



Dark Seed (DeBeers 0.50)

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Category: Young Adult, Horror, Fiction

Description: Dark Seed, reveals the disturbing early days of Willow DeBeers, the "dark seed" of the DeBeers family. This prequel to Willow, the highly anticipated first novel chronicling the DeBeers family, hints at the dark shadows that can haunt forever. Find out what secrets lie behind the beginning of the tragic and flawed DeBeers family. Revealed as only V.C. Andrews can.

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Early Days

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The flash of light above me on my ceiling and

the boom that followed snapped my eyes open. The sound of my own scream was so shrill, it seemed to be coming from outside me. It made me shrink and close up inside myself until I was like someone cowering deep down in the protective world of a bomb shelter, waiting for the explosions above to end.

For as long as I could remember. I believed the thunder and lightning that crashed and sizzled in the dark South Carolina summer skies could come right into our house. I imagined that terrible fear began the first time I was woken as an infant, shaken out of sleep by a loud clap and a flash of light on the ceiling of my nursery. I screamed then, just as I was screaming and crying now, even though I was already ten years old. Because my nanny Amou slept downstairs, tucked away in a small room as far from my mother as possible in our estate home, she did not hear my wails of fright.

But then again, she didn't have to hear them to know they were coming. No one in my life would ever be as sensitive to and aware of my feelings as Amou was. The moment she heard the thunderstorm begin, she knew I would be afraid, and she began to make her way quickly through the kitchen, down the corridor, and up the stairs to comfort me, but also to make sure I did not disturb my mother-- which was unlikely, since she slept with earplugs.

My mother slept with earplugs because she claimed my father snored loudly enough to wake the dead. She was very protective of her sleep, asserting it was essential not only for good health, but for healthy skin. So she did not hear my cries very often, but even if she had, she would not have come to comfort me, and she would have certainly complained if my father had risen, put on his robe and slippers, and come to my bedside. Although he could tiptoe and move with great care, he could or would disturb her, and that would bring on another and perhaps more horrifying crash of thunder and flash of lightning in our home,

"Isabella will take care of her," she would tell him if he dared stir. "That's why we hired the woman. I am not one of those wives who cleans her home before the maid arrives. What is the point of having servants if you don't let them serve, especially a nanny, to take away the burden of raising a child, especially this child?"

I often heard her discussing me with my father, not that she cared if I did or didn't hear. She certainly spoke loudly enough, her voice barely muffled by the walls between rooms. In fact, I never heard her whisper in our home. The only time she actually lowered her voice was when she was speaking to me and wanted to impress me with something.

"It's not natural for a girl that age still to be afraid of such things," she declared after she heard me crying once. "I'm not the psychiatrist. Claude. You are, and the irony here is that you can't see she's not normal."

My mother made that statement so often that it became the mantra in our home. I could hear it echoing through the house, whispered in the shadows: "She's not normal. She's not normal."

I couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't so, especially after I was force-fed the truth.

"Everyone has fears. Alberta." my father explained to her patiently. There was no

one I knew who spoke and conducted himself with as much control. His anger was kept hidden under blankets and blankets of psychological techniques. However, my mother even complained about that.

"I feel like I'm living with a Jehovah's Witness. You slam the door in his face and all he says is 'Have a nice day.'"

Nevertheless, no matter how calmly and reasonably he responded to her complaints, she insisted she was right about me.

"Everyone does NOT have fears like this child," she asserted. and waved off any argument or logic he might offer. Sympathy for me was simply not in the cache of emotions she carried in her cold heart. I had no idea why, but I did blame myself and tried as hard as I could to do things that would please her. I never seemed to be successful.

There was no more comforting sight to me anyway than Amou standing in my bedroom doorway.

"Hush. hush. Amou Una," she urged when she came to my bedside during the thunderstorm. Amou was a forty-three-year-old Portuguese woman my parents had hired right after I had been born, Amou Una was a Portuguese expression for loved one." which was her tender way of addressing me. I had picked up on it when I was little more than one and renamed her Amou, even though her real name was Isabella. The affectionate names we had for each other were part of the bond between us. a bond that seemed impassible between me and my mother.

Amou was tall, with hair so vibrantly red, cardinals eyed her jealously. I knew my mother was envious, even though she had beautiful light blond hair herself. She kept her hair short because it required less maintenance, but she had dozens of expensive wigs in a variety of styles.

Still, she was aware of how Amou's hair drew attention. She was always after Amou to cut it, and insisted she keep it tied back tightly. If a strand of it was found anywhere in our house, my mother would hold it between her thumb and forefinger and raze as though rat droppings had been discovered.

I can't recall a time when my mother was nice to Amou. If it wasn't for my father, Amou wouldn't have remained with us long. I'm sure. It couldn't have been because my mother was jealous of how much I cared for Amou and how much she cared for me. My mother insisted Amou remain with us long after I required such attention and care. The only other servant we had was a groundskeeper and driver my father hired. His name was Miles. I didn't think my mother was very fond of him, either, but she had little to do with him.

Amou was a different story. My mother, herself, did become somewhat dependent upon her, over time. Amou, after all, was our cook as well as my nanny, and although we had a separate cleaning woman twice a week. Amou did also look after my mother's things, ironed her clothes, brushed out her wigs, and performed a multitude of small favors. She never argued with my mother or in any way showed any defiance, but her compliance and her willingness to accept the verbal abuse without agreeing or disagreeing only infuriated my mother more. Gradually, as I grew older and more perceptive, I began to understand how Amou undermined and defeated my mother time and time again in her own subtle way.

Amou sat on my bed and held my hand.

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"What did I tell you. Willow? I told you to close your eyes and wish away the dreads. It was what my mother taught me. Just think of something nice, something pretty, and push the ugly dreads away," she said.

The scent of her lilac cologne filled my nostrils and soothed my troubled brain. I could feel my body relax, the fear drain out of me. The lightning flashed around us: the thunder clapped, and

then, its tail between its legs like some defeated big bad wolf, the storm gradually began to slink away toward some rendezvous with another small frightened child.

Amou remained with me until I closed my eyes again and drifted off. feeling my hand still held softly in hers, hearing her hum one of her Portuguese songs. In the morning all of it seemed like a bad dream, just another in a series of so many floating through our big house, settling in the walls, making each and every room just a little darker.

There was so much darkness in our home that I yearned for brightness and light. I cherished the sound of laughter. and especially held dear any glimmer of joy and pleasure I caught in my father's face when he spoke or gazed at me.

Our house had no reason to be dark. The formal sitting room, the den. the Doctor's office-- as my mother insisted I refer to my father-- had two large windows right behind his desk, and all of the bedrooms. even Amou's closet of a room, had nicesized windows. Everywhere there were beautiful views of rolling fields and trees. We had one hundred and fifty acres, and

there were wooded paths, two rather large ponds, and a stream that twisted itself over

rocks and hills to empty into a larger stream that fed into the Congaree River,

My father and his sister. my aunt Agnes, had inherited the land and the house, but my aunt lived in Charleston and had no interest in the property, so my father paid her for her share. My mother never stopped criticizing him for paying too much. She was not fond of Aunt Agnes, and it was no secret that Aunt Agnes was not fond of her. I could count on the fingers of one hand how often she and her husband and their daughter-- my cousin. Margaret Selby-- visited our house.

"Your sister simply cannot stand how beautiful I have made this family relic." Mother would tell my father.

The formal rooms, including the dining room, had golden-brown satin curtains with elaborate piping when I was a little girl, but all that, including most of the rooms, had been decorated and redecorated richly three times between my birth and my mother's tragic death in a terrible car accident. She was never satisfied with anything she had done in the house, and went through decorators almost as frequently as she went through brands of makeup. No matter what she did, what she bought, whose advice she cherished at the moment, she would see something someone else had and immediately become critical of her own things. The grass was always greener in someone else's yard.

If the Doctor questioned her sudden

dissatisfaction with furniture and drapes and rugs she had relatively recently bought, she would cry and rage at how he was so wrapped up in his work, he had no idea what was in style and what wasn't.

As soon as I was old enough to understand what their arguments were about, if anyone could call them arguments that is, I realized that my father's work and career were a constant source of irritation for my mother. I hesitate to call them arguments,

because. like Amou, he put up so little resistance, barely offering any sort of defense or opposition.

"You're not married to me!" my mother would scream at him. "You're married to that precious clinic of yours, that house of madness you have created. You spend so much time there I should sue you for adultery. How we that look? The perfect

psychiatrist, the man who could cure everyone else's messed-up life, can't cure his own?"

For some reason, a reason I wouldn't

understand for years and years to come, that particular threat was the only thing that actually dabbed a spot of fear in each of my father's eyes. She wielded it over him like a club, and any resistance, any objection he voiced about something she wanted to buy or spend money on in the house was immediately pulled back and buried under his nod of surrender, his whole body sinking in his chair like the flag of a defeated army.

I didn't know very much about the relationships between men and women yet, and sometimes I wonder if I ever will, but I did believe that, because my mother was so beautiful, my father loved her too deeply and completely to do anything that would displease her too much or too long. He was the most brilliant man I knew, and I knew even when I was only eight that he was a very famous and highly respected man in his field of psychology. There were piles of magazines with his articles in them, and his picture in many. Because the clinic he had created was becoming world-famous, he had been on television often as a guest on talk shows, and was constantly called upon to offer an opinion or a theory about one thing or another, especially in court trials.

I suppose that was why I didn't think it strange that she insisted I refer to him always

as the Doctor when I was speaking about him.

"Don't say my father or my daddy. Say the Doctor," she instructed. After a while, with her watching over my shoulder whenever I spoke. I had trouble thinking of him as anything else but the Doctor.

Despite my age. I sensed that my mother wasn't making me refer to him as the Doctor because she had so much admiration for him. There had to be some other reason. My mother always referred to the Doctor's clinic as either a madhouse or a nuthouse. and I don't know how many times I heard her say what he was doing over there was just high-priced voodoo.

When I was little, he would simply tell me he was going to his hospital. For a long time I thought of it as a place where people went when they had accidents or bad colds, and then one day. when I was little more than seven. I went by his office door and saw him sitting alone, staring out his window, He looked very sad. so I paused and went in to see why.

He didn't hear me for a while, and I was positive I saw him wipe his eyes, just like someone who was crying would,

"What's the matter?" I asked, and he spun around. I thought at first that he was going to be angry I had snuck into his office and watched him, but after a moment, he smiled more warmly than I could ever remember,

"Come here." he beckoned. and I walked around his desk. "Why did you ask me what was the matter?" he wanted to know.

I stood there, gazing down at the floor.

"I thought you were crying," I finally said.

"Well. Willow, you were right. I was crying." he revealed.

I couldn't imagine the Doctor crying. Nothing my mother said, no matter how angrily she said it, made him cry. The most dramatic thing I had ever seen him do in response was shake his head with a little expression of disgust on his lips and then walk away.

"Why were you crying?"

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"Sometimes. I think about my poor patients and I feel so sorry for them. I can't help it." he told me.

'Because they hurt themselves and they were bleeding?"

"No," he said. "My hospital is different. Willow. My patients are very unhappy or sad people. Sometimes they hurt themselves deliberately and they are taken to the sort of hospital you are thinking of, but after that, they are brought to see me, to see if I can help them feel better about themselves." "How do you do that?" He smiled.

"It's hard. but I talk to them a lot.. I give them medicines that help and they do things that make them feel better about themselves. They work an art projects or handicrafts, just like you do at school. In fact." he said, brightening even more. "I have something here that I was told to give you a long time ago. but I kept it safe until I thought you were ready for it, old enough far it," he said. 'I think you might be old enough now."

"What's that?" I asked. intrigued.

"Just a minute." he said, and went to his office closet, where he took down a box and uncovered it. For a moment he just looked at what was inside as if he was afraid to touch it. Then he lifted it out and showed it to me.

It was a doll, stuffed and sewn with a variety of colorful cloth patches, a real mishmash. Even though the doll's face was made of material similar to my other dolls, it wasn't like any doll I had or any doll I had ever seen in a toy or department store, but it was still very nice.

"It was made especially for you by a very special patient of mine," he told me. "Will you take very good care of it?"

I nodded.

"Okay. Here it is. then. Keep it in a special place in your room."

I took it gingerly into my hands and studied the face. It reminded me of someone. I thought. but I couldn't think of who that was until I had taken it up to my room and stared at it for a long time.

Then it came to me. after I realized the hair color was similar to mine and the face was just like the face in the one picture of me that the Doctor had on his desk, a picture in a silver frame of me when I was about one.

To be sure, when the Doctor was at his clinic and my mother was out shopping, I brought the doll to his office and placed it beside the picture.

The doll face really was my face.

There was no doubt, and this was the biggest mystery I had ever known, and maybe ever would.

2

Rebirth

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For me, the darkness really began when I was

born again, but not reborn in any good, religious sense. Instead. I was forced to reenter the womb and then be ripped out to discover I was not who I thought I was, My name was not really mine. What was really mine was as insubstantial as smoke, blown away the day I was crea

ted, and left to be an unsolved mystery with the title, Who Am I?

It had been the Doctor's decision to keep all this from me until he believed I was capable of fully understanding it, and therefore not be deeply emotionally or psychologically harmed by it. The truth had been circling our home like some confused bird, caught up in a harsh wind from time to time and dropping a feather here and there. It tickled my imagination, made me curious and yet confused. I could sense it lingered there on the tip of my mother's tongue, and it was taking all her self-control to keep it locked behind those beautifully shaped lips. She certainly had planted enough hints about our lives, little seeds of ugly truth she wanted to water and sprout.

Finally she couldn't keep it contained any longer, and decided my time had come. I was only eight when she reached this decision, but she was furious at me because she had discovered I had been into her makeup. I had been pretending I was much older and I was going on a date. Actually. I had seen something similar on a television show, where a girl not much older than I was had dressed up in her mother's clothes, put on her mother's makeup and one of her mother's wigs, and then was caught pretending she was her mother speaking to her father. Her parents thought it was cute and everyone had a good time.

However, when my mother caught me at her vanity table, she looked like the blood rising up her neck and into her face would blow off the top of her head. I never saw her swell up as quickly or as tall. The mere sight of her made me cower. How could someone so beautiful, so elegant, someone who drew the admiration of so many other women and so many men look so ugly so quickly?

"WILLOW!" she screamed, and ripped the lipstick out of my hands. She brought it down inches from the edge of my nose. "I put this on my lips!"

It was one thing to be angry I used her things, but another to make me feel as if I was a walking plague, full of disease. I was afraid to cry, to utter a sound, even to breathe. She stared at me a moment. fuming.

"This is ridiculous," she said. "Come with me. Once and for all, you will be made to understand."

She marched me down the stairs and into the living room ahead of her. I felt as if I was being led to a firing squad. If I slowed, she poked me with her forefinger, the long painted nail cutting into my back. Amou, preparing a roast in the kitchen, looked up as we passed by. One glance at my face told her I was utterly terrified, but she would never dart come between me and my mother.

"Sit!" she screamed, pointing to the La-Z-Boy the Doctor loved. I did so quickly.

"Pay attention!" she ordered. They were nearly always her first words to me, as if she was afraid I could fix my gaze on something else and ignore her completely, just the way the Doctor often did. She wouldn't start until she was satisfied my eyes were directed at her.

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"You should know how you came to be living here with us," she began.

That a strange thing to say, I thought. When a child is born, she lives with her parents. What is there to know about that?

"You are an adopted child. You understand what that means?" she asked.

I did. but I didn't understand how it could mean me. I did not nod: I did not shake my head. I couldn't move.

"I am not your natural mother. God help me if I was," she muttered, looking up at the ceiling. She lowered her eyes on me like someone aiming a canon and fired her words, "I am what is more properly known as your adoptive mother. You were born in the Doctor's clinic. That's why I have always wanted you to call him the Doctor instead of Daddy or Papa. He is your adoptive father. understand? He is not your daddy or your papa."

She took a deep breath before continuing. To me it seemed as if she were vomiting poison that had been inside her forever and ever.

"Your real mother was one of his patients. You were brought here as part of some cover-up. What a devastating thing it would have been for the worldfamous Dr. Claude De Beers to have the world know that one of his patients had been raped in his precious wonderful clinic." she added, wagging her head and speaking in a mocking tone.

She paused again. My eyes were probably as wide and as full of shock as they could

be.

"That's right, raped, and by one of the attendants, he says. Maybe she was raped by another patient, I say. Most probably another patient. Both your parents were mentally ill, which, in a way of thinking, helps explain everything."

She stared at me a moment, her head tilted a bit as if she was studying something in my face,

"Do you know what rape means?"

I had heard the word often enough on the television news, of course. but I nodded too slowly and with little conviction. Her initial words were still burning through me like hot coals, searing my heart and lungs, making it so difficult to breathe, much less talk.

She wasn't my real mother? The Doctor wasn't my real father? I was to think of them both as my adoptive mother and my adoptive father? My parents were patients? What did she mean by "that explains everything"? It was complicated, but mostly very cold. I felt I was being cut out of their lives. My little bags would be packed and I would be sent on my way to live in some orphanage. Amou would return to Brazil and I would never see her again.

My adoptive mother went on to explain in detail how a rape occurs and how what the rapist deposits in the victim can cause the victim to become pregnant,

"Which is what happened to your real mother. Chances are she didn't even know it was happening to her. Maybe she was one of his catatonic patients. It turns my stomach to think of it." she added with an ugly grimace. She could twist her beautifully shaped lips out of shape and slit her eyes so easily, anyone would think she was composed of rubber.

"Anyway," she continued, bringing her face closer to mine. "I want you to start thinking about how lucky you are we let you live here, how lucky you are I let you live here. There is no point in permitting him to lose his wonderful reputation and therefore all of his fancy, wealthy patients, whose families pay the high fees that keep us wealthy, but I don't have to suffer a single instant because of that."

She pulled back, her arms folded under her breasts, her shoulders still hoisted like a hawk's.

Tears burned under my lids, but I was afraid to cry, still afraid to move a muscle.

"Actually. I wanted you to know all this because I want you to understand that you could have inherited insanity of all kinds. I have to be firm with you so we can keep whatever mental disease you might have under control. If you don't, you could end up in the same place. Maybe now you will listen better and behave," she concluded.

She stared at me. "Well, what do you have to say?"

I shook my head slightly. "I don't know." I managed to utter.

"You don't know. I'll tell you what you should say. You should say 'Thank you. Thank you for giving me a nice house to live in, food to fill my stomach, and nice clothing to wear even though I'm not really a De Beers.' That's what you should say. Let me hear it. Go on."

"Thank you," I said through trembling lips.

"Good. Now, before you decide to do anything else that might upset me, you think about all I have told you and what might happen to you if you don't. Is that clearly understood. Willow?"

"Yes." I think I said. I wasn't sure if any sounds came from my lips.

She looked very contented with herself, actually relieved. I watched her walk out. Even after she was gone, I felt her heavy presence over me. It was as if she had left her shadow behind to watch me.

Amou surprised me by coming in a moment later, her face streaking with tears. Apparently, she had followed us and hovered just outside the doorway the whole time.

"Oh, Amou Uno, my poor Amou Uno," she said, and opened her arms for me.

I felt like a drowning victim, gasping for air, falling into the rescuing arms of my Amou.

You must not listen to her terrible words. Willow. You must not." she said, and repeated it like a prayer. No one is worthless who is born. God makes children. You have no disease in you, nothing bad in you Okay?"

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I nodded, but as one too stunned to really appreciate what she was being told or what she was agreeing to by nodding. Amou held me and rocked with me. My little heart pounded, and then, afterward, when she went back to her dinner preparations, I ran off behind the house and hid myself behind the biggest oak tree. I remained out there for hours and hours. When Amou called for me. I did not answer, nor did I go back. I crouched deeper into the shadows, even though it was so hard to ignore her pleas.

I was more comfortable out here, bathed in the darkness. I didn't fully understand everything my adoptive mother had told me, but it was enough to make me feel so empty. It was as if my body had lost all of its substance, and if I didn't cling to something, I might get caught up in the wind and carried off.

The Doctor was away on a speaking

engagement. He was often on those, and this one had taken him clear across the country to California. He was gone nearly three whole days, and during that time I continued to mope and hide from my adoptive mother's suspicious and critical eyes as much as I could. I spent most of my time wandering alone outside the house. When it was time for dinner and I knew my adoptive mother would be there at the table with me. I actually felt myself trembling. I had little appetite. too.

Before the Doctor returned. I developed a fever and Amou kept me in bed, bringing me my meals. My adoptive mother didn't think I was really sick, and Amou had to show her the thermometer. She drove her away by suggesting I might be coming down with something contagious. As it turned out. I never developed a cold or a cough, and as quickly as my fever had come, it was gone.

When the Doctor returned, he asked for me. and Amou told him what had happened. My adoptive mother was at a charity event. He came right to my room, which was not something he had often done. I thought he might be angry at me.

He never yelled at me, but whenever he spoke to me with my adoptive mother present, he always spoke firmly, sounding more like a schoolteacher than a father, adoptive or otherwise. With Amou at his side this time, he spoke much more softly, even lovingly.

He knelt down and took my hands.

""I'm sorry you heard that the way you did. Willow." he began,

"I'm adopted," I said, hoping he would deny it, hoping he would tell me my mother was simply alloy again and was saying something that wasn't really true, but he just nodded.

"Yes, you are adopted. Willow, but that doesn't mean you are less to me. You are our daughter and thi

s is your home. This room is still your room and all your dolls and toys are still yours. This is not any less your home than it was before you were told these things."

I wanted to ask him about the ward rape. I wanted to ask him if I was going to be a patient in his clinic, too, someday. but I didn't.

"I was planning on telling you everything someday. Willow. but I was hoping to wait until you were somewhat older, so you could understand everything easier." he explained. "I want you to know that nothing will change. Nothing is any different. You are Willow De Beers and you will always be, until you get married, that is," he added with a smile. "Although many women keep their maiden names these days," he

said, more to Amou than to me. "Come, get out of bed, wash your face, and put on something nice. Then come on downstairs." he said. standing. "It's almost time for dinner, and then afterward, you and I can read your schoolbook together."

It was one of the few things he did with me on a regular basis.

While I was getting dressed, my mother returned. and I heard them talking, The Doctor didn't raise his voice, but he was getting her more and more upset. I could tell by the shrill sound of her replies and how she was getting louder and louder.

"I did what you should have done a long time ago." she concluded. "You're an expensive

psychiatrist. Claude, but you don't seem to know how to handle your own situations at home. and I warned you at the start that I wouldn't put up with anything that made me unhappy."

He didn't respond apparently, because I didn't hear him. I heard doors close and his footsteps in the hallway.

Later, at dinner, my adoptive mother-- as I could not help but think of her now-- acted as if nothing terrible had been said and told. She chatted on about her social plans, something new she wanted to buy for the house, and a vacation she was thinking they should take. It was as if I wasn't even there, as if her earlier words had made me invisible. I felt the Doctor's eyes on me from time to time, but other than that. and Amou's talking to me. I imagined myself drifting away, like an astronaut whose lifeline in space had been cut. I was floating into the darkness. helplessly.

At school I couldn't help wondering if I suddenly appeared different to my friends and my teachers. Did some of them always know the truth anyway? Was it something in my school records? There was one other adopted child in my classes, a boy named

Scott Lawrence. For some reason his status as an adopted child was never kept secret. Of course, my adoptive mother had made it perfectly clear that I was a major embarrassment for the Doctor and his clinic, and so I had to be hush-hush. My very existence was a whisper.

Now that I had been so bluntly told the truth and left with the idea that madness could sprout in my face anytime, anywhere. I was sure anyone and everyone who looked at me instantly realized what I was.

At night I would lie awake and wonder what my real mother's name was and, of course, what she looked like. I would stare at myself in the mirror and study my eyes to see if there was someone crazy just waiting to pop out of me. And I would have terrible new nightmares about my birth.

I knew what someone in a catatonic state was like because I had wandered into the Doctor's office from time to time and looked at some of his

textbooks. I saw a picture of a woman who was catatonic. She looked like she was imprisoned in her own body. There were tubes connected to her, which was how she got food. When I asked the Doctor about it, he said sometimes people shut themselves up in their own bodies to escape from unpleasant things. They don't see or hear or even feel anything anymore.

A baby made in such a woman would grow like a plant, I thought. Her mother would not even realize she was in her until it was time for her to come out. The mother might have to be cut open and the baby taken out. Afterward, the sewed up mother wouldn't even know a baby had been there. Was that the way it had been for my real mother?

Maybe she didn't know I even existed, that a part of her was alive. She didn't name me or ever feed me-- she probably didn't so much as look at me and smile. I was just

something that was, something without any history. My adoptive mother was right. I supposed. I should be very grateful for what she and the Doctor were giving me. They were giving me a name and a home.

I couldn't help but be more curious about Scott Lawrence now. What image did he have of himself? Did he wonder about his real parents, too? Did he especially wonder whether or not he had any brothers or sisters? Could I have any? Was my mother married before she went to the clinic and could she have had other children before she became mentally ill?

I couldn't really imagine Scott Lawrence being bothered by anything like this. Of all the boys in my class, he was one of the most outgoing, if not the most outgoing. There was nothing even to suggest he had any sort of inferiority complex. In fact, some of the boys thought he verged on the border of being a bully. He was hyper in class and loved to pull practical jokes on the girls, especially shy ones like me. Getting him or any of the boys in my fifth-grade class to be serious for a few minutes was as hard as keeping a fish out of water calm.

Nevertheless, one day shortly after my terrible confrontation with my adoptive mother. I decided to chance it. We had a forty-five-minute lunch hour, but most everyone gobbled down his or her food in less than fifteen minutes and then spent the rest of the lunch hour in the shady area just outside the cafeteria. Our teachers who were on lunch duty monitored it as well as the lunchroom. We were not permitted to leave the designated section of the school grounds. Outside, students could play radios or CD players if they did so at a decent volume. Ordinarily, the boys stayed apart from the girls. We would laugh at the way some of them showed off, their fooling around and roughhousing occasionally breaking out into a more serious fight.

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Scott certainly had more than his share of those and, in fact, was on probation.

I could see that some of his friends were trying to encourage him to do something outrageous. They loved seeing someone else get into trouble. Their catcalls and challenges were making Scott's cheeks crimson. Mr. Anderson eyed him suspiciously, looking as if he was just waiting to pounce. I wandered close to Scott and said. 'Don't let them get you in trouble...

He tamed, his blond eyebrows lifted with surprise. Everyone thought he resembled the illustration of Huckleberry Finn that was on the cover of the copy in our library. He had hair that jetted up and out and was kept short. He had the same impish eyes, with a face spotted with freckles, and lips the color of orange sherbet. In an instant he could look sweet and innocent, but as soon as the teacher's eyes shifted away, he could turn into an imp with eyes full of mischief.

"If they were really your friends, they wouldn't be doing that," I added.

"I know." he said. "They don't bother me." "Good," I muttered, and looked away.

"How come You're not hangin. out with Madonna and her friends?" he asked me, referring to Selma Thursten, whose parents had permitted her to put a ring in her navel. She already had the suggestion of an oncoming bosom and wore tight pants with blouses that showed some midriff, especially after she acquired the ring. Scott often teased her by

threatening to stick his pinky finger through it and rip it away. Anyone could see she enjoyed being teased and screaming at him whenever he did it in our halls and school

classrooms.

I shrugged. "I don't think she's anyone special," I told him.

He liked that, "She isn't. You're more special than she is." he added, surprising me.

"I am?"

"Sure," he said. He picked up a rock and threw it dangerously close to Mr. Anderson, who didn't see it.

"Why do you do things like that?" I asked him.

"Do what?"

"Take such chances of getting into more trouble?"

"Nothing better to do." he quipped, but then looked quickly to see how I reacted. I smirked. "I don't know." he added, and looked a little remorseful. Then, as if he felt he was showing some sign of weakness, he added. "Why do you care if I get in trouble or not? I'm not one of your precious friends, am I?"

/> "I don't have any precious friends." I hesitated and then, after a deep breath. said. "I found out something terrible about myself." Then I thought terrible might not be the right word to use, especially with him. "Secret, I mean."

"What's that?"

"If I tell you, will you swear you will keep it a secret?"

"No," he said.

I looked away.

"All right. I swear, but it better be good, real good." Then he thought again and asked.

"Why are you telling me anyway?"

I looked at him, my eyes small, but dark and firm enough to impress him.

"Because you're the only one I know who might understand." I said.

His curiosity whetted, he softened his posture and looked very serious and interested,

"Why?"

"Because you're adopted."

"So?"

"I'm adopted. too. That's what I found out," I told him.

His first reaction was to look skeptical and even threaten to laugh out loud. but the expression on my face stopped him and brought him closer to ine.

"True?"

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"Yes," I said.

Something in his face changed dramatically. It was like a smile coming up from under the mask he usually wore. He glanced at the others and then looked at me.

"None of your precious friends knows?" I shook my head.

"Big deal," he said after another moment, and then he turned and charged at one of his friends, deliberately knocking him into Mindy Hasbrouck. which started enough of a commotion to make Mr. Anderson chase everyone back into the cafeteria.

I thought that was the end of it, and decided to put my great secret back into the safe locked behind my heart. but Scott surprised me that day by following the van that took me and four other students home after school. He rode behind us on his bike.

No one else noticed him but me. When I got out to walk up my driveway. I waited for him to catch up. He bounced over pavement and skidded to a stop inches from me.

"You gotta go right home?" he asked.

I looked at the front of the house. Amou usually waited for me after school. The Doctor was at his clinic and my adoptive mother was either out with friends shopping or attending some charity event.

"No," I said.

"Good. Get on," he ordered, pounding his seat. Courageously, I did so.

"Hold on." he told me. and shot away. There was a steep hill just down from our property and he didn't slow much to descend. I screamed and closed my eyes, and he laughed.

"Make way!" he shouted. "Make way for the Adopted."

Not only wasn't it a secret to him, he was eager to rub it in the face of Fate.

No adoptive mother would bring him to tears. Was it all a facade, an act to serve as a suit of armor? Even if it is, I thought, I want to be like him. Before our bike ride ended, I was screaming with him:

"Make way for the Adopted!"

3

Love Is in the Heart,

Not the Blood

.

It wasn't until I went to Scott's home one

weekend afternoon that I understood what gave him his self-confidence and strength. His adoptive father was a plumber and his adoptive mother, once a secretary, was now doing only freelance work, but not because she couldn't find a full-time job. Before Scott invited me to his home, he revealed that his mother (he never referred to her or his father as adoptive) was suffering from something called lupus. It was a debilitating illness, and from what he understood and what his father had told him, his mother was getting worse. She had been sick for nearly eight years.

"Sometimes she has a lot of pain." he explained to me. "And she doesn't like to see people, but she's okay right now and she told me you could come over.'

Despite her illness. Scott's mother was a very pleasant woman. She was sickly thin. I thought, but she had a nice smile with soft blue eyes. She was a dark brunette, and almost as tall as Amou. I could see that it was painful for her to move about the house, but she wouldn't let it stop her from making Scott and me some homemade chocolate chip cookies. What surprised me the most that first day I met her was that Scott had told her my secret.

The moment she revealed that, I turned sharply and glared angrily at Scott. His mother saw how upset I was.

"Scott doesn't keep secrets from me. Willow. We love each other too much to ever hide things from each other or lie to each other," she explained.

I turned back to her and saw she was very sincere. Love each other too much? I wondered, But...

"I even know how often he gets himself in trouble at school. don't I. Scott?" she asked, her eyes narrow, threatening.

He nodded and then smiled.

"However, he has recently promised me he won't be getting into trouble any longer, right, Scott?"

"A-huh," Scott said.

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"We know the value of a promise in this house, too, don't we, Scott?"

He nodded again and then raised his eyes to see how I was reacting to this little cross-examination his mother was holding.

His mother settled back on the settee, pulling the light blanket she had at her knees up a bit, and turned her attention more to me.

"Scott says you just recently learned about yourself. Is that true. Willow?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"It's not an easy thing to live with. I know, Everyone treats it differently, I suppose. and I suppose no one should know better about that than a man like your father, but we thought it was better for Scott to know everything as soon as we thought he would understand, because we wanted him to know without a doubt that we couldn't love him any more than we already did.

"Besides," she continued, smiling at Scott, "I had him in my arms moments after he was born, anyway. I gave him his first bottle and I changed his first diaper."

She stopped smiling and turned back to me.

"When other people find out about you, some of them are going to look at you differently. That's because they won't know what to expect. Too often children get measured in terms of their parents. If someone's father is a good athlete, they expect his son to be, or if a girl's mother has a nice singing voice, they expect she'll have

one, too.

"But you're a bit of a mystery, and that sometimes makes other people uncomfortable. Scott and I and his father have talked about these things many times, haven't we, Scott?"

"Yes," he said.

"We want him to be comfortable with himself. I suppose your father will be doing something similar with you, if he hasn't already, and your mother." she added.

I wanted to tell her, no, my mother would never do anything like that, but I was ashamed of it, especially there and then in the glow of the love she and Scott obviously shared. I don't think I ever felt as poor as I did that moment. I had a bigger home and we had so many more expensive things in it. but Scott Lawrence was far wealthier than I was, I thought.

"Why don't you show Willow your and your father's electric trains," his mother said, closing her eyes a bit and sinking in the settee. "I need a little rest. honey."

"Yeah," Scott said. "C'mon."

He grabbed my hand and tugged me roughly off the chair to lead me through the house. In a room down from the kitchen. Scott and his father had installed one of the most elaborate and wonderful sets of electric trains I had ever seen. The trains ran through a miniature city with tiny people, cars, buses, even school buses. There was so much to see.

Scott went to the controls and put on a train engineer's cap.

"Here we go," he declared, and started the engine that pulled boxcars and flat cars and

passenger cars with people in the little windows. He began a second train that ran under and around the first. They even made sounds and sent little puffs of smoke up in the air. Some of the storefronts had lights that flickered on. "How long did it take to make this?" I asked.

"Me and Dad been workin' on it for years and years." he said proudly. "You want to work this?" he offered, showing me the controls, "Go on, try it."

I did, and while I did, he went to a partially constructed new building, a lumberyard company, and started to work on the tiny sticks.

"I told Dad I'd finish this one before he got home from work today," he said.

What impressed me most about the tiny toy city and the trains was the obvious love and care that had gone into it, that was still going into it. How many, many hours must Scott and his father have spent here together, I thought. How jealous it made me.

Scott's mother was very sick, but there was so much less darkness in this house than there was in mine. No wonder he couldn't care less about his being an adopted child, I thought, There were probably dozens of children in our class who were naturally born to their parents and did not share half as much of their love and life.

I visited Scott's house often after that. I wanted to invite him to mine, but my adopted mother did not like the idea of my having friends over. It would be years before she relented, and only after the Doctor assured her they wouldn't be tracking in any dirt or touching any of her expensive things. When I did have friends over. I always thought of areas of the house as having invisible tape roping them off We could look into the rooms, but not set foot in them. I was sure my friends never felt half as comfortable as I did at Scott's or at their houses. and I understood why coming to my house was not something they were eager to do.

About a year after I had met Scott's mother, she died. I knew she had been taken to the hospital. During those days and weeks, he became a very withdrawn person. barely saying anything to anyone but me. Our teachers knew of the difficulties he and his father were facing, and they didn't call upon him or pressure him in class.

The day I heard his mother had died. I rode my bike to his house. Some of his father's and his mother's relatives had already arrived and were setting up food and preparing for the funeral

. Scott had closed himself in his room. His father was happy I had come and hoped I would be able to bring him out. I didn't know what I was going to say to him. The only death in our family I knew about was the Doctor's uncle, his father's brother. and I had seen him only once. He was in his late eighties when he died, and there wasn't much if any grief in anyone's face at the funeral, especially not my adaptive mother's face.

This was far different, of course. I knocked on his door and waited after I called to him, but he didn't respond. I was undecided about what to do. Should I continue to knock or should I try the door to see if it was unlocked?

"I just want to tell you how sorry I am. Scott," I said to the closed door.

I was about to turn and walk away when it opened. It seemed to open by itself. because he wasn't standing there.. I walked in and saw he had gone back to his bed, where he was sprawled on his back, looking up at the ceiling. His eyes were red, but there were no tears.

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"Are you all right?" I asked him.

"No," he said.

"Your father is worried about you," I told him. He raised his head and glared furiously at me.

"He told me he wasn't going to let her die. He told me. He promised!" he cried.

"I'm sure he did all he could do." I said softly. "It wasn't enough. He shouldn't have promised."

"He probably didn't want you to worry." I offered.

Scott glared back at me as if I was part of some horrible betrayal,

"We don't lie to each other in this house. remember?"

"I don't think it was meant to be a lie," I said.

"Well, it was!" he shouted, "It was!"

I looked down. His face was burning with so much fury, it was painful to look at him, and even frightening.

"I wasn't supposed to have a mother." he declared, "She shouldn't have adopted me. I was supposed to be an orphan. My father will die, too," he concluded.

I started to shake my head,

"It's true. It's the same for you," he snapped. "You'll see. We're not supposed to have a family. Ask your father. Ask your father to send you back to your real mother and see what he says. He'll tell you she's either dead or she doesn't want you."

I bit down on my lower lip. He was bringing tears to my eyes. His words were like little knives scratching and cutting into my heart.

I started to shake my head and he jumped up, seized my hand, and pulled me out of his room,

"Come on," he said, leading me down the stairs.

Relatives started toward him, but he ignored them all and charged along the hallway. I followed behind, confused, but afraid to stop. He led me past the kitchen and down to the train room, where he threw the door open and then stepped back. I looked at him, confused, and then I looked through the doorway and my heart stopped.

The little city was wrecked, the houses smashed and thrown about. Railroad cars were crushed as well. It was as if a bomb had fallen on the whole thing.

Finally tears began to stream down my cheeks. "Why?" I managed to utter.

"Because this was a lie, too!" he screamed. He was crying now. "It's fake. Everything is fake!"

He stood there for a moment, his shoulders shaking, and then he turned and ran to the back door of the house and out. The door slammed shut behind him. For a few moments_, I couldn't move. I was shaking so badly.

"It'll be all right." I heard, and turned to see his father. "It will take time, but he will be all right." he said, smiling, his eyes as red as Scott's, "I'll go after him. Thanks for coming to see him." he told me, touched my shoulder, and then walked slowly to the back door.

I sobbed most of my way home. When I arrived. I went directly to the rear of the house, where we had benches. There were walkways through the gardens and bushes that led to the woods. The Doctor loved to go for long walks. Usually, he did so alone, but on occasion, he took me with him. He wouldn't walk as long or as far then. We talked about things and he asked me lots of questions.

I didn't know he was home and had gone for a walk this afternoon. so I was surprised when he suddenly appeared, returning from the woods and fields.

"Willow," he said, approaching and smiling at me. "I asked Isabella where you were and she said you had gone for a bike ride to see your friend Scott. Everything all right?" he asked, wondering why I was back so soon. I suppose.

"No. His mother died," I said angrily.

"Oh. Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. You did tell me she was a very sick woman."

"Why didn't the doctors help her?" I demanded,

Even though I understood that he was involved solely with the illness of the mind. I did not separate him from the world of medicine and doctors I knew, They were all part of the same grand machine that was supposed to make us well again and repair our injuries. They were his people, and they had failed.

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He sat beside me. "You know there are many illnesses that we can't yet cure, don't you. Willow?"

"Yes." I reluctantly replied.

"Should you be angry at the doctors who tried to help her then?" I didn't want him to be right, but he was, "No."

"That's all right. though. I understand how you feel. We often blame the wrong people for things, but maybe it's because we put so much hope and faith in them."

That struck a familiar note.

"Scott's mad at his father. He said he promised his mother wouldn't die."

"Oh. I see. Well, why do you think his father did that?" "So he wouldn't worry."

"So his father didn't do it to hurt him then, did he?"

"No. But he shouldn't have promised." I added on Scott's behalf. "Lies weren't supposed to happen in his house."

"No, they shouldn't happen in anyone's house."

He was quiet a moment. and I wondered if, finally, the Doctor had no answers.

"I wouldn't want to ever tell you to lie," he continued. "But sometimes it's all right to

give people some hope. It helps keep them healthy and productive. How would Scott have been if his father had told him a long time ago that his mother was going to die soon?"

"Bad," I admitted.

"And would he be able to go to school and enjoy his friends and even sleep well at night?"

"No."

"So, did his father do a bad thing to him?"

"No," I said.

"Maybe afterward, when a little time passes, you can help Scott see that, too. Then you'll be a very good friend to him. Willow."

I nodded.

The Doctor does have all the answers, I thought.

He patted me on the knee and rose.

"Looks like we might get some rain tonight." he said, looking out over the trees.
"Flowers need it."

Sometimes I thought he was speaking to me, but he really wasn't. I was just there. He would look at me. but I felt he was looking past me, looking at someone else who was in his eyes. It gave me a funny feeling.

"Well. I've got some work to do," he concluded and went inside.

I wanted to go to Scott's mother's funeral, but my mother wouldn't take me and the Doctor had to be at his clinic. I thought about getting on my bike and riding all the way, however. I knew it was too far and it would take me too long. I did go to his house afterward and sat with him. There were so many people there, friends of his father's from work, more relatives. He and I didn't talk that much.

He was different when he returned to school. No longer as outgoing, he lost his impish quality, and if he got into any arguments or fights, they were far more vicious and brutal. He was in trouble more often.

Then, one day, he didn't come to school. He didn't come the next day, either. On the third day I rode to his house and saw a sign on the lawn advertising that it was for sale. The windows were dark and his father's pickup truck was not in the driveway,

I went up to the front door and pushed the buzzer, but no one answered. When I looked in the window, I saw the furniture was gone.

I remember I snapped back as if I had burned my forehead on the glass,

Later. I found out his father had gotten

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another job through one of their relatives who lived in Virginia. I was very sad over it. but I didn't have anyone to talk to about it. The Doctor was particularly busy at the time. I overheard that he had nearly a half dozen new patients admitted. Some days he didn't come home until after dinner. My adoptive mother complained about it for a while and then, as if something in her head snapped, she stopped. In fact, I sensed that she no longer cared if he was home or not.

She was angry about my being unhappy, though, and did complain to him again and again about my moods,

"I know enough about manic-depression, thanks to you, to know she's a prime candidate. Claude. Don't think I'm going to tolerate any of that in this house." she warned.

He assured her I was just experiencing what all young girls experience as they move into adolescence,

"I never acted like that," she told him.

He didn't answer, which was an answer she missed.

I spent most of my time trying to avoid her, and then doing my best to put on an act she would accept. How different our- home is from Scott's, I remember thinking. Here, truth is rare; lies are the coin we use to buy peace and toleration of each other.

Sometimes it felt as if the floor were trembling beneath my feet. The whole structure would come down around us in a grand collapse, and the Doctor could do nothing to

stop it. I imagined the seams pulling apart, the very walls severing.

I was sixteen by then, and we were all living separate lives. As a kind of negotiated settlement between my adoptive mother and the Doctor. I was permitted to refer to her as 'Mother' only when we were out or amongst people, so that there could be at least the semblance of a normal home life. In the house, however, she began to insist I call her Alberta.

"Since I'm not your mother," she told me. it makes more sense."

It was just another in a series of sour balls for me to swallow.

One day I heard a little girl tell her mother she had to go to the bathroom. I was in the lobby of the movie theater with two of my friends from school. Her mother made a pained expression and groaned so loudly, people stopped talking around her.

"What?" she demanded, tugging the little girl's arm.

"A BM," she replied, and the mother went charging off to the ladies' room.

I couldn't help recalling so many times when my adoptive mother treated me that insensitively, and suddenly it occurred to me.

I wouldn't think of her or refer to her as my adoptive mother anymore.

I would call her my AM. Just never to her face.... "Why are you smiling?" one of my girlfriends asked.

"Am I smiling? I must be happy," I replied.

The two of them shook their heads and laughed at my glee. It was not important why

one of us was happy. actually. The mood was catching. All giggles, we hurried into the theater, taking joy in our youth without ever really appreciating how precious and how short-lived it was.

4

Heartbreak and Fate

.

Perhaps no day in my life was as dark and as

sad for me as the day Amou told me she was going to leave. She told me before she told my AM or even the Doctor. Somehow. I never thought of her as leaving our home. Of course. I knew she and her older sister Marisa had left their family behind in Brazil. Two years before. Marisa had returned to Brazil. I suspected from reading between the lines that the Doctor had prevented Amou from going by raising her salary significantly and by paying for her vacation trip to Rio. I didn't really understand why he was so determined to keep her in our family. I assumed it was because of the many things she was still doing for my AM.

I was at my desk, doing my homework, when she came to my room. Even though I could sense when she was near. I suspected she had been standing in my doorway watching me for a good half minute or so before bringing herself to my attention.

"What, Amou?" I asked, smiling at her, "I am always surprised at how grown-up you have become," she said. "how beautiful you are. Muito lindo."

My face flushed crimson and I laughed. Once. when I was about fourteen. my AM had

come into my room, stood there looking at me, shaking her head, and then said. "Your real mother must have been a chunky woman with a double chin. Probably with oversized, sagging breasts and a waist you could tie an ocean liner to when it was in port. She was probably short and squatty with ballooned cheeks and tiny eyes. Medicine, especially the medicine they give mentally ill people, can do that to a person, you know, and then their offspring inherit it."

I had run to Amou immediately after and told her, Now I reminded her of that.

"Remember? She said I would be forever bloatfaced."

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Amou waved at the air as if she were waving away annoying flies and came into my room. For a moment she just stood there, looking at everything, just the way someone would who wanted to commit it all to memory forever. It started a small alarm in my heart that confused me.

"What's wrong. Amou?" I asked.

She smiled and sat on my bed. I turned my chair around.

"My sister is a lonely woman now that both our parents are gone." she began. "and there is something in my heart that cries not only for her, but for my youth. It is time for me to go home, Amou Una."

"Go home?"

In my mind, this had always been Amou's home, How could she think of anywhere else as her home?

"Back to my roots, my people, my uncles and aunts and cousins. I have so many nieces and nephews. I can't remember all their names." she added.

"Oh," I said. It was like all my insides were crumbling.

"You must not be upset. Willow. You really are a grown woman now. You do not need someone like me trailing after you all the time. Soon, you will be serious with some young man. I'm sure, and you would forget me. anyway."

"I could never forget you. Amou. Don't say such a terrible thing!" I cried.

She laughed. "When a girl becomes a woman, she forgets a lot more than she ever thought she would, but that's not something bad. It is what should be. It's only natural. Do not be upset at yourself for that," she insisted,

"When are you going?"

"In a week, Dr. De Beers doesn't know exactly, but he has been anticipating it for some time. I'm sure," she said. "Of course, I will miss him very much. too."

I could feel the tears flawing over my lids and starting down my cheeks.

"I'll never see you again," I moaned.

"Of course you will see me again. I will come back often, and maybe someday, when you are able. you will travel to Brazil and I will be able to show you my beautiful county."

My throat closed. I turned away,

"I'll hate living here without you," I threatened, "I'll run away." I turned back to her.

"Maybe I'll run away to Brazil."

"The Doctor would be very upset, Willow. You don't want to hurt him so much, do you?"

"He's never here. He hardly sees me these days. I almost agree with my AM about it." I said, dabbing my eyes with a tissue, "He's married to the clinic. It's his whole life."

"No," she insisted. You are his whole life." "Oh, sure," I said.

"Maybe no one should be anyone's whole life." she added, for more thoughtful and philosophical than I had ever seen her. "It's good to be a little selfish. So You can survive." she added. "You look at me like you don't understand. but I'm sure, some day, you will," she said. smiling.

"Oh, Amou."

I rose and threw my arms around her. We held each other for a long moment. rocking just the way I used to when I was very little and afraid or had just been hurt. Then she let go of me and I let go of her.

She stood up. and I saw she had tears welling in her eyes, too.

You have been my filha," she said, which was Portuguese for "'daughter."

"And you have been my mae," I told her. which was Portuguese for "mother."

How well those words fit the both of us.

I cried myself to sleep that night. The next day I could easily tell she had informed both my AM and the Doctor. My AM was even more nasty and sarcastic than ever, which I didn't think possible.

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"Normal people give their employers a month's notice," she said at breakfast when Amou brought in the coffee. It was as if she had been holding the sentence in her lips all night.

Amou poured her and the Doctor their coffee without speaking.

"To be fair," the Doctor said after a moment. "I would have to admit Isabella has been saying she intended on leaving very soon for some time now."

He smiled at Amou. "None of us wanted to believe it. Isabella, but we all understand."

"I don't understand," my AM snapped. "How can you want to return to the Third World and live in squalor when you can enjoy living in upper-class America?"

"My family does not live in squalor. Mrs. De Beers."

"Umph," my AM muttered.

"I wouldn't exactly call Brazil Third World, Alberta," the Doctor said softly.

"Right. It's paradise on earth."

"Paradise is wherever you are most happy," Amou said.

Since she rarely, if ever, even approached or hinted at contradicting my AM, her remark raised all our eyebrows at once.

"Oh, and you're not happy here, making a queen's salary for maid's work?"

"I have come to an end here. Mrs, De Beers, You will find someone else very quickly, I'm sure."

"I'm sure. too. Especially if we offer half of what we give you."

Amou sewed her mouth closed and finished serving our breakfast. I said nothing, The Doctor returned to his magazine and my AM sat smoldering. I imagined the smoke pouring out of her ears.

It was a very hard week for me. In school. I would suddenly break out in tears. My friends were confused. I never wanted anyone to know just how close I was to Amou. None of them would understand how I could be so emotionally tied to a house servant and care more about her than I did my mother.

The day Amou left. I went with her to the airport, The Doctor drove her. My AM didn't so much as say goodbye. I heard her threaten the Doctor, however, should he go and give "that woman" any sort of bonus.

You should charge back what it will cost us to have the house managed until we find a decent replacement," she told him.

I smiled to myself about that when I saw the Doctor h

and Amou an envelope at the airport. He said goodbye to her and then went out to the car to wait for me. I stayed with her until they called for her plane to be boarded.

"You must not think of this as a goodbye," she told me. "It's just a little space between us that we will close often. Amou Una."

"I know," I said.

"I can give you no more than you can give to yourself now. You will be a wonderful woman, and I know, when your time comes, you will be a wonderful mother and a wonderful wife. Take care of Dr. De Beers," she concluded.

I thought it was a strange thing for her to tell me to do. How could I ever be the one to take care of the Doctor? He was the one who took care of everyone else.

"He needs your understanding." she added.

She hugged and kissed me and then she started for the gate door. I waited until she turned, waved, and threw me a kiss. Moments later she was gone.

When I got back into our car, the Doctor reached across to squeeze my hand gently.

"I know you're sad, Willow, but Isabella is going home to her family, to people she loves and who love her and who miss her deeply. Don't you think you should be happy for Isabella?"

"Yes," I said in a small, reluctant voice.

"It's not like you will never see her again, is it?" "No."

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"You know you have a lot to do during the next two years. You will be graduating high school and thinking about a college education. You will be thinking about what you want to do with yourself. Have you given it any consideration?"

"Yes,"

"What ideas do you have?"

"I think I want to go into psychology. too." I said "I think I want to help people."

"That's very nice. Willow. I think you could be very successful at that. If you ever have any questions you want answered, please come to me. okay?"

"Yes." I said.

"I'm already very proud of your

accomplishments at school," he said.

"When did you know what you wanted to be?" I asked him.

"Oh, not until my first year of college, really. For a while. I thought I might go into teaching, and then I thought I would like to do something about the so-called unteachable, those troubled souls who are too often forgotten or discarded. Bringing someone back from that is like..."

"-What?"

"Bringing someone back from the dead," he replied. He smiled. "We don't have that sort of success all that often, but when we do, it makes you feel it's all been worth it. I know I should be spending more time with you, but that's been what's kept me from doing it. Maybe now, I will be suddenly decided. "I will."

"I'd like that," I said.

He nodded and we drove on in silence, my eyes and my ears filled with Amou's last moments with me.

I had no idea what his were filled with, but when I looked at him, he seemed just as sad, if not sadder than I was.

And I wondered why, what it could be that would have such an effect on him.

It wasn't going to be for a while yet before I would find out, but when I did. I fully understood every dark moment I had ever caught him having.

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Postcards from Brazil began arriving within two weeks of Amou's departure. I wrote her long letters, sometimes spending more time on them than I did on my homework. I wanted to get every little detail of our lives in the letters. I knew she would enjoy hearing about the three new maids my AM hired and fired within weeks of each other. If one cooked well, she didn't clean well: if she cleaned well, she couldn't cook: and if she could do both well, she had no idea how to brush out a wig,

"I guess Isabella was worth what we paid her after all." the Doctor said one night.

Finally my AM had no reply. Her silence was her admittance of being wrong. What she did instead was turn to me and say, "You should be doing more around here until

we find someone suitable. Apparently, you're smart enough to be on the honor roll at school all the time. Nothing here should be a challenge."

It was almost a compliment. The Doctor looked at me, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"I'll do whatever I can to help. Alberta."

She said nothing, but when we were between maids. I prepared one of Amou's favorite dishes: peixe oporto, which was baked white fish with a port wine sauce. I had stood beside her and watched and helped her do it many times. She always welcomed me in the kitchen, teaching me all sorts of little culinary secrets. I knew my AM loved this dish. When I brought it out and she and the Doctor began to eat it. I could see the pleasure and surprise in both their faces, especially hers.

"Brains, looks, and this, too," the Doctor said,

It wasn't that often that he gave me such compliments in front of my AM. I blushed with pride. and I saw her turn to me and look at me with an expression I had not seen before. It was as if she finally had taken a good look at me and at who I was. I could almost hear something click in her head.

I did some more cooking for us after that, but a week later my AM did find a cook and a maid who satisfied her. She was in her late fifties. Her name was Molly Williams, and she appeared to have the sort of personality my AM appreciated: a private person who was efficient and wasted few words. At times I thought she was robotic, but by now, as Amou predicted, my interests were developing in things outside our home. I participated in more school activities, was in a school play, and was even on the girls' field hockey team. The Doctor attended some of the games, and to my surprise. my AM accompanied him to the school play. I didn't have that big of a role, but it was enough for me to make an impression.

Whatever had clicked in my AM's mind that night I made my first dinner had an effect afterward on the way she behaved toward me. It began in little ways. She would make a comment about my hair and then, to my surprise this time, suggest some product she was using that would improve my texture, bring out the color, and keep it softer. She began to do the same with makeup, and especially her miraculous skin creams and facial treatments. She even invited me to join her at her spa one weekend. I began to have the feeling I had become a project for her. On a few occasions I heard her brag about how much of an improvement in my appearance she had made.

The Doctor seemed amused by all this, but also quite happy. Our once quite estranged little family began to take on the semblance of a unit. My AI was always quite involved in a variety of charity functions and always as a cosponsor or co-chair, always someone important. She surprised me again by inviting me to volunteer to help with some of these events.

Perhaps time and the inevitability of my continuing existence in her life finally had a positive influence on her. I did not know the reason. but I was grateful for the little truces between us. This didn't make a significantly dramatic change in her personality. She was still hard and cold more often than not, and her suggestions for my improvements always came on the heels of some nasty remark.

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Nor did any of this make a significant dent in the wall I sensed had grown in height and thickness between her and the Doctor. His work at the clinic still dominated his day and his life, and she never eased up on her complaints about it. To be sure, there were isolated moments when they seemed to be softer toward each other. I sensed the Doctor still liked to dress up and be seen with her. She had, whether it be because of her constant pampering of herself or not, an enduring beauty and made a striking figure, especially when she wore one of her expensive gowns.

Despite the way she often belittled and disparaged the Doctor's profession, she was an orthodox believer in the theory that stress degenerated and eventually killed someone. Whenever something made her alloy, she would go right to one of her pampering processes-- whether it be a facial, a massage, a mud bath, a herbal bath, whatever-- to counter the negative effects. I had seen her do that time and time again when I was little and she was barking at me for one thing or another.

Perhaps that belief in the importance of contentment and its significant influence on the aging process had the most to do with the changes that I saw in her behavior toward me and toward the

Doctor. She was getting older: she knew she had to put a lid on the pot of rage that boiled over too often in her chest.

Now, more than ever. "Do what you want. I don't care," was her mantra, especially after complaining about something the Doctor was going to do. She devoted much more time to her pet charities and her elaborate luncheons and gala affairs. To give the devil her due, she was at least raising funds for important causes.

All this was why I had a mixture of emotions the day she died. I was certainly not happy about it, despite the harsh manner in which she had treated me and the mean things she had done to me when I was much younger. I had become more and more like the Doctor than I imagined I ever would. Like him. I found I was able to step back from conflicts, from aggressive or unpleasant people, and question why whatever was happening was happening. I seemed to have a natural instinct for analysis, for explaining. Often this was frustrating to my friends, who thought I should be angrier or want revenge. My tolerance irked them, and there I was analyzing why they felt that way as well.

I had begun to do the same with my AM. In short. I had begun not to sympathize with her, but to understand her. Her failure to get what she wanted from her marriage to the Doctor turned her into the bitter person she was capable of being. The tendencies, the selfishness, was always there, waiting to sprout and take control, but the world she had chosen to be in and the life she led certainly fertilized it.

She would hate me for it. but I had grown to see her as a tragic and pathetic figure. What I knew beyond anything was that I never wanted to be like her, and I think, despite all her efforts to make me envy her, to look up to her, to think of her as successful and beautiful, she knew in her heart that she had failed at that. If there was one more thing she could not tolerate around her. it was certainly pity, and especially pity from someone like me.

I was at a rehearsal for the senior play the night she was killed,

The custodian who was on duty at the school came into the theater and told my drama teacher to send me home immediately.

"Your father needs you home right away." was all he said.

My heart pounded with every quick step I took to leave the building, get into my car,

and drive back to the house. When I pulled into the driveway, I saw a half dozen vehicles, some of which I recognized as cars belonging to associates of my father and one belonging to Temple Gidleigh. my AM's best and, to my mind, only friend. She and my AM usually served on the same charity committees.

When I entered the house. I heard the low murmur of conversation from the sitting room. I hurried down the corridor to it, and when everyone saw me standing there, he or she stopped talking. The Doctor, who was seated on the settee, put down the cup of tea he was drinking and rose quickly.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Why are all these people here?"

He indicated we should continue down the corridor to his office, which we did. When we were inside, he closed the door,

"Some very bad news." he said. "Alberta lost control of her car this evening returning from that fund-raiser for MS. She went off the road at Crowley's Junction and down an embankment, where she struck a tree. She wasn't wearing her seat belt and that damn air bag did not activate. It's preliminary, but it looks pretty much as if she struck the windshield and died instantly."

I felt my stomach fold up inside me, my heart tightening like a fist, making it very hard to breathe.

"She's gone," he added, to be sure I understood the full meaning of what he was telling me,

"Gone?" I repeated, like someone trying to memorize what she had been told.

"I'm sorry," he said. For a moment it was as if he were a total stranger giving me the bad news. "These will be difficult days ahead. The funeral will be in three days. My

secretary is contacting everyone whom we should contact."

"What should I do?" I asked him.

"There is nothing for you to do. Willow. Death is the most traumatic event in life because of its finality. I spend a good deal of my professional time trying to convince depressed and sick people that it is not the best alternative." He smiled, "I often use Shakespeare and quote from Hamlet. 'That

undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler has returned,' I try to get them to see they won't necessarily be better off.

"You have not been brought up in a religious home," he continued, "but I have to believe that she is in a better place. I won't ever tell any of my patients such a thing," he said, smiling again.

Then he put his arm around my shoulders, squeezed me to him, kissed my forehead, and left to return to his and my AM's friends, whom, he said, needed him to comfort them almost as much as he needed them to comfort him.

Without my Amou. I was left to find comfort in myself, for no matter what my true feelings were about Alberta, she and the Doctor were all the family I had. and Death had come into this house.

It made me think of Scott Lawrence and his belief that some people weren't supposed to have mothers and fathers. Death had done its duty.

For all I knew. it still lingered here somewhere, smiling through its icy teeth, enjoying- what it had accomplished.

What it had accomplished was to remind us all It was always there.

It was there waiting for us as well.

5

Setting Sail

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What was most remarkable to me after

Alberta's death was how little our lives changed. If anything, the Doctor became even more involved in his clinic and with his patients. I was his little: amateur psychiatrist by now, and my analysis told me that, despite what he might say to others and how he might seem to be, he was suffering some Guilt,

How Alberta's death could have been caused in even the slightest way by him was a mystery that would take some time to unravel. I saw it in the darkness in his eyes whenever he was home, in the hours and hours he spent alone in his office gazing out the window, in the longer walks he took by himself on our grounds, and in the exhaustion he showed in his face whenever he returned from the clinic.

I wrote to Amou about him and spoke to her on the phone from time to time. All she would say was "take care of him." which was of course what she had told me in the airport the day she had left. I knew in my heart that she held some trust with him, that there were still secrets to unfold and surprises awaiting me in the days and years to come.

About three months after my AM's accident and death. Aunt Agnes's husband Uncle Darwood died. I didn't know him very well. They had visited us so rarely and we

never visited them.

The Doctor and I went to the funeral. Afterward, he revealed that Uncle Darwood had been a bad closet alcoholic. He let slip that he thought Aunt Agnes was the reason, and then we talked about her and him for a while. It was a warm and interesting conversation for me because he did not often talk about his youth and his own parents. He revealed that my AM thought his family was snobby because she came from an old Southern family that had lost most of its wealth. She always accused Aunt Agnes of speaking down to her.

The intensity of the undercurrent of tension and friction that ran under the foundation of our home and family always surprised me. Everyone believed I came from the most stable family possible because my father was a world-renowned psychiatrist who could cure psychological and emotional problems. Some of those problems were so deeply embedded in the roots of our world, however, it was naive to think anyone, even the Doctor, could stop the erosion of happiness and contentment. It was a lesson I was never to forget.

It seemed that there was so little lately to bring any pleasure and satisfaction into our house, but the Doctor was happy that I had been accepted to the University of North Carolina, I had already decided that I wanted to follow in his footsteps to some extent and major in psychology, and he was not only familiar with their programs, but knew some of the teachers I would have.

One of the few prolonged periods of time that he and I were together was when he accompanied me to college. All during the trip he talked about how someone should work at orienting himself or herself to a new environment. His favorite expression was always "Focus. focus."

I thought he was the one doing most of the focusing on that trip. and I was quite pleasantly surprised at how much emotion he finally showed when we parted and he

was leaving me at college. He saw me unpack some of my things and noted that I had brought my doll along, the doll he had given me a long time ago, the one a patient had made in his clinic.

"You brought this." he said, holding it and turning it in his hands as if he wanted to inspect every single stitch.

"Yes."

He smiled at it.

"Whatever happened to the patient who made

that?" I asked. He looked up quickly. "Oh, she improved enough to go home eventually. She's never had to come back," he added.

"Maybe I should send that to her," I suggested. "Oh, no, no." he said. She wanted you to have it very much. She made it from a picture of you I had sent her after she left the clinic, actually."

"Yes." I said. nodding. "Besides, she probably doesn't want to be reminded she had to be in a clinic once."

"No," he said. "I don't imagine she does."

He put the doll down gently and then turned to me. "I guess it's time to go." he said.

"Okay," I said. I hugged him.

His eyes welled up with tears and all he could say was "Well, well, well,"

I kissed him and held tightly to him and assured him I would be fine.

"Of course you will." he said.

When he left. I watched him go off in a taxicab to the airport. I stood there for a moment, wondering why it was that we had lived in a house where emotions had to be kept under tight reins. What was it he feared so? I couldn't imagine the Doctor afraid of anything that much. I wondered to myself if I wasn't going into psychology hoping that I would learn enough to finally understand him.

And then I thought. perhaps I want to go into psychology not so much to learn about him as to learn about myself. So often and in so many ways, Alberta had drummed into my head that I showed signs of inheriting madness. It got so I questioned every action I took, every decision I made, every thought I had. Was it abnormal? Was it the symptom of something developing? Was my childhood pretending really just that-- pretending-- or was it the first sin of schizophrenia? And those fears I had, seeing something ominous in the shapes of shadows, in the silhouette of a tree at night, outlined against the inky sky, was all that the beginning of serious paranoia?

/> Were the voices I heard the voices everyone heard? Were my periods of depression and sadness unusual? What really awaited me as I turned the corner and entered adulthood: a life of fulfillment, marriage, a career. motherhood. or the dark corridors of rooms in my father's clinic?

I never told my father, but deep inside. I believed that if I could see the symptoms before anyone else. I could cure them, or maybe hide them well enough to keep even someone like him from blowing. Looking at my doll now, turning it in my hands as my father had done. I felt like a criminal who had gone into forensic science just so she could cover up any clues she might leave behind. Was the likeness to me just a wonderful accident of fate. or did this doll with its dark eyes, its patchwork of a dress speak to my own patchwork of emotions and my own dark fears?

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Perhaps I didn't have the most altruistic reasons to go into psychology, but I couldn't see myself doing anything else. If I had inherited anything. I thought, it was the desire to prove.

"It was supposed to be hard work." he continued. "What an incredibly unexpected reaction to it all. Like your new friends, some of my closer friends thought I was bizarre. 'Psychiatry is a good place for you. Claude,' they would say. 'Eventually, you can treat yourself and send yourself the bill.'"

We both laughed at the idea. and then he turned to me, his face as serious as it had ever been.

"If we don't love what we do," he told me. "then we don't love who we are, and the worst fate of all is not liking yourself. Willow, being trapped in a body and behind a face you despise. You hate the sound of your own voice. You even come to hate your own shadow. How can you ever hope to make anyone else happy-- wife, children, friends-- if you can't make yourself happy?"

"It seems like such a simple truth, but it remains buried beneath so many lies and delusions for most people. I know now that won't happen to you," he said assuredly.

I sensed he was going to tell me more. but Miles appeared to tell him he had a phone call from the clinic.

"They say it's an emergency," he added.

The crisis involved a patient who had attempted suicide, The Doctor had to rush back

to the clinic. He was very upset about it, and told me afterward that he thought he had been making some significant progress with the patient, who was a young man my age. Although he didn't show it often, my doctor father did take his work very personally.

"If you are serious about going into this field. Willow," he warned. The prepared for more defeat than victory, more failure than success. There is no more complicated thing than the human mind and trying to determine why people do what they do, want what they want, and hate what they hate. Unlike a medical doctor, your patients more often than not are unwilling to let you discover what is the cause of their illness. They are either afraid or unable to do so. Imagine a doctor's patient preventing the doctor from la-towing he or she has a fever, and refusing to let the doctor take his or her temperature, and then you will have a little better idea of what awaits you in the world of psychiatry."

"I understand," I said. "and I am not discouraged."

He smiled, "Good," he said. He closed and opened his eyes. "That's very good."

I returned to finish my college semester. Allan and I continued seeing each other. I didn't want to fall in love so fast. The Doctor's words staved with me. More than ever now, I was very determined to develop a career first. During the summer. Allan went to Europe to study. and I didn't see him again until the start of the new semester. I thought we would drift apart and he would probably find someone else, but to my surprise and delight at the time, that wasn't so.

It was the Doctor's idea that I do some volunteer work at his clinic that summer. I think I learned more about psychology in those ten weeks than I did or would in four years of formal schooling. One thing that happened was my appreciation and respect

for him grew. His reputation in the world of psychology had only grown over the years, and he was off as a guest speaker more often than ever.

My working there brought us even closer. We spent more time together after work as well, going to restaurants, taking walks on our grounds, or simply relaxing and watching some television. I could feel his effort to get to know me more and to slowly lower the barriers that had been kept up between us for so many years. One of the East things that happened was I stopped thinking of him as the Doctor, and, finally, as my father. After all, he was the only father I had known. Whoever had made my real mother pregnant did not know I existed, much less cared, and if there was one thing I had learned from Scott Lawrence and his family, it was that relationships, not blood, mattered the most.

When I prepared to leave for college this time. I did not expect it would be as emotional for either of us. We were planning to have dinner at my father's favorite restaurant. He had made all the arrangements, and I sensed it was going to be a special night for us. Two days before, however, he received a phone call from the coordinator of the American Psychiatry Association, who informed him their schedule for the upcoming national conference had been revised because the feature speaker, set to greet everyone, had suffered a heart attack. They wanted my father, and since he would have a national forum from which he could reveal and discuss some of his innovative techniques at his clinic, he had to accept. With the work he had to complete before leaving, his free time was constricted.

"Don't worry," I told him. "We'll see each other very soon anyway. Remember, you promised to visit me on campus this semester so I could show you off," I said, and he laughed.

He was gone the day before I left for school. Alone in the big house, except for Miles and the maid who came by to clean twice a week. I wandered slowly through the big estate home and thought about my youth here. my Amou, and my AM. I felt guilty

calling her that now, but it just seemed to come naturally to me.

So much of this house still seemed off-limits to me or still carried unhappy memories. It was here in the family room that Alberta came upon me one afternoon. I was pretending to be a mother and I was mothering two small dolls. I suppose I was imitating her too well, for she stood behind me quietly, listened, and then pounced.

She told me I was sick in the head to think such terrible things at my age, and she warned me if she ever caught me doing it again, she would put glue in my mouth and make my tongue stick to the roof of it. It was a terrifying image. I tried not to cry until she left because she hated that. It only made her angrier.

Because of that and a few other occasions when she spied upon me. I took to whispering my pretend, even when I was outside and there was no chance of her overhearing any of it.

The Doctor had kept her things in the bedroom for a long time after she died, mostly because he just didn't have the time to get around to doing anything about it. I thought. but I also thought it was because removing her clothing, her cosmetics, her brushes and all would be like closing the lid on her coffin, and it was just something he was avoiding for as long as he could.

Now, her naked vanity desk remained, a cold reminder of what had once been. Of course. I recalled the infamous time she caught me in her makeup and revealed the great secret of my birth and status. I could see myself sitting there as a little girl, enjoying my pretend. and I could see her in the doorway, furious.

The Doctor's office would always remain sacrosanct to me. His personality was there, in its order and neatness. Alberta never liked coming in here, I thought. It actually was threatening to her. Maybe that was why I enjoyed being in there so much. In our house, this office was like a sanctuary. Evil, nastiness, anger, and pain were not

permitted within its doors. Here there was only calmness, reason, logic, concern.

Amou's room was now occupied by Miles, because it was much nicer than the room he had had when she was living here. Still, just walking down that corridor and looking at the door brought back so many, many memories of her. I was so attached to her. I loved just watching her work, whether it was in the kitchen or doing her needlepoint. Her voice was forever embedded in my mind-- those melodies. Portuguese folk

songs, children's songs, and her laughter, melodic, full of love and life. It still echoed in this hallway. It would never be gone.

I wandered to the rear door and stepped out on the patio. The sun was setting. This would be the last twilight here for me for a while. Despite the difficult childhood I had experienced growing up here, it was still home. I knew no other, and at least I had a home, a place to call my own, or as Robert Frost once wrote. "A place where when you go there, they have to take you in."

Even if it was no more than that, it was something. I had this great faith that, in the days and weeks, months and years to come. the Doctor-- my father-- and I would grow into a true father and daughter, and this house, these grounds would warm up considerably for me. There would be a time when we would truly just have each other, and that would be enough for both of us for a while.

I would get married and have a family of my own. I was very determined about that, too, as determined as I was to have a career. It was as if I thought I could get revenge for how I had been treated. My, child will drown in my love, I thought, There would never be a doubt as to whom his or her mother was. It made me laugh to think of myself that way, but there was something inside me that called for and demanded that.

Can we be forgiven for giving too much love?

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We certainly can't be for giving too little, I thought angrily. Then I imagined the Doctor beside me shaking his head.

"Anger isn't appropriate for a therapist. Willow," he would tell me. "Step back. analyze. You don't have to forgive, but you do have to understand."

I sighed and nodded.

All right, I thought. I'll try to do that__

But I might not be as strong as you.

The Doctor. My father. My friend,

Will you forgive me for that at least"

My thoughts were caught up in the wind that stirred with the descending sunlight. Shadows were emerging from the woods, marching toward the house. It was almost their time. Night waited anxiously to put the birds asleep and put our thoughts in bed with us.

We all have little boxes in which we lock them all, our thoughts and memories, and keep them shut until someone like the Doctor, or maybe me someday, gives us the courage and the faith to open them again and let them go free.

After all, who wants to be chained by his or her own memories? I turned back to the house.

I will not let that happen to me, I thought.

I will open my heart and release my pain. I will bury it with the past in a grave as deep and as dark as Alberta's grave.

Only then will the Doctor and I find true peace. I did not know why this should be so.

But soon.

Soon I would.

And then it would all begin.