



Willow (De Beers, Book 1)

By V.C. Andrews

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Using an assumed name and pretending to conduct a study of one of the nation's wealthiest communities, Willow takes Florida's gem city by storm and quickly encounters Thatcher Eaton, a young lawyer who sweeps her off her feet. But as Willow spirals into a passionate love affair and becomes intoxicated with the lifestyle of the rich and famous, the dark truth about her birth family threatens her fabulous new life, pushing her to the brink of insanity....

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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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Chapter One: Saying Goodbye

I recognized the dean of students' secretary, Mrs. Schwartz, standing in my classroom doorway. She was shifting her weight nervously from one foot to the other and rubbing one palm against the other as if she were sanding down a block of wood. She gave each of my classmates a flashbulb smile as they entered, then quickly turned back to the hallway. I didn't know for certain yet, but I had a hunch she was waiting there for me. As usual, she was dressed in her navy-blue suit with her lace-trimmed white blouse and stiletto shoes -- practically her work uniform.

"Oh, dear," she said, reaching out for me as I approached. She seized my hand and drew me closer. "We have received a rather frantic call from your aunt Agnes Delroy. Apparently, she was unable to reach you at your apartment last night or this morning and has been burning up the telephone lines between here and Charleston," she ran on, obviously infected by my aunt's histrionics. Aunt Agnes often had that effect on people.

I could not tell her why I hadn't been able to receive Aunt Agnes's call. I had spent the night at Allan's apartment, and that wasn't anyone's business but mine. I was positive, however, that Aunt Agnes had been suspicious, especially if she had tried late in the evening, and had overdone her exasperation over failing to reach me. My father's fifty-one-year-old sister was the sort of person who expected that anyone she called or beckoned was just waiting to serve and fulfill her requests. She and I never got along, anyway. She never came out and said it in so many words, but she considered an adopted child somehow inferior, despite my achievements, especially a child whose mother was a patient in a mental clinic.

But even if my adoptive mother had given birth to me, Aunt Agnes would have been critical. I always knew she believed my father had married beneath the family. My adoptive mother came from one of those old Southern families that had lost most of its wealth but desperately clung to its heritage. That was not good enough for Aunt Agnes. Money, heritage, position in society, and certainly power were the pillars upon which she built her church, and if one was weak, the church would collapse.

My father tolerated Aunt Agnes rather than loved her as a sister and once told me that her husband, Uncle Darwood, probably had welcomed the Grim Reaper with open arms, seeing death as an avenue of escape, even though it wasn't any sort of pleasant death. He was a very serious closet alcoholic and had drowned his liver with all his unhappiness.

Talking about Aunt Agnes and Uncle Darwood was one of the few things Daddy and I could have a warm,

loving time doing together, basking in each other's laughter, soaking in the warm intimacy of a private hour when we were just father and daughter, alone, almost discovering each other for the very first time. This was some months after my adoptive mother's death, which ironically was the catalyst that finally drew us closer. It was almost as if she had cast a long, deep shadow over Daddy and me, keeping us both hidden from each other most of the time.

"What's wrong, Mrs. Schwartz?" I asked, sucking back my breath and swallowing it down into my lungs, already burning with anxiety.

A few of my classmates lingered just behind her in the room, waiting to hear.

"Your aunt says your father's been rushed to the Spring City General Hospital and you should come as quickly as you can." She pressed her right palm against her chest. It was as if those words had been burning inside her and now she was relieved.

"Why? Has my father been in an accident?" I asked.

It was how my adoptive mother had died less than two years ago, rushing home in the midst of a winter storm that dropped tiny icicles as sharp and as deadly as tiny knives out of the grumbling sky. She was hurrying home to get ready for a charity event. The police said she misjudged a turn and spun in circles in her small Mercedes before she hit the guardrail and went over and over, down into oblivion. I was sure she died upset that she wasn't properly dressed for it.

I remember thinking how horrible it all was, but I also remember I didn't cry as any other daughter would have done. I didn't feel that wrenching in my gut that comes when someone close to you is ripped away, and I felt guilty about that afterward. I even considered that my lack of emotion was indeed evidence of some mental problem, that maybe she had been right about me all along.

"No. It's heart trouble, I'm afraid," Mrs. Schwartz replied, her face so dark with sorrow she looked as if she were already at his funeral. "She said you should get right there. I'm sorry, dear. I'll see that all of your teachers know why you're not attending classes."

There is a moment after you hear bad news when your body goes into rebellion. You've heard shocking words. Everything is processed in your mind, but your brain becomes like those change machines that keep sending your dollar bill back out at you because it's creased or torn or put in upside down. The bad news has to be reprocessed and reprocessed until, finally, it takes hold and sinks down through your spine, ordering your defiant shoulders and hips and legs to obey the commands and turn you around so you can leave.

My lungs seemed to fill completely with hot air, threatening to explode. I was sure I would be blown to pieces right in front of everyone. All I could do was hold my breath and bite down on my lower lip to keep myself from bursting into tears.

As I walked away, I heard Mrs. Schwartz's stilettos clicking over the floor behind me, building in rhythm like a drumroll, chasing me out the door and to my car in the student parking lot. Daddy had made me a

present of the car a week before I was to leave for my second year of college. My intention was to go into psychology myself and perhaps become a school psychologist. I wanted to work with young people because, based on my own experience growing up, I thought I could have the best effect on someone's life if I could get to him or her early enough.

When I arrived at my apartment, I played back my answering machine and heard Aunt Agnes's annoyed voice crying, "Where are you? Why aren't you home at this hour, especially when I need to talk with you? Call me immediately, no matter how late." Her voice trailed off with "I wouldn't think a college student could stay out this late."

I phoned Allan and told him the news. I knew he would still be at home. He had a late-morning class and then a full afternoon, including an important exam for which he had to study.

"I've already called for a cab to take me to the airport," I told him.

I hadn't, but I knew how he hated distractions whenever he had an exam. Still, I wished he would volunteer to come by and take me to the airport. It wasn't only because I didn't want to leave my car there. I wanted to be hugged and reassured before I boarded the plane.

Allan and I had been going together for nearly a year. We had met at a college mixer when I was a freshman. Barely eighteen at the time, I was hardly a worldly woman and, unlike most of my girlfriends, could easily count on one hand how many boys I had even cared to consider as boyfriends. I used to worry that I was incapable of a serious relationship, but the truth was most of the boys I had known always seemed immature to me. Maybe I was too demanding, expecting somehow to find a younger version of my father: serious but not solemn, confident but not arrogant.

Allan seemed that way to me the first time I met him. Besides being a very good-looking man with a strong, masculine mouth, a perfect nose in size and shape, and strikingly dark blue eyes, Allan had a sureness about him, a steady focus that caused him to stand head and shoulders above the young college men around me who were still very obvious and insecure. Their laughter gushed like broken water pipes. Their courage came from beer and whiskey and shattered in the morning with the light of reality. Like vampires, they avoided mirrors. If they were so disappointing to themselves, I thought, what would they be to me?

"Good," Allan said. "Call me as soon as you find out what's happening," he added, hurrying me off the phone, which was a great disappointment to me, even though I knew he was doing it to get back to those books and notes and pursuit of his career. Sometimes, I wished I were competing with another woman. At least then I'd have a fighting chance.

"Okay." My voice cracked even over one simple word. I was already in a tight ball. Still, I managed to throw together a carry-on bag and call for the taxi.

I had to fly to Columbia, South Carolina. It wasn't a long trip, but the next scheduled flight wasn't for another hour and a half, and I found that nothing I did, read, or looked at on television in the airport calmed me down very much. If I glanced at my watch once, I glanced at it twenty times. I was still far too numb to take note of any of the people around me, the activity and noise. Finally, I heard the call for my flight and went to the gate. My heart was thumping.

Daddy's heart had given him trouble? How could this be? He was only fifty-nine. I knew of no warnings, but I also knew my father was capable of hiding something like that from me. I had no idea yet how much he did hide, how much of a man of secrets he had been.

As childish and unrealistic as it was, I simply saw my father as invulnerable, someone so strong and so powerful that he was beyond the reach of ordinary tragedy and illness. It would take the act of some supernatural being, some wicked mythological god, to bring him down into the real world where mere

mortals lived. I couldn't recall him ever being seriously ill. Except for an occasional cold, he seemed above it all. Even with a cough and a cold, he managed to go to work.

Everything he did in his life was always well organized, methodical, measured. For as long as I could remember, he ate the same things for breakfast: half a grapefruit, a mixture of oat and wheat bran cereals with strawberries, a cup of coffee, and, occasionally, a slice of four-grain bread. On weekends, he substituted the homemade date and nut bread Amou prepared, and on special occasions, he had her cheese and mushroom omelet with pieces of fruit cut perfectly to frame it on his plate.

Everything that was his in our house was kept in its proper place. I doubted that I would ever meet or get to know a neater man. He used to joke about himself and say he was obviously an obsessive compulsive. If the pen and pencil holder on his desk was moved an inch to the right or the left, he would notice. Amou was terrified whenever she went in there to clean, afraid she would move something and disturb him.

For exercise, Daddy took long walks on our property, for we had one hundred fifty acres with 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. He walked twice a week, and the walks lasted exactly two hours. I could adjust my watch around his walks, in fact.

As far as I knew, my adoptive mother never walked with him. He liked walking alone and told me once that he did a great deal of his creative thinking on those walks. I would have thought the wildlife and the scenery would have conspired to keep him from doing much of that, but my father seemed to have the power to turn off the world around him at will and fix his mind on whatever he wanted to focus on at the time.

Certainly, no one was better at ignoring my A.M. She would rant and rave about something, and most of the time he would stare at her, nodding at the proper moment, never changing his expression much more than occasionally lifting one of his dark brown eyebrows as a sort of exclamation point. He always promised to do whatever he could about the problem. Sometimes he did do something, but most of the time the problems either solved themselves or simply wilted and dropped from the branches of my A.M.'s tree of complaints.

Physically, Daddy wasn't intimidating. He was only about five-foot-ten, and he was always slim. He looked like a tennis player, and that was indeed the only actual sport he had played in college. His power lay in his eyes; when he fixed them on you, you would swear he was taller, bigger. I imagined that, especially for his patients, it was like being caught like a fugitive in a spotlight, unable to break out of it no matter how you twisted and turned in hopes of escape.

His eyes weren't set too deeply, nor were they extraordinarily large, yet they were always what my friends and other people who met him recalled most vividly. I used to laugh at my girlfriends, who were actually more than intimidated; they were afraid of him. They believed he could see into their thoughts since he was a famous psychiatrist.

I was always very proud of my father, but having the chief psychiatrist of a world-famous mental clinic as my father did put pressures on me that other girls my age could never even begin to understand.

Daddy was a handler. He rarely raised his voice or chastised me as would the parents of my friends. Now that I intended to become a student of psychology myself, I understood his techniques. My childhood relationship with him was built on questions, questions he wanted me to answer immediately or search inside myself to find the answers to, even at the ripe old age of four.

"Why is your mother angry at you, Willow?"

"Why do you think we're displeased with what you've done, Willow?"

"Why am I upset with what you've said to your mother, Willow?"

I could paper the walls of my memory with his questions.

My girlfriends worried about my father's psychological expertise from another point of view.

"How can you get away with anything?" they complained to me. "Your father would know immediately if you lie to him or cook up some phony excuse."

"I don't lie to him," I said, and they shook their heads at me with pity drooling from their eyes and lips, as well as some worry that I could get them into trouble. "However," I added, "I can fool my mother and often do."

That they not only understood but appreciated. It was as if getting past your parents was the initiation we all had to undergo to become full-fledged teenagers.

Somehow, lying to my adoptive mother on occasion didn't weigh too heavily on my conscience. Either the lies were too light or my conscience was too thick, whereas lying to Daddy would have been like stepping on a paper-thin sheet of ice.

Often, I thought my A.M. welcomed lies as long as the lies helped her to avoid some conflict or some disappointment. She was terrified of unhappiness because someone sometime in her life had convinced her that sadness was what aged people the fastest and the most. Her belief was reinforced by the faces of some of Daddy's patients, especially the women. Depression, she was persuaded, aged them twenty to thirty years, especially around their eyes -- red, sunken and sad.

Anger was second on the list of youth killers, even though she succumbed to it more often than she would have liked. Scowling not only created wrinkles where there were none, but it deepened any that were naturally there. Thus, when offered the choice of following a deception or facing an ugly or unpleasant truth, my adoptive mother lunged for the lie the way some drowning person would stretch and jump for a life preserver.

She was truly a very beautiful woman, elegant and always in style. She often traveled to Paris, without Daddy, to shop for the newest fashions. Nearly as tall as Daddy, she had the figure of a runway model; to her way of thinking, being overweight was just as much an agent of age as anything. Women who gained and lost weight on a regular basis, she once told me, stretch their skin and create wrinkles, not only in their faces but also on their legs and even on and around their breasts.

"What's uglier than a woman in a V-neck gown with ripples of skin around her cleavage? Why, even a drop of perspiration flowing down from the base of her throat would get discouraged and evaporate," she told me once while she turned each and every way in front of her full-length mirror, scrutinizing her figure for any signs of imperfection.

All of my girlfriends were in awe of my adoptive mother, but that was because they didn't live with her. They saw her only from afar, looked at her the way they would look at some beautiful celebrity. From the

things they said, I understood that their mothers were quite envious of mine, too.

I worried that I could never have her sort of figure. I was five-foot-six. I had hair the color of a tarnished penny, whereas my A.M. had hair a shade lighter than fool's gold which actually glittered in the light. She kept it quite short, but she had a shelf of wigs in her closet so she could change styles at a whim.

One feature I had that neither she nor Daddy had were tiny freckles along the crests of my cheeks. I have a much lighter complexion than either of them as well. None of that was remarkable considering I was adopted, of course, but my adoptive mother was always jealous of my nose, claiming it was perfect and in proportion with my mouth and my eyes, speaking about it as if it were all a waste on me.

When I was a little girl, she warned me about my weight and predicted that I would always be chunky since I didn't have her genes. She pointed out my bloated cheeks and told me that was a good indication of what was to be.

"Your real mother must have been a chunky woman with a double chin," she declared. "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 squat 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."

She drew so many ugly visions of my real mother for me that I was sure I had been born to some sort of circus freak. I hated thinking about her and secretly harbored the hope that I had been created in a laboratory. Someday my father would reveal it, and it would shut my mother's mouth.

Amou said my adoptive mother was wrong about my baby fat, anyway, and was quick to cheer me up whenever my A.M. said things like that to me.

"Your mama is so worried about being infeliz, unhappy, and the wrinkles that would come, you'd think she would make sure you never be sad," she muttered.

Amou said many things under her breath, things I wasn't supposed to hear, much less understand. Sometimes she would use as many Portuguese words as she could, but I got so I understood those words, even the curse words, because I sat by observing and listening when she and her sister Marisa met for lunch at our house every other Sunday.

Actually, even as a child, I understood a great deal more than anyone thought, especially about myself.

But not quite as much as I needed to understand. Not yet.

That was coming.

It waited for me on a shelf in Daddy's office like a secret whispered in a dead man's ear.

When I arrived at the airport in Columbia, I was very surprised to see my cousin Margaret Selby Delroy waiting for me at the arrival gate. It had been at least three years since we had seen and spoken to each other, the last time being at Uncle Darwood's funeral. The family had given out the story that he had died of heart failure. His alcoholism was an embarrassment that Aunt Agnes simply would not acknowledge. Like so many friends and relatives of my parents, the Delroys traveled on a bus without windows from one fantasy to another, shifting their eyes quickly away from anyone who would dare actually to look at them when they

wove one of their illusions.

Margaret was only six months younger than I was, and comparisons were inevitable, I guess. She was two inches taller, but, contrary to my adoptive mother's predictions, I was the one who lost all her baby fat. The roundness evaporated from my face as if some magical sculptor molded my visage a little every night, bringing my high cheekbones out, thinning my lips, shaping my jaw and the lines of my neck and shoulders, firming and curving my breasts and narrowing my waist, until one day I looked at myself in my ivory oval vanity mirror and felt my heart go skipping with the real possibility that I was going to be attractive after all.

Amou was the only one I dared tell. I did it in the form of a question, of course.

"Do you think I'm getting pretty, Amou?" I asked her one afternoon in the kitchen. I liked helping her prepare dinner.

She stopped what she was doing and looked at me with that soft smile on her lips that I had grown to think of as my true sunlight.

"It's like you've been wearing a child's mask and slowly, slowly, it's disappearing and you be coming out. But don't be staring at yourself all day," she warned. "Worst thing a woman can do is fall in love with herself before a good man do. You know what happens then?" she added, leaving the answer floating around us like the whispers of ghosts. I knew she was talking about my A.M., of course.

And about young women like Margaret Selby Delroy, despite the roundness in her face that betrayed her self-indulgence and kept her from being attractive. Her softness came from being spoiled and waited upon hand and foot. Her hips were a little too wide, and she had these puffy little fingers, swollen under the glitter of her expensive rings. Her lips always looked swollen and uneven, and her eyes, although an attractive hazel, seemed in retreat because of her plump cheeks.

But there was no limit to what she and her mother would spend on her coiffure, her wardrobe, and her cosmetics. From her early teen years until now, everything she did and everything her mother had done to and for her was designed for one purpose: to find her a suitable husband, even to the extent of sending her to charm school. Their planning and conniving had apparently worked, for she was now engaged to marry Ashley Standard Roberts, the son of the publisher of the *Charleston Times*. I had not met him, but I had seen their picture in the social pages of the newspaper.

They looked more like brother and sister to me, both at least ten to fifteen pounds overweight, he with that born-with-a-silver-spoon-in-his-mouth look that suggested the most difficult thing he had to do every day was get himself out of his king-size bed and go to the bathroom. There was surely someone around to help him choose his clothes, clean up after him, and chauffeur him through the world as if he were here simply to visit and taste hors d'oeuvres.

"Willow!" Margaret Selby called and waved to me emphatically even though she was directly in my sight. Maybe she was afraid I wouldn't recognize her in her Fendi quilted black skirt suit and velvet hat in winter white. It had taupe satin trim and a swooping brim and would make her stand out in any crowd. As I drew closer, I saw she had gained a few more pounds. In fact, the outfit fit her shoulders too tightly and looked as if it would take Superman to pull her arms out of the suit jacket.

Couldn't she see how foolish she looked? I wondered. Margaret worshiped expensive clothing but really had no sense of style, I thought.

We hugged.

"I didn't expect to find you here," I said. I didn't mean it in any mean way. I simply never anticipated she would be concerned.

"You know how my mother is. She hates facing any unpleasantness alone and simply insisted I go along -- not that I can do much of anything but sit and twist my hands. And I do have so much to do for my upcoming wedding," she concluded with a pout designed to draw out my sympathy.

"How's my father?" I asked dryly.

"Oh. Nothing's new that I know about since I left the hospital to meet you."

"What *do* you know?"

She shrugged. "Let's see," she said as we started out. "He was at home, not actually in the house, but returning from one of those famous constitutionals of his. Mother calls them that, although I don't have any idea why a walk resembles a government document," she inserted. "Do you have any luggage to get?" she asked before I could explain.

"No, no," I said. "This is all I brought. I left in a terrible hurry, obviously."

"Oh, right. Of course. You have things at home to wear, I'm sure."

"I'm not worried about what I'll wear, Margaret. What else do you know about my father's condition?"

"What else? Oh. So he was walking toward the house when he apparently collapsed. Fortunately, Miles...is that his name, your father's housekeeper?"

"Yes, yes."

How many years would it take for her to remember his name? People like my cousin selected their memories with snobbery, conveniently forgetting anyone or anything they considered beneath them.

"So funny having a man for a housekeeper. Mama says he does your father's laundry, cleans and cooks for him now, too."

"Miles has been with my father for nearly twenty years," I said. "He's not really just his housekeeper. He's been his driver and cared for the property all that time, looking after the grounds, doing maintenance. I think by now it would no longer be a novelty."

"Right," she said. "But wasn't he a former patient of his?" she whispered.

"Margaret, please. What else happened to my father?"

"Oh, Miles looked out a window and saw him lying on the ground and rushed out to him. He called for paramedics, who claimed they revived your father, and then they got him to the hospital. Miles called my mother, and we just put everything down and came rushing here. We had to cancel at least a half dozen appointments -- caterers, flower people, you know."

She laughed, a very loud cackle for someone who was supposed to be so ladylike, I thought.

"Whenever I complain about all the work I have to do planning my own wedding, Ashley says we should just elope. Can you imagine if we did? How many people would be disappointed? Hundreds. He's not serious, of course. He just likes to tease me."

"Mother says that shows he really cares about me. Men like to tease the women they love. It's a form of genuine affection," she declared with a single nod to serve as punctuation to mark the absolute, irrefutable truth.

I stopped and turned to face her.

"What were my father's diagnosis and prognosis, Margaret?"

"All I know is he had a heart attack. What does prognosis mean?" she asked, and grimaced quickly, anticipating criticism. "I know you're going to get into all that medical stuff and become like some sort of mental doctor, Willow, but not everyone studies the dictionary."

"You don't have to study the dictionary to know the meaning of prognosis," I said with forced patience. "It just means what they think his chances for recovery will be."

"Oh. Well, I don't know any of that," she said. "I haven't been here that long, Willow. We absolutely flew from your house to the hospital, and it's been very difficult just sitting around the waiting room. They hardly have any magazines to read, and as far as I know, Mother has had only one conversation with any sort of doctor. She didn't tell me anything except to go get you, and here I am. I have a car just outside, but the driver is not a very nice man. He kept saying he can't wait at the curb. They won't let him. Everyone thinks a bomb is going to go off at the airports these days. It really makes it difficult for those of us who are used to comforts and convenience. You would think they would make some sort of accommodation."

"Let's go," I said, already exhausted with my effort to squeeze even a tidbit of real information out of her.

"How is college life? Have you met anyone?"

I didn't answer. I kept walking, but that didn't discourage my cousin Margaret. People like her can easily have a conversation with themselves, I thought.

"I bet it's hard for you to meet someone. I don't know why you want to be a psychological doctor. People, men especially, can't feel too comfortable in the company of a psychiatrist. They're always suspicious of them, expecting them to analyze and judge them upon every word and gesture they make. You'll never have any real friends, Willow, much less a real love relationship. People simply won't trust you."

"Is that your mother's dogma?" I quipped as we stepped out of the airport.

"My mother's dog what?"

"Forget it, Margaret," I said, bursting out onto the sidewalk. I could feel the urgency coming to a head inside me. "Where's the car?"

"Oh. I think it was that one," she said, nodding at a black Lincoln Town Car. She waved emphatically, but

the driver just stared at us. "I guess that isn't him. I can't tell one of those cars from another. Where is he? I told you he was not a pleasant driver."

I charged forward toward the taxi stand.

"Where are you going?"

"To the hospital," I called back.

"But...our car. You can't just take an ordinary taxi, Willow."

I stepped into the next taxi. Margaret stood there on the sidewalk staring in at me.

"Are you coming or not?" I demanded, holding the door open.

She looked up and down.

"Maybe he misunderstood," she said, "and thought I didn't need him to take us back."

"Get in!"

She grimaced and got into the cab as if she were about to sit in the electric chair. I reached past her and pulled the door shut.

"Spring City General, and as quickly as you can," I urged the driver.

"Right," he said, and we shot away from the curb.

"Well, my goodness," Margaret said. "Now I know what it must feel like to be kidnapped."

Who in his right mind would want to kidnap you? I thought, and mentally urged the traffic to move along faster.

"Mother says it's good to occupy your mind with other things when you're in a situation like this," Margaret rattled on as our taxi wove in and out of traffic.

I could hear her droning in the background, but I really didn't hear a word she was saying. Her voice took on the monotony of bees gathering nectar in our garden. I pushed it away. *I'm more like my father than I believed I was*, I thought, and smiled to myself. *I'm learning how to focus and turn off people.*

"It's not funny," I finally heard Margaret say. She practically shouted in my ear.

"What?"

"The shape of the wedding cake is very significant. Just think of the picture of it with Ashley and me."

I shook my head. "Who said it was funny?"

"You were smiling like you thought it was," she accused with a pout, drawing up her puckered little prune

mouth like a drawstring purse.

"I was thinking of something else, Margaret. I didn't hear anything about your cake."

"What? Why were you thinking of something else?"

"I was doing just what you advised me to do, Margaret. I was occupying my mind," I said as we pulled up to the front of the hospital.

I paid the driver quickly and practically jogged into the lobby, Margaret moaning and groaning about having to keep up with my pace.

"Where?" I said, spinning on her and nearly knocking her over with my carry-on bag. For a moment, she looked absolutely confused. "Where do they have my father?"

"Oh. Something called CCU, I think."

"Well, lead the way, Margaret."

She sauntered to the elevator, smiled at a young intern emerging, and then got in and pushed the button for the second floor.

"I've always been afraid of your father," she confessed. "He always looks so disapproving."

"It might be because he disapproves," I muttered, and stepped out to follow the signs indicating the direction of the CCU.

I pulled up short at the doorway of the waiting room. Aunt Agnes was sitting on the sofa and looking up at a nurse. She was nodding gently and dabbing her eyes with the end of her silk handkerchief. I had rarely seen her cry, but on the few occasions I had, she seemed capable of controlling the flow of her tears, permitting them to emerge only one at a time, alternately from eye to eye, and only after each had fully appeared. She pressed the corner of the handkerchief with her right forefinger and touched each tear cautiously, absorbing it and then moving over in anticipation of the next.

She had my father's eyes and mouth, but her chin was nearly nonexistent, sweeping up sharply under her lower lip and into the flow of her jawbone, and very tight, pale skin, a shade lighter than the sepia tones in old photographs. Her forehead looked infected with age spots she tried to keep as hidden as possible under long bangs of gray hair the color of a wet mop.

Unlike my adoptive mother, Aunt Agnes refused to wear a wig. She thought it was vain and undignified to battle too hard against aging. Aside from a little lipstick and some rouge, her store of cosmetics was anemic compared to the arsenal of skin creams, eye shadow, brushes, pencils, and makeup kits my adoptive mother had kept ready for her wars against wicked time.

Aunt Agnes had been a thin woman for as long as I could remember. Amou used to refer to her as *Senhora do Passaro*, "Bird Lady," because of her fragile bone structure and the way her nose had turned downward with age and become beaklike. I also thought she fluttered when she entered a room, always doing a little shiver as if she were throwing off some chill she had anticipated in coming to our home to speak with my father.

When she saw me, she reached up and put her hand on the nurse's wrist, and the nurse turned.

"Oh, it's my niece, his daughter," I heard her say. "Finally."

The look on the nurse's face was as good as a sword through my heart. I barely felt myself walk up to them. Aunt Agnes shook her head.

"We lost him," she said. "Just twenty minutes ago."

I stared down at her and smiled with incredulity as if she had said the most ridiculous thing. *Lost him? How can we lose Daddy?* Because of my silence and my expression, the nurse felt obligated to add to it.

"There was just too much heart damage. I'm sorry," she said.

Margaret, who finally caught up with me, just went right into a tirade about greeting me at the airport and our trip back to the hospital.

"You've got to speak to whoever got you that car service, Mother. The driver wasn't around, and we had to take an ordinary taxicab. Willow wanted to get right over here. I told him to wait at the curb, but he was an unpleasant man, and..."

"Shut up!" I screamed at her.

She looked as if I had slapped her. She brought her hand to her cheek and stepped back.

"Willow's father has passed away, Margaret Selby," my aunt explained.

"Oh," she said, her eyes widening with the realization. "Oh, dear."

I turned to the nurse. "I want to see my father," I said sharply. I don't know how I managed that many words. My throat had already begun to close and felt as dry as soil in a drought.

"Of course," she said, reaching out to touch my arm. "I'll take you to him."

I set my bag down to follow her.

"I'll start seeing to arrangements, dear," Aunt Agnes called after me.

"Oh, Mother," Margaret moaned, "a funeral."

I felt as if I were sleepwalking. Everything around me seemed vague, foggy. I kept swallowing down the urge to scream. So often people feel that they can scream away their troubles like some giant blowing unpleasant and ugly things out of his way. My heartbeat was so tiny, I imagined my heart itself was withering, closing up like a clam somewhere deep in my chest. In fact, I thought I was shrinking, growing smaller and smaller until I was just a little girl again, a little girl being brought to see her daddy.

I stood in the doorway as if I were waiting for him to sit up on the gurney and beckon to me. The nurse stood at my side, wondering why I was so hesitant, I'm sure.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's never easy losing a parent, no matter how old they are. My mother was eighty-six when she died last year, but I still felt as if the world had dropped out from under me."

I looked at her and nodded. "I'd like to be alone with him for a while," I said.

"Of course. Just call for me if you need anything," she said.

If I need anything? I need a second chance. I need to have gotten here before he died. Could you please arrange for that? I thought.

I looked at Daddy lying there so peacefully. His reddish-brown beard was as trim and neat as ever. He hadn't been gone that long, so his skin wasn't the pale of the dead yet. They had closed his eyes. I wished they hadn't. I needed to look into those eyes one more time, even though they would be empty. At least I could remember what had been there.

It took a few more moments for me to draw close enough to take his hand. Funny, I thought as I held his hand in mine, my father had never once raised his hand to me, not even to pat me on the rear end. His anger, his chastising, lived in his voice, in those eyes, in his whole demeanor, and for as long as I could remember, that was sufficient.

My adoptive mother didn't hesitate to take a swipe at me now and again, even if it was always more like waving away a fly. She was very protective of her hands. Too many women her age showed their age in their hands, and she was determined that wouldn't happen to her. With Amou in our home, my A.M. never washed a dish or wiped a piece of furniture. The only thing she cleaned was her own body, and as gently as she would clean a piece of fine china.

"I'm sorry I didn't get here fast enough, Daddy," I began. I took a deep breath. Tears were trapped beneath my lids. I thought I was looking at him through a fishbowl. "But we were never really people who made much of goodbyes, anyway, were we? You accompanied me when I first went off to college, but, unlike the other parents we saw, there were no tears, no desperate hugs, no efforts to cling to the little girl who once was. We were so mature about it, weren't we?" I said, smiling down at him. "We knew how to deal with what for other people were very traumatic experiences.

"Focus, focus, remember?" I laughed. "I don't think you realized how much you lectured me on the trip. I bet you were like that because you were afraid of saying goodbye. I know I was, Daddy. Even though I never shed a tear in front of you or said anything to make you unhappy, I was afraid to say goodbye to you.

"Mother was already gone, but she had missed so many special occasions in my life, anyway. One more didn't seem to matter all that much.

"'Well,' you kept saying. 'Well, well, well, I suppose I should be going,' you said. 'You'll call me should you need anything, of course,' you told me, assuring yourself more than me, I think.

"Of course, I would call you. So much of our lives was built around *of course*, Daddy."

I stared at him. He was starting to look more like a statue, a monument of himself, a body already lying in state. It occurred to me that I had rarely seen my father asleep. Neither he nor my adoptive mother welcomed me into their bedroom that often, even if I had a bad dream. He would always come to me and talk the dream out of my head. He reassured me but left me to sleep in my own bed.

"I'm sorry I didn't get here in time, Daddy," I repeated. "There were so many things to say. We had just begun saying them to each other. We had many years of silence to make up for. What do I do now?"

I smiled because, even though his lips were sealed forever and ever, I could hear his response. Naturally, it was in the form of a question.

"What do you do now, Willow? What do you think you should do now?"

"I guess I should finish college and marry Allan or someone like him and eventually have a family of my own. I don't know all the details of our finances, but I will very soon, and I hope I can keep our home. Is that a good answer, Daddy?"

"Is it?"

"I think so."

"Then it is," he would say.

And it occurred to me that I was all right, that it didn't matter that I didn't get back in time to see him take his last breath on this earth, because he was with me forever and ever, his voice always there. I would always hear his questions, be guided by his wisdom. It was not something that died with his body. He had planted them in me like seeds, and they had blossomed and taken root. They would always keep me steady and guide me and help me to see the way.

I leaned over and kissed his cold forehead. Kisses were as rare as birds in winter at our house. My adoptive mother was always afraid of smudging her lipstick. She greeted people with an air kiss, a smack of the lips near their ears, and if she ever kissed me, which was something she was more or less forced to do in front of others, it was still as if she were using her lips to push me away.

Daddy kissed me, but it was always a quick kiss, almost like someone afraid of being caught doing it, which I thought quite funny considering he was a psychiatrist. *Do psychiatrists analyze themselves all the time?* I wondered. Did Daddy worry about why he was so afraid of being affectionate?

I brushed aside some strands of his hair, which was something I had never done when he was alive. Sometimes, we would look at each other across a room, and I would see the desire to hold me. I would catch him staring at me with a warm smile on his lips. I could sense the struggle going on within him, the battle between the urge to embrace me, to kiss me, to be my father completely, and this iron restraint that snapped his head around or darkened his eyes or made him sigh and walk away.

Why?

Why was that inhibition there? What had I done to cause it -- or what had he done?

It occurred to me that he had fears, too; my strong and powerful father was afraid of something. Even with all his psychological techniques, his proven methodology, he was like one of his own patients, haunted by something too powerful to ignore or escape.

What?

What could possibly do that to him?

I missed my chance to ask him the questions the way he would ask them of me. That I did regret.

But I was about to discover that I didn't need to rush back here to ask the questions.

The answers were waiting for me. I had merely to look in the right places, behind the shadows that for so many years had kept them securely hidden.

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