



Pearl in the Mist

By V.C. Andrews

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Even after a year as a Dumas, Ruby still wonders at the splendor of the family's New Orleans mansion, and rejoices in the love of the father she had never known. But true happiness in her new home is as elusive as d swamp mist. Ruby must carefully avoid a venomous enemy: her stepmother, Daphne, who cringes and sneers at her backwater upbringing. And Ruby's every effort to befriend her twin sister, Gisselle -- especially since Gisselle's crippling accident -- is answered with bitterness and vicious backstabbing.

So idyllic Greenwood -- the exclusive girls' boarding school that her father has chosen for his daughters' senior year -- seems to promise some peace from the conniving Daphne, and maybe even a fresh start with Gisselle. But Ruby's kind isn't welcome at Greenwood, and the legendarily strict headmistress, Mrs. Ironwood, plots with her stepmother to make her life miserable. Meanwhile, Gisselle is on a mission to break every school rule, leaving Ruby to suffer the humiliating punishments. But Ruby doesn't lose hope -- until a terrible tragedy leaves her alone in a world that never really wanted her. Ruby will have to summon every last ounce of her Cajun strength to reclaim her home, her future, and the happiness she once knew....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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

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Prologue

Dear Paul,

I waited until the last minute to write this letter to you, mainly because I wasn't sure until now that I would do what my father asked and, with my twin sister, Gisselle, attend a private school for girls in Baton Rouge. Despite the promises I made to him, I have been having nightmares about it. I've seen the brochures of the school, which is called Greenwood. It does look beautiful, consisting of a grand structure containing the classrooms, an auditorium, a gym, and even an indoor pool; as well as three dormitory buildings, each with sprawling willow and oak trees in front; its own lake filled with lavender hyacinths; beautiful wooded grounds of red oak and hickory; clay tennis courts and ballfields; in short, everything anyone could want. I'm sure it has far better facilities and opportunities than I would have at our public school in New Orleans.

But it is a school attended by only the wealthiest, upper-class young women from the finest Creole families in Louisiana. I'm not prejudiced against wealthy people who come from highly respectable backgrounds, but I know I'll be surrounded by dozens and dozens of girls who have been brought up the way Gisselle has. They will think like her, dress like her, act like her, and they will make me feel like an outsider.

My father has great confidence in me. He thinks I can overcome any obstacles and I would be more than a match for any and all snobby girls I might encounter. He's so confident in my artistic talent that he believes the school will immediately recognize it and want to see me develop and succeed so they can get credit for it. I know he's just trying to help me shake off my doubts and fears.

But no matter how I feel about going to this school, I guess it's the best thing I could do at the moment, for it will at least get me away from my stepmother, Daphne.

When you came to visit us and you asked me if things had gotten better, I told you yes, but I wasn't telling you the whole truth. The truth was, I had almost been put away and forgotten in the mental institution my poor Uncle Jean, my father's brother, is in. My stepmother had conspired with the administrator to have me committed. With the help of a very nice but deeply disturbed young man named Lyle, I escaped and returned home. I told my father what had occurred and he and Daphne had a horrible argument. After things settled down, he came to me with the proposal to send me and Gisselle to Greenwood, the private school. I saw how important it was to him that we get away from Daphne, and I saw how happy she was that we were leaving.

So I am being pulled in two directions. On the one hand I am very nervous about attending Greenwood, but

on the other I am glad to get away from what has become a very dark and dreary home. I feel bad about leaving my father. He seems to have grown years older in just a few months. Strands of gray have popped up here and there in his chestnut hair, and he doesn't stand as straight nor move as energetically as he did when I first arrived. I feel almost as if I'm deserting him, but he wants Gisselle and me to attend this private school and I want to make him happy and ease his burdens and tensions.

Gisselle hasn't once stopped complaining and whining. She is constantly threatening not to go to Greenwood. She moans and groans about having to be in a wheelchair and has everyone in the house running this way and that getting her things and satisfying her every whim. Not once did I ever hear her say the automobile accident was her and Martin's fault because of their smoking pot. Instead, she wants to blame the unfair world. I know the real reason she complains about going to Greenwood is that she's afraid she won't get what she wants whenever she wants it. If she was spoiled before, it was nothing compared to the way she is now. It makes it hard for me to feel sorry for her.

I have told her everything I know about our backgrounds, although she still won't accept the fact that our mother was a Cajun woman. Of course, she readily accepts all I tell her about Grandpere Jack, how he took advantage of our mother's pregnancy to make a bargain with Grandpere Dumas to sell Gisselle to the Dumases. He didn't know our mother was pregnant with twins, and Grandmere Catherine kept that fact from him until the day we were born, refusing to sell me too. I told Gisselle she could have easily been the one left in the bayou and I could have been the one brought up in New Orleans. That possibility puts the shudders into her and gets her to stop complaining for a while; but nevertheless, she has a way of getting under my skin and making me wish I had never left the bayou.

Of course, I often think of the bayou and the beautiful days we had together when Grandmere Catherine was still alive and you and I didn't know the truth about ourselves. Whoever said ignorance is bliss was saying the truth, especially when it comes to you and me. I know it's been harder for you to face up to it. You, perhaps more than I, have had to live with lies and deceit, but if I've learned anything, it's that we must forgive and forget if we are to go on enjoying anything in this world.

Yes, I wish we weren't half brother and half sister, and yes, I would come running home to you and we would build our lives together in the bayou, which is where my heart really is; but this isn't the course Destiny has laid out for us. I want us to be forever friends as well as brother and sister, and now that Gisselle has met you, she wants the same. Every time I get a letter from you she insists on my reading it aloud, and whenever you make a reference to her or tell her hello, she brightens with interest. Although with Gisselle you can never tell if it's just a momentary whim.

I love your letters, but I can't help feeling a bit sad whenever I get them. I close my eyes and hear the symphony of cicadas or the owl calling. Sometimes I imagine I can actually smell Grandmere Catherine's cooking. Yesterday Nina made us a crawfish etouffee for lunch, just the way Grandmere Catherine used to make it, with a roux glazed with butter and sprinkled with chopped green onions. Of course, as soon as Gisselle heard it was a Cajun recipe, she hated it. Nina winked at me and we had a private laugh, for we both knew Gisselle had eaten it heartily before.

Anyway, I promise I will write to you as soon as we are settled in Greenwood and maybe shortly, if you are able, you will come to visit us. At least you will know where to write.

I'd like to hear about the bayou and the people there, especially Grandmere Catherine's old friends. Most of all I'd like to hear about you. I suppose a part of me wants to hear about Grandpere Jack too. Although it is hard for me to think of him and not think of the terrible things he has done. I imagine he's a pathetic old

creature by now.

So many sad things have happened to us so soon in our lives. Maybe...maybe we've already had our share of hardships and misfortune and maybe the rest of our lives will be full of good and happy things. Am I a fool to think so?

I can just see you smiling at me with those darling blue eyes of yours twinkling.

It's a very warm night here tonight. The evening breeze carries the scent of the green bamboo, gardenias, and camellias up to me. It's one of those nights when every sound can be heard seemingly for miles and miles. Sitting by my window, I can hear the streetcar rattling along St. Charles Avenue, and somewhere in another house someone is playing a trumpet. It sounds so sad, and yet it sounds so beautiful.

Now there's a mourning dove on the upper galerie railing, moaning its sad cry. Grandmere Catherine used to say I must wish for something good for someone the first time I hear the dove at night and wish it quickly, otherwise the dove's sad note will bring hard luck to someone I love. It's a night for dreaming and for making wishes. I'll make one for you.

Go out and call to the marsh hawk for me. And then make a wish for me.

As always,

Love, Ruby

Chapter 1: First Day

The rap, rap, rapping of a woodpecker woke me out of a restless sleep. I had been awake for most of the night, tossing and turning with worry about what the next day would bring. Finally the weight of fatigue shut my eyes, and I felt myself falling into the world of twisted dreams, until once again I had a familiar nightmare. In it I was drifting in a pirogue through the swamp. The water was the color of dark tea. I had no pole; the current was taking me mysteriously along into the darkness draped with Spanish moss, ghostlike as it undulated in the slight breeze. Over the surface of the water, green snakes slithered, following my canoe. The luminous eyes of an owl peered at me with suspicion through the darkness as I drifted deeper and deeper into the swamp.

In this nightmare there was usually the sound of a baby crying. It was too young to form words, but the cry sounded very much like a call for "Mommy, Mommy." It drew me on, but usually I woke up from this terrible nightmare before I went much farther into the darkness. Last night, however, I passed my furthest point and continued into the murky, black world.

The pirogue made a turn and moved a little faster until I could see the luminous bone-white outline of a skeleton pointing its long, thin forefinger ahead, urging me to look into the darkness, until finally I saw the baby all alone, left in a hammock on the front galerie of Grandpere Jack's shack.

The pirogue started to slow down and then, right before my eyes, Grandpere Jack's shack began to sink into the swamp. The baby's cries grew louder. I reached over the side of the pirogue to row myself along faster, but my hand became entangled in green snakes. The shack continued to sink.

"NO!" I screamed. Deeper and deeper into the murky, muddy water it sunk, until only the galerie and the

baby in the hammock remained. She had a small face, the color of a pearl. I reached out as I drew closer, but just as I could finally take hold of the hammock, the galerie sunk too.

It was then that I heard the rapping of the woodpecker, and my eyes snapped open to see the morning sunlight seeping in around the curtains to light up the pearl-colored silk canopy above my dark pine queen-size bed. As if they were blooming, all the colors in the floral wallpaper brightened under the warm illumination as well. Even though I had barely slept, I was happy to wake up to so much sunshine, especially after my nightmare.

I sat up and scrubbed my face with my palms until I had wiped the Sandman's traces out of my eyes and cheeks, and then I took a deep breath and told myself to be strong and be ready and be hopeful. I turned toward the window when I heard the voices of the grounds staff as they fanned out to clip the hedges, weed the gardens, and sweep the banana leaves off the pool patio and tennis courts. My stepmother, Daphne, insisted that they always make the grounds and buildings look as if nothing had happened the night before, no matter how gusty the wind or hard the rain.

The night before I had chosen and laid out my clothing for traveling to our new school. Expecting my stepmother would scrutinize how I was dressed, I chose one of my longer skirts and matching blouses. Gisselle finally relented and permitted me to set out her things as well, although she went to sleep vowing never to get up. I could still hear her threats and vows echoing in my ears.

"I'd rather die in this bed," she whined, "then make this dreadful trip to Greenwood tomorrow. Whatever you choose for me will be what I will wear when I take my last breath. And it will be all your fault, too!" she declared, falling back histrionically in her bed.

No matter how long I might have lived with my twin sister, I never got used to how unlike we were despite our virtually duplicated faces and figures, eye and hair color. And it isn't only because of the differences in our upbringing, either. I am sure that even in our mother's womb we didn't get along.

"My fault? Why would it be my fault?"

She propped herself up on her elbows quickly.

"Because you've agreed to all this, and Daddy does whatever you agree to do. You should have argued and cried. You should have thrown a tantrum, You'd think you would know how to throw a tantrum by now. Haven't you learned anything from me since you ran away from the swamps?" she demanded.

Learn how to throw a tantrum? Learn how to be a spoiled brat is what she really meant, and that was one lesson I could do without, even though she thought she had been doing me a favor by teaching me to be more like her. I swallowed back my laughter, knowing it would just enrage her more.

"I'm doing what I think is best for everyone, Gisselle. I thought you understood. Daddy wants us to be away. He thinks it will make life easier here for Daphne and him and for us too. Especially after all that has happened!" I emphasized, my eyes as big as hers could be.

She sank back in her bed and pouted.

"I shouldn't have to do anything for anyone else. Not after what's happened to me. Everyone should be thinking of me first and my suffering," she moaned.

"It seems to me everyone does."

"Who does? Who?" she snapped, with sudden energy and strength. "Nina cooks what you like, not what I like. Daddy asks your opinions before he asks mine. Beau comes around to see you, not me! Why...why...even our half brother, Paul, writes only to you, never to me."

"He always sends his regards to you."

"But not a separate letter," she emphasized.

"You've never written one to him," I pointed out.

She considered this a moment. "Boys should write first."

"Boyfriends, maybe, but not a brother. With a brother, it doesn't matter who writes first."

"Then why doesn't he write to me?" she wailed.

"I'll tell him to," I promised.

"No you won't. If he won't do it on his own...then...he won't. I'll just lay here forever, left to stare at the ceiling as usual and wonder what everyone else is doing, what sort of fun they're having...you're having," she added sharply.

"You don't lay here wondering about anything, Gisselle," I said, finally unable to stave off a smile. "You go wherever you want, whenever you want. You merely have to snap your fingers and everyone jumps. Didn't Daddy buy the van just so you could be taken everywhere in your wheelchair?"

"I hate that van. And I hate being taken in the wheelchair. I look like something being delivered, like breads or...or...boxes of bananas. I won't go in it," she insisted.

Daddy had wanted to drive to Greenwood in Gisselle's van, but she vowed she wouldn't set foot in it. He wanted to use it because of all the things she had insisted on taking with her. She had had Wendy Williams, our maid, in her room for hours and hours packing everything, deliberately demanding the most insignificant things just to make it all that much more difficult. My pointing out to her that we had limited space in the dormitory and we had to wear uniforms didn't dissuade her.

"They'll make space for me. Daddy said they would do all that they could to accommodate me," she insisted. "And as for wearing uniforms...we'll see about that."

She wanted her stuffed animals -- each and every one -- her books and magazines, her photograph albums, almost her entire wardrobe, including all her shoes, and she even had Wendy pack every last thing from her vanity table!

"You'll be sorry when you come home for vacations," I warned her. "You won't have the things you want here, and then -- "

"And then I'll just send someone out to buy them for me," she replied smugly. Suddenly, she smiled. "If you would insist on more, Daddy would see how horrible this move is and maybe then he would change his

mind."

Gisselle's conniving never ceased to amaze me. I told her that if she put half as much energy toward doing the things she had to do instead of working on getting out of her responsibilities, she would be a success at anything.

"I'm a success when I want to be, when I have to be," she replied, so I gave up on another sisterly conversation.

Now it was the morning of our trip to the school and I just dreaded going into her room. I didn't need one of Nina's crystals to predict how I would be greeted and what to expect. I dressed and brushed out my hair before going in to see how far along she was. I met Wendy in the hallway hurrying away, practically in tears and muttering to herself.

"What is it, Wendy?"

"Monsieur Dumas sent me up to help her get started, but she won't listen to a word I say," she complained. "I plead with her and plead with her to get her body movin' and she lay there like a zombie, her eyes sewn shut, pretending she's asleep. What am I supposed to do?" she wailed. "Madame Dumas will yell at me, not her."

"No one's going to yell at you, Wendy. I'll get her up," I said. "Just give me a few moments."

She smiled through her tears and wiped them off her, plump cheeks. Wendy wasn't much older than Gisselle and me, but she had stopped going to school when she was only in the eighth grade and become a maid for the Dumas family. Ever since Gisselle's car accident, Wendy was more like Gisselle's whipping boy, bearing the brunt of her rages and tantrums. Daddy had hired a private duty nurse to look after Gisselle, but she couldn't tolerate Gisselle's tantrums. Neither could the second and third nurse, so the responsibility of looking to Gisselle's needs was unfortunately added to Wendy's chores.

"Don't know why you even care about her," Wendy said, her dark eyes as furious and bright as two shiny discs of black onyx.

I knocked on Gisselle's door, waited, and then entered when she didn't respond. She was as Wendy had described: still under the blanket, her eyes shut. I went to her window and looked out. Gisselle's room had a view of the street. The morning sunlight glittered off the cobblestone walk, and there was light traffic. Along our cornstalk fence, the azaleas, yellow and red roses, and hibiscus had all bloomed in a burst of breathtaking color. No matter how long I lived in this mansion, this estate in New Orleans's famed Garden District, I remained in awe of the homes and landscaping.

"What a beautiful day," I said. "Think of all the nice things we're going to see on the trip."

"It's a boring trip. I've been to Baton Rouge before," she said. "We'll see ugly oil refineries belching smoke."

"Oh my, she is alive!" I declared, slapping my hands together. "Thank heaven. We all thought you had passed on during the night."

"You all *wished*, you mean," she said angrily. She didn't pull herself to a sitting position. Instead, she turned and left her head sunk in the big, fluffy pillow, her arms at her sides, and sulked.

"I thought you finally agreed to go and not to make a fuss, as long as you could take everything you wanted along, Gisselle," I said with controlled patience.

"I just said I give up. I didn't say I agreed to go."

"You and I looked over the brochures. You admitted it looked like a beautiful place," I reminded her. She focused her gaze on me, her eyes small.

"How can you be so...so...agreeable? You'll have to leave Beau behind, you know," she reminded me. "And when the cat's away, the mice will play."

Beau had taken my going to Greenwood very hard when I first told him. We had been having a hard enough time as it was, continuing to see each other. Ever since Daphne had discovered my secret painting of Beau, we'd had to keep our romance quiet. He had posed nude for me and she had found the picture and told his parents. He was severely punished and we were forbidden to see each other. But time passed, and slowly his parents eased up, as long as Beau promised to see other girls as well. He really didn't, and even if he came to a school dance with someone else or took someone else for a ride in his sports car, he ended up with me.

"Beau's promised to visit as often as he can."

"But he didn't promise to become a monk," she stabbed back quickly. "I know half a dozen girls just waiting to sink their nails into him: Claudine and Antoinette for starters," she happily pointed out.

Beau was one of the most sought-after boys in our school, as handsome as a soap opera star. He merely had to turn his blue eyes on a girl and smile to make her heart pitter-patter so fast she lost her breath and said or did something foolish. He was tall and well built, one of our school's football stars. I had given myself to him and he had pledged his deep love for me.

Before I'd arrived in New Orleans, he was Gisselle's boyfriend, but she loved to tease and torment him by flirting and seeing other boys as well. She never realized how sensitive and serious he could be. All boys were the same to her anyway. She still saw them as playthings, not to be trusted and not worthy of loyalty. Her accident hadn't slowed her down, either. She still couldn't be in the company of young men and not torment them with a twist of her shoulder or a whispered promise to do something outrageous when and if she and the young man were ever alone.

"I don't have a collar around Beau," I told her. "He can do what he wants when he wants," I said with such nonchalance it made her eyes widen. Disappointment flooded her face.

"You don't mean that," she insisted.

"And he doesn't have a collar around me, either. If being apart for a while causes him to find another girlfriend, someone he likes better, than it was probably meant to be anyway," I said.

"Oh you and your damned faith in Destiny. I suppose you'll tell me Destiny meant for me to be a cripple for the rest of my life, won't you?"

"No."

"What, then?" she demanded.

"I don't want to speak badly about the dead," I said, "but you and I know what you and Martin were doing the day of the accident. You can't blame Destiny."

She folded her arms under her breasts and fumed.

"We promised Daddy we would go and give the school a chance. You know how things are here now," I reminded her.

"Daphne doesn't hate me as much as she hates you," she retorted, her eyes flaming.

"Don't be so sure of that. She's eager to get both of us out of her life. You know why she resents us: We know she really isn't our mother and that Daddy was more in love with our mother than he could ever be with her. As long as we're around, she can't escape the truth."

"Well, she didn't resent me until you arrived," Gisselle flared. "After that my whole life went downhill, and now I'm being carted off to some girls' school. Who wants to go to a school where there are no boys?" she cried.

"It says in the brochure that the school arranges dances with a boys' school from time to time," I said. The moment the words left my lips, I regretted them. She was always eager to pounce on any opportunity to point up her paralysis.

"Dances! Can I dance?"

"I'm sure there are many other things for you to do with a boy at Greenwood on the days they're permitted to visit."

"Permitted to visit? It sounds dreadful, like a prison." She started to cry. "I do wish I was dead. I do, I do."

"Come on, Gisselle," I pleaded. I sat on her bed and took her hand in mine. "I promised you I would do everything I could to make it easier for you, help you with your homework, whatever you need, didn't I?"

She pulled her hand back and ground her eyes dry with her small fists before peering over them at me.

"Everything I want?"

"Everything you need," I corrected.

"And if the school is terrible, you will side with me against Daddy and insist we come home?" I nodded. "Promise."

"I promise, but it has to be really terrible and not just hard with rules you hate."

"Promise on...on Paul's life."

"Oh, Gisselle."

"Go on or I won't believe you," she insisted.

"All right, I promise on Paul's life. You're absolutely dreadful sometimes, you know."

"I know," she said, smiling. "Go tell Wendy I'm ready to get up and get washed and dressed for breakfast."

"I'm right here," Wendy said, coming around the door jamb. "I was here waitin'."

"You mean you were spying on us," Gisselle accused. "Listening in."

"No I wasn't." Wendy looked at me, horrified. "I don't spy on you."

"Of course she doesn't spy on us, Gisselle."

"Of course she does, you mean. She likes listening in and living a romantic life through us," Gisselle teased. "It's that and your romance magazines, isn't it, Wendy? Or are you meeting Eric Daniels behind the cabana every night?"

Wendy nearly burst with embarrassment. Her mouth dropped and she shook her head.

"Maybe we are better off going to a private school and not being watched and spied upon all the time," Gisselle said, and sighed. "All right, all right," she snapped. "Help me wash and get my hair brushed and don't stand there looking like you were just caught with your panties down."

Wendy gasped. I turned away to hide my laughter and hurried down to tell Daddy all would be fine: Gisselle would be dressed and ready for the trip.

Ever since Daphne had tried to have me locked away in the institution and my subsequent escape, life at the House of Dumas had been difficult. Our meals together, whenever we were all available to eat together, were usually very quiet, formal affairs. Daddy no longer joked with Gisselle and me, and if Daphne had anything to say, it was usually abrupt and to the point. Most of the time was spent sympathizing with Gisselle or promising things to her.

Although something of a truce had supposedly been declared between us, Daphne never stopped complaining or looking for things to criticize about me. I think it was her constant badgering of my father that finally convinced him that shipping us off to a private school and getting us out of the house would be the wisest thing to do. Now Daphne behaved as if the idea had been hers and that it was all so wonderful for the family. My guess was she was afraid we would refuse to go at the last minute.

Daddy was alone in the dining room reading the morning paper and sipping his coffee when I arrived. A croissant with butter and some jam was on a small plate beside his cup. He hadn't heard me enter, and for a moment I was able to observe him without his being aware.

Our daddy was a strikingly handsome man. He had the same soft green eyes Gisselle and I had, but his face was leaner, his cheekbones more pronounced. Lately he seemed to have gained a little weight around his waist, but he still had a firm upper body with gracefully sloped shoulders. He was proud of his rich, chestnut-brown hair and still kept a small pompadour, but the gray strands that had invaded at his temples were beginning to appear in the back and top as well. Most of the time these days he looked tired or in deeply meditative thought. He spent less time outdoors, hardly ever went fishing or hunting, and consequently had lost the dark tan he used to always have.

"Good morning, Daddy," I said, and took my seat. He lowered his paper quickly and smiled, but I could see from the hesitation in his eyes that there had been some trouble between him and Daphne already this morning.

"Good morning. Excited?"

"And frightened," I admitted.

"Don't be. The last thing I want to do is send you someplace where you won't be happy. Believe me."

"I do," I said. Edgar appeared in the doorway with a silver tray carrying my orange juice.

"I won't have anymore than coffee and a croissant either this morning, Edgar."

"Nina won't like that, mademoiselle," he warned. His dark eyes looked darker this morning, his face glum. My gaze followed him out of the dining room and then I turned to Daddy, who smiled.

"Edgar is very fond of you and sorry to see you leaving. Like me, he knows that the brightness and the happy sound of your voice will be dearly missed."

"Perhaps we shouldn't go then. Perhaps this is a mistake," I said softly. "Gisselle is still complaining."

"Gisselle will always be complaining, I'm afraid," he said with a sigh. "No, no, regretful as it is, I think this is the best thing for you. And for Gisselle," he added quickly. "She spends too much time alone, feeling sorry for herself. I'm sure you won't let her do that at Greenwood."

"I'll look after her, Daddy."

He smiled. "I know. She has no idea how lucky she is to have a sister like you," he said, a warm smile around his tired eyes.

"Isn't Daphne coming to breakfast?" I asked.

"No, she's having breakfast in the bedroom this morning," he replied quickly. "Nina's just taken it up."

It didn't surprise me that Daphne would ignore us as much as possible on the day of our departure, but I half had expected to see her gloat about it too. After all, she was getting what she wanted: She was getting rid of me.

"I'll be visiting Jean on Wednesday," Daddy said. "I'm sure he'll be interested to hear all about you. And Gisselle, of course."

"Tell him I'll write to him," I said. "I will, too. I'll write long letters describing everything. Will you tell him?"

"Of course. I will visit you too," Daddy promised. I knew he felt guilty about sending Gisselle and me off to this private school because he had made that promise to visit at least a dozen times during the last week.

Edgar returned with my croissant and coffee. Daddy began reading his paper again. I started to sip my coffee

and nibble on my croissant, but my stomach felt as if it had a sac au lait fish swimming in it, tickling my insides with its tail. A few moments later, we heard the whir of the electric chair that brought Gisselle down the stairs. As usual, she moaned and groaned as she descended.

"It moves so slowly. Why doesn't Edgar just come up and carry me down? Or Daddy? Someone should be hired just for that. I feel so stupid. Wendy, did you hear what I said? Stop pretending you didn't hear."

Daddy lowered his paper and gazed at me as he shook his head.

"I'd better go help her," Daddy said. He got up and went to help Wendy shift Gisselle from the stairway chair to the wheelchair on the bottom floor.

Nina came bursting out of the kitchen and stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips, glaring at me.

"Good morning, Nina," I said.

"What kind of 'good morning' is it? You don't eat what Nina has prepared. It be a trip to Baton Rouge and you need your strength, hear? I got hot grits. I got eggs beat just the way you like."

"I guess I'm too nervous, Nina. Please don't be angry," I said.

She lowered her hands from her hips and pressed her lips together as she shook her head. "Nina don't get angry at you." She thought a moment and then approached, taking something out of her pocket. "I be giving you this before I forget," she said, and handed me a dime with a hole and a string through the hole.

"What's this?"

"You wear this around your left ankle, you hear, and no bad spirits come after you. Go on, put it around your ankle," she ordered. I glanced back at the doorway to be sure no one was looking and quickly did as she commanded. She looked relieved.

"Thank you, Nina."

"Bad spirits always hovering around this house. Got to be vigilant," she said, and went back into the kitchen. I wasn't one to doubt charms and talismans, superstitions and rituals. My Grandmere Catherine had been one of the bayou's most respected *traiteurs*, a treater who could drive away evil spirits and cure people of various ailments. She had even helped wives unable to get pregnant to get pregnant. Everyone in the bayou, including our priest, had deep respect for Grandmere. In the Cajun world from which I had come, various voodoo and other religious beliefs were often married to produce a view of the world that was more reassuring.

"I don't like this skirt," I heard Gisselle complain as Daddy wheeled her into the dining room. "It's too long and it feels like I have a sheet over my legs. You picked it out just because you think my legs are ugly now, didn't you?" she accused.

"It's the one you agreed to wear when we picked out your clothes last night," I reminded her.

"Last night I just wanted to get it over with and get you out of my face," she retorted.

"What would you like for breakfast, honey?" Daddy asked her.

"A glass of arsenic," she replied.

He smirked. "Gisselle, why make things harder than they have to be?"

"Because I hate being a cripple and I hate the idea of being carted up to this school where I don't know a soul," she said. Daddy sighed and looked at me.

"Gisselle, just eat something so we can get started. Please," I begged.

"I'm not hungry." She pouted a moment and then wheeled herself up to the table.

"What are you having? I'll have that too," she told Edgar. He lifted his eyes to the ceiling and then went to the kitchen.

As soon as we'd had our breakfast, Daddy went to see about all the luggage. It took Edgar and one of the grounds workers four trips to bring down everything. Gisselle had three trunks, two cartons, three bags, and her record player. I had one suitcase. Because Gisselle insisted on taking so much, Daddy had to hire someone to follow us in the van.

As I was wheeling Gisselle out to the galerie, where we could watch the loading of the vehicles, Daphne appeared at the top of the stairway. She called to us and took a few steps down. She had her pale reddish blond hair pinned up, and she wore a red Chinese robe and slippers.

"Before you go," she said, "I want to warn the both of you to be on your best behavior. Just because you're going a considerable distance away, it doesn't mean you're free to act and say whatever you like. You must remember you are Dumases and what you do always reflects on the family name and reputation."

"What are we going to do?" Gisselle moaned. "It's just a dumb girls' school."

"Don't be insolent, Gisselle. You two could bring disrespect to this family no matter where you go. I just want you both to know we have friends sending their children there, so we will be well informed as to your behavior, I'm sure," she threatened.

"If you're so afraid of how we'll behave away from home, don't send us," Gisselle retorted. Sometimes I enjoyed my spoiled twin sister -- especially when she annoyed our stepmother.

Daphne pulled herself up abruptly and glared down at us with her blue eyes turning icy.

"If anything," she said slowly, "you both need this school, need the discipline. You've both been horribly spoiled by your father. The best thing that could happen is for you to be away from him."

"No," I said. "The best thing is for us to be away from you, Mother." I turned and pushed Gisselle toward the door.

"Remember my warnings!" she cried, but I didn't turn back. I felt my heart pounding, the tears of rage burning just under the lids of my eyes.

"Did you hear what she said?" Gisselle muttered. "*Discipline*. They're sending us to a reform school. There will probably be bars on the windows and ugly matronly women slapping our hands with rulers."

"Oh Gisselle, stop," I said. She rattled on and on about how terrible this was all going to be, but I didn't listen. My eyes kept sweeping the street and my ears kept listening for the sound of a sports car instead. Beau had promised to be here before we left. He knew we were planning to be on our way by ten o'clock and it was already nine forty-five and he hadn't appeared.

"He's probably not going to come say goodbye to you," Gisselle teased when she caught me looking at my watch. "I'm sure he's decided not to waste his time. He probably already made a date to meet someone new today. You know it's what his parents want him to do anyway."

Despite my brave facade, I couldn't help but worry that she was right. I was afraid his parents had stopped him from coming to say goodbye to me this morning.

But suddenly, his sports car came careening around a turn. The engine roared and the brakes squealed as he came to a stop in front of our house and hopped out of the car. He raced up to the galerie. Gisselle looked very disappointed. I left her and hurried down the steps to greet him. We hugged.

"Hi, Gisselle," he said, waving to her, and then he turned me away so we could walk off and be alone for a few moments. He looked back at the luggage being loaded into the van and shook his head.

"You're really going," he said sadly.

"Yes."

"It's going to be impossible for me here now," he predicted. "Without you, my life has a gaping hole in it. The halls at school will seem empty. To lift my eyes while I'm on the playing field and not see you watching from the stands...Don't go," he pleaded. "Refuse."

"I have to go, Beau. It's what my father wants. I'll write you and call you and..."

"And I'll come see you as much as I can," he promised. "But it won't be the same for me as knowing every morning when I get up that I'm going to see you soon."

"Please don't make this any harder than it is for me, Beau."

He nodded, and we continued walking through the gardens. Two gray squirrels scurried along on our right, watching us with interest. Hummingbirds flitted around the purple bugle vine while a bluejay that had settled on a low branch in a magnolia tree jerked its wings nervously above us. In the distance, a train of narrow clouds rode the crest of a sea breeze east toward the Florida Gulf Coast. Otherwise, the sky remained a soft blue.

"I'm sorry I'm being so difficult. I'm being selfish. But I can't help it," he added. Then he sighed with resignation and wiped the strands of golden hair from his forehead. "So," he said, "you're going off to a ritzy school. I bet you'll meet a lot of rich young men, sons of oil barons who will charm you."

I laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Gisselle threatened me this morning with you falling in love with another girl here, and now you're telling me it's going to be me who falls in love with someone else."

"I have no room in my heart for anyone else," Beau said. "You take up too much of it."

We paused, facing the old stable. Daddy told me there hadn't been a horse in it for more than twenty years. Off to the right, one of the grounds staff was completing the clipping of a banana tree, the fends piling up beside him. Beau's words hung in the air between us. My heart ached, and tears mixed with happiness and sadness flooded my eyes.

"I mean it," Beau said softly. "I don't think a night passes when I don't think about us in your art studio."

"Don't, Beau," I said, and put my forefinger on his lips. He kissed it quickly and held my hand against his cheek.

"They can do anything they want; they can say anything they want. They can send you away, send me away, threaten, whatever, but they can't take you out of here," he said, pressing my hand to his temple, "and here," he added, bringing my hand to his heart. I felt the quickened beat and looked back to be sure no one was watching us as he pulled me closer and closer to him so he could press his lips to mine.

It was a long but soft kiss, one that sent a tingle down the back of my neck and brought a warmth to my bosom. His kisses were like little electric reminders of the passion we shared now. They awakened the memory of his touch, his fingers on my arms, my shoulders, and finally my breasts. His warm breath on my eyes brought back the image of his naked body that day he forced me to draw him. How my fingers had trembled; how they trembled now. The stirring in me was so great it frightened me, for I felt as if I could just turn and run away with him, run, run, run until we were alone in some dark, soft place, holding each other more tightly than ever. Beau aroused feelings in me that I never knew existed, feelings that were stronger than any warnings, any sensible thoughts could ever be. If they were set loose, there would be no way to rein them in again.

I pulled back.

"I've got to get going," I said.

He nodded, but as I started back, he pulled my hand.

"Wait," he said. "I want to give you this without a dozen eyes watching." He dug into his pocket and produced a small white box tied with a tiny pink ribbon.

"What is it?"

"Open it," he said, putting it into my palm. I did so slowly and plucked out a gold locket on a gold chain. The locket had a tiny ruby in the center circled with diamond chips.

"Oh, Beau, it's beautiful! But it must be very expensive."

He shrugged but smiled, indicating I was right.

"Now open the locket," he said, and I did so.

Inside was a picture of him, and across from it was a picture of me. I laughed and kissed him on the cheek quickly,

"Thank you, Beau. It's a wonderful gift. I'll put it on immediately," I said. "Help me with the clasp." I handed it to him and turned around. He draped the locket between my breasts and fastened the chain. Then he kissed me on the neck.

"Now if any other boy gets close to you, he'll have to get through me to reach your heart," he whispered.

"No one else will get that close, Beau," I promised.

"Ruby," we heard Daddy call. "It's time, honey."

"Coming, Daddy."

Beau and I started back. Daddy and Edgar were taking Gisselle off the galerie and transporting her to the rear seat of the Rolls-Royce. The wheelchair was folded and placed in the van.

"Beau, good morning," Daddy said.

"Morning, monsieur."

"How's everyone at home?"

"Fine," he said. Despite the passage of time and the healing of wounds, it was still hard for Daddy and Beau to speak to each other. Daphne had done so much to sensationalize and escalate the situation.

"Ready, Ruby?" Daddy asked, looking from Beau to me. Daddy knew what it meant to leave someone you love behind. His eyes were full of sympathy.

"Yes, Daddy."

Daddy got into the car, and I turned to Beau for our goodbye kiss. Gisselle had her face in the window.

"Come on, already. I can't stand sitting in here when we're not moving."

Beau smiled at her and then kissed me.

"I'll call as soon as I can," I whispered.

"And I'll come as soon as I can. I love you."

"Me too," I said quickly, and ran around the other side to get into the car.

"You could kiss me goodbye too, Beau Andreas. It wasn't so long ago that you couldn't wait to kiss me every chance you got," Gisselle said.

"I will never forget those kisses," Beau teased, and he leaned inside to kiss her quickly.

"That wasn't a kiss," she said. "Maybe you forgot how. Maybe you need an expert to teach you again." She flashed a look at me then and added, "Maybe you'll practice while we're away." She laughed and sat back.

Daddy conferred with the driver of the van, reviewing the route to Baton Rouge and the school just in case we got separated.

"What's that?" Gisselle asked when she saw the locket lying between my breasts.

"A gift from Beau."

"Let me see it," she said, leaning forward to take the locket in her fingers. I had to lean over so she wouldn't snap the chain off my neck.

"Be careful," I said.

She opened it and saw our pictures. Her mouth dropped open and she looked back through the window at Beau, who stood talking with Edgar.

"He never gave me anything like that. In fact," she said angrily, "he never gave me anything."

"Maybe he thought you had everything you wanted," I said.

She dropped the locket back on my chest and flopped back in the seat to pout. Daddy got into the car and looked at us.

"All set?" he asked.

"No," Gisselle said. "I'll never be set for this."

"We're all set, Daddy," I said. I looked through the window at Beau and mouthed, "Goodbye. I love you." He nodded. Daddy started the engine and we began to pull away.

I looked back through the rearview mirror and saw Nina and Wendy on the galerie, waving. I waved to them and to Edgar and to Beau. Gisselle refused to turn around and wave goodbye to anyone. She sat with her eyes forward, hatefully.

When we reached the gate, I lifted my gaze slowly up the front of the great house until my eyes focused on a window in which the curtains had been drawn back. I studied it, and as the shadows moved away, I saw Daphne standing there gazing down at us.

She was wearing a smile of deep satisfaction.

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