



Secrets of the Morning (Cutler Book 2)

By V.C. Andrews

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Then Michael Sutton arrives, a new teacher at the school, a singing star and the most wonderful looking man Dawn has ever seen. Together they create a world of feeling Dawn has never known. In his embrace Dawn awakens to disturbing, unfamiliar desires, and Michael's promises offer a vision of music and romance forever...until he disappears.

Dazed by his cruelty, alone with the bitter fruit of his betrayal, Dawn becomes, once again, a victim of her grandmothers twisted schemes. Desolate, she clings to the tender hope that Jimmy will return and renew with her their deepest hearts' dream...

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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. Join the conversation about the world of V.C. Andrews at [Facebook.com/OfficialVCAndrews](https://www.facebook.com/OfficialVCAndrews).

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PROLOGUE

As we descended through the billowing clouds, New York suddenly appeared below me. New York! The world's most exciting city, a city I had only read about and heard about and seen pictures of in magazines. I gazed through the window and held my breath. The tall skyscrapers seemed to go on forever and ever, past anything I could have imagined.

When the stewardess began telling us to fasten our seat belts and pull up the backs of our seats, and the no smoking sign was flashed, my heart began to thump so hard I thought the nice old lady beside me would hear it. She smiled at me as if she did.

I sat back and closed my eyes.

It had all happened so fast -- my discovering the truth about my abduction and confronting Grandmother Cutler with the lies, a confrontation that forced her to promise she would get Daddy Longchamp, the man I had mistakenly believed to be my father, paroled quickly. In exchange, I had to agree to go to the Bernhardt School for Performing Arts in New York, something Grandmother Cutler arranged so she wouldn't have to put up with a grandchild who she claimed wasn't really a Cutler. My mother confessed to having had an affair with a traveling singer, my real father, and then conveniently, she fell into one of her nervous states and retreated from any responsibility. Grandmother Cutler could do anything she wanted with me, just as she could do with anyone else at Cutler's Cove, including her son, my mother's husband Randolph.

What a horror life at the hotel had been after I had been returned to what was considered my real family. How would I ever forget Philip's forcing himself on me and Clara Sue's spite that eventually resulted in poor Jimmy's being carted off by the police after he had run away from a horrible foster home? Now I was caught between two worlds -- the ugly world back at the hotel where there was no one I could turn to or depend upon, and the frightening prospect of New York City where there was no one I knew.

Even though I was going to do what I had always dreamt of doing: train to be a singer, I was terrified of setting foot in a city so big. No wonder my breath was caught in my throat and my heart threatened to drum through my chest.

"Is someone coming to meet you at the airport, dear?" asked the old lady sitting next to me. She introduced herself as Miriam Levy.

"A taxi cab driver," I muttered and fumbled for the instructions I had been given and had placed in my purse. I must have looked at them twenty times during the flight, but still had to gaze at them again to confirm what was to happen. "He's going to be down by the luggage carousel and he's going to hold up a card with my name on it."

"Oh yes, many people have that done. You'll see," she said, patting me on the hand. I had told her that I was to live in an apartment house with other Bernhardt students. She said the location was in a very nice neighborhood on the East Side. When I asked her what she meant by the "East Side," she explained how the streets and avenues were divided into east and west and so I would have to know whether 15 Thirty-third Street, for example, was East or West Thirty-third. It seemed frighteningly complicated. I envisioned myself getting terribly lost and wandering forever through the long, wide avenues with thousands of people rushing by and not caring.

"You mustn't be afraid of New York," she said as she adjusted her hat. "It's big, but people are friendly once you get to know them. Especially in my neighborhood in Queens. I'm sure a nice girl like you will make friends quickly. And just think of all the wonderful things there are for you to see and do."

"I know," I said, putting my brochure about New York City back in my carry-on bag.

"What a lucky girl to be flying to New York to attend a famous school," she said. "I wasn't that much younger than you when my mother brought me over from Europe." She laughed. "We thought the streets were really paved with gold. Of course, it was a fairy tale."

She patted my hand again.

"Maybe for you, the streets will be paved in gold, for you fairy tales will come true. I hope so," she added, her eyes twinkling warmly.

"Thank you," I said, even though I no longer believed in fairy tales, especially fairy tales coming true for me.

I held my breath again as the plane's wheels were lowered and we approached the runway. There was a slight bump and we were rolling along. We had touched ground.

I was really here.

I was in New York.

Chapter 1: A New Adventure, a New Friend

We filed out of the plane slowly. When we entered the airport, Mrs. Levy spotted her son and daughter-in-law and waved at them. They came forward and hugged and kissed her. I stood back watching them for a moment, wishing that I had some family anxiously awaiting my arrival, too. How wonderful it must feel to arrive after a big trip and have people who love you waiting there to throw their arms around you and tell you how much they've missed you, I thought. Would I ever have that?

Once Mrs. Levy found her family, she forgot about me. I started after the crowd of passengers since we were all headed for the same place -- the luggage carousels. But I was like a little girl at a circus for the first time. I couldn't stop looking at everything and everyone. On the walls there were large, colorful posters advertising New York shows. The kind of musicals I had only dreamt about seeing were loudly announced all around

me. These stars and these shows, could they be only minutes away? Was I foolish to dream that someday I would be featured on one of these beautiful posters?

I continued down the corridor gazing up at the huge sign advertising a perfume by Elizabeth Arden. The women in all the advertisements looked like movie stars with their glamorous clothing and jewels and beautiful, radiant faces. As I spun around, I heard a voice over the public address system announcing arrivals and departures.

A family went by me speaking in a foreign language, the father complaining about something and the mother pulling her little wards by the hand as quickly as she could. Two sailors strolled past me and whistled and then laughed at my surprise. Farther down the corridor, I saw three teenage girls in a corner smoking cigarettes, none of them much older than I was, and all wearing sunglasses even though they were inside. They glared at me angrily when I stared, so I looked away quickly.

Never had I seen so many people in the same place at once. And so many rich people! The men in soft dark suits and polished black and brown leather shoes, the women in elegant silk dresses and coats, their diamonds glittering on their ears and necks as they clicked down the corridors in their high heels.

After a while I began to be afraid I'd gone in the wrong direction. I stopped and stared hard around me and realized that none of the other people from my plane were nearby. What if I got lost and the taxi driver who had come to fetch me left? Who would I call? Where would I go?

I thought I saw Mrs. Levy hurrying down the corridor. My heart jumped for joy and then plunged when I realized it was just another elderly lady wearing similar clothing. I wandered to my left until I spotted a tall policeman standing by a newspaper booth.

"Excuse me," I said. He peered down at me, over his open newspaper, his forehead creasing in tiny folds under his wavy brown hair.

"And what can I do for you, young lady?"

"I think I'm a little lost. I just got off the airplane and I'm supposed to go to the luggage carousel, but I started looking at posters and..."

A light sprang into his blue eyes.

"You're all by yourself?" he asked, folding his paper.

"Yes, sir."

"How old are you?" he asked, squinting with scrutiny.

"I'm almost sixteen and a half."

"Well, you're old enough to get about by yourself if you pay attention to directions. You're not very lost. Don't worry." He put his hand on my shoulder and turned me around and explained how to get to the luggage carousels.

After he finished, he waved his right forefinger at me.

"Now don't go looking at all the signs, you hear?"

"I won't," I said and hurried off, his light laughter trailing behind me.

By the time I got to the place where the baggage was the passengers were all squeezing and crowding around to get their bags. I found a small opening between a young soldier and an elderly man in a suit. Once the soldier saw me, he pushed to the right so I would have more room. He had dark brown eyes and a friendly smile. His shoulders looked so broad and firm under the snug uniform jacket. I saw the ribbons over his right breast pocket and couldn't help but stare.

"This one's for marksmanship," he pointed proudly.

I blushed. One thing Mrs. Levy had advised me on the plane was not to stare at people in New York and here I was doing it again and again.

"Where are you from?" the young soldier asked. Above his other breast pocket was his last name, WILSON.

"Virginia," I said "Cutler's Cove."

He nodded.

"I'm from Brooklyn. That's Brooooklyn, New York," he added, laughing. "The fifty-first state, and boy did I miss it."

"Brooklyn's a state?" I wondered aloud. He laughed.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Dawn."

"Dawn, I'm Private First Class, Johnny Wilson. My friends call me Butch because of my haircut," he said, wiping his right palm over his closely cut hair. "I wore it like this even before I joined the army." I smiled at him and then noticed one of my blue bags go by.

"Oh, my luggage!" I cried, reaching out in vain.

"Hold on," Private Wilson said. He slipped around some people to my left and scooped out my bag.

"Thank you," I said when he brought it back. "I have one more. I'd better keep my eyes on the luggage."

He reached over and lifted his duffle bag out from between two black trunks. Then I saw my second bag. Once again, he stabbed into the pile and got it for me.

"Thank you," I said.

"Where are you heading, Dawn? Any place in Brooklyn?" he asked hopefully.

"Oh no, I'm going to New York City," I said. He laughed again.

"Brooklyn's in New York City. Don't you know your address?"

"No. I'm being picked up," I explained. "By a taxi driver."

"Oh, I see. Here, let me carry one of your bags to the gate for you," he offered and before I could say anything, he lifted it and started away. At the gate there was another crowd of people with many holding up signs with names written on them, just as Mrs. Levy had predicted. I searched and searched, but I didn't see my name. A lump came to choke my throat. What if no one was here for me because they got my flight mixed up? Everyone else seemed to know where he or she was going. Was I the only one arriving in New York for the first time?

"There it is," Private Wilson said, pointing. I looked in the direction and saw a tall, dark-haired man who looked unshaven and tired and very bored standing with the card: DAWN CUTLER.

"With a name like Dawn, that could only be for you," Private Wilson remarked. He led me forward, "Here she is," he announced.

"Good," the taxi driver said. "I got my cab out front but there's an airport cop on my back. Let's get movin'," he said, hardly looking at me. He took both my suitcases and lunged forward.

"Thank you," I said to the soldier. He smiled.

"Have a good tour of duty, Dawn," he cried as I followed the lanky cab driver out of the airport. When I looked back, Private Wilson was gone, almost as if he had descended like some sort of protective angel to help me in a moment of need and then disappeared. For a few moments, I had felt secure, safe, even in this huge place with crowds and crowds of strangers. It was almost as if I had been with Jimmy again, with someone strong to look after me.

As soon as the taxi driver and I burst out of the airport, I had to shade my eyes to see where I was going. The sun was that bright. But I was glad it was a warm, summer day. It made me feel hopeful, welcome. The taxi driver showed me to the cab, put my suitcases in the trunk, and opened the rear door.

"Hop in," he said. A policeman was approaching rapidly, his face glum. "Yeah, yeah, I'm goin'," the taxi driver cried and moved around the car quickly to get behind the wheel.

"They don't let you make a livin' here," he explained as he pulled away from the curb. "They're on your back, day and night." He drove so fast I had to hold onto the handle above the window, and then he came to a quick stop behind a line of cars. A moment later, he shot out of the line, found a space, and wove our cab in and out with an expertise that made me gasp. We nearly collided a number of times, but soon we were on open highway.

"First time in New York?" he asked without turning around to look at me.

"Yes."

"Well I have heartburn every day, but I wouldn't live anywhere else. Know what I mean?"

I didn't know if he was waiting for a reply or not.

"Just live and let live and you'll be all right," he advised. "I'll tell you what I tell my own daughter -- when you walk in the streets, keep your eyes straight ahead and don't listen to nobody. Know what I mean?" he asked again.

"Yes, sir."

"Aaa, you'll be all right. You look like a smart cookie and you're going to a nice neighborhood. When someone mugs you there, they're polite about it," he said. "They say, 'Excuse me, but do you have ten dollars?'"

He gazed into the rearview mirror and saw my look of shock.

"Just kiddin'," he added, laughing.

He turned on his radio and I gazed out at the approaching skyscrapers, the traffic, and the hustle and bustle. I wanted to save and savor all of this ride, my entrance into New York, and ponder the memories later. It did seem overwhelming. What did Grandmother Cutler really hope would happen to me when she arranged for me to come here? I wondered. Did she think I would panic and beg her to let me return? Or did she hope I would run off and she would never have to lay her watchful, suspicious eyes on me again? I felt something tighten in my heart. I wasn't going to turn and run away, I told myself. I would be determined and strong and show her I was just as strong as she was, even stronger.

We went over a bridge and into the heart of the city. I couldn't stop looking up. The buildings were so tall and so many people were on the streets, going in and out of them. Car horns blared, other cab drivers shouted at each other and at other drivers. People rushed across streets as if they thought drivers were deliberately aiming for them.

And the stores! All the stores in the world were here, famous ones I had read about and heard about like Saks Fifth Avenue and Macy's.

"You're going to give yourself a neck ache, you keep doin' that," the cab driver said. I felt myself redden. I hadn't realized he was watching me. "Know when you're a New Yorker?" he asked, gazing at me through the rearview mirror. I shook my head. "When you don't look both ways crossing a oneway street." He laughed at what I imagined was a joke, but I didn't understand it. I guess I had a long way to go before I would be a New Yorker.

Soon we were going up very nice streets where the people seemed to be dressed better and the sidewalks were a lot cleaner. The fronts of the buildings looked newer and better cared for, too. Finally, we stopped in front of a brownstone house with a cement stairway and a black iron railing. The double doors were tall and looked like they were made of fine dark oak wood.

We pulled to a stop and the cab driver got out and put both of my bags on the sidewalk. I stepped out of the car and gazed about slowly. This was to be my new home for a long time now, I thought. Overhead I saw two airplanes climbing into the deep blue sky speckled with small, fluffy clouds. Across from us was a small park and beyond that, just visible between some trees was water, that I guessed was the East River. I couldn't stop looking at everything and, for a moment, forgot the taxi driver was still standing beside me.

"The fare's taken care of," he declared, "but not the tip."

"Tip?"

"Sure, honey. You always tip a New York cabby. Don't forget that. You can forget anything else."

"Oh." Embarrassed, I opened my purse and fumbled through the change. How much was I supposed to give him?

"A buck will be enough," he said.

I plucked one out and handed it to him.

"Thanks. Good luck," he said. "I gotta get back to the grind," he added and hurried around the cab just as quickly as he had at the airport. In moments, he drove off, his horn groaning as he cut in front of another car and spun around a corner.

I turned and looked up the small cement stairway. Suddenly it looked so high and forbidding. I took hold of the handles of my luggage and began my slow ascent. When I reached the landing, I put the bags down and pushed the buzzer. I wondered if it worked or anyone heard it inside because nothing happened. After a long moment, I pushed the buzzer again. Seconds later, the doors were pulled open dramatically by a tall, stately looking woman. I thought she was at least in her late fifties. She stood straight with her shoulders back like the women in the textbook pictures demonstrating perfect posture, the ones who parade about with a book balanced on their heads, and her brown hair had streaks of gray throughout it.

She wore an ankle-length, navy blue skirt, and pink ballerina slippers. Her ivory blouse had billowing sleeves and a wide collar with the two top buttons undone so her necklace filled with large, colorful stones was clearly visible. She wore a heavy-looking earring with smaller versions of the same imitation or precious stones on her left earlobe, but none on her right. I wondered if she knew one was missing.

Her face was heavily made up, her cheeks streaked with rouge as if she had put it on in the dark. She wore dark eye liner and had such long eyelashes, I knew they just had to be false. Her lipstick was a bright crimson.

She stared at me, drinking me in from head to toe. Then she nodded to herself as if to confirm a thought.

"I suppose you're Dawn," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied.

"I am Agnes, Agnes Morris," she declared.

I nodded. That was the name on my instruction sheet, but she looked like she expected a bigger reaction from me.

"Well, pick up your luggage and come on in," she said. "We have no servants for that sort of thing here. This isn't a hotel."

"Yes, ma'am," I repeated. She stood back to let me pass, and as I did so, I got a whiff of her strong, almost overpowering cologne. It smelled like a combination of jasmine and roses, as if she had sprayed one scent on, forgot, and then sprayed another.

I paused in the entryway. It had a cherry wood floor and a long, rather worn looking oval rug. The Oriental pattern was almost faded. As soon as we stepped in and I had closed the second set of doors behind me, a grandfather clock on my right chimed.

"Mr. Fairbanks is introducing himself," she said, turning to the tall clock encased in a rich mahogany wood. It had Roman numerals for numbers and thick, black hands with ends that looked more like tiny fingers pointing to the hour.

"Mr. Fairbanks?" I asked, confused.

"The grandfather clock," she said as if I should have known. "I have given most of my possessions names, the names of famous actors with whom I once worked. It makes the house more...more..." She looked about as if the words were somewhere in the air to be plucked. "More personal. Why?" she asked quickly, "do you disapprove?" Her eyes grew small and she pulled her lips so tight the corners became white.

"Oh, no," I replied.

"I hate people who disapprove of something just because they didn't think of it first." She ran the palm of her hand up the side of the grandfather clock cabinet and smiled as if it were indeed a person standing there. "Oh Romeo, Romeo," she whispered. I shifted my feet. The suitcases were heavy and I was standing with them in my hands. It was as if she had forgotten I was there.

"Ma'am?" I said. She snapped her head around and glared at me as if to say "Who was I to interrupt?"

"Continue," she said, waving toward the hallway.

Directly ahead of us was a stairway with a thick, hand-carved brown balustrade. The gray carpet on the steps looked as worn as the entryway carpet. The walls were covered with old pictures of actors and actresses, singers and dancers, framed clippings of theater reviews and pictures of performers with accompanying articles. The house itself had a pleasant musty scent to it. It looked clean and neat and a great deal nicer than most of the places Daddy and Momma Longchamp had taken Jimmy and me and Fern to live in. But that seemed ages and ages ago now, as though it all happened in another life.

Agnes stopped at the entrance to a room on our right.

"This is our sitting room," she said, "where we entertain our guests. Go in and sit down," she directed. "We'll have our first talk immediately so there are no misunderstandings." She paused and pursed her lips. "I suppose you're hungry."

"Yes," I said. "I came right from the airport and I didn't have anything on the plane."

"It's past the lunch hour and I don't like Mrs. Liddy having to work around the students' whims, eating and not eating when they feel like it. She's nobody's slave," she added.

"I'm sorry. I really don't mean to put anyone out." I didn't know what to say. She had been the one to suggest eating and now she was making me feel terrible for confessing I was hungry.

"Go on in," she commanded.

"Thank you," I said and turned to enter. She seized my shoulder and stopped me.

"No, no. Always hold your head high, like this, when you enter a room," she said, demonstrating. "That way everyone will notice you and sense your stage presence. You might as well learn the correct things right away," she said and sauntered off down the corridor.

As soon as she was gone, I turned back to the room. The sunlight through the pale ivory sheers was misted and frail and gave the sitting room a dreamlike quality. The chintz sofa and matching side chair with its high back and cushioned arms were both worn and comfortable looking. On the coffee table were copies of theater magazines and an old rocking chair sat across from the sofa.

In the corner to my right, next to a beautiful desk, was a table of dark oak with an old-fashioned record player just like the one in the RCA logo, and a pile of old records beside it. The top record was the aria from the opera *Madam Butterfly*. Over the fireplace mantel was a painting of a stage play. It looked like the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

On the other side of the room was a piano. I looked at the sheet music opened on it and saw it was a Mozart concerto, something I had played in Richmond. I felt like sitting down and playing it now. The tips of my fingers tingled in expectation. It was as if I had never been away from it.

Behind the piano were shelves filled with copies of plays and old novels and a glass case full of things from plays: old programs, pictures of actors and actresses, props, including a colorful mask like the kind worn at fancy costume balls, some glass figurines and a pair of castanets with a note under it that read, "Given to me by Rudolph Valentino."

My gaze fell on a silver framed photograph of what had to be a very young Agnes Morris. I took it into my hands to look at it more closely. Without the heavy makeup, she looked fresh and pretty.

"You shouldn't touch things without permission." I jumped at the sound of Agnes's voice and pivoted to see she was standing in the doorway, her hands pressed to her chest.

"I'm sorry, I was just..."

"Although I want the students to feel at home here, they must respect my possessions."

"I'm sorry," I said again. I put the picture back quickly.

"I have a number of valuable artifacts, things that you can't replace no matter how much money you have because they are associated with memories, and memories are more precious than diamonds or gold." She came farther into the room and gazed at the picture.

"It's a very nice picture," I said. Her face softened some.

"Whenever I look at that picture now, I think I'm looking at a complete stranger. That was taken the first time I appeared on a stage."

"Really? You look so young," I said.

"I wasn't much older than you." She tilted her head and swung her eyes so she gazed toward the brass light

fixture on the ceiling. "I had met and worked with the great Stanislavsky. I played Ophelia in *Hamlet* and got rave reviews."

She peered at me to see if I were impressed, but I had never heard of Stanislavsky.

"Sit down," she said sharply. "Mrs. Liddy will be in shortly with your tea and sandwiches, although you mustn't expect to be waited on hand and foot after this."

I sat on the sofa and she sat in the rocker across from it.

"I know a little about you," she said, nodding, her eyes small and her lips tucked tightly together. Suddenly, she reached under the waist of her skirt to produce a letter. What an odd place to keep it, I thought. She held up the envelope as if to show me she possessed some valuable secret thing. The instant I saw the Cutler Cove Hotel stationery, my heart began to flutter.

She took the letter out of the envelope. From the way it was folded and creased, it looked like she had been reading it every hour on the hour since it had arrived. "This is a letter from your grandmother. A letter to introduce you," she added.

"Oh?"

"Yes." She raised her eyebrows and leaned forward to peer right into my face. "She has told me about some of your problems."

"My problems?" Had Grandmother Cutler put my dreadful story in writing? Why? Did she hope to make me seem freakish and curious even before I had begun here? If she had, it was only to make sure I failed to follow my dream.

"Yes," Agnes said, nodding and sitting back in the rocker. She fanned herself with the letter. "Your problems at school. How they had to transfer you from school to school because of the difficulties you had getting along with other students your age."

"She told you that?"

"Yes, and I'm glad she did," Agnes replied quickly.

"But, I didn't have any trouble at school. I've always been a good student and..."

"There's no point in denying anything. It's all here in black and white," she said, tapping the letter. "Your grandmother is a very important and distinguished woman. It must have broken her heart to have had to write these things." She sat back. "You've been quite a burden to your family, especially to your grandmother."

"That's not so," I protested.

"Please." When she raised her hand, I saw that her fingers were turned and twisted with arthritis and her hand looked more like the hand of a witch. "Nothing matters now but your next performance."
par

"Performance?"

"How you behave here while you are under my wing," she explained.

"What else did my grandmother write?"

"That's confidential," she said as she folded the letter. She stuffed it back into the envelope and returned it to where she kept it under her skirt.

"But it's information about me!" I protested.

"That's not the point. Don't be argumentative," she said before I could respond any further. "Now then," she concluded, "since you do have this unfortunate past history, I'm afraid I'm going to have to consider you under probation."

"Under probation? But I've just arrived and I haven't done anything wrong."

"Nevertheless, it's a precaution I must take. You must not violate a single rule," she warned me, shaking her long forefinger. "No one stays out later than ten p.m. on weekdays and no later than midnight on weekends, and only when I know where he or she is going."

"Excessive noise is not permitted ever. And no one is ever to be messy or in any way damage or vandalize my home. You understand that while you are here, you are a guest in my house, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said softly. "But since the letter from my grandmother was about me, can't you tell me what else she said?"

Before she could reply, a plump, round-faced woman with blue-gray hair and friendly eyes, who stood no more than five feet tall, arrived carrying a tray with a sandwich and a cup of tea. She had roller-pin arms and small hands with pudgy fingers and she wore a light blue dress with a yellow flowered apron over it. I felt warmth and friendliness in her smile immediately.

"So this is our new Sarah Bernhardt, is it?" she asked.

"Yes, Mrs. Liddy. Our new prima donna," Agnes said and twisted her mouth up into her cheek. "Dawn, this is Mrs. Liddy. She's the one who really runs the house. You are to listen to her the same as you would listen to me. I will not tolerate anyone being nasty to Mrs. Liddy," she emphasized.

"Oh, I don't think this one will be anything but nice, Mrs. Morris. Hello, m'dear." She put the tray on the coffee table and stood back with her hands on her hips. "And welcome."

"Thank you."

"Pretty one," Mrs. Liddy said to Agnes.

"Yes, but the pretty ones are often the ones who get into the most difficulty," Agnes snapped.

With both of them staring at me, I felt as if I were encased in glass just like the theater artifacts.

"Well, m'dear," Mrs. Liddy said, "I'm in the kitchen most of the morning. If there's anything you need, you can come see me there. We like everyone to have his or her bed turned down by ten at the latest on weekends

and once a week we do a thorough sweep of the house. Everyone helps."

"Yes," Agnes said, cutting her eyes toward me. "We all work here. The girls tie their hair up, slap on the oldest blouse and skirt, and roll up their sleeves, just like the boys. Windows are washed, bathrooms scrubbed down. I compare it to breaking down a set," she added. "I imagine you know what that means, don't you?"

I shook my head.

Agnes's eyes widened as though she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"When a play has finished its run, the actors and the crew tear down the scenery so the next play can begin."

pard

At that point Mrs. Liddy smiled at me and left.

"Have you ever had piano lessons?" Agnes asked.

"A little," I said.

"Good. You will play for us during our artistic gatherings. I try to bring everyone together once a month for recitals. Some of the students recite lines from plays; some sing, some play instruments.

"But, that will be later on when the school year begins. I don't have many students here during the summer session. Actually, there are only two at present. But in the fall, we'll pick up three more. The Beldock twins are returning, and one, Donald Rossi, is brand new, just like you.

"Trisha Kramer has agreed to share her room with you. If you can't get along with Trisha, I will have to move you into the attic or ask you to leave. She's a delightful young lady and a promising young dancer. It would be dreadful if anything happened to make her unhappy here. Do I make myself clear on that score?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am." I could only wonder what lies Agnes had passed on to my prospective roommate.

"And I especially don't want you disturbing the other student who is here," she warned. "His name is Arthur Garwood." She sighed and shook her head. "He's a sensitive young man studying the oboe. His parents are quite famous: Bernard and Louella Garwood. They play in the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

"Well, I see you enjoyed your little snack. I will show you the rest of the house and take you to your room."

"Thank you." I stood up. "Should I take this tray back into the kitchen?"

"Absolutely. According to your grandmother, you are quite used to being waited on, but I'm afraid..."

"That's not true!" I exclaimed. "I've never been waited on."

Her eyes grew small and, watchful and for a long moment she stared at me.

"Follow me to the kitchen. We'll come back for your suitcases after I've shown you the rest of the house."

I followed Agnes out and down the hallway. The kitchen and the dining room were at the far end. The kitchen was small with a kitchenette table and chairs in the center and a window that looked out on another building, which meant there would be no sunlight here in the morning. Even so, Mrs. Liddy had everything looking so spick and span: the light yellow linoleum shining, the appliances glittering clean, that the room sparkled.

The dining room was long and narrow with a big chandelier of teardrop glass. The table could easily seat a dozen or so people. Right now it had a crystal centerpiece with a vase of flowers beside it and four place mats set at the far end, which I quickly imagined was there for myself, the other two students and Agnes Morris.

"Trisha set the table this morning," Agnes explained. "Each of the students takes his or her turn for a week setting the table and clearing the dishes. And no one complains," she added pointedly.

There were no windows in the dining room, but the right wall was covered with a long floor-to-ceiling mirror, which made the room look even longer and wider. The opposite wall was peppered with pictures of dancers and singers, musicians and actors. From the way some of the pictures had faded into sepia, I knew they were quite old. The floor was carpeted in dark brown and the carpet looked far newer than the rug in the entryway.

Agnes led me through the dining room to a short corridor. She explained that her room was here and Mrs. Liddy's room was at the far end. She paused at her door and her eyes seemed to soften a bit.

"If you ever need to talk, just knock softly on my door anytime," she said. I was surprised, but happy she had finally said something nice to me.

"It's one of the reasons why my house is so popular with the out of town students. , having been in the theater, can appreciate the problems performing arts students face. I understand and I can empathize." Sometimes, when she spoke to me, she made her gestures so big, it was as if we were both on a stage before an audience and our conversation was dialogue written for a play.

"Knock like this," she said and tapped gently on her own door. "Then wait. I'll say, enter. You turn the handle slowly and open the door gradually, an inch or so at a time," she said in a loud whisper and demonstrated. "I hate it when doors are thrust open."

I stared at her, fascinated by her every move, the soft way she spoke. I had never had anyone take such care showing me how to enter a room. Then my eyes swung from her to the doorway and I saw the curtain. It was in two sections, draped from the ceiling to the floor about five feet or so inside the door. Anyone who came into the room would have to separate the curtains and walk through, just like he or she would separate a curtain to enter a stage. Before I could ask about it, she closed the door softly and turned to me.

"Do you understand everything I've told you?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Let me show you your room."

We returned to the sitting room to pick up my luggage and then proceeded up the stairway to the second floor, which contained four bedrooms. There were two bathrooms on this floor, one on each side.

"Now," Agnes said, pausing in front of the bathroom on the left, "although everyone could use either one in an emergency, I like to keep this one reserved for males and the other one for females. We mustn't abuse our bathrooms," she emphasized. "We must always keep the others in mind and not be selfish and take up too much time doting on ourselves.

"As long as I've had students here," she said softly, "I haven't had any problems having both boys and girls. That's because we all use discretion," she said. "We don't spend inordinate time alone with a member of the opposite sex and never close the door when we are alone. Am I quite understood in this?" she asked.

"I'm afraid you have been misinformed about me," I said and felt the tears burning under my eyelids.

"Please, my dear Dawn. Let's not bring a single note of unpleasantness into this opening scene. Let it all go like clockwork -- all of us in tune with each other, all of us taking cues from each other. I just know we'll have curtain call after curtain call after curtain call. Don't you?" she said, smiling at me.

I didn't know what to say. Curtain calls for what? Using the bathrooms fairly? Not getting into trouble with boys? What cues did she mean? All I could do was nod.

She opened the door and stepped into the bedroom.

"It might not be as large and elaborate as what you've been accustomed to, but I am rather proud of my accommodations," she said.

I didn't reply. I could see it would do no good to defend myself right now. Her impression of me had already been poisoned by Grandmother Cutler.

The room was sweet. There were two white post beds with headboards and a night stand between them. The night stand had a lamp with a bell-shaped shade on it. The floor wasn't carpeted, but there was a rather large pink throw rug between the two beds. The bedding matched the pink in the rug. Each of the two small windows on the right above the two student desks were covered with white cotton curtains that had lace edging. There were shades on the windows, both drawn up at present to permit whatever sunlight squeezed in between this building and the one beside it. There were two dressers, and a large closet with a sliding door.

Agnes told me the bed on the right and the accompanying dresser were mine. Trisha had a picture of an attractive couple who I guessed were her parents on her dresser and a picture of a handsome boy who could be her brother or her boyfriend beside it. On her desk were textbooks and notebooks neatly piled beside each other.

"Well, I'll leave you to get yourself settled in," Agnes said. "Trisha should be coming home from school in an hour or so. Remember, you are a guest in my home," she said and started out. At the door she spun around and added, "Act One," and left.

I put my suitcases down and gazed around the room again. This was to be my new home for a long time. It was cozy and warm, but I was sharing it with another girl and that was something that both frightened and excited me, especially after the warnings Agnes had given me. What if we didn't get along? What if we were

so different that we ended up hardly speaking to each other? What would happen to my dream of becoming a singer?

I began to unpack, hanging up my clothes and putting my underthings and my socks into the dresser drawers. I had just placed my suitcases at the rear of the closet when the door was suddenly opened and Trisha Kramer burst into our room. She was an inch or so taller than I was and wore her dark brown hair drawn back from her face and pinned up in a chignon that I thought very sophisticated. Over black leotards she wore a floating chiffon black dress, and on her feet were silver dancing shoes.

Trisha had the brightest green eyes I had ever seen with eyebrows trimmed just the way fashion models wear theirs. Although she had a perfect little nose, her mouth was a little too thin and too long. But her soft, wonderful peaches and cream complexion and sleek figure went far to compensate for any imperfections.

"Hi," she exclaimed. "I'm Trisha. Sorry I wasn't here to greet you, but I had dance class," she added and did a pirouette. My smile widened into a laugh. "That, I want you to know, took me nearly a month to perfect."

"It was good," I said, quickly nodding. She bowed.

"Thank you, thank you. Don't do another thing," she said before I could utter a word or move. "Just sit down and tell me everything about yourself. I've been starved...starved!" she emphasized with big eyes, "for female companionship. The only other person living here now is Bones and you've already met Agnes," she said, swinging her eyes toward the door and back.

"Bones?"

"Arthur Garwood. But let's not talk about him just yet. Come," she said, taking my hand and pulling me to sit on my bed. "Talk, talk, talk. Where did you go to school before? How many boyfriends have you had? Do you have one now? Do your parents really own a famous resort in Virginia?"

I just sat there smiling.

"Maybe tomorrow we'll go to see a movie. Would you like that?" she asked, grimacing in anticipation of a yes.

"I've never been to a movie," I confessed.

"What?" She sat back and stared at me, her smile frozen. Then she leaned forward.

"Don't they have electricity in Virginia?" she asked. For a moment we stared at each other, and then I started to cry.

Perhaps it was all of it finally coming to a climax: discovering the parents I had known and loved for more than fourteen years were not really my parents, being dragged off to live with a family that didn't really want me back, discovering that the boy I thought might be my first boyfriend was really my brother and the boy I thought was my brother was the boy I really liked the way a girl should like a boy; having to have a vicious, jealous sister, Clara Sue, and a mother who doted only on herself. And now, being shipped off as part of a bargain with a grandmother who despised my very existence for reasons I still didn't quite understand -- all of it came raining down upon me.

As I looked at Trisha with her vibrant eyes and bubbly personality, her excitement over things like rock and roll and boys and movies, I suddenly realized how different I was. I had never really had the chance to be a young girl and a teenager. I had been forced because of Momma Longchamp's illnesses to be the mother. How I had longed to be like Trisha Kramer and others like her. Could I be? Was it too late?

I couldn't stop the tears from flowing.

"What is it?" Trisha asked. "Did I say something?"

"Oh, Trisha, I'm sorry," I said. "No, you're perfect. Agnes had me thinking you'd be horrible."

"Oh Agnes," she said, waving the air, "you can't pay attention to anything she says. Did she show you her room?"

"Yes," I said, nodding and wiping away my tears, "with the curtain."

"Isn't it a gas? She thinks she lives on the stage. Wait until you see the rest of it. Did you get your class program card yet?"

"Yes." I dug it out of my purse and showed it to her.

"Great! We have English together and vocal music. I'll take you over to the school now and give you a grand tour. But first, let's change into sweatshirts and jeans and sneakers, and go get ice cream sodas and talk and talk and talk until both our throats get dry."

"My mother bought me only fancy things for school. I don't have a sweatshirt," I moaned.

"Oh yes you do," she said, jumping up and going to the closet. She pulled out one of her own, a bright, blue cotton one, and tossed it at me.

I hurried to change as Trisha and I talked a mile a minute, giggling almost after everything we said. When we finally started out, Trisha stopped me at the door.

"Please, my dear," she said, assuming Agnes Morris's demeanor. "Whenever you enter or leave a room, always hold your head high and your shoulders back. Otherwise, you won't be noticed."

Our laughter trailed after us as we bounced down the stairs.

I wasn't in New York more than a few hours.

And already I had a friend!

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Users Review

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