and took my place at the breakfast table. Bart snatched his hands away from Melodie, staring at me as if I’d interrupted something that was very important to him. Then Chris and Cindy joined us. Silence came that I had to break.

“Melodie, I want to have a long talk with you as soon as we finish breakfast. You’re not going to run away this time, or turn deaf ears, and shut out my voice with your blank stare.”

“Mother!” flared Bart. “Can’t you see her viewpoint? Maybe someday Jory will be able to drag himself around on crutches, if he wears a heavy back brace and a harness ... can you imagine Jory like that? I can’t. Even I don’t want to see him like that.”

Melodie let out a shrieking cry, jumping to her feet. Bart followed suit, to hold her protectively in his arms.

“Don’t cry, Melodie,” he soothed in a tender, caring voice. Melodie uttered another small cry of distress, then fled the terrace. The three of us sat quietly staring after her. When she was out of sight, our eyes fixed on Bart, who sat down to finish his breakfast as if we weren’t there.

“Bart,” said Chris in this opportune moment before Joel joined us, “what do you know about the wet sand in the papiermâché columns?”

“I don’t understand,” said Bart smoothly, appearing very distracted as he stared at the door through which Melodie had

disappeared.

“Then I’ll explain more carefully,” went on Chris. “It was understood the sand would be dry so it would spill out easily and not harm anyone. Who wet the sand?”

Narrowing his eyes first, Bart answered sharply, “So now I’m going to be accused of causing Jory’s accident—and deliberately ruining the best time I’ve had until he was hurt. Why, it’s just like it used to be when I was nine and ten. My fault, everything was always my fault. When Clover died, you both presumed I was the one to wrap the wire about his neck, never giving me the benefit of a doubt. When Apple was killed, again you thought it was me, when you knew I loved both Clover and Apple. I’ve never killed anything. Even when you found out later it was John Amos, you put me through hell before you said you were sorry. Well, say you’re sorry now, for damned if I’ll take the blame for Jory’s broken back!”

I wanted to believe him so much tears came to my eyes. “But who wet the sand, Bart?” I asked, leaning forward and reaching for his hand. “Somebody did.”

His dark eyes went bleak. “Several of the workhands disliked me for being too bossy ... but I don’t really think they would do anything to hurt Jory. After all, it wasn’t me up there.”

For some reason I believed him. He didn’t know anything about the wet sand, and when I met Chris’s eyes, I knew he was convinced as well. But in asking, we’d alienated Bart ... again.

He sat silently now, not smiling as he finished his meal. In the garden I glimpsed Joel in the shadows of dense shrubbery as if he’d been eavesdropping on our conversation while pretending to admire the flowers in bloom.

“Forgive us if we hurt you, Bart. Please, do what you can to help us find out who did wet the sand. But for that, Jory would have the use of his legs.”

Wisely Cindy had kept very quiet during all of this.

Bart started to reply, but at that moment Trevor stepped from the house and began serving us. Quickly I swallowed a light breakfast, then rose to go. I had to do something to bring back Melodie's sense of responsibility. "Excuse me, Chris, Cindy. Take your time and finish your breakfast. I'll join you later."

Joel slipped out of the shadows of the dense shrubbery and seated himself beside Bart. As I turned to glance back over my shoulder, I saw Joel lean toward Bart, whispering something I couldn't make out.

Feeling heavy of heart, I headed for the room that Melodie now used.

Face down on the bed she and Jory had shared, Melodie was crying. I perched on the side of her bed, thinking about all the right words to say—but where were the right words? "He's alive, Melodie, and that counts, doesn't it? He's still with us. With you. You can reach out and touch him, talk to him, say all the things I wish I'd said to his father. Go to the hospital. Every day you stay away, he dies a bit more. If you don't go, if you just stay here and feel sorry for yourself, you'll live to regret it. Jory can still hear you, Melodie. Don't leave him now. He needs you now more than he's ever needed you before."

Wild and hysterical, she turned to beat at me with small fists. I caught her wrists to keep from being injured.

"But I can't face him, Cathy! I've known he lies there, silent and alone where I can't reach him. He doesn't answer when *you* speak, so why would he respond to me? If I kissed him and he said or did nothing, I'd die inside. Besides, you don't really know him, not like I do. You're his mother, not his wife. You don't realize just how important his sexual life is to him. Now he won't have any. Do you have any idea of what that one thing is doing to him? To say nothing of losing the use of his legs, and giving up his career. He so wanted to prove himself for his father's sake—his real father's sake. And you kid yourself to think he's alive. He isn't. He's already left you, Cathy. Left me, too. He doesn't have to die. He's already dead while he's still alive."

How her impassioned words stung me. Maybe because they were all too true.

I panicked inside, realizing that Jory could very well do as Julian had done—find a way to end his life. I tried to console myself. Jory was not like his father, he was like Chris. Eventually Jory would come around and make the best of what he had left.

I sat on that bed, staring at my daughter-in-law, and realized I didn't know her. Didn't know the girl I'd seen off and on since she was eleven. I'd seen the facade of a pretty, graceful girl who'd always seemed to adore Jory. "What kind of woman are you, Melodie? Just what kind?"

She flipped over on her back and glared angrily at me.

"Not your kind, Cathy!" she almost screamed. "You're made of special rugged stuff. I'm not. I was spoiled like you spoil your dear little Cindy. I was an only child and was given everything I wanted. I found out when I was small that life isn't all pretty picture book fables. And I didn't want it that way. When I was old enough, I ran to hide in the ballet. I told myself only in the world of fantasy could I find happiness. When I met Jory he seemed the prince I needed. Princes don't fall and injure their spinal cords, Cathy. They are never crippled. How can I live with Jory when I don't see him as a prince anymore? How, Cathy? Tell me how I can blind my eyes, and numb my senses, so I won't feel revulsion when he touches me."

I stood up.

I stared down at her reddened eyes, her face made puffy from so much crying and felt all my admiration for her fade away. Weak, that's what she was. What a fool to believe that Jory wasn't made of the same flesh and blood as any other man. "Suppose the injury had been yours, Melodie. Would you want Jory to desert you?"

She met my eyes squarely. "Yes, I would."

I left Melodie still crying on her bed.

Chris was waiting for me downstairs. “I thought if you went this morning, I’d visit him this afternoon, and Melodie can go to him tonight with Cindy. I’m sure you convinced her to go.”

“Yes, she’ll go, but not today,” I said without meeting his eyes. “She wants to wait until he opens his eyes and speaks—so that’s my plan, to somehow reach him and make him respond.”

“If anyone can do that, it will be you,” Chris murmured in my hair.

* * *

Jory lay supine on his hospital bed. The fracture was so low on his back that one fine day in the far future he might even gain back his potency. There were certain exercises he could do later on.

I’d bought two huge long boxes of mixed bouquets that I’d put into tall vases.

“Good morning, darling,” I said brightly as I entered his small, sterile room.

Jory didn’t turn his head to look my way. He lay as I’d seen him last, staring straight up at the ceiling. Kissing his faintly chilled face, I began to arrange the flowers.

“You’ll be happy to know Melodie is no longer suffering from morning sickness. But she’s tired most of the time. I remember I was tired, too, when I was pregnant with you.”

I bit down on my tongue, for I’d lost Julian not long after I knew I was with child. “It’s a strange kind of summer, Jory. I can’t say I really care for Joel. He seems very fond of Bart, but he does nothing but criticize Cindy. She can do nothing right in Joel’s eyes, or in Bart’s. I’m thinking it would be a good idea to send Cindy off to a summer camp until school starts in the fall. You don’t think Cindy is misbehaving, do you?”

No answer.

I tried not to sigh, or look at him with impatience. I drew a chair close to Jory’s bed and caught hold of his limp hand. No

response. It was like holding a dead fish. “Jory, they’re going to keep on feeding you intravenously,” I warned. “And if you still refuse to eat, they will put tubes in other veins, and use other methods to keep you alive, even if we have to eventually put you on every machine that will keep you going until you stop acting stubborn and come back to us.”

He didn’t blink, or speak.

“All right, Jory. I’ve been easy on you up until now—but I’ve had enough!” My tone turned harsh. “I love you too much to see you lie there and will yourself to die. So you don’t care about anything anymore, do you?”

“So you’re crippled and you’ll have to sit in a wheelchair until you can manage crutches, if you ever have that much ambition. So you’re feeling sorry for yourself, and wondering how you can go on. Others have done it. Others have made lives for themselves, and been in worse condition than you are. So you tell yourself what others do doesn’t count when it’s your body, and your life—and maybe you’re right. It doesn’t matter what others do, if you want to think selfishly.

“Tell me that the future holds nothing for you now. I thought that, too, at first. I don’t like to see you lying there so still, Jory. It breaks my heart, your father’s heart, and Cindy is beside herself with worry. Bart is so concerned he can’t bear to come and see you lying there so withdrawn. And what do you think you’re doing to Melodie? She’s carrying your child, Jory. She’s crying all day long. She’s changing into a different person because she hears us talking about your lack of response and your stubborn inability to accept what can’t be changed. We’re sorry, terribly sorry you’ve lost the use of your legs—but what can any of us do but make the best out of a miserable situation? Jory, come back to us. We need you with us. We’re not willing to stand back and watch you kill yourself. We love you. We don’t give a damn if you can’t dance and can’t walk, we just want you alive, where we can see you, talk to you. Speak to us, Jory. Say something, anything. Speak to Melodie when she comes. Respond when she touches you ... or you’ll lose Melodie and your child. She loves you, you know that. But no woman can live on love

when the object of her love turns away and rejects her. She doesn't come because she can't face the rejection that she knows you give us."

During this long, impassioned speech, I'd kept my eyes on his face, hoping for some slight change of expression. I was rewarded by seeing a muscle near his tight lips twitch.

Encouraged, I went on. "Melodie's parents have called and suggested that she return to them to have the baby. Do you want Melodie to go, thinking she can't do anything more for you? Jory, please, please, don't do this to all of us, to yourself. You have so much you can give the world. You're more than just a dancer, don't you know that? When you have talent it's only one branch on a tree full of many limbs. Why, you've never begun to explore the other branches. Who knows just what you might discover? Remember, I, too, made dancing my life, and when I couldn't dance, I didn't know what to do with myself. I'd hear the music playing, and you'd be dancing with Melodie in our family room. I'd stiffen inside and try to shut out the music that made my legs want to dance. My soul went soaring ... and then I'd crash to earth and cry. But when I started writing, I stopped thinking about dancing. Jory, you'll find something of interest to replace dancing, I know you will."

For the first time since he'd known he would never walk or dance again, Jory turned his head. That alone filled me with breathless joy.

He met my eyes briefly. I saw the tears there, unshed but shining. "Mel is thinking about going to her parents?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Hope struggled to survive within me. I didn't know what Melodie would do now, even if he did come back to being himself. Yet I had to say everything right, and so seldom was I adequate. I'd failed with Julian, failed with Carrie. *Please, God, don't let me fail with Jory.*

"She'd never leave you if you'd come back to her. She needs you, wants you. You turn away from us, proving to her that you'll turn from her as well. Your prolonged silence and

unwillingness to eat say so much, Jory, so much to keep Melodie afraid. She's not like me. She doesn't bounce back, spring forth, and kick and yell. She cries all the time. She only half eats ... and she's pregnant, Jory. Pregnant with your baby. You think about how you felt when you heard what your father did and consider the effects your death will have on your child. Think long and hard about that before you continue with what you've got your mind set on. Think about yourself, and how much you wanted to have your own natural father. Jory, don't be like your father and leave a fatherless child behind you. Don't destroy us, when you destroy yourself!"

"But, Mom!" he cried in great distress. "What am I going to do? I don't want to sit in a wheelchair the rest of my life! I'm angry, so damned angry I want to strike out and hurt everyone! What have I done to deserve this kind of punishment? I've been a good son, a faithful husband. But I can't be a husband now. There's no excitement down there anymore. I feel nothing below my waist. I'd be better off dead than like this!"

My head lowered to press my cheek against his inert hand. "Maybe you would be, Jory. So go on and starve yourself, and will yourself to die, and never sit in a wheelchair—and don't think about any of us. Forget the grief you'll bring into our lives when you're gone. Forget about all those Chris and I have lost before. We can adjust, we're used to losing those we love most. We'll just add you to our long list of those to feel guilty about ... for we will feel guilty. We'll search and search until we find something we failed to do right, and we'll enlarge that and make it grow, until it shuts out the sun and all happiness, and we'll go into our graves blaming ourselves for yet another life gone."

"Mom! Stop! I can't stand to hear you talk like that!"

"I can't stand what you're doing to us! Jory! Don't give up. It's not like you to even think of surrendering. Fight back. Tell yourself you're going to lick this and turn out a better, stronger person because you've faced up to adversities others can't even imagine."

He was listening. "I don't know if I want to fight back. I've lain here since that night and thought about what I could do.

Don't tell me I don't have to do anything because you're rich, and I've got money, too. Life is nothing without a goal, you know that."

"Your child ... make your child your goal. Making Melodie happy, another goal. Stay, Jory, stay ... I can't bear to lose another, I can't, can't ... "And then I was crying.

And I'd determined not to show weakness and cry. I sobbed brokenly without looking at him. "After your father died, I made my baby the most important thing in my life. Maybe I did that to ease a guilty conscience, I don't know. But when you came along on Valentine's night and they laid you on my stomach so I could see you, my heart almost burst with pride. You were so strong-looking, and your blue eyes were so bright. You grasped my finger and didn't want to let go. Paul was there, and Chris, too. They both adored you right from the beginning. You were such a happy, well-behaved baby. I think we all spoiled you, and you never had to cry to get what you wanted. Jory, now I know you are incapable of being spoiled. You've got an inner strength that will see you through. Eventually you'll be glad you hung on to see that child of yours. I know you'll be glad."

During all of this, I'd sobbed my words almost incoherently. I think Jory felt sorry for me. His hand moved so he could wipe away my tears with the edge of his white sheet.

"Got any ideas about what I could do in a wheelchair?" he asked in a small, mocking voice.

"A thousand ideas, Jory. Why, this day isn't long enough to list them. You can learn to play the piano, study art, learn to write. Or you can become a ballet instructor. You don't have to strut around to do that—all you need is a good vocabulary and an untiring tongue. Or you can do something more mundane, like become a CPA, study law and give Bart some competition. In fact, there is very little you can't do. We're all handicapped in one way or another. You should know that. Bart's got his invisible handicap, worse than any you'll ever have. Think back to all his problems while you were dancing and having the time of your life. He was tormented by psychiatrists probing painfully into his deepest self."

His eyes were brighter now, filling with vague hope that tried to find a mooring.

“And think about the swimming pool Bart put in the yard. Your doctors say your arms are very strong, and after some physical therapy you can swim again.”

“What do *you* want me to do, Mom?” His voice was soft, gentle as his hand moved over my hair, and his gaze was tender.

“Live, Jory, that’s all.”

His eyes were soft now, full of tears that didn’t fall. “What about you, Dad, and Cindy? Weren’t you planning to move to Hawaii?”

For weeks I hadn’t thought of Hawaii. I stared blankly before me. How could we leave now that Jory was injured and Melodie was in such distress? We couldn’t leave.

Foxworth Hall had trapped us again.

BOOK TWO



The Reluctant Wife



Regretfully Chris and I neglected Cindy as we spent most of our time in the hospital with Jory. Cindy grew restless and bored in a hostile house with Joel, who gave her only disapproval, with Bart, who gave her only scorn, with Melodie, who had nothing to give to anyone.

“Momma,” she wailed. “I’m not having a good time! It’s been a terrible summer, the worst. I’m sorry Jory’s in the hospital and he won’t ever walk or dance again, and I want to do what I can for him, but what about me? They only allow him to have two visitors at a time and you and Daddy are always with him. Even when I do see him, half the time I don’t know what to say, or what to do. And I don’t know what to do with myself when I’m here, either. This house is so isolated from the rest of the world it’s like living on the moon—boring, boring. You tell me not to go into the village, not to have dates unless you know about them, and you’re never here to ask when someone invites me. You tell me not to swim when Bart and Joel are around. You tell me not to do so many things ... what is it that I *can* do?”

“Tell me what you want to do,” I said with sympathy. She was sixteen and had expected this vacation to give her great pleasure. Now the mansion she’d admired so much in the beginning was proving, in some ways, to be as much a prison for her as the old one had been for us.

She came to sit cross-legged on the floor near my feet. “I don’t want to hurt Jory’s feelings by leaving, but I’m going crazy here. Melodie stays in her room all the time with her door locked and refuses to let me in. Joel dries me up with his mean old eyes. Bart pretends he doesn’t see me. Today a letter came from my friend Bary Boswell, and she’s going to this marvelous summer camp just a few miles north of Boston,

where there is a summer stock theater nearby. And there's swimming in the lake nearby, and sailing, and dances every Saturday, plus they teach all kinds of crafts. I like being with girls my own age, and I think that's just the kind of camp I'd enjoy. You can check into it and see that it has a good reputation, but let me go, please, before I go batty."

I'd so wanted all of us to have a close getting-to-know-you-all-over-again kind of summer, and here she was, wanting to leave, and I hadn't spent nearly enough time with her. Still, I easily understood. "I'll talk to your father about it tonight," I promised. "We want you to be happy, Cindy, you know that. I'm sorry if we've neglected you while we care for Jory. Let's talk now about you. What about boys you met at Bart's party, Cindy? What's going on between you and them?"

"Bart and Joel hide the keys to the cars so I can't drive off. And that's exactly what I would do, permission or not. I want to slip out a window, but they're all so high above the ground, and I'm afraid to jump and fall and hurt myself. But I think about boys all the time, that's what. I miss being with them, having dates and going to dances. I know what you're thinking, because Joel is always muttering about me being without morals ... I'm trying hard to hang on to them, really I am. Yet I don't know how long I can keep myself a virgin. I tell myself that I'm going to be old-fashioned and hold out until I'm married, but I plan not to marry until I'm at least thirty. Then, when I'm out with a boy I really like, and he begins to apply pressure, I want to surrender. I like the sensations I feel leaping up and making my heart beat faster. My body wants it to happen. Momma, why can't I find the kind of strength you have? How do I find the real me? I'm caught in a world that doesn't really know what it wants, you tell me that all the time. So if the world doesn't know, how can I? I want to be what you want me to be, sweet and pure, while *I* want to be sexy. The two contradict each other. I want you and Daddy to always love me, so I try to be as sweet as you think I am—but I'm not that innocent, Momma. I want all the good-looking boys to be in love with me—but someday I'm not going to be able to hold back."

I smiled to see her troubled expression, her fearful glance to see if I'd be shocked. I guessed, too, that she was afraid she'd just ruined her chances to escape this house. My arms went around her. "Hang on to morality, Cindy. You're much too talented and too beautiful to give yourself away like a bit of worthless trash. Think highly of yourself, and others will as well."

"But Momma—how do I say no, and still keep the boys liking me?"

"There are a lot of boys who won't expect you to 'give out,' Cindy, and that's the kind you want. Those who demand sex for one reason or another are more than likely to dump you quickly after they get what they want. There's something about men that makes them want to conquer every woman, especially an exceptional beauty like you. Remember, too, they talk amongst themselves and report on the most intimate details when they don't really love you."

"Momma! You make me feel that being a woman is a trap! I don't want them to trap *me*—I want to trap them! But I have to confess, I'm not good about resisting. Bart's made me feel so insecure about myself that I keep wanting the boys to convince me differently. But every time from this day forward, when some jerk gets me on the backseat and says he'll fall ill if I don't satisfy his lust, I won't feel sorry for him. I'll just think of you and Daddy and bash in his head—or give him the knee where it hurts worse."

She made me laugh, when I hadn't laughed in weeks. "All right, darling, I know in the end you'll do the right thing. So let's talk more about that summer camp so I can give your father all the details."

"You mean I haven't spoiled my chances?" she asked in a delighted way.

"Of course not. I think Chris will agree that you need a break from all this tragedy here."

Chris did agree, thinking as I did that a sixteen-year-old girl needed this special summer for fun. The moment Cindy knew, she had to visit Jory and spill it all out to him. "Now, just

because I'm leaving doesn't mean I don't care, but I'm so damned bored, Jory. I'm going to write often and send you little gifts." She embraced him, kissed him, her tears falling to put beads on his clean-shaven face. "Nothing can take away what you are, Jory—that wonderful thing that makes you so special, and it doesn't live in your legs. I'd want you for my own if you weren't my brother."

"Sure you would," he said with some irony. "But thanks anyway."

Chris and I left Jory alone with his nurse long enough to drive Cindy to the nearest airport, where we kissed her goodbye and he handed her some "pin" money. She was delighted with the amount and had to kiss him again and again before she backed off, waving vigorously. "I'll write real letters," she promised, "not just postcards, and I'll send pictures. Thanks for everything, and don't forget to write often and tell me what's going on. In a way, living in Foxworth Hall is like being caught up in some deep, dark, mysterious novel, only it's too frightening when you're actually living the story."

On the way to the hospital to stay with Jory again, Chris told me of his plans. We couldn't move to Hawaii now and abandon Jory to the frail mercies of Bart and Joel, and Melodie wasn't able to care for herself, much less a husband in a back cast, even if she did hire a nurse. And neither Jory nor Melodie would be in any condition to make the long plane trip to Hawaii for many months.

"I won't know what to do with myself when Jory goes back to the Hall and has his own attendants, any more than Cindy knew how to keep herself occupied and happy. Jory won't need me every hour. I'm going to feel useless unless I do something meaningful, Cathy. I'm not an old man. I still have many good years ahead of me."

Sadly I turned my head to watch him as he kept his eyes on the traffic. He went on without turning to meet my eyes. "Medicine has always played a very important part in my life. That doesn't mean I'm breaking my promise to share more time with you and my family than I do professionally. Just remember what losing a career means to Jory ..."

Sliding closer on the seat, I lowered my head to his shoulder, telling him in a choked voice to go ahead and do what he felt was right. "... but keep in mind a physician has to have an impeccable record, and someday there may be gossip about us."

He nodded, saying he'd already considered that fact. This time he was going into the research side of medicine. He wouldn't be meeting the public, who might recognize him as a Foxworth. He'd already thought enough on the subject. Already he was bored with staying home and contributing nothing. He had to do something important or lose the identity he felt he needed. I put on a bright smile even if my heart was sinking, for his dream of living in Hawaii had also been my dream.

With arms about each other, we entered the huge house that waited with its gaping jaws wide.

Melodie had sequestered herself in her room, Joel was in that little room without furniture, down on his knees praying while a single candle burned in the gloom. "Where is Bart?" asked Chris, looking around as if astonished that anyone would want to spend so many hours in such a dismal place.

Joel frowned, then faintly smiled, as if he had to remember to appear friendly. "Bart is off in some bar drinking himself under the table, as he put it."

I'd never known Bart to do such a thing. Regret for setting up the performance that ruined his brother's legs, and cost him his career? Regret for driving Cindy away? Did Bart know how to feel regret? I didn't know. I stared blankly at Joel as he paced the floor, seeming terribly upset, when what difference did Bart's behavior make to him?

The old man followed us as usually he followed Bart. "He should know better," muttered Joel. "Whores and harlots hang out in bars, though I've warned him about them."

His words intrigued me. "What's the difference between a whore and a harlot, Joel?"

His smeary eyes turned my way. As if light blinded him, he shaded those eyes with his gnarled hand.

“Are you mocking me, niece? The Bible mentions both nouns, so there must be some difference.”

“Perhaps a whore is worse than a harlot, or vice versa? Is that what you mean?”

He glared at me, telling me with his glittering, faded eyes that I was tormenting him with my silly questions.

“Then’s there’s a strumpet, Joel, and today we have hookers, call girls, and prostitutes—do they come between harlots and whores, or are they the same?”

His eyes hardened to rivet on me with the piercing glare of a virgin saint. “You don’t like me, Catherine. Why don’t you like me? What have I done to make you distrust me? I stay to save Bart from the worst in himself, or I’d leave today because of your attitude, and I am more Foxworth than you are.” Then his expression changed, and his lips quirked. “No, I take that back. You are *twice* the Foxworth I am.”

How I hated him for reminding me! Still, he did manage to make me feel ashamed, as if I’d misconstrued the silent messages he sent out. I didn’t defend myself, or protest to convince him otherwise. Nor did Chris say a word to prevent this confrontation he’d already sensed would come sooner or later.

“I don’t know why I distrust you, Joel,” I said in a kinder voice than I customarily used with him. “Perhaps you protest too much about your father, making me doubt you are one whit better or different.”

Without another word, but with a sad look that I think he feigned, he turned and shuffled off, his hands again tucked up those invisible brown monk sleeves.

That very evening, when Melodie insisted on dining in her room alone again, I made up my mind. Even if she didn’t want to go, and fought against me, I was driving Melodie to see Jory!

I stalked into her room and removed her almost untouched dinner tray without saying a word. She wore the same shabby robe that she'd worn for days. I pulled her best-looking summer outfit from her closet and tossed it on the bed. "Shower, Melodie, and shampoo your hair. Then get dressed—you are going to visit Jory tonight, whether or not you want to."

Instantly she jumped up and protested, acting hysterical as she said she couldn't go yet, wasn't ready yet, and I couldn't make her do anything she didn't want to do. I overrode everything she said, shouting back it seemed she'd never be ready, and I didn't care what excuses she offered, she was going.

"You can't make me do one damned thing!" she yelled, very pale as she backed away. Then, sobbing, she pleaded for me to give her more time to become adjusted to the idea of Jory being crippled. I said she'd had enough time. I'd adjusted, Chris had, Cindy had ... and she could pretend; after all, she was supposed to be a professional used to playing roles.

I had to literally drag Melodie to the shower and shove her inside when she wanted the tub. But I knew about Melodie in a bathtub. There she'd sit until her skin puckered, and visiting hours would be over. Waiting outside the shower door, I urged her to hurry. She stepped out, swathed in a towel, still sobbing as her blue eyes pleaded for mercy.

"Stop crying!" I ordered, shoving her down on the dressing room stool. "I'm going to blow-dry your hair while you put on your makeup—and do a good job of concealing that red puffiness around your eyes, for Jory will be very perceptive. You've got to convince him that your love for him hasn't changed."

On and on I talked to convince her that she would find the right words to say, the right expressions to wear, as I dried her pretty honey-blond hair.

Her hair had marvelous sheen, more depth to the color than mine had. No red in mine at all. The texture was stronger, than my frail, fine hair of flaxen color. When I had Melodie

dressed, I sprayed her lightly with the perfume Jory loved most, as she stood as if in a trance of not knowing what to do next. I hugged her before I pulled her to the door.

“Come now, Melodie, it’s not going to be that bad. He loves and needs you. Once you’re there and he looks at you, you’ll forget his legs are paralyzed. You’ll instinctively do and say the right things. I know you will because you love him.”

Pale beneath the makeup, her large eyes stared at me bleakly, as if she had her doubts and knew better than to bring them up again.

By this time Bart had come home from whatever bar had served him enough to make his legs limp and his eyes unfocused. He slouched in a deep chair, legs sprawled forward, and behind him in the shadows, Joel sagged limp as a dying palm. “Where yuh goin’?” Bart asked in a slurred voice, as I tried to slip Melodie down the hall to the garage without him noticing us.

“To the hospital,” I said, pulling Melodie toward the huge garage. “And I think it’s time you went to visit your brother again, Bart. Not tonight, but tomorrow. Buy him a gift that will entertain him ... he’s going mad in there from doing nothing.”

“Melodie, you don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” Bart said, rising unsteadily to his feet. “Don’t let my dominating mother push you around.”

She was trembling, hanging back to plead mutely with him. Ruthlessly I pulled her on and forced her into the car.

Bart came staggering into the garage, calling out to Melodie that he would save her ... and then he lost his drunken balance and fell to the floor. I pushed the electric button to open one of the huge garage doors and backed out of the garage.

All the way into Charlottesville, until I was parking in the hospital lot, Melodie trembled, sobbed, and tried to convince me she’d harm Jory more than she’d help him. And all the way, I’d tried to give her confidence that she could handle the situation.

“Please, Melodie, walk into that room with a smile. Put on your nobility, that regal princess air that you used to wear all the time. Then when you’re near his bed, take him in your arms and kiss him.”

Numbly she nodded, as a terrified child would.

I shoved the roses I’d purchased into her arms, and other gifts I’d wrapped prettily, one she’d chosen to give him after Bart’s party. “Now, tell him you haven’t been before because you’ve been feeling weak, sleepy and sick. Tell him all your other concerns if you want to. But don’t you dare even hint that you can’t feel toward him like a wife anymore.”

Like a blind, automated robot she nodded stiffly, forcing herself to keep pace with me.

We ran into Chris coming down the hall as we left the elevator on the sixth floor. He beamed happily to see Melodie with me. “How wonderful, Melodie,” he said, giving her a quick hug before he turned to me. “I went out and bought Jory his dinner, and enough for me as well. He’s in a fairly good mood. He drank all his milk and ate two bites of the pecan pie. And usually he adores pecan pie. Melodie, if you can, try to see that he eats more of that pie. He’s losing weight rapidly, and I’d like to see him gain some back.”

Still speechless, her eyes wide and blank, Melodie nodded, looking toward the door numbered 606 as if she faced the electric chair. Chris gave her a friendly, understanding pat on her back, kissed me, then strode off. “I’m going to talk to his doctors. I will join you later on and follow you home in my car.”

For the life of me I couldn’t feel confident as I ushered Melodie toward Jory’s closed door. He had a privacy fetish about keeping his door closed at all times so no one could see a former *premier danseur* lying helpless on his bed. I rapped once, then twice, our signal. “Jory, it’s only I, your mother.”

“Come in, Mom,” he called with more welcome than he’d used before. “Dad told me you’d be showing up any second. I hope you brought me a good book to read. I’ve finished—”

He broke off and stared as I shoved Melodie into his room first.

Because I'd called Chris to tell him my plans, Chris had helped Jory out of his hospital garment, and he was now wearing a blue silk pajama top. His hair was neatly brushed, his face was clean shaven and he'd had his first haircut since his accident. He looked better than he had since that horrible night.

He tried to smile. Hope flared in his eyes, so glad to see her again.

She stood where I'd pushed her and didn't take another step toward his bed. This caused his tentative smile to freeze on his face as he tried to hide his hunger ... his faltering flame of hope as his eyes tried to meet with hers. She refused to meet his eyes. Quickly the smile vanished as the flame in his eyes sputtered, flickered, then went out. Dead eyes now. He turned his face toward the wall.

Instantly I stepped up behind Melodie, pushing her toward his bed, before I moved to see what she was revealing on her face. She stood there with her arms full of red roses and gifts, rooted to the floor and trembling like an aspen tree in a high wind. I gave her a sharp nudge. "Say something," I whispered.

"Hi, Jory," she said in a quivery, small voice, her eyes desperate. I shoved her closer to him. "I've brought you roses ...," she added.

Still he kept his face to the wall.

Again I nudged her, thinking I should get out and leave them alone; yet I feared the minute I did she'd whirl about and run.

"I'm sorry I haven't visited before," she said in a stumbling way, inching bit by bit closer to his bed. "I've also brought you gifts ... a few things your mother said you needed."

He whipped his head about, his dark blue eyes full of smoldering rage and resentment. "And my mother forced you to come, right? Well, you don't have to stay. You've delivered your roses and your gifts—now GET OUT!"

Melodie broke, dropping the roses onto his bed, her gifts to the floor. She cried out as she tried to take his hand, a hand he quickly snatched away. “I love you, Jory ... and I’m sorry, so sorry ...”

“I don’t doubt for a minute you are sorry!” he shouted. “So sorry to see all the glamour disappear in a flashing moment, and now you’re stuck with a crippled husband! Well, you’re not stuck, Melodie! You can file for divorce tomorrow and leave!”

Back toward the door, I was filled with pity for him—and for her. Gently I eased out but left the door ajar just enough to hear and see what went on. I was so afraid Melodie would take this chance to leave, or else she’d do something to kill his desire to live ... and if I could, I would do anything to stop her.

One by one Melodie picked up the fallen roses. She threw old, dying flowers into the trash basket, filled the vase with water in the small adjacent bath, then carefully arranged the red roses, so carefully, taking so long, as if just by doing something she could hold off destroying him. When she’d done that, she turned again to the bed and picked up the three gifts. “Don’t you want to open them?” she asked weakly.

“I don’t need anything,” he said flatly, again staring at the wall so she saw only the back of his curly head.

From somewhere she drew courage. “I think you’ll like what’s inside. I’ve heard you say many a time what you wanted ...”

“All I ever wanted was to dance until I was forty,” he choked out. “Now that is over, and I don’t need a wife or a dance partner, I don’t need or want anything.”

She put the gifts on the bed and stood there wringing her pale, thin hands, her silent tears beginning to fall. “I love you, Jory,” she choked. “I want to do everything right, but I’m not brave like your mother and father, and that’s why I didn’t visit before. Your mother wanted me to say I was sick, unable to come, but I could have come. I stayed in that house and cried, hoping I could find the strength I needed to smile when I did

eventually come. I'm coming apart with shame for being weak, for not doing all I should for you when you need me ... and the longer I stayed away, the harder it became for me to show up. I feared you wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't look at me, and I'd do something stupid to make you hate me. I don't want a divorce, Jory. I'm still your wife. Chris took me to an obstetrician yesterday, and our baby is progressing normally."

Pausing, she tentatively reached to touch his arm. He jerked spasmodically, as if her hand burned, but he didn't snatch his arm away—she snatched hers.

From where I stood in the hallway, I could see enough of Jory's face to know he was crying and trying hard not to let Melodie know that. Tears were in my eyes, too, as I cringed there, feeling a sneaky intruder who had no right to watch and listen. Even so I couldn't move away, when I'd moved from Julian's side only to find him dead the next time I looked. Like father, like son, like father like son beat the unhappy tattoo of the drums of fear in my head.

Again she reached to touch him, this time his hair. "Don't turn your face away, Jory. Look at me. Let me see that you don't hate me for failing you when you needed me most. Shout at me, hit me, but don't stop communicating. I'm tied up in knots. I can't sleep at night, feeling I should have done something to keep you from dancing that role. I've always hated that particular ballet and didn't want to tell you when you choreographed it and made it your signature." She wiped at her tears, then sank to her knees by his bed and bowed her head onto his hand, which she'd managed to seize.

Her low voice barely reached my ears. "We can make a life together. You can teach me how. Wherever you lead, Jory, I'll follow ... just tell me that you want me to stay."

Maybe because she was hiding her face now, with her tears wetting his hand beneath her cheek, he turned his head and looked at her with such tormented, tragic eyes. He cleared his throat before he spoke and dried his tears with the edge of the sheet.

“I don’t want you to stay if living with me is going to be a burden. You can always go back to New York and dance with other partners. Because I’m crippled doesn’t mean you have to be crippled too. You have your career, and all those years of dedicated work. So go, Mel, with my blessings ... I don’t need you now.”

My heart cried out, knowing differently.

She looked up, her makeup ruined from so many tears. “How could I live with myself, Jory? I’ll stay. I’ll do my best to make you a good wife.” She paused while I thought her timing was so wrong, so damned wrong. She gave him time to think that he didn’t need a wife, only a nurse and companion, and a substitute mother for his child.

I closed my eyes and began to pray. *God, let her find the right words.* Why isn’t she telling him the ballet meant nothing without him? Why didn’t she say his happiness counted more than anything else? Melodie, Melodie, say something to make him believe his handicap doesn’t matter, it’s the man he’ll always be that you love. But she said nothing like this.

She only opened his gifts for him, showed them to him, while he studied her face with bleaker and bleaker eyes.

He thanked her for the bestselling novel she’d brought (chosen by me); thanked her for the traveling shaving kit with the sterling silver razors—straight edged, electric, and a third kind, dual edged—with a silver-handled lathering brush and a round mirror that could be attached to anything with a suction cup guaranteed to work. There was also a fancy silver mug with soap, cologne, and aftershave lotion. Then finally she was opening the best gift, a huge mahogany box full of watercolors, a hobby that Chris enjoyed. He planned to teach Jory the technique of using watercolors as soon as he came home. Jory stared at the paintbox for the longest time without interest before he looked away. “You have good taste, Mel.”

Bowing her head, she nodded. “Is there anything else you need?”

“No. Just leave. I’m sleepy. It’s nice to see you again, but I’m tired.”

She backed off hesitatingly, while my heart cried for them both. So much in love before his accident, and all that passion had been washed away in the deluge of her shock and his humiliation.

I stepped into the room.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything, but I think Jory is tired, Melodie.” I smiled at both brightly. “You just wait until you see what we’re planning for your return home. If painting doesn’t interest you now, it will later on. At home we’ve got other treasures waiting for you. You’re going to be thrilled, but I can’t tell you anything. It’s all supposed to be a huge welcome-back surprise.” I hurried to embrace him, which wasn’t easy to do when his body was so bulky and hard with the cast. I kissed his cheek, ruffled his hair, and squeezed his fingers. “It’s going to be all right, darling,” I whispered. “She has to learn to accept just like you do. She’s trying hard, and if she doesn’t say the words you want to hear, it’s because she’s too much in shock to think straight.”

Ironically he smiled. “Sure, Mom, sure. She loves me just as much as she did when I could walk and dance. Nothing has changed. Nothing important.”

Melodie was already out of his room and standing in the hall waiting, so she didn’t hear any of this. Over and over again she repeated on our way home, with Chris following in his car, “Oh, my God, my God ... oh, my God ... what are we going to do?”

“You did fine, Melodie, just fine. The next time you’ll do even better,” said I, brightly.

* * *

A week passed and Melodie did do better on her second visit, and even better on her third. Now she didn’t resist when I told her where she had to go. She knew it wouldn’t do her any good to resist.

Another day I sat in my dressing room before the long mirror, carefully applying mascara. Chris stepped into view with a look of pleasure on his face.

“I’ve got something great to tell you,” he started. “Last week I went to visit the university scientific staff and filled out an application for their cancer research team. They realize there, of course, that I’ve only been an amateur biochemist in my spare time. Nevertheless, for some reason, some of my answers seemed to please them, and they have asked me to join their staff of scientists. Cathy, I’m thrilled to have something to do. Bart has agreed to allow us to stay on here as long as we like, or until he marries. I’ve talked to Jory, and he wants to be near us. His apartment in New York is so small. Here he’ll have wide hall and large rooms that will accommodate his wheelchair. Right now he says he’ll never use one, but he will change his mind when that cast comes off.”

Chris’s enthusiasm for the new job was contagious. I wanted to see him happy, with something to do to take his mind off Jory’s problems. I stood to head for the closet, but he pulled me down on his lap to polish off his story. Some of what he said I didn’t understand, for every so often he’d forgetfully slip into medical jargon, which was still Greek to me.

“Will you be happy, Chris? It’s important for you to do what you want with your life. Jory’s happiness is important as well, but I don’t want you staying on here if Bart is going to be insufferable. Be honest ... can you tolerate Bart just to give Jory a wonderful place to live?”

“Catherine, my love, as long as you are here, then of course I’ll be happy. As for Bart, I’ve put up with him all these years, and I can take it for as long as need be. I know who is seeing Jory through this traumatic period. I may help a little, but it’s you who brings more sunshine with your gossipy chatter, your lilting manner, your armloads of gifts, and your consistent reassurances that Melodie will change. He considers every word you say as if it comes straight from God.”

“But you’ll be coming and going, and we won’t see much of you,” I moaned.

“Hey, take that look off your face. I’ll drive home every night and try to reach here before dark.” He went on to explain

that he didn't have to reach the university lab until ten, and that would give us plenty of time to breakfast together. There wouldn't be emergency calls to take him away at night; he'd have every weekend off, a month off with pay, not that money mattered to us. We'd take trips to conventions where I'd meet people with innovative ideas, the kind of creative people I enjoyed best.

On and on he extolled the virtues of his new enterprise, making me accept something he seemed to want very much. Still, I slept in his arms that night, fretting, wishing we'd never come to this house that held so many terrible memories and had caused so many tragedies.

Around midnight, unable to sleep, I got up to sit in our private sitting room that adjoined our bedroom, knitting what was supposed to end up a fluffy white baby bonnet. I almost felt like my mother as I furiously knitted on and on with such intensity I couldn't put it down. Like her I could never let anything alone until it was finished.

A soft rapping sounded on the door, soon followed by Melodie's request to come in. Delighted to have her visit, I answered, "Of course, come in. I'm glad you saw the light under my door. I was thinking about you and Jory while I knitted, and darn if I know how to stop once I start a project."

Falteringly she came to perch on the love seat next to me; her very uncertainty immediately put me on guard. She glance at my knitting, looked away. "I need someone to talk to, Cathy, someone wise, like you."

How pitiful and young she sounded, even younger than Cindy. I put down my knitting to turn and embrace her. "Cry, Melodie, go on. You have enough to cry about. I've been harsh with you, and I know that."

Her head bowed down on my shoulder as she let go and sobbed with abandon.

"Help me, Cathy, please help me. I don't know what to do. I keep thinking of Jory and how terrible he must feel. I think about me and how inadequate I feel. I'm glad you made me go to see him, thought I hated you for doing that at the time.

Today when I went alone, he smiled as if that proved something to him. I know I've been childish and weak. Yet each time I have to force myself to enter his room. I hate seeing him lying so still on that bed, moving nothing but his arms and head. I kiss him, hold his hand, but once I start to talk about important things, he turns his head toward the wall and refuses to respond. Cathy ... you may think he's learning to accept his disability, but I think he's willing himself to die—and it's my fault, my fault!"

Astonishment widened my eyes. "Your fault? It was an accident, you can't blame yourself."

In breathless gush her words spilled forth. "You don't understand why I feel as I do! It's been troubling me so much I feel haunted with guilt. It's because we're here, in this cursed house! Jory didn't want to have a baby until years from now. He made me promise before we married that until we'd been on the top for at least ten years, we wouldn't start a family—but I deliberately broke my word and stopped taking the pill. I wanted to have my first baby before I was thirty. I reasoned that after the baby was conceived he wouldn't want me to have an abortion. When I told him he blew! He stormed at me—and *demand*ed I have an abortion."

"Oh, no ..." I was shocked, thinking I didn't know Jory nearly as well as I'd thought.

"Don't blame him; it was my own doing. Dancing was his world," Melodie continued in a gasping way, as if she'd been running uphill for weeks. "I shouldn't have done what I did. I told him I'd just forgotten. I knew on our wedding day that dancing came first with him, and I was second. He never lied or told me differently, though he loved me. Then, because I was pregnant, we abandoned our tour, came here ... and look what happened! It's not fair, Cathy, not fair! On this very day we'd be in London but for the baby. He'd be on stage, bowing, accepting the applause, the bouquets, doing what he was born for. I tricked him, and in so doing, I brought about his accident, and what's he going to do now? How can I make up for what I've stolen from him?"

She trembled all over as I held her. What could I say? I bit down on my lip, hurting for her, for Jory. We were so much alike in some ways, for I'd caused Julian's death by deserting him, leaving him in Spain—and that had led to his end. Never deliberately harming, just coincidentally doing what I felt was right, as Melodie did what she considered right.

Who ever counted the flowers that died when we pulled up the weeds? I shook my head, pulling myself out of the abyss of yesterdays and turned my full concentration on the moment.

“Melodie, Jory's just as scared as you are, much more so, and with good reason. You aren't to blame for anything. He's happy about the baby now that it's on its way. Many men protest when wives want babies, but when they see the child they helped create, they're won over. He lies there on his bed, as you lie on yours, wondering how his marriage is going to work out now that he can't dance. He's the one who is crippled. He's the one who has to face up to everyday life, knowing he'll be unable to sit when he wants to; knowing he can't sit in a regular chair and get up and down when he feels like it; nor can he walk in the rain, or run on the grass, or even go to the bathroom in a normal way.

“All the simple normal everyday things he took for granted will now be very difficult for him. And think of what he was. This is a terrible blow to his pride. He wasn't even going to try and cope for fear he'd burden you too much. But listen to this. This afternoon when I was with him, he said he was going to make a big effort to cheer up and lift himself out of his depression. And he will. He'll make it, and a lot of it will be because you've helped by just visiting and sitting there with him. Each time you go you convince him you still love him.”

Why did she draw from my arms and turn her face away? I watched her brush the tears from her face impatiently; then she blew her nose and tried to stop crying.

With effort she spoke again. “I don't know what it is, but I keep having scary dreams. I wake up frightened, thinking something even more dreadful is going to happen. There's something weird about this house. Something strange and frightening. When everyone is gone, and Bart is in his office,

and Joel is praying in that ugly, bare room, I lie on my bed and seem to hear the house whispering. It seems to call to me. I hear the wind blow as if it's trying to tell me something. I hear the floor squeak outside my door so I jump up and race to throw open the door—and no one is there, no one is ever there. I suspect it's only my imagination, but I hear, as you've said you do sometimes, so much of what isn't real. Am I losing my mind, Cathy? Am I?"

"Oh, Melodie," I murmured, trying to draw her close again, but she put me off by moving to the far end of the sofa.

"Cathy, why is this house different?"

"Different from what?" I asked uneasily.

"From all other houses." She glanced fearfully toward the door to the hall. "Don't you feel it? Can't you hear it? Do you sense this house is breathing, like it has a life of its own?"

My eyes widened as a chill stole the comfort from my pretty sitting room. In the bedroom I could faintly hear Chris's regular, heavy breathing.

Melodie, usually too reticent to talk, gushed onward breathlessly. "This house wants to use the people inside as a way to keep it living on forever. It's like a vampire, sucking our lifeblood from all of us. I wish it hadn't been restored. It's not a new house. It's been here for centuries. Only the wallpaper and the paint and the furniture are new, but those stairs in the foyer I never climb up or descend without seeing the ghosts of others ..."

A kind of paralyzing numbness gripped me.

Every word she said was only too frighteningly true. I *could* hear it breathe! I tried to pull myself back to reality. "Listen, Melodie. Bart was only a little boy when my mother ordered it reconstructed on the foundations of the old manor home. Before she died it was up, but not completely finished inside. When her will was read, and she left this house to Bart, with Chris as trustee to manage until he came of age, we decided it was a waste not to have it completed. Chris and our attorney contacted the architects and contractors, and the job

went forward until it was finished, only the inside needed refurbishing. That had to wait until Bart came here in his college days and ordered the interior decorators to style it as it had been in the old days. And you're right. I, too, wish this house had been left in ashes ...”

“Maybe your mother knew this house was what Bart would want most to give him confidence. It's so imposing. Haven't you noticed how much he's changed? He's not like the little boy who used to hide away in the shadows and lurk behind trees. He's the master here, like a baron overseeing his domain. Or maybe I should say king of the mountain, for he's so rich, so terribly rich ...”

Not yet ... not yet, I kept thinking. Nevertheless, her frail, whispering voice disturbed me. I didn't want to think Bart was as overbearing as a medieval lord. But she went on. “Bart's happy, Cathy, extraordinarily happy. He tells me he's sorry about Jory. Then he telephones those attorneys and wants to know why they keep postponing the rereading of his grandmother's will. They've told him they can't read it unless everyone mentioned in the will is here to hear the reading, and so they put it off until the day when Jory comes home from the hospital. They will read the will in Bart's office.”

“How do you know so much about Bart's business?” I asked sharply, suddenly very suspicious of all that time when she was alone in this house with my second son ... and an old man who spent most of his time in that tiny, naked room he used as a chapel. Joel would quite happily see Jory destroyed if that would satisfy Bart. In Joel's eyes a dancing man was no better than the worst sinner, displaying his body. Leaping and bounding in front of women, wearing nothing but a loincloth ... I stared again at Melodie.

“Do you and Bart spend much time together?”

Quickly she stood. “I'm tired now, Cathy. I've said enough to make you think I'm crazy. Do all expectant mothers have such fearful dreams—did you? I'm afraid, too, that my baby won't be normal since I've grieved so much for Jory.”

I gave her what comfort I could when I felt sick inside, and later that night while I lay beside Chris I began to toss and turn, to flit in and out of nightmares, until he wakened and pleaded with me to let him get some sleep. Turning, I wrapped my arms about him, clinging to him as if to some unsinkable raft—as I'd always clung to the only straw that kept me from drowning in the cruel sea of Foxworth Hall.

Homecoming



Finally the decorators I'd hired to do over Jory's suite of rooms were finished. Now everything there was planned for his entertainment and comfort and convenience. With Melodie beside me, we stood and surveyed all that had been done to make the room bright and cheerful.

"Jory likes color and lots of light, unlike some who want only darkness because it's richer appearing," explained Melodie with a strange look haunting her eyes. Of course I knew she meant Bart. I gave her a quizzical look, wondering again how much time she spent with Bart, and what they talked about, and if he'd tried anything. Certainly all that wistful yearning I'd seen in his eyes would force him to make advances. And what better time than while Jory was away and Melodie was desperately needing? Then my safety valve turned on ... Melodie despised Bart. She might need him to talk to, but that was all.

"Tell me what else I can do to help," I said, wanting her to do most of it so she'd feel needed, useful. In response she smiled for the first time with some show of happiness. "You can help me make the bed with the pretty new sheets I ordered." She ripped open the plastic wrappings, the movement making her fuller breasts jiggle. Her jeans were just beginning to show a slight bulge.

I was almost as worried about her as I was about Jory. An expectant mother needed to eat more, drink milk, take vitamins, and then there was this unexpected reversal of her former heavy depression. She was now completely accepting of Jory's unhappy situation. It was what I had wanted, yet it had come about too quickly, and that gave me the feeling it was false.

Then came an explanation of her newfound security. “Cathy, Jory’s going to get well and dance again. I dreamed last night he was, and my dreams always come true.”

Now I knew she was going to do what I’d done in the beginning, convince herself that Jory would recover someday, and on that kind of fantasy she was going to construct her life—and his.

I started to speak, to say what Chris had to me, but Bart stepped into the hallway outside, his large feet clumping heavily down the long, dim hall. He glowered at the once dark paneling that was now painted off white so that painting of the sea and shore would show up beautifully. Easy enough to see he was displeased with our changes.

“We did it to please Jory,” I said before he could object, while Melodie stood silent and stared at him with the wide-eyed, helpless look of a child caught in a sticky situation. “I know you want your brother to be happy, and no one loves the sea, the surf, the sand, and seabirds more than Jory. So, into this room we’re putting a bit of the sea and shore—giving him the knowledge that all the important things in life will still exist for him. The sky above, the earth below, and the sea in between. He’s not going to lack for anything, Bart. He’s going to have what it takes to keep him alive and happy, and I know you want to do your part.”

He was staring at Melodie, not half listening to me. His eyes riveted to those larger breasts, moving to study the curve of the baby swelling her belly. “Melodie, you could have come to me and asked before you did anything, since I’m the one who’ll pay the bills.” I was completely ignored, as if I weren’t there at all.

“Oh, no,” denied Melodie. “Jory and I have money. We can pay for the changes we’ve made in here ... and I didn’t think you would mind since you seem so concerned about him.”

“You don’t have to pay for anything,” said Bart with surprising warmth. “The day Jory comes home, attorneys will be coming in the afternoon to read the will again, and this time

I'll know exactly my full worth. I'm damned sick and tired of having that day postponed."

"Bart," I said, stepping so I was between him and Melodie, "you know why they haven't reread the will. They want Jory to be here and fully cognizant of what's going on."

He walked around me to deliberately lock his eyes with the huge, sad ones of Melodie. He spoke to her and her alone. "You just tell me what you need, and I'll deliver it yesterday. You and Jory can stay as long as you like."

They stood staring at each other across twenty feet of sea-blue velvet carpeting. Bart's dark eyes probed into her blue ones before he said softly, winningly, "Don't worry so much, Melodie. You and Jory have a home here forever if you want. I don't really give a damn what you do with these rooms. I do want Jory to be as comfortable and happy as possible."

Were they formula words to satisfy me—or calculated words to seduce her? Why did Melodie blush and gaze down at her feet?

Cindy's tale resounded like distant church bells in my memory. Insurance for all the guests ... in case of accidents. Wet sand that should have been dry sand. Sand that clumped into cement and didn't instantly pour out to make the papiermâché columns safe.

Into my thoughts flitted memories of Bart when he was seven, eight, nine, and ten ...

Wish I had legs as pretty as Jory's. Wish I could run and dance like Jory. Gonna grow taller, gonna grow much bigger, gonna be more powerful than Jory. Someday. Someday.

Bart's mumbling boyhood wishes, said so many times I'd grown indifferent to them. Then when he was older ...

Who is gonna love me, like Melodie loves Jory? Nobody. Nobody.

I shook my head to rid myself of unwelcome memories of a little boy wanting to equal the stature of his older and more talented brother.

But why was he looking now at Melodie with such significance? Her blue eyes lifted to meet his briefly; then she looked away, blushing again, positioning her hands in the ballet position all dancers used to keep from drawing attention away from the main performer—her feet toed out. On stage, Melodie was on stage, playing a role.

Bart strode off, his legs confident and sure, as they'd never been when he was a young boy. I felt sad and sorry he had to wait until he was out of Jory's shadow before he could find even the ability to use his body coordination with skill. Sighing, I decided to think of the present and all that had been done to give Jory's convalescence the perfect environment.

A large color TV was at the foot of his bed, and he had a remote control unit to change channels and turn it off and on from his bed. An electrician had arranged a way for Jory to open and close his draperies when he chose. A stereo was within his reach. Books lined the back of his adjustable bed, which would sit him up and turn him into almost any position he wanted. Melodie and I, with Chris's help, had wracked our brains to come up with every modern convenience that would enable him to do what he could for himself. Now all we had to do was to see he stayed busy with some occupation of real interest, enough to absorb his energies and challenge his innate talents.

A long time ago I'd started reading books on psychology, my poor attempt to try and help Bart. Now I could help Jory with his "racehorse" personality that had to compete and win. He couldn't endure boredom, lying about doing nothing. There was already a barre along the wall without windows, put there recently, to give him the promise that one day he'd stand up, even if he would have to wear a back brace connected to leg braces. I sighed to think of my beautiful, graceful son stumbling along like a horse in a harness; then tears were streaking my face. Tears I quickly blinked away so Melodie wouldn't see them.

Soon Melodie was tired and left to lie down and rest. I finished up in the room, then hurried to oversee the ramps being constructed to take Jory down to the terraces and the

gardens. No effort was being spared to see he would not be confined to his room. There was also a newly installed elevator put where once there had been a butler's pantry.

* * *

At last came the wonderful day when Jory was allowed to leave the hospital and come home. The cast was still on his back, but he was eating and drinking normally and had gained back his color and a little of the weight he'd lost. My heart ached with pity to see him flat on a stretcher, being rolled to the elevator, when once he'd taken the stairs three at a time. I saw him turn his head to stare at the stairs as if he'd sell his soul to use them again.

But, smiling, he looked around the grand suite of rooms all refurbished and his eyes sparkled. "It's great, what you've done, really great. My favorite color combination, white and blue. You've given me the seashore—why, I can almost smell the surf, hear the seagulls. It's wonderful, truly wonderful what paint and pictures, green plants and planning can do."

His wife stood at the foot of the narrow bed he'd have to use until the cast came off, but she took pains not to meet his eyes. "Thanks for liking what we've done. Your mother and I, and Chris, too, really tried to please you."

His blue eyes turned navy as he stared at her, sensing something I, too, felt. He looked toward the windows, his full lips thinning, before he drew back into his shell.

Immediately I stepped forward to hand him a huge box, saved for this kind of uncomfortable moment. "Jory, something meaningful for you to do while you're still confined to the bed. Don't want you staring at that boob tube all the time."

Seeming relieved not to have to trouble his wife with words she didn't want to hear, he feigned childish eagerness by shaking the huge box. "A compressed elephant? An unsinkable surfboard?" he guessed, looking only at me. I ruffled his curly hair, leaned to hug and kiss him and ordered him to hurry and open that box. I was dying to hear what he

thought of my gift that had traveled all the way from New England.

Soon he had the ribbons and pretty wrapping off and was staring down at the long box containing what appeared to be neat bundles of super-long matchsticks. Tiny bottles of paint, larger bottles of glue, with spools of thin cording, carefully packaged cloth. “A kit to make a clipper ship,” he said with both wonder and dismay. “Mom, there are ten pages of instructions! This thing is so complicated it will take me the better part of my life to complete. And when it’s done—if ever—what will I have?”

“What will you have? My son, you will have when you are finished an heirloom that will be priceless, to leave to your son or daughter.” All said so proudly, so sure he could follow the difficult directions. “You have steady hands, a good eye for details, a ready understanding of the written word and such determination. Besides, take a look at that empty mantel that demands a ship smack in the middle.”

Laughing, he laid his head back on the pillow, already exhausted. He closed his eyes. “Okay, you’ve convinced me. I’ll give it a go—but I’ve not had much experience with any craft since I was a kid gluing airplane parts together.”

Oh, yes, I remembered clearly. They’d dangled down from his ceiling, infuriating Bart, who couldn’t glue anything together properly at that time.

“Mom ... I’m tired. Give me a chance to nap before the lawyers come to read that will. I don’t know if I’m up to all the excitement of Bart’s ‘coming into his own’—at last.”

It was at this moment that Bart stepped into the room. Jory sensed him there and opened his eyes. The dark brown and dark blue brotherly eyes met, locked, challenging the other for a dreadfully long time. The silence grew and grew until I became aware of my own heart throbs; the clock behind me ticked too loud, and Melodie was breathing heavily. I heard the birds outside twittering before Melodie began to rearrange another vase of flowers just for something to do.

On and on they clashed eyes, wills, when Bart should speak and welcome home the brother he'd visited only once. Still he just stood there, as if he'd keep his eyes locked on Jory until Jory broke the spell and lost the silent battle of wills.

I had my lips parted to stop this contest when Jory smiled and said warmly, without lowering his eyes or breaking the bind, "Hi, brother. I know how much you hate hospitals, so it was doubly nice for you to visit me. Since I'm here, in your home ... isn't it easier to say hello? I'm glad my accident didn't spoil your birthday party. I heard from Cindy that my fall only momentarily lulled the hilarity, and the party went on as if nothing had happened."

Still Bart stood there saying nothing. Melodie put the last rose in the vase and lifted her head. A few tendrils of her fair hair had escaped the tight confinement of her ballerina bun to make her look charmingly casual and antiquesy fragile. There was an air of weariness about her as if she'd surrendered to life and all its vicissitudes. Was I imagining that she sent some silent warning to Bart—and he understood? Suddenly he was smiling, even if it was stiff.

"I'm glad you're back. Welcome home, Jory." He strode forward to clasp his brother's hand. "If there's anything I can do, just let me know." Then he left the room, and I was staring after him, wondering ...

* * *

At four exactly, that very afternoon, shortly after Jory woke up and Chris and Bart lifted him onto a stretcher, three attorneys came to take over Bart's grand home office. We sat in fine milk-chocolate-colored leather chairs, all but Jory, who lay on a rolling stretcher very still and quiet. His tired eyes were half opened, showing his interest was small. Cindy had flown home to be here, as was required, for she, too, was mentioned in the will. She perched on the arm of my chair, swinging her shapely leg back and forth, treating all of this as a joke while Joel glared to see that blue high-heeled shoe moving constantly and calling attention to those remarkably lovely legs. We all sat as if at a funeral, as papers were shuffled,

spectacles were put on and whisperings between the lawyers made us all uneasy.

Bart was particularly nervous, exalted-looking, but suspicious of the way the attorneys kept glancing at him. The eldest of the three acted as spokesman as word by careful word the main portion of my mother's will was read once again. We'd heard it all before.

"... when my grandson, Bartholomew Winslow Scott Sheffield, who will eventually claim his rightful surname of Foxworth, reaches the age of twenty-five," read the man in his late sixties with the glasses perched low on his nose, "he will be given the annual sum of five hundred thousand dollars, until he reaches the age of thirty-five. At this stated age, the remainder of my estate, hereafter called The Corrine Foxworth Winslow Trust, will be turned over in entirety to my grandson, Bartholomew Winslow Scott Sheffield Foxworth. My firstborn son, Christopher Garland Sheffield Foxworth, will remain in his position as trustee until the aforesaid time. If he, the trustee, should not survive until the time when my grandson Bartholomew Winslow Scott Sheffield Foxworth reaches the age of thirty-five, then my daughter, Catherine Sheffield Foxworth, shall be named as replacement trustee until my aforesaid grandson reaches his thirty-fifth birthday."

There was more, much more, but I didn't hear anything else. I filled with shock and glanced at Chris, who seemed dumbfounded. Then my eyes rested on Bart.

His face was pale, registering a kaleidoscope of changing expressions. His color waxed and waned. He raked his long, strong fingers through his perfect hairstyle and left it ruffled. Helplessly he looked at Joel as if for guidance, but Joel only shrugged and crooked his lips as if to say, "I told you so."

Next Bart was glaring at Cindy as if her presence had magically changed his grandmother's will. His eyes flitted to Jory, who was lying sleepily on the stretcher, appearing disinterested in everything going on but Melodie, who stared at Bart with her pale, woebegone face flickering like a weak candle flame in the strong wind of Bart's disappointment.

Quickly Bart jerked his sizzling gaze away when her head lowered to Jory's chest. Almost silently she was crying.

An eternity seemed to pass before that elderly lawyer folded the long will, replaced it in a blue folder, then put that on Bart's desk. He stood with folded arms to wait for Bart's questions.

"What the hell is going on?" shouted Bart.

He jumped to his feet, stalked to his desk, and seized up the will, which he thumbed through quickly with the eye of an expert. Finished, he hurled down the will. "Damn her to hell! She promised me everything, everything! Now I have to wait ten more years ... why wasn't that part read before? I was there. I was ten years old, but I remember her will stating I'd come into my own when I was twenty-five. I'm twenty-five and one month old—where is my reward?"

Chris stood. "Bart," he said calmly, "you have five hundred thousand dollars a year—that kind of money isn't to be shrugged off. And didn't you hear that all your living expenses, and the cost of running this house and maintaining it, will be taken care of by the bulk of monies still in trust? All your taxes will be prepaid. And five hundred thousand a year for ten years is more money than ninety-nine point nine percent of the world will ever know in an entire lifetime. How much can you spend on supporting your own lifestyle after all other expenses are taken care of? Besides, those ten years will fly by, and then everything will be yours to do with as you want."

"How much more is there in toto?" Bart fired, his dark eyes rapacious and so intense they seemed to burn. His face was magenta-colored from his rage.

"Five million paid to me over a period of ten years, but what will be left? Ten million more? Twenty, fifty, a billion—how much?"

"I really don't know," replied Chris coolly as the lawyers stared at Bart. "But I'd say, with honesty, that day when you finally do come into your own, all of it, you will be, beyond a doubt, one of the richest men in the world."

“But until then—you are!” screamed Bart. “YOU! Of all people, you! The very one who’s sinned the most! It isn’t fair, not fair at all! I’ve been misled, tricked!” His eyes glared at all of us first as he slammed out of his office, only to stick his head in a second later.

“You’ll be sorry, Chris,” he blazed fiercely. “You must have talked her into having that codicil added—and instructed the attorneys not to read it aloud the day I heard it first, when I was ten. *It’s your fault I haven’t come into everything due me!*”

As always it had been Chris’s fault—or mine.

Brotherly Love



Most of the miserably hot month of August had come and gone while Jory stayed in the hospital, and September arrived with its cooler nights, only too soon starting the colorful process of autumn. Chris and I raked leaves after the gardeners had come and gone, thinking they carelessly overlooked so many. The leaves never stopped falling, and it was something we both liked to do.

We heaped them in deep ravines, dropped down a match and crouched close together on the grass to watch the fire blaze high and warm enough to heat our cold hands and faces. The fire down below was so safe we could enjoy just watching and turning often to gaze at one another and the way the glow lit up our eyes and turned our skins a lovely shade of scarlet. Chris had a lover's way of looking at me, of reaching to caress my cheek with the back of his hand, brushing my hair with his fingertips, kissing my neck, and in all ways touching me deeply with his abiding love. In the firelight of those leaves burning at night, we found each other in new ways, in mature ways that were even better than what we'd had before, and that had always been overwhelmingly sweet.

And behind us, staying forever locked within her room in that horrible house, Melodie's baby swelled her out more and more.

The month of October came to us in a stunning blaze of colors that stole my breath away, filling me with awe as only the works of nature could. These were the same trees whose tops we'd only glimpsed in our hideaway attic schoolroom. I could almost see the four of us staring out when I glanced up at the attic dormer windows, the twins only five, pining away to large-eyed gnomes, all our small, pale faces pasted wistfully

to the smudgy glass, staring out, yearning to be free to do what now I took as only natural and our due.

Ghosts up there, our ghosts up there.

Color all our days gray, was the way I'd used to think. Color all Jory's day gray now, for he wouldn't let himself see the beauty of autumn in the mountains when he couldn't stroll the woodsy paths, or dance over the browning grass, or lean to sniff the fall flowers, or jog alongside Melodie.

The tennis courts stayed empty as Bart abandoned them for lack of a partner. Chris would have loved a Saturday or Sunday tennis game with Bart, but Bart still ignored Chris.

The large swimming pool that had been Cindy's special delight was drained, cleaned, covered over. The screens came down, the glass was cleaned before the storm windows went up. The cords of wood stacked out of sight behind the garage grew by the dozens, and trucks delivered coal to use when or if our oil furnaces failed, or our electricity went off. We had an auxiliary unit to light our rooms and keep our electric appliances working, and yet somehow I feared this winter as I'd never feared any winter but those in the attic.

Freezing cold it had been in the attic, like the Arctic zone. Now we were going to have the chance to experience what it had been like downstairs, while Momma enjoyed life with her parents and friends, and the lover she found, while four unwanted children froze and starved and suffered upstairs.

Sunday mornings were the best. Chris and I gloried in our time together. We ate breakfast in Jory's room so he wouldn't feel so separate from his family, and only a few times could I persuade Bart and Melodie to join us.

"Go on," urged Jory, when he saw me glance often at the window, "go walking. Don't think I'm going to begrudge you and Dad your legs because mine don't work anymore. I'm not a baby, or that selfish."

We had to go or he'd think he was inhibiting our style of living. And so we went, hoping Melodie would join him.

One day we woke up so early the frost was still thick upon the ground and pumpkins were ripening under the stacked corn stalks where farmers eked out a poor living. The frost looked sweet, liked powdered sugar that would soon melt when the sun came out fully.

On our walk we stopped to stare up at the sky as Canadian geese flew south, telling us that winter would come earlier than usual this year. We heard the distant melancholy honking of those untiring birds fade as they disappeared in the morning clouds. Flying toward South Carolina—where once we had fled just before winter’s sharp bite.

In mid-October the orthopedist came to use huge electric shears to split Jory’s cast halfway through; then he used handheld shears to gently cut through what remained. Jory said he felt now like a turtle without its shell. His strong body had wasted inside that cast. “A few weeks of exercising your arms and shoulder muscles will see your chest as developed as ever,” encouraged Chris. “You’re going to need strong arms, so keep on using that trapeze, and we’ll have parallel bars put in your sitting room so you can eventually pull yourself up into a standing position. Don’t think life is over for you, that all challenges are behind you and nothing matters now, for you have miles and miles to go before you’re done with life, don’t you ever forget that.”

“Yeah,” murmured Jory bleakly, staring empty-eyed toward the door, which Melodie seldom passed through. “Miles and miles to travel before I can find another body that works like it should. I guess I’ll start believing in reincarnation.”

* * *

The quickly chilling days turned bitterly cold, with autumn nights that took us quickly toward freezing. The migrating birds stopped flying overhead now that the wind was whistling through the treetops, howling around the house, stealing inside our rooms. The moon was again a raiding Viking longboat sailing high, flooding our bed with moonlight, giving us kindling for a new kind of romance. Clean, cool, bright love that lit up our spirits, and told us we weren’t really sinners of the worst kind. Not when our love could last as it had, while

other marriages broke up after a few months or years. We couldn't be sinning and feel as we did toward one another. Who were we hurting? No one, not really. Bart was hurting himself, we reasoned.

Still, why was I haunted by nightmares that said differently? I'd become an expert at turning off disturbing thoughts by thinking of all the trivial details in my life. There was nothing as diverting as the startling beauty of nature. I wanted nature to heal my wounds, and Jory's—and perhaps even Bart's.

With a keen eye I studied all the signs as a farmer might and reported them back to Jory. The rabbits grew suddenly fatter. The squirrels seemed to be storing more nuts. Woolly caterpillars looked like tiny train cars of fur inching toward safety—wherever that was.

Soon I was pulling out winter coats that I'd intended to give to charities; heavy sweaters and wool skirts I'd never expected to wear in Hawaii. In September Cindy had flown back to her high school in South Carolina. This was her last year in a very expensive private school that she “absolutely adored.” Her letters poured in like unseasonable warm rain, wanting more money for this or that.

On and on flowed Cindy's sprawling girlish script, needing everything, despite all the gifts I was constantly bombarding her with. She had dozens of boyfriends, a new one each time she wrote. She needed casual clothes for the boy who liked to hunt and fish. She needed dressy clothes for the boy who liked operas and concerts. She needed jeans and warm tops for herself, and luxury underwear and nightclothes, for she just couldn't sleep in anything inexpensive.

Her letters emphasized all that I'd missed when I was sixteen. I remembered Clairmont and my days in Dr. Paul's house, with Henny in the kitchen teaching me how to cook by example, not with words. I'd bought a cookbook on how to win your man and hold him by cooking all the right dishes. What a child I'd been. I sighed. Perhaps I'd had it just as good as Cindy, after all—in a different way—after we escaped Foxworth Hall. I sniffed Cindy's pink, perfumed stationery

before I put down her letter, then turned my attention to the present and all the problems in this Foxworth Hall, without the paper flowers in the attic.

Day after day of closely observing Bart when he was with Melodie was convincing me that they saw a great deal of one another, while Jory saw very little of his wife. I tried to believe that Melodie was trying to console Bart for not inheriting as much as he'd believed ... but despite myself, I presumed there was more to it than pity.

Like a faithful puppy with only one friend, Joel followed Bart everywhere, except into his office or bedroom. He prayed in that tiny room before breakfast, lunch and dinner. He prayed before he went to bed, and prayed as he walked about, muttering to himself the appropriate quotes from the Bible to suit whatever occasion provoked him into pious mumbles.

In his own way, Chris was in Heaven, enjoying the best years of his life, or so he said. "I love my new job. The men I work with are bright, humorous, and have unending tales to tell and take away the monotony of doing a lot of drudgery. We go into the lab each day, don our white coats, check our petri dishes, expecting miracles, and grin and bear it when miracles just don't happen."

Bart was neither friend nor foe to Jory, just someone who stuck his head in the door and said a few words before he hurried on to something he considered more important than wasting time with a crippled brother. I often wondered what he did with his time besides study the financial markets and buy and sell stocks and bonds. I suspected he was risking much of his five hundred thousand in order to prove to all of us he was smarter than Chris and craftier than the foxiest of all Foxworths, Malcolm.

Soon after Chris drove off on a Tuesday morning in late October, I hurried back up the stairs to check on Jory and see that he was properly taken care of. Chris had hired a male nurse to tend to Jory, but he was only here every other day.

Jory seldom complained about being housebound, although his head was often turned toward the windows to stare out at

the brilliance of autumn.

“The summer’s gone,” he said flatly, lifelessly, as the wind tossed colorful leaves playfully about, “and it’s taken my legs with it.”

“Autumn will bring you reasons for being happy, Jory. Winter will make you a father. Life still has many happy surprises in store for you, whether or not you want to believe that. I believe like Chris, that the best is still to come. Now ... let’s see what we can do to give you substitute legs. Now that you’re strong enough to sit up, there’s no reason why you can’t move into that wheelchair your father brought home. Jory, please. I hate seeing you in bed all the time. Try the chair, maybe it won’t be as obnoxious as you think.”

Stubbornly he shook his head.

I ignored that and went on with my persuasions. “Easily we can take you outside. We can stroll through the woods as soon as Bart has workmen clear the paths that might hinder your progress, and right now you could sit on a terrace in the sunshine and gain back some of your color. Soon it will be too cold to go outside. And when the time comes, I can push you through the gardens and the woods.”

He threw the chair, kept where he could see it every day, a hard, scornful look. “That thing would turn over.”

“We’ll buy you one of those electric chairs that’s so heavy and well balanced it can’t turn over.”

“I don’t think so, Mom. I’ve always loved autumn, but this one makes me feel so sad. I feel I’ve lost everything that was truly important. I’m like a broken compass, spinning without direction. Nothing seems worthwhile. I’ve been cheated, and I resent it. I hate the days. But the nights are worse. I want to hold fast to summer and what I used to have, and the falling leaves are the tears I shed inside, and the wind whistling at night are my howls of anguish, and the birds flying south are all telling me that the summer of my life has come and gone and never, never again will I feel as happy, or as special. I’m nobody now, Mom, nobody.”

He was breaking my heart.

Only when he turned to look at me did he see this. Shame flushed his face. Guilt turned his head. “I’m sorry, Mom. You’re the only one I can talk to like this. With Dad, who is wonderful, I have to act manly. Once I spill out to you all I feel, it doesn’t eat at me inside so much. Forgive me for laying all my heavy feelings on you.”

“It’s all right. Never stop telling me just how you feel. If you do, then I won’t know how to help. That’s what I’m here for, Jory. That’s why you have parents. Don’t feel that your father won’t understand, for he will. Talk to him like you talk to me. Say anything you need to say, don’t hold back. Ask for anything within reason, and Chris and I give all we can—but don’t ask for the impossible.”

Silently he nodded, then forced a weak smile. “Okay. Maybe, after all, I can stand to sit in an electric wheelchair someday.”

Before him, spread on the table with casters that fitted over his bed, were the many parts of the clipper ship he was tediously gluing together. He seldom turned on the stereo, as if beautiful music was an abomination to his ears now that he couldn’t dance. He ignored the television as a waste of time, reading when he wasn’t working on the model ship. A tiny part of the wood was held by tweezers as he applied a bit of glue; then, squinting his eye, he looked at the directions and completed the hull.

Casually he asked without meeting my eyes, “Where’s my wife? She seldom comes to visit before five. What the hell does she do all day?”

It seemed a casual enough question for Jory to ask as Jory’s nurse came in again to say he was off for classes. He waved a cheerful good-bye and left. During his absence either Melodie or I were supposed to do what we could to make Jory comfortable, as well as keep him entertained. Keeping him occupied was the most difficult part. His life had been a physical one, and now he had to be content with mental

activities. The nearest thing he had that even approached a physical life was putting the ship together.

At least I'd presumed Melodie came in to do what she could for him.

I very seldom saw Melodie. The house was so large it was easy to avoid those whom you didn't want to see. Lately she'd taken to eating not only breakfast but lunch as well in her bedroom across the hall from Jory's suite.

Chris brought home the custom-made electric wheelchair with its joystick for driving. Immediately the nurse began to teach Jory the methods he'd use to swing his body out of the bed and into a chair he'd have locked beside his bed, with the arm nearest the bed pulled out.

Jory had been crippled for more than three and a half long, long miserable months. For him they were more like years. He'd been forced to change into another kind of person, the kind of person I could tell he really didn't like.

Another day came without a visit from Melodie, and Jory was asking again where she was, and what she did with her time. "Mom, did you hear my question? Please tell me what my wife does all day." His usually pleasant voice held a sharp edge. "She doesn't spend it with me, I know that."

Bitterness was in his eyes as he nailed me with his penetrating dark blue eyes. "Right this minute I want you to go to Melodie and tell her I want to see her—NOW! Not later, when she feels like it—for it seems she never feels like it!"

"I'll get her," I said with determination. "She's no doubt in her room listening to ballet music."

With trepidation I left Jory still working on the model ship. Even as I looked back at him, I saw the wind was picking up and beginning to hurl the falling leaves toward the house. Golden and scarlet and russet leaves that he refused to see—and once he'd heard the music of colors.

Look, now, Jory, look now. This is beauty you won't see again, perhaps. Don't ignore it—take it and seize the day, as you used to do.

But had I, back then ... ? Had I?

As I stood and looked at him, trying to bring him back to himself, the sky suddenly darkened and all the bright falling leaves went limp in the cold, drenching rain that plastered them against the glass. “Daddy used to do all the chores when we lived in Gladstone. Momma used to complain the storm windows gave her twice as many to clean ...”

“I want my wife, Mom, NOW!”

I was reluctant to go in search of Melodie for no reason I could name. In the dreary gloom Jory was forced to turn on a lamp at ten in the morning.

“Would you like a cheerful wood fire burning?”

“I only want my wife. Do I have to repeat this ten times? Once she’s here, *she* can start the fire.”

I left him alone, realizing my presence irritated him when he wanted her—the only one who could bring him back to himself.

Melodie was not in her room as I’d expected her to be.

The halls I trod seemed the same halls I’d walked before when I was younger. The closed doors I passed seemed the same heavy, solid doors I’d stealthily opened when I’d been fourteen, fifteen. Behind me I sensed the omniscient presence of Malcolm, the malice of the hostile grandmother.

I turned to the western wing. Bart’s wing.

Almost automatically my feet took me there as my mind stayed blank. Intuition had ruled most of my life and, it seemed, would rule my future as well. Why was I going this way? Why didn’t I look elsewhere for Melodie? What instinct was guiding me to my second son’s rooms, where he never wanted me to go?

Before Bart’s wide double doors that were heavily padded with luxurious black leather, gold-tooled with his monogram and the family crest, I called softly, “Bart, are you in there?”

I heard nothing. However, all the doors were made of solid oak, heavily paneled beneath the ostentatious padding. Very

soundproof doors and thick walls that knew how to hold secrets, so no wonder we four had been so easily hidden away. I turned the doorlatch, expecting to find it locked. It wasn't.

Almost stealthily I stepped inside Bart's sitting room, which was kept immaculate, not one book or magazine out of place. On his walls hung his sporting equipment: tennis rackets and fishing rods, a golf bag in a corner, a rowing machine inside a closet with the door partially open. I stared at the photographs of his favorite sports stars. I often thought Bart made a pretense of admiring football and baseball athletes just so he'd have something in common with the rest of his sex. To my way of thinking he'd have been more honest to plaster his walls with pictures of those who'd earned fortunes in the stock market, or wheeling and dealing in industry, or politics.

His rooms were all black and white with red accents; dramatic, but somehow cold. I sat down on his white leather sofa fully twelve feet long, my feet on his red carpet, with black velvet and satin pillows behind my back. In one corner was a marvelous bar sparkling with crystal decanters and various stemmed glasses, and every kind of liquor he kept there for his private use, along with snack foods. There was also a small fridge and a micro oven for melting cheese, or doing whatever light cooking he wanted.

Every photograph was matted in black or red and framed in gold. Three walls were of white moire fabric. One wall was covered with padded and quilted black leather. A deceiving wall. One of those leather buttons concealed the large safe in which he kept his stock and bond certificates, for he'd proudly shown me his suite just once, soon after it was completely decorated. He'd operated the secret buttons, happy to display the complexity of all he controlled. The safe in his office downstairs was used for less permanent and important papers.

I turned my head to stare at the door to his bedroom, covered with black leather too. Beautiful doors to a magnificent bedroom with the same decor as this room. I thought I heard something. The soft rumble of male laughter—the softer giggle of a woman. Could I be wrong? Did Bart

have the ability to make Melodie laugh when none of the rest of us could?

My imagination worked overtime, picturing what they had to be doing, and I felt sick at heart, thinking of Jory in his room, hopefully waiting for a wife who never came to him. Sick because Bart would do this to him, his own brother, whom he'd loved and admired very much for a short while, such a pitifully short while ...

Just then the door opened and Bart came striding out, wearing not one stitch of clothing. He moved swiftly, his long legs a fast blur. Embarrassed to see him naked, I shrank back into the soft cushions, hoping he wouldn't see me. He'd never forgive me. I shouldn't be here.

Due to the sudden storm, the gloom in his sitting room was so dense there was some hope he wouldn't notice me sitting on his white sofa. Straight to the fully equipped bar he stalked, and with quick, skilled hands mixed some drink using crystal decanters. He sliced lemon, filled two cocktail glasses, put those half-filled glasses on a silver tray and headed back for his bedroom. The door behind him was kicked closed.

Cocktails in the morning, before twelve ... ?

What would Joel think of that?

I sat on, hardly breathing.

Thunder rolled and lightning cracked, the rain beat on the windowpanes. Lightning zagged and lit up the gloom every few seconds.

Moving to a more secluded spot in his room, I made myself part of the shadows behind a huge plant, then waited.

It seemed an eternity passed before that door opened again, and I knew Jory was waiting anxiously, perhaps even angrily, for Melodie to show up. *Two* glasses, *two*. She was here. She had to be here.

In the dimness I finally saw Melodie step out of Bart's bedroom wearing a filmy peignoir that clearly showed she wore nothing beneath. A flash of lightning briefly illuminated

her, showing the bulge of the baby that was due early in January.

Oh, Melodie, how can you do this to Jory?

“Come back,” called Bart in a slurred, satisfied voice. “It’s raining. The fire in here makes it cozier—and we have nothing better to do ...”

“I’ve got to bathe and dress and visit Jory,” she said, hesitating in the doorway, looking at him with apparent longing. “I want to stay, really I do, but Jory needs me once in a while.”

“Can he give you what I’ve just given you?”

“Please, Bart. He needs me. You don’t know what it’s like to be needed.”

“No, I don’t know. Only the weak depend on others for sustenance.”

“You’ve never been in love, Bart,” she answered hoarsely, “so you can’t understand. You take me, use me, tell me I’m wonderful, but you don’t love me, or truly need me. Someone else would serve your purpose just as well. It feels good to be needed, to know someone wants you more than he wants anyone else.”

“Leave, then,” he said, his happy tone turning quickly icy as he stayed hidden from my sight. “Of course I don’t need you. I don’t need anyone. I don’t know if what I feel for you is love or just desire. Even pregnant, you’re very beautiful, and if your body does give me pleasure now, it might not tomorrow.”

I could tell from her profile that she was hurt. She cried out pitifully, “Then why do you want me to come every day, every night? Why do your eyes follow wherever I go? You *do* need me, Bart! You *do* love me! You’re just ashamed to admit it. Please don’t talk so cruelly to me. It hurts. You seduced me when I was weak and afraid, and Jory was still in the hospital. You took me when I needed *him*, and told me my need was *you*! You knew I was terrified Jory might die ... and I needed someone.”

“And that’s all I am?” he roared. “A need? I thought you loved me, really loved me!”

“I do, I do!”

“No, you don’t! How can you love me and still talk of him? So go to him. See what he can give you now!”

She left, her frail garment fluttering behind her, reminding me of a ghost frantically fleeing to try and find life.

The door slammed behind her.

Stiffly I rose from my chair, feeling my knee throbbing with pain, like it always ached when it rained. I limped a little as I neared the closed door of Bart’s bedroom. I didn’t even hesitate as I threw it open. Before he could protest I’d reached inside to throw the switch and bring his cozy, firelit room into electric brightness.

Immediately he bolted up in the middle of his king-sized bed. “Mother! What the hell are you doing in my bedroom? Get out, *out!*”

I strode forward, covering the large space between the door and the bed in a second.

“What the hell are you doing sleeping with your brother’s wife? Your injured brother’s wife?”

“Get out of here!” he bellowed, taking care to keep his privates well covered, while the mat of dark hair on his chest seemed to bristle with indignity. “How dare you spy on me?”

“Don’t you yell at me, Bart Foxworth! I’m your mother, and you are not thirty-five years old yet, so you can’t order me out of this house. I’ll go when I’m ready, and that time hasn’t arrived. You owe me so much, Bart, so much.”

“I owe you, Mother?” he asked sarcastically, bitterly. “Pray tell me why I owe you anything. Should I thank you for my father, whom you helped to kill? Should I say thank you for all those miserable days when I was young and neglected, and unsure of myself? Should I thank you now for putting me on such unstable ground that I don’t feel I’m a normal man, capable of inspiring love?”

His voice broke as his head bowed. “Don’t stand there and accuse me with those cursed Foxworth blue eyes. You don’t have to do one damned thing to make me feel guilty. I was born feeling that way. I took Melodie when she was crying and needing someone to hold her and give her confidence and love. And I found for the first time the kind of love I’ve been hearing and reading about all my life, from the noble type of woman who’s only had *one* man. Do you realize how rare they are? Melodie is the first woman who has made me feel truly human. With her I can relax, put down my guard, and she doesn’t try to wound me. She loves me, Mother. I don’t think I’ve ever been happier.”

“How can you say that when I just overheard the words the two of you exchanged?”

He sobbed and fell back to roll on his side away from me, the sheet just barely covering enough. “I’m on the defensive, and so is she. She feels she’s betraying Jory by loving me. I feel much the same way. Sometimes we can let go of guilt and shame, and it’s wonderful then. When Jory was in the hospital, and you and Chris were gone all the time, she didn’t need a great deal of seducing. She fell with only a little reluctance into my arms, glad to have someone who cared enough to understand her feelings. Our fights all grow from the mire of guilt. Without Jory in the way, eagerly she’d run to me, be my wife.”

“BART! You can’t take Jory’s wife from him. He needs her as he has never needed her before! You were wrong to take her when she was weak from desperation and loneliness. Give her up. Stop making love to her. Be loyal to Jory, as he’s been loyal to you. Through everything, Jory has stood behind you—remember that.”

He flipped over, clutching the black sheet modestly. Something fragile broke behind his eyes and made him seem vulnerable, a pathetic child again. A wounded, small child who didn’t like himself. His voice was hoarse when he said, “Yes, I love Melodie. I love her enough to marry her. I love her with every bone, muscle, ounce of my flesh. She’s awakened me from a deep sleep. You see, she’s the first

woman I've loved. I have never been touched or moved by a woman as I've been touched and moved by Melodie. She slipped into my heart and now I can't push her out. She steals into my room wearing her delicate clothes, with her beautiful long and shining hair down, fresh from her bath and smelling sweet, and she just stands there, pleading with her eyes, and I feel my heart begin to beat faster, and when I dream, I dream of her. She's become the most wonderful thing in my life.

“Don't you see why I can't give her up? She's the one who has really awakened this burning desire for love and sex that I didn't even know I had. I thought that sex was a sin, and never did I pull away from a woman without feeling dirty, even dirtier than I thought I left her. When I made love to other women, I was always left feeling guilty, as if two naked bodies meeting in passion was evil—now I know differently. She's made me realize how beautiful loving can be, and now I don't know how to carry on without her. Jory can't be a real lover anymore. Let me be the husband she needs and wants. Help me to build a normal life for her and for myself ... or else ... I don't know ... I just don't know what will happen ...” His dark eyes turned my way, pleading for my understanding.

Oh, to hear him say all of that, when all his life I'd longed to have his confidence, and now that I had it, what could I do? I loved Bart, as I loved Jory. I stood there wringing my hands, twisting my conscience, and tormenting myself with guilt, for somehow I must have brought this about. I had neglected Bart, favored Jory, Cindy ...

Now I, and Jory, had to pay the price ... again.

He spoke, his voice lower and cracked, making him seem even younger and more vulnerable as he lay there, trying to lock his happiness away in a safe place I couldn't reach, and in this way forever shield it from killing exposure.

“Mother, for once in your life, see something from my side. I'm not bad, not wicked, or the beast you sometimes make me feel I am. I'm only a man who has never felt good about himself. Help me, Mother. Help Melodie have the kind of husband she needs now that Jory can't be a real man anymore.”

The rain beat a frantic tattoo on the window glass. It matched the rhythm of my heart. The wind whistled and shrieked around the house, while frenzied bat wings threw themselves against the inside of my skull. I couldn't split Melodie into two equal halves and give to Jory and Bart each their share. I had to stick with what I knew was right. Bart's love for Melodie was wrong. Jory needed her most.

Still I stood there, riveted to the carpet ... and felt overwhelmed with my second son's desperate need to be loved. So many times in the past I'd believed him capable of evil, and he'd been proven innocent. Did my own guilt for bringing him into being curse me with eyes that refused to see the good in Bart?

"Are you sure, Bart? Do you truly love Melodie—or do you just want her because she belongs to Jory?"

Turning on his back, his dark eyes met mine with more honesty than he'd ever shown. How those dark eyes pleaded for understanding. "In the beginning I wanted Melodie only because she belonged to Jory. I honestly admit that. I wanted to take from him what he treasured most. Because he'd taken from me what I wanted most—YOU!"

I cringed as he went on. "She rejected my advances so many times that I began to respect her, to see her as different from other women who were easy to get. The more she shoved me away, the higher burned my desire, until I had to have her or die. I love her! Yes, she's made me vulnerable ... and now I don't know how to live without her!"

I threw my hands wide before I sank to the side of his king-sized bed. "Oh, Bart ... what a pity it couldn't have been another woman. Any woman but Melodie. I'm glad you've experienced love—and know it isn't dirty or sinful. Would God have made men and women the way he did if he hadn't meant for them to join together? He planned it that way. We recreate ourselves through love. But, Bart, you have to promise not to see her alone again. Wait until Melodie has her baby before you and she decide anything."

His eyes filled with hope, with gratitude. “You’ll help me?” Disbelief flooded his eyes. “I never thought you would ...”

“Wait, please wait. Let Melodie have her child, then go to her, and then to Jory, and face up to him, Bart. Tell him how you feel about her. Don’t steal his wife without giving him a chance to have his say.”

“What can he say, Mother, that will make any difference? He’s already lost. He can’t dance. He can’t even walk. He can’t perform physically.”

Seconds ticked away before I found more useless words to speak. “But does she honestly love *you*? I was in your sitting room. I heard her. She hasn’t had her say in this matter. From what I can tell, she’s torn between loving Jory and needing you. Don’t take advantage of her weakness, or Jory’s disabilities. Give him time to recover—then do what you must. It isn’t fair to steal from Jory when he can’t fight back. Give her time to adjust to Jory’s condition. Then, if she still wants you, take her, for she’d only harm him more. But what would you do with Jory’s child? Will you take that child from Jory, as well as take his wife? Are you planning to leave him nothing?”

Staring up at me, his eyes glittered suspiciously. Bart jerked his eyes away to stare up at the ceiling. “I don’t know yet about the baby. I haven’t thought it out to that extent. I try not to think of the baby—and you don’t have to go running to Chris or Jory with this. For once in your life, give me a chance to have something of my very own.”

“Bart—”

“Go now, please. Leave me alone to think. I’m tired. You can weaken a man, Mother, with your demands, with your judgments. Just give me a fair chance this time to prove to you that I’m not as bad as you think, or as crazy as I once believed myself to be.”

He didn’t ask me again not to tell Jory, or Chris. As if he knew I wouldn’t. Standing and turning about, I left his room.

* * *

On the way back to my room I thought about confronting Melodie, but I was too upset to face her without giving it more thought. She was already distraught enough, and I had to consider the health of her child.

Alone in my rooms, I sat before a guttering log fire and contemplated what to do. Jory's needs came first. In three months Jory's strong legs had begun to wither into thin sticks, reminding me of Bart's legs when he was very young. Short, thin legs covered with scratches, cuts, and bruises, always falling, always breaking his bones. Punishing himself for being born and not living up to the standards Jory had set. That alone stood me up and headed me toward Jory's bedroom.

I stood in his doorway, my face washed clean of tear streaks, my eyes cooled by ice packs so they weren't red, and I smiled brightly at my firstborn. "Melodie is napping, Jory. But she'll see you before dinner. I think it would be nice for the two of you to dine alone before the fireplace. The rain outside will make it very cozy in here. I've asked Trevor and Henry to carry up logs and a special small table for dining. I've planned a menu with everything you like. Now, what can I do to help you dress and look your best?"

He shrugged indifferently. Before the accident he'd always loved clothes, had always groomed himself to perfection. "What difference now, Mom, what difference? I see you didn't bring her back with you, and why did it take you so long to come back and say she's napping?"

"The telephone rang ... and Jory, I have to do a few things for myself once in a while. So now, what suit do you favor most?"

"Pajamas and a robe will do," he said distantly.

"Listen to me, Jory. Tonight you are going to sit in that electric wheelchair, wearing one of your father's suits, since you didn't bring a winter suit with you." Immediately he objected, while I insisted.

Already we'd sent to New York for all of Jory's clothes, but Melodie had requested we leave hers where they were—and

that had made me heat with anger inside, although I'd said nothing.

“When you look good, you feel good, and that's half the battle. You've stopped caring about your appearance. I'm going to shave your face even if you do want to grow a beard. You're much too handsome to hide behind bristly hair. You've got the most beautiful mouth, and a strong chin. Only weak-chinned men should hide behind beards.”

Eventually he gave up and smiled sardonically, agreeing to all I wanted to do to make him look more like himself. “Mom, you're something else. You care so damned much—but I won't ask why. I'm just grateful somebody cares enough.”

About that time Chris drove home from Charlottesville, and he was eager to help. He shaved Jory's handsome face with a straight-edge razor, claiming that kind of shave did more for a man than anything else.

I sat on the bed to watch Chris finish the shaving before he splashed on lotion and cologne. All the time Jory looked so tolerant. I couldn't help but wonder what Bart was doing, and how I was going to approach Melodie and tell her that I knew what was going on between her and my second son.

Already Jory's arms were strong enough to swing his upper body into the chair. Chris and I stood back and watched, not offering to help, knowing he had to do this for himself. He seemed somewhat humiliated, and also somewhat proud that he did it easily the first time. Once he was in the chair, Jory looked pleased despite himself. “Not so bad,” he said as he studied his face in the mirror I held up. He activated the chair and buzzed around the room for a trial spin. He grinned at us both. “It is better than the bed. What a fool you must think me—now it will be easier to finish the ship before Christmas, and maybe, with pampering like this, I'll struggle through.”

“As if we ever believed anything else,” said Chris happily.

“Now, contain yourself, Jory ... I'm going for Melodie,” I said, delighted with the way he looked, and the glow of happiness in his eyes, and his excitement to be mobile again, even if he had wheels instead of legs. “Melodie is probably

dressed and ready for dinner downstairs. As you know, our formerly sloppy Bart is now a stickler for all the niceties of living elegantly.”

“Tell her to hurry,” called Jory behind me, sounding more like his old self. “I’m famished. And the sight of that fire burning makes me want her very badly.”

With many trepidations I headed for Melodie’s room, knowing I was going to face her down with what I’d found out—and when I was finished, I might very well have driven her straight into Bart’s ready arms. That was the chance I took.

One brother would win.

The other would lose.

And I wanted them both to win.

Melodie's Betrayal



Softly I rapped on Melodie's door. I could hear faintly through the heavy wood the music from *Swan Lake*. She must have had it playing very loud, or else I wouldn't be hearing it at all. I knocked again. She didn't respond. This time when she didn't answer I opened her door and stepped inside, quietly closing the door behind me. Her room was messy with clothes dropped on the floor; cosmetics littered the dressing room table. "Melodie, where are you?"

Her bathroom was empty. Oh, damn! She'd gone to Bart. In a flash I was off and running back to Bart's wing. On his door I banged furiously. "Bart, Melodie ... you can't do this to Jory."

They weren't there.

I flew down the back stairs, heading for the dining room, half expecting they'd start dinner without Chris and me. Trevor was setting the table for two, measuring with his eye the distance of the plate from the edge of the table with such precision it was as if he used a ruler. I slowed down to walk into the dining room. "Trevor, have you seen my second son?"

"Oh, yes, my lady," he said in his polite British way, beginning to lay out the silver flatware. "Mr. Foxworth and Mrs. Marquet just left to eat in a restaurant. Mr. Foxworth requested that I tell you he'd be back ... soon."

"What did he really say, Trevor?" I asked, feeling sick at heart.

"My lady, Mr. Foxworth was just a wee bit drunk. Not too drunk, so don't worry about the rain and accidents. I'm sure he can control the car, and Mrs. Marquet will be just fine. It's a lovely night for driving if you like rain."

I hurried on toward the garage, hoping to be in time to stop them. Too late! And it was just as I'd feared. Bart had taken Melodie in his small, fast, sports car, the red Jaguar.

My steps were snail-like as I headed back up the stairs. Jory was glowing from the champagne he'd sipped as he waited. Chris had gone on to our room to change for dinner.

"Where is my wife?" asked Jory, seated at the small table Henry and Trevor had carried up. Fresh flowers from our greenhouse centered the table, and with the champagne cooling in a silver ice bucket the atmosphere was festive and seductive, especially with the log fire burning to chase away the damp chill. Jory looked very much like himself with his legs hidden, and the chair he'd hated was hardly noticeable.

Should I make up a lie this time, as I had before?

All the brightness in his eyes faded. "So she's not coming," he said in a flat way. "She never comes here anymore—at least not inside the room. She lingers in the doorway and speaks to me from a distance." His husky voice cracked, then broke entirely and he was crying.

"I'm trying, Mom, really trying to accept this and not be bitter. But when I see what's happening between me and my wife, I come apart inside. I know what she's thinking even when she says nothing. I'm not a real man anymore, and she doesn't know how to cope with that."

I fell upon my knees at his side and took him into my arms. "She'll learn, Jory, she'll learn. We all have to learn how to cope with what can't be helped. Give her time. Wait until after the baby comes. She'll change. I promise she'll change. You will have given her your child. There's nothing like a baby of your own to hold in your arms to put joy in your heart. The sweetness of a baby, the thrill of having one small, tiny bit of humanity entirely dependent on you to shape and mold. Jory, just you wait and see how Melodie changes."

His tears had stopped, but the anguish in his eyes stayed.

"I don't know if I can wait," he whispered hoarsely. "When there are other around to see, I smile and act content. But I'm

thinking all the time about putting an end to this and setting Melodie free of all obligations. It's not fair to expect her to stay on. I'm going to tell her tonight that she can go if she wants, or she can stay until after the baby is born and then leave, and file for divorce. I won't contest."

"No, Jory!" I flared. "Say nothing to upset her more—just give her time. Let her adjust. The baby will help her adjust."

"But, Mom, I don't know if I can live through to the end now. I think all the time about suicide. I think of my father and wish I had the courage to do what he did."

"No, darling, hang on. You'll never be alone."

Chris and I sat down at the small table to keep him company. He didn't speak a dozen words during the meal.

At bedtime, I stealthily put away all the razors and everything with which he could harm himself. I slept on the couch in his room that night, fearful he was so despondent he might try to end his life just to give Melodie freedom to leave without guilt. His moans reached me even as I dreamed.

"Mel ... my legs ache!" he cried out in his sleep. I got up to comfort him. He wakened and stared at me in a disoriented way. "Every night my back and my legs ache," he answered sleepily in reply to my questions. "I don't need sympathy for my phantom pains. I just want a full night's rest."

All through the night he writhed in agony. The legs that he couldn't feel during the day by night tormented him with constant pain. The lower part of his back stabbed him with repeated jabs.

"Why do I feel pain at night, when I feel nothing during the day?" he cried out, sweat pouring down his face, sticking his pajama jacket to his chest. "I still wish I had the nerve my father did—that would solve all our problems!"

No, no, no. I clung to him, covering his face with kisses, promising him everything and anything to make him cling to life. "It will work out, Jory, it will! Hang in there. Don't give up and lose the greatest challenge of your life. You have me

and you have Chris and sooner or later Melodie will come around and be your wife again.”

Bleakly he stared at me, as if I spoke of pipe dreams made of nothing but smoke.

“Go sleep in your own room, Mom. You make me feel more like a child by staying here. I promise not to do anything to make you cry again.”

“Darling, be sure and ring for your father or me if you need anything. Neither one of us minds getting up. Don’t call for Melodie, for she might trip and fall in the dark now that she’s kind of unsteady on her feet. I’ve always been a light sleeper, and it’s easy for me to fall asleep again. Are you listening, Jory?”

“Sure, I’m listening,” he said with his eyes blank and remote. “If there’s one thing I’m good at now, it’s listening.”

“And soon the physical therapist will come to start you on the road to recovery.”

“Recovery, Mom?” His eyes looked tired, very shadowed and dark. “You mean that back brace I’ll be fitted for? Indeed, I am looking forward to using that thing. The leg braces are going to be a real joy to wear. Isn’t it fortunate I won’t feel them? And I’m not even going to mention that harness contraption that will make me think of myself as a horse. I’ll just think it will keep me from falling ...” He paused, covered his face with his hands briefly, threw back his head and sighed. “Lord, give me strength to endure—are you punishing me for having too much pride in my legs and body? You’ve done a damned good job of bringing me low.”

His hands came down. Tears shone in his eyes, streaked his cheeks. In a moment he was apologizing. “Sorry about that, Mom. Tears of self-pity aren’t very manly, are they? Can’t be brave and strong all the time. Got my moments of weakness just like everyone else. Go back to your room. I’m not going to do anything to cause you and Dad more grief. I’ll see this thing through to the end. Good night. Say good night to Melodie for me when she comes in.”

I cried in Chris's arms, causing him to ask a thousand questions that I refused to answer. Frustrated and more than a bit angry, he flipped away. "You can't fool me, Catherine. You're holding something back, thinking it will add another burden, when not to know what's going on is the heaviest of all burdens!"

He waited for me to reply. When I didn't, he quickly fell asleep on his side. He had the most irritating habit of being able to sleep when I couldn't. I wanted him awake, forcing me to answer the questions I'd just avoided. But he slept on and on, turning to embrace me in his sleep, burying his face in my hair.

Every hour I was up and checking to see if Bart had brought Melodie home, checking to see if Jory was all right. Jory lay on his bed with his eyes wide open, apparently waiting, as I did, for Melodie to come home.

"Has the phantom pain eased up?"

"Yes, go back to bed. I'm fine."

I met Joel in the hallway outside Bart's room. He flushed to see me in my lacy white negligee. "Joel," I said, "I thought you changed your mind about living under this roof and went back to that small cell over the garage ..."

"Used to, Catherine, used to," he muttered. "Bart ordered me into the house, saying a Foxworth shouldn't be treated like a servant." His watery eyes reproached me for not objecting when he'd informed us he liked the garage cell better than the nice room in Bart's wing of the house.

"You don't know what it's like to be old and lonely, niece. I've suffered from insomnia for years and years, troubled by bad dreams, with vague aches and pains that kept me from ever reaching that deep sleep I yearn for. So I get up to tire myself, I roam about ..."

Roam about? Spying, that's what he did! Then, looking at him more closely, I felt ashamed. Standing there in the gloom of the hall, he appeared so frail, so sickly and thin—was I being unfair to Joel? Did I dislike him only because he was

Malcolm's son?—and had that detestable habit of muttering to himself incessant quotes from the Bible to take me back in time to our grandmother, and her insistence that we learn a quote each day from the holy book.

“Good night, Joel,” I said with more kindness than usual. Still, as he continued to stand there, as if to win me to his side, I thought of Bart, who had said many a painful thing to me when he was a boy, but not since he'd been an adult. Now he, too, was reading the Bible, using the words written in there to prove some moot point. Had Joel helped bring life back to what I thought was dormant? I stared at the old man, who edged away from me almost fearfully.

“Why do you look like that?” I asked sharply.

“Like what, Catherine?”

“Like you're afraid of me.”

His smile was thin, pitiful. “You are a fearsome woman, Catherine. Despite all your blond prettiness, you can sometimes act as hard as my mother.”

I started, stunned that he could think that. I could not possibly be like that mean old woman.

“You also remind me of your mother,” he whispered in his thin, brittle voice, drawing his old bathrobe more tightly about his skinny frame. “And you seem far too young to be in your fifties. My father used to say the wicked always managed to stay young and healthy longer than those who had a place waiting for them in Heaven.”

“If your father went on to Heaven, Joel, then I will gladly go in the opposite direction.”

He eyed me as if I were a pitiful object who just didn't understand before he ambled away.

Once I was back beside Chris, he woke up long enough for me to spill out the scene between Joel and me. Chris glared at me in the dimness. “Catherine, how rude of you to talk to an old man like that. Of course you can't drive him out. In a way he has more right here than all of us, and it is Bart's home legally, even if we do have lifetime residency privileges.”

Anger filled me. “Can’t you recognize that Joel has become the father figure Bart has been looking for all his life?” And there I’d gone and hurt him. He stiffened and turned away from me.

“Good night, Catherine. Perhaps you should stay in bed and mind your own business for a rare change. Joel is a lonely old man who is grateful to have a champion like Bart and a place where he can live out the rest of his life. Stop imagining you see Malcolm in every old man you meet, for eventually, if I live long enough, I’ll be another old man.”

“If you look and act like Joel, I’ll be glad to see the end of you as well.”

Oh, how could I say that to the man I loved? He shifted farther away, then refused to respond to my touch on his arm. “Chris, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.” My hand caressed his arm, then moved to slip inside his pajama jacket.

“I think it best if you keep your hands to yourself. I’m not in the mood now. Good night, Catherine, and remember, when you look for trouble, you usually find it.”

* * *

I heard a distant door close. My illuminated wristwatch read three-thirty. Drawing on a robe, I slipped into Melodie’s room and sat down to wait. It was four before she managed the long trip from the garage to her bedroom. Did she and Bart stop to embrace and kiss? Did they whisper love words they couldn’t save for tomorrow? What else could be talking her so long? Faint hints of dawn approaching showed over the rimming mountains. I paced the floor of her room, growing terribly impatient. Finally I heard her coming. Stumbling in the door of her room, Melodie held her high-heeled silver slippers in one hand, and in her other hand she held a small silver clutch.

She was six months pregnant, but in her loose-fitting black dress it was hardly noticeable. She jerked when she saw me rise from a chair, then choked as she backed away. “Well, Melodie,” I said cynically, “don’t you look pretty.”

“Cathy, is Jory all right?”

“Do you really care?”

“You sound so angry with me. You look at me so hard—what have I done, Cathy?”

“As if you don’t know,” I said to her with angry emphasis, forgetting the tact I’d intended to use. “You slip out on a rainy night with my second son, and you come home hours later with red strawberry marks on your neck, with your lipstick smeared and your hair unbound, and still you ask, *what ... have ... you ... done*. Why don’t you tell me ... *what* you have done.”

She stared at me with huge eyes of disbelief, half-blended with guilt, with shame, but there was some element of hope there as well. “You’ve been like my mother, Cathy,” she cried, her eyes tearing as they pleaded for my understanding. “Please don’t fail me now—now when I need a mother more than I ever have before.”

“But you forget, I am Jory’s mother first and foremost. I am also Bart’s mother. When you betray Jory, you betray me.”

Melodie cried out again, pleading with me to listen to her.

“Don’t turn away from me now, Cathy. I have no one but you who will understand. Certainly you of all people have to understand! I love Jory, I’ll always love him—”

“And so you go to bed with Bart? What a fine way to show your love,” I interrupted. My voice sounded cold and hard.

Her face lowered into my lap as her arms wrapped around my waist. She clung to me. “Cathy, please. Wait until you hear my side.” Her face lifted, already stained with tears, black tears because of her mascara. Somehow this served only to make her look more pitifully vulnerable. “I’m part of the ballet world, Cathy, and you know what that means. We are the dancers who take music into our bodies and souls and make it visible for all to see, and for that we pay a price, a heavy price. You know the price. We dance with our souls bared for all to view and criticize if they will, and when the dance ends, and we hear the applause, and we accept the roses, and take the bows and the curtain calls, and hear the calls of *bravo! bravo!*

finally we end up backstage to take off the makeup, to put on everyday mundane clothes, and then we know the best of what we are isn't real, only fantasy. We float on wings of sensuality so powerful nobody can realize as we do the pain of all that's so insensitive and cruel and brutal in reality."

She hesitated to gain the strength to go on, while I sat stunned with her acuteness, for I knew the truth when I heard it—who would know better than I?

"Out there in the audience they think most of us are gay. They don't realize we're borne on the music, sustained by the music, made bigger than life by the sets, the applause, the adulation, and least of all do they realize that lovemaking is all that keeps us really nourished. Jory and I used to fall passionately into each other's arms the minute we were alone and only then could we find the release we needed to wind down enough to fall asleep. Now I have no release, nor does he. He won't listen to the music, and I can't turn it off."

"But you have a lover," I said weakly, fully understanding every word she'd said. Once I, too, had flown on the joyous wings of music, and drifted downward, sick because there was no one to love me and lend reality to the fantasy world I loved best of all.

"Listen, Cathy, please. Give me a chance to explain. You know how boring it is in this house, with no one ever visiting, and the only time the phone rings it's Bart they want. You and Chris and Cindy were always in the hospital with Jory, while I was a coward and hung back, scared, so scared he'd see my fright. I tried to read, tried to entertain myself with knitting like you do, but I couldn't do it. I gave up and waited for the telephone to ring. Nobody from New York ever calls me. I took walks, pulled weeds from the garden. Cried in the woods, stared at the sky, watched the butterflies, and cried some more.

"Several nights after we found out that Jory would never walk or dance again, Bart came to my room. He closed the door behind him and just stood there looking at me. I was on the bed, crying as usual. I had ballet music playing, trying to recreate the feeling of how it had been with Jory, and Bart was there, staring at me with those dark, mesmerizing eyes. He

stood waiting, just looking at me, until I stopped crying and he came closer to wipe the tears from my face. His eyes turned soft with love when I sat up and just stared at him. I'd never seen his eyes so kind, so full of tenderness and compassion. He touched me. My cheek, my hair, my lips. Shivers began to race up and down my spine. He put his hands in my hair, stared into my eyes, and slowly, ever so slowly he inclined his head until his lips brushed over mine. I'd never guessed he could be so gentle. I'd always presumed he'd take a woman by brutal force. Maybe if he had touched me with rough, uncaring hands I would have turned away. But his gentleness was my undoing. He reminded me of Jory."

Oh, I didn't want to hear anymore. I had to stop her before I felt pity and sympathy for her, for Bart.

"I don't want to hear anymore, Melodie," I said coldly, jerking my head so I didn't have to look at the love marks that Jory might notice if she went to him now. "So now when Jory needs you most, you intend to fail him and turn to Bart," I said bitterly. "What a wonderful wife you are, Melodie."

She sobbed louder, covering her face with her hands.

"I remember your wedding day when you stood before the altar and made your vows of fidelity, for better or for worse—and the first worse that turns up, you find a new lover."

While she sniffled and tried to find better words to win me to her side, I thought of how lonely this mountainside home was, how isolated. And we'd left Melodie here thinking she was too upset to want to drive anywhere. Thoughtless about what she and Bart could be doing, never suspecting she'd turn to him—the very one she'd seemed to dislike so much.

Still sniffing and crying, Melodie fiddled with her strap, while her washed-out eyes took on a certain wariness. "How can you condemn me, Cathy, when you have done even worse?"

Stung, I rose to leave, feeling that my legs had turned to lead along with my heart. She was right. I wasn't any better. I, too, had failed, and more than once, to do the right thing. "Will

you forget Bart and stay away from him, and convince Jory you still love him?”

“I do still love Jory, Cathy. It may sound strange, but I love Bart in a different way, a strange way that has nothing at all to do with the way I feel about Jory. Jory was my childhood sweetheart and my best friend. His younger brother was someone I never really liked, but he’s changed, Cathy, he has, really. No man who really hates women can make love as he does ...”

My lips tightened. I stood in the open doorway condemning her, as once my grandmother had condemned me with her pitiless steel-gray eyes alone telling me I was the worst kind of sinner.

“Don’t go before I make you understand!” she cried, putting forth her arms and beseeching me. I closed the door, thinking of Joel, and backed against it. “All right. I’ll stay, but I won’t understand.”

“Bart loves me, Cathy, really loves me. When he says it, I can’t help but believe him. He wants me to divorce Jory. Bart has said he will marry me.” Her tearful voice diminished to a husky whisper. “I don’t truthfully know if I can live out my life with a husband confined to a wheelchair.”

Sobbing more than before, she broke and from her kneeling position fell in a crumpled heap on the floor. “I’m not strong like you are, Cathy. I can’t give Jory the support he needs now. I don’t know what to say, or what to do for him. I want to turn back the clock and bring back the Jory I used to have, for I don’t know this one. I don’t even think I want to know him ... and I’m ashamed, so ashamed! Now all I want to do is vanish.”

My voice took on the steely edge of a razor. “You’re not going to escape your responsibilities that easily, Melodie. I’m here to see that you live up to your marriage vows. First, you will cut Bart out of your life. You will never allow him to touch you again. You will say no every time he tries anything. I am going to confront him again. Yes, I’ve already faced him down, but I’m going to be tougher. If I have to, I will go to

Chris and tell him what's going on. As you know, Chris is a very patient, understanding man with a great deal of control, but he won't condone what you're doing with Bart."

"Please," she cried. "I love Chris like a father! I want him to keep on respecting me."

"Then leave Bart alone! Think of your child, which should come first. You shouldn't be having sex now anyway, it's sometimes not safe."

Her huge eyes closed, squeezed back the tears; then she was nodding and promising never to make love with Bart again. Even as she vowed, I didn't believe her. I didn't believe Bart either when I spoke to him before I went to bed.

* * *

Morning came and I hadn't slept at all. I rose tired and listless, putting on a false smile for Jory before I tapped on his door, announcing myself. He invited me to come in. He appeared happier than he had last night for some reason, as if overnight thought had calmed him down. "I'm glad Melodie has you to lean on," said Jory as I helped him to turn over.

Each day Chris, the nurse, and I took turns moving his legs and massaging them when the therapist wasn't there to do it for him. This way his muscles wouldn't atrophy. His legs, due to the massaging, had regained a little of their former shape.

I took that as a huge step forward. Hope ... in this house of dark misery we were always clinging to hope we colored yellow—like the sun we'd seldom seen.

"I was expecting Melodie to come in this morning," Jory said with a bit of wistfulness, "since she failed to even stop by and say good night last night."

* * *

Days passed. Melodie disappeared often, as did Bart. My faith in Melodie had eroded. No longer could I meet her eyes and smile. I stopped trying to talk to Bart and turned to Jory for companionship. We watched TV together. We played games together. We competed in silly jigsaw competitions to see who could find the right pieces faster. We sipped wine in the

afternoon, grew sleepy by nine and pretended, pretended that everything would work out fine.

There was something about being in bed most of the time that made him exceptionally fatigued. “It’s the lack of proper exercise,” he said, pulling on the trapeze fastened to his headboard. “At least I’m keeping my arms strong—where did you say Melodie was?”

I put down the bootee I’d just finished and picked up the yarn to make another. In between games I knitted and watched TV. When I wasn’t with Jory, I was in my room typing the journal I was keeping of our lives. My last book, I told myself. What more did I have to say? What else could happen to us?

“Mom! Don’t you ever listen to me? I asked if you knew where Melodie was, and what she’s doing.”

“She’s in the kitchen, Jory,” I said quickly. “Busy preparing just the kind of dinner you like most.”

A look of relief brightened his face. “I’m worried about my wife, Mom. She comes in and does small things for me, but her heart doesn’t seem in it.” A shadow fled through his eyes, quick to disappear when he saw my piercing look. “I say to you all the things I need to say to her. It hurts to watch her pulling away from me bit by bit. I want to speak out and say I’m still the same man inside, but I don’t think she wants to know that. I believe she wants to think that I’m different because I can no longer dance or walk, and that makes it easier for her to break away and release all the ties that bind us. She never talks to me about the future. She hasn’t even discussed names for our child. I’ve been looking in books for just the right names for our son or daughter. I tell myself, like you said, that she’s pregnant, and I’ve been reading up on that subject, too. Just to make up for my former lack of interest ...”

On and on he talked, convincing himself with his own words that it was her pregnancy that was responsible for all the changes in his wife.

I cleared my throat and used my chance. “Jory, I’ve been giving this serious thought. Your doctor said once you’d be better off in the hospital than staying here and having someone

come to help with your rehabilitation. You and Melodie can rent a small apartment near the hospital, and she can drive you each day to Rehab. It's almost winter, Jory. You don't know about winters in this western mountainous part of Virginia. They're freezing. The wind never stops blowing. It snows often. The roads leading here from the village are often blocked. The state keeps the highways and expressways open, but the small private roads to this estate are often closed. I'm thinking of the days when your nurse won't be able to come, or your physical therapist, and you need daily exercise. If you live near the hospital, all your physical needs can easily be met."

He stared at me in hurt surprise. "You mean you want to get rid of me?"

"Of course not. You've got to confess you don't like this house."

His eyes darted to the windows where the rain was coming down hard, driving dead leaves and late-blooming roses into the earth. All the summer birds had flown away.

The wind whipped around the house, finding its way through small crevices, shrieking and howling in this replica just as much as it had in the old, old original.

Jory said from behind me, as I just continued staring out, "I like what you and Mel did to these rooms. You've given me a haven safe from the scorn of the world, and right now, I don't want to leave and face those who used to admire my grace and skill. I don't want to be separated from you and Dad. I feel we've grown closer than we've ever been, and the holidays are coming up.

"And if the roads from here to there might be closed for my nurse and my therapist, they'll also be closed for you and Dad. Don't put me out, Mom, when I most want to stay. I need you. I need Dad. I even need this chance to grow closer to my brother. I've been thinking a lot about Bart recently. Sometimes he comes and sits nearby, and we talk. I think, at last, we're beginning to be the kind of friends we were before

your mother moved into that house next door, way back when he was nine ...”

Uneasily I fidgeted, thinking of Bart’s dual face, coming in to be his brother’s friend and seducing his wife behind his back.

“If it’s what you want, Jory, stay. But give it more thought. Chris and I could move to the city just to be with you and Melodie, and we can make things as comfortable for you there as they are here.”

“But you can’t give me another brother at this late date, can you, Mom? Bart’s the only brother I’m going to have. Before I die, or he does, I want him to know I care what happens to him. I want to see him happy. I want him to have the kind of married life I share with Mel. Someday he’s got to wake up to the fact that money can’t buy everything, and most certainly, it can’t buy love. Not the kind of love Mel and I have.”

He looked thoughtful, as I inwardly cried for him and his “love”; then a blush rose up from the neck of his sports shirt covered with a red sweater that put color in his wan cheeks. “At least, I should add, the kind of marriage we used to have. It’s not much of a marriage now, I’m sorry to admit. But that’s not her fault.”

* * *

A week later I was alone in my room, furiously writing in the journal, when I heard the pounding of Chris’s footfalls as he ran and burst in on me. “Cathy,” he said excitedly, throwing off his topcoat, hurling it to a chair, “I’ve got wonderful news! You know that experiment I was assisting with? There’s been a breakthrough.” He pulled me up from my desk, shoved me into a chair before the roaring fire. He explained in minute detail all that he and other scientists were trying to accomplish. “It means I’ll be away from home five nights a week, now that winter’s come. The snow isn’t cleared until around noon, and that gives me so little time in the lab. But don’t look sad, I’ll be here on weekends. But if you object, tell me honestly. My first duty is to you and our family.”

His excitement over this new project was so evident I couldn't dash his enthusiasm with my fears. He'd given so much to me, to Jory and Bart, and received so little appreciation. My arms went automatically around his neck. I scanned over his dear, familiar face. I saw faint etchings around his blue eyes that I hadn't noticed before. My fingers in his hair found silver that was coarser in texture than the gold. There were a few gray hairs in his eyebrows.

"If this is going to make you unhappy, I can always quit and forget about research, and devote all my time to my family. But I'll be very grateful if you give me this opportunity. I thought when I gave up my practice in California that I would never find anything to interest me more, but I was wrong. Perhaps this was meant to be—but, if necessary, I *can* give it up and stay here with my family."

Give up medicine entirely? He'd centered the major portion of his life on the study of medicine. To feel useful gave added zest to his life. To keep him here just to please myself, doing nothing that would contribute to mankind at this crucial point when he felt vulnerable by being middle-aged, would destroy him.

"Cathy," Chris said, interrupting my thoughts as he pulled on his heavy woolen coat again, "are you all right? Why do you look so strange? So sad? I'll be back every Friday evening and won't leave until Monday morning. Explain to Jory everything I've told you. No, on second thought, I'll stop by his room and explain myself."

"If it's what you want, then it's what you have to do. But we're going to miss you. I don't know how I can sleep without you beside me. You see, I talked to Jory, and he doesn't want to move to Charlottesville. I think he's grown to like his rooms very much. He's almost finished that clipper ship. And it would be a pity to deprive him of all the comforts he has here. And Christmas isn't too far away. Cindy will be coming home for Thanksgiving to stay until the New Year. Chris, promise to make real efforts to come home every Friday. Jory needs your strength as well as mine since Melodie fails him entirely."

Oh, I'd said too much.

His eyes narrowed. “What’s going on that you’re not telling me?” He pulled off the heavy coat and carefully hung it up. Swallowing first, I started to speak, faltered, tried to pull my eyes from the strong hold of his ... but those blue eyes forced me to say, “Chris, would you think it terrible if you knew that Bart has fallen in love with Melodie?”

His lips twitched. “Oh, that. I know Bart’s been infatuated with her since the day she came here. I’ve seen him watching her. One day I found the two of them in the back salon, seated on the sofa. He had her dress open and was kissing her breasts. I walked away. Cathy, if Melodie didn’t want him, she’d slap his face and make him stop. You may think their affair is stealing Jory’s wife when he needs her most, but he doesn’t need a woman who doesn’t love him anymore. Let him have her—what good can she do Jory now?”

I glared at him with total disbelief. “You’re defending Bart! Do you think it’s fair what he’s done?”

“No, I don’t think it is fair. When is life fair, Cathy? Was it fair when Jory’s back was broken, and now he can’t walk? No, it’s *not* fair. I’ve been in medicine too long not to know justice isn’t doled out equally. The good often die before the bad. Children die before grandparents, and who is to say that’s right? But what can we do about it? Life is a gift, and perhaps death is another kind of gift. Who am I, or you, to say? Accept what has happened between Bart and Melodie, and stay close to Jory. Keep him happy until the day comes when he can find another wife.”

Reeling from his words, I felt hazy and unreal. “And the baby, what of the baby?”

Now his voice turned hard. “The baby is another matter. He or she will belong to Jory, no matter which brother Melodie chooses. That child will help see Jory through—for he may never be able to sire another.”

“Chris, please. Go to Bart and tell him to let Melodie go. I cannot stand the thought of Jory losing his wife at this point in his life.”

He shook his head, telling me that Bart had never listened to him, and it wasn't likely he would now. And already he'd spoken without my knowledge to Melodie.

“Darling, face up to the facts. In her heart Melodie doesn't want Jory now. She won't come out and say that, but behind every word she doesn't say, behind all her excuses, is the plain fact that she just does not want to stay married to a man who can't walk. In my way of thinking it would be cruel to force her to stay, and even harder on Jory in the long run. If we do try to force her to stay, sooner or later she'd strike back at him for not being the man he was and I want to spare him that. Better to let her go before she hurts him even worse than by just having an affair with Bart.”

“Chris!” I cried, shocked that he would think as he did. “We can't let her do this to Jory!”

“Cathy, who are we to judge this matter? Right or wrong, should we, who are considered sinners by Bart, sit in judgment on him?”

* * *

In the morning Chris drove away after telling me he'd be back Friday evening around six. I watched from my bedroom window until his car was out of sight.

How empty the days when Chris was away, how bleak the nights without his arms to hold me and his whispers to assure me everything would work out fine. I smiled and laughed for Jory, not wanting him to know that I was suffering from the lack of having Chris in my bed every night. Jory slept alone, I told myself, and I could manage if he could. I knew that Melodie and Bart were still lovers; however, they were discreet enough to try and hide that from me. But I knew from the way Joel glared at Jory's wife that he considered her a bitch. Strange that he didn't glare at Bart, when he was just as guilty. But then men had a way of thinking what was right for the gander was wrong for the goose, even pious religious ones like Joel.

We were two weeks into November, and our plans for Thanksgiving were complete. Our weather turned more severe

and hurled blustery winds and snow our way, stacking snow around our doors, freezing it overnight to ice so we couldn't leave the garage in one of our many cars. One by one our servants deserted until there was only Trevor to prepare the meals with my off-and-on help.

Cindy flew home and helped cheer our hours with her easy laughter, her winning ways that charmed everyone but Bart and Joel. Even Melodie seemed a bit happier. Then she took to her bed, to stay there all day long, trying to keep warm now that our electricity went off so often, and that meant our furnaces controlled by electric thermostats refused to give out heat. We then had to resort to our coal furnace auxiliary.

Freely Bart carried in the wood he wanted to burn in his office fireplace and forgot the rest of us would enjoy a fire.

Bart was secreted away with Joel, whispering of the Christmas ball he planned, so I had to carry in enough logs to build a fire in Jory's room, where Cindy was playing a game with him. He sat in his chair, wrapped with an afghan, his shoulders covered with a jacket, and smiled at my futile attempts to set the kindling ablaze. "Open the damper, Mom, that always helps a little."

How had I forgotten that?

Soon I had a fire going. The bright glow cheered up the room, which seemed so right in summer but not so right in winter, just as Bart had predicted. Now the dark paneling would have made Jory feel cozier.

"Mom," Jory said, suddenly looking very cheerful, "I've been thinking about something for days. I'm a fool to act as I am. You're right—been right all along. I'm not going to feel sorry for myself the minute I'm alone and no one can see, as I've been doing since the accident. I am going to accept what can't be helped and make the most of a difficult situation. Just like you and Dad did when you were locked away, I'm going to turn my idle moments into creative moments. I'll have plenty of time to read all the books I've never had time to read before, and I'm going to say yes to Dad the next time he offers to teach me how to paint with watercolors. I'll go outdoors and

try landscapes. Perhaps I'll even venture into oils, other mediums. I want to thank you both for giving me the incentive to go on. I'm a lucky guy to have parents like you and Dad."

Feeling proud enough to cry myself, I embraced him, congratulating him for coming back to being his natural, enthusiastic self.

Cindy had set a bridge table for two, but Jory soon turned back to the clipper ship he was determined to finish before Christmas. He was stringing the threadlike cords to the rigging, which was the last step before a little touch-up painting here and there.

"I'm going to give this to someone very special, Mom," he informed me. "On Christmas day, one person in this house is going to have my first difficult piece of handicraft."

"I bought it for you, Jory, to become an heirloom to pass down to your children ..." I blanched when I heard myself say "children."

"It's all right, Mom, for with this gift I am going to win back the younger brother who loved me before that old man came and changed him. He wants it badly; I see it in his eyes every time he comes in and checks to see my progress. Besides, I can always put together another one for my child. Right now I want to do something for Bart. He thinks none of us need him or like him. I've never seen a man as uncertain about himself ... and that's such a pity."

Holiday Joys



Thanksgiving Day came, and with it arrived Chris early in the morning. Jory's nurse ate Thanksgiving dinner with us, keeping his lovesick eyes glued on Cindy as if she had him under a spell. She couldn't have behaved more like a lady, making me tremendously proud of her. The next day she eagerly accepted our invitation to go shopping in Richmond. Melodie shook her head. "Sorry, I just don't feel up to it."

Chris, Cindy and I drove off with a clear conscience, knowing Bart had flown to New York and wouldn't be with Melodie. Jory's nurse had promised to stay with Jory until we returned.

Our three-day holiday in Richmond refreshed our minds and souls, gave me the sense of being still beautiful and very much in love, and Cindy had the time of her life spending, and spending, and spending some more. "You see," she said proudly, "I don't waste all the allowance you send me on myself. I save to buy wonderful gifts for my family ... and Momma, Daddy, you just wait until you see what I bought for you both. And I certainly hope Jory likes his gift. As for Bart, he can take what I give and like it or not."

"What about your Uncle Joel?" I asked with curiosity.

Laughing, she hugged me. "Wait until you see."

Hours later Chris turned onto the private road that would wend its crooked way up to Foxworth Hall. In one of the boxes that filled our trunk and rear seat of the car, I had an expensive dress to wear to the Christmas ball I'd overheard Bart arranging with the same caterers who'd taken care of his birthday party. In her own huge box, Cindy had chosen a spectacular dress, daring but at the same time wonderfully appropriate. "Thank you, Momma, for not objecting," she'd whispered before she kissed me.

Nothing unusual had occurred during our absence, except Jory had finally completed the clipper ship. It stood proud and exquisitely finished down to the last detail, its tiny brass helm gleaming, its sails full and bulging with invisible and unfelt high winds. “Sugar stiffening,” revealed Jory with a small laugh, “and it worked. I took the sails and shaped them around a bottle like the instructions read, and now our maiden voyage is well under way.” He was proud of his work, smiling as Chris stepped over to admire his meticulous craftsmanship more closely. Then we had to help him lift the ship into a styrofoam form-fitting mold that would hold it securely until it reached the hands of the new owner.

His beautiful eyes turned to me. “Thanks for giving me something to do during all these long, boring hours, Mom. When I first saw it I was overwhelmed, thinking I’d never be able to do something that appeared so difficult. But I took one step at a time, and now I feel I won over those hideously complicated directions.”

“That’s the way all life’s battles are won, Jory,” said Chris as I hugged Jory close. “You don’t look at the overall picture. You take one step, then another, and another ... until you arrive at your destination. And I must say, you did a magnificent job on this ship. It’s as professionally made as any I’ve seen. If Bart doesn’t appreciate all the effort you put into this, he’ll really disappoint me.”

Standing, Chris beamed at Jory. “You’re looking healthier, stronger. And don’t give up on the watercolors. It is a difficult medium, but I thought you would enjoy it more than oils. I think one day you are going to be a fine artist.”

Downstairs, Bart was on the phone directing a bank official to take over a failing business. Then he was talking to someone else about the Christmas party he was planning, a ball to make up for the tragedy of his birthday party. I stood in his open doorway thinking it was a good thing that all he ordered did not come from his personal fund but from the Corrine Foxworth Winslow Trust, which left Bart his annual five hundred thousand as “pin” money to spend only on himself. It more than irked Bart to be forced to confer with

Chris each time he spent over the named figure of ten thousand.

Bart slammed down the receiver, glared at me. “Mother, do you have to stand in the doorway and eavesdrop? Haven’t I told you before to stay away from me when I’m busy?”

“When do I see you if I don’t do this?”

“Why do you need to see me?”

“Why does any mother need to see her son?”

His dark eyes softened. “You’ve got Jory—and he always seemed more than sufficient.”

“No, you’re wrong there. If I had never had you, Jory would have been sufficient. But I *did* have you, and that makes you a vital part of my life.”

Uncertain-looking, he stood up and strode to a window, keeping his back toward me. His voice came to me deep and gruff, with a melancholy sadness. “Remember when I used to keep Malcolm’s journal stuffed inside my shirt? Malcolm wrote so much about his mother, and how much he loved her until she ran off with her lover and left him alone with a father he didn’t like. Some of Malcolm’s hate for her rubbed off on me, I’m afraid. Each time I see you and Chris head up those stairs together, I feel the need to cleanse myself from the shame I feel and you two don’t. So don’t you start lecturing to me about Melodie, for what I do with her is far less sinful than what you do with Chris.”

He was no doubt right, and that’s what hurt worse than anything.

* * *

More or less I grew unhappily accustomed to seeing Chris only on the weekends, although my heart ached and my bed felt huge and lonely without him, and all my mornings alone were wistful, wishing I could hear him whistling as he shaved and showered, missing his cheerfulness, his optimism. When the weather kept him away on the weekends, even then, I grew used to that. How adaptable we humans were, how willing to

suffer through any horror, any adjustment, any deprivations just to gain those few minutes of priceless joy.

To stand at the window and watch Chris drive up filled me with surprising youthful excitement so overwhelming it was as if I were waiting for Bart's father to steal away from Foxworth Hall and meet me in the cottage. Certainly I didn't act as placidly accepting as when I'd seen him every night, every morning. The weekends were something to be anticipated and dreamed about. However, Chris was both more and less to me—more a lover and less a husband. I missed the brother who'd been my other half, and loved the lover-husband who didn't remind me as much of the brother I'd known.

There was no way and there were no words that could separate the two of us now that I'd accepted him and taken him as my husband, defying all scorn and society's moral rules.

Still, my unconscious was trying peculiar tricks to give my conscious relief. With determination I was separating Chris the man from Chris the boy who'd been my brother. An unconscious, unplanned game we both began to play with some finesse. We didn't discuss it, we didn't have to. No longer did Chris call me "my lady Cath-er-ine." No more did he say teasingly, "Don't let the bedbugs bite." All the charms and enchantments of those yesterdays when we were locked up, meant to keep away evil spirits, we let go, at last, in the middle years of our contentment.

He came home late one Friday night in December, stomping his feet in the foyer as I lingered in the shadows of the rotunda watching him take off his topcoat and hang it neatly in the guest closet before he raced up the stairs two at a time, calling my name. I stepped out of the shadows and threw myself into his eager arms." You're late again!" I cried. "Who do you see in your lab that sends shivers up and down your spine?"

No one! No one! his passionate kisses assured.

The weekends were so short, so dreadfully short.

I was spilling out all that troubled me, about Joel and his weird ways of roaming about the house, scowling his disapproval at everything I did. I told him about Melodie and Bart, and Jory, who was depressed and yearning for Melodie, hating her indifference, loving her even so, while I was trying constantly to remind Melodie of her responsibilities, which hurt him even more grievously than the loss of the use of his legs.

Chris lay beside me and listened to my long tirade with quiet impatience before he said sleepily and bit out of patience, “Catherine, sometimes you make me dread coming home.” He rolled on his side away from me. “You spoil everything wonderful and sweet we have between us with your incessant, unpleasant, suspicious tales. And most of all that troubles you is in your imagination. Haven’t you always had too much of it? Grow up, Catherine. You are contaminating Jory with your suspicions as well. Once you learn to expect only good from people, then perhaps that’s all you’ll get.”

“I’ve heard your philosophy before, *Christopher*,” I said with a flash of bitterness that shot through my brain like a laser beam, bringing to mind his faith in our mother, and the good he’d expected from her by his devotion. *Chris, Chris, don’t YOU even learn?* But I didn’t say it, didn’t dare to say it.

There he was, middle-aged, even if he didn’t look it, presenting me with his same old rosy-glow boyish optimism. Though I could ridicule him verbally for this, inside I longed for his kind of redeeming faith ... for it gave him peace, while I lived day in and day out, juggling from one foot to another on a hot frying pan.

* * *

Bart sat before the roaring fire, trying to concentrate on *The Wall Street Journal* as Jory and I wrapped Christmas gifts on a long table we’d cleared of all accessories. All of a sudden it occurred to me as I tied fancy bows and cut foil paper to size, that since Cindy had arrived, she’d drifted dreamlike throughout the house, lost in her own world, so that she seemed almost not there. Because of the peace this brought, I had more or less forgotten her needs as I attended to Jory’s. I

hadn't been surprised when she wanted to go with Chris into Charlottesville to finish up her shopping and see a movie before she came back with him on Friday. Chris had a one-bedroom apartment and planned to sleep Cindy on his sofa bed.

"Really, Momma, my special Christmas surprise will please you." Only when she was gone did I wonder what put that secret smile of pleasure on her pretty face.

As Jory and I topped off all his presents with huge satin bows and name tags, I heard the banging of car doors, the stomping feet on the portico, and then the sound of Chris calling out. It was only about two in the afternoon as he strolled into our favorite salon with Cindy at his side—and, to my amazement, a strikingly handsome boy about eighteen was with them. I already knew Cindy considered any boy less than two years older too young for her. The older and more experienced the better was the way she liked to tease me.

"Mom," said Cindy happily, her face radiant, "here is the surprise you said I could bring home."

Startled, I still managed a smile. Cindy had not once said her "secret" surprise was a guest she'd invited without asking anyone's permission. I stood so Chris could introduce the boyfriend Cindy had met in South Carolina as Lance Spalding. The young man had considerable poise as he shook hands with me, with Jory, with Bart, who glowered.

Chris kissed my cheek and briefly embraced Jory before he hurried toward the door. "Cathy, forgive me for leaving so soon, but I'll be back tomorrow early. Cindy couldn't wait until tomorrow to bring her houseguest home. I've got a few things to wrap up at the university. And I haven't finished my shopping." He flashed me a brilliant smile full of charm. "Darling, I've got two weeks off for the holidays. So take it easy and keep your imagination under lock and key." He turned to Lance. "Enjoy your holiday, Lance."

Cindy, very full of herself, pulled her boyfriend closer to the very one who was least likely to be hospitable to her guest.

“Bart, I knew you wouldn’t mind if I invited Lance. His father is president of the chain of Chemical Banks of Virginia.”

Magic words. I smiled at Cindy’s cleverness. Instantly Bart’s hostile attitude changed into interest. It was embarrassing to see the way he tried to milk every bit of information he could from the young man, who was obviously very much infatuated with Cindy.

Cindy was lovelier than ever, glowing like a winter rose in her tight white sweater banded with stripes of rose to match her tight knit pants. She had a wonderful figure she was determined to display.

Laughing and full of joy, she caught hold of Lance’s hand and tugged him away from Bart. “Lance, you just wait until you see all of this house. We have authentic suits of armor—two of them—and they would be too small for me to wear. Momma, maybe, but not me. And just think, knights were supposed to be big, powerful men, and they weren’t big. The music room is larger than this room, and my room is the prettiest room of all. The suite my parents share is incredible. I’ve not been invited to view Bart’s rooms, but I’m sure they must be fabulous.” Here she half turned to toss Bart a wicked, teasing smile. His scowl deepened.

“Stay out of my rooms!” he ordered harshly. “Don’t go near my office. And Lance, while you are here, you will remember you are under my roof and I expect you to treat Cindy with honor.”

The boy’s face turned red before he meekly said, “Of course. I understand.”

The second the two of them were out of sight, though we could still hear Cindy singing the praises of Foxworth Hall, Bart hurled at me his opinion of Cindy’s boyfriend. “I don’t like them. He’s too old for her and too slick. She or you should have told me. You know I don’t want unexpected guests just dropping in.”

“Bart, I agree with you entirely. Cindy should have warned us, but perhaps she was fearful that if she did, you would say no. And he seems a very nice young man to me. Remember

how sweet Cindy has been since Thanksgiving. She hasn't given you one second of trouble. She's growing up."

"Let's hope she continues to behave herself," he grumbled before he smiled faintly. "Did you see him looking at her? She's got that poor kid snowed under."

Relieved, I settled back to smile at Bart, then at Jory, who was fiddling with the Christmas lights before he began to quietly arrange his gifts beneath the tree.

"The Fox-worths had a tradition for always throwing a Christmas ball on Christmas night," said Bart in a pleasant tone, "and Uncle Joel himself drove to mail my invitations two weeks ago. I'm expecting at least two hundred if the weather remains fairly decent. Even if a blizzard blows in, I still think half will manage to get here. After all, they can't afford to slight me when I give them so much business. Bankers, attorneys, brokers, doctors, businessmen and their wives and girlfriends, as well as the best of the local society. And a few of my fraternity brothers will be showing up. So for once, Mother, you shouldn't complain that our lives are lonely in this isolated area."

Jory went back to reading his book, seemingly determined not to let anything Bart said or did upset him. In the firelight his profile was classically perfect. His dark hair curled softly around his face, turning up at the collar of his knit sports shirt. Bart lounged in a business suit, as if at any moment he'd be up and away to attend a corporation meeting. That's when Melodie drifted in wearing a shapeless gray garment that hung from her shoulders and bulged out as if she had a watermelon beneath. Her eyes went immediately to Bart, who jumped up, turned his eyes away, and hastily left the room, leaving behind him an uncomfortable silence.

"I met Cindy upstairs," said Melodie huskily, her forlorn eyes avoiding contact with Jory's. She sat down near the fire and stretched forth her hands to warm them. "Her boyfriend seems very pleasant and well bred, and also very handsome." She kept her eyes on the fire while Jory diligently tried to force her to look at him. His heart was in his eyes as he wistfully gave up and turned back to his book. "It seems Cindy

likes dark-haired men who look like her brothers,” she went on in a vague, distant way, as if nothing mattered and she was only making an effort, for a change.

Angrily Jory jerked his eyes up. “Mel, can’t you even say hello to me?” he asked hoarsely. “I’m here, I’m alive. I’m doing my best to survive. Can’t you say or do something to tell me you remember that I’m your husband?”

Reluctantly turning her head his way, Melodie gave him a vague smile of recognition. Something in her eyes said she didn’t see him anymore as the husband she’d so passionately loved and admired. She saw only a crippled man in a wheelchair and as he was now, he made her uneasy and embarrassed.

“Hello, Jory,” she said dutifully.

Why didn’t she get up and kiss him? Why didn’t she see the pleading in his eyes? Why couldn’t she make an effort, even if she didn’t love him anymore? Slowly Jory’s wan face reddened before he bowed his head and stared down at all the gifts he’d so beautifully wrapped.

I was about to say something cruel to Melodie when Cindy and Lance came strolling back, both with starry eyes and flushed faces. Bart wasn’t long in following them in. He raked the room with his eyes, saw that Melodie was still there, and turned to leave again. Instantly Melodie rose and quickly disappeared. Bart must have seen her leave, for shortly he returned and sat down and crossed his legs, looking relieved now that Melodie was gone.

The boyfriend spoke up, looking at Bart and smiling widely. “I hear all this belongs to you, Mr. Foxworth.”

“Call him Bart,” ordered Cindy.

Bart frowned.

“Bart ... ,” began Lance hesitatingly, “truly this is a remarkable house. Thank you for inviting me.” I glanced at Cindy, who stood her ground as Bart threw her an angry look, even as Lance went on innocently, “Cindy didn’t show me your suite of rooms, or your office, but I hope you will do that.

Someday I hope to own something like this ... and I have a passion for electronic gadgets, as Cindy tells me you have.”

Instantly Bart was on his feet, seemingly proud to show off his electronic equipment. “Sure, if you want to see my rooms, and my office, I’ll be delighted to show you. But I’d rather Cindy didn’t accompany us.”

After a sumptuous dinner, which Trevor served, we conversed in the music room with Jory and Bart. Melodie was upstairs, already in bed. Soon Bart said he had to rise early and *he* was going to bed. Instantly the conversation dwindled to nothing as we all stood and headed for the stairs. I showed Lance into a lovely room with its own connecting bath. It was in the eastern wing, not so far from Bart’s own rooms, while Cindy’s was near my own. Cindy smiled sweetly and kissed the cheek of Lance Spalding. “Good night, sweet prince,” she whispered. “Parting is such sweet-sweet sorrow.”

His arms folded over his chest, as Joel folded his, Bart stood back and watched this tender scene with scorn. “Let it be a true parting,” he said meaningfully, looking directly at Lance, then at Cindy, before he stalked off toward his rooms.

First I saw Cindy to her room and we exchanged a few words and our regular good night kisses. Then I paused outside Melodie’s door, wondering if I should rap and go in and try to reason with her. I sighed, knowing it wouldn’t do any good, not when I’d tried so many times before. Next I was crossing over to Jory’s room.

He lay on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. His dark blue eyes rolled my way, shiny with unshed tears. “It’s been so long since Melodie came in to kiss me good night. You and Cindy always find the time to do that, but my wife ignores me as if I don’t exist for her. There’s no real reason now why I couldn’t sleep in a larger bed, and she could sleep beside me, but she wouldn’t even if I asked. Now I’ve finished the clipper ship, and I don’t know what to begin next to occupy my time. I really don’t want to start another ship for our child. I feel so unfulfilled, so at odds with life, with myself, and most of all, with my wife. I want to turn to my wife, but she turns from

me. Mom ... without you, Dad and Cindy, I wouldn't know how to live through the days."

I held him in my arms, ran my fingers through his hair as I had when he was a little boy. I said all the things that should have come from Melodie. I pitied her, disliked her for being weak, hated her for not loving enough, for not knowing how to give even when it hurt.

"Good night, *my sweet prince*," I said from Jory's doorway. "Hold tight to your dreams, don't abandon them now, for life offers many chances at happiness, Jory. It's not all over for you."

He smiled, said good night, and I headed for the southern-wing suite I shared with Chris.

All of a sudden Joel was in front of me, blocking my passage. He wore a shabby old bathrobe of some faded color that seemed more gray than anything else. His thin, pale hair stood up in small peaks like horns, while the long end of his corded sash trailed behind him like a limp tail.

"Catherine," he said sharply, "do you realize what that girl is doing this very minute?"

"*That* girl? What girl?" I answered just as sharply.

"You know who I mean, that daughter of yours. Right now, at this moment, she is entertaining that young man she brought home with her."

"Entertaining? What do you mean?"

His smile came crooked and mean. "Why, if anyone should know, it should be you. She's got that boy in her bed."

"I don't believe you!"

"Then go and see for yourself!" he answered quickly, with some delight. "You never believe anything I say. I was in the back hall and just happened to see this boy stealing down the halls, and I followed. Before he reached Cindy's door, she had it open and was welcoming him inside."

"I don't believe you," I said again, more weakly this time.

“Are you afraid to check and find out I might be telling the truth? Would that convince you then that I am not the enemy you presume me to be?”

I didn't know what to say or think. Cindy had promised to behave herself. She was innocent, I knew she was. She'd been so perfect, helping with Jory, resisting her natural tendency to argue with Bart. Joel had to be lying. Spinning about, I headed toward Cindy's room with Joel close at my heels.

“You are lying about her, Joel, and I intend to prove that to you,” I said as I almost ran.

Just outside her door I paused and listened, hearing nothing at all. I lifted my hand to knock. “No!” hissed Joel. “Don't give them any warning if you want to know the full truth. Just throw open the door and step inside the room and see for yourself.”

I paused, not wanting to even think he could possibly be right. And I didn't want Joel to tell me what to do. I glared at him before I knocked sharply just once, waited a few seconds, then threw open Cindy's bedroom door and stepped inside her room, which was lit by moonlight flooding in through her windows.

Two totally naked bodies were entwined on Cindy's virgin bed!

I stared, shocked, feeling a scream in my throat that just stayed there. Before my amazed eyes Lance Spalding sprawled over my sixteen-year-old daughter, jerking spasmodically. Cindy's hands clutched at his buttocks, her long red fingernails digging in, her head rolling from side to side as she moaned with pleasure, telling me this was not their first time.

What should I do now? Close the door and say nothing? Fly into a towering rage and drive Lance out of our home? Helplessly caught in a web of indecision I stood there as only seconds must have passed, until I heard a faint noise behind me.

Another gasped. I whirled around to see Bart, who was staring at Cindy, who'd rolled on top of Lance and was lustily

riding him, crying out four-letter word vulgarities in between her moans of ecstasy, entirely unaware of anything but what she was doing and what was being done to her.

Bart had no indecision.

He strode directly to the bed and caught hold of Cindy around the waist. With a mighty heave he tore her off the boy, who seemed helpless in his nakedness and the bliss of what had been going on. Bart ruthlessly hurled Cindy to the floor. She screamed as she fell face downward on the carpet.

Bart didn't hear.

He was too busy handling the youth. Again and again his fists slammed into Lance's handsome face. I heard the crack of his nose as blood spurted everywhere. "NOT UNDER MY ROOF!" he roared, repeatedly battering Lance's face. "NO SINNING UNDER MY ROOF!"

A moment ago I felt like doing the same thing. Now I ran to save the boy. "Bart, STOP! YOU'LL KILL HIM!"

Cindy kept screaming hysterically even as she tried to cover her nudity with the clothes she'd dropped on the floor. They were all mixed up with Lance's discarded garments. Joel was now in the room, raking his eyes scornfully over Cindy; then he was turning to smile at me with gloating satisfaction that said over and over again: *See, I told you so. Like mother, like daughter.*

"See what you've raised with your pampering?" Joel intoned, as if behind a pulpit. "It was evident from the first time I saw her that that girl was nothing but a harlot under the roof of my father's house."

"You fool!" I stormed. "Who are you to condemn anyone?"

"You are the fool, Catherine. Just like your mother, in more than one way. She, too, wanted every man she saw, even her own half uncle. She was like this naked girl crawling lewdly around on the floor—ready to bed down with anything in pants."

Unexpectedly Bart dropped Lance on the bed and hurled himself at Joel. "Stop it! Don't you dare tell my mother she's

like her mother! She isn't, she isn't!"

"You'll see it my way eventually, Bart," said Joel in his softest, most sanctimonious tone. "Corrine got what she deserved. Just as your mother will get hers one day. And if justice and right still rule in this world, and God is in his Heaven, that indecent, naked girl on the floor trying to cover herself will meet her end in fiery flames, as she deserves."

"Don't you say anything like that again!" bellowed Bart, so furious with Joel he forgot all about Cindy and Lance, who were both hastily pulling on the night clothes they'd abandoned. He hesitated, as if shocked to find himself defending the girl he incessantly denied was his sister. "This is my life, Uncle," he said sternly, "and my family more than it is yours. I will deal out what justice is demanded, and not you."

Seemingly very distressed and shaken, shuffling lamely like an older man, Joel ambled off down the hall, bent over almost double.

The moment Joel was out of sight, Bart turned his furious temper on me. "YOU SEE!" he roared. "Cindy has just proven what I suspected she was all along! She's no good, Mother! NO GOOD! All the time she played the game of being sweet, she was planning how she'd enjoy herself when Lance came. I want her out of this house and out of my life forever!"

"Bart, you can't send Cindy away—she's my daughter! If you have to punish someone more than you have, send Lance away. You're right, of course, Cindy shouldn't have done what she did, nor should Lance have taken advantage of our hospitality."

Somewhat mollified, he managed to simmer down a little. "All right, Cindy can stay since you insist on loving her no matter what. But that boy is going tonight!" He yelled at Lance, "Hurry and pack your things—for in five minutes I'm driving you to the airport. If you ever dare touch Cindy again, I'll break the rest of your bones! And don't think I won't know. I have friends in South Carolina, too!"

Lance Spalding was very pale as he hurried to throw his clothes back into suitcases he'd just emptied. He couldn't even

look at me as he hurried by and whispered huskily, “I’m sorry and so ashamed, Mrs. Sheffield ...” and then he was gone, with Bart right behind him, shoving him on faster from time to time.

Now I turned to Cindy, who had donned a very modest granny gown and was huddled under the covers of her bed, staring at me wide-eyed and scared-looking. “I hope you are satisfied, Cindy,” I said coldly. “You have truly disappointed me. I expected more from you ... you promised me. Don’t your promises mean anything at all?”

“Momma, please,” she sobbed. “I love him, and I wanted him, and I think I waited long enough. It was my Christmas gift to him—and to myself.”

“Don’t lie to me, Cynthia! Tonight wasn’t your first time with him. I’m not as stupid as you presume I am. You and Lance have been lovers before.”

She wailed loudly, “Momma, aren’t you going to love me anymore? You can’t just turn it off, ’cause if you do, then I’ll want to die! I don’t have any parents but you and Daddy ... and I swear it won’t happen again. Please forgive me, please!”

“I’ll think about it,” I said coldly as I closed her door.

* * *

The next morning as I dressed, Cindy came running into my room, crying out hysterically, “Momma, please don’t let Bart force me to leave too. I’ve never had a happy Christmas when Bart was around. I hate him! Really hate him! He’s ruined Lance’s face, ruined it.”

More than likely she was right. I had to teach Bart how to hold back his rage. How terrible for such a good-looking boy to have his beautiful nose broken, to say nothing of his black eyes and many cuts and bruises.

However, after Lance was gone, something peculiar laid a ghostly hand on Bart and turned him very quiet. Lines I hadn’t seen before etched from his nose to his beautiful shaped lips, and he was too young for face lines. He refused to look or talk to Cindy. He treated me as if I weren’t there, either. He sat

sullen and quiet, staring at me, then rested his dark eyes fleetingly on Cindy, who was weeping, and I couldn't remember another time when Cindy had allowed any of us to see her cry.

Through my mind flitted all kinds of dreary thoughts. The place where owls and foxes resided, remembering the Bible we used to have to study every day. Where could understanding be found? There was a time for planting, a time for reaping, a time to gather in ... where was our time for joy?

Hadn't we waited long enough?

Later that morning I had a talk with Cindy. "Cindy, I am shocked at your behavior. Bart had every right to be enraged, even though I disapprove of the way he was so rough on that boy. I can understand *his* actions, but not yours. Any young man would have entered your room when you willingly opened your door and invited him in. Cindy, you have to promise not to do anything like that again. Once you are eighteen, you become your own boss—but until that day, and while you are under this roof, you will not play sex games with anyone here or anywhere else. Do you understand?"

Her blue eyes widened, took on the shine of forthcoming tears. "Momma, I don't live in the eighteenth century! All the girls are *doing it!* I held out much longer than most do, and from all I've heard about you ... you went after men too."

"Cindy!" I snapped sharply. "Don't you ever throw my past or present in my face! You don't know what I had to endure—while you have had nothing but happy days full of everything that was denied me."

"Happy days?" she asked bitterly. "Have you forgotten all the nasty, mean things Bart did to me? Maybe I wasn't locked up, starved, or beaten, but I've had my problems, and don't think I haven't. Bart makes me feel so unsure about my femininity that I have to test all the boys I meet ... I just can't help it."

We were at that time in her bedroom, while Bart was downstairs.

I stepped forward to take Cindy into my arms. “Don’t cry, darling. I do understand how you must feel. But you must try to understand how parents feel about their daughters. Your father and I want only the best for you. We don’t want you to be hurt. Let this experience with Lance teach you a lesson, and hold back until you are eighteen and able to reason with more maturity. Hold out longer than that if you can. When you grab at sex too soon, it has a way of biting back and giving you exactly what you don’t want. It did that to me, and I’ve heard you say a thousand times you want a stage and film career, and husbands and babies have to wait. Many a girl has been thwarted by a baby that started because of uncontrollable passion. Be careful before committing yourself to anyone. Don’t fall in love too soon, for when you do you make yourself vulnerable to so many unforeseen events. Give romance a try without sex, Cindy, and save yourself all the pain of giving too much too soon.”

Her arms were tight about me, her eyes turned soft and told me we were again mother and daughter.

Later Cindy and I stood side by side downstairs, watching everything whiten with snow, grow misty with distance, cruelly isolating us even more from the rest of the world. “Now all roads from Charlottesville will be blocked,” I said tonelessly to Cindy. “What’s more, Melodie is acting so strangely she makes me fear for the good health of her child. Jory’s staying in his room as if he doesn’t want to encounter her, or any of us. Bart saunters around like he owns all of us as well as the house. Oh, I wish Chris were here. I hate it when he’s gone.”

I turned to find Cindy staring at me with a kind of wonderment. She flushed when she met my eyes. When I asked why, she murmured, “I just wonder sometimes how the two of you hang on to what you have, when I fall in and out of love so often. Momma, someday you’ve got to tell me how to make a man really love me, and not just my body. I wish boys would look first into my eyes like Daddy looks into yours; I wish they’d look at my face at least once in a while, for it’s not an ugly face, but they all stare at my boobs. I wish their eyes would follow me around like Jory’s follow Melodie ...”

Cindy put her arm around me and buried her face against my shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Momma, really so sorry I caused all that trouble last night. Thank you for not scolding me more than you did. I’ve been thinking about what you said, and you’re right. Lance has paid a heavy price, and I should have known better.” Pleadingly she gazed into my eyes. “Momma, I was serious, all the girls at school started way back when they were eleven, twelve, and thirteen, and I love Lance. And I held back, although all the boys chased after me more than they did the others. The girls thought I was doing it when I wasn’t. I pretended to be really with it, but then one day I heard some boys comparing notes and they were all saying they hadn’t scored all the way with me. They talked as if I were some kind of freak—or maybe a lesbian. That’s when I decided I’d let Lance have his way this Christmas. The special gift I had for him.”

I stared at her hard, wondering if she told all the truth, as she went on to tell me she was the only girl in her group to hold out until sixteen, and that was really old for a girl in today’s world. “Please don’t be ashamed, for if you are, then I’ll be. I’ve wanted to do it since I was twelve but held back because of what you said. But you’ve got to understand that what I did with Lance wasn’t casual. I love him. And for a while, before you and Bart came in ... it felt ... felt ... so good.”

What could I say now ?

I had my own willful youth clearly tucked in a memory closet, ready to jump forward and put the vision of Paul before me ... and the way I’d wanted him to teach me all the ways of love, especially when my first experience with sex had been so devastating, filling me with the kind of guilt that even now I could cry to look up at the moon that had seen Chris’s sin, and mine.

About six Chris called to say he’d been trying to reach me all day but the lines had been down. “You’ll be seeing me Christmas Eve,” he said cheerfully. “I’ve hired a snowplow to precede me to the Hall, and I’ll be right behind. How are things going?”

“Fine, just fine,” I lied, telling him Lance’s father had fallen down the stairs and he had to fly home immediately. Then I rattled on and on, saying we were all set for Christmas, gifts wrapped, tree up, but Melodie was, as usual, clinging to her rooms as if they offered her the only sanctuary in the world.

“Cathy,” said Chris in a tight voice, “how nice it would be if you’d only level with me on occasion. Lance didn’t fly home. All the planes are grounded. Lance is, at this moment, not ten feet away from this very phone booth. He came to me and confessed everything. I took care of his broken nose, his other wounds, and cursed Bart all the time. That boy is a mess.”

Early the next morning, we heard on the radio that all roads to the village and the nearest city were snowed under. Travelers were warned to stay home. We kept the radio on all day, listening to the weathermen who seemed to control our lives. “Never before has there been a winter more dramatic than this one,” went the singsong male voice, extolling the virtues of weather. “Records are being broken ...”

Hour by miserable hour Cindy and I stood at the windows, with Jory often joining us to stare as we did at the snow coming down with relentless determination to isolate us.

Behind my eyes I saw the four of us, locked in that room, whispering about Santa Claus and telling the twins that surely he would find us. Chris had written him a letter. Oh, the pity of those little twins waking up on Christmas morning, not even remembering the good times that had gone on before.

Hearing Jory cough brought me back to the present. Every few minutes Jory suffered through paroxysms of racking coughs. I glanced at him fearfully.

Soon he was heading his chair for his room, saying he could put himself back into bed. I wanted to go with him but knew he wanted to do all he could for himself.

“I’m beginning to hate this place,” grumbled Cindy. “Now Jory’s got a cold. That’s why I brought Lance home with me, knowing it would be this. I was hoping every night we’d have a party, and being slightly drunk would take away the pall of

living under the shadows of Bart and that creepy old Joel. I was expecting Lance to keep me happy while I was here. Now I've got no one but you, Momma. Jory seems so aloof and alone, and he thinks I'm too young to understand his problems. Melodie never says anything to me, or anybody. Bart stalks around like the grim reaper—and that old man sends shivers up my spine. We don't have any friends. No one ever calls unexpectedly. We're all alone, getting on each other's nerves. And it's Christmas. I'm looking forward to that ball Bart says he's throwing. At least that would give me the chance to meet some people and brush off the moss I feel creeping up my legs."

Suddenly Bart was there, yelling at Cindy. "You don't have to stay. You're just the bastard my mother had to have."

Cindy blushed deeply red. "Are you trying to hurt me again, jerk? You can't hurt me *now*! I'm through with that!"

"Don't you ever call me jerk again, bastard!"

"CREEP, JERK, CREEP, JERK!" she taunted, backing up and dodging behind chairs and tables, deliberately baiting him to give chase, and in this way, give her dull day a bit of excitement.

"Cindy!" I stormed, furious now. "How dare you talk to Bart that way? Now, say you're sorry ... say it!"

"No, I won't say it, for I'm not sorry!" she yelled not at me but at Bart. "He's a brute, a maniac, a crazy, and he's trying to drive us all as batty as he is!"

"STOP!" I yelled, seeing Bart's face go very pale. Then he lunged forward and caught her by her hair. She tried to run, but he had her held too securely. I rushed forward to prevent him from striking her by clinging onto his free arm. Above her he towered. "If you ever so much as speak to me again, little girl, you'll rue the day. You're very proud of your body, of your hair, of your face. One more insult and you'll hide in closets and break all the mirrors."

His deadly tone of voice said he was serious. I moved to help Cindy stand. "Bart, you don't mean that. All your life

you've tormented Cindy. Can you blame her for wanting her revenge?"

"You take her side, after what she said to me?"

"Say you're sorry, Cindy," I pleaded, turning to her. Then I turned appealing eyes on Bart. "You say it, too, please."

Indecision flashed in Bart's fiery dark eyes as he saw how upset I was, but it vanished the moment Cindy screamed out, "NO! I'm *not* sorry! And I'm not afraid of him! You're just as creepy and senile as that old jerk who wanders around muttering to himself. Boy, do you have a thing for old men! Maybe that's your hang-up, *brother!*"

"Cindy!" I whispered, very much shocked, "apologize to Bart."

"Never, never, NEVER!—not after what he did to Lance!"

The anger on Bart's face frightened me.

Just then Joel ambled into the room. He stood with his long arms crossed over his chest and met Bart's fiery eyes. "Son ... let it go. The Lord sees and hears all and, in time, wreaks his own justice. She's a child like a bird chirping in the trees, led by instincts that know nothing of morality. She acts, speaks, moves, all without thinking. She's nothing compared to you, Bart. Nothing but a hank of hair, a bone, and a rag—you are born to lead."

As if transfixed, Bart's anger simmered down. He followed Joel from the room without looking our way. To see Bart follow that old man so obediently and without question filled my head with fresh fears. How had Joel gained such control?

Cindy fell into my arms and began to cry. "Momma, what's wrong with me, with Bart? Why do I say such hateful things to hurt him? Why does he say them to me? I want to hurt Bart. I want to pay him back for every ugly thing he's done to hurt me."

In my arms she sobbed out her anxieties until she was limp.

In many ways Cindy reminded me of myself, so eager to love and be loved, to live a full, exciting life even before she

was mature enough to accept the emotional responsibilities.

I sighed and held her closer. Someday, somehow, all family problems would be resolved. I held to that belief, praying that Chris would come home soon.

Christmas



As it had in the past, Christmas Eve arrived with its charm and festive peace to reign over troubled spirits and gave even Foxworth Hall its own beauty. The snow still fell, but it was not so wild and wind driven. In our favorite room for getting together, Bart and Cindy, with Jory directing, were decorating the gigantic Christmas tree. Cindy was up on a ladder on one side, Bart was on the second ladder, as Jory sat in his wheelchair, fiddling with strings of lights meant for our door wreaths. Decorators were working in other rooms to make them festive enough for the hundreds of guests Bart expected to entertain at the ball. He was terribly excited. To see him happy and laughing added joy to my heart, especially when Chris came in the door loaded down with all he'd purchased at the last moment, as was his customary procrastinating way.

I ran to greet him with hungry arms and eager kisses that Bart couldn't see from his position behind the tree. "Whatever took you so long?" I asked, and he laughed, indicating the beautifully wrapped gifts.

"Out in the car I've got more," he said with a happy smile. "I know what you're thinking, that I should do my shopping earlier, but I never seem to find the time. Then all of a sudden it's Christmas Eve, and I end up paying twice as much, but you're going to be very pleased—and if you're not, don't tell me."

Melodie was crouched down on a low stool near the fireplace in the salon just off the foyer, looking miserable. In fact, when I studied her more closely she appeared to be in pain. "Are you all right, Melodie?" I asked. She nodded to say she was fine, and I foolishly took her word for that. When Chris questioned her, she stood and denied anything was wrong. She threw Bart an imploring glance he didn't see, and

then she was heading for the back stairs. In her shapeless, dull-colored garment, she seemed a drab thing that had aged ten years since July. Jory, who always kept a close eye on Melodie, turned to watch her drift away, a terrible haunted sadness in his eyes that stole his pleasure from the happy occupation at hand. The string of lights slid from his lap to entangle the wheels of his chair. He didn't notice, only sat with clenched fists, as if he'd like to smash Fate in the face for taking away the use of his marvelous body, and in so doing stealing from him the woman he loved.

On the way to the stairs, Chris stopped to clap Jory heartily on the back. "You're looking fit and healthy. And don't worry about Melodie. It's normal for a woman in the last trimester to become irritable and moody. So would you if you were carrying around all that extra weight."

"She could at least speak to me occasionally," complained Jory, "or look at me. She doesn't even cozy up to Bart anymore."

I looked at him with alarm. Could he know that only a short while ago Bart and Melodie had been lovers? I didn't believe they were anymore, and that was the true explanation of Melodie's miserable state. I tried to read his eyes, but he lowered his lids and pretended to be interested in decorating the tree again.

Long ago Chris and I had established a tradition of opening at least one gift on Christmas Eve. When night came, Chris and I sat alone in the best of our downstairs salons, toasting one another with champagne. We lifted our glasses high. "To all our tomorrows together," he said with his warm eyes full of love and happiness. I repeated the same words before Chris handed me my "special" gift. I opened the small jewelry box to find a two-carat pear-shaped diamond suspended on a fine gold chain.

"Now, don't object and say you don't like jewelry," Chris said hastily when I just stared at the object that glittered and refracted rainbow colors. "Our mother never wore anything like this. I really wanted to buy you opera-length pearls like the ones she used to wear, because I think they are both

elegant and understated. But knowing you, I forgot the pearls and settled for this beautiful diamond. It's tear-shaped, Cathy—for all the tears I would have cried inside if you had never let me love you.”

The way he said that put tears in my eyes and swelled my heart with the guilty sadness of being us, the special joy of being us; the complications of being us sometimes were just too overwhelming. Silently I handed him my “special” gift—a fine star-sapphire ring to fit his forefinger. He laughed, saying it was ostentatious but beautiful.

No sooner were those words out of his mouth than Jory, Melodie, and Bart joined us. Jory smiled to see the glow in our eyes. Bart frowned. Melodie sank into a deep-cushioned chair and seemed to disappear in the depths. Cindy came running in with bells that she shook merrily, her pants and sweater bright red. Finally Joel slunk into the room to stand in a corner with his arms folded over his chest, casting his own pall, like a somber judge overseeing wicked and dangerous children.

It was Jory who first responded to Cindy's charm by raising his glass of champagne high and toasting. “Hail to the joys of Christmas Eve! May my mother and father always look at one another as they do this night, with love and tenderness, with compassion and understanding. May I find that kind of love in the eyes of my wife again ... soon.”

He was directly challenging Melodie and in front of all of us. Sadly, his timing was bad for this kind of confrontation. She drew herself into a tighter knot and refused to meet his eyes; instead, she leaned forward to stare more intensely into the fire. The hope in Jory's eyes faded. His shoulders sagged before he swiveled his chair so that he couldn't see her. He put down his champagne and fixed his eyes on the fire just as intensely as his wife, as if to read what symbolism she was seeing. In a distant dim corner, Joel smiled.

Cindy tried to force gaiety. Bart, by attrition, gave in to the corroding gloominess that Melodie emitted like a gray fog. Truly our little family get-together in a gloriously festive room was a flop. Bart refused even to look at Melodie now that she was so grossly out of shape.

Soon he was pacing the room restlessly, glancing at all the gifts under the “family” tree. His eyes accidentally found Melodie staring at him hopefully, and only too quickly he looked away, as if embarrassed by her too overt pleading. In a few minutes Melodie excused herself, saying in a low voice that she didn’t feel well.

“Anything I can do?” Chris asked immediately, jumping up to assist her up the stairs. She plodded along heavily, flat footed. “I’m all right,” she snapped near one newel post. “I don’t need your help—or anyone’s!”

“And a merry Christmas was had by all,” intoned Bart, much in the manner of Joel, who still stood in the shadows, watching, always watching.

The moment Melodie was gone from the room, Jory slumped forward in his chair before he stated, too, that he was tired and not feeling too well. His next prolonged bout of coughing revealed that. “I’ve got just the medicine you need,” said Chris, jumping up and heading for the stairs. “You can’t go to bed yet, Jory. Stay a while longer. We have to celebrate. Before I dose you with something that might not be appropriate, I need to listen to your lungs.”

Bart leaned casually against the mantel, watching this caring scene between Jory and Chris as if jealous of their relationship. Chris came to me. “Perhaps it is better if we retire now, so we can be up at dawn to eat breakfast, open our presents, and then have naps before we start getting ready for the ball tomorrow night.”

“Oh, glory hallelujah!” cried Cindy, whirling around the room in a small dance. “People, hordes of people, all dressed in their best—I can hardly wait for tomorrow night! Laughter, how I long to hear it. Jokes and small talk, how my ears crave that. I’m so tired of being serious, looking at grim faces that don’t know how to smile, hearing sad talk. I hope all those old fuddy-duds bring along their college-aged sons—or any son as long as he’s over twelve. I’m that desperate!”

Bart wasn’t the only one of us to throw her disapproving looks, which Cindy ignored. “I’m gonna dance all night, I’m

gonna dance all night,” she sang, whirling around by herself, pretending to have a partner, refusing to let her anticipations be diminished by anything anyone of us could say. “And then I’ll dance some more ...”

Despite themselves, Chris and Jory were charmed with her actions, her bright, happy song. Chris smiled before he said, “There should be at least twenty young men here tomorrow night. Just try to contain yourself. Now, since Jory looks so beat, let’s head for bed. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

It seemed a good idea.

All of a sudden, falling into a chair, Cindy sagged as limp as Melodie had, looking sad and near tears. “I wish Lance could have stayed. I’d rather have him than any other.”

Bart threw her a furious look. “That particular young man will never enter this house again.” He turned to me next. “We don’t need Melodie at the party,” he went on with determination and continued anger, “not when she’s acting so miserable and sick. Let her sulk in her room tomorrow morning so we can enjoy opening our gifts. I think afternoon naps are a good idea, so tomorrow night we’ll look fresh from plenty of rest and bright and happy for my party.”

Jory had gone on ahead, entering the elevator by himself, as if to prove his independence. The rest of us seemed reluctant to part. As I sat there hearing the Christmas carols that Bart had put on the stereo to play, I thought of all his newly acquired fastidious habits.

As a boy he’d loved being not just dirty, but filthy. Now he took several showers a day, kept himself immaculately groomed. He couldn’t retire until he’d checked over “his house” from top to bottom, seeing that the doors were locked, the windows, too, and that the new kitten Trevor had as his pet hadn’t stained a carpet. (Trevor had been fired a dozen times by Bart, but still he stayed on, and Bart didn’t insist that he go.)

Even as I watched, Bart got up to fluff the throw pillows, smoothed wrinkles out of downy sofa cushions, picked up magazines and arranged them in neat piles. All the things the

servants forgot to do, he did. Then he'd jump on Trevor in the morning and order the maids to do better—or out they'd go without severance pay. No wonder we couldn't keep servants. Only Trevor remained loyal, ignoring the rudeness of Bart, whom he looked at with pity, although Bart didn't know that.

All this was on my mind as I took note of Bart's growing enthusiasm for tomorrow night's party. I glanced toward the windows and saw the snow was still falling, and already two feet of snow were on the ground. "Bart ... the roads are going to be icy tomorrow night, perhaps closed, and many of your guests might not be able to make it here for the traditional Foxworth ball."

"Nonsense! I'll fly them in if they call to cancel. A helicopter could land on the lawn."

I sighed, for some reason made uneasy by the strangely malicious look of Joel, who chose that time to leave the room.

"Your mother is right, Bart," said Chris kindly, "so don't feel disappointed if only a few are able to show up. I had a devil of a time reaching here a few hours ago, and it's snowing harder now."

It was as if Chris hadn't said a word. Bart bade me good night, then strode toward the stairs. Shortly afterward, Chris, Cindy and I ascended the stairs.

While Chris went in to say a few words to Jory, I waited for Cindy to come from her bath. Another shower (at least two a day with shampoos) brought her fresh and bright from the bath, wearing the briefest little red nightie. "Momma, don't you lecture me again. I just can't take any more. When I first came to this house, I thought it like a fairy tale palace. Now I think of it as a gloomy fortress to keep us all prisoners. As soon as this ball is over, I'm leaving—and to hell with Bart! I love you and Daddy and Jory, but Melodie has turned into a boring pain in the neck and Bart will never change. He'll always hate me, so I'm going to stop even trying to be nice to him."

She slipped between the sheets, pulled the covers high, turned on her side away from me. "Good night, Momma.

Please turn out the light when you leave. Don't ask me to behave myself tomorrow night, for I intend to be the model of ladylike decorum. Wake me three hours before the ball begins."

"In other words, you don't even want to share Christmas morning with us?"

"Oh," she said indifferently, "I guess I can wake up long enough to open my gifts ... and watch the rest of you open yours. Then back to bed so I can be the belle of the ball tomorrow night."

"I love you, Cindy," I said as I switched off her lamp, and then bent to lift her hair and kiss the warm nape of her neck.

Flipping over, her slim young arms tightened around my neck as she sobbed, "Oh, Momma, you're the best! I promise to be good from now on. I won't let any boy so much as hold my hand. But let me escape this house and fly to New York and attend that New Year's party my best friend is throwing in a grand hotel ballroom."

Silently I nodded. "All right. If you want to enjoy yourself at the home of your friend, that's fine, but please do your best not to rile Bart tomorrow. You know his problem, and he has worked hard to overcome all those disturbing ideas planted in his head when he was very young. Help him, Cindy. Let him realize he has a family backing him up."

"I will, Momma, I promise I will."

I closed the door and was soon saying good night to Jory. He was unusually quiet. "It's going to be all right, darling. Just as soon as the baby is here, Melodie will see you again."

"Will she?" he asked bitterly. "I doubt it. She'll have the baby then to occupy her time and thoughts. She'll need me even less than she does now."

Half an hour later, Chris opened his arms to me, and eagerly I surrendered to the only love in my life that had lasted long enough to let me know I had a firm grip on happiness ... despite everything that could have ruined what we had cultivated and grown in the shade.

* * *

The morning light crept eerily into my room, bringing me out of sleep even before the alarm sounded. Quickly I was up and staring out the windows. The snow had stopped. Thank God for that; Bart would be pleased. I hurried back to the bed to kiss Chris awake. "Merry Christmas, darling Doctor Christopher Sheffield," I whispered in his ear.

"I'd rather you call me just darling," he mumbled as he came awake and looked around in a disoriented way.

Determined that this day was going to be successful, I tugged him out of bed, and soon we were both dressed and heading for the breakfast room.

For two days men and women had been coming to the house, repeating what had been done in the summer, only this time the entire downstairs had been transformed into a Christmas fantasy.

I watched with a certain indifference as the workers from the caterer Bart had hired finally finished making our home look like a wonderland. Cindy stood at my side watching all they did to turn the rooms into extraordinarily festive rooms, full of color, candles, wreaths, garlands, a towering Christmas tree that outdid our family tree by ten feet.

All she saw soon had Cindy convinced she didn't want to spend the better part of her day in bed. She forgot Lance and loneliness, for Christmas Day worked better magic than Christmas Eve.

"Look at that pie, Momma! It's huge. Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie," she sang, all of a sudden glowing with life. "Sorry I've acted ugly. I've been thinking, there'll be boys here tonight, and lots of handsome rich men. Oh, maybe this house can give more than misery after all."

"Of course it can," Bart said as he came in to stand between us, his eyes shining as he surveyed all that had been done. He seemed thrilled by his expectations. "You just be sure and wear a decent dress, and don't do anything outrageous." Then he was following the workmen and giving directions, laughing

often, even including Jory, Cindy, Melodie, and me, as if all were forgiven now that it was Christmas.

Day after day, like some dark, gloomy shadow, Joel had trailed behind Bart, his old voice cracking as he intoned words from the Bible. He said again this morning, fully dressed at six-thirty, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God ...”

“What the hell are you trying to say, old man?” shouted Bart.

Momentarily Joel’s watery eyes flared with anger, like a spark ready to ignite from a brisk, unexpected wind.

“You’re throwing away thousands of dollars hoping to impress someone—and no one will be impressed, for the others have money, too. Some live in finer homes. Foxworth Hall was the best of its kind in its day, but its day has come and gone.”

Bart turned on him with fury. “SHUT UP! You’re trying to spoil whatever happiness I reach for. Everything I do is a sin! You’re an old man and have done your share; now you try to spoil mine. This is my time to be young and fully enjoy my life. Keep your religious quotes to yourself!”

“Pride goeth before a fall.”

“Pride goeth before destruction,” corrected Bart, glaring at his great-uncle and giving me delicious satisfaction.

At last, at last, Bart was seeing Joel as a threat and not as the respectable father he’d sought all his life.

“Pride is the never-failing vice of fools,” extolled Joel, looking with disgust at all that had been done. “You have wasted money that would be better off given to charities.”

“Get out! Go to your room and polish your pride, Uncle! For obviously you have nothing in your heart but jealousy!”

Joel stumbled from the room, muttering to himself, “He’ll find out. Nothing is forgotten or forgiven here in the hills. I know. Who would know better than I? Bitter, bitter are the days of the Foxworths despite all their wealth.”

I stepped forward to hug Bart. “Don’t listen to him, Bart. You’ll have a wonderful party. Everyone will come now that the sun is shining and melting the snow. God is on your side this day, so rejoice and have the time of your life.”

The look in his eyes when I said that, oh, that grateful look. He stared at me, trying to say something—but the words couldn’t form. Finally he could do nothing but briefly embrace me; then he was striding away as if embarrassed. Such a wonderful-looking man, so wasted, I was thinking. There had to be someplace where Bart fitted.

Rooms that had been closed off since winter began were opened, the dustcovers removed and freshened so that no one would know we ever made an effort to conserve heat or money. Bathrooms and powder rooms were given special attention to make them both immaculate and attractive. Expensive soaps and lavish guest towels were put out. Every toiletry item that a guest might need was displayed. Special Christmas china and crystal were taken from the party cabinets, along with seasonal decorations too expensive for the caterer to supply.

We gathered around the Christmas tree about eleven o’clock. Bart was freshly shaven, splendidly well groomed, as was Jory. Only Melodie looked stale in her worn maternity dress that she wore day in and week out. Trying as always to ease tensions, I picked up the Christ child from the realistic manger and held the baby in my arms. “Bart, I haven’t seen this before. Did you buy this? If so, I’ve never seen a more beautifully carved set of Biblical figures.”

“It just arrived yesterday, and only today I unpacked it,” Bart answered. “I bought it in Italy last winter and had them ship it over.”

I gushed on, happy to see him so animated. “This Christ child looks like a real baby, when most don’t, and the virgin Mary is absolutely beautiful. Joseph looks so kind and understanding.”

“He’d have to be, wouldn’t he?” asked Jory, who was leaning forward to put more of his gifts under our family tree.

“After all, it must have seemed a bit incredible for him to believe a virgin could be impregnated by an invisible, abstract God.”

“You’re not supposed to question,” answered Bart, his eyes lovingly caressing the almost life-sized figures he’d purchased. “You just blindly accept what is written.”

“Then why did you argue with Joel?”

“Jory ... don’t push me too far. Joel is helping me find myself. He’s an old man who lived in sin when he was young and is redeeming himself in his old age through good deeds. I am a young man who wants to sin, feeling my traumatic childhood has already redeemed me.”

“I suggest a few orgies in some big city will have you running back here, as old and hypocritical acting as your great-uncle Joel,” answered Jory fearlessly. “I don’t like him. And you’d be wise to drive him out, Bart. Give him a few hundred thousand and say good-bye.”

Something yearning struggled in Bart’s eyes, as if he’d like to do exactly this. He leaned forward to stare into Jory’s eyes. “Why don’t you like him?”

“I can’t really say, Bart,” said Jory, who’d always forgiven easily. “He looks around your home like it should be his. I’ve caught him glaring at you when you aren’t paying attention. I don’t believe he’s your friend, only your enemy.”

Deeply distressed and disturbed-looking, Bart left the room, tossing back his cynical remark. “When have I ever had anything but enemies?”

In a few moments Bart was back, bearing his own heavy stack of gifts. It took him three trips from his office to put all he’d bought under the family tree.

Then it was Chris. Carefully arranging all his presents, and that took some doing. The gifts were stacked up three feet high and spreading to fill most of one corner.

Melodie crept dismally into the cheerful room like a dark shadow and settled down near the fireplace, close enough to feel the warmth, crumpled like a rag in her chair, still

everlastingly finding more fascination in the dancing flames than in anything else. She appeared sullen, moody, withdrawn, and determined to be there in physical appearance only as her spirit roamed free. Her abdomen was tremendously swollen, and she still had a few weeks to go. Her eyes were darkly shadowed.

Soon all of us were making an effort to be a loving family as Cindy played Santa Claus. Christmas, as I'd learned a long time ago, had its own gifts to give. Grudges could be forgotten, enemies forgiven as we all united around the tree, even Joel, and one by one shook our packages, made our guesses, then tore into our packages, laughing and drowning out the carols I'd put on the stereo. Soon glittering paper and shining ribbons littered the floor.

Cindy at last handed Joel the gift she had for him. He accepted it tentatively as he'd taken all our gifts, as if we were heathen fools who didn't know the real meaning of a Christmas that didn't need gifts. Then his eyes were bulging at the white nightshirt and the peaked sleeping cap Cindy must have really hunted to find. Definitely he would look like Scrooge wearing those things. Included was an ebony walking stick, which he hurled to the floor along with the nightshirt and cap. "Are you mocking me, girl?"

"I only wanted you to have warm sleeping garments, Uncle," she said demurely, her sparkling eyes downcast, "and the walking stick would hurry your steps."

"Away from you? Is that what you mean?" He stooped painfully to pick up the stick and brandished it wildly in the air. "Maybe I will keep this thing after all; great weapon in case I'm attacked one night when I stroll the gardens ... and long corridors."

Silent for a moment, not one of us could speak. Then Cindy laughed. "Uncle, I thought of that in advance. I knew one day you'd feel threatened."

He left the room then.

Only too soon all the gifts were unwrapped, and Jory was staring worriedly at the litter on the floor, then scanning all

around the room. “I didn’t forget you, Bart,” he said with concern. “Cindy and Dad helped me wrap it once, but then I undid the wrapping, touched up again, wrapped it myself the last time after Cindy helped me lift it in.” He kept looking through the rubble of discarded foil and ribbons. “Early this morning, before the rest of you were up, I came down here and I put it under the tree. Where the hell did it go, I wonder? It’s a huge box, wrapped in red foil, tied with silver ribbons—and by far the largest box under the tree.”

Bart didn’t say a word, as if he’d grown accustomed to disappointments and the lack of Jory’s gift was of no importance.

Of course I knew Jory had worked for months and months to finish the clipper ship that had ended up three feet in length and just as tall, with all its fragile riggings exactly right. He’d even sent for special copper fittings and a solid brass wheel for the helm. Desperately Jory looked around. “Has anyone seen the big box wrapped in red foil, with Bart’s name on the tag?” he asked.

Immediately I was on my feet and scrambling through the piles of boxes, papers, ribbons, tissues, with Chris soon joining me in the search. Cindy began her own search on the other side of the room. “Oh,” she cried out. “Here it is, behind this red sofa.” She carried it to Bart and put it on the floor near his feet, bowing in mocking obeisance. “For our lord, our master,” she said sweetly, backing away. “I think Jory’s a fool to give it to you after all the hard work he put into this thing, but maybe you’ll be appreciative, for once.”

Suddenly I noticed Joel had slipped back into the room to observe Bart. How strange his expression, how strange.

Bart dropped his sophistication like an unwanted garment and became childishly eager to open this particular gift. Already he was tearing into the package Jory had so beautifully and carefully wrapped. He glanced up at Jory, his smile warm, wide, and happy, his dark eyes lit with boyish anticipation. “Ten to one it’s that clipper ship you made, Jory. You really should keep that yourself ... but thanks, thanks a heap—” He paused, then sucked in his breath.

He stared down into the box, paling before he looked upward, his happiness vanished. Now his eyes were full of bitterness. "It's broken," he said in a dull tone. "Smashed to small pieces. There's nothing in this box but broken matchsticks and tangled rigging."

His voice cracked as he stood up and dropped the box to the floor. Violently he kicked it aside before he threw a hard look at Melodie, who hadn't said a word even when she opened her gifts, only thanked us with nods and weak smiles. "I should have known you would find the perfect way to repay me for sleeping with your wife."

Stunned silence rumbled louder than thunder. Melodie sat on, bleakly staring, seeming an empty shell, even as she mumbled on and on about how much she hated this house. Jory's eyes went starkly blank.

Had he guessed all along? All of Jory's color vanished before finally he could force his eyes to look at Melodie. "I don't believe you, Bart. You've always had a nasty, hateful way of kicking where it hurts most."

"I'm not lying," lashed out Bart, disregarding the pain he was inflicting on Jory, on me and Chris. "While you lay on your hospital bed, inside your cast, your wife and I shared one bed, and eagerly enough she spread her legs for me."

Chris jumped to his feet, his face angrier than I'd ever seen it. "Bart, how dare you say such things to your brother? Apologize to Jory and Melodie, immediately! How can you hurt him like this, when already he's hurt enough? Do you hear me? You tell him every word you just said is a lie! A damned lie!"

"It's not a lie," raged Bart. "If you never believe anything I say again, believe me when I say that Melodie was a very cooperative bed companion."

Cindy squealed, then jumped up to slap Melodie's stricken white face. "How dare you do that to Jory?" she screamed. "You know how much he loves you!"

Then Bart was laughing, hysterically laughing. Chris thundered, “*STOP THAT!* Face up to this situation, Bart—the loss of the clipper ship is not a good excuse for trying to destroy your brother’s marriage. Where is your honor, your integrity?”

Almost instantly Bart’s laughter faded. His eyes turned crystal hard and cold as they surveyed Chris from head to toe. “Don’t *you* talk to me about honor and integrity. Where was yours when it came to your sister? Where is it now when you continue to sleep with her? Don’t you realize yet that your relationship with her has warped me so that I don’t care about anything but seeing the two of you separated? I want my mother to finish out her life as a decent, respectable woman ... and it’s you who keeps her from that! *You, Christopher, you!*”

His face full of disgust and no remorse, Bart spun on his heel and left the room.

Left us all in the shambles of our Christmas joy.

Eager to do the same, Melodie rose awkwardly, stood trembling with her head bowed, before Cindy yelled, “Did you sleep with Bart? Did you? It isn’t fair for you to just say nothing when Jory’s heart is breaking.”

Melodie’s darkly shadowed eyes seemed to sink deeper into her skull even as they grew larger and larger, her pupils dilating as if with fear. “Why can’t you leave me alone?” she cried pitifully. “I’m not made of the same iron as the rest of you! I can’t take one tragedy after another. Jory lay stricken in the hospital, unable to ever walk or dance again, and Bart was here. I needed someone. He held me, comforted me. I closed my eyes and pretended he was Jory.”

Jory fell forward in his chair. I ran to hold him, only to find him gasping so rackingly he couldn’t even control his shaking hands. I held him in my arms as Chris tried to stop Melodie from running up the stairs. “Be careful!” he called. “You could fall and lose your baby!”

“I don’t care,” came back her pitiful wail before she disappeared from sight.

By this time Jory had gained enough control to wipe away his tears and find a weak smile. “Well, now I know,” he said in a cracked voice. “I guessed a long time ago that she and Bart had something going on, but I hoped it was only my suspicions working overtime. But I should have known better. Mel can’t live without a man beside her, especially in bed ... and I can hardly blame her, can I?”

Stricken to the bone, I began to pick up the wrappings that had been so carefully applied and so ruthlessly ripped off. Like life, and how carefully we tried to maintain our illusions when things were seldom what they had appeared to be.

Soon Jory excused himself, saying he needed to be alone.

“Who could have smashed that wonderful ship?” I whispered. “Cindy helped Jory wrap that gift the last time he touched up the paint, and I was there watching. The ship was carefully put in a special plastic foam shell to hold it upright. It shouldn’t have had one crack, one thing broken.”

“How can I ever explain what goes on in this house?” answered Chris in a throaty voice full of pain. He looked up to see Bart standing in the doorway, his long legs spread wide, his fists on his hips as he glared at me. In a louder tone Chris addressed Bart. “What’s done is done, and I’m sure it’s not Jory’s fault the clipper ship was broken. He meant well. All along he told us he was putting that ship together for your office mantel.”

“I’m sure Jory did mean well,” said Bart evenly, his control regained. “But there is my dear little adopted sister who hates me and no doubt wants to punish me for giving her boyfriend what he deserved. Next time it will be *her* I punish.”

“Maybe Jory dropped the box,” said Joel in a saintly way. I stared at that old man with his glittering weak eyes and waited my opportunity to say what I had to when no one else was around.

“No,” denied Bart. “It had to be Cindy. I have to admit my brother has always given me fair treatment, even when I didn’t deserve it.”

And all the while he said this, I was staring at Joel with his smirky face, his glittery, satisfied eyes.

Just before retiring, I had my chance. We were in a back second-floor hallway. “Joel, Cindy wouldn’t have destroyed all Jory’s work and ruined Bart’s gift. But you like to drive wedges between members of our family. I believe it was *you* who smashed the ship, then rewrapped it.”

He said nothing, only put more hatred in his unrelenting stare.

“Why did you come back, Joel?” I shouted. “You claim you hated your father and were happy in your Italian monastery. Why didn’t you stay there? Certainly in all those years you made a few friends. You must have known you wouldn’t find any here. My mother told me you always hated this house. Now you walk through it as if you owned it.”

Still he said nothing.

I followed him into his room and looked around for the first time. Biblical illustrations on his walls. Quotes from the Bible put in cheap frames.

He moved so that he was behind me. I felt his wheezy warm breath on my neck, smelling old and faintly sick. I sensed when he moved his arms he meant to choke me. Startled, I whirled about to find him inches away.

How silently and quickly he could move. “My father’s mother was named Corrine,” he said in the sweetest possible voice, enough to make me doubt my reasoning. “My sister had the same name, given to her as a form of punishment, a constant reminder to my father of his unfaithful mother, proving to him again and again that no beautiful woman could be trusted—how right he was.”

He was an old man, in his eighties, yet I slapped him, slapped him hard. He staggered backward, then lost his balance and fell to the floor.

“You’ll regret that slap, Catherine,” he cried with more anger than he’d as yet shown. “Just as much as Corrine

regretted all her sins. You, too, will live long enough to regret yours!”

I fled his room, fearing what he said was only too true.

The Traditional Foxworth Ball



On Christmas night our dinner was served around five in order to give the family plenty of time to prepare for the big event that would begin at nine-thirty. Bart wore a glow of happiness. His warm hand reached to cover mine, sending a shock of pleasure through me, for so seldom did he show affection by touching. “If I can’t have all my wealth right away, then I should have at least all the prestige due the owner of this house.”

I smiled and covered the hand that held mine with my free hand. “Yes, I understand, and we’ll do everything possible to see that your party is a huge success.”

Joel sat nearby, sending out invisible vibes. He was smiling cynically. “Lord help those fools who deceive themselves,” he muttered half under his breath. Bart closed his ears and pretended not to hear, but I was worried. Someone had broken Jory’s clipper ship, which had been meant as a reconciliation gift to Bart. It had to be Joel who had heartlessly ruined that ship that Jory had slaved over for months and months. What else would he do?

My eyes met Joel’s. I couldn’t quite put my finger on how Joel looked at this moment, except sanctimonious. He daintily picked at his food, cutting his fruitcake into tiny morsels that he picked up with his long fingers. These he chewed with intense concentration, using only his front teeth, much as a rabbit ate a carrot.

“I’m going to bed now,” announced Joel. “I don’t approve of tonight’s party, Bart, you might as well know that. Remember what happened at your birthday party, and you should have known better. Again I say it’s a waste of good money entertaining people you don’t know well enough. I also disapprove of people who drink, who cavort and act wild on a

day meant for worship. This day belongs to the Lord and his son. We should all go down on our knees and stay there from dawn until midnight, like we did in my monastery, as we gave silent thanks for just being alive.”

Since not one of us said a word, Joel went on. “I know drunken men and women will eventually try to fornicate with someone other than whom they came with. I remember your birthday party and what went on. Sinful modern life makes me realize how pure the world was when I was young. Nothing is the same as it used to be. People knew how to act decently in public then, no matter what they did behind closed doors. Now nobody cares who sees them do what. Women didn’t bare their bosoms when I was a boy, nor pull up their skirts for every man who wanted them.”

He riveted his cold blue eyes on me, and then on Cindy. “Those who sin, and sin again, always pay dearly, as some here should already know.” Next he was staring at Jory meaningfully.

“The old son of a bitch,” murmured Cindy, watching him slip out of the room with the same stealth as he had entered.

“Cindy, don’t you ever let me hear you say anything like that again!” fired Bart. “Nobody uses obscenities under *my* roof.”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” flared Cindy. “Just the other day I overheard you calling Joel the same thing. And what’s more, Bart Foxworth, I’ll call a spade a spade—even under your roof!”

“Go to your room and stay there!” bellowed Bart.

“Everybody continue having fun,” said Jory, guiding his chair toward the elevator. “As for me, damned if I don’t want to turn in my Christian membership.”

“You’ve never been a Christian to begin with,” called Bart. “Nobody here goes to church. But there will come a day in the near future when *everyone* here will attend church.”

Chris stood up and precisely put down his napkin, fixing Bart and Cindy with commanding eyes. “I’ve had enough of

this childish quibbling. I'm surprised that all of you who think you are adults can revert to children in a wink of the eye."

But Jory was not to be stopped this time. He wheeled his chair about abruptly, rage flaming his usually controlled face, flaring wide his nostrils. "Dad, I'm sorry, but I've got to have my say." He turned toward Bart, who had risen to his feet. "Now, you listen to me, *little* brother." His strong hands released the joystick to clench into fists. "I believe in God ... but I don't believe in religion. Religion is used to manipulate and punish. Used in a thousand ways for profit, for even in the church, money is still the *real* God."

"Bart," I implored, so afraid he'd harm Jory again, "it's time we all headed upstairs."

Bart had paled. "No wonder you sit there in that chair if you believe what you just said. You are being punished by God, just as Joel says."

"Joel," sneered Jory. "Who the hell cares what an old fool like Joel says? I'm punished because some stupid idiot wet the sand! God didn't pour down rain to do that. A garden hose took God's place, and that's why I'm in this chair and not where I belong. As soon as possible, I'm leaving here, Bart! I'm forgetting you're my brother, whom I've always tried to love and help. I'm not going to try again."

"Hooray for you, Jory!" cried Cindy, jumping to her feet and applauding.

"STOP!" I yelled, seizing Cindy by the arm while Chris grabbed her other arm and we dragged her away from Bart. Still she twisted and fought to free herself. "You damned freaky hypocrite!" she yelled back at Bart. "I heard at your birthday party that you do your share of using the local brothel ..."

Thank God the elevator door closed behind us and we were on our way up before Bart could reach Cindy.

"Learn to keep your mouth shut," said Jory. "You only make him worse, Cindy—and I regret what I just said. Did you see his face? I don't think he's pretending about religion. He's

deadly serious. He seems to truly believe. If Joel is a hypocrite, Bart is not.”

Chris fixed his strong regard on both before he stepped out of the elevator. “Jory, Cindy, you listen to me carefully. I want you both to do your best tonight to see that Bart’s party is successful. Forget your enmity, at least for one night. He was a troubled little boy, and he has grown into a more troubled man. He needs help, and badly. Not from more sessions with psychiatrists, but help from those who love him most—and despite everything, I know you both love him. Just as his mother and I love him and care what happens to him. As for Melodie, I visited her before dinner, and she’s not feeling well enough to attend the party. She wouldn’t let me examine her, though I tried to insist, and she says she feels too big, too clumsy and won’t be coming out where guests can stare at her enormous size. I think that might be the best solution for her. But if you would, look in on her and say a few kind words of encouragement, for that poor girl is coming apart from worry ...”

Jory steered his chair down the hall, turning directly into his room, ignoring Melodie’s closed door. I sighed, as did Chris.

Dutifully Cindy tried to say a few consoling words to Melodie outside of her locked door before she came prancing back to join Chris and I. “I’m not going to let Melodie spoil my fun. I think she’s acting like a damned selfish fool. As for me, I intend to have the time of my life tonight,” said Cindy in parting. “I don’t give a damn about Bart and his party except what pleasure it gives me.”

“I’m concerned about Cindy,” said Chris when we were lying on our wide bed, trying to catch a short nap. “I have the feeling Cindy is not stingy with her favors.”

“Chris, don’t you dare say that! Just because we caught her with that boy Lance doesn’t mean she is loose. She’s looking, looking all the time at each young man she meets, hoping he’s the one. If one says he loves her, she believes because she needs to believe. Don’t you realize Bart has stolen her confidence? She’s afraid she is exactly what Bart thinks she is.

She's torn between being as wicked as he thinks and being as nice as we want her to be. Cindy's a beautiful young woman ... and Bart treats her like filth."

It had been a long day for Chris. He closed his eyes and turned on his side to embrace me. "Eventually Bart will straighten out," he murmured. "For the first time I'm seeing in his eyes the need to find a compromise. He has the desperate desire to find someone or something to believe in. Someday he will find what he needs, and when he does, he'll be set free to be the fine man he is under that hateful exterior."

Sleep and dream of impossible things, like harmony in the family, like brothers and a sister who found love for each other. Dream on, dreamer ...

I heard the grandfather clock down the hall chiming the hour of seven when we were supposed to rise from our naps to bathe and dress. I shook Chris awake and told him to hurry and dress. He stretched, yawned, lazily got up to shower while I took a quick tub bath; then he was shaving before donning his custom-tailored tux. Chris stared at himself in a pier glass. "Cathy, am I gaining weight?" he asked with concern.

"No, darling. You look terrific—as Cindy would say."

"What do *you* say?"

"You grow more handsome with each passing year." I stepped closer to encircle his waist with my arms as my cheek rested against his back. "I love you more each year ... and even when you are as old as Joel, I will see you as you are now ... standing twelve feet tall, in your shining suit of armor, soon to ride your white unicorn. In your hand you'll carry a twelve-foot spear with a green dragon's head perched upon its point."

In the mirror I saw his reflection; tears had come to glisten in his eyes. "After all this time, you remember," he whispered hoarsely. "After all these many years ..."

"As if I could forget ..."

"But it's been so long ago."

“And today the moon shone at noon,” I murmured, moving to face him and slide my arms up around his neck, “and a blizzard blew in your unicorn ... and I saw to my own delight that you’ve always had my respect. You didn’t need to earn it.”

Those two tears trickled slowly down his cheeks. I kissed them away. “So you forgive me, Catherine? Say now, while we have the chance, that you forgive me for putting you through so much hell. For Bart would have turned out differently if I had stayed only his uncle and found another wife.”

I was careful not to smudge his jacket with my makeup as I rested my cheek over his heart, which I heard thumpity-thump-thumping. Just as I’d heard it the first time our love changed and became more than it should have been. “If I blink my eyes just once, I’m twelve years old again, and you’re fourteen. I can see you as you were then ... but I can’t see me. Chris, why can’t I see me?”

His crooked smile was bittersweet. “Because I’ve stolen all the memories of what you were and stored them in my heart. But you haven’t said you forgive me.”

“Would I be here, where I am, if I didn’t want to be?”

“I hope and pray not,” and I was held, held so tightly in his arms my ribs ached.

Outside the snow began to fall again. Inside my Christopher Doll had turned back the clock, and if there was no magic for Melodie in this house, and Lance’s departure had stolen romance from Cindy, there was more than enough magic for me when Chris was there to cast his spell.

* * *

At nine-thirty we sat, all ready to stand when Trevor hurried to open the door. He stood anxiously looking at his watch, glancing at us with great pride. Bart, Chris, Jory, and myself in our elegant expensive formal clothes faced the front windows with their splendid draperies. The towering Christmas tree in the foyer sparkled with a thousand tiny white lights. It had taken five people hours to decorate that tree.

As I sat there like some middle-aged Cinderella who had already found her prince and married him and was caught in the spell of the happy-ever-after, which wasn't all that perfect, something pulled my eyes upward. In the shadows of the rotunda where two knights in full armor stood on pedestals opposite each other, I saw a dark shadow move. Even in the shade of that smaller closer knight, I thought I knew who it was. Joel, who was supposed to be in bed asleep, or on his knees praying for all our sinning un-Christian souls.

"Bart," I whispered to my second son, who moved to stand beside my chair, "wasn't this supposed to be the special party to reintroduce Joel to all his old friends?"

"Yes," he whispered back, putting his arm over my shoulders. "But that was just my excuse. I knew he wouldn't want to come. The truth of the matter is, few of his old friends are still alive, although many of my grandmother's school chums are still around." His strong fingers bit down into my shoulder's tender flesh. "You look lovely—like an angel."

Was that a compliment, or a suggestion?

He smiled at me cynically, then snatched his arm away as if it had betrayed him.

I laughed nervously. "Oh, someday when I'm as old as Joel I suppose I'll take on a dowager's hump and shuffle my feet along, and when my sinning is over, I'll put on the halo I lost way back when I was in puberty ..."

Both Bart and Chris scowled to hear me talk that way, but I felt good when I saw the shadow of Joel slink away.

Liveried servants readied the buffet tables as Bart got up to pace the floor, looking exceptionally handsome in his black tux with the pleated formal shirt.

I reached for Jory's hand, squeezed it. "You're looking just as handsome as Bart," I whispered.

"Mom, have you given him a compliment? He looks great, really great, the very man his father must have been."

Blushing, I felt ashamed. "No, I haven't said a word because he seems so devilishly pleased with himself that I

think he'd burst with any praise he might hear from me."

"Mom, you're wrong. Go on, say to him what you say to me. You may think I need it more, but I think he does."

Standing, I strode over to where Bart was peering out onto the drive, which curved gradually downward. "Can't see a single headlight," he gruffly complained. "It's not snowing now. The roads have been cleared. Ours is sprinkled over with gravel; where the hell are they?"

"I've never seen you look more handsome than you do tonight, Bart."

He turned to stare into my eyes, then he glanced at Jory. "More handsome than Jory?"

"Equally as handsome."

Scowling, he turned back to the window. Out there he saw something to take his mind off of himself.

"Hey—look, here they come!"

I watched the string of headlights in the distance, heading up the hill. "Get ready, everybody," called Bart, giving Trevor an excited gesture to be ready to swing wide the doors.

Chris strolled beside Jory's chair, which he guided expertly, as I caught hold of Bart's arm and went to form a receiving line. Trevor hurried up to give us all a bright smile.

"I just love parties, I always have, I always will. Makes the heart beat faster. Makes old bones feel young again. I can tell it's going to be a jolly smashing one tonight."

Two or three times Trevor said that—with less conviction each time, as still not one pair of those headlights climbed high enough to reach our drive. No one rang our bell, banged our door knocker.

The musicians were in position under the rotunda, on a dais that had been constructed especially for them, centered directly between the curving dual stairways. They tuned their instruments over and over again as my feet in their high-heeled fancy slippers began to ache. I sat again on an elegant chair and wiggled my shoes off under the folds of my gown,

which was growing heavier and more uncomfortable by the minute. Eventually Chris sat beside me, and Bart took the righthand chair, all of us very silent, almost holding our breaths. Jory had his own special chair that could buzz him around tirelessly. From window to window he drove, looking out and reporting.

I knew that Cindy was upstairs, all dressed and ready, waiting to be “fashionably” late and impress everyone when finally she drifted down the stairs. She had to be growing very impatient.

“They must be coming soon—” Jory said when the hour reached ten-thirty. “There’s lots of banked snow on the side roads to confuse them ...”

Bart’s lips were tight and grim, his eyes stony cold.

No one said anything. I was afraid to even speculate on why no one had arrived. Trevor looked very anxious when he thought we weren’t noticing.

To give myself something pleasant to think about, I fixed my eyes on the buffet tables, which reminded me so much of that first ball I’d seen in the original Foxworth Hall.

Very much like what I was staring at.

Red linen tablecloths, silver dishes and bowls. A fountain spraying champagne. Huge, gleaming, chafing dishes emitting delicious odors. Heaps and heaps of food on fancy tiered plates of crystal, porcelain, gold, and silver. At last I could resist no longer and got up to taste of this and that while Bart frowned and complained I was ruining the beautiful designs. I wrinkled my nose his way and handed Chris a plate full of everything I knew he’d like best. Soon Jory was helping himself.

Red beeswax bayberry candles burned lower and lower. Towering gelatin masterpieces began to sag. Melted cheeses began to toughen, and the heating sauces thickened. Crepe batter waited to be poured on turned over thin pans, while chefs eyed each other curiously. I had to look away from all that was going bad.

Fires cheered all our main rooms, making them cozy, exceptionally lovely. Extra servants grew restless and anxious-looking as they fidgeted and began to mill about, whispering amongst themselves, not knowing what to do.

Down the stairs drifted Cindy in a crimson hooped-skirted gown, so elaborate it put my delicately beaded gown to shame. Hers had a tight bodice, with a flounce of fluted ruffles to cover a little of her upper arms, displaying her shoulders to advantage and creating a magnificent frame for her creamy, swelling breasts. The red gown was cut very low. The skirt was a masterpiece of ruffles, caught with white silk flowers rain-dropped with iridescent crystals. A few of these white silk blossoms were tucked in her upswept hair, duplicating something Scarlett O'Hara might have liked.

"Where's everybody?" she asked, looking around, her radiant expression fading. "I waited and waited to hear the music playing, then sort of dozed off, thinking when I woke that I was missing out on all the fun."

She paused and glanced around before a look of dismay flooded her expression. "Don't tell me nobody's going to come! I just can't stand another disappointment!" Dramatically she threw her hands about.

"No one has as yet arrived, Miss," said Trevor tactfully. "They must have lost their way, and I must say you look a dream of loveliness, as does your mother."

"Thank you," she said, floating his way and brushing his cheek with a daughterly kiss. "You look very distinguished yourself." She dashed past Bart's look of astonishment and ran to the piano. "Please, may I?" she asked a young, good-looking musician who seemed delighted to have something happening, at last.

Cindy sat down beside him, put her hands on the keys, threw back her head and began to sing: "Oh, holy night, Oh, night when stars are shining."

I stared, as did all of us, at the girl we thought we knew so well. It wasn't an easy song to sing, but she did it so well, with

so much emotion even Bart stopped pacing the floor to turn and stare at her in amazement.

Tears were in my eyes. Oh, Cindy, how could you keep that voice a secret for so long? Her piano playing was only adequate, but that voice, the feeling she put into her phrasing. All the musicians then joined in to drown out her piano playing, if not her voice.

I sat, stunned, hardly believing that my Cindy could sing so beautifully. When she'd finished, we all applauded enthusiastically. As Jory called out, "Sensational! Fantastic! Absolutely wonderful, Cindy! You sneak—you never told us you continued with your voice lessons."

"I haven't. It's just me expressing the way I feel."

She cast her eyes down, then took a sly, hooded look at Bart's astonished expression, which showed not only his surprise but some pleasure as well. For the first time he had found something to admire about Cindy. Her small smile of satisfaction fled quickly by, kind of a sad smile, as if she wished Bart could like her for other reasons as well.

"I love Christmas carols and religious songs, they do something for me. Once in school I sang 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,' and the teacher said I had the kind of emotional feeling to make a great singer. But I still want most to be an actress."

Laughing and happy again, she asked us to join in and we'd make this a real party, even if no one showed up. She began to bang out a tune resembling "Joy to the World." Then "Jingle Bells."

This time Bart was not moved.

He strode again to the windows to stare out, his back straight. "They can't ignore my invitations, not when they responded," he mumbled to himself.

I couldn't understand how his business friends could dare to offend him when he had to be their most important client, and everyone loved a party, especially the kind of party they had to know would be sensational.

Somehow or other, Bart was accomplishing miracles with that five hundred thousand a year, making it grow in ways that Chris would have found too risky. Bart risked everything ... calculated gambles that paid off handsomely. Only then did I realize that perhaps my mother had meant it to be this way. If she had given Bart all the fortune in one grand huge sum, he wouldn't have worked as hard to build his own fortune, which would, if he kept it up, far exceed what Malcolm had left him. And in this way Bart would find his own worth.

Yet what did money matter when he was so disappointed he couldn't eat a thing that was lavishly displayed? However, disillusionment drove him to the liquor, and in a short while he'd managed to swallow half a dozen strong drinks as he paced the floors, growing angrier by the second.

I could hardly bear to watch his disappointment, and soon, despite myself, tears were silently wetting my face.

Chris whispered, "We can't go to bed and leave him here alone. Cathy, he's suffering. Look at him pacing back and forth. With every step he takes his anger grows. Somebody is going to pay for this slight."

Eleven-thirty came and went.

By this time Cindy was the only one having a good time. The musicians and servants seemed to adore her. Eagerly they played and she sang. When she wasn't singing, she was dancing with every man there, even Trevor and other male servants. She gestured to the maids, inviting them to dance, and happily they joined in the festivity she created around her as they took turns to see that she, at least, was entertained.

"Let's all eat, drink, and be merry!" Cindy cried, smiling at Bart. "It's not the end of the world, brother Bart. What do you care? We're too rich to be well liked. We're also too rich to feel sorry for ourselves. And look, we have at least twenty guests ... let's dance, drink, eat, have a ball!"

Bart stopped pacing to stare at her. Cindy held high her glass of champagne. "My toast to you, brother Bart. For every ugly thing you've said to me, I give you back blessings of good will, good health, long life, and much love." She touched

his highball glass with her champagne glass and then sipped, smiling into his eyes charmingly before she offered another toast. “I think you look absolutely terrific, and the girls who don’t show up tonight are missing the chance of their lifetimes. So here it is, another toast to the most eligible bachelor in the world. I wish you joy, I wish you happiness, I wish you love. I would wish you success, but you don’t need that.”

He couldn’t move his eyes away. “Why don’t I need success?” he asked in a low tone.

“Because what more could you want? You have success when you have millions, and soon enough you’ll have more money than you know what to do with.”

Bart’s dark head bowed. “I don’t feel successful. Not when no one will even come to my party.” His voice cracked as he turned his back.

I got up to go to him. “Will you dance with me, Bart?”

“No!” he snapped, hurrying to a distant window where he could stand and stare again.

Cindy had a wonderful time with the musicians and the men and women who’d come to serve Bart’s guests. However, I was deeply downcast, feeling sorry for Bart, who had counted so much on this. Out of sympathy for him, all of us but Cindy and the hired help moved into the front parlor, and there we sat in our fabulous expensive clothes and waited for guests who obviously had accepted, only to trick Bart later on—and in this way tell us what they thought of the Fox-worths on the hill.

The grandfather clock began to toll the hour of twelve. Bart left the windows and fell upon the sofa before the guttering log fire. “I should have known it would turn out this way.” He glanced bitterly at Jory. “Perhaps they came to my birthday party only to see you dance, and now, when you can’t—to hell with me! They’ve snubbed me—and they’re going to pay for it,” he said in a hard, cold voice, louder and stronger than Joel’s but with the same kind of zealot’s fury. “Before I’m through, there won’t be a house in a twenty-mile radius that

doesn't belong to me. I'll ruin them. All of them. With the power of the Foxworth trust behind me I can borrow millions, and then I'll buy out the banks and demand they pay off their mortgages. I'll buy out the village stores, close them down. I'll hire other attorneys, fire the ones I have now and see that they're disbarred. I'll find new stockbrokers, hire new real estate agents, see that real estate property values are undermined, and when they sell cheap, I'll buy. By the time I'm through, there won't be one old aristocratic Virginia family left this side of Charlottesville! And not one of my business colleagues will be left with anything but debts to pay off!"

"Then will you feel satisfied?" asked Chris.

"NO!" flared Bart, his eyes hard, glaring. "I won't be satisfied until justice has ruled! I have done nothing to deserve this night! Nothing but try to give them what our ancestors did—and they have rejected me! They'll pay, and pay, and then pay some more."

He sounded like me! To hear my very own words coming from the mouth of the child I'd carried when I'd said them made all my blood drain into my feet. Shivering, I tried to appear normal. "I'm sorry, Bart. But it wasn't a total loss, was it? We're all together under one roof, a united family for once. And Cindy's music and singing made this a festive occasion after all."

He wasn't listening.

He was staring at all the food that had yet to be eaten. All the champagne with the bubbles gone flat. All the wine and liquor that could have loosened many a tongue and given him information he wanted to use. He glared at the maids in their pretty black and white uniforms, drunken and staggering around, some still dancing as the music played on and on. He glowered at the few waiters who still held trays of drinks gone warm. Some stood and looked at him and waited for his signal to say the night was over. The impressive centerpiece of an ice crystal manger, with the three shepherds, the wise men and all the animals, had melted into a puddle and spilled over to darken the red cloth.

“How lucky you were when you danced in *The Nutcracker*, Jory,” said Bart as he headed fast for the stairs. “You were the ugly nutcracker that turned into the handsome prince. You dominated every male role—and won the prettiest ballerina every time. In *Cinderella*, in *Romeo and Juliet*. In *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*—every time but the last time. And it’s the last time that counts, isn’t it?”

How cruel! How very cruel! I watched Jory wince, and for once he allowed his pain to show, making my heart ache for him.

“Merry Christmas,” Bart called as he disappeared up the stairs. “We’ll never again celebrate this holiday, or any other in this house as long as I run it. Joel was right. He warned me not to try and conform and be like others. He said I shouldn’t try to make people like or respect me. From now on, I’ll be like Malcolm. I’ll gain respect by inflicting my will on others, with fists of iron, and with ruthless determination. All who have alienated me tonight will feel my might.”

I turned to Chris when he was out of sight. “He sounds crazy!”

“No, darling, he’s not crazy—he’s just Bart, young and vulnerable again and very, very hurt. He used to break his bones when he was a child to punish himself because he failed socially and in school. Now he’s going to break the lives of others. Isn’t it a pity, Cathy, that nothing works out for him?”

I stood at the newel post looking upward to where an old man hid in the shadows, seeming to shake from his silent laughter.

“Chris, you go on up, and I’ll follow in a few seconds.” Chris wanted to know what I was planning, so I lied and said I was going to have a few words with our housekeeper about cleaning up the mess. But I had something far different in mind.

As soon as everyone was out of sight, I ducked into Bart’s huge office, closed the door and was soon rifling through his desk to find the R.S.V.P. cards that had dutifully arrived weeks ago.

They must have been fingered many a time from the ink smudges on the envelopes. Two hundred and fifty cards had accepted. My teeth bit down on my lower lip. Not one rejection, not even one. People didn't do things like this, even to someone they disliked. If they hadn't wanted to come, they would have tossed the invitations into the trash along with the return card, or sent back the card declining.

Carefully I replaced the cards and then headed up the back stairs to Joel's room.

Without even a preliminary knock I opened his door to find him sitting on the edge of his narrow bed, doubled over in what appeared to be a terrible stomach cramp, or that hateful silent laughter. He was in quiet convulsion, quivering, jerking, hugging himself with skinny arms.

Quietly I waited until his hysteria was over, and only then did he see the long shadow I cast. Gasping, his mouth sunken because his teeth were in a cup by the bed, he stared up at me. "Why are you here, niece?" he asked in that whiny but raspy voice, his thin hair ruffled into devil horns that stood straight up.

"Downstairs, a while ago, I looked up and saw you in the rotunda shadows, laughing. Why were you laughing, Joel? You must have seen that Bart was suffering."

"I don't know," he mumbled, half turning to replace the teeth in his mouth. When he had them in, he ran a hand over his spikey hair, smoothing it down. Only his cowlick refused to behave. Now he could meet my eyes. "Your daughter made so much racket down there I couldn't sleep. I guess the sight of all of you in your fancy clothes waiting for guests that didn't come tickled my sense of humor."

"You have a very cruel sense of humor, Joel. I thought you cared for Bart."

"I do love that boy."

"Do you?" I asked sharply. "I don't think so, or else you would have sympathized." I glanced around his sparsely

furnished room, thinking back. “Weren’t you the one who mailed off the party invitations?”

“I don’t remember,” he said calmly. “Time doesn’t mean much to an old man like me when it’s growing so short. What happened years ago seems clearer than what happened a month ago.”

“My memory is much better than yours, Joel.”

I sat down in the one chair he had in his room. “Bart had an important appointment, and, as I recall, he turned over that stack of invitations to you. Did you mail them, Joel?”

“Of course I mailed them!” he snapped angrily.

“But you just said you couldn’t remember.”

“I remember *that* day. It took so long, dropping them in the slot one by one.”

All the time I’d closely watched his eyes. “You’re lying, Joel,” I said, taking a wild shot in the dark. “You didn’t mail those invitations. You brought them up here, and in the privacy of this room, you opened each one, filled in the blank places for “Yes, we will be happy to attend,” and then mailed those in the provided envelope back to Bart. You see, I found them in Bart’s office. I never saw such a strange assortment of crooked handwriting, all in various shades of blue, violet, green, black, and brown ink. Joel, you changed pens to make it seem those cards were signed by different guests, when it was you who signed them all!”

Slowly Joel stood. He gathered about him the handwoven invisible brown habit of a saintly monk, thrusting his gnarled hands up those imaginary sleeves. “I think you have lost your mind, woman,” he said coldly. “If you wish, go to your son and tell him your barbaric suspicions, and see if he believes you.”

Jumping up, I headed for the door. “I intend to do just that!” I slammed the door hard behind me and hurried off.

In his study Bart was seated behind his desk, now wearing pajamas covered by a black woolen robe piped in red. Drunkenly he was tossing the R.S.V.P. cards one by one into

the roaring fire. I saw to my dismay the last of the pile go up in flames as I watched Bart pour another drink.

“What do you want?” he asked in a slurred way, narrowing his eyes and seeming surprised to see me.

“Bart, I’ve got to say this, and you have to listen. I don’t think Joel mailed your invitations, and that is why your guests didn’t show up.”

He tried to focus his eyes and his intellect, which must have reeled under the influences of all he’d drunk. “Of course he did. Joel always does as I order.” He leaned back in his swivel chair with its back that lowered automatically from the pressure he applied and closed his eyes. “Tired now. Go away. Don’t stand and stare at me with eyes of pity. And they did accept ... didn’t I just burn their replies?”

“Bart, listen to me. Don’t fall asleep before I finish. Didn’t you notice now strangely they were signed? All the different colored ink? The crooked, awkward handwriting? Joel did not mail your invitations, but instead took them to his room, opened them, extracted the R.S.V.P. cards and envelopes, and since you had put stamps on all of them, all he had to do was drive to the post office and mail them back to you a few each day.”

His closed eyes slotted. “Mother, I think you should go to bed. My great-uncle is the best friend I’ve ever had. He’d never do anything to hurt me.”

“Bart, please. Don’t put too much faith in Joel.”

“GET OUT!” he roared. “It’s your fault they didn’t come! Yours and that man you sleep with!”

I stumbled as I turned away, feeling defeated and so afraid this could very well be true—and Joel was just what Bart and Chris believed him to be, a harmless old man who wanted to live out his days in this house, near the one person who respected and loved him.

Unto Us Is Born ...



Christmas Day was over. I was in bed curled up beside Chris, who could always fall easily into deep sleep, leaving me to fret and stew and flip and turn. Behind me the great one-eyed swan kept its ruby eye alert, causing me to look around often at what it could be seeing. I heard the deep, mellow tones of the grandfather clock at the end of our hall strike three o'clock. A few minutes ago I'd gotten up to watch Bart's red car speed down the drive, heading toward the local tavern where no doubt he'd drown his sorrows in additional liquor and end up in some whore's bed. More than once he'd come home reeking of liquor and cheap perfume.

Hour after hour passed as I waited for Bart to come home. I pictured all sorts of calamities. On a night like this the drunks were out, deadlier than arsenic.

Why lie here doing nothing? I slipped out of the bed, arranged the covers neatly over Chris's sleeping bulk, kissed his cheek, then arranged his heavy arms around a pillow that I presumed he'd think was me, and he did from the way he snuggled it close. It was my intention to wait for Bart in his room.

It was almost five on a cold, blustery, winter morning before I heard his car approaching. I was huddled in a deep pile robe of red-rose, curled up on one of his white sofas with his black and red pillows behind my back.

I dozed, then heard him climbing the stairs, heard him moving drunkenly from room to room, bumping into furniture as he had when he was a child. He was dedicated to checking each room to see if it had been neatly tidied before the servants retired. And to my dismay, from the length of time it was taking him to appear in his own rooms, he was doing that now. No newspapers could be left in sight. No magazines not

neatly stacked in their respective piles. No articles of clothing left on the floor, or coats on doorknobs or draped on chair backs.

Minutes later Bart was in his room, flicking the switch to light the lamps. He swayed to and fro before he stared at me sitting in the dimness of his room, where I'd started a fire that crackled cheerfully in the darkness. Shadows danced on the white walls, turning them orange and rosy, the black leather of another wall catching red highlights, creating a kind of fake inferno.

“Mother, what the hell is going on? Didn't I tell you to stay out of my wing?” Yet, in his drunken state, he looked glad to see me.

He wove his way uncertainly to a chair, took careful aim and fell down, closing his darkly shadowed eyes. I got up to massage the back of his neck while he drooped his head forward and held it as if it pained him dreadfully. His hands cupped his face as my hands took away the pain. Then he sighed, leaned back, and stared fuzzily up into my eyes.” I should know better than to drink,” he murmured in a slurred way, sighing as I stepped back and sat before him. “It always makes me do crazy things, and then I feel sick. Stupid to keep it up when liquor has never done anything for me but add to my problems. Mother, what's wrong with me? I can't even drink myself into a forgetful stupor. I'm always too sensitive. I overheard Jory tell you one day he was building that wonderful clipper ship to give to me, and I was secretly thrilled. No one has ever spent months and months making me a gift—and then it's broken. He did such a great job, taking so many pains to see that everything was exactly right. Now all that work is in the trash pile.”

He sounded childlike, vulnerable, easy to reach and I was going to try, try to give him every ounce of love I had. Not mean when he was drunk, not silly but loveable, touching in his humanity. “Darling, Jory will gladly make you another,” I volunteered, not sure he would be glad to do all that tedious work a second time.

“No, Mother, I don’t want it now. Something would happen to that one, too. That’s the way my life goes. Life has a cruel way of taking from me what I want most. There’s no happiness or love waiting for me around the bend of tomorrow. No gaining what I want—my heart’s desire, as I used to call the impossible dreams of my youth. Wasn’t that childish and silly? No wonder you pitied me—I wanted so much. Too much. I was never satisfied. You and that man you love gave me everything I ever said I wanted, and many things I didn’t even mention, and still you never gave me happiness. So I’ve decided not to care about anything anymore. The Christmas ball wouldn’t have given me pleasure even if the guests had showed up. I still would have failed to impress them. Inside, all along, I knew my party would prove just another failure, like all the other parties you used to give me. Still I went ahead and hypnotized myself into believing that if tonight was successful it would set a precedent, so to speak, and all my life would then change for the better.”

My second son was talking to me as he’d never done before. Liquor was loosening his tongue.

“Stupid, aren’t I?” he went on. “Cindy’s right when she calls me a jerk and a creep. I look in my mirrors and see a handsome man, very much like my father, whom you say you loved more than any other man. But I don’t feel I am handsome inside. I’m uglier than sin inside. Then I wake up, feel the fresh morning mountain air, see the dew sparkling on the roses, see the winter sun shining on the snow, and that tells me maybe life is going to offer me my chance after all. I have hopes of one day finding the real me—the one I can like, and that’s why, months ago, I decided to make this the happiest Christmas of all our lives, not only for Jory, who deserves it, but for you and for myself. You think I don’t love Jory, but I do.”

He bowed his head into his waiting hands and sighed heavily. “Confession time, Mother. I hate Jory too, I don’t deny that. But I hold no love at all for Cindy. She’s done nothing but steal from me—and she isn’t even one of us. Jory’s always had the largest portion of your love, the part you’ve got left over after giving your brother the best. I’ve

never had the major portion of anyone's love. I thought that Melodie had given me that. Now I know she'd have taken any man just to replace Jory. Any man at all who was available and willing, and that's why I hate her now, just as much as I hate Cindy."

His hands came down to show how bitterly his dark eyes glowed; the reflection from the fire made them like red-hot coals. Those drinks had made his breath reek. My heart almost stopped beating. What would he want? I stood up, moved behind his chair and slid my arms around his neck before my head lowered to rest on top of his disheveled hair. "Bart, you drove away tonight and left me sleepless and waiting for you to come home. Tell me what can I do to help. Nobody here hates you like you think. Not even Cindy. Often you make us angry because you disappoint us, not because we want to reject you."

"Send Chris away," he said tonelessly as if he said this without hope of ever seeing Chris gone from my life. "That will tell me you love me. Only when you break with him can I feel good about myself, and you."

Pain stabbed me. "He'd die without me, Bart," I whispered. "I know you can't understand the way it is between us, and I myself can't explain why he needs me, and why I need him, except we were young and alone and in a terrifying situation, and we had only each other. We created a fantasy dreamlike world when we were locked away and trapped ourselves in so doing, and now that we're both middle-aged we still live in that fantasy. We can't survive without it. To lose him now would destroy not only him, but me as well."

"But Mother!" he cried out passionately, turning to hold me, to press his face between my breasts, "you'd still have me!" He gazed up into my face, his arms around my waist. "I want you to purify your soul before it's too late. What you do with Chris is against the rules of God and society. Let him go, Mother. *Please let him go*—before someone does something terrible, let go of your brother's love."

I drew away, brushed back a fallen wisp of my hair. Feeling defeated and hopeless, for it was so impossible, what he asked.

“Would you hurt me, Bart?”

He bit down on his lip, a childish habit that came back when he was disturbed. “I don’t know. Sometimes I want to. More than I want to hurt him. You smile at me with such sweetness, and my heart reaches out, wanting you never to change. Then I go to bed and hear whispers in my head that tell me you are evil and deserve to die. When I think of you dead and in the ground, tears fill my eyes and my heart feels empty and broken, heavier than lead—and I’m undone. I feel so cold, so alone and scared. Mother, am I crazy? Why is it I can’t fall in love with confidence that it will last? Why can’t I forget about what you do?”

“I thought for a while that Melodie and I had it made. She seemed to me so perfect, and then she began to turn fat and ugly. She whined and nagged, and complained about my home. Even Cindy was more appreciative. I took her to the best restaurants, to plays and movies, and tried to take her mind off Jory, but she wouldn’t let it go. She kept talking of the ballet and how much it means to her, and that’s when I found out I was only a substitute for Jory and she never loved me, never loved me at all. She used me as a way to forget her loss for a while. Now she doesn’t even look like the girl I fell in love with. She wants pity and sympathy, not love. She took my love and turned it around, so now I can’t stand to look at her.”

Sighing, he lowered his eyes and said in such a low voice I could hardly hear him, “I see that kid, Cindy, and realize she must look the way you used to, and a little bit of me knows why Chris fell in love with you. That makes me hate her worse. She teases me, you know. Cindy would like to creep under my skin and make me do something as wicked as what Chris does with you. She strolls around in her bedroom wearing nothing but bikini bra and bottoms. And she knows I check her rooms before I retire. Tonight she had on a nightgown so transparent I could see right through it. She just stood there and let me stare. Joel tells me she’s nothing but a whore.”

“Then don’t go to her bedroom,” I said with control. “Lord knows we don’t have to see anyone who lives here if we don’t want to—and Joel is a bigoted, narrow-minded fool. All Cindy’s generation wears next-to-nothing undergarments. But you’re right, she shouldn’t parade around in them. I’ll speak to her about that in the morning. You’re sure she displayed herself deliberately?”

“You must have done the same thing,” he said, dully accusing. “All those years locked up with Chris—did you show him your body—deliberately?”

How could I tell him how it had been and make him understand? He’d never understand. “We all tried to be decent, Bart. It’s so long ago and I don’t like to remember. I try to forget. I want to think that Chris is my husband and not my brother. We can’t have children, never could. Doesn’t that make it better—a little better?”

Shaking his head, his eyes darkened. “Go away. You just give me excuses, and you bring it all back, the sickness I used to feel when I found out about you and him. I was just a kid wanting to feel clean and wholesome. I still want to feel that way. That’s why I keep showering, shaving, picking up, ordering the servants to scrub, vacuum, dust and dust, and do it every day. I’m trying to eliminate the dirt you and Chris put in my life—and *I can’t do it!*”

* * *

There was no comfort in Chris’s arms as I tried to sleep. I drifted into an uneasy dream. Then I bolted awake to hear distant screams. Leaving my bed for the second time in the same night, I raced toward the screams.

Disoriented, I stared down at Melodie on the floor of the long corridor. She seemed to be wearing a white nightgown with ragged red stripes. She crawled along, moaning, causing me to think I was still dreaming. Her long hair was in damp disarray, her brow dripped sweat—and behind her was a trail of blood!

Blindly she stared up at me, imploring. “Cathy, my baby is coming ...” She screamed, then slowly, slowly, her pleading

eyes went blank before she keeled over in a dead faint.

I ran for Chris, shaking him awake. “It’s Melodie!” I cried as he sat up and rubbed at his tired eyes. “She’s in labor. Right now she’s fainted, lying facedown in the hall with a trail of blood behind her ...”

“Take it easy,” he soothed, leaping out of bed and pulling on his bathrobe. “First babies are notoriously slow in arriving.” Nevertheless there was a look of anxiety in his eyes, as if he were mentally calculating just how long Melodie had been in labor. “I’ve got everything I’ll need in my bag,” he said as he rushed about gathering up blankets, clean sheets, towels. He still had the same black doctor’s bag they’d given him when he graduated from medical school, as if that bag were sacred to him. “No time to get her to the hospital if she’s hemorrhaging like you say. Now all *you* have to do is rush down to the kitchen and put on all that hot water all doctors in the movies seem to need.”

I yelled impatiently, thinking he just wanted me out of his way. “We’re not in the movies, Chris!”

We were in the hall now, and he was bending over Melodie. “I know that—it would help if you did something except run beside me and act hysterical. Now move aside, Catherine,” he barked as he leaned to pick Melodie up. In his arms she seemed to weigh no more than a feather, while her middle seemed a mountain high.

In her room he stuffed pillows under her hips, asked for more white towels, sheets, newspapers, even as he glared at me. “Move, Catherine, move! From the position of the baby, its head is down and is already well on its way. RUN! I do have to sterilize a few instruments. Damn her for not speaking up and telling me she’d started her contractions early. While we were opening our gifts, she just sat there and said nothing. What the hell is wrong with everybody in this house? All she had to do was speak up and say something!”

Even before he finished muttering all this, as if to himself more than to me, I fled down the long dim halls, dashed recklessly down the back stairs closest to the kitchen. I drew

hot water from the tap, put the kettle on to boil. Anxiously I waited, thinking Melodie enjoyed pity and wanted to punish us, and perhaps even wanted her baby to die so she could go back to New York unencumbered by a crippled husband and a fatherless child.

A watched pot takes so long to boil. A thousand thoughts went through my mind, ugly thoughts as I peered into the water to see the slightest roll. What was Chris doing? Should I waken Jory and tell him what was going on? Why had Melodie done this? Was she in some ways like Bart—inflicting punishment on herself for her sins? Finally, after what seemed an hour, the water began to bubble, then roll furiously. With steam pouring from the spout, I sprinted up the stairs and down more endless halls until I came to Melodie's bedroom.

Chris had arranged Melodie so she was sitting up, backed with many pillows. Her knees were shoved upward and held spread wide apart by pillows he used to support them. She was naked from the waist down, and I could see blood still trickling from her body. Feeling peculiar to see something like this, I fixed my eyes on the pads of towels and sheets he'd spread over newspapers to catch the blood. "I can't stop the bleeding," he said in a worried way. "Scares me to think the baby might swallow some." He threw me a glance. "Cathy, put on that extra pair of rubber gloves and use the calipers you see in my bag to dip each instrument I've laid out into that boiling water. I expect you to hand me what I need when I ask for it."

I nodded, terribly afraid I wouldn't remember the instrument names, when it had been so long ago, before he'd even graduated from medical school.

"Wake up, Melodie," he said over and over. "I need your help." Lightly he slapped her face. "Cathy, wet a washcloth in cold water. Wipe her face with that to bring her around so she can bear down and help push the baby out."

The cold cloth on her head brought Melodie back to reality filled with pain. Right away she began to scream, to try and shove Chris away, to pull the covers over herself. "Don't fight me," said Chris in a fatherly way. "Your baby is almost here,

Melodie, but you have to bear down and take deep breaths, and I can't see what I'm doing if you cover yourself."

Still screaming in a jerky, spasmodic way, she tried to obey Chris's orders as the sweat streamed off her face and wet her hair and chest. Her gown, which was shoved up to her waist, was soon sopping. "Help her, Cathy," ordered Chris, fiddling with what I thought were forceps. I put my hands where he told me and bore down.

"Please, darling," I whispered when she stopped yelling long enough to hear me, "you have to help. Right now your baby is struggling to survive and get out."

Her wild eyes fraught with pain and fear struggled to focus on reality. "I'm dying!" she yelled before she squinched her eyes shut, pulled in a deep breath and then, with my hands assisting the shove, bore down with more determination.

"You're doing fine, Melodie," encouraged Chris. "Now another hard shove and I should be able to see the top of your baby's head." Sweating, holding on to my hands and squinting her eyes even tighter, Melodie gave one last mighty effort.

"Fine ... you're doing fine! I can see the top of the baby's head," said Chris in a happier tone, throwing me a look of pride. At that moment Melodie's head fell to the side and her eyes closed.

She'd fainted again. "It's all right," said Chris, glancing at her face. "She's done a good job, and I can do my part now. She's through the worst part and can rest. I was thinking I'd have to use forceps, but it won't be necessary."

With confident, kind hands, he carefully slid his hand inside the birth canal and somehow drew out a very small baby and handed it to me. I held the tiny, slimy, red baby and stared down in awe at Jory's son. Oh, how perfect this miniature little boy who flailed the air with his tiny fists and kicked with incredibly small feet, and screwed his apple-sized face into a knot as he prepared to let go with a howl as Chris tied off and severed the umbilical cord. Thrills that felt cold made my spine shiver. Out of the joining of my son with his wife came this perfect little grandson who had already seized my heart

even before he cried. With tears in my eyes, my heart beating joyously for Jory, who would be so happy, I glanced up to see Chris working over Melodie and drawing from her what must be the afterbirth.

Again, I stared down at the crying, doll-sized, slimy infant that seemed to weigh less than four pounds. A child born from the passion and beauty of the ballet world ... born on the music that must have played when he was conceived. I hugged the child to my heart, thinking this was God's finest miracle, more beautiful than a tree, more lasting than a rose, a human born in His likeness. Tears flowed down my cheeks, for, like God's son, this child was born almost on Christmas day. My grandson! "Chris, he's so little. Will he live?"

"Absolutely," he said in an absorbed, abstracted tone as he continued to work over Melodie, frowning with some perplexity. "How about using the mail scales and weighing him in. Then, if you would, give him a nice bath in tepid water. He'll begin to feel much better. Use the solution I mixed and put in a blue bowl to wash out his eyes, and use the solution in the pink bowl to clean his mouth and ears. There should be diapers and receiving blankets around here somewhere. He needs to be kept very warm."

"In her suitcase," I called out as I hurried into the adjacent bath and held the little boy in the cradle of my arm and began filling a pink plastic basin. "For weeks she's had baby things packed and ready."

I was excited, feeling exalted, wishing now I'd gone to Jory and given him the chance to see his child born. I sighed then, thinking this would be his one and only child. The chances were very slim that he could father another. How lucky he was to be blessed with this little boy.

The baby I held was so frail, with just a fuzz of blond making the top of his small head softly hazy. Miniature hands and incredibly small feet flailed the chilly air. His rosebud mouth worked in sucking motions even as he tried to open eyes that seemed glued together. Despite all the slime of childbirth smeared on his red skin, my heart went out to him.

Beautiful little baby. Dear, sweet little boy to make my Jory happy. I wanted to see the color of his eyes, but he kept them tightly closed.

I was nervous, as if I'd never had a newborn of my own, and in a way, I hadn't. This baby was so small, so delicate-looking. My two had been full term and had been cared for by experienced nurses immediately after their birth.

"Wrap him up tight," reminded Chris from the other room. "But sure to run your finger around in his mouth to take out any blood clots or mucous you'll find. Newborns can choke on what's in their mouths."

The baby's cries were distraught over the loss of the warm, familiar fluid of the womb, but as soon as I gently eased him into the warm water, he stopped crying and seemed to fall asleep. This little babe was so new, so raw-looking that he seemed pitiful as I did what I had to. Even asleep his tiny, doll-like hands reached to find his mother and her breasts. His tiny penis stood straight up as I poured warm water over his genitals. Then, to my astonishment, I heard another baby cry!

Quickly wrapping my clean little grandson in a thick white towel, I hurried into the bedroom to see Chris staring down at a second child.

Chris looked up with the strangest expression. "A girl," he said softly. "Blond hair, blue eyes. I talked to her obstetrician myself, and he didn't mention anything about hearing two heartbeats. Sometimes that happens because one child is behind the other ... but how odd that not once—" He broke off before he changed the subject and continued. "Twins are usually smaller than other babies, and their small size, plus the weight of the second bearing down, helps the first come quicker than a single birth—usually. Melodie was lucky this time ..."

"Ohhh," I breathed, taking the small girl into my free arm and gazing down at her. I knew immediately who they were. Carrie and Cory born all over again!

"Chris, how fantastically marvelous!" I laughed, then saddened as I thought of my beloved twin brother and sister,

now dead for so long. Still I could see them behind my eyes, racing through the backyard garden in Gladstone; running through the pitiful attic garden of paper flora and fauna. “The same twins. Doppelgangers.”

Chris looked up, his rubber-gloved hands quite bloody. “No, Cathy,” he stated firmly, “not doppelgangers. These are not the same twins born again. Remember that. Carrie came first then; this time the boy was first. This is not an unlucky, doomed set of children. These two will have only the best. Now, would you please stop staring and get busy? She needs a bath, too. And diaper that boy before he sprays everything.”

Handling such slippery tiny babies wasn’t at all easy. Still, I managed, feeling overwhelmingly happy. Despite what Chris had said, I knew who these twins were—Cory and Carrie, reborn to live the kind of wonderful lives that were their due, the happy lives stolen from them by greed and selfishness.

“Don’t you worry,” I whispered as I kissed each small red cheek and then their sweet tiny hands and feet. “Your grandmother will see that you’re happy. No matter what I have to do, you two are going to have everything that Carrie and Cory didn’t.”

I glanced toward the bedroom where Melodie lay spent, just pulling out of her faint.

Chris called in to say he thought Melodie could use a nice sponge bath now, before he strode into the bathroom to take both babies from me. He sent me out to tend to the new mother while he gave the newborn twins a more complete inspection.

As I bathed Melodie and then slipped a fresh pink gown over her head, she awakened to stare at me with blank, disinterested eyes. “Is it over?” she asked in a weak, weary way. I picked up her hairbrush and went to work to unsnarl her damp, stringy hair.

“Yes, darling, it’s over. You have delivered.”

“What is it? A boy?” There was hope in her eyes, the first I’d seen in many a day.

“Yes, darling, a boy ... and a girl. You have just given birth to beautiful, perfect twins.”

Her eyes grew huge, dark, full of anxieties so numerous she seemed about to faint again.

“They are perfect, with everything where it’s supposed to be.”

She stared at me until I hurried to show her the twins. She stared with the look of utmost amazement before she smiled faintly. “Oh, they’re cute ... but I thought they’d be dark like Jory.”

I placed the two babies in her arms. She gazed down at them as if all this was totally unreal. “Two,” she whispered weakly again and again, “two!” Her eyes fixed somewhere in space. “*Two*. I used to tell Jory we’d stop having children when we had two. I wanted a boy and a girl ... but not twins. Now I have to be both mother and father to two! Twins! It’s not fair, not fair!”

Gently I smoothed back her hair. “Darling, this is God’s way of blessing both you and Jory. He has delivered to you the complete family you wanted, and you won’t have to go through this again. And you’re not alone in this; we’ll do all we can to help you. We’ll hire nurses, maids, the best. Neither you nor they will lack for anything.”

Hope came to her eyes before she closed them. “I’m tired, Cathy, so tired. I guess it is nice to have both a boy and a girl, now that Jory can’t make more. I just hope this will make up for a little that he’s lost ... and he’ll be pleased.”

With those words she fell into deep sleep, even as I finished brushing her hair. Once her hair had been so lovely; now it was dull, lifeless. I’d have to shampoo it before Jory saw her. When next Jory saw his wife, he’d see again the lovely girl he’d married.

For I was going to reunite this pair if it was the last thing I did.

Chris stepped up beside me and took the twins from her arms. “Leave now, Cathy. She’s exhausted and needs a long

rest. Time to shampoo tomorrow.”

“Did I say that aloud? I was only thinking about it.”

He laughed. “You did only think it, but you were also fingering her hair, and in your eyes your thoughts shone clearly. I know how you feel about clean hair—the remedy for all depressions.”

Kissing him first and hugging him tight, I left him with Melodie, then went to shake Jory awake. He came back from dreams, rubbing at his eyes, squinting at me. “What’s up now? More trouble?”

“No trouble this time, darling.” I stood and grinned at him until he must have thought I’d lost my mind. He looked so perplexed as he shoved himself up on his elbows. “I have belated Christmas gifts for you, Jory, my love.” He shook his head in a bewildered way.

“Mom, couldn’t that gift have waited until morning?”

“No, not this one. You’re a father, Jory!” I laughed and hugged him again. “Oh, Jory, God is kind. Remember when you and Melodie planned your family, you said you wanted two children, first a boy, then a girl? Well, as a special gift, sent straight from Heaven, you have twins! A boy, a girl!”

Tears flooded his eyes. He choked out his first concern. “How is Mel?”

“Chris is in there now, taking care of her. You see, ever since the wee hours of yesterday, Melodie was in labor and she didn’t say a word.”

“Why?” he bemoaned, his hands covering his face. “Why, when Dad was here all the time and he could have helped?”

“I don’t know, son, but let’s not think about that. She’ll be fine, just fine. He says she won’t even need to go to the hospital, although he does want to drive the twins in for a checkup just to be safe. Such tiny babies need more care than full-term ones. And he also said it wouldn’t hurt if Melodie had the attention of an obstetrician. He had to cut her, an episiotomy he called it. Without the surgery she would have torn. He sewed her up nicely, but it hurts, Jory, until the

stitches come out. No doubt he'll bring them and her back the same day."

"God *is* good, Mom," he whispered hoarsely, swiping at the tears as he tried to smile. "I can't wait to see them. It will take me too much time to get up and go to them—will you bring them here to me?"

First he had to sit up to be ready to receive the twins into his arms. I turned to look at him from the doorway, thinking I'd never seen a happier-looking man.

During my absence, Chris had fashioned cribs out of two drawers pulled open and lined with soft blankets. He immediately wanted to know how Jory took my news and smiled when he heard of Jory's delight. Tenderly he put both babies in my arms. "Walk carefully, my love," he whispered before he kissed me. Then I was hurrying back to my eldest son with his firstborn. He received them as tender gifts to cherish forever, staring down with pride and love at the children he'd created.

"They look so much like Cory and Carrie did," I said softly in the warm glow of his dimly lit room. "So beautiful, even if they are very small. Have you thought about names?"

He flushed and continued to admire the babies in his arms. "Sure, I've got names all ready, although Mel failed to tell me there was a chance of twins. This makes up for so much." He looked up, his eyes shining with hope. "Mom, all the time you've been saying Mel would change after the baby came. I can't wait to see her, to hold her in my arms again."

That's when he paused and blushed. "Well, at least we can sleep together, if nothing more."

"Jory, you'll find ways ..."

He went on as if he hadn't heard. "We constructed our lives around a plan, thinking we'd dance until I was forty, and then we'd both go into teaching or choreography. We didn't include the chance of accidents, or sudden tragedies, no more than your parents did, and on the whole, I think my wife has held up rather well."

He was being kind, overly generous! Melodie had been his brother's lover, but perhaps he didn't want to believe that.

Or, more likely, he understood her need and had already forgiven not only Melodie but Bart as well. Reluctantly Jory allowed me to take the twins away.

In Melodie's room, Chris said, "I'm taking Melodie and the twins to the hospital. I'll be back as soon as possible. I'd like another doctor to check Melodie over, and, of course, the twins need to be put in incubators until they weigh five pounds. The boy weighs three pounds thirteen ounces and the girl three pounds seven ounces ... but nice healthy babies, even so.

"In your heart you'll fit the new twins and love them just as much as you did Cory and Carrie." How did he know each time I looked at those small babies, visions of "our" twins came to haunt me?

* * *

Glowing, Jory was at the breakfast table seated beside Bart when I entered our sunny room saved for special mornings. The plates were bright red on a white tablecloth, and a bowl of fresh holly was the centerpiece. Poinsettias were everywhere, both red and white.

"Good morning, Mom," said Jory as he met my eyes. "I'm a very happy man today ... and I saved my news to tell Bart until you and Cindy and Dad arrived."

Small happy smiles played about Jory's mouth. His bright eyes pleaded with me not to hold anger, as once Cindy stumbled in, all sleepy and tousled-looking, Jory proudly announced that he was now the father of twins, both a girl and boy whom he and Melodie had decided to name Darren and Deirdre. "Once there were C-named twins. We're following precedent a little, but traveling further through the alphabet."

The frown on Bart's face was envious, scornful, too. "Twins, twice the trouble as one. Poor Melodie, no wonder she grew so huge. What a pain—as if she didn't have enough problems."

Cindy let out a squeal of delight. “Twins? Really? How wonderful! Can I see them now? Can I hold them?”

But Jory was still bristling from Bart’s cruel remark. “Don’t count me out, Bart, just because I’m down. Mel and I have no problems we can’t overcome—once we’re gone from this place.”

Bart got up and left his breakfast uneaten.

Jory and Melodie were going to leave and take the twins with them? My heart sank. My hands on my lap worked nervously.

I didn’t see the hand that took mine and pressured my fingers. “Mom, don’t look so sad. We’d never cut you or Dad out of our lives. Where you go, we’ll go—only we can’t stay on here if Bart doesn’t start acting differently. When you need to see your grandchildren, all you have to do is yell—or whisper.”

Around ten Chris drove home with Melodie, who was put immediately to bed. “She’s fine now, Jory. We would have liked to keep her in the hospital for a few days, but she made such a fuss that I brought her back. We left the twins in the nursery, put in separate incubators until they gain weight.”

Chris leaned to kiss my cheek, then beamed brightly. “See, Cathy. I told you everything would work out fine. And I do like those names you and Melodie chose, Jory. Really fine names.”

Soon I carried a tray up to Melodie, who was out of bed and staring out of a window to see snow. She began to speak immediately.

“I’m thinking of when I was a child and how much I wanted to see snow,” she said dreamily, as if babies out of sight were also out of mind. “I always wanted a white Christmas away from New York. Now I have a white Christmas, and nothing has changed. No magic to give Jory back the use of his legs.”

She went on in that strange, dreamlike way that frightened me. “How am I going to manage with two babies? How? One

at time was the way I planned it. And Jory won't be any help ...”

“Didn't I say we'd help?” I said with some irritation, for it seemed Melodie was determined to feel sorry for herself no matter what. Then I understood, for Bart stood in the open doorway.

His unsmiling face showed no expression. “Congratulations, Melodie,” he said calmly. “Cindy made me drive her to the hospital to see your twins. They're very ... very ...” He hesitated and finished—“small.”

He left.

Melodie stared vacantly at the place where he'd stood.

Later Chris drove Jory, Cindy, and me to the hospital to again look at the twins. Melodie was left in her bed, deeply asleep and looking very worn. Cindy took another look at the tiny babies in their little glassed-in cages. “Oh, aren't they adorable? Jory, how proud you must feel. I'm going to make the best aunt, you just wait and see. I can't wait to hold them in my arms.” She was behind his chair, leaning over to hug him. “You've been such a special brother ... thank you for that.”

Soon we were home again, and Melodie was asking weakly about her children, then falling asleep as soon as she knew they were fine. The day wore on without guests who dropped in, without the telephone ringing with friends to congratulate Jory on becoming a father. How lonely it was on this mountainside.

Shadows Fade Away



Miserable winter days slipped by, filled with myriad trivial details. We'd gone to a party on New Year's Eve, taking Cindy and Jory with us. Cindy finally had her chance to meet all the young men in the area. She'd been an overwhelming hit. Bart had failed to join us, thinking he'd have a better time in an exclusive men's club he'd joined.

"It's not a club for only men," whispered Cindy, who thought she had all the answers. "He's going to some cathouse."

"Don't you ever say anything like that again!" I reprimanded. "What Bart does is his own business. Where do you hear such gossip?"

At that New Year's Eve party a few of the guests that Bart had invited to his party had showed up, and soon enough I was tactfully finding out if they'd received Bart's invitation. No, everyone said, though they stared at Chris and me, then at Jory in his chair, as if they had many secret thoughts they'd never speak.

"Mother, I don't believe you," said Bart coldly when I told him the guests I'd met hadn't received his invitations. "You hate Joel, you see only Malcolm in him, and therefore you want to undermine my faith in a good and pious old man. He's sworn to me he did mail off the invitations, and I believe him."

"And you don't believe me?"

He shrugged. "People are tricky. Maybe those you talked to only wanted to appear polite."

Cindy left for school the second of January, eager to escape the boredom of what she considered Hell on earth. She'd finish high school this spring and had no intentions of going on to college as Chris had tried to persuade her.

“Even an actress needs culture.” But it hadn’t worked. Our Cindy was just as stubborn in her own way as Carrie had been in hers.

Melodie was quiet, moody, and melancholy, and so tediously boring to be around that everyone avoided her. She resented caring for the small babies I had thought would give her pleasure and something meaningful to do. Soon we had to hire a nurse. Melodie also did very little to help with Jory, so I did for him what he couldn’t do for himself.

* * *

Chris had his work that kept him happy and away until Fridays around four when he’d come in the door, much as Daddy had once returned to us on Fridays. Time repeating itself. Chris was in his own busy world, we on the mountainside stayed put in ours. Chris came and went, looking fresh, breezy, confident, and overjoyed to be with us on the weekends. He brushed aside problems as if they were lint not worth noticing.

We in Foxworth Hall stayed, never going anywhere now that Jory didn’t want to leave the security of his wonderful rooms.

Soon it would be Jory’s thirtieth birthday. We’d have to do something special. Then it came to me. I’d invite all the members of his New York ballet company to come to his party. First, of course, I’d have to discuss this with Bart.

He swiveled his office desk chair away from the computer. “No! I don’t want a group of dancers in my house! I’m not ever going to throw another party and waste my good money on people I don’t even want to know. Do something else for him—but don’t invite them.”

“But, Bart, once I heard you say you’d like to have his ballet company entertain at your parties.”

“Not now. I’ve changed. Besides, I’ve never really approved of dancers. Never have, never will. This is the Lord’s house ... and in the spring a temple of worship will be raised to celebrate his rule over all of us.”

“What do you mean, a temple will be raised?”

He grinned before he turned his attention back to the computer. “A chapel so near you can’t avoid it, Mother. Won’t that be nice? Every Sunday we’ll rise early to attend services. *All of us.*”

“And who will be on the podium delivering those sermons? You?”

“No, Mother, not me. As yet I am not washed clean of my sins. My uncle will be the minister. He is a very saintly, righteous man.”

“Chris enjoys sleeping late on Sunday mornings, and so do I,” I said despite my will to always keep him placated. “We like to eat breakfast in bed, and in the summers, the bedroom balcony is the perfect place to start off a happy day. As for Jory and Melodie, you should discuss the subject with them.”

“I already have. They will do as I say.”

“Bart ... Jory’s birthday is the fourteenth. Remember, he was born on Valentine’s Day.”

Again he looked at me. “Isn’t it weird and meaningful that babies come often to our family on holidays—or very near them? Uncle Joel says it means something—something significant.”

“No doubt!” I flared. “Dear Joel thinks everything is significant—and offensive in the eyes of *his* God. It’s as if he not only owns God but controls him as well!” I whirled to confront Joel, who was never more than ten feet away from Bart. I shouted because for some reason he made me afraid. “Stop filling my son’s head with crazy notions, Joel!”

“I don’t have to fill his head with those kind of notions, dear niece. You established his brain patterns long before he was born. Out of hatred came the child. And out of need comes the angel of salvation. Think of that before you condemn me.”

* * *

One morning the headlines of the local paper told of a family who’d gone bankrupt. A notable family that my mother had often mentioned. I read the details, folded the newspaper and

stared thoughtfully before me. Had Bart had anything to do with that man's fortune suddenly disappearing? He'd been one of the guests who hadn't shown up.

Another day the newspaper told of a father who killed his wife and two children because he'd put the main part of his savings into the commodity market, and wheat had dropped drastically in price. There went another of Bart's enemies—once an invited guest to that unhappy Christmas ball. But if so, how was Bart manipulating the markets, the bankruptcy?

“I know nothing about any of that!” flared Bart when I questioned. “Those people dig their own graves with their greed. Who do you think I am, God? I said a lot of things Christmas night, but I'm not quite as crazy as you think. I have no intention of putting my soul in jeopardy. Fools always manage to trip themselves.”

* * *

We celebrated Jory's birthday with a family party; Cindy flew home to stay two days, happy to celebrate with Jory. Her suitcases were full of gifts meant to keep him busy. “When I meet a man like you, Jory, I'm going to grab him so quickly! I'm just waiting to see if any other man is half as wonderful. So far Lance Spalding hasn't proved to be half the man you are.”

“And how would you know?” joked Jory, who had not heard the details of Lance's sudden departure. He flashed his wife a hard look as she held Darren and I held Deirdre. We were both supporting nursing bottles as we sat before the cozy log fire. The babies gave all of us reasons for feeling the future held great promise. I think even Bart was fascinated with how swiftly they grew, how sweet and cuddly they felt when on a few occasions he held them for several uncomfortable seconds. He'd looked at me with a certain pride.

Melodie put Darren in the large cradle Chris had found in an antique shop and had refinished so it looked almost new. With one foot she rocked the baby as she glared hard at Bart before once again gazing pensively into the roaring fire. Seldom did she speak, and she showed no real interest in her

children. Only negligently did she pick them up, as if for show, as she showed no interest in any one of us, or anything we did.

Jory shopped by mail for gifts that were delivered almost daily to surprise her. She'd open each box, faintly smile and say a weak thank you, and sometimes she even put the package down unopened, thanking Jory without even looking his way. It pained me to see him wince, or bow his head to hide his expression. He was trying—why couldn't she try?

Each passing day saw Melodie withdrawing not only from her husband but, much to my amazement, also from her children. Hers was an indecisive love, without strong commitment, like the frail flutterings of moth wings beating at the candle flame of motherly love. I was the one who got up in the middle of the night to feed them. I was the one who paced the floor and tried to change two diapers at once, and it was I who raced down to the kitchen to mix their formula and held them on my shoulder for burping, I who took the time and trouble to rock them to sleep as I sang soft lullabies while their huge blue eyes stared up at me with fascination until they grew sleepy and with great reluctance closed their eyes. Often I could tell they were still listening from their small, pleased smiles. It filled me with joy to see them growing more and more like Cory and Carrie.

If we lived isolated from society, we did not live isolated from the malicious rumors that the servants brought home with them from the local stores. Often I overheard their whispers as they chopped onions, green peppers, and made the pies and cakes and other desserts we all loved to eat. I knew our maids lingered too long in back halls and deliberately made our beds when we were still upstairs. Thinking we were alone, we'd let out many secrets for them to feed their gossip.

Much of what they speculated on I speculated on as well. Bart was so seldom home, and sometimes I was grateful for that. With him out of the house, there was no one to create arguments; Joel stayed in his room and prayed, or so I presumed.

It came to me one morning that maybe I should try the servants' tricks and hang out near the kitchen ... and when I did, our cook and maids filled my ears with knowledge gained from those in the village. Bart, according to them, was having many affairs with the prettiest and richest society ladies, both married and unmarried. Already he'd ruined one marriage that just happened to be one of the couples that had been on his Christmas guest list. Also, according to what I overheard, Bart often visited a brothel ten miles away, not within any city's limits.

I had evidence that some of those tales might be true. Often I saw him come home drunk and in mild, happy moods that made me wish, regretfully, that he'd stay drunk. Only then could he smile and laugh easily.

One day I had to ask. "What are you doing all those nights you stay out so late?"

He giggled easily when he drank too much; he giggled now. "Uncle Joel says the best evangelists have been the worst sinners; he says you have to roll in the gutter filth to know what it's like to be clean, and saved."

"And that's what you're doing all those nights, rolling in the gutter filth?"

"Yes, Mother darling—for damned if I know what it's like to feel clean, or saved."

* * *

Spring approached cautiously like a timid bluebird. Blustery cold winds softened to warm southern breezes. The sky turned that certain shade of blue that made me feel young and hopeful. I was often out in the gardens raking leaves and pulling up weeds that the gardeners overlooked.

I couldn't wait to see the crocus peek from the ground in the woods, couldn't wait to see the tulips and daffodils and watch pink and white dogwood blossoms spring forth. Couldn't wait for the azaleas everywhere to make my life a fairyland of many delights, for the twins, for all of us. I'd look up and admire the wonder of the trees that never seemed

depressed or lonely. Nature—how much we could learn if only we would.

I took Jory with me as far as he could easily guide his sturdy electric chair with the huge balloon wheels that climbed most gradual grades. “We’ve got to find a better way to get you deeper into the woods,” I said thoughtfully. “Now, if we laid flagstones everywhere, they’d be very lovely, but if they freeze in the winter they’d poke up and could possibly snag your chair and tip you over. As much as I hate cement, we’ll have to use that or blacktop. Somehow I like blacktop better, what about you?”

He laughed at my silliness. “Red bricks, Mom. Brick walks are so colorful, and besides, this chair of mine is a real marvel.” He looked around, smiling with pleasure, then tilted his face so the sun could warm it. “I only wish Mel would accept what’s happened to me and show more interest in the twins.”

What could I say to that, when already I’d had it out with Melodie more than a dozen times, and the more I said the more resentful she grew. “This is MY life, Cathy!” she’d shouted. “MY LIFE—not yours!” Screaming at me, her face a red mask of fury.

Jory’s physical therapist showed Jory how to lower himself to the ground without so much effort, and then he taught Jory how to get back into his chair without assistance. And all so Jory could help me plant more rose bushes. His strong hands used the trowel much better than mine.

The gardeners eagerly taught Jory how to prune our shrubbery, when to fertilize, how to mulch and with what. He and I made gardening not just a hobby but a lifestyle to save us both from going crazy. The greenhouse was enlarged so we could grow exotic flowers, and in there we had a world of our own to control, full of its own kind of quiet excitement. But it wasn’t enough for Jory, who decided he had to stay in the arts in one form or another.

“Dad is not the only one in this family who can paint a hazy sky and make you feel the humidity, or put a dewdrop on a

painted rose so real you can smell it,” he said to me with a broad smile. “I’m growing as an artist, Mom.”

Even with Melodie in the same house, Jory was making a life without her. He fashioned slings to his chair that fitted over his shoulder so he could carry his twins with him. His delight to see them smile when they saw him coming touched my heart, just as it drove Melodie from the nursery. “They love me now, Mom! It’s in their eyes!”

They knew Jory better than they knew their mother. They gave her void and somehow pitifully hopeful smiles, perhaps because her expression was so blank and thoughtful when she stared at them.

Yes, the twins not only loved and knew who was their father, they also trusted him fully. When he reached to pick them up, they didn’t flinch or fear he’d drop them. They laughed as if they knew he’d never, never drop them.

I found Melodie sulking in her room, really thin now, her once beautiful hair dull and stringy. “It take times, Melodie, to develop motherly instincts,” I said as I sat down unasked and, apparently, unwanted. “You allow me and the maids to wait upon them too much. They don’t recognize you as their mother when you stay away. The day you see their small faces light up when you come in, and they smile from the happiness they feel to see you, their mother, you’ll find the love you’re searching for. Your heart will melt. Their needs will give you something nothing else can, and never again will you feel anything but an all-encompassing love for your children, when they love you, and you love them.”

Her faint smile flashed bittersweet and was quickly gone. “When do you give me the chance to mother my children, Cathy? When I get up in the night, you are already there. When I rise early, you’ve already bathed and dressed them. They don’t need a mother when they have a grandmother like you.”

I was stunned by her unfair attack. Often I lay on my bed and heard the twins cry and cry before I got up to tend to their needs. In torment while I waited and waited for Melodie to go

to them. What was I supposed to go, ignore their cries? I gave her time enough. Her room was across the hall from theirs, and mine was in another wing.

She apparently saw my thoughts, for her voice came almost like the hiss of a venomous snake. “You always come out on top, don’t you, mother-in-law? You always manage to get what you want, but there’s one thing you will never get, and that’s Bart’s love and respect. When he loved me—and *once he did love me*—he told me he hated you, really despised you. I felt sorry for him then, and sorrier for you. Now I understand why he feels as he does. For with a mother like you, Jory doesn’t need a wife like me.”

* * *

The next day was Thursday. I felt heavy-hearted to think of all the ugly words Melodie had screamed and hissed at me yesterday. I sighed, sat up and swung my legs off the bed, slipping my feet into satin mules. A busy day ahead since this was the day all our servants but Trevor had off. On Thursdays I was like Momma had been, preparing myself for Friday, coming fully alive only when the man I loved strolled through the door.

Jory was quietly sobbing when I entered his room with the freshly bathed and diapered twins held one in each of my arms. In his hands he loosely held a creamy long sheet of stationery.

“Read this,” he choked, putting the paper on the table beside his chair before he reached for his children. When he had them both in his arms, he bowed his face into the soft hair of his son, then his daughter’s hair.

I picked up the creamy sheets; always bad news on cream-colored paper came from Foxworth Hall.

My dearest darling Jory,

I’m a coward. I’ve always known that, and hoped you’d never find out. You were always the one with all the strength. I love you, and no doubt will always

love you, but I can't live with a man who can never make love to me again.

I look at you in that horrible chair that you've grown to accept, when I cannot accept it, or your handicap. Your parents came to my room and confronted me and urged me to face up to you and say everything I feel. I'm unable to do that, for if I do, you might say or do something that would change my mind, and I've got to leave, or lose my mind.

You see, my love, I already feel half insane from being in this house, this horrible, hateful house with all its deceiving beauty. I lie on my lonely bed and dream of the ballet. I hear the music playing even when it isn't. I've got to go back to where I can hear it play, and if that is ugly and selfish, as I know it is, forgive me, if you can.

Say kind things about me to our children when they are old enough to ask questions about their mother. Say those nice words even if they aren't true, for I know I've failed you just as much as I've failed them. I've given you every reason to hate me, but please don't remember me with hate. Remember me as I used to be when we were younger, and very much in control of our lives.

Don't blame yourself for anything, or blame anyone else for what I have to do. Everything is my own fault. You see, I'm not real, I never was, and I never will be. I can't face up to the kind of cruel reality that destroys lives and leaves behind broken dreams. Then, too, remember this: I'm the fantasy you helped create out of your desire and my own.

So farewell, my love, my first and sweetest love, and sadly perhaps my only true love. Find someone rare like your mother who can take my place. She's the one who gave you the ability to cope with reality, no matter how harsh.

*God would have been kind if he had given me
your kind of mother.*

Yours regretfully,

Mel

The note fell from my hand, fluttering its pathetic certain way to the carpet. Both Jory and I stared at it lying there, so sad—and so final.

“It’s over, Mom,” he said tonelessly, his voice deep and gruff. “What began when I was twelve and she was eleven, all over. I built my life around her, thinking she’d last until we were old. I gave her the best I had to offer, and still it wasn’t enough once the glamour was gone.”

How could I tell him that Melodie wouldn’t have lasted even if he was still on stage dancing. Something in her resented his strength, his innate ability to cope with situations beyond her ability to comprehend.

I shook my head. No, I was being unfair. “I’m sorry, Jory, so terribly sorry.” I didn’t say, *perhaps you’ll be better off without her.*

“I’m sorry, too,” he whispered, refusing to meet my eyes. “What woman will want me now?”

* * *

Perhaps he would never perform sexually again in the normal way, and I knew he needed someone in the bed with him during all those long, lonely nights. I could tell from his morning face that the nights were the worst part of his life, leaving him feeling isolated, vulnerable emotionally, as well as physically helpless. He was like me, needing arms to hold me safe during the darkness, wanting kisses on my face to put me to sleep, to wake me up, to put over me a safe parasol of love.

“Last night I heard the wind blowing,” he confided to me as the twins sat in their highchairs and smeared their faces with warm, mushy cereal. “I woke up. I thought I heard Mel breathing beside me, but there was nothing. I saw the birds happily building their nests, heard them chirping to greet the new day, and then I saw her note. I knew without reading what

was inside, and I went on thinking about the birds, and all their love songs suddenly turned into only territorial rights.” His voice broke again as he lowered his head to hide his face. “I’ve heard that geese, once mated, never mate again, and I keep seeing Melodie as the swan, loyal forever, no matter what the circumstances.”

“Darling, I know, I know,” I soothed, stroking his dark curls. “But love can come again, you hold on to that—and you’re not alone.”

He nodded, saying, “Thanks for always being here when I need you. Thank Dad for me, too ...”

Brusquely, fearing I’d cry as well, I put my arms about him. “Jory, Melodie is gone, but she’s left you with a son and a daughter, be grateful for that. Because she did leave you, that makes them all yours now. She walked out not only on you, but also on her own children. You can divorce her and use your strength to help your children develop your own kind of courage and determination. You’ll manage without her, Jory, and as long as you need us, you have your parents’ willing help.”

And all the time I was thinking that Melodie had deliberately withdrawn from her own children in order to make the break easier; she hadn’t allowed herself to love them, or them to love her. Her parting gift of love to her childhood sweetheart was his own children.

Jory brushed the tears from his eyes and tried to grin. When he did it was full of irony.

BOOK THREE



The Summer of Cindy



All of a sudden Bart was taking business trips, flying off to return in a few days, never staying away more than two or three days, as if afraid that during his absence as he wheeled and dealt we would run away with his fortune. As he put it, “I have to keep on top of things. Can’t trust anyone more than I trust myself.”

He had just happened to be gone the day that Melodie slipped out of Foxworth Hall and left that pitiful note for Jory to find on his night table. Bart’s expression didn’t change when he came home and found Melodie’s chair at the dining table empty. “Upstairs moping again?” he asked indifferently, indicating her chair, which was a constant reminder of her absence.

“No, Bart,” I answered when Jory refused to look his way or even answer. “Melodie decided she wanted to resume her career, and she left, leaving Jory a note.”

His left eyebrow quirked upward cynically; then he flashed Jory a glance, but not one word to say he was sorry to find her gone, or one word of condolence to his brother.

Later, when Jory was upstairs and I was changing diapers, Bart came in and stood at my side. “Too bad I was in New York at the time. I would have enjoyed seeing Jory’s expression when he read her note. By the way, where is it? I’d like to read what she had to say.”

I turned to stare at him. For the first time it occurred to me that Melodie might have arranged to meet him in New York. “No, Bart, you will never read that note ... and I hope to God you had nothing to do with her decision to go.”

Angry, his face reddened. “I went on a business trip! I haven’t said two words to Melodie since Christmas. And as far

as I'm concerned, it's good riddance."

In some ways it was better without Melodie always sitting around moodily, shadowing the rooms with her dreary depression. I made it a practice to visit Jory just before bedtime, tucking him in, opening his window, dimming the lights, and seeing he had water where he could reach it. My kiss on his cheek tried to substitute for a wife's kiss.

Now that Melodie was gone, I soon found out that she had helped a little just by getting up early once in a while to change and feed the babies. She'd even bothered to diaper them several times a day.

Often Bart drifted into the nursery, as if irresistibly drawn, and stared down at the tiny twins, who had learned how to smile and had found out to their delight that those waving shadowy things were their own feet and their own small hands. They reached for the mobiles of pretty colorful birds, struggled to pull them down and put them in their mouths.

"They are kind of cute," Bart commented in a musing way that pleased me, even doing a little to help by handing me the baby oil and talcum. Unfortunately, just when the twins almost had him won over, Joel strode into the nursery and scowled down at the beautiful babies, and all the kindness and sympathy growing in Bart vanished completely, leaving him standing beside me looking guilty.

Joel gave the twins one hard, quick glance before he turned away his offended eyes. "Just like the first twins, the evil ones," muttered Joel. "Same blond hair and blue eyes ... no good will come of this pair either."

"What do you mean by that?" I raged. "Cory and Carrie never harmed anyone! They were the ones who were harmed. They suffered what was inflicted on them by your own sister, mother, and father, Joel. Don't you ever dare to forget that."

With silence Joel answered before he left the room, taking Bart with him.

* * *

In mid-June, Cindy flew home to stay the summer. She made determined efforts to keep her rooms neater, hanging up her own clothes, which she used to drop on the floor. She helped me by changing the twins and holding their bottles as she rocked them to sleep. It was sweet to see her sitting in the rocker, a baby in the crook of each arm, struggling to hold two bottles at the same time while she wore baby doll pajamas, her lovely long legs bare and tucked under her. She seemed very much a child herself. She bathed and showered so often I thought she'd shrivel into a dried prune.

One evening she came from her luxurious bath and dressing room looking radiantly fresh and alive, smelling like an exotic flower garden. "I love twilight," she gushed, twirling around and around. "Just adore strolling the woods when the moon is on the rise."

By this time we were all seated on our favorite terrace, sipping drinks. Bart pricked up his ears and glared at her. "Who's waiting for you in the woods?"

"Not who, dear brother, but what." She turned her head to smile at him in an innocent, charming way. "I'm going to be nice to you, Bart, no matter how nasty you are to me. I've decided I cannot win friends by tossing out rude and nasty remarks."

He glared suspiciously. "I still think you're meeting some boy in the woods."

"Thank you, brother Bart, for only thinking of punishing me with nasty suspicions. I expected more—and worse. There's a boy in South Carolina that I've fallen madly for, and he's a nature lover. He's taught me how to appreciate all that money can't buy. I adore sunrises and sunsets. When rabbits run, I follow. Together we catch rare butterflies and he mounts them. We picnic in the woods, swim in the lakes. Since I'm not allowed to have a boyfriend here, I'm going to stand alone at the top of a hill and try just strolling down. It's fun to challenge gravity and try not to run all breathless and out of control."

“By what name do you call gravity? Bill, John, Mark, or Lance?”

“I’m not going to let you annoy me this time,” she said arrogantly. “I like to stare up at the sky, count the stars, find the constellations, watch the moon play hide-and-seek. Sometimes the man in the moon winks at me, and I wink back. Dennis has taught me how to stand perfectly still and absorb the feel of the night. Why, I’m seeing wonders I didn’t even know existed because I’m in love—madly, passionately, ridiculously, insanely in love!”

Envy flashed through his dark eyes before he growled, “What about Lance Spalding? I thought you felt that way about him. Or did I ruin his pretty face permanently so you can’t bear to look at him?”

Cindy paled. “Unlike you, Bart Foxworth, Lance is beautiful inside and out, like Daddy, and I do still love him, and Dennis, too.”

Bart’s frown deepened. “I know all about your nature loving! You want to sprawl on your back and spread your legs for some village idiot—and I won’t have it!”

“What’s going on here?” asked Chris, appearing dumbfounded to come back from the telephone and find all the peace gone.

Cindy jumped to her feet, took her stance, and put her hands on her hips. She glared down into Bart’s face, struggling to hold fast to that adult control she was determined to have with him. “Why do you always presume the worst about me? I just want to walk in the moonlight, and the village is ten miles away. What a pity you don’t understand what it’s like to be human.”

Her answer and her glare seemed to infuriate him more. “You’re not my sister, just a smart-ass little bitch in heat—the same as your mother!”

This time it was Chris who jumped up from the table and slapped Bart hard. Bart drew back and raised his fists, as if ready to punch Chris in the jaw—when *I* jumped to my feet

and placed myself in front of Chris. “No, don’t you dare ever hit the man who’s tried to be the best father possible! If you do, Bart, you and I are through forever!” That was enough for him to turn his dark, fiery eyes on me, so furious his look could have started a blaze.

“Why can’t you see that little whore for what she is? You both see everything wrong about me, but you close your eyes to the sins of your favorites! She’s nothing but a tramp, a god-damned tramp.” He froze, his eyes wide and startled.

He’d taken the Lord’s name in vain. He looked around to see Joel, who for once was out of sight and hearing. “You see, Mother, what she does to me? She corrupts—and in my own home, too.”

Looking at Bart disapprovingly, Chris sat down again. Cindy disappeared into the house. I stared forlornly after her, as Chris spoke harshly, confronting Bart. “Can’t you see that Cindy is doing her best to please you? She’s been trying since she came home to do her utmost to appease you, but you won’t let her. How can you take a stroll in these lonely woods as anything but innocent? From now on, I want you to treat her with respect—for if you don’t you may well drive her into doing something rash. Losing Melodie is quite enough for one summer.”

It was just as if Chris had no voice and Bart had no ears, from all the effect those words had. Chris ended by giving Bart an even harder look and more reprimanding words before Chris stood and disappeared inside the house. I suspected he would follow Cindy upstairs and do what he could to comfort her.

Alone with my second son, I tried to rationalize, as I always did. “Bart, why do you talk so ugly to Cindy?” I began. “She’s at a very vulnerable age and is a decent human being who needs to be appreciated. She’s not a tramp, a whore, or a bitch. She’s a lovely young girl who is very thrilled to be pretty and attracting so much attention from the boys. That doesn’t mean she’s giving in to every one. She has scruples, honor. That one episode with Lance Spalding has not corrupted her.”

“Mother, she was corrupted long ago, only you don’t want to believe that. Lance Spalding wasn’t the first.”

“How dare you say that?” I asked, really enraged. “What kind of man are you, anyway? You sleep with whom you please, do what you please, but she’s supposed to be an angel with a halo and wings on her back. Now you go upstairs and apologize to Cindy!”

“An apology is something she’ll never get from me.” He sat down to finish his meal. “The servants talk about Cindy. You don’t hear them, for you’re too busy with those two babies you can’t leave alone. But I hear them as they clean and dust. Your Cindy is a red-hot number. The trouble is you think she’s an angel. You think that just because she looks like one.”

I sank down to lean my elbows heavily on the glass-topped wrought-iron white table, feeling overwhelmingly tired, just as Jory did, and he hadn’t said one word for or against Cindy. To be for any length of time around Bart was so exhausting; the tension of saying one wrong thing kept you wired tight.

My eyes fixed on the crimson roses that were this evening’s centerpiece. “Bart, has it ever occurred to you that Cindy may feel she’s been contaminated, so that now she doesn’t care? And certainly you don’t give her any reason to value her self-esteem.”

“She’s a wanton, loose slut.” Said with absolute conviction.

My voice turned as uncompromising as his. “Apparently from what I overhear when the servants whisper, you are drawn to the very type of woman you condemn.”

Standing, he threw down his napkin and stalked purposefully into the house. “I’ll fire every damn one who gossips about me!”

I sighed. Soon we wouldn’t be able to hire any servants if he kept hiring and firing.

“Mom, I’m going to hit the sack,” said Jory. “This pleasant evening meal on the terrace has turned out just as I could have predicted.”

That very evening Bart fired every servant but Trevor, who seldom said anything except to me or Chris. If Trevor had left every time Bart fired him, he'd have been gone long ago. Trevor had an understanding way of knowing just when to believe Bart was serious. Never, never did he rebuke Bart, nor did he meet Bart's eyes squarely. Perhaps because of this, Bart thought he had Trevor cowed. I thought Trevor forgave Bart, because he understood and pitied him.

I headed for Cindy's room, meeting Chris as he came down. "She's very upset. Try to calm her down, Cathy. She's talking about leaving here and never coming back."

Cindy was face down on her bed. Small grunts and groans came from her throat. "He ruins everything," she wailed. "I never knew my own father and mother—and Bart wants to chase me away from you and Daddy," she sobbed as I perched on the side of her bed. "Now he's determined to spoil my summer, drive me away like he did Melodie."

I held her slight body in my arms and comforted her as best I could, thinking I'd have to send her away to keep her safe from being hurt again by Bart. Where could I send Cindy and not injure her feelings, which didn't need another cruel blow? I went to bed thinking about that, as Cindy escaped the house to meet a boy from the village.

I was to hear about this later.

As Bart had predicted, Cindy's nature-loving experience did have a name. Victor Wade. And while I lay on my bed, and Chris slept beside me, pondering what to do with Cindy, and still keep her love, how to keep Bart from being his worst self, our Cindy sneaked out of the house and went with Victor Wade to Charlottesville.

* * *

In Charlottesville Cindy had a glorious time, dancing with Victor Wade until she wore holes in the thin soles of her fragile, sparkling sandals with the four-inch glass heels (really only Lucite and not as heavy as glass). Then Victor, true to his word, drove back toward Foxworth Hall. Near one of the roads leading to our hill, he parked and drew Cindy into his arms.

“I’ve fallen in love,” he whispered huskily, raining kisses expertly on her face, behind her ears, traveling down her neck to end up on her breast that he bared. “I’ve never met a girl who was half the fun you are. And you were right. They don’t grow ’em better in Texas ...”

Half drunk on too much wine, intoxicated, too, with the expertise of his foreplay, Cindy’s efforts to resist his lovemaking were weak, ineffectual. Soon her own passionate nature was responding, and eagerly she helped him to undress as he unzipped her dress and soon had it off, along with everything else. He fell upon her—and that’s when Bart showed up.

Bellowing like an enraged bull, Bart rushed the parked car, catching Cindy and Victor in the very act of copulating.

Seeing their naked bodies with arms and legs entwined on the backseat confirmed all his suspicions and enraged him more. Bart threw open the door and yanked Victor out by the ankles, forcefully dragging him off the top of Cindy so he fell face downward upon the rough gravel of the roadside.

Not giving the body a chance to recover, Bart attacked, using his fists brutally.

Screaming her anger, disregarding her nudity, Cindy hurled her dress directly into Bart’s face, blinding him momentarily. This gave Victor the chance to jump to his feet and deliver his own blow that momentarily gave Bart pause, but already Victor’s nose was bleeding and he had a black eye.

In the moonlight his nakedness seemed blue in Cindy’s eyes. “And Bart was so ruthless, Momma! So awful! He seemed like a madman—especially when Victor managed to smash a good right hook into his jaw. Then he tried to kick Bart in the groin. It did hit him there, but not hard enough. Bart doubled up, cried out, then rushed Victor with so much fierce anger that I was scared he’d kill him! He came out of that pain so fast, Momma, so fast—and I’d always heard that stopped a man cold.” Cindy sobbed with her head on my lap.

“He was like the Devil straight from hell, screaming abuse at Victor, using all the obscene words he never wants me to

use. He knocked Victor down, then beat him into unconsciousness. Then he came at me! I was terrified he'd batter my face and break my nose and make me ugly, like he's always threatened to do. Somehow I'd managed to pull on that dress, but the zipper was wide open down the back. He grabbed me by the shoulders, shook me so hard the dress fell to my ankles and I was naked—but he didn't look to see anything. He kept his eyes on my face as he slapped one cheek and then the other and my head was rocked from side to side, until I felt dizzy and faint. My head was reeling before he picked me up like a sack of grain, threw me over his shoulder and took off through the woods, leaving Victor lying on the ground.

“It was awful, Momma, so humiliating! To be carried like that, as if I were cattle! I cried all the way, pleading with Bart to call an ambulance in case Victor was seriously hurt ... but he wouldn't listen. I begged him to put me down and let me cover myself, but he ordered me to shut up or else he'd do something terrible. Then he took me to—”

She cut off her words abruptly, staring before her as if mesmerized by fear.

“Where did he take you, Cindy?” I asked, feeling sick, as if her humiliation was mine, and so furious with Bart, feeling sorry for her shocking plight. At the same time I was so angry that she'd brought this upon herself by disobeying and disregarding everything I'd tried to teach her.

In a small, weak voice, with her head lowered so her long hair fell to hide her face, she finished, “Just home, Mom ... just home.”

There was more to it, but she refused to tell me anything else. I wanted to scold her, to chastise her, remind her again that she knew all about Bart and his fierce temper, but she was too traumatized to hear more.

I got up to leave her room. “I'm taking away all your privileges, Cindy. I'll send up a servant to take out your telephone so you can't call one of your boyfriends to help you escape. I've heard your side of the story now, and Bart just this

morning told me his side. I don't agree with his method of punishing you or that boy. He was much too brutal, and for that, I apologize. However, it seems you are very free with your sexual favors. You can't deny that any longer, for I've seen you with my own eyes when that boy Lance was here. It hurts to know that you've heeded so little of what I've tried to teach you. I realize it's hard to be young and different from your peers, but still I was hoping you'd wait until you knew how to handle intimate relationships. I couldn't bear for an unknown man to lay a finger on me—much less take me totally—and you just met that boy, Cindy! A complete stranger who might have hurt you!”

Her pitiful pretty face lifted. “Momma, help me!”

“Haven't I done my best to help you all your life? Listen to me, Cindy, for once really listen. The best part of loving comes with learning to know a man, by allowing him to know you as a person before you begin to think about sex—you don't pick up the first man you meet!”

Bitterly she railed back. “Momma, all the books write about sex. They don't mention love. Most psychiatrists say there is no such thing as love. You've never explained to me exactly what love is. I don't even know if it really exists. I think that sex is as necessary at my age as water and food, and love is nothing but excitement; it's your blood heating up; your pulse racing, your heart pounding, your breath coming faster, heavier, and in the end it's only a natural need no worse than wanting to sleep. So despite you and your old-fashioned ideas, I give in when a boy I like wants to make out. Victor Wade wanted me ... and I wanted him. Now, don't blaze your eyes at me that way! He didn't force me. Didn't rape me—I just let him! I wanted him to do what he did!”

Her blue eyes defied me as she jumped up and stared me in the eyes. “Now go on and call me a sinner like Bart did! Yell and scream and say I'll go to hell, but I don't believe you any more than I believe him! If so, ninety-nine percent of the world's population are sinners—including you and your brother!”

Stunned, deeply hurt, I turned and left.

* * *

The beautiful summer days dragged by while Cindy sulked in her room, angry at Bart, at me, even at Chris. She refused to eat at the table if Bart or Joel were there. She stopped showering two and three times a day and allowed her hair to become just as stringy and dull as Melodie's, as if proving to us she was now on her way to abandoning us as Melodie had, and it was Melodie's manner she tried to duplicate as much as possible. However, even in sullenness her eyes still sparked with fire, and she managed to look pretty even when she looked messy.

"You're not accomplishing anything but making yourself miserable," I said when I saw her quickly turn off the TV set she had in her bedroom, as if she wanted me to believe she didn't have a single pleasure left to enjoy when her room contained every luxury but the telephone, which I'd removed so she couldn't arrange secret dates with Victor Wade or anyone else.

She sat on the bed, staring at me resentfully. "You just let me go, Momma. You go and tell Bart to let me go and I'll never bother him again. I'll never come back to this house again! NEVER!"

"Where will you go and what will you do, Cindy?" I asked with concern, afraid she'd slip out one night and we'd never hear from her again. And I knew she didn't have enough money saved to see her through longer than two weeks.

"I'LL DO WHAT I HAVE TO!" she screamed, tears of self-pity streaking her pale face, which was already losing its rosy tan. "You and Daddy gave to me generously, so I won't have to sell my body if that's what you're thinking. Unless I just want to. Right this moment I feel like being everything Bart doesn't want me to be, and that would show him, really show him."

"Then you stay in this room until you feel like being everything *I* want you to be. When you can speak to me with respect, without yelling, and express to me some mature

decisions on what you intend to do with your life, I'll help you escape this house.”

“Momma!” she wailed. “Don't hate me! I can't help it if I like the boys and they like me! I'd like to save myself for that special Mister Right, but I've never met anyone that special. When I refuse to let them, they go straight from me to some other girl who doesn't refuse. How did you manage it, Momma? What did you do to keep all those men loving you, and only you?”

All those men? I didn't know how to answer.

Instead, like other parents put on the spot, I avoided giving the straight answer I didn't have anyway. “Cindy, your father and I love you very much, you should know that. Jory loves you. And the twins smile just to see you come near them. Before you decide to do something rash, let's sit down with your father, with Jory, and then you have your say, and let us know what you want for yourself. And if it is at all reasonable, we will do what we can to see that you obtain your goals.”

“You won't let Bart in on any of this?” she asked suspiciously.

“No, darling. Bart has proven he doesn't reason when it comes to you. Ever since the day you joined our family he's resented you, and at this late date there doesn't seem to be much any of us can do about that. As for Joel, I don't like him, either, and he has no place in our family discussion about your future.”

Suddenly she flung her arms about my neck. “Oh, Momma, I'm so ashamed I said so many ugly things. I wanted to hurt you the other day because Bart had shamed me so much. Save me from Bart, Momma. Find a way, please, please.”

After Chris, Jory, Cindy, and I talked, we found a way to save Cindy not only from Bart but from herself. I tried to calm Bart, who wanted to punish her more drastically.

“She's only adding fuel to the fire already burning in the village,” he shouted when I entered his office. “I try to lead a decent, God-fearing life—now don't you yell at me and say

you've heard differently. I'll admit I was rolling in filth for a while, but things have changed. I didn't enjoy those women. Melodie was the only one who gave me anything that approached love."

I tried to keep the frown from my face. How easily he had turned away from her once he knew he had her loving him ...

Looking around at all the valuables in his office, I wondered again if Bart didn't love things more than he loved people; I stared at the luxurious antique Orientals that he'd purchase at auctions, costing hundreds of thousands. His furniture put that in the White House to shame. He *would* be the wealthiest man in the world if he kept doubling his five hundred thousand a year every few months, the way he was somehow managing to do now. Even before he came fully "into his own" he'd have made his billion or so. He was clever, quick, brilliant. What a pity he couldn't be more to mankind than just another greedy, selfish millionaire.

"Leave now, Mother. You waste my time." He swiveled his chair around and stared out at the beautiful gardens now in full bloom. "Send Cindy away—anywhere. Just get her out of my hair."

"Cindy told us last night she'd like to spend the remainder of the summer in a New England drama school. She had the name and address of the one she preferred. Chris called to check them out, and they seem reliable and have a good reputation. So she's leaving in three days."

"Good riddance to rubbish," he said indifferently.

Standing, I threw him a look of pity. "Before you condemn Cindy so harshly, Bart, think about yourself. Has she done any worse than you have?"

He began to use his computer without replying.

I slammed the door behind me.

* * *

Three days later I was helping Cindy finish her packing. We'd been shopping, so she had more than enough casual clothes, six pairs of new shoes, and two new swimsuits. She kissed

Jory good-bye, then lingered with the twins cuddled in her arms. “Dear little babies,” she crooned, “I’ll be back. I’ll sneak in and out and won’t let Bart even see me. Jory, you should get away from here, too. Momma, you and Daddy go with him.” Reluctantly she put the twins back in their play pen and came to hug and kiss me. I was already crying. I was losing my daughter. I knew from the way she looked at me that nothing between us would ever be quite the same again.

Still she came to me and hugged me. “Daddy’s going to drive me to the airport,” she said as she bowed her head on my shoulder. “You can come too, if you don’t cry and feel sorry for me, because I’m happier than any lark to be free of this damned house. And take me seriously for once—get Jory and yourselves free of this house. It’s an evil house, and now I hate its spirit just as much as once I loved its beauty.”

We drove to the airport without Cindy bidding Bart or Joel farewell.

Without another word to me, her remote expression told me everything. She was warmer with Chris, kissing him goodbye. She only waved to me as she raced toward her departure gate. “Don’t hang around and wait for my plane to take off. I’m boarding it gladly.”

“You will write?” Chris asked.

“Naturally, when I can find time.”

“Cindy,” I called despite myself, wanting to protect her again, “write at least once a week. We care about what happens to you. We’ll be here to do what we can when you need us. And sooner or later, Bart will find what he’s looking for. He’ll change. I’ll see to it that he changes. I’ll do anything I have to so we can be a family again.”

“He won’t find his soul, Momma,” she called back coolly, backing away even farther. “He was born without one.”

Before her plane left the ground, my tears stopped flowing and my determination hardened into concrete. *Indeed, before I died, I was going to see my family united, made whole and healthy—if it took the rest of my life.*

Chris made attempts to pull me out of my depression as he drove me back to what had to be called “home.” “How’s the nurse making out?”

My concern for Cindy had kept me so involved that I’d paid little attention to the beautiful, dark-haired nurse Chris had recently hired to live in and help with the twins and Jory. She’d been in the house a few days and I’d hardly said more than six words to her.

“What does Jory think of Toni?” he asked. “I took considerable pains looking for just the right one. In my opinion, she’s a real find.”

“I don’t think he’s even looked at her, Chris. He stays so busy with his painting and the babies. They’re just beginning to crawl without so much effort. Why, yesterday I saw Cory—I mean Darren—pick up a bug from the grass and try to put it in his mouth. It was Toni who ran to prevent that. I don’t recall Jory even looking at her.”

“He will, sooner or later. And Cathy, you’ve got to stop thinking of his twins as Cory and Carrie. If Jory hears you call them Cory or Carrie he’ll be angry. They are not *our* twins—they are Jory’s.”

Chris said nothing more during the long drive back to Foxworth Hall, not even when he turned into our long drive and then drove slowly into the garage.

* * *

“What’s going on in this crazy house?” Jory asked as soon as I stepped onto the terrace, where he was seated on an athletic mat put on the flagstones. The twins were with him, playing happily in the sunshine. “Shortly after you left to drive Cindy to the airport, a crew of construction workers arrived and knocked and banged away in that downstairs room Joel likes to pray in. I didn’t see Bart, and I didn’t want to talk to Joel. And then there’s something else—”

“I don’t understand ...”

“It’s that damned nurse you and Dad hired, Mom. She’s gorgeous and she’s good at her job—when I can get hold of

her. I've been calling for ten minutes and she hasn't responded. The twins are dripping wet, and she didn't bring out enough diapers so I can change them again. I can't go in the house and get more without leaving them alone. They scream now when I try to put them in the slings. They want to be on their own. Especially Deirdre."

I diapered the twins myself and put them down for naps, then went in search of the newest member in our household.

To my astonishment I found her in the new swimming pool with Bart, both of them laughing, splashing water at one another.

"Hi, Mother!" called Bart, looking tan and healthy, and happier than I'd seen him since the days when he had believed himself in love with Melodie. "Toni plays a super game of tennis. It's great having her here. We were both so hot after all that exercise that we decided to cool off in the pool."

The look in my eyes was read clearly by Antonia Winters. Immediately she clambered out of the pool and began to dry off. She toweled her dark curly hair dry, then wrapped her red bikini with the same white towel. "Bart has asked me to call him by his first name. You won't mind if I do that, will you, Mrs. Sheffield?"

I looked her over appraisingly, wondering if she was truly responsible enough to take care of Jory and the twins. I liked her dark hair that sprang immediately into soft waves and curls to frame her face becomingly without makeup. She was about five eight and had as many voluptuous curves as Cindy, curves that Bart had despised on his sister. But from the way he was looking at the nurse, he approved of her figure very much.

"Toni," I began with control, "Jory, who I hired you to help, tried to call you to bring more diapers for the twins. He was out on the terrace with his children, and you should have been with *him*, not Bart. We hired you expecting you'd see that neither Jory or his children would be neglected."

Embarrassment heated her face. "I'm sorry, but Bart ..." and here she hesitated, seeming flustered as she glanced at him.

“It’s all right, Toni. I accept the blame, “ said Bart. “I told her Jory was fine and able to take care of himself and the twins. It seems to me he has made a big point of being independent.”

“See that this doesn’t happen again, Toni,” I said, disregarding Bart.

That damned man was going to drive all of us batty! Then I had a brilliant idea. “Bart, you and Toni would have done Jory a great favor if you had included him in your swimming party. He has full use of his arms. In fact, he has very powerful arms. And you should remember, Bart, that it’s rather dangerous to have a pool like this without a fence, when two small children are around. So, Toni, with Jory’s help, I’d like you both to begin teaching the twins how to swim ... just in case.”

Thoughtfully Bart stared at me, seeming to read my mind. He glanced again at Antonia, who was striding toward the house. “So you’re going to stay on—why?”

“Don’t you want us to stay?”

His smile radiated his dead father’s charm. “Why, yes, of course, I do. Now that Toni has come to brighten up my lonely hours.”

“You leave her alone, Bart!”

He grinned at me wickedly and began to backpaddle in the pool, performing a backward flip that brought him up near my feet to grasp my ankles so hard it hurt. For a moment I feared he’d pull me in the pool and ruin the silk dress I wore.

I stared down and met his dark, suddenly menacing, eyes, not flinching. “Let go of my ankles. I’ve already had my morning swim.”

“Why not swim with me sometimes?”

What did he see that made the threat leave and sadness come, a look so wistful he leaned to kiss my toes with the pink nails that peeked through the sandals? Then *he* was breaking my heart. Speaking with the exact tones of his dead father: “I think that I shall never see, anyone quite as lovely as thee ...”

He looked up. “See, Mother, I’ve got a bit of artistic talent, too.”

This was my moment. He was vulnerable, touched by something he saw on my face. “Yes, of course you do, but Bart, don’t you feel just a little sorry that Cindy is gone?”

His dark eyes grew hard, remote. “No, not sorry. I’m glad she’s gone. Did I prove to you what she really was?”

“You proved just how hateful you can be.”

His eyes darkened more. A fiercely determined look came to frighten me. He glanced toward the house on hearing some slight shuffling noise. I looked that way. Joel had come out onto the grassy area that enclosed our long oval pool.

Silently Joel condemned us with his pale blue eyes, his long-fingered bony hands steepled beneath his chin. He tilted back his head and stared heavenwise. His weak, sweet voice came to us falteringly. “You keep the Lord waiting, Bart, while you waste your time.”

Helplessly I watched Bart’s eyes flood with guilt before he scampered from the pool. For a moment he stood in all his youthful male glory, his long, strong legs deeply bronze, his belly hard and flat, his shoulders wide, his muscles firm, rippling beneath his skin, the hair on his chest curling, and for a flashing second I thought he was flexing his strong muscles, preparing them for a lion’s charge that would lunge him straight at Joel’s throat. I tensed, wondering if he would even consider striking his uncle.

A cloud drifted over the sun. Somehow it caused shadows from the unlit poolside lamps to form a cross on the ground. Bart stared downward.

“You see, Bart,” said Joel in a compelling voice I’d never heard before, “you neglect your duties and the sun disappears. God gives you his sign of the cross. He’s always watching. He hears. He knows you. For you have been chosen.”

Chosen for what?

Almost as if Joel had him hypnotized, Bart followed his great-uncle into the house, leaving me standing alone beside

the pool. I hurried to tell Chris about Joel. “What can he mean, Chris—by saying that Bart has been chosen?”

Chris had just come in from visiting Jory and the twins. He forced me to sit, to relax. He even handed me my favorite mixed drink before he sat beside me on our small balcony overlooking the gardens and the mountains all around. “I had a few words with Joel minutes ago. It seems Bart hired workers to construct a small chapel in that small, empty room he favors for his prayers.”

“A chapel?” I asked with bewilderment. “Why do we need a chapel?”

“I don’t think it is meant for us, it’s for Bart and Joel. A place where they can worship without going into the village and facing up to all the villagers who despise Foxworths. And if it’s what Bart thinks will help him to find himself, for God’s sake, don’t say a word to condemn what he’s doing with Joel. Cathy, I don’t think Joel is an evil man. I think, more than anything he’s trying to make himself a candidate for sainthood.”

“A saint? Why, that would be like putting a halo above the head of Malcolm!”

Chris grew impatient with me. “Let Bart do what he wants. I’ve decided it’s time we left here, anyway. I can’t talk to you in this house and expect a sane answer. We’ll move to Charlottesville and take Jory, the twins, and Toni with us, just as soon as I can find a house that’s suitable.”

Unknown to me, Jory had rolled himself into our suite of rooms, and he startled me when he spoke up. “Mom, Dad may be right. Joel could be the kind, benign saint he often appears. Sometimes I think we are both overly suspicious, and then again, you are so often right. I study Joel when he isn’t watching. I think in many ways he’s trying not to be what we most fear—a duplicate of the grandfather you both hated.”

“I think all of this is ridiculous! Of course Joel isn’t like his father, or else he wouldn’t have hated him so much,” Chris flared with sudden and unusual anger, his expression hard and totally out of patience not only with me but with Jory. “All this

talk about souls being born again in later generations is absolute nonsense. We don't need to add complications to our lives when they're complicated enough already."

The next Monday Chris drove off again, heading back to the job he now loved just as much as he'd loved being a practicing physician. I stood staring after his car, feeling my rival was his blossoming love affair with biochemistry.

The dinner table seemed lonely without Chris or Cindy there, and Toni was upstairs putting the twins to bed, a fact that annoyed Bart greatly. He said several things to Jory about Toni, meant to imply she was already madly in love with him. This information didn't affect Jory one way or another; he was too deep in his own thoughts. He didn't say two words during the entire meal, even when eventually Toni did join us.

* * *

Another Friday evening came, and with it Chris returned, as once Daddy had come home every Friday. Somehow or other I was disturbed by the similarities of our lives compared to our parents' lives. Saturday we spent most of the day in the pool with Jory and the twins, with Toni and I supporting the babies as Chris helped Jory, who really didn't need much help. He took off across the water, expertly swimming, his strong arms more than making up for his legs that trailed limply behind. In the pool, with his legs under the water, he appeared so much himself that it showed on his happy face.

"Hey, this is great! Let's not move away from here yet. There aren't many houses in Charlottesville with pools like this. And I need the wide hallways and the elevator. And I've grown accustomed to Bart, and even to Joel."

"I might not be coming next weekend." Chris didn't meet my eyes as he gave out this startling information at our Sunday breakfast table. He went on, steadfastly refusing to look my way or meet anyone's eyes. "There's a convention of biochemists in Chicago and I'd like to fly there. I'll be gone two weeks. If you want to join me, Cathy, I'd be grateful."

Bart keened his ears my way, digging his spoon into his ripe melon. His dark eyes held a quiet, waiting look, as if his

entire life depended upon my answer. I wanted to go with Chris. In the worst way I wanted to escape this house, its problems, and to be alone with the man I loved. I wanted to be near him, but I had to deny him and make this last-ditch effort to save Bart. “I’d like very much to go with you, Chris. But Jory is embarrassed to ask Toni to do some intimate things for him. He needs me here.”

“For Christ’s sake! That’s why we hired her! She’s a nurse!”

“Chris, not under my roof do you take the Lord’s name in vain.”

Glaring at Bart for saying this, Chris rose to his feet. “I’ve suddenly lost my appetite. I’ll eat breakfast in town, if I can regain an appetite for anything again.”

He glared at me accusingly, flashed angry eyes at Bart, put his hand briefly on Jory’s shoulder, and then he was off.

It was a good thing I’d asked him to find a nurse before this happened. Now he’d more than likely close his ears to what I wanted to do for my two sons who were, in one way or another, driving a wedge between us. Yet I couldn’t leave Jory when I wasn’t really sure Toni would take good care of him, not yet.

Toni joined us at our luncheon table wearing a fresh white uniform. The three of us at the table talked of the weather and of other mundane things while she sat with her eyes fixed on Bart. Beautiful soft, luminous, gray eyes filled with awe—and infatuation. It was so obvious I wanted to warn her to look at Jory, to see him and not the man who was most likely to destroy her.

Sensing her admiration, Bart turned on his charm, laughing and telling her some silly stories that mocked the little boy he’d been. Each word he said entranced her more, as Jory sat unnoticed in his detested chair, pretending to read the morning newspaper.

Day by day I could see Toni’s infatuation with Bart growing, even as she kindly tended to the twins and patiently

did what she could for Jory. My firstborn son stayed in a sullen mood, waiting constantly for telephone calls from Melodie, waiting for letters that didn't come, waiting for someone to help with things he used to do for himself and no longer could. I sensed his impatience when it took the servants so long to make up his bed, to tidy his rooms, to get out of his way and leave him alone.

He drove himself relentlessly, hired an art instructor to come three times a week and teach him different techniques. Work, work, work ... he was driving himself to become the best artist possible, as once he'd dedicated himself to practicing his ballet exercises morning, night and noon.

The four *Ds* of the ballet world never died in some of us. Drive, Dedication, Desire, Determination.

"Do you think Toni is an adequate nursemaid for the twins?" I asked one evening as she took off down the road, pushing the twins in a double stroller. They loved being outdoors. Just to see the stroller brought squeals of pleasure and excitement. No sooner were the words out of my mouth than both Jory and I saw Bart racing to catch up with the nurse. Then the two of them were pushing Jory's children.

Uneasily I waited for Jory to speak. He said nothing. I glanced to see his bitter expression as he stared after Bart, now taking charge of his children, and the nurse I'd hired for him. It was as if I could read his thoughts. He didn't stand a chance with any woman now that he was in that chair. Now that his legs didn't dance, or even walk. Yet his doctors had told Chris and me that many handicapped men married and lived more or less normal lives. The percentages for marriage were much higher for disabled men than for handicapped women. "Women have more compassion than men. Most normal men think more of their own needs. It takes an exceptionally compassionate and understanding man to marry a woman who isn't physically normal."

"Jory, do you still miss Melodie?"

He stared gloomily before him, deliberately turning his eyes away from Toni and Bart, who'd paused to sit on a tree

stump, apparently talking.

“I try not to do much thinking at all. It’s a good way to keep from worrying about the years ahead, and how I’m going to manage. Eventually I will be alone, and I fear that day, fearing it’s more than I can handle.”

“Chris and I will always be with you, as long as you need us, and as long as we live; but long before either of us die, you will have found someone else. I know that will happen.”

“How do you know that? I’m not sure I even want anyone. I’d be embarrassed now to have a wife. I’m trying to find something to do to fill the empty place that dancing left, and so far I haven’t. The best thing in my life now are my twins and my parents.”

I glanced again at the pair on the tree stump, just in time to see Bart jump up to lift the twins out of their double stroller, and then he was playing with them on the roadside grass. They liked everyone and even tried to charm Joel, who never touched them, never spoke to them as we did. Faintly we could hear the laughter of the little boy and girl who grew prettier and prettier each day. Bart looked and acted happy. I told myself that Bart needed someone too, just as desperately as Jory did. In a way, he needed someone even more than Jory. Inevitably Jory would find his way, with or without a wife.

We sat on and on, watching the pair who played with the twins. A full moon rose, appearing exceedingly large and golden in the twilight. A bird over the lake not so far away made its lonely cry. “What’s that?” I asked, sitting up straighter. “I never heard a bird like that before down here.”

“It’s a loon,” said Jory, looking in the direction of the lake. “Sometimes a storm blows them down this way. Mel and I used to rent a cottage on Mount Desert Isle, and we’d hear the cries of the loons and think them romantic. I wonder why we thought that. Now that cry just sounds forlorn, even eerie.”

Out of the dark near the shrubbery, Joel spoke up. “There are some who say that lost souls inhabit the bodies of loons.”

His benign voice said softly, “Those who can’t find peace in their graves, Catherine. Those who hesitate between Heaven and Hell, looking back to their time on earth to see what they left unfinished. By looking back, they are trapped forever, or at least until their life’s work is done.”

I shivered as if a cold wind blew from the cemetery.

“Don’t try to digest that, Mom,” said Jory impatiently. “I wish I could use some of the descriptive adjectives that Cindy’s age group can throw out with so much ease and not feel crass. Funny,” he added more thoughtfully as Joel disappeared again in the darkness, “when I was in New York and I was disgusted, impatient, or angry, I used gutter language, too. Now, even when I think about saying those words, something keeps me from doing it.”

He didn’t have to explain. I knew exactly what he meant. It was all around us, in the atmosphere, the clarity of the mountain air, the closeness of the stars ... the presence of a strict and demanding God. Everywhere.

The New Lovers



They met in the shadows. They kissed in the halls. They haunted the sunny, spacious gardens, roamed there in the moonlight, too. They swam together, played tennis together, strolled hand in hand by the lakeshores; they walked and jogged in the woods, had picnics by the pool, by the lake, in the woods; went dancing, to restaurants, then the theater, the movies.

They lived in their own world while we were apparently invisible, not seen or heard by them, not when they could look at each other across the dining table with dazzled eyes, as if they had the world by its tail and would never let it go. I was caught up in their romance, despite myself, thrilled to be around such glowing, beautiful young lovers, a matched pair with their dark hair almost the same color. I was happy and I was unhappy, delighted, yet so sad that it was not Jory who had found another woman to love. I wanted to warn Toni she was on treacherous ground, that Bart was not to be trusted, but then I'd look at Bart's radiant face, free of guilt or shame. This time he wasn't stealing anything that belonged to his brother. My critical words would fade away unspoken. Who was I to tell him whom he could love? I, of all people, had to stay quiet and let him have his chance. This was different than it had been with Melodie; Toni didn't belong to Jory.

Bart showed his happiness by becoming more confident, and with the security in his newfound love he forgot all his peculiar habits and his obsessive concern for neatness and allowed himself to relax in sports clothes. In the past, a thousand-dollar suit worn with expensive silk shirts and ties had given him his status symbols; now he didn't care, for Toni had given him his sense of worth. I could tell that for the first time in his life he seemed to have found stable ground to stand on.

He smiled and kissed me several times on the cheek. “I know what you wanted to happen, I do! I do! But it’s me she loves, Mother! *Me!* Toni sees something wonderful and noble in *me!* Do you realize how that makes me feel? Melodie used to say she saw these qualities in me too, but I didn’t feel noble or wonderful when I knew what harm I was doing to Jory. Now it’s different. Toni’s never been married, never had a lover before, although she’s had lots of boyfriends. Mother, think of that! I am her first lover! It makes me feel so special to be the one she waited for. Mother, we have something wonderfully special. In me she sees the same things that *you see* in Jory.”

“I think that’s wonderful, Bart. I am happy for you both.”

“Are you really?” His dark eyes turned serious as they sought to delve the truth of my statement. Before I could reply, Joel spoke from the open doorway of Bart’s study.

“You stupid fool! You think that nurse really wants *you*? That woman sees the nobility of your money! It’s your bank accounts she’s after, Bart Foxworth! Have you observed the way she strolls through this house, her eyes half closed, obviously pretending that she’s the mistress here! She doesn’t love you. She is using you to get what every woman wants—money, control, power, and then more money—and once you marry her, she’ll be set for life, even if you divorce her later on.”

“Shut up!” barked Bart, turning to glare furiously at the old man. “You’re jealous because I have no time left to spend with you. This is the cleanest, purest love of my life—and I’m not going to allow you to spoil it!”

Joel bowed his head meekly, appearing crestfallen as he templed his palms together under his chin before he slipped down the hall, obviously headed for that special small room that Bart had converted into a family chapel, although only Joel and Bart ever prayed there. I’d never even bothered to look inside.

I stood on my toes to kiss Bart’s cheek, to hug him and wish him good luck. “I’m happy for you, Bart. Sincerely

happy. I truthfully admit I had hopes that Toni might fall in love with Jory and make up for his loss of Melodie. I wanted the twins to have a mother while they are still babies. She would have the chance to learn to love them like her own, and they wouldn't remember any mother but her. But since it hasn't happened that way, seeing your happiness and hers makes me feel warm and good inside."

Delving, delving, those dark eyes that tried to read my soul. I had to ask: "Will you marry her?"

His hands rested lightly on my shoulders. "Yes, I'll ask her soon, after I make sure she isn't deceiving me. I have a method all planned to test her."

"Bart that's not fair. When you love you have to trust."

"To have blind faith in anyone but God is idiotic."

Only too well I remembered what Chris was always telling me. *Seek and you shall find*. I knew that well enough. I'd always been suspicious of the best that life gave me, and soon enough the best had disappeared.

"Mother ... ," he began with surprising candor, "if Jory had kept his dancing legs, I know now that Melodie would never have let me touch her. She loved him, not me. She may have even pretended I was him, for sometimes I see a certain resemblance between us. I also think Melodie saw what she wanted to see, and she turned to me because he couldn't satisfy her physical needs any longer. I was a substitute lover for my brother, just as I've always come in second to Jory. Only with Toni have I come first."

"You're right this time, Bart. Jory is here and Toni isn't seeing him. She sees you, only you."

His lips took on an ironic twist. "Yeah ... but you're not mentioning that I'm up on my legs and he's down. I've got the most money, and he's got a pittance in comparison. And he's already burdened with two children that won't be hers. Three strikes against Jory ... so I win."

Now I was wanting him to win; he needed Toni ten times more than Jory did. My Jory was strong even when he was

down, and Bart was so vulnerable and uncertain while he was perfectly healthy. “Bart, if you can’t love yourself for what you are, how do you expect anyone else to? You’ve got to start believing that even without money Toni would still love you.”

“We will soon find out,” he said tonelessly, a certain something in his eyes that reminded me of Joel. He turned to dismiss me. “I’ve got work to do, Mother. See you later ...” and he was smiling at me with more love than he’d shown since he was nine.

Contrary, complex, perplexing, challenging, the man my little troubled Bart had grown into ...

Cindy had written to tell us how fabulous her summer days in the New England drama class were going. “We act in real productions, Momma, in real barns that are temporarily converted into theaters. I love it, really love every aspect of show biz.”

Often I missed Cindy as the summer days passed. We all swam in the lake or pool, introducing the rapidly growing twins to all the wonders of nature. They had small teeth now and were both fast crawlers to wherever they wanted to go, and that was everywhere. Nothing was safe from their small, grasping hands that considered every object a food item. Flaxen blond hair turned into ringlets on their heads, pink lips turned rosy from the sun, and their cheeks stayed flushed with color, while their wide, innocent, blue eyes devoured all faces, swallowed down all first impressions.

We swept the glorious hot summer days away like iridescent dust settling into photograph albums that would never let the days and happy moments truly disappear. Snap snap snap went three different kinds of cameras, as Chris, Jory, and I took picture after picture of our wonderful twins. They adored being outdoors, sniffing the flowers, feeling the tree bark, watching the birds, squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, the ducks and geese that often invaded our swimming pool, only to be chased off quickly by the adults.

Before I knew it, summer was gone and autumn was upon us again. This year Jory could enjoy this glorious season of

splendor in the mountains. The trees foresting the mountain-side flamed into spectacular colors.

“A year ago I was in Hell,” said Jory, staring at the trees and mountains and glancing down at his left hand, which no longer wore a wedding band of gold. “My final divorce papers came, and you know, I didn’t feel anything but numb. I lost my wife the day I lost the use of my legs, and still I’m surviving and finding that life does go on and it can be good, even when experienced from a chair.”

My arms went around him. “Because you have strength, Jory, and determination. You have your children, so your marriage was not without its rewards. You still have celebrity status, don’t forget that, and you can, if you want, start teaching ballet classes.”

“Nope, I can’t neglect my son and daughter, not when they don’t have a mother.” Then he tilted his head back to smile at me. “Not that you don’t make a super mother figure, but I want you and Dad to live your own lives, not be burdened down with small children who might hamper your lifestyle.”

Laughing, I tousled his dark curls. “What lifestyle, Jory? Chris and I are happy where we are, with our sons and grandchildren.”

* * *

The bright fall days slowly chilled, bringing the acrid scent of woodfires burning. I was drawn outside early each day, taking Jory and the twins with me. The twins were pulling themselves up to stand by holding on to hands or furniture. Deirdre had even taken a few faltering, wide-legged steps, her bottom fat with diapers and plastic panties, covered by other pretty panties that she seemed to adore. Darren seemed more than content with his fast crawl that took him speedily wherever he wanted to go—which was everywhere. I’d even caught him crawling backward down those high front stairs, with Deirdre close behind him.

On this fine early October day, Deirdre rode on Jory’s lap, happily jabbering to herself, as I carried a more subdued Darren, using the new dirt trails that Bart had considerably

ordered leveled so Jory could drive his chair through the woods. Tree roots that might have tripped up his chair had been removed at considerable cost. Now that Bart had a love of his own, he treated his brother with much more consideration and respect.

“Mother, Bart and Toni are lovers, aren’t they?” Jory shot out unexpectedly.

“Yes,” I admitted with reluctance.

He said something then that startled me. “Isn’t it odd how we’re born into families and have to accept what we’re given? We don’t ask for each other, yet we’re glued all our lives to those whom we’d never speak to twice if they weren’t blood related.”

“Jory, you don’t really dislike Bart that much, do you?”

“I’m not speaking of Bart, Mom. He’s been rather decent lately. It’s that old man who says he’s your uncle that I dislike. The more I see of him the more I detest him. At first when he showed up, I pitied him. Now I look at Joel and see something evil beneath those faded blue eyes. Somehow or other he reminds me of John Amos Jackson. I believe he’s using us, Mom. Not just for practical reasons of having a home and food to eat ... he has something else in mind. Just today, I happened to hear Joel whispering to Bart in the back hall. I think from what I overheard, Bart is going to tell Toni the complete truth about his past—his psychological problems—and the fact that if he’s ever committed to an institution he’ll lose his entire inheritance. He’s being urged to do this by Joel. Mom, he shouldn’t tell her! If Toni truly loves him, she’ll accept the fact he’s had his problems. From all I can see, he’s normal now, and very brilliant at making money grow.”

My head bowed. “Yes, Jory. Bart told me himself, but he keeps putting off that revelation, as if he himself believes it’s his money she’s after.”

Jory nodded, holding fast to Deirdre, who was trying to climb down from his lap and explore by herself. Just seeing his sister do that made Darren anxious to be free as well.

“Has Joel ever said anything to indicate he might try to break his sister’s will and take the money that Bart expects to inherit the day he’s thirty-five?”

Jory’s laugh was short, dry. “Mom, that old man never says anything that isn’t a *double entendre*. He doesn’t like me and avoids me as much as possible. He disapproves of the fact that once I was a dancer and wore skimpy costumes. He disapproves of you. I see him watching you with narrowed eyes, and he mutters to himself, ‘Just like her mother ... only worse, far worse.’ I’m sorry to tell you that, but he’s scary, Mom, really a sinister old man. He looks at Dad with hatred. And he prowls the house at night. Since I’ve been disabled, my ears have become very sharp. I hear the floorboards in the hall outside my door squeak, and sometimes my door is opened ever so slightly. It’s Joel, I know it’s him.”

“But why would he be peeking in on you?”

“I don’t know.”

I bit down on my lower lip, imitating Bart’s nervous habit. “Now you are frightening me, Jory. I have reasons to think he means harm for all of us, too. I believe it was Joel who smashed the ship you made for Bart, and I truly believe Joel never mailed off those Christmas invitations. He wanted Bart to be hurt, so he took them up to his room, removed the R.S.V.P. cards, signed them as if the invitations were accepted, and then mailed them back to Bart. It’s the only explanation of why no one showed up.”

“Mom ... why didn’t you tell me this before?”

How could I tell him of all my suspicions about Joel without his reacting much like Chris had? Chris had completely rejected my story of how Joel might have planned to hurt Bart. And sometimes even I thought I was much too imaginative and gave Joel credit for being more evil than he actually was.

“And what’s more, Jory, I think it was Joel who overheard the servants in the kitchen talking about Cindy meeting that boy, Victor Wade, and he quickly passed that information along to Bart. How else would Bart have known? Servants are

to Bart like designs on the wallpaper, not worthy of his notice—it's Joel who does the eavesdropping so he can report what they say to Bart.”

“Mom ... I think you could very well be right about the ship, the invitations, and Cindy, too. Joel has something in mind for all of us, and I'm afraid it's not for our good.”

Deep in thought, Jory had to tell me twice that I should put his son on his lap, to ride on his other leg, and we'd make better progress through the woods. Even one twin was a load to carry for a long distance, and more than willingly I lowered Darren to his father's lap. Deirdre squealed her delight and hugged her small brother. “Mom, I believe if Toni really loves Bart enough, she'll stay, no matter what his background—or how much he inherits.”

“Jory ... that's exactly what he's trying to prove.” Around midnight, when I was almost asleep, a soft tapping sounded on my door. It was Toni.

She came in wearing a pretty rosy peignoir, her long dark hair loose and flowing, her long legs appearing as she neared my bed. “I hope you don't mind, Mrs. Sheffield ... I waited for a night when your husband wasn't with you.”

“Call me Cathy,” I said as I sat up and reached for my own robe. “I'm not sleeping. Just lying here thinking, and I appreciate another woman to talk to.”

She began to pace the floor of my large bedroom. “I've got to speak to a woman, someone who can understand more readily than a man, so that's why I'm here.”

“Sit down. I'm ready to listen.” Tentatively she perched on a love seat, twisting a tress of her dark hair over and over, sometimes pulling it in between her lips.

“I'm terribly upset ... Cathy. Bart's told me some very disturbing facts today. He mentioned that you already know about us, that he loves me and I love him. I think you have caught us a few times in one room or another in rather intimate moments. And I thank you for pretending not to notice, so I

wouldn't feel embarrassed. I've got all kinds of notions that most people think are obsolete."

She gave me a nervous smile, seeking my understanding. "The moment I looked at Bart I fell in love. There's something so magnetic about his dark eyes, so mystical and compelling. And then tonight he took me into his office, sat down behind his desk and like a cold and distant stranger told me a long story about himself, as if he were talking about someone else, someone he didn't like. I felt like a business client whose every reaction was being judged. I didn't know just what he thought I'd reveal. It occurred to me he expected me to appear shocked or disgusted, and at the same time his eyes were so beseeching.

"He loves you, Cathy ... loves you almost to the point of obsession," she said, making me sit up straighter, stunned with her crazy notion. "I don't even think he realizes how much he adores you. He thinks he hates you because of your relationship with your brother." She flushed and lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry I have to even mention this, but I'm trying to be open."

"Go on," I urged.

"Because Bart feels he should hate you for that, he tries to. Still, something in you, in him, keeps him from ever really deciding which emotion will reign, love or hatred. He wants a woman like you, only he doesn't know that." She paused, looked up to meet my wide and interested eyes. "Cathy, I told him what I honestly thought, that he was looking for a woman like his mother. He went pale, almost dead white. He appeared totally shocked at the idea."

She paused to watch my reaction. "Toni, you have to be wrong. Bart doesn't want a woman like me, but the exact opposite."

"Cathy, I've studied psychology, and Bart does protest too much about you, so while I listened, I tried to keep an open mind. Bart impounded also the fact that he's never been mentally stable, and that any day he could lose his mind and, with it, his inheritance. Why, it's as if he wants me to hate him,

to cut all ties and run away ... so I am going to run,” she sobbed, her hands covering her face so that her tears trickled between her long, elegant fingers. “As much as I love him and I thought he loved me, I can’t continue to love and sleep with a man who has so little faith in my integrity—and worse than that, in his own.”

Quickly I was on my feet and striding to comfort her. “Don’t go, please, Toni, stay. Give Bart another chance. Give him time to think this through. Bart has always been inclined to act on impulse. He also has that old great-uncle who whispers in his ears, telling him you love him for his money alone. It’s not Bart who is crazy, but Joel, who tells Bart what he should look for in a future wife.”

Hopefully she stared at me, trying to check her flow of tears. I went on, determined to help Bart escape the childhood sense of being unworthy and the adult influence of Joel. “Toni, the twins adore you, and there’s only so much I can do. Stay to help with Jory and help me keep him entertained. He needs professional help to maintain physical progress, too. And keep in mind that Bart is unpredictable, sometimes unreasonable, but he loves you. He’s told me several times how much he loves and admires you. He’s testing your love for him by telling you what is the truth. He *was* unstable mentally when he was a child, but there were good reasons that caused his mental disturbance. Hold fast to your belief in him and you can save him from himself and his great-uncle.”

Toni stayed.

Life went on as usual.

Deirdre, before her first birthday, was walking anywhere she chose to go, or we’d allow. Small and dainty, her golden curls bobbing, she charmed us all with her incessant babbling, which soon turned into simple words, leading the way for Darren to follow. Once she heard herself speak, she couldn’t stop. Although Darren was slower to walk, he was not slower to investigate dark, dim places that scared his twin sister. He was the incessant explorer, the one who had to pick everything up and examine it, so I was forced to put expensive and delicate objets d’art on shelves he couldn’t reach.

A letter came from Cindy stating that she was homesick for her family and wanted to come home and spend Thanksgiving through Christmas, but she was invited to a fabulous New Year's Eve party and would fly back to attend that.

I gave the letter to Jory to read. Smiling, he looked up. "Have you told her about Bart and his love affair with Toni?"

"No," I said, for I was going to let her see and find out for herself. Of course, before she'd left last summer, Toni had been with us only two days, but at that time Cindy had been so discontented she hadn't paid attention to what she thought was just more hired help.

The day came when we were expecting Cindy home for the holidays, a bitterly cold day. Chris and I were at the airport when she came through the gate, dressed in bright crimson, looking so beautiful all the people in the airport turned to stare her way. "Mom! Dad!" she cried happily, flinging herself first into my arms and then into Chris's. "I'm so happy to see you. And before you warn me, I promise to do and say nothing that will upset the applecart named Bart. This Christmas I'm going to be the perfect sweet little angel he wants me to be ... and no doubt even then he'll find something to criticize, but I won't care." Then she was asking about Jory, about the twins, and had we heard from Melodie? And how was the new nurse working out? And was our chef the same? Was Trevor still as sweet as ever?

Somehow or other, Cindy gave me the feeling we were, after all, a real family ... and that was enough to make me very happy. Once she was in the grand foyer, Toni and Bart, with Jory holding the twins on his lap, were all waiting to sing out greetings. Only Joel hung back and refused to welcome our daughter home. Bart shook her hand in a warm fashion, and that gave me such relief and pleasure. Cindy laughed. "Someday, brother Bart, you are going to be really overjoyed to see me, and maybe then you can allow your chaste lips to kiss my unholy cheek."

He flushed and glanced uneasily at Toni. "I've got a confession, Toni. In the past, Cindy and I haven't always gotten along."

“To say the least,” said Cindy. “But rest easy, Bart, I’m not here to make trouble. I didn’t bring a boyfriend. I’m going to behave myself. I’ve come because I love my family and can’t stand being away during the holidays.”

The holidays that year couldn’t have been better, unless we could have turned back the clock and made Jory whole again, and restored Melodie to him.

In a matter of a few days, Cindy and Toni became close friends. Toni went shopping with us as Jory took care of the twins with the help of a maid. Time flew as it never did when Cindy wasn’t around. The four years’ difference between her age and Toni’s didn’t matter. Generously Cindy loaned Toni one of her prettiest dresses for that Christmas Eve trip into Charlottesville where she could dance with one of the doctor’s sons she’d met the year before. Jory went as well but sat looking unhappy while Bart danced with Toni.

“Mom,” whispered Cindy when she came back to our table, “I think Bart has changed. He’s a much warmer person now. Why, I’m even beginning to think he’s human.”

Smiling, I nodded, but still I couldn’t help thinking of Joel and the way he and Bart spent so much time in that small room they’d converted into a chapel. Why? There were churches all around.

New Year’s Eve came and Bart and Toni decided to fly to New York with Cindy and celebrate there. Leaving Chris, Jory, and I to do the best we could without them. We used this opportunity to invite a few of Chris’s colleagues to our home, along with their spouses, knowing that Joel would report this to Bart when he came back. Still I didn’t care.

I bumped into Joel that night as I left the nursery. Smiling, I met his eyes. “Well, Joel, it seems my son won’t be as dependent on you once he marries Toni.”

“He’ll never marry her,” said Joel in his harsh, forecasting way. “He’s like all young men in love, a fool who can’t see the truth. She wants his money, not him, and he’ll soon find that out.”

“Joel,” I said softly, pityingly, “Bart is a very handsome young man, and a passionate one, and even if he were a ditch digger, the girls would fall for him. When he lets go of his determination to show the world how brilliant he is, he’s a very likeable young man. Leave him alone. Stop trying to mold him into something that will please you but might not suit him. Let him find his own way ... for that will be what’s the right thing for him, even if it’s not what you have in mind.”

Scornfully he looked me over. “What do you know about what’s right and wrong, niece? Haven’t you already proved you have no perception of morality? Bart will never find himself without my guidance. Hasn’t he been searching all his life and failed? Did you help him then—do you help him now? God will provide for Bart, Catherine, while you continue to plague Bart with your sins.”

He turned from me and shuffled off down the hall.

While Bart was in New York with Toni and Cindy, Jory completed his most impressive watercolor depicting Foxworth Hall. He’d darkened the rosy bricks to a dusty and dreary old ash rose, made the immaculate gardens overgrown with weeds; the cemetery was moved in closer so that tombstones showed off to the left, casting long shadows that snared the Hall in their web. Foxworth Hall looked two thousand years old and full of specters.

“Put that thing away, Jory, and try a happier subject,” I said, feeling strange. I think that was the only watercolor Jory painted that didn’t please me.

Bart and Toni flew home from New York, and immediately I noticed the difference. They didn’t look or speak to each other but went quietly to their rooms without spilling out happy tales of the fun they’d had. When I tried to broach the subject, both refused to give me details. “Leave me alone!” stormed Bart. “She’s just another woman after all.”

“I can’t tell you, Cathy,” cried Toni. “He doesn’t love me, that’s all!”

January fled by, and then came the February when we celebrated Jory’s thirty-first birthday. We had a huge cake

baked for him in the shape of a heart covered with red frosting to represent the Valentine gift he'd been, with his name in white icing, trimmed with white roses. The twins were delighted, squealing when they saw him blow out the candles. Both were seated in highchairs, one on each side of him, and before Jory could slice down into the cake, Deirdre and Darren reached simultaneously and grabbed great handfuls of the soft fresh cake. We all stared at the mess they'd made of a work of art, while they jammed the cake into their mouths and smeared their faces with red.

“What's left is still edible,” said Jory with a laugh.

Silently Toni got up to wash the hands and faces of two very messy little one-year-olds. Bart followed her every movement with sad, wistful eyes.

We were trapped, all of us, in the winter blizzards, caught in frozen time, making do with each other when others would have been welcomed, even as some of us kept on loving the wrong person.

The day came when the snow stopped and Chris could drive back to his cancer research team, which worked on and on without ever reaching any conclusions that were absolute.

Another blizzard kept Chris in Charlottesville, and two weeks dragged slowly by, although we talked every day when the lines weren't down—but they weren't comfortable conversations. Always I had the sensation that someone was listening in on another telephone.

Chris called on the next Thursday to say he'd be home, have the home fires burning, the steak charcoaled, the salad fresh, “... and wear that new white nightgown I gave you for Christmas.”

Eagerly I waited at an upstairs window to spot Chris's blue car coming around the drive, and when I did, I raced down the stairs to the garage to be there when he left his car. We came together like long separated lovers who might never have the chance to kiss and hug again. But it wasn't until we were in the sanctuary of our rooms with the doors closed that my arms slipped around his neck again. “You still feel cold. So, just to

warm you up, you are going to hear all the dull things that go on here—and in exquisite detail. Last night I overheard Joel telling Bart again that Toni is only after his money.”

“Is she?” he asked, nibbling on my ear.

“I don’t think so, Chris. I think she sincerely loves him, but I’m not sure how long her love will last, or his. It seems when they went with Cindy to New York for New Year’s Eve, Bart scolded Cindy ruthlessly again, humiliating her in a nightclub, and Cindy’s letter said he later on jumped on Toni for dancing with another man. He so shocked Toni with his brutal accusations that she hasn’t been the same since. I think she’s afraid of his jealousy.”

His eyebrows shot up quizzically, though he said nothing to remind me he was “my Bart.” “And Jory, how is he?”

“He’s adjusting marvelously, but he’s lonely and melancholy, wanting Melodie to write. He wakes up in the night and calls her name. Sometimes he inadvertently calls me Mel. I found a small article about Melodie in *Variety*. Melodie has rejoined their old ballet company and has a new partner. I showed that to Jory just today, feeling he should know. His eyes went blank. He put away his watercolors just when he’d washed in the most beautiful winter sky and refused to finish the painting. Anyway, I put the painting in a safe place, thinking he can finish it later.”

“Yes ... everything will work out.” And with that we surrendered to each other, forgetting our problems in the ecstasy we knew so well how to create.

* * *

Time flew by, wasted by small, trivial things. Daily arguments between Bart and Toni concerning his attitude toward Cindy, whom Toni really liked, as well as his suspicions of her loyalty to him and only him. “You shouldn’t have danced with that man you just met!” and on and on. There were also daily fights between them about the twins and how they should be handled, and soon enough the narrow gulf between them widened into an ocean.

We wore on each other's nerves. The sight, the sound, the closeness of living so tightly knit had its toll.

I contributed nothing to help and nothing to harm as Bart and Toni fought it out. I felt they had to solve their differences between themselves, and I would only have added complications. Once again Bart started visiting the local bars, often staying out all night. I suspected he spent many a night in brothels, or else he'd found someone else in the city. Toni spent more time with the twins, and since Jory was trying to teach them to dance and speak more clearly, naturally she spent more time with him as well.

March finally arrived with its fierce rains and winds, but also with welcome faint heralding signs of spring. I watched Toni carefully for signs of taking notice of Jory as a man and not as a patient. His eyes followed wherever she went. There were a few weeks that year when I was under the weather with a severe cold, and she took over all duties, including washing Jory's back, massaging his long legs that were bit by bit losing their fine shape. I hated seeing his beautiful legs turn into thin sticks. I suggested to Toni that she massage them several times a day. "He was always very proud of his legs, Toni. They served him so well and looked so great in tights. So, even if they don't walk or dance, or even move, do what you can to see they don't lose all their shape. Then he can retain a bit of his pride."

"Cathy, his legs are still beautiful; thin, but well shaped. He's a wonderful man, so kind and understanding and naturally cheerful. And you know, for the longest time I didn't see anyone but Bart."

"Do you think of Bart as beautiful?"

Her expression changed and grew hard. "I used to. Now I'm seeing that he's very handsome, but not beautiful in the way that Jory is. Once I thought he was perfect, but during our stay in New York, he showed so much ugliness toward me and Cindy that I began to see him differently. He was nasty and cruel to both of us. Before I knew what was happening, he embarrassed me in a nightclub by jumping on me about my dress, when it was a perfectly nice dress. Maybe it was cut a

little low, but all the girls wear dresses like that. I came home from that trip a little afraid of him. Every day my fear of him grows; he seems too harsh about harmless events and believes that everyone is wicked. I think he corrupts himself with his thoughts and forgets that beauty comes from the soul. Just last night he accused me of trying to arouse his brother sexually. He couldn't talk like that to me if he really loved me. Cathy, he'll never love me as I want and need to be loved. I woke up this morning feeling a huge emptiness in my heart, realizing that what I felt for Bart is over. He's ruined what we had by letting me know what I'm in for if I marry him," she went on brokenly. "He's got an invisible model of the perfect woman, and I'm not perfect. He thinks your one flaw is your love for Chris ... and if he ever found a woman he believed is perfect in the beginning, I'm sure he'll keep looking until he finds something he can hate about her. So I've given up on Bart."

I felt embarrassed to ask what I did, but still I had to know. "But ... are you and Bart still lovers, despite your disagreements?"

Furiously she shook her head. "NO! Of course not! He's changing every day into someone I really can't even like. He's found religion, Cathy, and according to the way he tells it, religion is going to be his salvation. Every day he tells me I should pray more, go to church ... and stay away from Jory. If he keeps it up I think I may well end up hating him, and I don't want that to happen. We had something so beautiful between us in the beginning. I want to keep that special time like a flower I can press between the pages of my memory."

She stood up to go, smearing her tears with her balled handkerchief, tugging down her tight white skirt and trying to smile. "If you want me to quit so you can hire a new nurse for Jory and his children, I'll do that."

"No, Toni, stay on," I answered quickly, afraid she'd go anyway. I didn't want her to leave now that I knew without a doubt that she didn't love Bart anymore, and Jory had finally given up hope of Melodie returning to him. And with the final hope dead, Jory had at last turned his eyes on the woman he believed was his brother's mistress.

As soon as possible I was going to inform him differently. But ... even as Toni left the room, I sat on and on, thinking of Bart and how sad it was that he couldn't hold on to love once he had it. Did he deliberately destroy love, afraid it would enslave him as he often accused me of having enslaved Chris, my own brother?

The endless days crept by. No longer did Toni's eyes follow Bart with wistful yearning, pleading mutely with him to love her again as he had in the beginning. I began to admire the way she could keep her poise regardless of some of the insulting innuendoes Bart made during meal times. He took her former love for him and turned it against her, making it seem she was loose, depraved, immoral and he'd been wrongfully seduced.

Dinner after dinner, sitting there and watching the two drift further and further apart, driven there by all the ugly words Bart found so easy to say.

Toni took my place and played the games I used to entertain Jory with ... only she could do so much more to light up his eyes and make him feel a man again.

Bit by bit the days began to mellow, the brown grass showed spikes of fresh green, the crocus came up in the woods, the daffodils blossomed, the tulips fired into flame, and the Grecian windflowers that Jory and I had planted everywhere the grass didn't grow turned the hills into paint-smearred palettes. Chris and I stood again on the balcony watching the geese return north as we stared up at our old friend and sometimes enemy, the moon. I couldn't take my eyes from the winged skein as they disappeared beyond the hills.

Life grew better with the coming of summer, when the snow couldn't keep Chris away during the weekends. Tensions eased now that we had the great outdoors to escape to.

In June the twins were one year and six months old and able to run freely anywhere we would permit. We had swings from which they couldn't fall hung from tree limbs, and how happy they were to be swung high ... or what they considered

high enough to be dangerous. They pulled the blossoms off the best of my flowers, but I didn't care—we had thousands blooming, enough to fill all the rooms with daily fresh bouquets.

Now Bart was insisting that not only the twins should attend church services but Chris and I and Jory and Toni as well. It seemed a small enough thing to do. Each Sunday we sat in our front-row pews and stared up at the beautiful stained-glass window behind the pulpit. The twins always sat between Jory and me. Joel would don a black robe as he preached fire-and-brimstone sermons. Bart sat beside me, holding my hand in such a tight grip I had to listen or have my bones broken. Next to Toni, deliberately separated from me by my second son, was Chris. I knew those sermons were meant for us, to save us from eternal hellfires. The twins were restless, like all children their age, and didn't like the pew, the confinement, the dullness of the overlong services. Only when we stood up to sing hymns did they stare up at us and seem enchanted.

“Sing, sing,” encouraged Bart, leaning to pinch tiny arms or tug on golden locks.

“Take your hands off my children!” snapped Jory. “They will sing or not sing, as is their choice.”

It was on again, the war between brothers.

Autumn again, then Halloween when Chris and I took the twins by their small hands and led them to the one neighbor we considered “safe” enough not to recriminate us or our children. Our little goblins timidly accepted their first Halloween trick-or-treat candy, then screamed all the way home with the thrill of having two Hershey bars and two packs of chewing gum of their very own.

Winter came, and Christmas and the New Year started without anything special happening, for this year Cindy didn't fly home. She was too busy with her budding career to do more than call long distance or write short but informative letters.

Bart and Toni now moved in different universes.

Perhaps I was not the only one who guessed that Jory had fallen deeply in love with Toni, now that all attempts at restoring a brotherly relationship with Bart had failed. I couldn't blame Jory, not when Bart had taken Melodie and driven her away and was even now trying to hold fast to Toni just because he could detect Jory's growing interest. To keep Jory from having her, he was turning again toward Toni ...

Loving Toni gave Jory new reasons for living. It was written in his eyes, written on his new zeal for getting up early and beginning all those difficult exercises, standing for the first time, using parallel bars we'd had put in his room. As soon as the water was warm enough, he swam the length of our large swimming pool three times in early mornings and late evenings.

Maybe Toni was still waiting for Bart to make her his wife, though she often denied this. "No, Cathy, I don't love him now. I only pity him for not knowing who or what he is and, more importantly, what he wants for himself but money and more money." It occurred to me that, inexplicably, Toni was as rooted here as any one of us.

The Sunday church services made me nervous and tired. The strong words shouted from the weak lungs of an old man brought back terrifying memories of another old man I'd seen but once. *Devil's issue. Devil's spawn.* Evil seed planted in the wrong soil. Even wicked thoughts were judged the same as wicked deeds—and what wasn't sinful to Joel? Nothing. Nothing at all.

"We're not going to attend anymore," I stated firmly to Chris, "and we were fools to even try to please Bart. I don't like the kind of ideas Joel is planting in the twins' impressionable young heads." True to Chris's agreement, he and I refused to attend "church" services or allow the twins to hear all that shouting about Hell and its punishments.

* * *

Joel came to the play area in the gardens, under the trees where there were a sandbox, swings, a slide, and a spin-around that the twins loved to play on. It was a fine sunny day

in July, and he looked rather touching and sweet as he sat between the twins and began to teach them how to do cat cradles, twining the string and intriguing the curious twins. They abandoned the sandpile with the pretty awning overhead and sat beside him, looking up at him in bright anticipation of making a new friend out of an old enemy.

“An old man knows many little skills to entertain small children. Do you know I can make airplanes and boats out of paper? And the boats will sail on the water.”

Their round eyes of amazement didn't please me. I frowned. Anyone could do that.

“Save your energies for writing new sermons, Joel,” I said, meeting his meek, watery eyes. “I grew tired of the old ones. Where is the New Testament in your sermons? Teach Bart about that. Christ *was* born. He did deliver his Sermon on the Mount. Deliver to him *that* particular sermon, *Uncle*. Speak to us of forgiveness, of doing unto others as you would have done unto you. Tell us of the bread cast upon the waters of forgiveness returning to us tenfold.”

“Forgive me if I have been neglectful of our Lord's one truly begotten son,” he said humbly.

“Come, Cory, Carrie,” I called, getting up to leave. “Let's go see what Daddy is doing.”

Joel's lowered head jerked upright. His faded blue eyes took on heaven's deeper blue. I bit down on my tongue to observe the twisted smile that Joel displayed. He nodded sagely. “Yes, I know. To you they are the ‘other twins’—those born of evil seed planted in the wrong soil.”

“How dare you say that to me!” I flared.

I didn't realize then that by occasionally calling Jory's twins by the names of my beloved dead twins I was only adding fuel to the fire—a fire that was already, unknown to me, sending up small red sparks of brimstone.

Comes a Morning Dark



A storm threatened a perfectly lovely summer day with dark ominous clouds, forcing me to hurry outdoors to cut my morning flowers while they were still fresh with dew. I drew up short when I saw Toni snipping yellow and white daisies that she brought to Jory in a small milkglass vase. She put them near the table where Jory was working on another watercolor showing a lovely dark-haired woman very much like Toni picking flowers. I was hidden by the dense shrubbery and could take a peek now and then without either one seeing me. For some strange reason, my intuitiveness warned me to stay quiet and say nothing.

Jory thanked Toni politely, gave her a brief smile, swished his brush in clean water, dipped it in his blue mixture and added a few touches here and there. “Never can seem to mix the exact color of the sky,” he murmured as if to himself. “The sky is always changing ... oh, what I could give to have Turner for my teacher ...”

She stood watching the sun play on Jory’s waving blue-black hair. He hadn’t shaved, and that made him look twice as virile, although not as fresh. Suddenly he looked up and noticed her overlong stare. “I apologize for the way I look, Toni,” he said as if embarrassed. “I was very anxious to be up and busy this morning before the rain sets in and spoils another day for me. I hate the days when I can’t stay outside.”

Still she said nothing, only stood there, the peekaboo sun glorifying her beautifully tanned skin. His eyes drifted over her clean, fresh face even before he briefly dropped his eyes and took in the rest of her. “Thank you for the daisies. They’re not supposed to tell. What is the secret?”

Swooping down, she picked up a few sketches he’d tossed at the wastebasket and missed. Before she could drop them in

the can, she gave the subjects her attention, and then her lovely face flushed. “You’ve been sketching me,” she said in a low tone.

“Throw them away!” he said sharply. “They’re no good. I can paint flowers and hills and make fairly good landscapes, but portraits are so damned difficult. I can never capture the essence of you.”

“I think these are very good,” she objected, studying them again. “You shouldn’t throw away your sketches. May I keep them?”

Carefully she tried to flatten out the wrinkles, and then she was placing them on a table and stacking heavy books upon them. “I was hired to take care of you and the twins. But you never ask me to do anything for you. And your mother likes to play with the twins in the mornings, so that gives me extra time, time enough to do many things for you. What can I do for you?”

The brush dripping with gray colored the bottoms of clouds before he paused and turned his chair so he could look at her. A wry smile moved his lips. “Once I could have thought of something. Now I suggest you leave me alone. Crippled men don’t play very exciting games, I’m sorry to say.”

Appearing weary with defeat, she crumpled down on a long, comfortable chaise. “Now you’re saying to me what Bart does all the time—‘Go away,’ he shouts, ‘Leave me alone,’ he yells. I didn’t think you’d be the same.”

“Why not?” he asked with his own bitterness. “We’re brothers, half-brothers. We both have our hateful moments—and it’s better to leave us alone then.”

“I thought he was the most wonderful man alive,” she said sadly. “But I guess I can’t trust my own judgment anymore. I believed Bart wanted to marry me—now he yells and orders me out of sight. Then he calls me back and begs forgiveness. I want to leave this house and never come back—but something holds me here, keeps whispering that it’s not time for me to go ...”

“Yes,” said Jory, beginning to paint again with careful strokes, tipping the board to make his washes run and create “accidental” blendings that sometimes worked out beautifully. “That’s Foxworth Hall. Once you enter its portals, you seldom are seen again.”

“Your wife escaped.”

“So she did; more credit to her than I believed when it happened.”

“You sound so bitter.”

“I’m not bitter, I’m sour, like a pickle. I enjoy my life. I am caught between Heaven and Hell in a kind of purgatory where ghosts of the past roam the hallways at night. I can hear the clank and clonk of their restraining chains, and I can only be grateful they never appear, or perhaps the silent tread of my rubber-rimmed wheels scares them off.”

“Why do you stay if you feel that way?”

Jory shoved away from his painting table, then riveted his dark eyes on her. “What the hell are you doing here with me? Go to your lover. Apparently you like the way he treats you, or easily enough *you* could escape. You aren’t chained here with memories, with hopes or dreams that don’t come true. You aren’t a Foxworth, nor a Sheffield. This Hall holds no chains to blind you.”

“Why do you hate him?”

“Why *don’t* you hate him?”

“I do sometimes.”

“Trust your sometime judgment and get out. Get out before you are made, by osmosis, into one of us.”

“And what are you?”

Jory drove his chair to the rim of the flagstones, where the flowerbeds began, and stared off toward the mountains. “Once I was a dancer, and I never thought beyond that. Now that I can’t dance, I have to presume that I am nothing of importance to anyone. So I stay, thinking I belong here more than I belong anywhere else.”

“How can you say what you just did? Don’t you believe you’re important to your parents, your sister, and most of all to your children?”

“They don’t really need me, do they? And my parents have each other. My children have them. Bart has you. Cindy has her career. That leaves me the odd man out.”

Toni stood, stepped behind his chair and began to massage his neck with skillful fingers. “Does your back still bother you at night?”

“No,” he said in a hoarse voice. But it did, I knew it did, I knew it did. Hidden behind the shrubs, I went right on snipping roses, sensing they didn’t know I was there.

“If ever your back aches again, buzz for me and I’ll give you a massage to take away the pain.”

Whirling his chair around in a full about-face, Jory confronted her fiercely. She had to jump back out of the way or be knocked down. “So, it seems if you can’t get one brother, you’ll settle for the other—the crippled one who can’t possibly resist your many charms? Thanks, but no thanks. My mother will massage my aching back.”

Slowly she drifted away, turning twice to look back at him. She didn’t know that she left him staring after her with his heart in his eyes. She closed a French door behind her quietly. I stopped cutting roses for the breakfast table and sat on the grass. Behind me the twins were playing “church.”

Following Chris’s instructions, we were doing what we could to increase their vocabulary daily, and our instructions seemed to be working wonders.

“And the Lord said to Eve, go forth from this place.” Darren’s childish voice was full of giggles.

I turned to look.

Both children had removed their brief sunsuits and taken off small white sandals. Deirdre stuck a leaf on her brother’s small male organ, then stared down at her own private place. She frowned. “Dare ... what’s sinning?”

“Like running,” answered her brother. “Bad when you’re barefoot.”

They both giggled and jumped up to run toward me. I caught them in my arms and held their soft, warm, nude bodies close, raining kisses on their faces. “Have you eaten your breakfast?”

“Yes, Granny. Toni fed us grapefruit, which we hate. We ate everything but the eggs. Don’t like eggs.”

That was Deirdre who did most of the talking for Darren, just as Carrie had been Cory’s voice most of the time.

“Mom—how long have you been there?” called Jory. He sounded annoyed, a bit embarrassed.

Rising, I held the naked twins in my arms, and headed for Jory. “I found Toni in the pool teaching the twins how to swim, so I took over and asked her to look in on you. They’re doing very nicely in the water now, paddling all around with confidence. Why didn’t you join us this morning?”

“Why did you keep yourself hidden?”

“Just snipping my morning roses, Jory. You know I do that every day. It’s the one thing that makes this house cozy, the cut flowers I put in every room the first thing in the mornings.” Playfully I stuck a red rose behind his ear. Quickly he snatched it away and stuffed it in with the daisies Toni had brought him.

“Jory, when I am outdoors in August knowing September isn’t far away, I just grab each moment and value it for what it is. The rose scent is in my nostrils, making me think I am in Heaven, or in Paul’s garden. He had the most beautiful gardens. All kinds. He divided sections into those that held English gardens, Japanese, Italian—”

“I’ve heard all that before!” he said impatiently. “I asked if you heard us?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I did hear every fascinating thing, and when I had the chance, I peeked above the roses to watch the two of you.”

He scowled very much like Bart as I moved to put the twins on their feet, then gave their bare bottoms small spansks, telling them to find Toni, who would help them dress. They scuttled away, little naked dolls.

I sat down to smile at Jory, who glowered at me accusingly. He seemed even more like Bart when he looked angry. “Really, Jory, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I was there before either of you came out.” I paused and looked at his frowning face. “You love Toni, don’t you?”

“I *don’t* love her! She’s Bart’s! Damned if I want to take Bart’s leavings again.”

“Again?”

“Come off it, Mom. You know as well as I do the real reason why Mel left this house. He made it plain enough, and so did she that Christmas morning when the clipper ship was mysteriously broken. She’d have stayed on here forever if Bart had kept his position as replacement for me. I think she fell in love with him inadvertently, while trying to satisfy her need for me and the sex we shared. I used to hear her crying in the night. I’d lie on my bed, wanting to go to her but unable to move, feeling sorry for her, sorrier for myself. It was hell then. It’s hell now. A different kind of hell.”

“Jory—what can I do to help?”

He leaned forward, meeting my eyes with such intensity I was reminded of Julian and the many ways in which I had thwarted him.

“Mom, despite all this house represents to you, it’s grown to feel like home to me. The halls and doorways are wide. There’s the elevator to take me up and down. There’re the swimming pool, the terraces, the gardens, and the woods. Actually, a kind of paradise on earth—but for a few flaws. I used to think I couldn’t wait to get away. Now I don’t want to go, and I don’t really want to worry you any more than you already are, yet I must speak.”

I waited with dread to hear about those few “flaws.”

“When I was a child, I believed the world was full of many wonders, and miracles could still happen, and blind men would one day see, and the lame would one day walk, and so forth. Thinking like that made all the unfairness I saw all around, all the ugliness, much better. I think the ballet kept me from fully growing up, so I maintained the idea that miracles could truly happen if you believed in them enough—like that song ‘When you wish upon a star, your dreams come true.’ And in the ballet miracles do happen all the time, so I stayed childlike even after I became an adult. I still believed that in the outside world, the real world, everything would work out fine in the long run if I believed enough. Mel and I had that in common. There’s something about ballet that keeps you virginal, so to speak. You see no evil, hear no evil, though I won’t mention speak no evil. You know what I mean, I’m sure, for it was your world too.” He paused and glanced up at the threatening sky.

“In that world I had a wife who loved me. In the outside world, the real world, she quickly found a replacement lover. I hated Bart for taking her when I needed her most. Then I’d hate Mel for allowing him to use her as just another way to get back at me. He’s still doing it, Mom. And I wouldn’t trouble you with what’s going on if I wasn’t sometimes afraid for my life. Afraid for my children.”

I listened to him, trying not to show shock as he spoke of all he’d never hinted at before.

“Remember the parallel bars I exercise on, in order to use the back and leg braces? Well, somebody scraped the metal so that when I slip my hands along the rails I get metal splinters in both hands. Dad dug them out for me and made me promise not to tell you.”

I shivered, shrank inside. “What else, Jory? That’s not all, I can tell from the way you look.”

“Nothing much, Mom. Just little things to make my life miserable, like insects in my coffee, tea, and milk. My sugar bowl filled with salt, and my salt cellar full of sugar ... dumb tricks, childish pranks that could be dangerous. Tacks appear in my bed, in the seat of my chair ... oh, it’s Halloween time

all the time in this house for me. At times I want to laugh, it's so silly. But when I slip on a shoe and there's a nail in the toe that I can't feel, and it gives me an infection because my leg circulation isn't top-notch, it's not a laughing matter. It could cost me a leg. I waste so much time looking everything over before I use it, like my razor with new blades that are suddenly rusty."

He looked around as if to see if Joel or Bart were in ear-shot, and even though he saw nothing, for I looked, too, still his voice lowered to a whisper. "Yesterday was very warm, remember? You yourself opened three of my windows so I'd have fresh, cool breezes—then the wind shifted and blew from the north, and it turned dramatically cold. You came on the run to close my windows, to cover me with another blanket. I fell back to sleep. Half an hour later I woke up from a dream of being at the North Pole. The windows—all six of them—were wide open. Rain blew in and wet my bed. But that wasn't the worst of it. My blankets had been removed. I turned to ring for someone to come to my assistance. My buzzer was gone. I sat up and reached for my chair. It wasn't where I usually put it, right beside my bed. For a moment I panicked. Then, because I'm much stronger now in my arms, I lowered myself to the floor, used my arms to pull myself over to a regular chair that I could shove near the windows. Once I was on the chair seat, I could have easily pulled the windows down. But the first one refused to budge. I moved the chair to another window, and that wouldn't close any more than the first one would. Stuck with the fresh coat of paint applied a few weeks ago. I knew then it was useless to try the other four and brave that fiercely cold wet rain and wind, for my leverage wasn't right, even if my arms are strong. Yet, foolhardy as you often say I am, I persisted. No luck. That's when I put myself on the floor again and made my way to the door. It was locked. I dragged myself along by pulling on furniture legs until I was in the closet, and there I pulled down a winter coat, covered myself and fell asleep."

What had happened to my face? It felt so numb that I couldn't move my lips and speak, nor could I manage to show shock. Jory stared at me hard.

“Mom, are you listening? Are you thinking? Now ... don’t try to comment until I complete this story. As I just said, I fell asleep in the closet, on the floor, soaking wet. When I woke up, I was back on my bed. A *dry* bed, the sheet and blankets covered me, and I was wearing a fresh pair of pajamas.” He paused dramatically and met my horrified eyes.

“Mom ... if someone in this house wanted me to catch pneumonia and die, would that someone have put me back in bed and covered me up? Dad wasn’t home to pick me up and carry me, and certainly you don’t have the strength to do that.”

“But,” I whispered, “Bart doesn’t hate you that much. He doesn’t hate you at all ...”

“Perhaps it was Trevor who found me, and not Bart. But somehow I don’t think Trevor is young and strong enough to lift me. Still, somebody here hates me,” Jory stated firmly. “Somebody who would like to see me gone. I’ve thought about this considerably and come to the conclusion that it had to have been Bart who found me in the closet and put me back to bed. Has this occurred to you: If you, Dad, I, and the twins were out of the way, Bart would have our money as well as his own?”

“But he’s already filthy rich! He doesn’t need more!”

Jory spun his chair so that it faced east, staring at the faded sun. “I’ve never really been afraid of Bart before. I have always pitied him and wanted to help him. I think about taking the twins and leaving with you and Dad ... but that’s a coward’s way. If Bart did open those windows to let in the rain and wind, he later changed his mind and came back to rescue me. I think about the clipper ship and how it was broken, and certainly Bart couldn’t have been responsible for that, not when he wanted it so much. And I think about Joel, whom you think was responsible—and again I think about who influences Bart more than anyone here. Someone is taking Bart and twisting him and turning back the clock, so he’s again like that tormented ten-year-old kid who wanted you and his grandmother to die in fire and be redeemed ...”

“Please, Jory, you said you’d never mention that period in our lives again.”

Silence came, stretched out interminably before he went on. “The fish in my aquarium died last night. Their air filter was turned off. The temperature control smashed.” Once again he paused, watching my face closely. “Do you believe any of what I’ve just told you?”

I fixed my eyes on the blue-misted mountains with their soft, rounded tops to remind me of ancient, gigantic, dead virgins laid out in jagged rows, their upthrust, moss-covered bosoms all that remained. My eyes lifted to the sky, deeply blue, and the feather-brushed storm clouds with wisps of shimmering gold clouds behind them, heralding a better day.

Under such skies as this, surrounded by the same mountains, Chris, Cory, Carrie, and I had faced terrors while God watched. My fingers nervously wiped away those invisible cobwebs, trying to find the right words to say.

“Mom, as much as I hate to say this, I think we have to give up on Bart. We can’t trust his now-and-then love for us. He needs professional help again. Truthfully, I’ve always believed he had a great deal of love within him that he didn’t know how to release or express. And here I am, now thinking he’s beyond saving. We can’t drive him out of his own home—unless we want him declared insane and put in an institution. I don’t want that to happen, and I know you don’t. So, all we can do is leave. And isn’t it funny—now I don’t want to go, even when my life is threatened. I’ve grown accustomed to this house; I love it here, so I risk my life, the lives of all of us. The intrigue of what might happen today keeps me from ever being bored. Mom, the worst thing in my life is boredom.”

I wasn’t half listening to Jory.

My eyes widened as I saw Deirdre and Darren following Joel and Bart to the small chapel, which had its own outside door that could be reached from the gardens. They disappeared inside, and the door closed.

I forgot my basket of cut roses and jumped to my feet. Where was Toni? Why wasn’t she protecting the twins from

Bart, from Joel? Then I felt foolish, for why should she feel that Bart or Joel was a threat to two such small, innocent children? Still I said a hasty good-bye to Jory, told him not to worry, I'd be back in a few minutes with Darren and Deirdre so we could all eat lunch together. "Jory, you will be all right if I leave you alone for a few moments?"

"Sure, Mom. Go after my kids. I spoke to Trevor this morning, and he gave me a battery-operated two-way intercom. Trevor can be fully trusted."

Believing wholeheartedly in our butler's loyalty, I sped after the foursome already in the chapel.

* * *

Minutes later I sneaked through the small downstairs inside door to enter the chapel that Joel had told Bart was truly necessary if he were to redeem his soul from sin. It was a small room that tried to duplicate what many old castles and palaces contained for family worship. There was Bart kneeling behind the first pew, with Darren on one side and Deirdre on the other. Joel stood behind the pulpit, his gray head bowed as he began to pray. Stealthily I inched myself closer to hide in the shadow of an arch strut.

"We don't like it here," complained Deirdre in a loud whisper to Bart.

"Be quiet. This is God's place," Bart warned.

"I hear my kitty crying," said Darren weakly, cringing away from Bart.

"You cannot possibly hear your cat, or any cat crying from such a distance. Besides, it's not your kitty. It's Trevor's kitten, which he only allows you to play with."

Both the twins began to sniffle, trying to hold back cries of distress. They both adored kittens, puppies, birds, anything that was little and cute. "SILENCE!" roared Bart. "I don't hear anything from the outside, but if you listen carefully, God will speak and tell you how to survive."

"What's survive?"

“Darren, why do you let you sister ask all the questions?”

“She likes questions better.”

“Why is it so dark in here, Uncle Bart?”

“Deirdre, like all females, you talk too much.”

She began to wail louder. “I do not! Gramma likes my talk ...”

“Your gramma likes anyone’s talk as long as it isn’t mine,” answered Bart bitterly, pinching Deirdre’s small arm to make her stay quiet.

Dozens of candles burned on the podium where Joel lifted his head. The architects had arranged for ceiling spots to converge on whoever was behind the pulpit, placing Joel squarely in the center of a mystical, artificial, light cross.

In a clear and loud voice he said, “We will stand and we will sing the praises of the Lord before today’s sermon begins.” His voice was resonant, assured, and authoritative.

I had eased myself by this time to a position behind a supporting pillar from which I could spy and not be seen. Like two small robots, the twins, who’d obviously been here many times before without their father, Chris, me, or Toni, were well trained and intimidated. They stood obediently, one on each side of Bart, who kept his hands restrainingly on their small shoulders and they began, with him, to sing hymns. Their voices were frail, faltering, unable to carry the tune well. Yet they made mighty efforts to keep up with Bart, who stunned me with his surprisingly good baritone singing voice.

Why hadn’t Bart sung out like that when we attended the chapel services? Did Chris and I, with Jory, so intimidate Bart that he held back what had to be a God-given natural gift? When we’d praised Cindy for her singing voice, he had just frowned and said nothing to indicate that he had a wonderful voice as well. Oh, the complexity of Bart was likely to drive me crazy.

Under other, less sinister circumstances I would have been thrilled to hear Bart’s voice lifted so joyously, his whole heart in it. Some filtering sunlight fell through the stained glass

windows to glorify his face with colors of purple, rose, and green. How beautiful he appeared as he sang, with his eyes lit up, as if he truly had the power of the Holy Ghost.

I was touched by his faith in God. Tears came to my eyes as a sense of relief washed over me and made me feel clean.

Oh, Bart, you can't be all evil if you can sing like that, and look like that. It isn't too late to save you, it can't be.

No wonder Melodie had loved him. No wonder Toni was unable to turn her back and leave such a man.

*"Oh, sing this song ... this song of love to thee,
In God we trust, in God we trust ..."*

His voice soared, overwhelming the thin voices of the twins. I was lifted up and out of myself, willing to believe in the powers of God. I sank down on my knees, bowing my head.

"Thank you, God," I whispered. "Thank you for saving my son."

Then I was staring at him again, catching the Holy Spirit and willing to believe in anything he did. Words came out of the past. Bart had been with us at the time. "We've got to be careful with Jory," warned Chris. "His immunity system has been impaired. We can't allow him to catch a cold that might fill his lungs with fluid ..."

Still I knelt on, transfixed. Now I could not believe Bart was anything but a very troubled young man trying desperately to find what was right for himself.

Bart's powerful singing voice drew to the end of the hymn. Oh, if only Cindy could have heard him. If only they could both sing together, the two of them friends at last, joined by their equal talents. There was no one to applaud when his song ended. There was only silence and the thud of my beating heart.

The twins stared up at Bart with wide, innocent, blue eyes. "Sing again, Uncle Bart," pleaded Deirdre. "Sing about the rock ..."

Now I knew why they came to this chapel—to hear their uncle sing, to feel what I was feeling, an unseen presence that was warm and comforting.

Without any accompaniment, Bart sang “Rock of Ages.” I was by this time a limp rag of emotions. With a voice like that he could have the world at his feet, and he locked away his talent in an office.

“That’s enough, nephew,” said Joel when the second song was over. “Everyone will sit, and we will begin today’s sermon.”

Obediently, Bart sat and pulled the twins down beside him. He kept his arm about each in such a protective way that I was again moved to tears. Did he love Jory’s twins? Had he, all this time, only pretended to dislike them because they resembled the *evil* twins of yesterday?

“Let us bow our heads and pray,” instructed Joel.

My head bowed as well.

I listened to his prayer with incredulity. He sounded so professional, so concerned for those who had never experienced the joy of being “saved” and belonging entirely to Christ.

“When you open your heart and let Christ enter, he fills you with love. When you love the Lord, love his son who died for you, and you believe in the righteous ways of God and his son crucified so cruelly on that cross, you will find the peace of fulfillment that’s always eluded you before. Lay down your sins, your swords, your shields, your thirsts for power and money. Put away your earthly lusts that crave the pleasures of flesh. Lay down all your earthly appetites that can never be satisfied and believe, believe! Follow in the footsteps of Christ. Follow where he led, believe in his teachings, and you will be saved. Saved from the evils of this world of sin and lust for sex and power. Save yourselves before it is too late!”

His zealot’s fire was frightening. Why couldn’t I believe in his fiery sermon as I believed in Bart’s beautiful singing voice? Why were visions of wind and rain pouring in on Jory

washing me clean of Joel's evangelistic oratory? I felt I'd betrayed Jory by my moment's belief that even Joel was what he seemed to be at this moment.

There was more to his sermon. I was startled at the casual, conversational tone he now assumed, as if he were talking directly to Bart. "The voices in the village are momentarily lulled because we have constructed in this great mountain mansion a small temple dedicated to the worship of God. The workmen who constructed this divine house of worship and created the elaborate embellishments have told them what we have done, and others spread the word that the Fox-worths are trying to salvage their souls. They no longer speak of revenge upon the Foxworths, who have ruled over them for more than two hundred years. They bear deep in their hearts many grudges for deeds done to them in the past by our self-serving, self-centered ancestors. They have not forgotten or forgiven the sins of Corrine Foxworth, who married her half-uncle, nor have they forgotten the sins of thy mother, Bart, and the brother she loves. Under your very roof she still gives him the pleasure of enjoying her body, as she takes her pleasure with him ... and under God's own heavenly blue sky, those two lie naked in the sun before they blend one with the other. They are addicted to one another, as surely as if they were addicted to one of the many drugs that abound in today's immoral, headstrong, selfish, heedless society.

"He, the doctor, her very own brother, redeems himself somewhat in his efforts to serve mankind, dedicating his professional life to medicine and science. So he can be more easily forgiven than the sinful woman, thy mother, who gives nothing to the world but a perverted daughter who will turn out perhaps even worse, and a firstborn son who danced indecently for money! For glorifying his body! And for that sin he has paid, and dearly paid, by losing the use of his legs, and in losing his legs, he lost his body, and in losing his body, he lost his wife. Fate has infinite wisdom when it comes to deciding whom to punish and whom to assist." Again he paused, as if for dramatic effect, before he fixed his piercing zealot's eyes on Bart, as if to burn his will into the brain of my son by pure force. "Now, my son, I know you love your

mother and you would at times forgive her anything ... wrong, wrong—for will God? No, I don't think so. Save her, for how can God forgive *her* when she is responsible for luring her brother into her arms?"

He paused, his pale eyes lit with religious zeal, waiting for Bart to respond.

"I'm hungry!" wailed Deirdre suddenly.

"Me too," cried Darren.

"You'll stay, and you will do what you have to do, or suffer the consequences!" shouted Joel from the pulpit.

Immediately the twins shrank into small, tight shells, staring at Joel with immense eyes of fear. What had Joel done to put that fear there? Oh, God, had I given Joel or Bart an opportunity to hurt them in some way?

Long minutes passed, as if Joel were deliberately testing them. I wanted to jump up and cry out to stop Joel from implanting foul ideas in the heads of innocent babes. But there sat Bart, as if not hearing Joel's words at all. He had his dark eyes riveted on the magnificent stained-glass window directly behind the pulpit. Stained glass that showed Jesus with the little children at his feet, leaning against his knees, staring up into his face with adoration. That same adoration was on Bart's face. He wasn't listening to his great-uncle. He was filling himself with the presence even I could feel in this place.

God did exist, had always been there even when I wanted to deny him.

The words of Christ did have meaning in today's world—and somehow his teachings had reached out and found a place in Bart's maze of troubled brain waves.

"Bart, your niece and nephew are falling asleep!" roared Joel angrily. "You neglect your duty! Wake them up! Immediately!"

"Suffer the little children, Uncle Joel," said Bart. "Your sermons last too long and they become bored and restless. They are not evil or contaminated. They were born within the

holy vows of marriage. They are not the first twins, the blood-related twins, Uncle—not the *evil* twins ...”

Even as I saw Bart lifting Darren and Deirdre up into his arms, holding them in a protective way, I felt fear confused with hope. Bart was proving himself to be just as fine and noble as his father. No sooner did I think that when I heard words that chilled my blood. I froze in the shadows.

Bart had risen with the twins in his arms. “Put them down,” ordered Joel, his sermon over and his strong voice diminished to his habitual thin whisper. Had he drained his supply of energy so that now he was ineffective? I prayed so.

“Now, children who have not learned how to control physical demands, repeat the lessons I have tried to teach you. Speak, and tell me, Darren, Deirdre! Speak the words you are supposed to keep forever in your minds and hearts. Speak, and let God hear.”

They had such babyishly small voices that seldom said more than a few words at a time. They sometimes used the wrong syntax ... but this time they intoned as correctly and as seriously as adults.

Bart listened carefully, as if he’d helped coach them.

“We are children born of evil seed. We are the Devil’s issue, the Devil’s spawn. We have inherited all the evil genes that lead to incestuous relationships.”

Pleased with themselves, they grinned at each other for having said it right, not understanding in the least the meaning of the words. Then both the twins turned serious blue eyes on that forbidding old man behind the pulpit.

“Tomorrow we will continue with our lessons.” So said, Joel closed his huge black Bible.

Bart picked up the twins, kissed their cheeks, and told them that now they could put on clean, dry pants, eat lunch, take baths, and have nice naps before they attended chapel services again.

That’s when I stood up and stepped into full view. “Bart, what are you trying to do to Jory’s children?”

My son stared at me, his sun-bronzed skin going very pale. “Mother, you aren’t supposed to come here except on Sundays ...”

“Why? Do you hope to keep me away so you can mold the twins into warped human beings you can punish later on? Is that your purpose?”

“Who warped you into what you are?” asked Joel coldly, his eyes small and hard.

In a wild fury of rage, I spun to confront him. “Your parents!” I screamed. “Your sister, Joel, locked us up and kept us there, living on promises year after year, while Chris and I were turning into adults with no one to love but each other. So place the blame on those who made Chris and I what we are. But before you say one more word, I’m having my say.

“I love Chris, and *I am not ashamed*. You think I have given nothing of importance to the world, yet there stands your great-nephew, holding my grandchildren, and on the terrace is another of my sons. And they are not contaminated! They are not Devil’s issue, or Devil’s spawn—and don’t you ever, as long as you live, dare to say those words again to anyone who belongs to me, or I will see that you are put away and declared senile!”

Color came to Bart’s face as what color he had left departed from Joel’s pasty skin. His desperate, faded, blue eyes sought to meet Bart’s, but Bart was staring at me as if he’d never seen me before. “Mother,” he said weakly, and would have said more, but the twins tore from his arms and ran to me.

“Hungry, Gramma, hungry ...”

My eyes locked with Bart’s. “You have the most beautiful singing voice I have ever heard,” I said, backing away and taking the twins with me. “Be your own man, Bart. You don’t need Joel. You have found your talent, now use it.”

He stood there frozen, as if he had volumes to say, but Joel was tugging on his arm, imploring, just as the twins were crying for lunch.

Heaven Can't Wait



Jory fell very ill a few days later with a cold that just wouldn't go away. The cold, wet rain and winds had done their work. He lay on his bed with his temperature soaring, his brow glistening with beads of perspiration, writhing and turning his head incessantly from side to side, as he moaned, groaned, and called repeatedly for Melodie. I saw Toni wince each time he did that, even as she did her best to nurse him.

As I watched her with him, I saw that she truly did care for Jory; it was clear in every caring thing she did, in her soft, compassionate eyes and her lips that brushed his face whenever she thought I wasn't looking.

She turned to give me a brave smile. "Try not to worry so much, Cathy," she pleaded, bathing Jory's bare chest with cool water. "Most people don't realize that a fever is usually very helpful in burning up viruses. As a doctor's wife I'm sure you already know this and are just worried that he will go into pneumonia. He won't. I'm sure he won't."

"Let's pray he won't ..."

I still worried; she was only a nurse without the medical expertise of Chris. I called him every hour, trying to find him in that huge university lab. Why wasn't Chris responding to my urgent calls? I began to feel not only worried but angry that Chris couldn't be reached. Hadn't he promised to always be here when he was needed?

Two days had passed since Joel preached his sermon, and Chris had not called home.

The sweltering, humid weather and intermittent rain and electrical storms did nothing but create more misery and havoc in my mind. Thunder crashed overhead. Lightning flashed, momentarily lighting up dark, forbidding skies. Near my feet

the twins were playing and whispering about it being time for lessons in the chapel. "Please, Gramma. Uncle Joel says we must come."

"Deirdre, Darren, I want you to listen to me and forget what your Uncle Joel and Uncle Bart tell you. Your father wants you to stay with me and Toni, near him. You know your daddy is sick, and the last thing he'd want is for his son and daughter to be visiting that chapel where ... where ..." and here I stumbled. For what could I say about Joel that wouldn't somehow rebound later? He was teaching what he believed was right. If only he had not taught them those phrases ... Devil's issue. Devil's spawn.

Instantly the two of them wailed, as if of one mind. "Will Daddy die?" they cried out simultaneously.

"No, of course he won't die. What do you two know about death, anyway?" I went on to explain that their grandfather was a wonderful doctor and he'd be coming home any second.

They stared at me without comprehension before I realized they often mouthed words they'd learned by rote and had no understanding of what they said. Death—what could they know about that?

Toni turned to give me a strange look. "You know something? As I help those two on and off with their clothes and give them baths, they keep up a constant chatter. They're really very remarkable and bright children. I guess being around adults so much has taught them more swiftly than playing with other children would have. Most of what they say while playing alone is silly gibberish. Then out of this silly gibberty-junk come serious words, adult words. Their eyes widen. They speak in whispers. They look around and seem afraid. It's as if they are expecting to see someone, or something, and in low tones they suddenly warn each other of God and his wrath. It alarms me." She looked from me and the twins back to Jory.

"Toni, listen carefully. Never allow the twins out of your sight. Keep them with you at all times during the day, unless you know positively they are with me or Jory, or my husband.

When you're caring for Jory and are too preoccupied to keep an eye on them, call me and I'll take them over. Above all, don't let them go off with Joel," and as much as I hated to, I had to add Bart's name.

She threw me another worried look. "Cathy, I think it was not only that thing that happened in New York with Cindy, and with me, but also what Joel had to say when we came back that made Bart start looking at me as if I were the worst kind of sinner. It hurts to have the man you think you love hurl such ugly accusations."

Again she was bathing Jory's arms and chest. "Jory would never say such ugly things, no matter what I did. Sometimes he looks fierce, but even then he's thoughtful enough to say nothing to damage my ego. I never knew a man so thoughtful and compassionate."

"Are you saying now that you love Jory?" I asked, wanting to believe she did but afraid her disappointment was rebounding and making Jory only a substitute love.

She blushed and bowed her head. "I've been in this house almost two years, and I've seen and heard a great many things. In this house I found sexual satisfaction with Bart, but it wasn't romantic or sweet, just exciting. Only now am I beginning to feel the romance of a man who tries to understand me and give me what I need. His eyes never condemn. Never do his lips shout out terrible things, when I haven't done anything I think is terrible. My love for Bart was a burning hot fire, kindled to a blaze the first day we met, while my feet stayed in quicksand, never knowing what he wanted, or what he needed, except he wanted someone like you ..."

"I wish you'd stop saying that, Toni," I objected with discomfort. Bart still disliked himself so much he feared a woman turning away from him first, and to keep that from happening, he discarded Melodie before she had the chance to turn against him. Later, he turned his self-loathing against Toni before she could hate him and leave him. Again I sighed.

Toni agreed never to discuss Bart with me again, and then she began with my help to slip a clean pajama jacket onto Jory. We worked together as a team while the twins played on the floor, shoving little cars and trucks along just like Cory and Carrie had done.

“Just be sure which brother it is you love before you hurt both of them. I’m going to talk to my husband and Jory again, and I’m doing my damndest to see that we move out of this house just as soon as Jory recovers. You can go with us if that is your choice.”

Her pretty gray eyes widened. She looked from me back to Jory, who had rolled on his side and was murmuring incoherently in his delirium. “Mel ... is that our cue?” I think he was saying.

“No, it’s Toni, your nurse,” she said softly, caressing his hair and brushing it back from his beaded brow. “You have a very bad cold ... but soon you’ll feel just fine.”

Jory stared up at her in a disoriented way, as if trying to distinguish this woman from the one he dreamed about every night. During the day he had eyes only for Toni, but in the night, Melodie came back to haunt him. What was there about the human condition that made us hold on to tragedy with such tenacity and easily forgo the happiness we could reach readily?

He began to cough violently, choking and pulling up huge wads of phlegm. Tenderly Toni held his head, then threw away the soiled tissues.

Everything she did for him she did with tenderness, fluffing his pillows, massaging his back, moving his legs to keep them supple even if he couldn’t control them. I couldn’t help but be impressed with all that she did to make him comfortable.

I backed off toward the door, feeling I was an intruder during a very important private moment as Jory’s eyes came into focus enough for him to pick up her hand and meet her eyes. Even as sick as he was, something in his eyes spoke to her. Quietly I caught hold of Darren’s hand, and then

Deirdre's. "Got to go now," I whispered even as I watched Toni tremble before her head bowed.

To my surprise, just before I closed the door, she put his hand to her lips and kissed each of his fingers. "I'm taking advantage of you," she whispered, "at a time when you can't fight back, but I need to tell you what a fool I've been. You were here all the time, and I never saw you. Never saw you at all when Bart stood in the way."

Weakly Jory answered, his eyes warm as they drank in the sincerity of her words and most of all, her loving, warm expression. "I guess it's easy to overlook a man in a wheelchair, and perhaps that alone was enough to make you blind. But I've been here, waiting, hoping ..."

"Oh, Jory, don't hold it against me because I let Bart dazzle me with his charm. I was overwhelmed and sort of flabbergasted that he found me so desirable. He swept me off my feet. I think every woman secretly wants a man who refuses to take no for an answer, and pursues her relentlessly until she has to give in. Forgive me for being a fool, and an easy conquest."

"It's all right, all right," he whispered, then closed his eyes. "Just don't let what you feel for me be pity—or I'll know."

"You're what I wanted Bart to be!" she cried out as her lips neared his.

This time I did close the door.

Back in my own rooms, I sat down near the telephone waiting for Chris to call in response to my many urgent messages. On the verge of sleep, with the twins tucked neatly in my bed for their naps, the phone rang. I snatched up the receiver, said hello. A deep, gruff voice asked for Mrs. Sheffield, and I identified myself.

"We don't want you and your kind here," said that frightening, deep voice. "We know what's going on up there. That little chapel you built don't fool us none. It's a sham to hide behind while you flaunt God's rules of decency. Get out

—before we take God’s will into our own hands and drive every last one of you away from *our* mountains.”

Unable to find a clever reply, I sat stunned and very shaky before he hung up. For long moments I just sat there with the receiver in my hand. The sun broke through the clouds and warmed my face ... only then did I hang up. I looked around me at the rooms I myself had decorated to please my own taste, and found, much to my surprise, that these rooms no longer reminded me of my mother and her second husband. In here were only remnants of the past that I wanted to remember.

Cory and Carrie’s baby pictures in silver frames on my dresser, placed next to those of Darren and Deirdre. They were look-alike twins, but when you knew them well, you could see they weren’t the same. My eyes moved to the next silver frame, and there was Paul smiling at me, and Henny was in another. Julian sulked, in a way he used to think sexy, from a gold frame, and I also had a few snapshots of his mother, Madame Marisha, framed to keep near her son. But nowhere did I have a photograph of Bartholomew Winslow. I stared at the picture of my own father, who’d died when I was twelve. So much like Chris, only now Chris looked older. Turn around, and the boy you knew so well was a man. The years flew by so swiftly; once a day had seemed longer than a year did now.

Again I looked at the two sets of twins. It would take only someone very familiar with both sets to recognize the slight differences. There was a hint of Melodie in Jory’s children, a vague resemblance. I stared at another picture, with Chris and myself, taken when we still lived in Gladstone, Pennsylvania. I’d been ten, he’d just turned thirteen. We stood in three feet of snow beside the snowman we’d just finished, smiling at Daddy as he took yet another picture. A photograph turning brown, one that our mother had put in her blue album. Our blue album now.

Little snippets of our lives were caught in all those little squares and oblongs of slick paper. Frozen forever in time, that Catherine Doll who sat on an attic windowsill, wearing a

flimsy nightgown as Chris in the shadows took a time-lapse photo. How had I managed to sit so still, and hold that expression—how? Through the nightgown I could see the tender form of young breasts—and in that girlish profile all the wistful sadness I'd felt back then.

How lovely she was—I'd been. I stared at her hard and long. That frail, slender girl had long ago disappeared in the middle-aged woman I was now. I sighed for the loss of her, that special girl with her head full of dreams. I tried to tear my gaze away; instead, I got up to pick up the picture that Chris had carried with him to college, to medical school. When he was an intern, still he had this photograph with him. Was it this paper in my hand that had kept his love for me so strong? This attic face of a girl of fifteen, sitting in the moonlight? Longing, always longing for love that would last forever? I no longer looked like this girl I held in my hand. I looked like my mother the night she burned down the original Foxworth Hall.

Shrill telephone rings startled me back to the here and now. "I've had a flat tire," said Chris on hearing my small voice. "I had driven to another lab and spent a few hours there, so when I came back I saw all those messages from you about Jory. Jory can't be worse, can he?"

"No, darling, he's no worse."

"Cathy, what's wrong?"

"I'll tell you when you get here."

Chris reached home an hour later and rushed in to embrace me before he hurried to Jory. "How's my son?" he asked even as he sat on Jory's bed and reached to feel his pulse. "I hear from your mother that someone opened all your windows and the rain soaked you."

"Oh!" cried Toni. "Who could have done such an awful thing? I'm so sorry, Doctor Sheffield. It's my habit to check on Jory, I mean Mister Marquet, two or three times during the night, even if he doesn't call for me."

Jory grinned at her in a happy way. "I think you can stop calling me Mister Marquet now, Toni." His voice was very

weak and hoarse. “And this happened on your day off.”

“Oh,” she said, “that must have been the morning I drove into the city to visit my girlfriend.”

“It’s just a cold, Jory,” said Chris, checking his lungs again. “There’s no hint of fluid in your lungs, and from your symptoms you don’t have the flu. So swallow your medicine, drink the fluids Toni brings you, and stop fretting about Melodie.”

* * *

Later, sprawled in his favorite chair in our sitting room, Chris listened to everything I had to say. “Did you recognize the voice?”

“Chris, I don’t know any of the villagers well enough. I do my damndest to stay away from them.”

“How do you know it was a villager?”

That thought had never occurred to me. I’d just presumed. Nevertheless, as soon as Jory was well enough, we both determined to leave this house.

“If it’s what you want,” said Chris, looking around with some regret. “I like it here, I must admit. I like all the space around us, the gardens, the servants who wait on us, and I’ll be sorry to leave. But let’s not flee too far. I don’t want to leave my work in the university.”

“Chris, don’t worry. I won’t take that away from you. When we leave here, we will go to Charlottesville and pray to God nobody there will know that I’m your sister.”

“Cathy, my dearest, sweetest wife, I don’t think even if they knew, they’d give a damn. And besides, you look more like my daughter than my wife.”

Wonderfully sweet as he was, he could say that with honesty in his eyes. I knew then he was blind when he looked at me. He saw what he wanted to see, and that was the girl I used to be.

He laughed at my doubting expression. “I love the woman you’ve become. So don’t you go looking for the tarnish when I

deliver to you eighteen-karat-gold honesty. I'd say twenty-four karat, but you'd then say it was too soft and therefore useless functionally. So I give to you the best there is: my eighteen-karat love that truly believes you are beautiful inside, outside, and in between."

* * *

Cindy flew in for one of her whirlwind visits, breathlessly gushing out every detail of her life in exquisite minute detail since last she'd seen us. It seemed incredible that so much could happen to one girl of nineteen.

The instant we were inside the grand foyer, she raced up the stairs, hurling herself into Jory's arms with such abandon I thought she might tip over his chair. "Really," he laughed, "you weigh more than a feather, Cindy." He kissed her, looked her over, then laughed. "Wow! What kind of outfit is that, anyway?"

"The kind that is going to fill the eyes of a certain brother named Bart with horror. I picked this out just to annoy him and dear Uncle Joel."

Jory turned solemn. "Cindy, if I were you, I'd stop deliberately baiting Bart. He's not a little boy anymore."

Unknown to Cindy, Toni had stepped into the room and stood patiently waiting to take Jory's temperature.

"Oh," said Cindy, turning to see Toni. "I thought after that terrible scene Bart made in New York that you'd see him for what he really is and leave this place." The look in Toni's eyes made Cindy glance again at Jory, then back to Toni again, and she laughed. "Well, *now* you've got good sense! I can read your eyes, Toni, Jory. You're in love! Hooray!" She rushed to hug and kiss Toni before she settled down near Jory's chair and stared up at him with adoration. "I met Melodie in New York. She cried a lot when I told her how pretty the twins are ... but the day after your divorce went through, she married another dancer. Jory, he looks a lot like you, only not nearly as handsome, and he doesn't dance as well, either."

Jory kept his small smile, as if Melodie had been put on the shelf and there she'd stay. He turned his head to grin at Toni. "Well, there goes my alimony payment. At least she could have let me know."

Again Cindy was staring at Toni. "What about Bart?"

"*What about me?*" asked a baritone voice from the open doorway.

Only then did we all notice that Bart was in the doorway, lounging insolently against the frame, taking in all we said and did as if we were specimens in his special zoo of family oddities.

"Well," he drawled, "as I live and breathe, our breathless little imitation Marilyn Monroe has come to thrill us all with her stagey presence."

"That's not how I'd describe my feelings on seeing you again," Cindy said with her eyes flashing. "I'm chilled, not thrilled."

Bart looked her over, taking in her skin-tight gold leather pants, her striped cotton knit sweater of white and gold. The horizontal stripes emphasized her breasts, which jiggled freely each time she moved, and knee-high gold boots decorated her feet and legs.

"When are you leaving?" asked Bart while he stared at Toni sitting on Jory's bed and holding his hand. Chris sat next to me on a love seat, trying to catch up on some mail that had been delivered to the house and not to his office.

"Dear brother, say what you will, I don't care. I've come to see my parents and the rest of my family. I'll be leaving soon enough. Chains of steel couldn't keep me here longer than necessary." She laughed and stepped closer and looked up his face. "You don't have to like me, or approve of me. And even if you open your mouth and say something insulting I'll just laugh again. I've found a man to love me that makes you look like something dug up from the Dismal Swamp!"

"Cindy!" said Chris sharply, putting down his unopened mail. "While you are here, you will dress appropriately, and

you will treat Bart with respect, as he will treat you. I'm sick of these childish arguments about nothing."

Cindy looked at him with hurt eyes, making me say apologetically, "Darling, it is Bart's home. And sometimes I would like to see you in clothes that aren't too small."

Her blue eyes changed from those of a woman to those of a child. She wailed, "You're both taking his side—when you know he's nothing but a crazy creep out to make us all unhappy!"

Toni sat uncomfortably until Jory leaned to whisper something in her ear, and then she was smiling. "It doesn't mean anything," I heard him say in an undertone. "I believe Bart and Cindy enjoy tormenting one another."

Unfortunately Bart's attention was drawn from Cindy to take notice of Jory with his arm about Toni's shoulders. He scowled, then beckoned to Toni. "Come with me. I want to show you the inside of the chapel with all its new additions."

"A chapel? Why do we need a chapel?" asked Cindy, who had not been informed of the newest room transformed.

"Cindy, Bart wanted a chapel added to this house."

"Well, Mom, if anybody ever needed a chapel close at hand, it's the creep of the hill and the Hall."

My second son didn't say a word.

Toni refused to go with him. She gave him the excuse of needing to bathe the twins. Anger lit up Bart's eyes before it died, leaving him standing there, strangely desolate-looking. I got up to take his hand. "Darling, I'd love to see what new additions you've made in the chapel."

"Some other time," he said.

I watched him covertly at the dinner table as Cindy taunted Bart in rather ridiculous ways that might have made the rest of us laugh if he could only see the humor she displayed. However, Bart had never been able to laugh at himself, more the pity. He took everything so seriously. Her grin was triumphant. "You see, Bart," she teased, "I can put away my

childish foibles, even physical ones. But you can't put away anything that sours your guts and chews away on your brain. You're like a sewer, ready to hold all that's sinking and rotten and never give it up."

Still he said nothing.

"Cindy," spoke up Chris, who'd remained quiet during our evening meal, "apologize to Bart."

"No."

"Then get up and leave the table, and eat in your room until you can learn to speak pleasantly."

Her eyes flashed balefully again, this time at Chris. "ALL RIGHT! I'll go to my room—but tomorrow I'm leaving this house and I'm never coming back! NOT EVER!"

Finally Bart had something to say. "The best news I've heard in years."

Cindy was in tears before she reached the dining room archway. I didn't jump up to follow her this time. I sat on, pretending nothing was amiss. Always in the past I'd shielded Cindy, chastised Bart, but I was seeing him with new eyes. The son I'd never known had facets that weren't all dark and dangerous.

"Why don't you go to Cindy, as you always have in the past, Mother?" asked Bart, as if challenging me.

"I haven't finished my dinner, Bart. And Cindy has to learn to respect the opinions of others."

He sat staring at me as if completely taken off guard.

* * *

Early the next morning, Cindy stormed into our room without knocking, catching me wrapped in a towel, fresh from my bath, and Chris was still shaving. "Mom, Dad, I'm leaving," she said stiffly. "I won't enjoy myself here. I'm wondering why I even bothered to come back. It's clear you've decided to take Bart's side on every issue, and if that's the case, then I'm finished. I'll be twenty next April, and that's old enough not to need a family."

Her eyes smeared with the tears that came unbidden. Her voice turned small and broken. “I want to say thanks to both of you for being wonderful parents when I was little and needed someone like both of you. I’m going to miss you and Daddy, and Jory and Darren and Deirdre, but every time I come here, I leave feeling sick. If ever you decide to live somewhere far from Bart, maybe you’ll see me again ... maybe.”

“Oh, Cindy!” I cried, rushing to embrace her. “don’t leave!”

“No, Momma,” she said staunchly. “I’m going back to New York. My friends there will throw me a party, the best kind. They do everything better in New York.”

But her tears were coming faster, harder. Chris wiped his face free of shaving lather and came to hug her close. “I can understand how you feel, Cindy. Bart can be irritating, but you did go too far last night. In a way you were very funny, but sadly, he can’t see that. You have to judge whom you can tease, and whom you cannot. You’ve outgrown Bart, Cindy. And we won’t object if you want to leave so soon. But, before you go, we want you to know your mother and I are taking Jory and his children, and Toni, too, and moving to Charlottesville. We’ll find a large house there and settle down in the midst of people, so when you come again, you won’t be lonely, and Bart will still be here, high on this hill and far from you.”

Sobbing, she clutched Chris. “I’m sorry, Daddy. I was nasty to him, but he always says such mean things to me, and I have to hit back or feel like a doormat. I don’t like for him to wipe his feet on me—and he is like a sewer, *he is*.”

“Someday I hope you’ll see him differently,” said Chris softly, tilting up her pretty tear-stained face and kissing her lightly. “So kiss your mother, say good-bye to Jory, Toni, Darren, and Deirdre ... but don’t say you won’t come back to see us again. That would make us both very unhappy. You give us a great deal of joy, and nothing should spoil that.”

I helped Cindy pack the clothes she’d just unpacked. And even as we did this together, I saw that she was undecided and wanted to stay on if only I’d plead. Unfortunately we’d left her

door open, and I looked around to see Joel standing in the doorway watching us.

Joel turned pale eyes on Cindy. “Why are you red-eyed, little girl?”

“I’m not a little girl!” she screamed. She turned wrathful eyes on him. “You’re in league with him, aren’t you? You help make him what he is. You stand there and gloat because I’m packing my bags, don’t you? Glad I’m leaving—but before I go, I’m telling you off, too, old man. And I don’t care if my parents scold me for not showing respect for old age.” She stepped closer, her posture dominating his cringing form. “I hate you, old man! Hate you for preventing my brother from being normal, and he could have been without you! I HATE YOU!”

Hearing this, Chris, who’d been seated near the window, became furious. “Cindy, why? You could have gone and said nothing.” Joel had disappeared by this time, leaving Cindy staring at Chris, bleak-eyed. “Cindy,” Chris said softly, reaching out to caress her hair. “Joel is an old man dying of cancer. He won’t be around much longer.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. “He looks healthier than when he came.”

“Perhaps he’s had a remission. He refuses to see a doctor and won’t let me check him over. He says he’s resigned to dying soon. So, I take him at his word.”

“I expect now you want me to apologize to him—well, I won’t! I meant every word! That time in New York, when Bart was so happy with Toni, and they seemed so much in love, we were at a party, when suddenly an old man appeared that looked like Joel—and instantly Bart changed. He turned mean, hateful, like a spell had been cast, he began to criticize my clothes, Toni’s pretty dress that he said was shameless ... and only a few minutes before, he’d complimented the way she looked in that very same dress. So don’t tell me that Joel doesn’t have a great deal to do with Bart’s nutty behavior.”

Instantly I was with Cindy. “You see, Chris. Cindy believes just as I do. If Joel weren’t here using his influence, Bart

would straighten out. Drive Joel out, Chris, before it's too late."

"Yes, Daddy, make that old man leave. Pay him off, get rid of him."

"And what do I say to Bart?" asked Chris, looking from one to the other of us. "Don't you realize he has to be the one who sees Joel for what he is? We can't tell him Joel's not a healthy influence. Bart has to discover that for himself."

* * *

Soon after this we drove to Richmond to see that Cindy caught a plane back to New York. In another week she was moving to Hollywood to try and begin a film career. "I won't be coming to Foxworth Hall again, Momma," she repeated. "I love you, and I love Dad, even if he is angry with me for speaking my mind. Tell Jory again that I love him and his children. But hate and ugly thoughts come into my mind the minute I step inside that house. Leave there, Momma. Daddy. Leave before it's too late."

Numbly I nodded.

"Momma, remember the night when Bart beat up Victor Wade? He carried me home naked—and he took me up to Joel's room. He held me so Joel could look me over, and that old man spat on me, cursed me. I couldn't tell you then. The two of them scare me when they get together. Alone, Bart might straighten out. With Joel there to influence him, he could be dangerous."

She was soon on the plane and we were on the ground watching her fly away again.

She flew toward morning. We drove home toward night.

This couldn't go on any longer. To save Jory, Chris, the twins, and myself, we had to leave, even if it meant we'd never see Bart again.

Garden in the Sky



Poor Cindy, I was thinking, how would she fare in Hollywood? I sighed, then began to look around for the twins. They sat solemnly in their sandbox with the rainbowed canopy overhead, although in early September the weather was steadily cooling off. They sat without shoveling sand into pretty buckets, not building sand castles. Not doing anything. “Just listening to the wind blow,” said Deirdre.

“Don’t like the wind,” added Darren.

Before I could speak, Chris was striding toward us, and soon I was telling him, “Cindy just called from Hollywood. She says she has lots of friends there already. I don’t know if she does or not. But she does have plenty of money. Already I’ve called one of my friends who will check on her.”

“It’s better so,” he said with a troubled sigh. “It seems nothing can work out for Cindy here. She can’t get along with Bart, and now she’s started on Joel as well. In fact, she seems to think Joel is worse than Bart.”

“He is, Chris! Don’t you know that by now?”

He grew impatient with me, just when I thought I had him convinced. “You’re prejudiced because he is Malcolm’s son, and that’s all it is. For a while when Cindy was berating him, too, the two of you almost convinced me, but Joel is not doing one thing to influence Bart. Bart, from all I hear, is a full-blooded young stud, having the time of his life, only you don’t know that. And Joel can’t have much longer to live. That cancer is devouring him day by day, even if he does maintain his weight. He can’t possibly hold on more than a month or two more.”

I wasn’t distressed. I didn’t even feel guilty or ashamed at that moment, I told myself with sincerity, that Joel was getting

out of life exactly what he deserved. “How do you know he’s ill with cancer?” I asked.

“He told me that’s why he came back to die on home ground, so to speak. He wants to be buried in the family cemetery.”

“Chris, like Cindy said, he does look better now than when he came.”

“Because he’s well fed and well housed. He lived in poverty at that monastery. You see him in one way, I see him another. He confides in me, Catherine, and tells me how hard he’s tried to win you to his side. Tears come into his eyes. ‘And she’s so much like her dear mother, my dear sister’ he’ll say over and over again.”

Not for one minute, after witnessing Joel in that chapel, would I ever believe in that evil old man. Even when I told Chris about the chapel incident in great detail, he didn’t think it so terrible until I mentioned what had been taught to the twins.

“You heard that? Actually heard those babies say they were Devil’s issue?” Disbelief was clear in his blue eyes.

“Does it ring a familiar bell? Do you see Cory and Carrie on their knees by their beds, praying for God to forgive them for being born Devil’s spawn? Even when they didn’t know what that meant? Does anyone know more than you and I what harm can be done from ideas like that planted in such young minds? Chris, we have to leave soon! Not after Joel dies, but soon as possible!”

He said exactly what I’d feared he would. We had to think of Jory, who needed special quarters, special equipment. “He’ll have to have an elevator. Doors will have to be enlarged. The halls must be wide. And there is another consideration—Jory may marry Toni. He asked me what I thought about it, wanting to know if I believed he had a chance of making Toni happy. I said yes, of course he could. I can see the love between them growing day by day. I like the way she treats him, as if she doesn’t see the wheelchair, or what he can’t do—only what he can.

“And Cathy, it wasn’t love between Toni and Bart. It was infatuation, glands calling to glands—or call it whatever you will, but it wasn’t love. Not our kind of everlasting love.”

“No ... ,” I breathed, “not the kind that lasts forever ...”

* * *

Two days later Chris called from Charlottesville, telling me he’d found a house.

“Exactly how many rooms?”

“Eleven. It’s going to seem small after Foxworth Hall. But the rooms are large, airy, cheerful. It has four baths and a powder room, five bedrooms, a guest room and another bath over the garage, and also on the second floor is a huge room we can convert into a studio for Jory, and one of the extra bedrooms can be my home office. You’re going to love this house.”

I doubted that, he’d found it too quickly, even though that’s what I’d asked him to do. He sounded so happy, and that gave me happy expectations. He laughed, then explained more. “It’s beautiful, Cathy, really just the kind of house I’ve always heard you say you wanted. Not too big, not too small, with plenty of privacy. Three acres with flowerbeds everywhere.”

It was settled.

As soon as we could pack our bags and many personal possessions accumulated over the years we’d lived in Foxworth Hall, we would move out.

I felt sad in some ways as I sauntered through the grand rooms that I’d gradually made cozy with my own decorating ideas. Bart had complained more than once that I was changing what should never change. But even he, once he’d seen the improvements that made this a home rather than a museum, had finally agreed to let me have my way.

Chris came to me Friday evening, looking at me with soft eyes. “So, my beautiful, hold on for just a few more days and let me drive back to Charlottesville and check out that house more thoroughly before we sign the contract bid. I’ve found a nice apartment we can rent until we can close on the house.

Also, I have a few things to clear up at the lab, so I can take off several days and help get us settled. As I was telling you on the phone, I think two weeks of work, after the closing, and our new home will be ready for all of us—ramps, elevator, and all.”

He graciously didn't mention all the years he'd lived with Bart, knowing it was like living with an explosive hidden somewhere, bound to go off sooner or later. Never a word to reproach me for giving him a defiant, disrespectful son who refused to care how much love was given him.

Oh, how much agony he'd suffered because of Bart, and still he didn't say a word to condemn me for going with deliberate intentions after my mother's second husband. I put my hands to my head, feeling that deep ache beginning again.

My Christopher drove away in the early morning, leaving me to fret through yet another anxiety-ridden day. Over the years I'd grown more and more dependent on him, when once I'd prided myself for being independent, able to go my own way and not need anyone nearly as badly as they needed me. How selfishly I'd looked at life when I was younger. My needs had come first. Now it was the needs of others that came first.

Restlessly I roamed about, checking on all those I loved, staring at Bart when he came home, dying to throw all kinds of accusations his way, yet somehow feeling so much pity for him. He sat behind his desk, looking absolutely the perfect young executive. No guilt. No shame as he bargained, manipulated, negotiated, making more and more money just by talking over the telephone, or communicating with his computer. He looked up at me and smiled. A genuine smile of welcome.

“When Joel told me Cindy had decided to leave, it cheered my whole day, and I still feel that way.” Yet what was that oddness behind the darkness of his eyes? Why did he look at me as if soon he'd cry?

“Bart, if ever you want to confide in me—”

“I have nothing to confide, Mother.”

His voice was soft. Too soft, as if he spoke to someone that would soon be gone—forever gone.

“You may not know this, Bart, but the man you so hate, my brother and your uncle, has done the best he could to be a good father replacement.”

Shaking his head, he denied this. “To do this best would have been abandoning his relationship with you, his sister, and he hasn’t done that. I could have loved him if he’d only stayed my uncle. You should have known better than to try to deceive me. You should know by now all children grow up to ask questions and remember well scenes you think they’ll soon forget, but those children don’t forget. They take those memories and bury them deep in their brains, to bring them out later when they can understand. And all that I can remember tells me that the two of you are bound in ways that seem unbreakable, except by death.”

My heart quickened. On the roof of Foxworth Hall, under the sun and stars, Chris and I had sworn certain vows to see us through eternity. How young and foolish to create our own traps ...

Tears could so easily flood my eyes lately. “Bart—how could *I* live without *him*?”

“Oh, Mother, you could! You know you could. *Let him go, Mother.* Give to me the kind of decent, God-fearing mother I’ve always needed to keep my sanity.”

“And if I can’t say good-bye to Chris—what then, Bart?”

His dark head bowed. “God help you, Mother. I won’t be able to. God help me, too. Even so, I do have to think of my own eternal soul.”

I went away.

* * *

All through the night I dreamed of fire, of such terrible things I woke up, not clearly remembering anything but the fire, yet there had been something else, some dreadful remembered thing I kept shoving to the back of my mind. What? What? Unable to overcome the inexplicable fatigue I felt, I drifted

back to sleep and fell again immediately into a continuing nightmare where I saw Jory's twins as Cory and Carrie, carried off to be devoured. For the second time I forced myself awake. Forced myself to get up, although my head ached badly.

I felt woozy-headed, half drunk as I set about my daily chores. At my heels the twins tagged behind, asking a thousand and one questions, in particular Deirdre. She reminded me so much of Carrie with her why? where? and whose is it? And how did it come to be his or hers or its? Jibberty-jabber, chitter-chat, on and on as Darren poked into closets, pulled open drawers, investigated envelopes, leafed through magazines and in the process ruined them for reading, making me say, "Cory, put those down! They belong to your grandfather and he likes to read the writing even if you don't like anything but the pictures. Carrie, would you please be quiet for just five minutes? Just five?" That, of course, drew another question that wanted to know who was Cory and who was Carrie, and why was I always calling them those funny names?

Finally Toni came to relieve me of the too inquisitive children. "Sorry, Cathy, but Jory wanted me to model for him in the garden today before all the roses die ..."

Before all the roses die? I stared at her, then shook my head, thinking I was reading too much into ordinary words. The roses would live until a heavy freeze came, and winter was months away.

Around two in the afternoon, the telephone in my room rang. I'd just laid down to rest. It was Chris. "Darling, I can't stop worrying about what might happen. I think your fears are getting to me. Have patience. I'll be seeing you in an hour. Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be all right?"

"Just checking. I've had a bad feeling. I love you."

"I love you, too."

* * *

The twins were restless, not wanting to play in the sandbox, not wanting to do one thing I suggested.

“Dee-dee don’t like jump rope,” said Deirdre, who couldn’t pronounce her name correctly and didn’t really want to. The more we tried to teach her the correct way, the more she lisped. She had Carrie’s stubbornness. Just as Darren was more than willing to follow where she led, and he’d lisp when she did. And what difference did it make if a little boy his age played house?

I put the twins down for their naps. They noisily objected and didn’t stop until Toni came in and read to them a story she’d promised she’d read—when I’d just read the same blasted story three times! Soon they were asleep in their pretty room with the draperies drawn. How sweet they looked, turned on their sides to face one another, just as Cory and Carrie had done.

In my own room, after checking on Jory, who was busy reading a book on how to strengthen certain lower sexual muscles, I turned to my neglected manuscript and brought it up to date. When I grew tired, distracted by the absolute silence in the house, I went to waken the twins.

They were not in their small beds!

Jory and Toni were on the terrace, both lying on their sides on the quilted exercise mat. They were embracing, kissing long and passionately. “Sorry to interrupt,” I said, feeling ashamed I had to intrude on their privacy and ruin what had to be a wonderful experience for Jory—and for her. “Where are the twins?”

“We thought they were with you,” said Jory, winking at me before he turned back to Toni. “Run find them, Mom ... I’m busy with today’s lesson.”

I used the quickest way to reach the chapel. Through all the gardens I hurried, glancing uneasily at the woods that hid the cemetery. Tree shadows on the ground were beginning to stretch out and cross one another as I neared the chapel door. A strange scent was wafted on the warm summer breezes. Incense. I ran on, reaching the chapel quite out of breath, with

my heart pounding. An organ had been installed since I was here last. I stole as quietly as possible into the chapel.

Joel was seated at the organ playing beautifully, showing that once he had been truly a professional musician with remarkable ability. Bart stood up to sing. I relaxed when I saw the twins in the front pew, looking content as they stared up at their uncle, who sang so well it almost stole my fear and gave me peace.

The hymn ended. Automatically the twins went down on their knees and placed their small palms beneath their chins. They seemed cherubs—or lambs for the slaughter.

Why was I thinking that? This was a holy place.

“And lo, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil ... ,” spoke Bart, now on his knees. “Repeat after me, Darren, Deirdre.”

“And lo, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil,” obeyed Deirdre, her high-pitched, small voice leading the way for Darren to follow.

“For thou art with me ... ,” instructed Bart.

“For thou art with me ...”

“Thy rod and thy staff shall comfort me.”

“Thy rod and thy staff shall comfort me.”

I stepped forward. “Bart, what the devil are you doing? This is not Sunday, nor has anyone died.”

His bowed head raised. His dark eyes met mine and held such sorrow. “Leave, Mother, please.”

I ran to the children, who jumped up. I gathered them into my arms. “We don’t like it here,” whispered Deirdre. “Hate here.”

Joel had risen to his feet. He stood tall and lean in the shadows, with color from the stained glass falling on his long, gaunt face. He said not a word, just looked me up and down—scathingly.

“Go back to your rooms, Mother, please, please.”

“You have no right to teach these children fear of God. When you teach religion, Bart, you speak of God’s love, not his wrath.”

“*They* have no fear of God, Mother. You speak of your own fear.”

I began to back away, pulling the twins with me. “Someday you are going to understand about love, Bart, You are going to find out it doesn’t come because you want it, or need it. It’s yours only when you earn it. It comes to you when you least expect it, walks in the door and closes it quietly and when it’s right, it stays. You don’t plot to find it. Or seduce to try and make it happen. You have to deserve it, or you’ll never have anyone who will stay long enough.”

His dark eyes looked bleak. He stood, towering up there; then he advanced, taking the three steps down.

“We are all leaving, Bart. That should delight you. None of us will come back to bother you again. Jory and Toni will go with us. You will have *come into your own*. Every room of this mammoth lonely Foxworth Hall will be all yours. If you wish, Chris will turn over the trusteeship to Joel until you are thirty-five.”

For a moment, a brief illuminating moment, fear lit up Bart’s face, just as jubilation lit up Joel’s watery eyes.

“Have Chris turn the trusteeship over to my attorney,” Bart said quickly.

“Yes, if that’s what you want.” I smiled at Joel, whose face then turned. He shot Bart a hard look of disappointment, confirming my suspicions—he was angry because Bart would take what might have been his ...

“By morning we will be gone, all of us,” I whispered hoarsely.

“Yes, Mother. I wish you godspeed and good luck.”

I stared at my second son, who stood three feet from me. Where had I heard that said last? Oh, oh ... so very long ago. The tall conductor on the night train that brought us here as children. He’d stood on the steps of the sleeper train and called

that back to us, and the train had sounded a mournful good-bye whistle.

It came to me as I met Bart's brooding gaze that I should speak my parting words now, in this chapel of his building, and forget about saying anything tomorrow when I was likely to cry.

He spoke first. "Mothers always seem to run and leave the sons to suffer. *Why are you deserting me?*"

The tone of his throaty voice, full of pain, filled me with suffering. Still I said what I had to say. "Because you deserted me years ago," I answered brokenly. "I love you, Bart. I've always loved you, though you don't want to believe that. Chris loves you. But you don't want his love. You tell yourself each day you live that your own natural father would have been a better father—but you don't know that he would have been. He wasn't faithful to his wife, my mother—and I wasn't his first dalliance. I don't want to speak disrespectfully of a man whom I loved very much at the time, but he wasn't the same kind of man Chris is. He wouldn't have given you so much of himself."

The sun through the windows turned Bart's face firered. His head moved from side to side. Tormented again. At his sides his hands clenched into tight fists. "Don't say one word more!" he shouted. "He's the father I want, have always wanted! Chris has given me nothing but shame and embarrassment. Get out! I'm glad you're leaving. Take your filth with you and forget I exist!"

* * *

Hours passed, and still Chris didn't show. I called the university lab. His secretary said he'd left three hours ago. "He should have been there, Mrs. Sheffield."

Immediately thoughts of my own father came to torment me. An accident on the highway. Were we duplicating our mother's act in reverse, running away from, not to, Foxworth Hall? Tick-tock went the clocks. Thumpity-thump-thump went my heartbeats. Nursery rhymes I had to read so the twins would sleep and stop asking questions. Little Tommy Tucker,

sing for your supper ... When you wish upon a star ... dancing in the dark ... all our lives, dancing in the dark ...

“Mother, please stop pacing the floor,” ordered Jory. “You rub my nerves raw. Why this grand rush to leave? Tell me why, please say something.”

Joel and Bart strolled in to join us.

“You weren’t at the dinner table, Mother. I’ll tell the chef to prepare a tray.” He glanced at Toni. “YOU can stay.”

“No, thank you, Bart. Jory has asked me to marry him.” Her chin lifted defiantly. “He loves me in a way you never can.”

Bart turned betrayed, hurt eyes on his brother. “You can’t marry. What kind of husband can you make now?”

“The very kind I want!” cried Toni, striding to stand beside Jory’s chair and putting her hand lightly on his shoulder.

“If you want money, he doesn’t have one percent of what I have.”

“I wouldn’t care if he had nothing,” she answered proudly, meeting squarely his dark, forbidding gaze. “I love him as I’ve never loved anyone before.”

“You pity him,” stated Bart matter-of-factly.

Jory winced but said nothing. He seemed to know Toni needed to have it out with Bart.

“Once I did pity him,” she confessed honestly. “I thought it a terrible shame such a wonderful man with so much talent had to be handicapped. Now I don’t see him as handicapped. You see, Bart, all of us are handicapped in one way or another. Jory’s is in the open, very visible. Yours is hidden—and sick. You are so sick, and it’s pity I feel now—FOR YOU.”

Seething emotions contorted Bart’s face. I glanced at Joel for some reason and saw him staring at Bart, as if commanding him to stay silent.

Twisting about, Bart barked at me, “Why are you all gathered in this room? Why don’t you go to bed? It’s late.”

“We are waiting for Chris to come home.”

“There was an accident on the highway,” spoke up Joel. “I heard the news on the radio. A man killed.” He seemed delighted to give me this news.

My heart seemed to drop a mile—another Foxworth downed by an accident?

Not Chris, not my Christopher Doll. No, not yet, not yet.

From far away I faintly heard the kitchen door open and close. The chef leaving for his apartment over the garage I thought—or maybe Chris. Hopefully I turned toward the garage. No bright blue eyes, no ready smile and arms outstretched to hold me. No one came through the door.

Minutes passed as we all stared at each other uncomfortably. My heart began to throb painfully; it was time he was home. Time enough.

Joel was staring at me, his lips cocked in a peculiarly hateful way, as if he knew more than he’d said. I turned to Jory, knelt beside his chair, and allowed him to hold me close. “I’m scared, Jory,” I sobbed. “He should be home by now. It couldn’t take him three hours even in the winter with icy roads.”

No one said anything, Not Jory, who held me tight. Not Toni. Not Bart or even Joel. The very show of all of us being together, waiting, waiting brought back only too vividly the scene of my father’s thirty-sixth birthday party and the two state policemen who’d come to say he’d been killed.

I felt a scream in my throat ready to sound when I saw a white car heading up our private road, a red light spinning on the top.

Time turned backward.

NO! NO! NO! Over and over again, my brain screamed even as they spilled out the facts about the accident, the doctor who’d jumped out of his car to help the injured and dying victims laid on the roadside and as he ran to cross the highway, he’d been struck by a hit-and-run driver.

They carefully, respectfully put his things on a table, just as they'd dumped my father's possessions on another table in Gladstone. This time I was staring at all the items that Chris usually carried in his pockets. All this was unreal, just another nightmare to wake up from—not my photograph in his wallet, not my Chris's wristwatch and the sapphire ring I'd given him for Christmas. Not my Christopher Doll, no, no, no.

Objects grew hazy, dim. Twilight gloom pervaded my entire being, leaving me nowhere, nowhere. The policemen shrank in size. Jory and Bart seemed so far away. Toni loomed up huge as she came to lift me to my feet. "Cathy, I'm so sorry ... so terribly sorry ..."

I think she said more. But I tore from her grip and ran, ran as if all the nightmares I'd ever dreamed in my life were catching up with me. *Seek the tarnish and you shall find.*

On and on running, trying to escape the truth, running until I reached the chapel where I threw myself down in front of the pulpit and began to pray as I'd never prayed before.

"Please, God, you can't do this to me, or to Chris! There's not a better man alive than Chris ... you must know that ..."

And then I was sobbing. For my father had been a wonderful man, and that hadn't mattered. Fate didn't choose the unloved, the derelicts, the unneeded or unwanted. Fate was a bodiless form with a cruel hand that reached out randomly, carelessly, and seized up with ruthlessness.

* * *

They buried the body of my Christopher Doll, not in the Foxworth family plot, but in the cemetery where Paul, my mother, Bart's father, and Julian all lay under the earth. Not so far away was the small grave of Carrie.

Already I'd given the order to have the body of my father moved from that cold, hard, lonely ground in Gladstone, Pennsylvania so he, too, could lie with the rest of us. I thought he would like that, if he knew.

I was the last of the four Dresden dolls. Only me ... and I didn't want to be here.

The sun was hot and bright. A day for fishing, for swimming, for playing tennis and having fun, and they put my Christopher in the ground.

I tried not see him down there with his blue eyes closed forever. I stared at Bart, who spoke the eulogy with tears in his eyes. I heard his voice as if from a far-far distance, saying all the words he should have said when Chris was alive and he could have appreciated hearing those kind, loving words.

“It is said in the Bible,” began Bart in that beautiful, persuasive voice he could use when he wanted, “that it is never too late to ask for forgiveness. I hope and pray this is true, for I will ask of this man who lies before me that his soul will look down from Heaven and forgive me for not being the loving, understanding son I could and should have been. This father, that I never accepted as my father, saved my life many times, and I stand here, shafted to my heart with all the guilt and shame of a wasted childhood and youth that could have made his life happier.”

His dark head bowed so the sun made his hair and his falling tears gleam. “I love you, Christopher Sheffield Foxworth. I hope you hear me. I hope and pray you forgive me for being blind to what you were.” Tears flowed down his cheeks. His voice turned hoarse. People started to cry.

Only I had dry eyes, a dry heart.

“Doctor Christopher Sheffield denied his surname of Foxworth,” he went on when he found his voice again. “I know now he had to. He was a physician right up to his last moment, dedicated to doing what he could to relieve human suffering, while I, as his son, would deny him the right to be my substitute father. In humiliation, in remorse, and in shame, I bow my head and say this prayer ...”

On and on he went while I closed my ears and turned away my eyes, gone numb from grief.

* * *

“Wasn’t it a wonderful tribute, Mom?” asked Jory one dark day. “I cried, couldn’t help it. Bart humbled himself, Mom,

and in front of that huge crowd. I've never seen him humble before. You have to give him credit for doing that."

His dark blue eyes pleaded with me.

"Mom, you've got to cry, too. It's not right for you to just sit and stare into space. It's been two weeks now. You're not alone. You have us. Joel has flown back to that monastery to die there with that cancer he says he has. We'll never see him again. He wrote his last words, saying he didn't want to be buried on Foxworth ground. You have me, you have Toni, Bart, Cindy, and your grandchildren. We love you and need you. The twins are wondering why you don't play with them. Don't shut us out. You've always bounced back after every tragedy. Come back this time. Come back to all of us—but come back mostly for Bart's sake, for if you allow yourself to grieve to death, you will destroy him."

For Bart's sake I stayed on in Foxworth Hall, trying to fit myself into a world that didn't really need me anymore.

* * *

Nine lonely months passed. In every blue sky I saw Chris's blue eyes. In everything golden I saw the color of his hair. I paused on the streets to stare at young boys who looked as Chris had at their ages; I stared at young men who reminded me of him when he was their age; I gazed longingly at the backs of tall, strong-looking men with blond hair going gray, wistfully hoping they'd turn and I'd see Chris smile at me again. They did turn sometimes, as if they felt the yearning hot blaze of my eyes, and I'd turn away my eyes, for they weren't him, not ever him.

I roamed the woods, the hills, feeling him beside me, just out of reach, but still beside me.

As I walked on and on alone, but for Chris's spirit, it came to me that there was a pattern in our lives, and nothing that had happened was coincidental.

In all ways possible Bart did what he could to bring me back to myself, and I smiled, forced myself to laugh, and in so

doing I gave him peace and the confidence he'd always needed to give him a feeling of value.

Yet, yet, who and what was I now that Bart had found himself? That feeling of knowing the pattern grew and grew as I sat often alone in the grand elegance of Foxworth Hall.

Out of all the darkness, the anguish, the apparently hapless tragedies, and pathetic events of our lives, I finally understood. Why hadn't all of Bart's psychiatrists realized when he was young that he was testing, seeking, trying to find the role that suited him best? Through all that childhood agony, throughout his youth, he'd chiseled at his flaws ruthlessly, backing off the ugliness he believed marred his soul, steadfastly holding on to his credence that good eventually won over evil. And in his eyes, Chris and I had been evil.

Finally, at long last, Bart found his niche in the scheme of what had to be. All I had to do was turn on the TV on any Sunday morning and sometimes during midweek and I could see and hear my second son singing, preaching, acknowledged as the most mesmerizing evangelist in the world. Rapier-sharp, his words stabbed into the conscience of everyone, causing money to pour into his coffers by the millions. He used the money to spread his ministry.

Then came the surprise one Sunday morning of seeing Cindy rise and join Bart on the podium. Standing beside him, she linked her arm through his. Bart smiled proudly before he announced, "My sister and I dedicate this song to our mother. Mother, if you are watching, you'll know exactly how much this song means not only to both of us, but to you, as well."

Together, as brother and sister, they sang my favorite hymn ... and a long time ago I'd given up on religion, thinking it wasn't for me when so many were bigoted, narrow-minded, and cruel.

Yet, tears streaked my face ... and I was crying. After all the months since Chris had been struck down on that highway, I was crying dry that bottomless well of tears.

* * *

Bart had hacked off the last rotten bit of Malcolm's genes and had left only the good. To create him, the paper flowers had bloomed in the dusty attic.

To create him, fires had burned houses, our mother had died, our father, too ... just to create the leader who would turn mankind away from the road to destruction.

I switched off the TV when Bart's program was over. His was the only one I watched. Not so far away, they were building a huge memorial honoring my Christopher.

THE CHRISTOPHER SHEFFIELD MEMORIAL CANCER RESEARCH CENTER, it was to be called.

In Greenglenna, South Carolina, Bart was also the founder of a grant for struggling young lawyers, and this was called THE BARTHOLOMEW WINSLOW LEGAL GRANT.

I knew Bart was trying to return good for the evil he'd done by denying the man who'd tried his best to be his father. A hundred times I reassured him that Chris would be pleased, very pleased.

* * *

Toni had married Jory. The twins adored her. Cindy had a film contract and was a fast-rising star. It seemed strange, after living a lifetime of giving, first to my mother's twins, then to my husbands, and my children and grandchildren, not to be needed, not to have a place of my own. Now I was the odd one out.

"Mom!" Jory told me one day, "Toni is pregnant! You don't know what that does for me. If we have a boy, he will be called Christopher. If we have a girl, she will be Catherine. Now, don't you say we can't do that, for we will anyway."

I prayed they'd have a boy like my Christopher, or my Jory, and one day in the future, I prayed Bart would find the right woman to make him happy. And only then did I realize that Toni had been right, he was looking for a woman like me, without my weaknesses, wanting her to have only my strengths, and perhaps with me as a living model—he'd never find her.

“And Mom,” Jory had gone on during that same conversation, “I won my first prize, in the watercolor division ... so I’m on my way to another successful career.”

“Just as your father predicted,” I answered.

* * *

All of this was in my mind, making me vaguely happy for Jory and Toni, happy for Bart and Cindy, as I turned toward the dual winding staircase that would take me up, up.

I had heard the wind from the mountains calling me last night, telling me it was my time to go, and I woke up, knowing what to do.

Once I was in that cold dim room, without furniture or carpet or rugs, only a dollhouse that wasn’t as wonderful as the original, I opened the tall and narrow closet door and began my ascent up the steep and narrow stairs.

On my way to the attic.

On my way to where I’d find my Christopher, again ...

Epilogue



It was Trevor who found my mother up there, sitting in the windowsill of what could have been the window of the schoolroom that she'd mentioned so often in the stories of her imprisoned life in Foxworth Hall. Her beautiful long hair was loose and flowing over her shoulders. Her eyes were open and staring glassily up at the sky.

He called to tell me the details, heavy sorrow in his voice, as I beckoned Toni closer so she could listen too. Too bad that Bart was away on a tour around the world. For he would have flown home in a minute if he'd even guessed she needed him.

Trevor went on. "She hadn't been feeling well for days, I could tell. She was so reflective, as if she were trying to make sense out of her life. There was that terrible sadness in her eyes, that pathetic yearning that made my heart ache to see her. I went searching to find her, and eventually I used the second set of narrow, steep stairs to the attic. I looked around. It surprised me when I saw that she must have, for some time, been decorating the attic with paper flowers ..."

He paused as I choked up with tears, with regrets that I hadn't done more to make her feel needed and necessary. Trevor went on, a strange note in his heavy voice. "I must tell you something strange. Your mother, sitting there in the windowsill, looked so young, so slender and frail—and her face even in death held an expression of great joy, and happiness."

Trevor gave me other details. As if she knew she was soon to die, my mother had glued paper flowers on the attic walls, including, too, a strange-looking orange snail and a purple worm. She had written a note that was found in her hand, clutched tight in her death grip.

*There's a garden in the sky, waiting there for me.
It's a garden that Chris and I imagined years ago,
while we lay on a hard black slate roof and stared up
at the sun and the stars.*

*He's up there, whispering in the winds to tell me
that's where the purple grass grows. They're all up
there waiting for me.*

*So, forgive me for being tired, too tired to stay. I
have lived long enough, and can say my life was full
of happiness as well as sadness. Though some might
not see it that way.*

*I love all of you, each equally. I love Darren and
Deirdre and wish them good luck throughout their
lives, as I wish the same for your child-to-be, Jory.*

The Dollanganger Saga is over.

*You'll find my last manuscript in my private vault.
Do with it what you will.*

*It was meant to be this way. I have no place to go
but there. No one needs me more than Chris does.*

*But please don't ever say I failed in reaching my
most important goal. I may not have been the prima
ballerina I set out to be. Nor was I the perfect wife
or mother—but I did manage to convince one
person, at last, that he did have the right father.*

And it wasn't too late, Bart.

It's never too late.

FORBIDDEN SISTER

V.C. Andrews

Available from Gallery Books February 2013

Turn the page for a preview of *Forbidden Sister*

My father was always the first to rise in the morning, even on weekends. He was never quiet about it either. All three bedrooms in our town house just off Madison Avenue on East 81st Street in New York were upstairs. It was a relatively new building in the neighborhood, and Papa often complained about the workmanship and how the builders had cut corners to make more money. He said the older structures on the street were far more solid, even though ours cost more. Our walls were thinner, as were the framing and the floors.

Consequently, I could hear him close drawers, start his shower, close cabinets, and even talk to Mama, especially if their bedroom door was open. The cacophony of sounds he made was his rendition of army reveille. Of course, being the son of an army general, he actually had heard it most of his young life. His family had often lived that close to the barracks, depending on where his father had been stationed, but especially when they were overseas. When I commented about it once, Mama said the volume of the noise he made after he awakened in the morning was a holdover from the days when Roxy lived with us. Her bedroom was on the other side of theirs. She would never wake up for school on her own so Papa would be sure to make all this noise to get her up much earlier than was necessary. No matter what Mama said, he was stubborn about it. Maybe Roxy had inherited that obstinacy from him. Who could be more inflexible when he made up his mind than my father?

Even though he basically had defied his own father's wishes and chosen a business career rather than a military one as his older brother Orman had, Papa still believed in military discipline. Disobeying an order in our house could lead to the equivalent of being court-martialed. At least, that was the way it felt to me, and I'm sure it had felt the same way to Roxy, especially when he told her to leave the house. To her it must have been like a dishonorable discharge. Perhaps, despite what Papa said, she felt some shame. I imagined she would, even though I couldn't remember her that well anymore. After all, it was now a little more than nine years since I had last seen her or heard her voice.

I often wondered if she had seen me and secretly watched me growing up. During these years, did she hide somewhere nearby and wait for a glimpse of either my mother or me? One of the first things I used to do when I stepped out and often still do was look across the street, searching for someone Roxy's age perhaps standing behind a car or off to the side of a building, watching for any sight of us. Even if I didn't see her, I couldn't help but wonder if she followed me to school.

Sometimes, I would pretend she was, and then I would stop suddenly and turn to catch her. People behind me always had either an annoyed or frightened look on their faces. Whenever I walked in the city, whether it be to school or to the store or just to meet friends, I would scan the faces of any young woman who would be about Roxy's age. I often studied some young woman's face so hard, she flashed anger back at me, and I quickly looked away and sped up.

One of the first things my parents had taught me about walking the streets of New York was never to make too much eye contact with strangers. I suppose Roxy would be like a complete stranger to me now. I even had trouble recalling the sound of her voice, but I did sneak looks at the pictures of her Mama had hidden every chance I had.

Of course, I believed Roxy would be as curious about me as I was about her. Why shouldn't she be? Although I feared it, it was hard for me to accept that she hated Mama and me because of what Papa had done to her. Despite his stern ways, it was also hard for me to believe she hated him. Maybe, it was difficult only because I didn't want to believe it. I didn't even want to think that someone with whom I shared so much DNA could be that bad, that immoral? Or did it mean that somewhere deep inside me there was a strain of evil that would someday rise to the surface, too? How would it show itself? What emotions, lusts, and desires exactly did we share?

Having an older sister who had become so infamous to my parents naturally made me worry about myself. When I suggested such a thing to Mama once, she looked at me with pain in her eyes. I know the pain was there because like me she didn't want to believe Roxy was so wicked and sinful, or

as evil as Papa made her out to be. Then she softened her look and told me to think of Cain and Abel in the Bible. Abel wasn't evil because Cain was. Abel was good.

“Besides, we must not believe that evil is stronger than good, Emmie. You're my perfect daughter, my *fille parfaite, n'est ce pas?*”

“Oui, Mama,” I would say whenever she asked me that, but I didn't believe I was as perfect as Mama or Papa thought I was. Who could be?

Yes, I kept my room neat, made my bed, helped Mama with any house chores, shopped for her, came home when my parents told me I must, never smoked or drank alcohol with my classmates, not even a beer, and refused to try any drug or pot any classmate offered. Mama believed in letting me drink wine at dinner, even when I was barely ten, but that was the way she had been brought up in France, and Papa thought it was just fine.

“The best training ground for most things is your home,” he would tell me. My friends at school, especially the ones who knew how strict my father could be, didn't know what to make of that. He sounded so lenient, but I knew that his leniency didn't go any farther than our front door. Sometimes, especially when I left our house, I felt like I was walking around with an invisible leash and collar around my neck.

Rules rained down around me everywhere I looked and not just in my home. Our school, which was a private school, didn't tolerate sexy clothing or any body piercing, not that I wanted to do that. Our teachers even criticized some girls for wearing too much makeup. It was far more serious for any of my classmates to violate a rule at school than it was for students in a public school because unlike public school, he or she wouldn't simply be suspended. They'd be thrown out and all their tuition money would be forfeited. What they did after school the moment they had left the property was another thing, however. Buttons were undone, rings put in noses, and cigarettes taken out of hidden places. Students puffed defiantly. Suddenly their mouths were full of profanity, words they would be afraid even to whisper in the school's hallways.

It was as if all the pent-up nasty behavior was bursting at the seams. They were far from goody-goodies, so why shouldn't I wonder if I were as well?

I probably wouldn't be attending a strict private school if it wasn't for Roxy. She had been going to a public school, had been suspended for smoking, for cheating on a test, and worst of all, was nearly arrested and expelled for smoking a joint in the girls' room. It was one of the better public schools in New York too, but according to what I gleaned from Mama, Roxy never had better than barely passing grades, if that.

The only thing she excelled at was speaking French, thanks to Mama. But even with that skill, she was in trouble. She would say nasty things in French to her teachers under her breath or even aloud, and when some of them went to the language teacher for translations, Roxy ended up in the principal's office and Mama would have to come to school. She tried to keep as much of it as she could hidden from Papa, but often there was just too much to hide, and whatever he did learn was way more than enough to rile him and send him head over heels into a rage.

Mama could get away with hiding much of it because Papa was dedicated to his work at the investment firm. He was up early to deal with the stock market and then always working late into the afternoon with financial planning and other meetings. Mama said that for her to have to call him at work because of something Roxy had done was like the U.S. President having to use the famous red phone or something. I had no doubt that Mama trembled whenever she had to tell him about something very bad Roxy had done in school. She said he was so furious that he could barely speak whenever he had to leave work to attend a meeting because of something she had done.

She once told me, "It got so your sister wouldn't even pretend to feel remorseful about something she had done. She would just look at him with that silent defiance, just as she would when he would practically rattle the whole house to get her out of bed in the morning."

Even though Papa got up earlier than I would have to on weekday mornings, I was used to rising and having breakfast with him and Mama. She was always up to make his breakfast. I would spend the extra morning time studying for a test or reading. Whenever I did anything that probably was completely opposite of what Roxy would have done, such as eat with him, I could see the satisfaction in Papa's face. I used to think and still do that he was letting out an anxious breath, always half-expecting I would somehow turn out to be like Roxy. No matter how well I did in school, how polite I was to his and Mama's friends, or how much I helped Mama, he couldn't help fearing that I would wake up one day and be my sister.

It was as if he had two different kinds of daughters. One was Dr. Jekyll and the other was Miss Hyde, only he wasn't sure if Miss Hyde would emerge in me as well.

"So what's on for today?" Papa asked. It was the same question he asked me every day at breakfast.

Anyone who thought that he asked it out of habit would be wrong, however. He really wanted to know what I had to do, and especially, what I wanted to do. My route to and from school was to follow Madison Avenue north for five blocks and then turn west for another block. I could do it blindfolded by now. If I had any plans to diverge from the route, especially during nice weather, as we were having this particular fall, and go somewhere after school, I would have to tell him. He even wanted to know when I would take my lunch and eat it in Central Park with some friends. The school let us do that. Many of our teachers even did it, but doing something spontaneously was very difficult.

Maybe because of how angry Papa would get about Roxy if and when Mama slipped and brought up her name, I tried extra hard to please him. To get him to smile at me, laugh at something I had said or done, and kiss me when he hugged me was so very important to me. Although I didn't come out and say it, earning this reaction from him was like me telling him that I wasn't and never would be like Roxy. Nothing made me feel warmer and happier than when he used Mama's French to

call me his *fille parfaite*. Maybe hearing him say I was a perfect daughter in French made it even more special.

Sometimes, I would imagine Roxy was standing there beside me in the house, scowling and sneering whenever Papa said that. I knew what sibling rivalry was, how friends of mine competed with their sisters or brothers for their parents' affection and approval. As strange as it might sound, even though my sister was gone from our home and lives, I still felt sibling rivalry. Perhaps I was competing with a ghost. My visions of her were as vague as that, but I still felt I was always being measured against her. Was my French as good as hers? Was I as pretty?

Other girls and boys my age might have older brothers or sisters to look up to and try to emulate. I had a sister, a secret sister who always seemed to be better than me. It wasn't difficult for me to outdo her in every way possible except misbehavior, but nothing I could do or say really stopped my parents from thinking about her. I knew that was true, regardless of what Papa pretended or how furious and red his face would become at the mere suggestion of her.

Roxy was here; she would always be here, haunting us all. Keeping her bedroom door shut, throwing out her things, removing her pictures from the shelves and mantle, ignoring her birthday and forbidding the sound of her name didn't stop her voice from echoing somewhere in the house. Whenever I saw Papa stop what he was doing, or look up from what he was reading and stare blankly at a corner or at a chair, I had the feeling he was seeing Roxy. I know Mama did. It got so I recognized those moments when she would pause no matter what she was doing and just stare at something. I would say nothing. Afterward, she often went off to cry in secret.

"If it doesn't rain, we're going to the park for lunch, and then after school I'm going to Chastity Morgan's house to study for our unit exam in social studies," I told Papa at breakfast. His whole body was at attention waiting for my next response.

"Just you and Chastity?" he asked, his dark brown eyebrows lifted in anticipation of my answer.

Even though Papa had never been in the army, he kept his dark-brown hair as short as a soldier's and had a soldier's military posture, with his shoulders back and his back straight. He had a GI Joe shave every morning and wore spit-polished shoes. He was a little over six feet tall and tried to keep himself physically fit. He would walk as much as he could and avoid taxicabs whenever possible, but his job was sedentary. Despite his efforts, he had slowly gained weight over the years until his doctor warned him about his blood pressure and cholesterol. He tried to watch his diet, but Mama was French and cooked with sauces he loved. It did him no good to try to pass the blame onto her either, because she was ready to point out how the French were thinner and healthier because they didn't ask for seconds as he would often do.

Except for that and the topic of my sister, my parents rarely argued. If anyone complained, it was Mama critiquing herself. I thought it was an odd complaint.

"I'm too devoted to that man," she would mutter. "But I can't help it."

I wondered if that was true. Could you love someone too much? What was too much? From what I saw in the lives of my classmates, especially when I visited them at their homes, their parents could use love inoculations, affection booster shots. Chastity's parents were like that. Eating dinner in their dining room was like eating at a restaurant. Their conversation was mostly directed to their maid. I was there when her father sent food back to be cooked longer or complained about being given food too cool. I half-expected him to leave a tip at his plate before he left the table.

Most of the time at these dinners, her mother would talk to Chastity and me without saying more than two words to Chastity's father. Her father often read a paper at the dinner table, too. My father would bring him up on charges and have him face a military tribunal and then a firing squad for doing something like that.

When Chastity came to my house for dinner, the contrast was so great, it almost brought tears to her eyes. Both my parents made her feel like part of our family. Papa directed a

great deal of conversation her way. In this case, however I wished he wouldn't because his conversation was mostly interrogation. Maybe Chastity wasn't aware of it as much as I was, but he was looking to see if she would be a bad influence on me, even though we had been best friends for two years now, and she was the only one at school who knew I had an older sister. I had even told her where Roxy lived and what Roxy did.

I didn't do that because I was proud of her. I did it because I wanted company when I eventually went to spy on her, and I knew this would excite Chastity. She and I really had been talking about doing this for weeks now, and I decided that I was finally ready to do it. She understood that it required lots of planning. I just couldn't go hanging around the hotel for hours and hours. My parents, especially my father, would want to know where I had been and what I had been doing. I needed a solid alibi and telling my father I was going to her house to study would suffice.

I was sure I could get away with it, but lying to my father wasn't something I liked to do or did often. My reason for that wasn't simply fear of being caught. I couldn't help feeling that my father would see even the smallest, most insignificant untruth as a serious betrayal and, more important, evidence that I was heading toward becoming another Roxy. With such disappointment, his love for me would suffer a nearly fatal wound.

If and when that happened, I was sure I would be able to see it in his face immediately. It would certainly be there if he found out my secret plan to spy on Roxy. Why, he would want to know, would I want to know anything about such a sister? What did this say about me? Would he now definitely believe I was more like her than he had feared or expected? And how would my mother react? Would she blame me for bringing such unhappiness back into our small family? I surely would no longer be their *fille parfaite*. Why would I risk all this just to spy on Roxy? What was the attraction, the fascination? Why didn't I despise her for doing what she had done to both of them?

However, no matter what they pretended, deep in my heart I knew that even they, even my father, wanted to know more about her. No matter what you said or did, you really couldn't wash your hands completely of your child. Blood was too strong. I was convinced she lived in Papa's dreams and even his nightmares. In his heart of hearts, he didn't want to see bad things happen to her and wished that there was some way to bring her back.

"Maybe Kelli Fisher will study with us," I told Papa, hoping to make my alibi more credible. "She's a good student, too. Her twin brother, Carson, might come along," I added nonchalantly, just to make it all seem more truthful.

He nodded, but kept his eyes so fixed on me that even if I weren't lying, I'd inevitably act as if I were. However, he was thinking about something else.

"You like this boy?"

"He's all right," I said, which were a girl's code words for "Ugh!" Papa didn't know that, of course.

"What's 'all right' mean?"

"No second look," I said. "And barely a first."

Mama laughed, but Papa kept his military serious expression.

"I hope you're mother has done a good job of explaining the minefields out there when it comes to sex, Emmie."

"Oh, Norton," Mama said.

"You know, I don't go for this false modesty when it comes to training your children, Vivian. We just have to look to your sister Manon for a good example of what result that can have," he said sharply. Like his father and his father's father, he could swing words like a machete.

Because Papa avoided mentioning Roxy and therefore using her as the example of what not to be, he relied heavily on the story of Mama's sister Manon, who got pregnant at sixteen and married a much older man, a friend of her young

uncle's. Mama would counter with the fact that they were still married and had a nice family.

“Only you French can pretend not to see what's on your right and left flanks,” Papa told her. “Yves or Leaves or whatever he calls himself is surely out there pollinating other *jeunes filles*.”

“It takes only one foolish time,” Papa warned me. “You go a little bit farther and farther out on this weak branch until it snaps and drops you in one pool of muck. That's what teenagers frolicking in sex do, swim in muck.”

Although he didn't add them, I could hear the words, *Just ask your sister*.

“Norton, *s'il vous plaît*,” Mama pleaded.

He gave me one more look of warning and returned to his breakfast.

I had yet to bring a boy home to meet my parents because I was terrified of how Papa would make him feel. It would surely be like a CIA interrogation. I once told Chastity that my father would probably waterboard any boy I had been out with more than once, let alone twice.

And all because of Roxy!

Under these circumstances, who wouldn't expect me to be more and more interested in whom and what she had turned out to be? I had every reason to hate her. Look how she was affecting my life. She was like someone who had died but wouldn't stay buried. She could be thousands of miles away and not only blocks away, but it wouldn't matter. Papa would always look past whatever I had done to see if Roxy had a hand in it, if her influence was in my blood. There were many nights when I raged to myself about it. I wouldn't dare rage at Papa, but I could mutter and think my protest aloud when I was alone.

If you're going to forget her, Papa, forget her. Don't keep looking in me to find her! And don't dare deny that you do!

I even imagined his guilty, remorseful face, but none of this fantasizing really helped to make it easier.

I would look out my bedroom window at the street below, especially whenever I had these thoughts. I could see the corner from where I stood. I knew Roxy was just a little north of us.

“Why didn’t you go farther away?” I whispered. “Did you stay here just to spite Papa? Or did you stay close because you were so sorry and really do miss us?”

“I’m going to know the answers to all my questions about you, Roxy. I swear.

“I’m going to force you to look at me. And I’m going to make you do what I have done too often because of you.

“I’m going to make you cry.”

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