



Christopher's Diary: Echoes of Dollanganger

By V.C. Andrews

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Seventeen-year-old Kristin Masterwood is thrilled when her father's construction company is hired to inspect the Foxworth property for a prospective buyer. The once grand Southern mansion still sparks legends and half-truths about the four innocent Dollanganger children, even all these decades later. Foxworth holds a special fascination for Kristin, who was too young when her mother died to learn much about her distant blood tie to the notorious family.

Accompanying her dad to the “forbidden territory,” they find a leather-bound book, its yellowed pages filled with the neat script of Christopher Dollanganger himself. Her father grows increasingly uneasy about her reading it, but as she devours the teen's story page by page, his shattering account of temptation, heartache, courage, and betrayal overtakes Kristin's every thought. And soon her obsession with the doomed boy crosses a dangerous line...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

One of the most popular authors of all time, V.C. Andrews has been a bestselling phenomenon since the publication of *Flowers in the Attic*, first in the renowned Dollanganger family series which includes *Petals on the Wind*, *If There Be Thorns*, *Seeds of Yesterday*, and *Garden of Shadows*. The family saga continues with *Christopher's Diary: Secrets of Foxworth*, *Christopher's Diary: Echoes of Dollanganger*, and *Secret Brother*. V.C. Andrews has written more than seventy novels, which have sold more than 106 million copies worldwide and been translated into twenty-five foreign languages.

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Christopher's Diary: Echoes of Dollanganger

Becoming Christopher and Cathy



The shorter days of approaching winter darkened the corners of my attic earlier and earlier every afternoon. Usually, when you think of yourself ascending, whether it's hiking up a mountain, flying in an airplane, or walking to the top floor of your house, you imagine moving into brighter light. But as my boyfriend, Kane Hill, and I walked up the attic stairway for the first time together, I could almost feel the shadows growing and opening like Venus flytraps to welcome us.

The stairs creaked the way they always had, but it sounded more like a warning this time, each squeak a groan of frantic admonition. Our attic didn't have an unpleasant odor, but it did have the scent of old things that hadn't seen the light of day for years: furniture, lamps, and trunks stuffed with old clothing too out of fashion to care about or throw away when the previous owners left. They were still good enough for someone else to use. All of it had been accumulated by what my father called "pack rats," but he also admitted to being one himself. Our garage was neat but jammed with his old tools and boxes of sample building materials, my first tricycle, various hoses, and plumbing fittings he might find use for someday.

The attic floor was a dark brown hardwood that had worn well and, according to my father, was as solid as the day it was laid. He looked in once in a while, but I would go up regularly to dust a bit, get rid of spiderwebs, and clean the two small windows, spotted with small flies and other tiny bugs who thought they had died outside. I felt I had to maintain the attic mostly because my father kept my mother's things in an old wardrobe there, walnut with embossed cherubs on the doors, another antique. Even after nearly nine years, my father couldn't get himself to throw out or give away any of her things: shoes and slippers, purses, dresses, blouses, nightgowns, coats, and sweaters.

Just like in the Foxworth attic that Christopher had described in his diary, there were other larger items that previous occupants had left, including brass and pewter tables and standing lamps, a dark oak magazine rack with some old copies of *Life* and *Time*, some black and silver metal trunks that had once worn their travel labels proudly, bragging about Paris, London, and Madrid, and other pieces of furniture that had lost their places in the living room and the bedrooms when the decor was changed.

Despite being thought useless and relegated to this vault, to my father, they were almost a part of the house

now. He said that their having been there so long gave them squatters' rights. It really didn't matter whether they had been there long or whether they would find another home, fulfill another purpose. Memories, no matter whose they were, were sacred to him. Things weren't ever simply things. Old toys were once cherished by the children who owned them, and family heirlooms possessed history, whether or not you knew exactly what that history was. It didn't surprise me that a man who built and restored homes had such respect for what was in them. I just hadn't paid much attention to any of it until now.

I was still not convinced that what Kane Hill had suggested the day he discovered Christopher's diary under my pillow was a good idea. At first, I suspected that he might be playing with me, humoring me, when he said he would read it aloud to me, pretending to be Christopher Dollanganger, the oldest of the four children who had been incarcerated in Foxworth Hall more than fifty years ago. I didn't want to diminish the diary's historical importance for Charlottesville or in any way make fun of it. He had assured me that he wouldn't do that.

And then he had added, "To get into it, really get into it, we'll read it up in your attic."

The Foxworth attic was where the four Dollanganger children had spent most of their time for years, there and in a small bedroom below. According to what I knew and how Christopher had described it, the attic was a long, rambling loft that they had turned into their imaginary world because they had been shut out of the real one for so long. The idea of reading Christopher's thoughts and descriptions aloud in a similar environment both fascinated and frightened me. We would no longer be simply observers. In a sense, by playing the roles of Christopher and Cathy, we would empathize, and not just sympathize, with them.

As soon as he had said it, Kane saw the indecision in my face and went on to explain that it would be like acting on a movie set. Movie sets in studios were suggestions of what really was or had been, weren't they?

"This is no different, Kristin," Kane said.

I pointed out that my attic was much smaller than the one in Foxworth, but he insisted that it was an attic, a place where we could pretend to be imprisoned and better understand what Christopher and Cathy had experienced.

He thought we'd get a more realistic sense of it. "It will be like reading *Moby-Dick* while you're on a ship on the ocean. This way, you'll appreciate what happens to the older sister more, and I'll appreciate Christopher's words more, I'm sure."

Of course, I had found myself empathizing with Cathy often when I read Christopher's diary anyway, but not to the extent he was suggesting. It was more like putting on her clothes and stepping into her shoes. In moments, I would lose myself completely and for a while become her. Maybe I did have to be in an attic for that. However, what frightened me about pretending to be her in front of someone else was the possibility that I would be exposing my own vulnerabilities, my own fears and fantasies. Everyone knew the Dollanganger children were distant cousins of mine.

What if I was more like her than I imagined?

The leather-bound book suddenly loomed larger than some historical discovery. It was almost as though the diary had the power to unmask me and cause me to reveal my own secrets, deeply personal ones I had yet to share with anyone, even my father. There would inevitably be questions about Cathy's feelings and how they were the same as or different from mine, especially when it came to her physical and emotional maturing.

Like most girls my age, I was both excited and confused at times by changes in my body and my feelings. I wasn't comfortable chatting about them with other girls, even best friends. And here I was confronting it all with Kane more intimately than I had with anyone. We hadn't been dating that long. There was still so much about each other we had to learn, with or without Christopher's diary. Was I rushing headlong into something I would regret, all because of the diary, because of how it made me feel about myself and my own new feelings? So much of what we do and who we draw closer to ourselves makes us see deeper into ourselves. Sometimes I felt surrounded by mirrors.

Yet I had to admit that Kane sounded as enthusiastic about and as genuinely interested in what Christopher was revealing in his diary as I was. He was as excited as I had been that day when I realized what it was. Since we could safely assume that no one else had read it, Kane made the point that only he and I would know what really had occurred at Foxworth Hall. The legend, the exaggerations, and the misinformation would all be shed, and we would know the truth about the mysteries that were thought to have gone up in flames and assumed to have been lost in the darkness of fading memories.

Kane's eyes were dazzled with excitement when he spoke about it. He looked like a little boy on Christmas morning who knew what was in the package he was about to unwrap. In his mind, perhaps, and certainly in mine, it was like opening a forbidden door, an entrance that led us back into the dark past, through the shadows, up the narrow stairway, and into a world now more like the subject for Halloween stories. Would the door slam shut behind us? Would we trap ourselves in someone else's nightmare? Would what we read and did in my attic haunt us forever because of how intimate the revelations were, both Christopher Dollanganger's and our own?

I never anticipated that I'd be in such a quandary, but after Kane had discovered the diary while he was waiting for me in my room, he was naturally very curious about it. He had only read a page. However, it was enough to force me to reveal what it was. When I explained it to him and told him that my father wasn't happy that I was reading it, his curiosity grew. Nothing makes anything more desirable than declaring it forbidden. Kane said he couldn't wait to catch up to where I was in the diary so that we could go forward together. He sounded like a child about to begin an adventure he had imagined for a long time. I felt his excitement enliven my own and thought maybe it was a good thing he had found the diary under my pillow. Maybe it was meant to be. I even fantasized that it had the power to capture anyone who came close to it. I shouldn't have been so surprised at his finding it and being drawn to it.

And yet I had gone to sleep that night afraid that I had given my trust too easily. I thought that yes, right now, he honestly might be interested in and genuinely excited about what the diary was going to reveal, and for a while, he might find reading it aloud to me in my attic somehow as satisfying as being in a play or a movie, but what if he became bored or thought it had been stupid to start with and then mentioned it to someone at school, who mentioned it to someone else, until I was surrounded with demands and questions? As my father was fond of saying, "Loose lips sink ships." In this case, it would be my ship that had sunk, even before it had much of a chance to sail.

Would I feel like a fool? Would I feel as betrayed as Christopher would be by revealing to strangers how Cathy obviously felt at this point in his diary? I could appreciate how horrible it was for her and maybe even for him. When people whom you cared about and who cared about you seriously disappointed you, it was truly like digging farther down into a wound, sending the pain through your very being. Your heart would close around itself. You would feel naked, lost, deceived by anything and everything afterward, and you would know that from then on, you would not have faith in anyone again. You would be unable to give your trust, even to those you loved. How much more alone could you be than that? Surely, that was what had happened to the Dollanganger children. And maybe that would happen to me.

And all because I was reading the diary secretly.

Was it possible for a diary to be too dangerous to open, a Pandora's box? Was that why my father had told me not to read it? Wasn't it silly to ascribe such powers to an old leather-bound book full of some teenage boy's personal thoughts and descriptions? However, I reminded myself that there were forbidden books. Books had influence on their readers. Schools kept certain books out of their libraries, and parents forbade their children to read them. Governments forbade books. Religions forbade books they thought had been written by witches, even the devil.

Whatever had happened at the original Foxworth Hall, it still had an atmosphere of mystery and horror around it. It had been kept alive through fantastic theories printed in the local newspaper and discussed around the date of the famous first fire and always on Halloween. The diary could carry that same aura. Touch it, open the cover, read the pages, and you could be carried away in the same ugly shadows and cold wind that had carried away those children.

I had tossed and turned all night debating these thoughts and worries in my mind. Sometimes I believe we all really do have two people living inside us arguing often. One has conscience, and the other doesn't. Everyone talks to himself or herself. They would all have to admit that. Well, who were they all talking to? Who is the himself or herself?

The following morning, one side of me seemed to have won the argument. I was determined to tell Kane to forget it. I was even working up a good story, a fabrication, something that would end his idea completely. I thought I might tell him that my father had found me reading the diary into the early hours and was so angry that he had seized it right out of my hands. He had said he was going to burn it, and I had watched him throw it into an old oilcan in our backyard. It had gone up in a puff of black smoke.

But I changed my mind the moment I set eyes on my father at breakfast and saw how happy he was with how well his work was going rebuilding a new, more modern mansion on the Foxworth property. He was getting along with Arthur Johnson, who didn't seem as difficult apparently as other customers he had worked for. That made my father even more sweet and loving to me. I regretted even thinking of using him to deceive someone by making him sound unreasonable and angry. I couldn't do it. However, I felt trapped because I was disobeying his wishes by permitting someone else to know about the diary. I comforted myself by telling myself in this case, he would understand and forgive me.

But the questions and the doubts about what I had agreed to do wouldn't be still. Really, I had thought, what if Kane should betray me and, in a real sense, betray Christopher? Go through with this or not, Kristin? I had asked myself while I had dressed to go down to breakfast. I was tottering between yes and no. I could easily go in either direction. I looked at the clock. It wasn't much longer before I would have to make a definite decision. Kane was going to pick me up to take me to school again, and I knew he would be talking about nothing else. When I had told my father that Kane was coming, he paused in making our breakfast.

"Picking you up again? We're considerably out of his way, especially with morning traffic. He has to be getting himself up and out much earlier."

"Oh, please. He doesn't care about that, Daddy," I said, making it sound like he was just another parent who didn't understand what was and wasn't a priority for teenagers like us.

He shrugged. "To me—you excluded, of course—it seems young people don't want to make compromises or sacrifices too easily. They don't naturally go out of their way. It's the 'please me now' generation."

“You can exclude Kane, too, from that conclusion. Besides, you’d have driven as far as another state to pick up Mommy, wouldn’t you?”

He turned and squinted at me, deepening the folds in his forehead. “I see. Getting a little serious in this first romance of yours?” he asked.

I was a bit surprised myself at how quickly I had come to Kane’s defense, but I had also compared us to my father and mother, who I knew had loved each other intensely. That comparison was a bit over the top, at least for now. And my father was right to characterize my dating Kane as my first real romance. I had gone out on dates, met other boys at parties and dances, but none of that ever became much more than one follow-up call or a few days of some additional hanging out together. Until now, those budding romances always seemed to drift away with the softening of a grip on my hand, until my date’s fingers cooled into icicles and finally slipped out to find a different hand to hold. More often than not, however, it was my hand that began to avoid theirs.

You can’t help but think at first that it’s your fault, that maybe there’s something wrong with you, especially if it happened more than once or twice. Most of my girlfriends had a similar reaction to their failed little affairs of the heart. I always felt I should have been sorrier about it. My indifference surprised me. Was I capable of having deep feelings for anyone besides my own father? Maybe you’re too picky, too sensitive, or too afraid of having a relationship, I told myself. Your standards are too high—impossible, in fact. No relationship will ever be satisfying, and it’s mostly your own fault.

The insecurity rocks you for a while and makes you so timid that you don’t even want to look at another boy and encourage what might be another flop. Why try? Failure was inevitable no matter how promising it was when it started. It was as if the moment I returned a smile, joined a conversation with a new boy, and then went on a date, magnifying glasses dropped over my eyes, and I could see all of my prospective boyfriend’s weaknesses and faults. The only comfort I had was watching other couples fail. It was always good to have friends close enough to support me and sympathize, especially because they had been through the same challenges, similar experiences.

I was an amateur psychiatrist, especially when it came to myself, and I came up with a theory, which I told no one, especially not my father. Maybe because of how involved I was with my father’s loss of his one great love, I was afraid of ever finding one of my own. People end up alone for many reasons. Many are just too selfish to share or compromise or are just too cynical. They believe love brings too many expectations that can never be fulfilled. And because you’ve invested so much of yourself in it, your emotions are bankrupt when it fails, and unlike with any other bankruptcy, you can’t reorganize those feelings and begin again.

However, right from the beginning, I could sense that something different from any of those brief little romances was happening between Kane and me. We were looking at each other with more intensity, holding our gazes longer, smiling at each other more often, and rushing toward every opportunity to be together. It was happening whether or not either of us wanted it to happen. Every time we saw each other in the school hallways, there was almost a surge of electricity in the air. Everyone around us began to fade away, their voices drifting off, their questions lingering unanswered.

I had to believe there was something special between us, and whatever that was, it helped me relax my resistance and permit myself to believe something magical could be happening. After all, that was how it was supposed to work, wasn’t it? It was finally happening to me. I felt relief about myself, as if going seventeen years without having a serious romance was close to tragic, abnormal, an indication of troubled relationships

to come. I worked on convincing myself that whatever happened between Kane and me would support and justify my faith in his promises, but especially when it came to the diary, because he could see how important it was to me. Of course, he wouldn't betray me. He couldn't, I thought. Why was I even debating with myself about it? He cared for me too much. He knew I wouldn't forgive him and that everything we had would burn out as fast as a meteor falling to earth.

That buoyed my confidence and sent me back to yes, but then, almost immediately, I wondered if I was becoming another one of those ostriches my father often pointed out to me, people who wouldn't face unpleasant realities or admit to weaknesses in themselves or others they trusted.

"You can't simply will things to happen the way you want them to, Kristin," my dad had warned me. "The night owl knows sunrise is coming, and there is nothing he can do to stop it, no matter how much he enjoys the darkness."

Wisdom often dripped from his lips like honey, always kindly, always sweet. Right now, I had to answer him truthfully about Kane.

"Yes, Daddy. It's a little serious between Kane and me," I replied.

He nodded and then, turning away, added, "Let me know if a little turns into a lot."

"Why?" I demanded with a little more fervor than I had intended. Was he already suspicious about what I was going to share with Kane? Would he be upset if I had strong feelings for someone besides him?

"I'm just kidding, Kristin. I don't expect you to run off and elope or anything. Uh-oh," he added, putting up his hands to surrender when I didn't respond. Then he hummed the theme from Jaws as if a big shark was approaching a swimmer, and he stepped back.

"What?"

"I think I just entered that world I've been warned about."

"What world?"

"The world of sensitive teenage girls, otherwise known as bedlam."

"Very funny, Daddy. The world of teenage boys is more dysfunctional, if you ask me."

"Probably so." He returned his attention to the pancakes on the stove. "But at least that's waters I've swum in myself. I know what to expect and when to expect it. Teenage girls are more like an earthquake."

He flipped a pancake. Right after being in the navy, where he got into cooking, he had been a short-order cook in a diner-type restaurant off I-95. This was before he met my mother and got into the construction business. When I was little, he actually would juggle a couple of pancakes with two spatulas. It made my mother and me laugh. He would flip one so it fell perfectly on my plate. Somehow all that juggling made them even more delicious.

"And so for me, with a teenage daughter," he said, bringing over my pancakes, "it does feel like swimming in shark-infested waters."

"I promise, I'll warn you ahead of time before I bite," I said as he poured out just the right amount of maple syrup and added banana, which he had sliced for me. He would do all that even when I was married and had children of my own, I thought.

"I'll appreciate the warning. Oh, by the way, I might be running late every afternoon this week," he said, sitting across from me. "Scheduling all these building inspectors, dealing with different contractors, meeting with the architect. This owner is taking a very detailed interest in all the construction, too. He's a nice guy, but lately, now that this is really happening, it feels like he's breathing down my neck sometimes. He slips in behind me like a ghost stepping back into the world."

"Don't most new homeowners take that sort of interest in what you're doing?"

"Not like this," he said. "Sometimes I get the feeling someone's looking over Arthur Johnson's shoulder, too."

"What do you know about him?"

"I told you he ran a hedge fund and made a lot of money. I know as much about him as I have to, I guess. But between you and me, I think it's ridiculous for a man that young to retire, even if he can. He's married to a woman about twelve years younger. I picked that up. Her mother apparently worked for his father. I sort of got the impression that—" He suddenly clamped his lips together and scrunched his nose the way he would when he was about to utter a secret or a nasty comment about something or someone in front of me and stopped himself.

"What?"

He looked at me oddly, obviously hesitant to tell me what he was thinking.

"I'm not a child anymore, Dad. You don't have to worry about offending my innocent little ears."

"Yeah, I have to keep reminding myself. Anyway, you've heard worse and read worse, I'm sure," he added, raising his eyebrows.

"Worse than what?"

"I picked up that Arthur Johnson's father got romantically involved with Arthur's mother-in-law after her husband died. Right after," he added. I guess I didn't react enough, so he said, "Minutes after. Understand?"

"Oh. She might have picked up with him a little before her husband had died?" I asked.

He nodded. "And maybe not just a little before. His wife had died just a year or so earlier, not that her still being alive might have stopped him anyway."

The disapproval on his face was blatant. I knew he was thinking of his own tragedy and wondering how much in love with his wife Arthur Johnson's father had been if he could move on to another woman so quickly. And wondering about it even more so when he learned about Arthur Johnson's mother-in-law. For many reasons, a line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* never drifted too far from my memory after we had read it in English class: "A second time I kill my husband dead, when second husband kisses me in bed."

It was only natural for me to wonder if my father would fall in love with someone again. When would he be ready, if ever, to kiss another woman in his bed? It was painful for me to think about it, but I didn't want to wish him endless loneliness, and I was especially worried about what his life would be like when I was out of the house. I had been filling out applications for college. An acceptance would come soon and ring a bell in this house. I wondered how often he thought about that. I knew he did. Maybe he had his own timetable for when he would fall in love again, and it would start when that bell rang; or maybe he was determined never to love again. Maybe he knew that line in Tennyson's poem: "'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."

"Anyway," he continued, now that he had committed to revealing the story, "afterward, Arthur Johnson met and spent time with his future wife because of their parents' relationship, and both parents were pleased when they became engaged. Then they decided to do the same thing, get engaged and get married. It was a double wedding. His father married his wife's mother at the same ceremony."

"To save money?"

"Maybe," he said, smiling. "When you question why someone rich looks for bargains, he always tells you that's how he became rich. The women shopped for gowns together, and the men bought tuxedos together. They probably did get deals. They even bought similar wedding rings from the same jeweler. He gave away his son at the altar, and she gave away her daughter, and then vice versa. It was a ceremony conducted in mirrors."

"Must have looked weird with them switching places and all."

"I would think so, but he seemed proud of it when he talked about it. 'I got a new mother, and she got a new father the same time we got each other,' he told me. Families replacing families instantly," he said, shaking his head. "Goes on a lot more these days. People accept almost everything when it comes to relationships, exes marrying exes of friends, widows marrying widowed husbands of best friends, stepbrothers marrying stepsisters. Anything goes, it seems."

"Have you seen her?"

"Who?"

"Arthur Johnson's young wife."

"Yeah, once. Pretty girl. I shouldn't say 'girl.' They have a fourteen-year-old son and a twelve-year-old daughter. Both attend a private school in another state and live in dormitories. Maybe they're just not built to raise children. More bird in them."

"Bird?"

"You know. Hatching the eggs is one thing, getting them out of the nest as soon as possible is another."

"Bird," I repeated, and shook my head. "You are a character, Dad."

He shrugged. "I call it like I see it. And if you ask me, you can learn a lot about people by watching and observing so-called lower animals."

"I guess you learn a lot about the people you build or redo houses for."

"Nothing reveals as much about people as the home they live in," he said. "And their children are products of all that, too, often through no fault of their own."

I wanted to ask, What if you were brought up in a mansion with parents from hell like Corrine Foxworth? Would that excuse her behavior after her husband died? But I didn't. I started to clear off the table.

"Only odd thing," Dad added, sounding more like he was talking to himself than to me.

"What?"

"Huh? Oh. The only odd thing was the feeling I got that both Johnson and his wife—her name's Shannon—that both knew a lot more about both the original and the restored Foxworth Hall than Johnson first revealed."

"How do you mean? Knew what?"

"What it looked like in detail, inside and out. He makes references to it from time to time. Where windows were and what they looked out on, stuff like that. Although it's a different architecture, with all sorts of technological updates, he wants to be sure some things are the same."

"Well, there have been pictures of it. What's the surprise?"

"No. It was as if they had been there when it was in its heyday." He thought a moment and then shook his head. "Probably just my imagination. Anyway, don't let my blabbering make you late for school."

I had been late once before because of reading the diary late into the night and then oversleeping. One time was a warning, two was a detention and a demerit, and with my pursuit of class valedictorian, any misbehavior could affect a close decision if my final grades and someone else's were practically the same, which, right now, was the case. But it wasn't just that. Ever since my mother had died of a cerebral aneurism and my father and I were the only immediate family we had, disappointing him in any way, even with something as relatively minor as a tardiness demerit, was abhorrent to me. It was as if since my mother's death, both he and I felt things more, especially sad and disappointing things.

I once heard my father say that the death of someone as close as a wife or a husband strips away the bark. "The rain, even a sharp breeze, stings more."

"I won't be late. I have someone making sure of it, remember?"

"Oh, right. Okay. I left a meat loaf in the fridge. You just have to warm it up. Don't wait dinner on me," he said, and gave me a kiss. He held on to me just a few seconds longer than usual.

"Don't worry about this bird. I'm not leaving the nest so quickly, Dad," I said, and he laughed.

"Have a good day, Kristin."

"You, too, Dad."

I turned back to the sink but paused to think. What had my father meant by people accepting more when it came to relationships these days? Would they easily accept Christopher's father and mother marrying even though he was her half-uncle? According to Christopher Jr., that's what Corrine had finally revealed, making it sound so romantic and inevitable that she expected her children would accept it. There was a time when parents actually wanted their children to marry within the family, marry cousins, believing it kept their blood purer or something, and no one thought of it as incest back then.

I glanced at the clock and finished cleaning up quickly. By the time I had my hands wiped, Kane was sounding his horn. One long beep and two short beeps, like he was sending Morse code or a spy message. Why are we all so dramatic at our age? I thought. When we were older, would we look back and laugh at the little things that made us cry or laugh, sad or happy? When had I become so damn analytical? Maybe because of the way Christopher described Cathy, I was thinking more about everything I did. I was finding myself blaming more of what I thought and felt on my reading of the diary. Was that a bad omen?

I scooped up my books, flicked my dark blue hooded jacket off the hanger in the entryway, and shot out the door as if I was being chased. I slammed it behind me, the echo reverberating like a gunshot. It jerked me out of my deep thoughts as effectively as a slap on my face.

Kane was laughing at me as I hurried to the driveway, putting my jacket on as I went.

"What?" I asked, getting in.

"You should see me when I get up in the morning and stumble into the kitchen for some breakfast. I have to feel my way to the table. You look so alert, so ready to go," he said, and he gazed at the front of the house for a few seconds to see if my father might be looking out the window, then leaned over to kiss me quickly. "Hi."

"I'm not raring to go. Don't remind me how tired I am," I said. "I didn't sleep that well."

"Why not?"

"I just didn't."

He carefully backed out of the driveway. It was a mostly cloudy day. Before this, I had barely noticed the chill in the air. If it had ever smelled like snow was on the way, it did this morning. Already I missed the songbirds and the sweet scent of freshly cut grass. Our short Indian summer was gone. The leafless trees looked stunned. The surrounding woods had become the sleeping forest, hibernating, and the fields of dry grass looked like faded yellowish-green carpets, corpses of hay. With the weather so unpredictable, it was difficult to know confidently what it would be like tomorrow, much less next week or next month. Normally, we didn't have heavy snowfalls this early, but there were also many Christmases without snow at all.

Kane was only in a long-sleeved khaki shirt and jeans despite the cool air. Sometimes I thought he must have ice in his veins. He could be indifferent about the weather. I thought he was that way about almost everything. Whenever I'd complain about something, he'd simply nod, shrug, and give me that "what's the difference?" smile. What's the difference what I wear, what I say, even what I think? Just move along, and if anything, just laugh. Laugh at the changes in the weather, laugh at the nervousness before exams, laugh at the school rules, and especially laugh at the drama of growing older and closer to being totally responsible for yourself. Just laugh.

“Did you read any more of the diary without me?” he asked as we drove off to school. He narrowed his eyes with suspicion when he turned to me. “Is that why you didn’t sleep well?”

I didn’t answer him. I was still thinking about reading the diary in the attic, with him playing Christopher and me being Cathy. He was so casual about everything. Why should I believe he’d take the diary as seriously as I did? This is too big a risk, I told myself. You’ll regret it.

“What’s wrong?” His hazel eyes darkened with concern. “Did you read something that bothered you, something terrible? I really want to do it with you. You haven’t changed your mind, have you?” He looked about as sincere as he ever was about anything.

This was it, I thought. I would either deliver my fabrication and end the diary reading or go on with it. I had to take that big risk. I had to believe in someone else besides my father, didn’t I? Otherwise, I’d lock myself in a different kind of attic, but it would still be avoiding the world. I had to go on with it. I really wasn’t a good liar, anyway. I was often compared to a fish in a bowl, with all my thoughts visibly swimming about. My father bragged about that, telling people, “Deceit’s not comfortable sitting on her face.” That was certainly not true for Corrine Dollanganger, I thought. If anything, she was certainly a good liar. Were selfish people naturally better liars?

“Nothing’s wrong. I didn’t read any more of the diary.”

“Good. That gives me a chance to catch up. What about this afternoon? What time does your father usually come home? How much time will we have?”

“He’s going to be late today, maybe the rest of the week.”

“Perfect. Isn’t it?” he asked when I didn’t say anything.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Kane, really sure?”

“What? How can you ask? Absolutely. I couldn’t stop thinking about it last night. I’m excited. Besides, I remembered that I always thought my father might know more about what happened at that original Foxworth Hall fire than he admits. He’s learned lots of things about Malcolm Foxworth and his family from his older customers. I just never cared much about it until now.”

“Did you tell him about the diary?” I asked, my voice on the verge of panic.

“No, no. I promised I would tell no one, and that’s that. I won’t.”

“What do you mean, your father might know more than he admits?” I asked, sitting up more. “What does he know? How do you know it’s more?”

“Easy,” he said, smiling. “My father and mother know we went up to Foxworth to have that picnic.”

“So?”

“He asked me about the site, what your father was doing, and I asked him what he really knew about the original fire. This was before you told me about the diary. He said what he heard was that the first fire definitely wasn’t accidentally caused by a servant or some electrical malfunction or gas leak. He said that the

story of how it happened that some firemen describe was right.”

“Which story?”

“The one about the daughter deliberately setting the fire. She had gone mad and deliberately set the fire. He said she was whisked away before anyone could ask any more questions and apparently put in an insane asylum or something.”

“He definitely said ‘the daughter’? He believes that to be true?”

“Yes.”

“Did you ask him her name?”

“I didn’t want to ask him too many questions and get him suspicious.”

“That was probably a good idea. Why would she have done that?”

“Who knows? Considering how long ago that was, I’m not surprised there are so many theories and so few facts. He said no one really cared that much about them or what had happened to them. He said from what old-timers told him, Malcolm and Olivia Foxworth weren’t particularly liked and were considered rich, raving, religious maniacs. It was easy to believe they were capable of doing weird things to their children and grandchildren. That’s why what you found is so exciting, Kristin. We’ll know the truth. We’ll learn all the secrets, secrets more than fifty years old.”

“I’m not really sure we should jump to conclusions about anything in the diary. We can’t treat it as gospel.”

“What do you mean? You said it was found on the property. It’s the diary of the boy who was imprisoned there, Christopher, right?”

“Right, but we are getting the story from Christopher. Maybe . . . maybe he’s not telling the truth. My father once suggested that after I had begun to read it.”

Kane thought a moment and then nodded. “I’ll know pretty quickly once I get into it,” he said confidently. “But people don’t usually lie in a diary, anyway. That’s why I never kept one. I don’t want to be caught telling the truth.” He gave me that James Dean smile and shrug that he had become famous for in our school.

“That I believe. So how will you know so quickly if he’s lying or not?”

“I have a built-in lie detector. A buzzer goes off in my head, so don’t try to fool me.”

“Maybe I’ve fooled you already.”

He laughed. “You’re good, angel, you’re real good,” he said. “My father uses that line on my mother. It comes from some old Humphrey Bogart movie.”

“Too bad Christopher Dollanganger didn’t have that built-in buzzer of yours to know when he was being told the truth and when he wasn’t. I’m sure he and his brother and sisters wouldn’t have suffered so much.”

"I'll have to catch up to see what you mean by suffering so much, but don't tell me any more. I want to be objective and come to my own conclusions. I know that's what you want, too, right?"

I nodded, and Kane made the turn into the school parking lot. Others were racing not to be late, the cooler air putting more energy into their strides, because, like Kane, most were underdressed. Even though they looked like they were on treadmills going five or six miles an hour and looked as comical as silent movie stars, some boys thought it was macho to freeze.

After Kane parked and shut off the engine, he sat there for a moment.

"What?" I asked, seeing that he was still in deep thought.

"Their mother brought them there, right?"

"Yes, you'll read about how and why. So?"

"So maybe he rationalized a lot. Maybe he did know, Kristin."

"Did know what?"

"Maybe he knew when he was being lied to but put up with it and lied to himself, and that's what we'll read. So your father could be at least half right."

"Why would he lie to himself?"

"All of us are willing to forgive the ones we love, Kristin," he replied, "even for their lies."

That was a perceptive thing to say, I thought, but what was going on in Kane's life that brought him to that conclusion, a conclusion he was willing to share? I was more impressed with him every time we were together. The sensitivity he revealed was a nice surprise. My father always said that getting to know someone, someone you cared very much to know, was like peeling an onion. It took time and patience. Sometimes you peeled away too much and regretted it. I didn't think I would regret it when it came to Kane. At least, I hoped I wouldn't.

I got out of the car, but I was still thinking about what he had said. All of us are willing to forgive the ones we love? Even for lies?

I hope so, I thought. I hope that in the end, my father will forgive me.

* * *

A big secret changes you in ways you don't realize immediately, especially if you share that secret with someone and hope he or she is keeping it safe. The bigger the secret, the more vulnerable and in danger you feel. Sometimes it shows right on your face, like splattered egg yolk, especially a face like mine. Practically every moment outside of class, I expected someone to rush over to me and declare, "You have the diary? You know what really happened at the original Foxworth Hall?" Every time I heard one of my friends call my name, an electric chill would rush up my spine.

Everyone has little secrets. In our world, that was what made you more interesting. But this was very

different. Anyone who found out what we had would surely pounce, and not just my classmates. Newspapers, radio, television people would haunt us. The phone wouldn't stop ringing, nor would the doorbell. People would accuse us of always having had it and deliberately hoarding the truth because it was embarrassing for our family. My mother was a distant cousin of Malcolm Foxworth, so the children were distant cousins of mine. My father would feel terrible for calling me over that day to watch him open the locked metal box at the bottom of some debris in the remains of the restored Foxworth Hall. The restoration had used the same basement walls. My father thought the builders were just not very meticulous when it came to cleaning away the original debris. His colleagues would tease him about it. Some might even be nasty and make him angry. He would hate to go anywhere, except to work and right back home. Just going to the supermarket would become a big deal. I couldn't even imagine what coming to my high school graduation would be like for him.

He might lose business. He might want to sell our house and move away.

I didn't want to imagine any of it. It was like having a nightmare while awake. That's what it was starting to feel like at school.

Physically, I was walking about with my books embraced tightly against my breasts, as if I were protecting something precious inside the covers, or perhaps really more inside me. Emotionally, I felt clogged, as if my feelings were twisted into figure-eight knots. The weight of our secret slowed my pace, no matter what I was doing. I could feel my eyes widen in expectation every time I was asked a question, no matter how innocent the question might seem. Had I revealed anything accidentally? Had I whetted anyone's interest? Had Kane inadvertently given something away already, and others were testing me? I was taking on real paranoia. This was triggered especially when one of my close friends, Kyra Skewer, asked me about Kane picking me up every morning and taking me home after school.

"Does he hang out at your house, or do you go to his or what afterward?" she wanted to know. She asked in front of Suzette, Missy Meyer, and Theresa Flowman, and all four of them gave me their full attention, their ears perked up like extraterrestrial antennae.

"It varies with my mood," I said cryptically.

"Huh?"

"Whatever," I said. "It's spontaneous."

"You and your vocabulary," Kyra complained. She had a grimace that made her look like she was being burned at the stake whenever she complained about anything.

"Spontaneous? Please. That's not a hard word to define, Kyra."

"I know what it means. I just never heard it used like that," she said.

"When you're in love, everything is spontaneous," Suzette said, and then giggled and turned her shoulders inward, which made her breasts bulge in the deep V-neck of her light blue sweater. I knew she often did that deliberately just to see where the gaze of the boy she was talking to went. "Whether it's a kiss or something more," she added.

"Then every day is spontaneous for you," Kyra said. "Every month, you fall into a desperate love that lasts

as long as your period.”

Everyone laughed. I smiled. It wasn't all that much of an exaggeration when it came to Suzette. Recently, she had gotten blond highlights in her dark brown hair because Tommy Clark liked blond highlights, and soon after that, she let us all know she had pierced her navel. In fact, she let everyone know, especially Greg Storm, who had his nose pierced. It did seem like she remade herself weekly to attract some new boy she fancied.

“I'd rather go to Kane's house. You'd have more privacy,” Missy Meyer said, getting serious again. “I mean, you have a nice house. It's just that . . .”

“The way the house is laid out, her father might hear what goes on in her bedroom?” Suzette suggested, her silver-blue eyes brightening like two diamonds of promiscuous excitement. “Didn't your younger brother hear what went on in yours when you brought Dylan Marks home one afternoon?” she asked Kyra. She embraced herself and mimicked groans and moans.

“Shut up.”

“Well, no matter where you go after school, Kristin, he can't help you with your homework. If anything, he'll distract you,” Theresa Flowman said in her nasal voice. She was hoping for that result, hoping Kane would distract me enough to lower my grades. After the last marking period, Theresa and I were neck and neck for valedictorian.

“Please, Theresa, distract her?” Kyra said. “What you need is a lot more distraction. Any distraction, come to think of it,” she added, flashing a sly smile at me. Suzette and Missy laughed. Theresa turned crimson, glared at her, and walked off.

“All that girl knows about sex is that it's a three-letter word,” Suzette said.

“And what do you know?” Kyra teased.

“I know Steve Cooper would like to practice the missionary position with you in his basement,” she retorted, and the three of them laughed again. Steve's parents had let him move into their basement, which felt like a private apartment because it had a separate entrance. Lately, it had acquired a nickname: Steve's Sex Pit.

They looked at me, noticing I wasn't laughing this time. The chitchat had reminded me of Christopher and Cathy talking about sex, and for a moment, I was back in the attic, thinking about an older brother being a young girl's only source for information about her maturing body. Even though Christopher was coldly scientific, he was still her brother and not her mother or older sister. Any young girl would still be sensitive about asking him questions about sex, but especially a sister. I recalled how hard it had been for my father to talk to me about any of it. He finally had to ask his sister, my aunt Barbara, to speak with me about my own emerging hormones clamoring to be recognized. She had made a special trip from New York to do it.

Who would make a special trip for Cathy? It didn't look like her mother would take the time to do it. She certainly wouldn't take her out of the room to have a private conversation, one of those mother-daughter talks that my girlfriends satirized. They didn't realize how envious of them I was. There were so many little things that had become big things for all of us, but especially for children locked away like that, I thought, children locked in a room and an attic and left to their own imagination to amuse and educate themselves. Christopher would do fine, but Cathy . . . how would it end up for her? Did I really want to know? Would

both Kane and I regret turning those pages in the diary?

“Anything wrong?” Kyra said. “Hello, earth to Kristin?”

“What?”

She looked at Suzette.

“We were both talking to you, and you didn’t hear us. You’ve been acting weird all day. You didn’t miss a period, did you?” Suzette asked. She would.

The three of them looked at me with one face, mouths slightly open, eyes anticipating.

“She hasn’t been going with him long enough, has she?” Kyra asked.

“We really don’t know how long she’s been seeing him,” Suzette said, enjoying the implication as she kept her eyes on me. “And guess what? It doesn’t take that long to get pregnant. Some sperm are faster than a speeding bullet, right, Kristin?”

“Get outta here,” I said, playfully nudging her. “You have a one-track mind,” I added, and then spotted Kane coming around the hallway corner. “Later,” I muttered, and hurried to join him.

“Hey,” he said, putting his arm around my shoulders. “You all right?”

He looked back at my girlfriends, who were staring at us and giggling.

“Someone say something about us?”

“No. They don’t bother me. I think I screwed up on a math quiz.”

“Does the CIA know yet?”

“I’m serious. I should have aced it, Kane.”

“All right. Sorry. What happened?” he asked as we walked to our next classes.

“I don’t know. My mind just . . . went blank or something.”

“Everyone has a day like that.”

“I never did,” I said.

“So now you’re normal. Relax. You’ll do better the next time,” he insisted. He shrugged. “Isn’t that why there are erasers on pencils?”

I stopped and smiled. “That’s exactly what my father says when I complain about something I’ve done wrong.”

“My father doesn’t say it; my mother does. My father doesn’t believe in mistakes. He claims it’s not in his

religion.”

“What religion is that?”

“Perfection,” he replied, then laughed and gave me a quick kiss on the lips, which at least twenty other students saw, their eyes blinking like the lenses of paparazzi cameras. And then he hurried off to beat the late bell for his class. Most of my classes were advanced placement classes now. He turned and waved and then pretended he had been grabbed and pulled into a room. I laughed. He could have entertained everyone on the Titanic.

What a mixture of emotions I was feeling. I was excited about being with him. I really did love every minute, and I loved how we were like everyone’s perfect couple, but I was feeling a little numb, confused, very tentative about myself because of the plan we had made for reading the diary together. I kept coming back to it all day, and sometimes I’d be trembling. Why was I so nervous about it? Did I really think the diary had some evil magical power because it had been buried so long in the rubble of the original Foxworth Hall? Was opening it like opening Pandora’s box? Did my father get me thinking like this by his wishing so strongly that I wouldn’t read it?

My father always had this weird attitude about the original Foxworth Hall, never really wanting to talk about it or what had happened there, even though I was related to them on my mother’s side. Maybe he didn’t want to talk about it precisely because of that. When I was younger and even now, some of my classmates wondered if I had inherited any of the Foxworth madness.

It got so even I began to wonder.

Finally, I decided I was just being stupid thinking all these weird things and pushed it all out of my mind by concentrating hard on my schoolwork.

However, as soon as the bell rang to end our final class of the day, I felt my heart begin to beat faster in anticipation of what Kane and I were going to begin doing. My girlfriends, especially Suzette, continued to tease me about being with Kane before and after school, filling up every free moment with him. I thought they were just jealous.

“Will we ever see you again?” Suzette joked.

“Will you ever answer the phone when we call?” Kyra followed.

I shut them out, their laughter falling behind me like pebbles falling from a speeding, bouncing dump truck, and hurried to meet him. He was already at the exit waiting for me. He put his arm around me quickly and turned us to the door.

“I lucked out. Not much homework tonight,” he said. “I can spend more time reading.”

“I have my usual ton.”

He opened the door, and we walked out quickly to the parking lot and his car. Practically every classmate of mine smiled licentiously at us as they passed us, some walking faster just to do that. Kane seemed oblivious to it. We had known each other a long time, even though we had just started going out together. I was still trying to understand him. Was he indifferent to most of the things that captured everyone else’s interest

because he was just plain arrogant, or did he simply not care? Perhaps our experience with Christopher's diary would peel that onion faster when it came to him.

"Don and Ryan were driving me crazy to go skeet shooting with them this afternoon," he said after we got into the car. "I forgot I had made plans to do that."

"You want to?" I asked, welcoming the reprieve. "We can postpone this."

"Hell no. As you know, I've got reading to do, and with your father coming home late, we have a good opportunity to get into a lot of it," he said. He started the engine and drove us to my house.

I could never imagine Kane Hill nervous about anything, but until we turned into my driveway, he talked continually, describing the most inconsequential things that had happened during the day. It was almost like someone dictating Facebook or Twitter posts. His desk in math class wobbled too much. His math teacher, Mr. Brizel, broke his green chalk, the one he used to underline answers on the blackboard when he was frustrated with class responses. It was too cool in shop class because Mr. Primack left a window open too much and no one had the nerve to complain.

I was half-listening, anyway. I was thinking that I should call my father just to be sure he was going to be late for dinner and wouldn't arrive earlier than I expected and discover us in my room reading the diary. When we entered the house, I went right to the phone in the kitchen. Kane glanced at the stairway and looked at me expectantly.

"Go on up ahead of me and start," I said. "I have to call my father."

He shot up the stairs, taking two at a time, and turned to my room before I even entered the kitchen.

He really was into this, I thought, but that still wasn't making me feel confident about it now. I called my father.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked. "Anything wrong?"

"No. Just checking to be sure you will be late for dinner."

"Yeah, sorry. I know you don't like to eat alone."

"I might invite Kane," I said. "You made enough for at least five people," I added quickly.

"Oh, so he's there?"

"Yes. We're . . . doing homework together."

"Sounds romantic. Should I be worried?" He hummed the shark theme again, just what I had been anticipating when I thought about calling him from Kane's car.

"Dad! Stop!"

"Okay."

"Is it all right to have him stay for dinner?"

"Absolutely. Later are you going to brag that your father won over your new boyfriend with his cooking?"

"No," I said.

He laughed. "Enjoy," he said, and shouted to someone just before he hung up.

I stood there for a moment thinking about it all and then walked slowly up the stairs. Kane was on my bed, his shoes off, the diary in his hands.

"You want to stay for dinner? My father's definitely going to be late," I said.

"What's for dinner?"

"It's his meat loaf, my mashed potatoes, and string beans."

"Sure. I love meat loaf," he replied, and then returned to the diary as if his eyes were pulled to it beyond his control.

I put my books on my desk and, after looking at him again, began to attack my homework. Even though I glanced at him from time to time, neither of us spoke for a good hour or so. Finally, I heard him sigh deeply, and I turned and saw that he had sat up and was holding his hands over his face.

"What?" I asked.

"This was one bright kid, this Christopher Dollanganger. He writes well, but he sounds like he's afraid of his own emotions, afraid that he's going to explode or something. I get the feeling he was walking around holding his breath most of the time, especially after they were brought to the mansion. And how about that grandmother? She'd give Norman Bates from Psycho nightmares. He's putting up with a lot more than I would, even at that age."

"Yes. He's doing a great deal for his little brother and sister and for Cathy, and he has to keep the lid on."

"I can't wait to see if he does. Cathy sounds more difficult than the twins."

"She has a lot to be unhappy about, Kane. She's cut off from all her friends, everything that once made her life exciting, and look at the new responsibilities dropped on her. It wasn't fair."

He nodded. "Makes sense. So you like her?"

"Why not? It's not her fault that they are where they are."

"You sound very defensive. Maybe there's more Cathy in you than either of us knows."

"What?"

He smiled and picked up the diary again.

“Are you going to catch up to me in one day?” I asked, sounding a bit annoyed now.

“You bet.”

“What about your homework?”

“I told you, I don’t have that much, and besides, I’ll do it when I get home.”

I looked at my watch. “I’m going down to start on dinner. We’ll eat in about a half hour. I hope you can tear yourself away. You’re not bringing it to the dinner table,” I warned.

He didn’t respond. He was already back into the diary so much that he didn’t hear me. I paused in the doorway and looked at him, with the book up and his face blocked. I thought of Cathy, bored in that attic, looking at Christopher and seeing him deep in one of his science books, in his own world. That was probably his only escape, but it had to be frustrating for her. She had no one else to talk to but the twins.

I didn’t know why exactly, but Kane’s attraction to the diary was making me irritable. Anyone might think I was jealous of how passionate he had become about it. It was as though he appreciated it more than I did or something. I banged things around a bit more than necessary and mumbled under my breath as I set the table.

Kane came down exactly thirty minutes later. I turned, surprised.

“Wow! You could break away, after all.”

“Smelled the aroma and got hungry,” he said. “How can I help?”

“Take this jug of water to the table. Everything else is done,” I told him.

I began to bring in the food.

“It looks terrific,” he said.

I began to serve him. Then I served myself and sat.

“How did you like how their grandmother fed them?” he said. “It was like leaving crumbs out for birds. I think the servants knew what was going on, or at least one or two did.”

“Why?”

“Think about it. She’s making food, putting together food, and taking it to them. She doesn’t strike me as the sort of person who would slink about. If any of them saw her, she would tell them to buzz off.”

I hadn’t thought about that. Maybe it was good to have someone else reading it at the same time after all.

I started eating and so did he. “This meat loaf is the best I’ve ever had,” he said.

“My father will be happy to hear it. I tried making it a few times, but it’s never as good. He has little secrets he keeps even from me. He promises he’ll reveal all when I get married.”

Kane paused and looked thoughtful again.

“What?”

“There were so many secrets going on in that mansion that it’s a wonder it didn’t explode before it burned down. What’s really going on between Corrine and her parents? Christopher is limited in what he can write, so we might not discover that. He doesn’t really know what’s happening in the rest of the mansion. He’s never even seen the grandfather. Who knows if the old goat is really that sick?”

“You think their mother deliberately lied about that? Why?”

“I don’t know.” He was thoughtful for a few moments and then said, “The jury’s not in on it, and maybe it will never be. As you said, we’re getting it from Christopher only. Even with only what I’ve read until now, I can’t imagine him ever calling his mother a liar. And not only because he’s a respectful, obedient kid. I’d like to read her diary. That would be a page-turner, I bet. We’d learn a lot more if we could compare.”

“I do have one other source of information,” I said.

He looked up sharply. “What? Your father?”

“No, especially not him. I told you, he doesn’t like me reading it, and he doesn’t like talking about it.”

“So?”

“It’s my uncle Tommy, my father’s younger brother. He met someone who claimed he had known a servant who worked at the original Foxworth Hall.”

“No kidding. And?”

“He said this man told him the servant claimed their grandfather knew they were up there.”

“See? Like I said, the servants probably saw the old hag carrying food and told the old man, or maybe he and the Friday the Thirteenth grandmother plotted together.” He thought a moment and then brightened and asked, “Did your uncle say Corrine knew that her father knew?”

“He didn’t say, and back then, I didn’t know enough to ask many questions. I wasn’t old enough to appreciate the answers anyway, and because of how my father was about it, I didn’t want to think about it.”

Kane sat back and nodded. “There’s a lot to discover. I like mysteries. I’m not going home tonight until I catch up to you,” he declared.

“I want to emphasize that I don’t want my father to know about this.”

“I wonder what’s making him so uptight about it. Did you ever come right out and ask him?”

“No. And we’re not going to ask,” I said firmly.

He smiled. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t want to get him even slightly mad at me.” I was about to smile, thinking he meant that would risk his being with me, but then he went for another forkful of meat loaf and

added, "I might not get any more of his home cooking."

I laughed. Maybe my father was right. Maybe I would win Kane through his cooking.

Kane skipped dessert so he could get back up to my room. He offered to clear the table and help in the kitchen, but I told him just to go back to the diary. He'd only rush and break something. He didn't need to be told twice.

While I was finishing up, my father came home. "Where's Kane?" he asked immediately when he entered the kitchen. "I see his car's still here."

"Oh, he's up in my room doing homework."

"Enjoy the dinner?"

"You have a devoted fan."

"Didn't offer to help with the dishes?"

"He offered," I said. "Let's just say he's not used to working in a kitchen, and like you always say, when someone who doesn't know what he's doing assists you, it makes for twice the work."

"Not surprised he's unaccustomed to KP duty, but I'm surprised he left you alone. He could have at least watched. He's that into his homework?"

"He had more than I did tonight. We don't have the same classes. How's everything at the building site?" Get him talking about the project quickly, I told myself. I hated coming up with all these white lies. I was with Huckleberry Finn. Why tell the truth and hurt someone?

"Usual bureaucratic delays with inspectors, but we're muddling through."

I wiped my hands. "Everything's hot and ready for you. Go sit, and I'll bring it in."

"I'm not ready yet. I want to shower and change first, baby. You better get back to that homework," he added with a bit of an impish smile.

I threw the dish towel at him and hurried up the stairs.

"Break out your textbooks," I warned Kane. "My father's here."

He nodded and slipped the diary under my pillow. By the time my father knocked on the door, Kane was doing his math.

"Smells like a library in here," my father joked when he saw us both into our textbooks.

"Hi, Mr. Masterwood. Fantastic meat loaf."

"Thanks. Glad you enjoyed it. I'll get changed so I can eat it myself and see if you're giving me a false compliment," my father said, and then he winked and left us.

Kane closed his textbook. "Gotta confession," he said.

"What?"

"I caught up to you."

"What? How could you?"

"You're not even half through it, you know, and I read fast when I'm really interested in what I'm reading."

I nodded, thinking about how I did labor over some sentences and events, always trying to imagine how Cathy was feeling. "I guess so."

"And I read another page before I realized it. I'll reread it tomorrow . . . aloud. Up in the attic," he added, and closed his textbook. "I'd better get going. I forgot to call my mother to tell her I wasn't coming home for dinner," he said. "Don't worry. I've done it before, and it's never a big shock, anyway. Tell your father good night for me."

He gave me a very quick kiss on the cheek and a playful pat on the top of my head.

I was expecting him to kiss me before he left, but not like a brother.

* * *

I had been nervous while Kane was reading the diary to catch up with me, so I hadn't done my homework as quickly as I could. I had some left to complete. Nevertheless, I went down to sit with my father while he ate. He was surprised Kane had left so early.

"Maybe he really was here just to do homework," he playfully suggested.

"Did the new owner come around again?" I asked, again looking to change the topic quickly.

"He did."

I could see that he was into one of his deep thoughts again because of my question, a thought he wasn't eager to reveal to me.

"What?" I asked.

"You still reading that diary?"

I was surprised he asked. He had told me recently that he wouldn't inquire about it anymore and that when I was finished, he wanted me to give it back to him. I had the feeling he really would burn it, so I was debating whether I ever would give it to him.

"On and off," I said, as nonchalantly as I could. The words almost got stuck in my throat.

"Has there been any mention of anyone else in the house? I mean other than their mother, grandmother, and grandfather?"

“Well, servants are mentioned but not by name,” I said.

“No one specifically, then?”

“Not yet as far as I have read. Why? Who do you think was there? Someone from town knew about them?”

“It’s not important,” he said, and continued eating.

“If it wasn’t important, you wouldn’t mention it,” I said.

He shook his head. “I swear, Kristin, if I closed my eyes when you were talking sometimes, I’d think your mother was sitting there.”

Whenever he said anything like that, making comparisons between my mother and me to point out how much I was like her, I felt the struggle between two conflicting emotions, happiness and sadness. I loved the idea that I was anything like her, but just the reference to her stirred the well of tears that would forever be there, ready to rise and overflow before I could do anything to stop them. If I cried in front of my father, he would cry all night, I thought, and turned away.

He didn’t say anything else about it, and I didn’t pursue it. Don’t bring up the diary, I told myself. In fact, don’t bring up Foxworth Hall if you can help it until you and Kane are finished reading the diary.

I cleared away his dishes and did everything that had to be done in the kitchen before I returned to my room to finish my homework. I knew I wasn’t giving it my best. I was rushing now, because I didn’t want him to know how distracted I had been. He knew how responsible I was and how dedicated I was to getting my schoolwork done and done well. He would never suspect the diary, especially because Kane was there. He would think it was because of something else, obviously something that had to do with my private time with Kane. I was confident that he wouldn’t come right out and ask, “Did you guys spend all your time doing assignments from your teachers, or did you come up with your own homework?” He could tease a little, skirt around it by asking me to tell him how serious we were becoming, but making reference to something explicitly sexual just wasn’t something my father would do. He wasn’t a prude. He was just a shy man who was left to do and worry about things my mother was supposed to handle.

The irony was that we had done nothing my girlfriends were suspecting we did. All the girls believed that Kane was not timid about making love, and we’d been alone in my bedroom. Not only them but any parent would suspect more intimacy. All my girlfriends talked about the suspicions their parents had. Suzette went so far as to tell us her mother had given up on her, telling her not to expect her to come rushing in to rescue her. “You’re old enough to know better,” she’d said.

My father would never say such a thing, no matter what I did, I thought.

Before I went to sleep, I went down to wake him up and tell him it was time to go to sleep. It was a constant joke between us. He’d watch television and drift off. I would turn it off, and he’d wake up surprised. Then he would kiss me and go to his room to sleep with his memories.

I got into bed and lowered my head to the pillow, Christopher’s words rambling on under it, below me in the forbidden diary.

And Kane’s questions and thoughts rambling right along with them.

* * *

Kane amazed me the following day. He was so excited about what he had read and what we were going to do that I thought for sure he would be talking about nothing else, but from the first moment he set eyes on me in the morning, he seemed to know that to keep me from having any anxiety, especially while we were at school, the diary should remain under my pillow, physically and mentally. Neither of us would mention it. To show me I could rely on him for that, he talked about everything and anything else on our way to school and during the day. He went on and on about a party Tina Kennedy was planning. I knew she was always chasing him, and he enjoyed teasing me about it. He was so good at ignoring the diary, in fact, that it felt like I had dreamed the entire thing—his discovering the diary under my pillow and our plans for where and how to read it together. However, it couldn't be completely ignored until the moment we took it out from under my pillow again. For one thing, just like Christopher at this point in his diary, we were a week away from Thanksgiving. Finally, on the way to my house after school, Kane mentioned that.

"Quite a coincidence that the time period coincides," he said.

Neither of us had to say it, but we both thought that was a little eerie. Why had the diary been discovered now? And how coincidental was it that my father would be the one to locate the locked metal box after all these years? Other people, young people, searched in the debris because there were so many rumors and stories about hidden wealth at Foxworth Hall. Malcolm was supposed to be a miser, spending his money mainly on church or some religious charity. The story was that he distrusted everyone, especially bankers, and was one of those people who literally kept money buried somewhere, yet no one had managed to uncover the metal box that contained Christopher's diary—no one until my father was sent to evaluate the foundation for a new prospective buyer.

"I can't imagine what he'll write about their Thanksgiving shut up like that. If the legendary story about them is true, they spent more than one Thanksgiving and Christmas in that attic and more than one birthday. We've got thirty-five people coming for dinner at our house," he continued when I didn't comment. "My parents don't do much. There's a full kitchen staff, waiters, and a bartender. It's more like a party than a family gathering, even though two of my uncles and aunts are there with their children, who I don't see very much. That's a good thing. Their pictures are right beside the word 'brat' in the dictionary. I'm glad Darlena comes home from college, though. What about you? What goes on in your house?"

"As you can imagine, my father fixes quite a dinner. He has a sweet potato pudding to die for."

"Just the two of you?"

"No. My aunt Barbara, my father's sister, has come occasionally and might come this time, but my father always invites his chief assistant, Todd Winston, and his wife and their two children, and Mrs. Osterhouse, who does his bookkeeping and would like to do more for him, and I don't mean at work. She's a widow who has been with him for a long time."

"Ah. Do you like her?"

"Yes, she's nice."

"Nice enough to be a new mother?"

"I'll never have another mother, Kane. Even a saint couldn't step into her shoes."

“Yeah. I’m sorry I put it that way. What about your father? Any interest? Has he dated her?”

“No. He’s polite to her, but I think she tries too hard.”

“Like Tina Kennedy when it comes to yours truly?”

“No, not quite as obvious as that,” I said, and he laughed. “But my father likes subtlety when it comes to women.”

“He’s not so subtle when it comes to you.”

“No,” I said, smiling, “and I’m not when it comes to him, either.”

“I like your father. He seems comfortable in his own skin.”

“He never puts on airs, if that’s what you mean. I’m proud of him.”

“You should be.” He paused and added, “I think I’m more like him than I am like my own father.”

“Why do you say that?”

“My father’s always striving to do more, get bigger, and is quite obvious about it. That’s why he’s on edge so much. Everything’s got to come out just the way he planned. It’s always the bottom line, no matter what it is. He wants to make a profit on everything, even relationships. More than once, I’ve overheard my mother accuse him of marrying her for her family money.”

“Do you think that’s true?”

He gave me a look that said, “You have to ask?”

“So you’re not coming out just the way he planned, his bottom line for a son?” I asked.

He smiled. “Not exactly.”

“Why not? You do well in school. They say you’re the best baseball pitcher the school’s ever had. You don’t get in trouble, and you’re passably good-looking.”

“Passably?”

“Maybe a little more,” I kidded.

“I’m not as ambitious as he’d like, and he thinks I waste time on too many ‘unprofitable’ ventures. He never stops complaining about my enthusiasm when it comes to my future. He thinks I should be just as aggressive and ambitious as he was at my age. He never misses an opportunity to say it. His favorite expression is ‘Youth is wasted on the young.’”

“That’s what most parents say.”

“Not like he does. But from what my relatives say, he wasn’t always this intense. He’s like someone who

wins the lottery and turns from Jekyll to Hyde. Don't quote me, especially in front of my father or my mother, but money changes you and not always for the best."

"I fear Christopher might come to that same conclusion, even though that's all they're dreaming about in that attic, lots of money."

"We'll know soon enough," Kane said, smiling, as he pulled into my driveway.

Now that we were about to start, I really wasn't sure how we were going to do this. Was he going to read it like a bedtime story? Were we going to stop to discuss things the way we might when we were studying a book in school? Was I just going to sit there and listen the whole time, or was I supposed to take over and read to him?

I headed for the kitchen first.

"What are you doing? Let's get started," he said, practically leaping at the stairway.

"I thought I'd get us something to drink and eat first. Don't you want a snack? I have—"

"Just water," he said. "Nothing else. That's all they had most of the time. We've got to try to replicate their situation to really appreciate what he writes when I read it."

I felt a flush come over me. It wasn't excitement, exactly. It was as if he really believed we could do it, that we really could become Christopher and Cathy while we were up in my attic. He saw the look on my face.

"Didn't you ever hear the expression 'stay in character'? That's all I'm saying."

"Okay."

I poured two glasses of cold water, handed him one, and led him up the stairs to my room. After I plucked the diary out from under my pillow, I looked at him. Now that we were about to do it, I half expected him to start laughing and say it was all just a joke, a reason to get me alone with him after school, but he stepped back instead to let me pass.

I led the way to the attic stairs. When we reached the door, I hesitated. Those creaking steps, those dark shadows, everything made it seem as if I was opening this door for the first time. It wasn't simply a door to an attic; it was a door to the past. When I did step in, I paused as if I was expecting to see the four Dollanganger children waiting for us.

"Perfect," Kane whispered, coming up beside me. "There's furniture and old things. It really is a miniature Foxworth."

"Not quite," I said, looking at my mother's wardrobe. "It's not all other people's leftovers and such. My mother's clothing is in here," I told him, putting my hand on the wardrobe.

"Oh." He looked guilty suddenly. "I didn't know. You didn't say anything. Maybe I shouldn't have suggested we come up here."

"It's all right. I've been up here often. I even wore one of her dresses, remember? That was the night you

took me to the River House.”

“Oh. Right. But everything else here . . .”

“Nothing with any real memories for me, and the rest of it is stuff left by the original occupants.”

He went over to the small windows and looked out. “Should I open one of these?”

“A little, but let’s not forget to close it before we leave,” I said.

He opened one and then turned and sat on the sofa.

“Come on,” he said, obviously even more excited now. “Let’s begin.” He held his hand out for the diary. I gave it to him and sat beside him. He thought a moment and then got up and moved to the chair across from the sofa.

“Why did you do that?”

“Better this way,” he said.

I smiled at him. “Why?”

“It’s more like when Christopher read to them or something. Don’t worry. You’ll understand after we get started,” he said, as if he already knew more about the Dollanganger children than I did. He opened the diary.

I sat back. I had no idea what to expect or what would happen next, but I couldn’t help being eager to find out.

He didn’t change his voice, exactly, but as he read, I could see him trying to pronounce every word perfectly and speak like a young boy who thought he was much more intelligent than anyone else around him, including, of course, his mother and grandmother. Kane even changed his posture, assuming that Christopher would never slouch.

To play along, I sat back and tried to remember what I was like when I was Cathy Dollanganger’s age, when every new little discovery about myself was earth-shattering and when, like her, I needed my mother so much, a mother neither of us had.

And as he read, I could feel myself slipping out of this world and into theirs.

I think the realization that it was almost Thanksgiving shocked me as much as if not more than it shocked Cathy. I did my best to act surprised when Cathy mentioned it, acting almost carefree about it. I knew how dramatic she could be, and I was afraid of what that would do to the twins. I put on a face that said, “So it’s almost Thanksgiving, so what?”

She didn’t have to tell me. The “what” in “so what?” was that Thanksgivings were always wonderful in our house when my father was alive. To him, it was pre-Christmas, so he always had little novelty presents for us: a challenging mental puzzle for me, a small toy car for Cory, and fake jewelry or combs for Carrie and Cathy. It wasn’t much, just little surprises at the dinner table. He didn’t do anything resembling a novelty for Momma. He never gave her anything that wasn’t very special. Any occasion was good for a new piece of

jewelry.

“When you find your soul mate,” he told me, “always treat her like a princess. Women love jewelry.”

Just before Daddy was killed, it got so that Cory used to think a pair of diamond earrings could multiply somehow into a diamond necklace, too, or a bracelet by Christmas. They weren’t large diamonds. Maybe they weren’t even real diamonds, but Momma was always excited and happy to get gifts, no matter what the occasion and especially if there was no occasion. If he came home with something for her after work, it meant he was thinking about her.

“Oh, look, children!” she would cry. “Your father was thinking of me even when he was at work.”

“I’m always thinking of you, Corrine,” he would say. It made her more buoyant and beautiful, especially at Thanksgiving, because he would always begin by telling us how thankful he was for our mother. Maybe because of that more than anything, she was eager to make our Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners special. She was never the greatest cook, but she did a good job on the Thanksgiving turkey with all the trimmings, some of which were smuggled in by Mrs. Wheeler, who also made our pies.

I was carefree and indifferent about it now, because I was afraid Momma would forget to do something about Thanksgiving for us, but she surprised me when she came into the attic with some decorations for our table and announced that they were for our Thanksgiving dinner, which she promised would be hot and wonderful, as wonderful as any.

“How could it be as wonderful?” Cathy whispered. “We don’t have Daddy.”

“But we still have each other,” I replied. “We’ll always have each other.”

She looked at me with grateful eyes. I always seemed to come up with the right answers for her. Sometimes, though, I thought she was sorry I had. She wanted me to be more of an ally, more impatient and disgusted with everything.

One thing that did bother both Cathy and me was that Carrie had completely forgotten what Thanksgiving was. She had been old enough to appreciate what we once had, but so much about our lives was beginning to fade and get lost in the fog of what had happened so quickly and where we were now. When the door was shut and locked, it seemed to cut off our ties with our own past, slamming down on our happier memories.

My second pleasant surprise, however, was how wholeheartedly Cathy decided to get into it, fixing the table with the dishes and place settings that she had the twins help her create. She was almost frantic about making our table joyful. I tried to go along with the same enthusiasm, but I was worried about her. She acted as if she was convinced that this dinner would be more than a typical Thanksgiving celebration; it would be the dinner celebrating our escape into a new life. I have to admit that the way Momma described it and how happy she seemed certainly gave us that impression. She promised all sorts of wonderful food from the party our grandparents were having and described the festivities just the way she would before Daddy died. All of this was going to come to a quick end and a new beginning. Momma’s promises were alive and well.

However, that day, the hour for our participating in the wonderful foods and desserts came and went. Every minute, every hour, was like another whiplash. Every creak in the floor or the walls turned our eyes to the door expectantly, but there was only silence and more disappointment.

We were all getting ravenously hungry in anticipation. Momma had done such a good job of describing it all. The twins were especially irritable as time passed. Cathy tried to calm them with whatever we had to nibble on, but it wasn't working. I felt I was slipping myself, losing my control. I wanted to start screaming and pounding on the door, shouting, "Where are you? Where's our wonderful dinner? Where's our Thanksgiving?"

Finally, hours after she was supposed to be here, Momma arrived. There was the Thanksgiving food she had promised, but by now, it was cold, and the twins wouldn't eat any, and worst of all, Momma couldn't stay with us. What kind of a family dinner was this? Nevertheless, I was ravenous and couldn't get those pieces of turkey into my mouth fast enough. The twins moaned and complained more than ever. They wouldn't touch a thing. Desperate to have them eat something, Cathy prepared peanut butter sandwiches. Afterward, Cathy didn't have to say a word to convince me. I sat staring at the plates and thinking how miserable we really were.

Kane paused and looked at me. "I guess I know what we'll both be thinking about at our own Thanksgiving feasts," he said. "How would you like eating alone with only your younger brother and sisters in an attic? No music, no conversations, nobody telling jokes, nothing but cold turkey and potatoes? I'll never complain about our Thanksgivings again. That's for sure."

I nodded. He was right. How cruel. As if he knew what would follow in the diary, he put up his hand before I could speak and began again, his voice firmer, the words now colored with anger so visible his face turned a shade of crimson. It riled up my sense of outrage, too. Kane had been right. It was different, more effective, to read Christopher's diary with someone else and see his reaction. I sat back, and he began again.

But the misery was yet to start. The following morning, Cory came down with a very bad cold. Two days later, Carrie was just as sick. These were very bad colds, more like flu. Momma came to treat them with aspirin and soup and juice, our grandmother following right behind her like some dark shadow cast by Death looking to get his hands on our little brother and sister. She hovered over Cory and Carrie and shook her head at the way we were making a big deal over their illness. She ridiculed whatever I suggested.

"Some doctor you'll be," she said, and insisted they just had to tough it out like any other children. I was surprised Momma had told her what my ambitions were, but now I was upset she had. I glanced at Cathy, who would always come to my defense. I shook my head so she'd understand not to do or say anything nasty now. The twins were too sick.

At one point, Cory had a very high fever, but nothing impressed our grandmother, and Momma, to my great disappointment, didn't challenge her. To impress us with how serious she thought it was, however, she claimed she had taken off from secretarial school just to care for them. I never told Cathy this, but I always suspected that Momma never went to any secretarial school. I couldn't even begin to imagine her doing that sort of work, and logically, why would she bring us here and put us through all this if we weren't going to live here but instead live in some apartment supported by her secretarial job? Of course, Cathy never thought of these things, and I wasn't going to say anything that would diminish her hope.

The twins' illness went on and on for nearly three weeks. Finally, they began to recuperate, but the illness had drained them. They were lethargic, wisps of themselves, sleeping more than usual, and difficult to get excited about any game or food.

I told Momma, and she decided that all we needed were vitamins. The words were barely out of her mouth before Cathy exploded, shouting at her to get us out or at least take the twins into the fresh air. She stomped

her feet and raged. The twins were wide-eyed at her tantrum. They wanted to cry, but they were too frightened to utter a sound. She was making so much noise that I thought if no one else really knew we were here, they surely knew now. Momma pleaded with Cathy to calm down, telling her she couldn't risk taking the twins out and having us all discovered and revealed to her father. She insisted we were so close.

Cathy continued to rage. "Close, close, that's all we hear is that he's close!" she cried.

At one point, Momma cried back, "What do you want me to do, kill him?" Tears were streaming down her face. At that moment, I felt terrible for her. "There are eight servants working here," she muttered. "They're like spies, watching me all the time, especially that John Amos. I never liked him. He's like a puppet. He'll do anything my parents tell him to do."

The air seemed to go out of Cathy finally. She just glared at Momma, full of frustration and emotionally exhausted.

"You must be patient," Momma added before she left, more like fled.

Before Cathy could start, I thought I had better attack her, because I felt just like she felt, but I couldn't show it. Of course, I wanted the twins out in the fresh air. We all needed it, but I told Cathy to stop picking on Momma, especially with her incessant questions, not one, by the way, that I hadn't thought of myself. But what could I do? I had to be stronger. If I fell apart, it would all be lost, all this suffering for nothing.

Kane paused and dropped his arms to his sides, staring ahead for a moment. He looked different. Those impish eyes were suddenly dark and troubled. He sat with a posture I thought was stiff, even uncomfortable for him. Then he turned and looked at me with such a cold, impersonal expression I had to hold my breath.

"What?" I asked in a whisper. "Why did you stop reading?"

"What do you think of me?"

"You?"

"Christopher, I mean. Do you hate him? You have to hate him for defending her, regardless of the reason. From what I read up to here, he's always defending her, no matter what."

"I don't know. I don't hate him for that, but I would imagine Cathy has to be angry at him for taking Corrine's side all the time, especially now. However, she doesn't understand the danger, the risks involved with what she's asking her mother to do. It's complicated, Kane."

"Yes," he said, nodding. My answer seemed to please him, although he didn't smile. The pleasure was all in his eyes, the tiny movement at the corners of his mouth. "Of course, you're right. She can't understand the way Christopher can. She's too young. He's unselfish, that's all. He can see the bigger picture. He has the vision." He paused and looked like he was struggling with troubling thoughts again. "Although . . ."

"Although what?"

"He seems like he would forgive his mother for anything. She risked the health of the twins for three weeks, and yet he was kind of calm about that. His little brother and sister suffered unnecessarily. Kids that age need their mothers around the clock when they're sick, and they needed to be in the sunshine. What good will all

the money in the world do them if they're physically and emotionally damaged? He knows that. Don't you think he knows that?"

"Yes . . . but . . ."

He shook his head. "I don't know, Kristin. At times, I feel like he almost worships her. Maybe it's even more than that."

"What do you mean by more? You suspect an Oedipus complex?"

"Maybe. Yes. But that's not the full explanation. He wants to believe Corrine is doing the right thing for them so much he will avoid reality. And then sometimes I think he really believes her lies. I mean, come on. The old man's about to die, but he can attend a Thanksgiving dinner? What's with that?"

"I know. I wondered about that, too."

"Actually, now that I give it more thought, Christopher's pretty gullible for someone who is supposed to be so bright that he can become a doctor. I want to be on his side, but he bugs me with his understanding and forgiveness. Sorry if I show it when I read aloud."

"It's getting to you," I said, nodding.

"It has gotten to me. I didn't want to say anything this morning when you told me you hadn't slept well. I had all sorts of nightmares after reading to catch up, especially after I read that part about Cory accidentally getting locked in that trunk. I'm not claustrophobic, but I don't think I ever get into an elevator without wondering what I'd do if it broke down." He looked at the diary in his hands. "Maybe you should be the one reading it aloud."

"Oh, no, Kane, you read the diary well," I said, and I smiled. "You even read Cathy well. Maybe you should go out for the spring play. Mr. Madeo would love you in the drama club, I'm sure."

"No thanks. This is the only stage I want to be on right now, and with only you as an audience." He laughed. "If any of my buddies knew what I was doing—"

"Which they'll never know," I said sharply.

"Not from me. That's for sure."

He stood up and looked around the attic with his shoulders up, embracing himself, and for the moment looking like someone who really was imprisoned, diminished by the small space and crawling into himself. He continued to look around, turning his head slowly and pausing at the windows.

"Even convicts in real prisons get time outside," he muttered.

His gaze stopped when he reached me. It was as if he had forgotten that I was up here with him. He stared for a moment, and then his body seemed to fall back into the Kane I knew, his shoulders just a little slumped, his face framing that impish, offbeat smile that was so sexy.

"Speaking of spending time in an attic, however, I wouldn't mind being locked in here with you for a while,"

he said. He sounded more like himself again. He started toward me, his eyes full of passion.

I held up my hand like a traffic cop. "But I'm your sister," I said, and he stopped. "Up here, as long as we're up here, I'm your sister. We behave toward each other like they do; otherwise, your whole theory of why we're here is lost."

I wasn't saying it to be impish or defensive. I really believed it now.

I could see his mind spinning with conflicting desires. Was this it? Would he give up reading the diary in my attic? Or reading it at all? Is that what I wanted, what I hoped to hear? Was it unfair of me to tease him with the promise that it would be different once we left the attic?

"Right," he said. He stepped back, looking insulted, taking on Christopher's posture again. "What kind of a brother do you think I am? You sound like you believe what the grandmother from hell believes about us."

I started to laugh. He was so convincing, but then I decided to get right into it and be just as convincing. "Sorry. Oh," I moaned as dramatically as I could, "I'm so sorry for doubting you, Christopher."

"Right. You should be sorry. We Dollangangers, Foxworths, whatever we are, need to stick together."

"Desperately," I said. I was expecting him to laugh, but he didn't.

He nodded instead and returned to his chair, looking even more determined.

"I guess we'll have to wait to see what kind of a brother you really are. Won't we?" I teased, but that didn't bring a smile, either. He picked up the diary, glared at me defiantly, snapped his arms out firmly, and began to read again.

Christmas Eve now loomed on our horizon, but not like Christmas Eves before. This threatened to be dark and horrible, a pending electric storm of broken promises and memories dangling like broken tree ornaments. When Cathy muttered one night that it would soon be Christmas and reminded me that we had been here just about five months, I felt panic rise through me. Five months! One look at the twins, who were still so fragile and so subdued since their stubborn colds, and I knew I had to come up with something that would stave off any more sadness and disappointment.

"We'll make them gifts," I declared. It seemed to distract her, which was my purpose, and then one night, I came up with the idea that we should even make our grandmother a Christmas present.

"Why would we do that?" Cathy asked.

"To win her over. She's still our grandmother," I told her, even though the words nearly choked me.

She stared at me. Was she going to scream or laugh? I saw her giving it serious thought. Then she smiled, realizing I was suggesting we do something to manipulate her for a change. "You really think that might work?"

I shrugged. "Why not try? Daddy used to say, 'You can get more with honey than vinegar.'?"

Maybe that was underhanded, quoting Daddy for this, but I knew it would move Cathy to cooperate, and

cooperate she did. She decided that whatever we made, it had to be perfect. "We'll show her," she said, and I smiled to myself. My plan, at least for now, was working.

She came up with the idea to bond tan linen to a stretcher frame and glue on a variety of colored stones with gold and brown cording. She worked on it more intensely than she had ever worked on anything, telling me our grandmother was obviously a perfectionist and would only appreciate this if it was perfect. Whatever, I thought. At least it was keeping her occupied and not thinking about the rest of it.

And then Momma justified the faith I had in her. One afternoon, she came with a live Christmas tree in a small wooden tub. She helped us trim the tree and hang miniature ornaments. For a while, it was as though we were back home again, being the family we were. She gave us four hanging stockings and promised that next year at this time, we would be living in our own home. Cathy was still skeptical, especially since Thanksgiving, but amazingly, we woke up on Christmas morning and found the stockings stuffed and gifts under the tree. After we unwrapped our gifts, Cathy looked at me with eyes drowning in tears. I knew why. She was sorry she had ever doubted Momma.

"It's all right," I told her, and kissed her forehead. "The main thing is, she cares as much about us as ever."

Later, our grandmother arrived with a picnic basket. She said nothing, not "Merry Christmas" or anything, but I nodded at Cathy, and she approached her and handed her our gift. I held my breath. Would this be a wonderful Christmas after all? Would everything finally change?

Grandmother Olivia looked at us and at the gift, then handed it back to Cathy without a word and left. I was stunned by her insensitivity, but Cathy went wild. She stomped on the gift, smashing it and screaming about how horrid our grandmother was and how angry she was at Momma for leaving us in this place at the mercy of that monster. Her rage brought tears. I had to calm her down, embrace her, and rock her like a child, assuring her that we had done the right thing. Our grandmother was the one in the wrong.

"And you can't blame Momma, Cathy. It's not Momma's fault that she has a mother like that. Now we can understand why she was so eager to leave with Daddy and give up inheriting a fortune," I told her.

That seemed to make sense to her. Cathy saw how the twins were taking her outburst and my trying to calm her. She nodded. "You're right," she whispered, then flicked away her tears and went to them. I watched her calm them and cheer them up again, just the way a mother would do.

It wasn't a perfect Christmas; it was a Christmas, however, and Christmas always made you hopeful.

Miraculously, just at the right time, Momma returned with more gifts, one being a large dollhouse that she said had been hers. It was done in amazing detail, with furniture and little servants. The twins were fascinated, as was I. I was sure Momma was right. It was a very expensive toy. Cathy was still very down, though, and when Momma asked why, I told her about the way our grandmother had reacted to our gift.

"Oh, you have to ignore her," she told me. "She's always been hard to please. She's not a happy woman. She'll never be a happy woman, even with all the wealth. She doesn't know how to use it to bring happiness, but believe me, I do, and I will. In fact—"

Suddenly, she burst into a new smile, hurried out, and then returned with a small television set. She told us that for now, it would be our window on the world. But even this didn't please Cathy. Finally, Momma embraced both of us, gave us each a hug, and announced that the end was near.

“This is my real Christmas gift,” she said. “My plan is working. My father has called for a lawyer to put me back in his will. Step one,” she declared with happy tears, “has been accomplished, and you’re all just as responsible for my success as I am.”

I couldn’t help it. I almost burst into tears of happiness myself.

I looked at Cathy. When she was little, she didn’t want me to always be right, but this time, she looked grateful, maybe more than grateful. I think she was looking at me and thinking I was really quite brilliant.

And she was happier than ever that I was her brother. I couldn’t hope to replace the father we had lost, but I was so grateful that I was able to get as close to that as possible.

For both our sakes.

Kane set the diary on the small table beside his chair and took a deep breath. He had read it with such intensity, the intensity of someone who had been there. He was wiping a few tears off his cheeks. I was emotionally frozen for a moment, from both what he had read and how he was reacting.

“Phew,” he said, shaking his head. “That was intense. Do you realize how often Christopher is on the verge of exploding, pounding on that door, and demanding an end to it all? I can’t imagine how he sleeps at night and how he holds himself together, seeing what’s happening to his brother and sisters. I don’t care how much faith he has in his mother or whatever.”

“Christopher? How about Cathy?”

“She’s always exploding,” he said. He laid his head back and closed his eyes.

I never expected him to react this way. Many times when I was reading the diary alone in my room, I would find myself as deeply emotionally involved as he looked like he was now, but I just assumed it was a girl thing, especially because of how closely I identified with Cathy. I realized that no one knew this side of Kane Hill, his sensitivity, maybe not even his parents.

Whenever I had an emotional reaction to something in the diary, I realized that whatever it was, it resonated because of something similar, some similar fear or sadness in my own life. What was Kane finding similar to his own life, which everyone at school, including me, saw as about as perfect and privileged as life for someone our age could be?

“That’s enough for today, Kane,” I said, standing. “I really want to get to my homework before my father comes home.”

He looked up at me with what I thought was both anger and disappointment in his face.

“I mean, we don’t have to rush through it, do we? It’s better if we take our time so we won’t miss something important.”

He thought a moment and then nodded and stood up. “Of course. You’re right. Let’s get at some homework, and then how about my taking you to have some pizza or something? We’ll go to the Italian Stallion.”

“I’ll have to call my father and see what he’s doing for dinner later,” I said.

We left the attic, and Kane paused in the doorway to look back as though he had forgotten something. I had taken the diary from him. There was nothing else. I looked at him quizzically, and he hurried past me and down the stairs.

“Wait!” I called.

He stopped. “You want to keep going?”

“No. You opened the window, remember? I told you we always have to remember to leave things as they were.”

“Oh.” He started up.

“I’ll do it,” I said.

He waited for me on the stairway. “Sorry. I won’t forget next time.”

I nodded, and we headed for my room. I slipped the diary under my pillow and went to my phone while he took his books out of his book bag.

“What’s up?” my father said, but not until after the third ring. I’d been preparing to leave a message.

“Are you busy?”

“Debating with the building inspector, which is par for the course. So?”

“You’re not coming home in time for dinner, right?”

“Right. I might have a bite with Mr. Johnson. His architect suggested some changes that will create new issues. I don’t know where some of these ideas are coming from.”

“What ideas?”

“Never mind. Why are you asking about dinner? There’s that roast chicken I prepared and—”

“Kane wants to take me for pizza at the Italian Stallion.”

He was silent for a few moments.

“Dad?”

“Sure. Have a good time. I’ll spend some time with you afterward. That is, if you have your homework done,” he added almost sarcastically, which was a real change for him. Something was bothering him, I thought.

“I’ll have it done,” I said, then added, “Don’t be a worrywart,” which was another one of his favorite expressions.

“Okay. Gotta go,” he said. “My torturer is getting impatient.”

“Everything all right?” Kane asked as soon as I hung up.

“Yes. Just some of the usual complications involved in building a house,” I said, as if I really knew.

He nodded and returned to his homework. I dug in to mine, and nearly an hour later, I heard him slap his history book closed.

“I’m starving,” he said.

“Okay. I can handle what I have left later. Let me freshen up a bit first,” I said, and went into the bathroom. While I was brushing my hair, I heard him on the phone talking to his mother.

I had yet to spend any real time with his parents. He really hadn’t spent any quality time with my father, either. It wasn’t as if we were on the verge of getting engaged or anything, but some of the parents of my friends made a big thing about meeting people they dated and getting to know them better. It was important to my father but so far not a big thing for Kane’s parents. Parents wanting to get to know people you went out with seemed to be truer for girls than for boys. If some of them only knew how their daughters could be a lot worse.

It wasn’t my intention to eavesdrop on Kane, but something his mother had said seemed to have irritated him, and he raised his voice.

“Yes, I’m at her house. I plan on being here a lot. Don’t worry about it,” he said sharply. It got quiet, so I imagined he had ended the call, but when I stepped out, he was still on my phone, listening. “You’re lucky she’s even coming home,” he finally said, and ended the call.

“Everything all right at home?”

“Just the usual turmoil. I have to hear my mother rant about my sister, Darlena, because my father refuses to listen to any of it.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Darlena wants to bring her boyfriend home for Thanksgiving.”

“And your mother doesn’t like him?”

“Let’s just say she’s reluctant about it. He has a bit of Hispanic heritage.”

“What? What’s a bit?”

“His mother is from Chile,” he said with a smile.

“And that matters?”

“She’ll never come out and say it. My mother was brought up to be a princess. My parents met on some billionaire’s yacht, you know. Anyway,” he said, smiling, “you should hear how fluently Darlena speaks Spanish now. I think she does it just to drive my mother nuts.”

“What’s your father say about it?”

“If he can make a lot of money, it won’t matter if he’s half Eskimo. My father is an equal opportunity capitalist.”

“Sometimes you sound like you don’t like your parents, Kane,” I said. I was back to peeling that onion again. We were both uncovering more and more about ourselves, and I couldn’t help being more interested in him after seeing how he reacted to what Christopher had written in his diary.

He looked at me. “Probably so.”

“What?” I was shocked at his candor.

“We can love them, but we don’t have to like them,” he said. “Don’t look so surprised. Lots of kids, maybe even most, don’t want to be replicas of their parents.”

“Doesn’t mean they don’t like them.”

“They don’t like enough of them, and they want to be different, right?”

“I guess so. But not for me,” I added quickly.

“Yeah, but maybe that’s what eventually happened to Christopher and Cathy when it came to their mother. Maybe they still loved her but they didn’t like her. I don’t like her,” he added. “Even if Christopher does.”

“But you really don’t like your own mother?”

He shrugged. “Let’s put it this way, Kristin. I don’t have trouble imagining her locking me away in an attic if it meant she’d inherit a fortune.”

“You don’t mean that.”

He smiled. “Wait until you get to know her better,” he said. “When she lets her hair down. Sometimes my mother reminds me of Lady Macbeth.”

He made me think. I had been at the homes of many of my friends, eaten dinner with their families, watched television with them, and slept over, but did I really know what their family life was like? How much of it was a show for me, the nearly orphaned girl? Don’t let her see any family problems. Be grateful you’re not in her situation.

The neighbors the Dollangangers had before Christopher Sr. was killed probably thought of them as a precious little family full of love and beauty. Could any of those neighbors and friends, any who had been waiting for Christopher Sr. at his birthday party that fateful night, ever have imagined those children locked away by their own mother and grandmother for years?

We left for the restaurant.

“Promise me you won’t read the diary without me,” Kane said after we had sat in a booth at the Italian Stallion and ordered our pizza. “To make this real for us, we have to make the discoveries together.”

“I won’t.”

“I can tell from the expression on your face if you do,” he warned.

“You want me to make your famous blood oath?” I asked.

“Maybe,” he said, and then he laughed.

We talked a lot about events in the earlier part of the diary. Kane found it hard to believe that Christopher Sr. had left his family so destitute.

“The man has no life insurance? He had four children. There’s something odd about it, about the way they behaved together, anyway. It was like a family of children. They lived in a bubble, and the bubble burst. They thought all they had to do was change their name to Dollanganger, and they could make the past disappear. You know what I think? I think by the time we get to the end, Christopher Jr.’s going to think his parents were just plain irresponsible. You saw the way he began to doubt his father, thinking he might have been some kind of dreamer who talked a good game but never had his grasp of anything substantial. Even his job might have been all fluff.”

“You were supposed to be the objective pair of eyes here, Kane,” I said. “No preconceptions. Wait until we get to the end before making judgments.”

“I know, I know. I get . . . frustrated too easily. But you’ll keep my feet on the ground,” he added, reaching for my hand. “Just the way in the end Cathy will keep Christopher’s. That’s a bet.”

We stared at each other, but I felt as if we were looking through each other, looking at our visions of Christopher and Cathy rather than ourselves.

“I still have some work to do,” I said, “and I’d like to spend some time with my father before I go to sleep.”

“Sure.” He signaled for our check.

When we pulled into my driveway, I could see my father was home. His cherished pickup, Black Beauty, was parked there. He treated it like some revered old friend, full of mechanical arthritis but still ambulatory. Sometimes I would catch him just looking at it and stroking it affectionately, lost in some memory that involved it or perhaps thinking about my mother sitting beside him.

“Maybe I could get your dad a good deal on a new truck,” Kane said. “I’ll talk to my father.”

“Don’t bother. Even if you brought one over for free, he’d drive his. He says they grew on each other. He even named it: Black Beauty.”

Kane laughed. “Tell him people like him will put my father out of business.”

“I will,” I said.

He kissed me softly. “I would have preferred being the older child in my family,” he said. “I kind of like the idea of looking after someone the way Christopher is doing, without the situation, of course.”

“You will someday, with your own children,” I said.

He nodded, but I could see he meant something else. “See you in the morning.”

“You sure? I mean, I could drive myself and—”

“Absolutely not. I’m looking after you as if there was no one else,” he said. “As if we had no one but each other.”

It sounded like something I should appreciate, but it followed me all the way to the front door, the way something eerie and haunting might. He backed out, waved, and drove off. I gazed up at my bedroom window. In my wild imagination, I saw Christopher Dollanganger peering out between the curtains. The image disappeared as quickly as it had come, but a night that had begun with a warm, cozy feeling suddenly had a chill.

I didn’t hear the television when I entered. It was too early for my father to go to bed, and he wasn’t at the desk he used in the den for his paperwork at home.

“Dad?” I called. Either he hadn’t heard me or he was in the bathroom. Nevertheless, I went into the living room and saw him sitting in his chair, staring at the television. It wasn’t on. “Dad?”

He turned slowly. “Oh, Kristin. I didn’t hear you come in. Have a good time?”

“Yes. What’s happening? Why are you just sitting here practically in the dark?” I asked. He had turned on only a small lamp next to the sofa.

“Oh, I must have nodded off a little.”

“Aren’t you feeling well?” I asked, not hiding my nervousness.

Ever since my mother’s sudden illness and death, I would practically panic when my father complained about an ache, developed a cough and cold, or just looked exhausted. His health actually was very good. I couldn’t recall a time when he had missed work or even gone in late, but for that matter, I couldn’t recall my mother ever showing signs of any serious illness before she had her cerebral aneurism. Like most young children, I took it for granted that my parents would always be there, would live forever. Many nights I woke up crying for her. It took months for me to get past expecting her to be sitting where she always sat, standing where she stood in the kitchen, hearing her footsteps in the hallway or her voice somewhere in the house. I kept pushing the reality of her death away, thinking of it as only a bad dream.

For Christopher, Cathy, and even Corrine, the appearance of those policemen who had come to report their father’s fatal accident surely became the basis of nightmares that would follow them into every sleep, perhaps for the rest of their lives. Cory and Carrie were still young enough to fail to grasp the impact of the tragedy. Every day, just like I expected to see my mother miraculously appear, they expected to see their father come through that front door, calling for them, eager to embrace them, and maybe, even though they didn’t say it according to Christopher, they were hoping he would come and take them away from Foxworth Hall, too.

The younger you were, the longer it took for death to find its way completely inside you. But they all felt lost, vulnerable, and frightened, even Christopher, who portrayed himself as older and mature. No wonder

they were so willing in the end to do what Corrine demanded. They could rage, throw tantrums, cry, and moan, but in the end, they would tolerate far more than ever, because they had only her now. Maybe Kane ascribed other motives to Christopher because he didn't understand this, never having lost a parent.

"Yeah, I'm fine," my father said, but he rose as if he had aged years in hours.

"You didn't hurt yourself today?"

"Oh, no."

"Something's up," I said. I reached back into myself, perhaps into that part of me that was my mother, to sound firm and demanding. "What is it, Dad?"

He looked at me and instantly knew he couldn't get by with some lame excuse. He took a deep breath and tried anyway. "Things just got a little more complicated at the site, that's all," he said.

I stood my ground. "Why?"

"It's probably nothing. I'm just a stickler for perfection, for everything I do being clean and straight."

"Dad," I said, and I put my hands on my hips, something he would do when he wanted to get to the bottom of things.

"It's really nothing you'll be interested in, Kristin."

"Which means it is," I said.

He sighed deeply and sat again. I came around and stood in front of him, my arms crossed over my breasts. He looked up at me and smiled.

"What?"

"You look just like her doing that. Whenever I tried to keep something from her, she would plant herself in front of me and fold her arms, practically singing, 'I will not be moved.' You even hold your head the same way."

"And you told her what it was?"

"Always," he said.

"So?"

"Okay. I had occasion to look at the paperwork on the property late this afternoon. Not the architecture or materials, none of that."

"What, then?"

"The title, who owns it."

"I don't understand." I sat on the sofa. "I thought Arthur Johnson owned it."

"So did I. Turns out it was bought by a trust, and the trustees are not revealed."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not even sure Arthur Johnson and his wife will live there."

"But you said he was so involved—haunting you, I believe, was the way you put it."

"Yes, that's true."

"So?"

"I don't know. That's what irks me. Maybe I'm just spooking myself. Like I said, it's not anything to talk about. As long as I'm paid, I guess."

"It still matters to you, and there's some reason for that."

"I just don't like mysteries involving something I'm doing. Especially on that property," he muttered.

"What could it be? Who would want to keep the fact that they had bought and were building on Foxworth a secret?"

"I don't know."

"Someone from Charlottesville?"

"Maybe. Look, I'm tired, Kristin," he said, getting up again. "It was a longer day than usual. We'll talk about it some other time, maybe when I find out more. Okay?"

He did look tired. I didn't want to keep nagging him and making it all worse. "You're right to think it's weird," I said sharply, then turned and went upstairs.

How much of this should I tell Kane, or should I tell him anything about it at all? What could it possibly have to do with Christopher's diary? I stood staring at my bed and thinking about the diary. Should I do what I had promised and not read it until Kane and I could read it together? Or should I read ahead and be more prepared for what happened? Would Kane realize it, as he claimed he would? Probably, I thought, and then he might be the one who felt betrayed, and who knew what would happen then?

No, despite the temptation, I would have to wait. Nevertheless, I went to sleep thinking that maybe including him in reading the diary would turn out to be a big mistake in the end for many reasons, some unforeseen.

My father looked surprised the following morning when I told him that Kane was picking me up again. He was thoughtful a moment, and then he smiled.

"Well, I guess we'll save a lot on gas and tires," he joked. He didn't seem as bothered by what he had discovered yesterday, so I didn't bring it up again. "Let me know when I should sell your car."

“Like I would,” I said. “Ever.”

He laughed. “I’m going to get down to business about Thanksgiving,” he said, changing his tone. “It’s only days away. I reserved a fourteen-pound turkey.”

“Sounds bigger than last year.”

“Just in case we have another guest or two,” he replied, his eyebrows up in expectation.

“Not Kane,” I said quickly. “His family has a big Thanksgiving with lots of relatives. He has to be there.”

He nodded. I was sorry that the way I had said it made it sound like I was unhappy with our small group. “Your aunt Barbara might still come. She was invited to her boss’s home, but . . . she might still come.”

“Whatever. We’ll have the best dinner for miles around,” I told him.

It brought a weak smile to his face. “Did I ever tell you about your mother’s and my first Thanksgiving together?”

He had, but I shook my head.

“I was still at the diner, and I made a six-pound turkey just for the two of us. We ate late, after the crowd had gone. We ate in the kitchen. It was the best Thanksgiving we had until you were born and could sit at the table with us. She was the one who said, ‘No matter how good the food is, it’s better when you share it with people you love. Otherwise, it’s just good food.’ Sounds like it should be on a greeting card, huh?”

“Yes.”

He was thoughtful for a moment and then snapped back quickly. “She’d sure bawl me out for doing or saying anything to diminish ours.”

“You didn’t, and you won’t,” I said. “Besides, you’re with someone you love and who loves you.” I got up and kissed him. I heard Kane’s horn.

“He’s early.”

“Eager to get to school and learn,” I said, and left him laughing as I rushed out the door.

Kane put up his hand as soon as I got into his car.

“What?”

“We don’t talk about the diary ever until we’re up in the attic from now on.”

“Well, I agree, for reasons I’ve said. I don’t want us to talk about it in school in case someone overhears, but when we’re alone, too? What’s brought you to that conclusion?”

“I thought about it a lot last night. We’ve got to give it authenticity, and that will come only when we’re in it, when we can feel it on us. I don’t want to make this into some school project. You know, like we’re studying

a book in English class or for an exam. Do you?"

"No, but—"

"So good. Good," he said, and backed out. He looked up at the attic before driving off. "It doesn't exist except up there," he added firmly.

At first, I thought his attitude was a bit extreme. Of course, I liked the idea that it would be kept an even better and tighter secret, but there was still something about it that bothered me. It didn't frighten me or anything, and I certainly agreed about not turning it into some extra-credit book report. Like him, I wanted to step away from that sort of thinking. There was nothing personal about that. Maybe what bothered me was what had begun to bother me from the start. Kane seemed even more into this than I was, and I had far more reason to be. As distant as the relationship was, the Dollanganger children were still related to me through my mother. And it was my father who was working on the property and who had found the diary. What got me thinking harder about it was wondering why Kane was so into it. What was he bringing to it that I had never expected or could have known? At times, he seemed to be very critical of Christopher, but then he would suddenly embrace him. Our English teacher, Mr. Madeo, who also directed the school plays, once told us that an actor has to find something with which he can identify in a character he plays, even if he plays a villain.

What was it that Kane found in Christopher and the whole Dollanganger situation that enabled him to get so into it? Maybe there were some resemblances to his own family. The Dollangangers were a loving family at the start of the diary, but it was clear that with the loss of their father, the children were drifting away from their mother. They were almost like orphans. Kane did admit that he didn't like his mother; he'd said he loved her like a child should love a mother, but he didn't particularly like the person she was.

Even though I never spent any time with Kane and his sister together, I could tell that he had a very good relationship with her. Was she as critical of their parents as he was? Did they complain about them to each other? She surely must be complaining to him about her mother's attitude toward her boyfriend. In how many families that I knew only on the surface were the children allied against their own parents? Even if I had a brother or a sister, I couldn't imagine the two of us being adversaries of our parents, especially my father.

How ironic this was all becoming. In the beginning, I was afraid that I would be the one who revealed too much about herself, but it was starting to look like it might be Kane who did that. Was I ready for the revelations? Did I want to know them? What sort of a Pandora's box had I opened by agreeing to read the diary with him? Of course, I didn't bring up any of this, even after the school day had ended and we were on our way to my home. All day, I had tried to distract myself from these heavy thoughts.

The girls were all talking about Tina Kennedy's party the coming weekend. Unlike Kane's recent party at his home when his parents had gone on a trip, Tina's party was promising to be wild. Her father owned lots of real estate, and one of the properties was an adult bar outside of Charlottesville, so everyone imagined there would be a good supply of booze, and Tina had an older brother in his third year of college who seemed to have an endless supply of mood-enhancing drugs. Lately, she had practically dared me not to attend. In her effort to win Kane's attention, she was portraying me as the class "goody-goody," who was capable of turning "state's evidence" when it came to whatever my girlfriends and the boys did. She didn't want me to be trusted. I complained to Kane about it, but he didn't want to take any of it seriously. That was beginning to annoy me.

To counter her insinuations, my closer friends, like Suzette and Kyra, were telling everyone that Kane and I were really getting it on at my home after school almost daily. I wasn't happy about any of that and was even a little irritated at Kane's indifference to the chatter. Until now, that was his charm, his "coolness," as most girls put it, but I had seen him be quite the opposite in the attic.

I suggested that he and I boycott the party.

"Why give her the satisfaction?" he said. "We can handle it. Don't worry."

We both had a light load of homework that day, which Kane took to mean we could spend more time on the diary.

"We'll order in Chinese or something, okay?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. He drove a little faster than usual. Neither of us said anything more until we entered my house and went up to my room to get the diary.

"I just want to freshen up a bit," I said when he turned to the door.

"Go to the bathroom?"

"Just freshen up. Go on ahead if you want," I said, and to my surprise, he did just that.

I was even more surprised at what he had done by the time I got up there. He had moved furniture around so it resembled the Foxworth Hall attic as much as possible.

"Gives a better idea," he said when I just stood there looking at it all. "Okay?"

"We have to move it back before we leave."

"Oh, absolutely. No problem." He got into the chair and looked at me. I moved to the sofa. He began.

Momma had told us about the grand Christmas party her parents were having, and Cathy pleaded and pleaded for us to be able to see it.

"How can I let you do that?"

"We'll hide and watch. We'll be careful. Please," she pleaded.

Momma looked at me. I knew she was hoping I would disagree with Cathy or help her explain why it wasn't possible, but I was just as tired of being confined and seeing nothing beautiful and fun. She read it in my face, thought for a moment, and then pulled us aside so the twins wouldn't hear us.

"Okay. I know a place where you can hide and watch. Just the two of you. The twins wouldn't be able to contain themselves, and they would give us all away. Promise not to tell them, and promise to wait until they are fast asleep."

We did, and she promised to come get us and take us to where we could watch the party unseen. I thought Cathy would be ecstatic about it, but the moment Momma left, she took on a long face.

“What?”

“She won’t come back. It will be like our wonderful Thanksgiving dinner. Something will prevent her.”

“Give her a chance,” I said, but in my heart, I bore the same skepticism. Momma was good at making promises and then finding explanations for why they were broken. But that was something I thought I would never tell Cathy.

Fortunately, this time, I didn’t have to consider it. Momma showed up looking more beautiful than ever. She looked like a princess, a movie star, in her formal gown, which showed more cleavage than I expected, especially in this house with our grandmother. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Even when I was younger, but not too young to appreciate a naked woman, I wasn’t as moved, even when she had paraded nude in front of us. Maybe it was because it was so long since I had seen her so bright, the crests of her breasts so crimson with excitement, her eyes as dazzling as her diamond and emerald earrings, that I found myself so taken. It was easy for me to imagine how my father had been so smitten with her beauty and impervious to any suspicions of incest. I could feel my own sexuality stirring, and I was admittedly ashamed. How could I have these thoughts and feelings about my own mother?

Kane paused and looked at me with a strange expression of guilt on his face. In fact, he seemed to cringe in the chair.

“What?” I asked. “Why did you stop reading?”

I expected him to go into his theory of the Oedipus complex again, but he surprised me. “I remember when I first had a similar feeling.”

“What similar feeling?”

“Feelings about my mother. I’ve never told anyone. I’ve read about it, of course. I don’t have an Oedipus complex,” he added firmly. “The jury’s still out on whether that even exists.”

I didn’t know what to say. I just stared at him.

“I was just a little more than twelve. For the previous year or so, my mother had become very careful about undressing in front of me or appearing undressed where I could see. She always closed her door, but one time, she didn’t, and . . .”

“You saw her naked?”

“Worse. She and my father were on the verge.”

“Oh.”

“I couldn’t help becoming aroused. Sometimes you just can’t help it,” he quickly added. “It just happens, especially for boys. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“It never happened again,” he said. He looked angry now.

"I'm sure it's quite normal, especially at that age, when you were just . . ."

"Breaking out," he said. Then he smiled, which gave me an instant sense of relief. "And not just with pimples." His expression changed again, returned to a cross between anger and guilt. He looked around the attic and nodded to himself.

"What?" I asked. What was he thinking now?

"This is our special place now, Kristin, our attic of secrets, right?"

"Of course. We both took blood oaths."

"I'm serious."

"I am, too. I was the first to demand that, Kane. And I would never repeat anything we say to each other up here, especially because of the diary."

He nodded, looking satisfied. "I'm sorry. I just . . . I've never been so honest with anyone else, even my parents or my sister."

"Then I'm flattered," I said, and his smile returned.

"You're very special, Kristin. I mean it. I'm happy you trusted me with this. I know what that means to you." He looked down at the diary in his hands.

"Go on," I said. "It's all right. You haven't done or said anything that would change my mind."

I told him that, but I wasn't as confident about it as I made it sound.

Nevertheless, he nodded, smiled, and began again.

Momma smiled at me as if she knew how intoxicatingly beautiful I thought she was. Why should I be surprised? She was always good at reading my thoughts.

She warned us not to stay out for more than an hour, as the twins might waken, and then she took us to a place she said used to be her own hiding place from which to spy on adults, a massive oblong table with cabinet doors underneath. There was barely enough room for Cathy and me to crawl under, but through the fine mesh screen, we could see the grand ballroom below, all lit with candles. The elegantly dressed men and women, the women with glittering jewels, the huge Christmas tree with what looked like hundreds of lights and ornaments, the dozens of servants serving champagne, the display of foods being served by chefs, and the music made it the greatest display of wealth we had ever seen. Momma hadn't lied about this. They were rich, very rich! She hadn't exaggerated about that.

I looked at Cathy. Her face was so full of wonder it brought tears to my eyes. All these months of boredom and depression, sickness and cold, and reams and reams of cruel words spewed at us, all of it paled at this moment. A curtain had been lifted and showed us what could one day be ours, too! Oh, how worth it our struggle has been, I thought.

I looked at my sister and smiled at the way she was dazzled before my eyes. She could easily grow into one

of those beautiful women below, as beautiful as Momma, I thought. We watched Momma, who was talking to a man about my father's height. Suddenly, he took her hand and kissed it. I felt like an arrow of ice had just been shot into my chest. Cathy nudged me.

"Did you see that, what she let that man do?"

Of course I had, but instead of talking about it, I talked about what our parties would be like when we were finally accepted and living in this grand mansion.

I thought we had seen all we would that would shock and amaze us, but suddenly, our grandmother from hell appeared, only now she looked as elegantly dressed as any of the other women. Cathy was astonished, too, but could only remark about her size. Somehow, among other women, she looked even taller than when she loomed as she stood above us.

And then the most astonishing thing of all happened. Our grandfather was brought in, in his wheelchair.

"It's him!" Cathy muttered.

He paused and slowly raised his head and looked up in our direction. I was positive he was smiling. Instinctively, I pulled back, but Cathy remained staring down at him.

"He looks like Daddy, only older," she said.

"Why wouldn't he? He's Daddy's half brother."

"But—"

"Shh," I said. There were two people nearby talking, a man and a woman. They talked about our mother. The woman was uncomplimentary, but the man, whom she called Albert Donne, raved about Momma and wished she was his instead of belonging to someone named Bartholomew Winslow. They confirmed that Momma was once adored by her father and would inherit the fortune, but neither was happy for her. They drifted off.

"Who's Bartholomew Winslow?"

"Let's go," I said, instead of trying to come up with an answer. I knew it had to be the man who had kissed her hand and was paying so much attention to her at the party. "The twins might have woken up."

Cathy wanted to stay longer, but I made her leave and return to our little bedroom. The twins were still fast asleep. Both of us stood there looking at them, stunned and dazzled by all we had seen and heard.

"Is Momma going to marry this Bartholomew Winslow? Is that what those people meant?"

"How do I know?" I snapped back at her. I shouldn't have, but I couldn't help it. The woman I had seen below at that grand party was different from the woman who had brought us to Foxworth Hall, and I was afraid of what that difference might mean.

Suddenly, I felt defiant and excited about a new idea. Why not take advantage of this opportunity to explore the house and really understand where we were? Momma was occupied, I told Cathy, and the door was

unlocked. We wouldn't get a better opportunity. She was worried that our grandmother would find out and whip us, but I thought I would go up to the attic, find some clothes to use for a disguise, and then go out. I found an old dark suit that fit well. Cathy stared in amazement as I paraded boldly before her, pretending to be some old gent.

"I'll never be recognized," I declared. She still looked quite terrified but told me to go explore. She made me promise I wouldn't be too long. I pretended to be a hero about to embark on a dangerous venture to save us both by learning the secrets of the mansion. She smiled when I swept her up in my arms, and for a moment, inhaling the sweet scent of her freshly washed hair and feeling the smoothness of her skin and the closeness of her body naked beneath her new nightgown, I felt a rush of passion, heat rising from my thighs, through my body, and into my face. I kissed her cheek, and the kiss was such a surprise to both of us that we stood motionless for a moment. Then I forced a laugh and, pretending to be a knight in armor, rushed out of the room and into the mansion of secrets.

Kane paused, looked at me, and then jumped up and came over to kiss me.

"Why did you do that?" I asked, smiling.

"Christopher kissed his sister. You said we had to do what they do when they do it."

"I didn't mean literally," I said.

"Maybe you did and you didn't realize it." He returned to his chair. "You hear anything that surprised you?"

"Don't try to be a teacher, Kane. Remember, this is supposed to be different from a school assignment."

He laughed. "Sorry. Okay. You heard how the old man looked up at them and smiled?"

"Christopher said he thought it looked like that. He wasn't sure."

"The old man knew they were there," Kane said, nodding. "Your uncle's contact was right, I bet."

"Okay, I'll play along. What do you think it all means?"

He sat back, looking like a junior Sherlock Holmes, full of self-confidence. "I'm thinking the old lady told him right from the start, and he approved of keeping them under lock and key. They both believed the children were the devil's children or something, didn't they? Maybe they thought they'd grow horns and tails and confirm their nutty ideas."

"But what about Corrine? I admit that what she's doing, what she's permitting, most mothers wouldn't, but I really believe she thinks she can pull it off, don't you?"

He shrugged. "Maybe they played her, too."

"Played her?"

"You know, conned her into believing the plan had a chance. Granny told her she was keeping the kids a secret from the old coot until he kicked the bucket. She forced Corrine to do the things she did, convincing her that was the case. All the while, she kept the old man in the loop."

“But why would he do it?”

“He gets his slow revenge for her running off with Christopher Sr. He puts her through all this hell first.”

“It doesn’t sound like she’s going through hell now.”

“Yeah, not now. Now she’s back to being Daddy’s little girl. She’s been whipped and made to do what they want her to do with the children. He’s letting out the leash little by little, her own car, money, clothes, and jewelry. He keeps her obedient, and that keeps the children locked up. She’s all he’s got left, with the brothers dead. He sounds to me like someone who wants his legacy. He’s probably got too much of an ego to see the end of the Foxworths. Her return, molding her into the woman he wants her to be, is satisfying, maybe even keeping him alive at this point,” he continued, obviously thinking it through as he spoke.

“Maybe,” I said. What he was saying did make some sense, at least with what we knew now. “But I still think we shouldn’t jump to any conclusions.”

He smiled. “That’s okay. Keep your options open. One of us should always be challenging what the other thinks, anyway. Cathy’s really challenging Christopher’s theories most of the time, isn’t she? You challenge mine.”

“Yes, but—”

“So let’s keep going. I want to see what he discovers. It’s still early.”

I checked the time. “Okay.”

Pleased, he returned to the diary. As he began, I thought again about what I had considered might happen, how by reading the diary and putting ourselves as best we could in Christopher’s and Cathy’s place, we might expose things about ourselves that we’d told no one. He had already done it. Soon it would be my turn, I was sure. Would this all make us closer, or, in the end, would it drive us apart?

As quietly as I could, I opened the door and slipped into the room, but when I turned to look for Cathy, there was Momma. I had never seen such rage in her face. Her whole body looked swollen with it. Before I could speak, she slapped me hard on the left cheek, and when I recuperated, she slapped me even harder on my right. Stunned, I stood there, my face stinging.

“Where were you? Where did you go? If you ever do anything like this again”—she practically spit at me—“I’ll whip you. I’ll whip you both the way I was whipped. Do you hear? Do you?”

I couldn’t speak.

Was this the mother who had so often embraced me, petted me, and covered my face with kisses, telling me how much she needed and depended on me and how like my father I was to her in almost every way?

Was this the mother who looked to me to help her get through this crisis, because she believed I was more an adult than a child and I could understand her and what she needed more perhaps than someone her age?

Who was this woman now standing before me with such fury in her eyes?

For a long moment, it was so quiet we could hear the walls and floors creak. Then my mother's expression changed so quickly it took my breath away. It was as if she had been possessed by some demon and, realizing what had happened, driven him out.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry!" she cried. "Forgive me, please. Forgive me!"

She reached forward with soft hands now and cupped my face as she stepped toward me, muttering how I shouldn't be so frightened or afraid of her, how her threat to whip us as she had been whipped was, of course, ridiculous. She flooded my stinging face with quick kisses, apologizing, embracing me, and bringing my face, my lips, down to the warmth of her breasts, my lips pressing to them, drawing out the warmth and love I always thought she kept safely there for me.

She released me, and I stepped back, but then she kissed me again, but this time, she kissed me on the lips the way I had seen her kiss my father so many times. It wasn't simply a smack on the lips; it was a kiss that cried for forgiveness. When she pulled away, she stroked my hair and smiled that soft, loving smile I had known so well all my life.

"Will you forgive me? Will you?"

"Yes, Momma," I said. "I forgive you."

She burst into a wide, ecstatic smile and reached for Cathy's hand. I could see that Cathy was trembling with fear. She had never seen our mother like she was moments ago, either. She looked at me, her face slowly hardening now more into anger than surprise or fear. I gave her a look of reassurance, but she wasn't ready to accept any. Momma could see that, too.

Momma told us she had overreacted because everything was finally going our way. That perked up Cathy.

"How?" Cathy asked. "Tell us how it's going our way."

"I can't right now," Momma said. "I've got to get back. Perhaps I'll have time to tell you everything tomorrow. Forgive me, Christopher," she said, and kissed me again before going to the door. And then, before she walked out, she said something that sounded out of place, even stupid. "Merry Christmas."

She closed and locked the door.

Cathy turned to me. "For a while there, I thought our grandmother from hell had gotten into her body," she said, and then, slowly, she gazed at all the presents. Suddenly, everything looked out of place for both of us—these gifts, being locked away, us being our little sister and brother's parents, and a grandmother threatening us with a rainstorm of hell if we broke any of her ridiculous rules. "Merry Christmas," Cathy said bitterly.

"She didn't mean it, Cathy. She got frightened when I wasn't here. She thought I had been discovered and it was all over," I told her.

She moved quietly, silently, looking like her tongue had hardened into stone in her mouth, and then she got back into bed with Carrie.

I got undressed quickly and decided to lie beside her for a while. Without a word, she rested her head on my

chest, and I slipped my arm around her.

To my surprise, Kane lowered the diary and looked at me. He had been reading so well and was so into it that I truly felt as if I was there alongside Christopher. I hated for him to stop. We still had plenty of time.

“What?”

“That sofa you’re on.”

“What about it?”

“It’s a pull-out.”

“So?”

He rose. “Let’s do it,” he said. I sat looking up at him. “Re-create the scene,” he added, and held out his hand. I took it, and he helped me up and then removed the cushions and lifted out the sofa bed. There was a cloud of dust. We waved our hands in front of our faces. “We should clean up this place a bit. They cleaned up their attic,” he said.

“Just what I need, more housework.”

“I’ll help.” He looked around and went to one of the trunks, opened it, and took out an old comforter. “This will work for now,” he said, and spread it on the sofa bed. Then he put the pillows back on the bed. “Ta-daaaa.”

“What are we doing?”

“We’re Christopher and Cathy lying on that mattress.” He picked up the diary. “Come on,” he said, and lay down on the sofa bed.

I remember thinking that maybe we were going too far with this, but it also intrigued me. I did what he asked. He sat up, pulled off his shirt, and lay back again, patting his chest. I knew what he wanted and laid my head against him. He held up the diary to begin reading again, his right arm slipping comfortably around my shoulders.

“Wait,” he said.

“What?”

“You’ve got to get more into it, get closer to the way Cathy was at this point.”

“I don’t exactly have a nightgown up here, Kane.”

He looked at my mother’s wardrobe. “Maybe there’s something in there.”

I hesitated.

“I’m overdressed, too,” he said, and sat up to take off his pants.

My heart began to race. I could feel a warm sensation of excitement building in the pit of my stomach and spreading like tepid water just beneath my skin, into my thighs. I rose quickly and went to the wardrobe. Two nightgowns were hung on the right. I plucked one out and began to undress. He was in his underwear, lying back, watching me and waiting. With my back to him, I went down to my panties and slipped the nightgown over my head. Smoothing it down, I returned to the sofa bed and lay beside him, placing my head on his chest. He ran his fingers through my hair and then began to read.

There was no longer a doubt in my mind.

We were in the Foxworth Hall attic.

In the short silence that passed between us, I felt my sister's warmth in a way I never had felt it. It's difficult to explain, but perhaps because of our circumstances, all that had happened, the emotional roller coaster we were on, I wasn't thinking of her as my sister. I was sensing her more as a girl, young, of course, somewhat frightened, but also desperate for my touch, my warmth. It aroused me in ways I hadn't expected.

I started babbling about everything, defending Momma again, and talking about how we had all changed. She perked up, now interested in how I thought she had changed. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her she was more mature, she was even prettier, but something kept me from saying it. I was afraid to say it.

Instead, I started to talk about what I had discovered when I had snuck out. I told her I heard the party winding down and went to spy on them and that many of them looked drunk. I saw the nurse wheel out our grandfather. Moments after, I saw Momma come up the stairs with Bartholomew Winslow, who asked to see her special bed. I thought it was just a clever way to get into her room with her. I hesitated to tell Cathy any more, but she insisted. I had to tell her about how they kissed and how he touched Momma. I knew it would make her angry but not angrier than it made me. I told her how he still insisted on seeing the famous swan bed, which I had overheard had been our great-grandmother's. To get off the topic, I described wandering into a trophy room with dozens of animal heads on the walls and the portrait of our grandfather, Malcolm Neal Foxworth. She didn't want to hear any of that.

Again, I hesitated, but I had promised I would tell her everything I saw, so I couldn't leave it out, even though I knew it was going to disturb her. I described what I had seen of Momma's suite of rooms, with that enormous swan bed, when the door opened. There was no way not to say it; it was the bedroom of a princess.

Momma was living in luxury, while we were wallowing in a small room and an attic full of antiques, dust, and no sunshine. The air was stale. We were shut away and drawing closer to each other daily to find the comfort and the hope anyone our ages should have the moment he or she opens his or her eyes. Maybe legally we weren't orphans, but the only thing that separated us from them was a second death certificate—our mother's.

Darkness was never darker; silence was never deeper. We were in a world where it was futile even to cry. Who would hear us? Who would wipe away our tears? How different we were already from the children who had been brought here. We were frightened, and we were unhappy, but we had been dressed in hope. Momma's voice had been so full of promise. Really. Where else could we have gone but to her to find a reason to continue, to grow, to dream again of any future for ourselves?

Kane stopped reading and turned to me. "If I were really there with her in that bed, I would say, 'More and more, it's looking like we're going to have only each other, Cathy.'?"

“Their mother does seem so deceptive, complaining about how difficult it is for her and telling them how patient they have to be.”

“I think Christopher knows that but can’t say a word. You can understand how alone they must feel, locked away. I can see a mother unconcerned about them in the interim, but those two little ones.”

“Yes.” I could feel the tears coming into my eyes, and he could see them. He leaned toward me and gently kissed my eyes, his lips feeling like slightly damp tissues. Then he kissed my cheeks with small pecks, as if he was exploring and finding his way to my lips. I wasn’t terribly experienced at it, but I could sense that Kane was a very good kisser. He pressed just so hard and held his lips on mine just long enough to keep the tingling lingering after we parted.

“And we can understand why they would need more from each other, more comfort, more love,” he whispered, his lips just under my ear and just close enough to graze the peach fuzz on my cheek. He caressed my breasts, lifting my left breast gently, and with his left hand, he reached down to get under the hem of my mother’s nightgown, sliding it softly but quickly up my thigh to my waist and turning me to him more for another long and passionate kiss that seemed to draw the last drops of resistance from me.

When he started to draw back, I was the one who pursued, bringing my lips back to his. Then I stiffened when his hand reached my breasts, naked under the nightgown. His fingers nudged my nipple as he lowered his mouth to my neck. I was surprised at how I suddenly stiffened and pulled back. I could feel myself sliding down that dangerous slope my aunt Barbara had described, when she had come to visit and play the role of a mother educating her daughter about her own sexuality.

“It’s all right,” Kane said, kissing my forehead and trying again to bring his fingers to my erect nipples, but I moved back even farther.

“They wouldn’t do this,” I told him. I knew it was a strange thing to say the second after I said it.

He smiled. “Right, right. We’ll continue this downstairs. I think we’ve done enough today, anyway,” he said, and rose. He looked down at me to see if I would follow, if I wanted to continue. The candles he had lit inside me were still flickering and did not go out. So many places on my body still longed to be touched. Now it felt like I had suffered sunburn. My skin tingled.

I nodded and started to get up. As he dressed and then began to put everything back to the way it was, I dressed, too, and rehung my mother’s nightgown. I closed the windows, and then we left the attic, both of us pausing first to look back at it, me to be sure it didn’t reveal what had been happening in it and him looking back with the expression of someone who was remembering having been there for years and finally leaving.

He took my hand. The passion that had blossomed between us was still as heavy as honey on our lips. My body still tingled, and both of us were as flushed as the moment we had touched and caressed. Neither of us spoke. We were hurrying down to my bedroom, where I was almost certain now I would do what my girlfriends and I jokingly referred to as “crossing the Rio Grande.”

We had just gotten down the stairs and started toward my room when I heard the front door open and close. We both froze for a moment. Without speaking, I hurried him to my room.

“Does anyone else have the key to your house?” he asked.

“No. It has to be my father,” I said, slipping the diary under the pillow and flopping onto the bed with my history text open to where I was actually supposed to be reading.

Obviously frustrated, Kane reluctantly took his books out of his bag and slapped his math text onto my desk. “If there’s anything that could keep you from feeling romantic, it’s studying math,” he muttered.

We could hear my father coming up the stairs. I brushed back my hair and gave my clothes a once-over just before he knocked.

“Hey,” I called, and he opened the door.

He peered in at us. Kane turned as if he hadn’t heard him coming because he had been so entranced with his intermediate algebra.

“If this keeps up, you’ll both be competing for valedictorian,” my father said.

I could tell from the look in his eyes, the way he tightened his lips and moved his ears slightly back, that he really didn’t believe what he was seeing. I imagined we looked too perfect, too innocuous, or perhaps our faces were still flushed. We hadn’t had time to throw cold water on them. He didn’t look angry as much as he looked a little more concerned this time.

Seeing the knowing expression on his face made me wonder why any teenager, boy or girl, believed he or she could completely fool parents, anyway. My father wouldn’t tell me, I’m sure, but in his youth, he was surely in some similar circumstance. Yes, teenagers today were probably more sexually active than they were in my dad’s time, I thought. Eighth-graders were getting pregnant. The attitude about virginity seemed completely upside down. Once, a girl could be proud she had held out until she met the man she loved and who loved her, but now, girls even considered carrying virginity into their late teens to be some sort of failure.

My father worked hard. He didn’t socialize as much as everyone else’s parents did, but he wasn’t oblivious to the way things were today. Just because he trusted me not to get into trouble, that didn’t mean he would never worry that I would, maybe especially now that I was dating a boy as carefree and privileged as Kane Hill.

“Hey, Mr. Masterwood,” Kane said. “No worries. Kristin is so far above me in grade point average, I need a telescope to see her scores.”

Dad smiled. “I bet.”

“What are you doing home so early? I thought you said you would be late all week,” I said.

“I have to change and put on some formal duds. I’ve been invited to dinner at Spencer’s.”

“Spencer’s? Très top-notch,” Kane said. “My father goes there to close deals.”

Dad nodded.

“Who invited you?” I asked him.

“Mr. Johnson. He wants me to meet someone,” he added. I knew he didn’t want to say any more in front of Kane.

“Your blue suit was dry-cleaned a month ago,” I said. “It’s on the right side in your closet.”

“I was thinking about that. Good.”

“And wear the light blue shirt with that tie I bought you last Christmas,” I added as he started to back up.

He glanced at Kane, a little embarrassed, but nodded and backed out, closing the door softly.

The look on Kane’s face made me laugh.

“Yes?”

He shook his head. “You really take care of him, don’t you?”

“We take care of each other, Kane.”

He looked very sad for a moment and then turned back to his math homework. “Let me know when you’re hungry,” he said. “I’ll order and go pick it up.”

“I can just throw something together here, but you had better remember to call home and tell your mother this time,” I warned. “Stay on your homework. I’ll be back,” I told him, and went down to see what I could make us for dinner. I was pretty good at pasta with olive oil, cheese, and some eggplant. Everything was there, so I started.

I heard someone coming down the stairs about twenty minutes later and saw my father standing in the doorway.

“Well?” he asked, gesturing like a six-year-old boy waiting for his mother’s approval.

“You look very handsome, Dad.” I walked over to him and brushed his hair back a little before kissing him on the cheek.

“I always feel a little awkward in a jacket and tie, especially after a day in the field.” He looked back at the stairway. “Staying for dinner, I see,” he added, glancing at my preparations.

“Yes, I thought I’d do a nice pasta, some salad. Defrost and heat up that Italian bread we have in the freezer. Nothing fancy.”

“You’ll probably eat better than I will. I don’t like dinner meetings. Everyone waits for the right pause in chewing and drinking to say the important things after the mandatory small talk.”

“You and Uncle Tommy are really different, from the sound of how he runs his business. He says the better the deal, the better the restaurant, or vice versa.”

“He was spoiled from the get-go.”

“So who is going to be at this dinner?” I asked, and then held my breath to see if he would tell me.

“Someone who flew in just for it, apparently. I don’t know whether to be flattered or nervous.”

“You don’t know his name?”

“I was simply told it was a major stockholder in the trust involved. I’m beginning to think I’m deep in some tax-avoidance scheme. I was starting to suspect that this whole sweet deal was too good to be true. Anyway, don’t worry about it. It will all work out.”

“You used to say it would come out in the wash.”

“Yeah, but no one’s doing any washing in particular right now. Enjoy your dinner,” he said, then kissed me and started out.

He did look handsome, as handsome as I could ever remember him being, but I didn’t have to be a sophisticated, mature older woman to realize there was still something very important missing. There was a light, that joie de vivre that a truly happy man had. He had carried his sorrow too long. It had lost no weight and still put darkness in places where there should be none. It kept his enthusiasm for almost everything contained, chained to a sense of guilt, perhaps. How could he be happy without her? The moment he laughed, felt a smile break out on his face, let something exciting quicken his pace, he felt his loss, remembered she wasn’t there beside him to share in the joy. Every laugh, every smile, gave birth to another tear. He went to sleep apologizing for being alive.

I knew all this, and it broke my heart. Right now, it made me feel even guiltier about what Kane and I were doing. I had never kept anything this serious a secret from him. How was I going to explain it to him afterward? My fear was that I would not only hate myself for having done it but also hate Kane for encouraging me with his own obvious interest and excitement. Could I explain this to him and stop? Had we gone too far to stop? And would the effect on our relationship be the same? Would he now feel betrayed? Already, he had confided in me about himself and his family more than he had confided in anyone else.

I returned to preparing dinner, these thoughts like little pinpricks on my heart. I cut some onions for our salad, but the tears that came to my eyes were not a result of that. I tried to pull myself together when I heard Kane descending.

“You didn’t come back up,” he said.

“I thought I had better get started on dinner. I’m hungry, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, for lots of things.” I smirked, and he smiled. “I left a message on my mother’s cell and a message with Martha, the maid who looks after her things, which include me,” he added. “Your father left?”

“Yes. He hates business dinners.”

“My father has business breakfasts, lunches, and dinners. He once even had a business New Year’s,” he said, and leaned against the doorjamb.

“Oh, c’mon.”

He raised his right hand. "I kid you not. He invited all these car company executives and their wives to our home on New Year's Eve, and they talked about business right up to the clock striking twelve. I was only eleven at the time, but I remember it well, because my sister and I were spying on the party just the way Christopher and Cathy were spying on their grandparents' gala. We got bored, however, and returned to our own rooms. I remember thinking that if that's what adults did to celebrate, I was going to remain a kid."

"And you have," I said.

He laughed. "I'll set the table this time." I looked at him, surprised. "Hey, I'm not spoiled. I'm corrupted but not spoiled," he said. "I think I was two when my mother had me instructed on how to place silverware, fold a napkin, and organize the wine and water glasses."

"Not two."

"Well, close to it. I had to live up to being a prince, didn't I?"

He went for the dishes and silverware, and I continued preparing our meal. Occasionally, we gave each other a look that reminded us of the passion that had just passed through us, but neither of us said anything. It was just dinner now and more discussion about what we had read of the diary.

"I really have to get to my homework this time," I said, when we were cleaning up. "I have a test in history and a quiz in English tomorrow."

"Don't throw me out. I promise I won't touch you," he said. "I'll just work on my own."

"Why is it I get the impression you're in no rush to go home . . . ever?"

"Maybe because I make it so obvious," he said.

We returned to my room, and we did do our homework. Close to nine o'clock, he closed his books and declared that I was turning him into a better student. He couldn't stand it any longer. We both laughed, and I let him kiss me, but he could feel that we were going no further. I was anticipating my father returning any moment, anyway.

"I'm off," he said. "I'll be in your driveway waiting for you in the morning."

"I'm going to forget how to drive."

"If you would agree to bring the diary to my house . . ."

"No," I said sharply. He put up his hands and then, with that cute smirk on his face, began to back up toward the doorway.

"Don't shoot. I'm going, I'm going." He threw me a kiss and disappeared.

I went to the window and watched him leave. Literally seconds later, I saw my father pull into the driveway. I could tell from the way he came into the house and started up the stairs that he was tired. I stepped out to greet him in the hallway.

“Hey,” I said. “How was your dinner?”

“It was okay. The steak was a little overdone for me.”

“I don’t mean the food, Dad,” I said.

He stood there looking at me.

“So?”

“Remember how I once told you that getting to know someone is like peeling an onion?”

“Yes.”

“Well, getting to know what’s behind the building of a new mansion on the foundation of Foxworth Hall is like peeling an onion, too.”

I thought he was going to leave it at that, but it was just a long pause as he put his own thoughts about it together. I waited.

“The man I met tonight still isn’t the man behind the project. Arthur Johnson was one layer of onion, and the man I met tonight is another. You know how I feel about navigating through mazes.”

“Who did you meet tonight?”

“A Dr. Martin West,” he said.

I saw that he was waiting to see if I knew that name from reading the diary. I shook my head. “What kind of a doctor is he?”

“He’s a psychiatrist.”

Again, he waited for my reaction. Again, I shook my head. “How is he involved in all this?”

“He didn’t come right out and say it, but I’m sure he worked in the clinic Corrine Foxworth was taken to after the fire here,” he said.

“Corrine was his patient?”

“My guess is that’s how Arthur Johnson and his wife know so much about the interior of Foxworth Hall. Dr. West knew it all from what she told him during whatever they call that treatment psychiatrists do. You know, patient on a couch or something, babbling.”

“So Arthur Johnson works for this psychiatrist?”

“Not exactly. I mean, he’s not on the title document. As I’ve told you, it’s a trust, and the owners or partners, or whatever they call them, aren’t mentioned.”

“But the doctor is a wealthy man?”

"I don't know if he's the one who's wealthy. Although he didn't say it, I had the feeling he was working for someone else, someone who's a major investor in Johnson's hedge fund. That's all I can tell you. My head's spinning with all the intrigue. I'm going to sleep," he said.

"Are you upset about it?" I asked quickly.

"Upset?" He thought a moment. "I'm not sure if 'upset' is the right word. I'm more . . . confused about it, but maybe, if I just stick to what I have to do to build this turkey, I'll be fine. Which reminds me. Mrs. Osterhouse is going to pick up the turkey I ordered. I've given her a list of what I need to prepare it. When does your holiday start?"

"Next Wednesday. We usually pick it up and do the extra shopping."

"I know, but she wanted to do something. Sometimes being generous means letting someone do something for you. It doesn't sound like it makes sense, but it does. You and I will get the rest of it on Sunday along with our weekly food, okay?"

"Yes. I understand," I said. I didn't want to elaborate and reveal that I knew Mrs. Osterhouse was working so hard to become a member of our family, but it was one of those times when my father knew what I was thinking. He left it dangling in the air.

"Right." He started to turn away and then stopped. "Oh. So how was your dinner?"

"Pretty tip-top," I told him, which finally brought a smile to his face.

"I bet," he said. "You're a chip off the old block. Get to sleep."

I watched him walk to his room, and I hated how old he suddenly looked, his shoulders slumped now with the fatigue of work, along with the weight of the deep and enduring sorrow he carried plus the weight of worrying that he was doing what he could and should do for me.

* * *

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