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“No, 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 onto the floor, to sit and stare at them, speechless, utterly bewildered.

What was going on? Why was I suddenly so afraid?

The Dollanganger Family Series

Flowers in the Attic
Petals on the Wind
If There Be Thorns
Seeds of Yesterday
Garden of Shadows

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Broken Wings

Midnight Flight

The Gemini Series

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Black Cat

Child of Darkness

The Shadows Series

April Shadows

My Sweet Audrina

(does not belong to a series)

**If
There
Be
Thorns**


V.C. Andrews®



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For Mary,
For Joan

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-wisps of 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 in greasy, 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 Julia 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 the 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 had 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 Mordecai. 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 onto, 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 cancelling 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 from 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 and 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 fast *pirouettes* that fanned her long blonde hair out in a horizontal 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 her 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 a room full of 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 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

take her in his arms and forgive her. “Cathy, Cathy,” he pleaded with anguish, “don’t be like *her* 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’s 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? What 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—older, 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,
'Til 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 Julia 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

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. I 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 die 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’you 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 could 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 nothing 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 somethin. 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—the chick keeled over dead too!

Hated stiff cold things. Why'd it give up so easily? "What's the matter with you?" I shouted. *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 onto 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 how to make good, unscuffable shoes. Never saw a dad 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 backwards and twice I 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 tellin 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. 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," 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 nothin 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 the birds 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 talkin, and if we sat still on a dusty ole velvet couch and didn't talk, up from the cellar would come faint rustlins 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 any 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 of the 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 sitting 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 Momma 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 showing 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 talkin 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—because when you said somethin 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 talkin 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 a

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 trimmin 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 when we weren't doin a thing bad. "How many times do I have to tell you boys?" he bellowed. "No, 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 and 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 goodbye.

"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 orange 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

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 Bart. "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 Gladston 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. "George 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. "Becha got icky-sticky green goo under all that pretty-colors"

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