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**When our group sessions ended, I
really didn't believe that the other
girls wanted to be friends and keep in
touch, even though we all said so....**

We had all revealed so many intimate secrets to each other. Sometimes, sharing such things ties people together tightly, binds them in knots that are almost impossible to break.

Misty's mother and father had a bad divorce and her father was in a romance with a much younger woman. Her mother was trying to see other men, but was still quite self-absorbed with her pursuit of youth and beauty, and poor Misty felt so alone.

Star lived with her grandmother, her mother's mother, after her father had first deserted the family and then her mother had run off with a boyfriend. Yet Star was still the proudest and, in some way, the strongest of the four of us.

And then there was the official president of our club, Jade, a beautiful and rich girl who lived in a Beverly Hills mansion. Her parents treated her like another possession, an asset over which to battle during their nasty divorce.

It was really the other girls who had made me question why my mother had wanted to adopt me in the first place. She never seemed comfortable with me and hated the responsibilities that came along with being a mother.

The revelation was enough to make me feel sick to my stomach and even more unwanted and confused....

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Into The Garden



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Into The Garden

Prologue



Whenever I read stories about girls my age, I would wonder what had happened to my childhood. Sometimes it seems I was born and now here I am, Cathy Carson, seventeen. All the years before are blurred as if my memories had been kept on old film that spoiled. Faces and names, places and events, no matter how important they were at the time, are smudged and splotched so that nothing is recognizable. Of course, I know why. I don't want to remember, not after all that has happened, not after what my father did to me.

He's out of our lives, but he's not gone. He's never far away. All I have to do is close my eyes and there he is again, smiling, speaking softly, telling me how pretty I am, and then touching me, doing all under the guise of his special lessons that would give me an advantage over other girls my age.

I shudder just the way I would if ice dripped down my back. Then I shake my head hard to rattle the images and stop the flow of pain. It goes away, and for a while, I am safe.

After having spent months and months with my therapist, Doctor Marlowe, and after being with the other Orphans With Parents, Jade, Star, and Misty, in group therapy, I was able to get back into the world. I had finished my junior year at St. Jude's High School and completed the group therapy. I was supposed to have a follow-up session, but it hadn't been scheduled yet.

When our group sessions ended, I really didn't believe that the other girls wanted to be friends and keep in touch, even though we all said so and Jade took everyone's telephone number. We had all revealed so many intimate secrets to each other. Sometimes, sharing such things ties people together tightly, binds them in knots that are almost impossible to break. Each revelation is like another string wrapping around our hearts, binding us together forever.

But sometimes, after you realize what you have revealed, you can't face the listener again. It's embarrassing to know that when she looks at you, she sees your pain and your humiliation. You turn away. You wish she would go away, and you don't try to make contact. You are eager to turn her back into a stranger. You might even see each other somewhere, gaze blankly into each other's faces, and pretend you didn't see each other.

Half of me hoped that would happen, but the other half, the half that longed for friends and kindred spirits, hoped it wouldn't. No one but my father, who had his reasons, ever kept a promise to me. I didn't expect the girls would keep theirs. Each of them had her own problems, and each was sure she was occupied and distracted.

Misty Foster's mother and father had a bad divorce and her father was in a romance with a much younger woman. Her mother was trying to see other men, but was still quite self-absorbed with her pursuit of youth and beauty, and poor Misty felt so alone, she came up with the idea of calling herself and the rest of us Orphans With Parents, or the OWP's. It was a funny idea, but after a while, I liked it because I had never belonged to any organization or club, had never been in a play or on a team. It wasn't the sort of club membership anyone would want, but at least there was a sense of togetherness and something shared.

Star Fisher lived with her grandmother Pearl Anthony, her mother's mother, and her eight-year-old brother, Rodney, after her father had first deserted the family and then her mother had run off with her boyfriend. Yet Star was still the proudest and, in some ways, strongest of the four of us. I was afraid

her when we first met. She seemed so hard and even mean, but after I heard her story and she heard mine, she seemed to soften, even become protective of me and the others. In so many ways, I wanted to be like her.

And then there was the official president of our club, Jade Lester, a beautiful and rich girl who lived in a Beverly Hills mansion. Her parents treated her like another possession, an asset over which they fought to battle during their nasty divorce. They were two strong and independent people. Her father was a famous and successful architect and her mother was an executive in a cosmetic company who guarded her career with a passion, even refusing to permit her parental responsibilities to interfere with her climbing the corporate ladder. At the time we ended our group therapy, her parents were approaching some sort of compromise over custody, but had still not reached it.

As bad as my story was, I ended up feeling sorry for each of them. They seemed to feel sorrier for me than they did for themselves, and they didn't even know the whole truth about my family.

Family is such a strange word to apply to my situation. I had been adopted, but I had not discovered that until after my father began forcing himself on me. It was really the other girls who had made me question why my mother had wanted to adopt a child in the first place. She never seemed comfortable with me and hated the responsibilities that came along with being a mother. I had wondered what had made her want me, but not with the passion and the need the girls instilled in me. Finally, I confronted my mother and forced her to tell me the truth, or what I discovered was the sordid truth.

I was not really her adopted daughter. I was her half sister. Our mother had had some sort of love affair and had become pregnant in her forties. My half sister had been pressured into getting married to Howard Carson, and then pressured again into adopting me. There was still a great deal I didn't know, but that revelation was enough to make me feel sick to my stomach and even more unwanted and confused.

What was I? Who was I? To learn that you were a regretted mistake, a sin, an embarrassment, horrible, but I still had to know more.

My half sister Geraldine (I have great difficulty now thinking of her as my mother) always warned me about getting too close to the truth. She claimed it doesn't set you free. She said, "It's like to get much of any good thing. It puts you in a darker place. Don't ask so many questions."

One time when I pursued one of my endless lines of questions, telling her I had to know the truth and that the truth was important, Geraldine responded by asking me, "What if you were horribly ugly, but you lived in a world without reflections, no mirrors, no way to see yourself and know? Would you be better off if someone brought you a mirror and showed you your face? That's the truth, too, and all that brings is pain."

Was she right? Had I forced her to hold up a mirror? Was my pain my own doing? Maybe that was why she hated mirrors and caring about your looks, why she criticized most women for being narcissistic, why she censored my books and magazines when I was younger and wouldn't permit me to watch certain television programs, why she practically spit at some commercials, and why she wanted me to do all that I could to hide my breasts when they began to develop much too early.

Or maybe there was another reason, a deeper reason, one that she feared even more than the truth she had already revealed. Our house was full of secrets, unspoken dark thoughts that hovered in the corners or lived like insects under rugs and in locked closets. Should I take them out? Should I do what she warned me not to do? Should I continue to cling to silence, to look away, to close my eyes?

I remembered how Star described her fantasy world, her magic carpet to take her away from her unhappiness. I was never able to do that. Make-believe was always too difficult, too thin, and easily shattered by Geraldine's voice or look. It was like a balloon that started to lift me away and always exploded or leaked its air and brought me down hard, planting me firmly in my loneliness.

Clocks ticked, day turned to night and then to day. I moved through my responsibilities as if I had

been hypnotized, mechanically, never feeling any excitement, surprised at the sound of my own laughter, if it ever came, and even surprised by my own tears and sobs.

After Geraldine had reluctantly told me part of the truth, I felt even lighter, less substantial, more alienated and alone. I stared out of my window at the street and watched the cars go by, wondering who everyone was and where everyone was going. I was also looking for a sign of my stepfather. He loomed forever and ever out there.

Geraldine thought he wouldn't dare show his face, but in my secret, deepest places, I feared he would return. Maybe I would see his hands first, those familiar large palms, those long, spider fingers, and then he would come out of the darkness, smiling, reaching for me. I would close my body like a fist and hold my breath.

And he would touch me again. Try as I would, I couldn't keep myself locked away. My cries of protest would go unheard and he would cover me like a blanket woven out of the darkness.



Forbidden Pleasures

When Jade called to invite me, as well as Misty and Star, to her home for our first official meeting of the OWP's, my heart seemed to wake up and beat happiness as well as blood through my veins and arteries. My whole body came alive and lifted as if some heavy chains had been broken. I could almost hear them shatter and clank at my feet.

Geraldine was busy preparing our dinner, cleaning the vegetables for our salad, inspecting every carrot, every lettuce leaf for some imperfection and then pausing to baste the roast chicken, but always listening with one ear tilted in my direction. Our downstairs phone was on the kitchen wall near the door and I had no phone in my room. The only time I could have any privacy during a personal call was when she was upstairs, out of the house, or in the bathroom. The moment I cradled the receiver she spun on her heels, demanding to know who had called.

"It was Jade," I announced, unable to hide my excitement, "inviting me to her house for a brunch."

"Jade?" Geraldine's small eyes narrowed into suspicious slits, darkened with accusations, fear, and threats. "Isn't she one of *them*?"

Geraldine usually referred to the other girls in my group therapy as "Them." It made it sound as if they were all monstrous, alien creatures. If they were monstrous, what was I in her eyes? I wondered. She blamed everything on my father when she spoke about it, if she ever spoke about it, but deep down in my heart, I believed she blamed me as well. I could see it and feel it in the way her eyes lingered on me like two tiny spotlights of accusation.

After all, I thought, she had made me feel as if there was something polluted about me because I had been born a child out of an adulterous affair, even if the adulterer was her own mother. Sin was always something contagious in Geraldine's eyes. Why shouldn't she believe I had inherited a tendency toward it?

I couldn't remember her ever looking at me with pleasure, and certainly never with pride. She was always searching for something to criticize as if she had been given the responsibility of ensuring that I never wandered from the path of righteousness, her righteousness. My premature voluptuous figure only reinforced her tarnished image of me. Once she even told me it meant I'd be over-sexed, and she always talked about sex as if it was a disease. She often tried to make me feel ashamed of what I looked like and she had even gone so far as to try to prevent me from having a female figure as long as she could, making me wear what were practically straight-jackets when my body started to develop.

"She's one of the girls, yes," I said finally, hoping she wouldn't start criticizing Jade and the other girls as she had done so many times in the past.

"The girls? You mean those girls from Doctor Marlowe's clinic?" she asked, grimacing as if she had just bitten into a rotten walnut.

Geraldine never had approved of the therapy sessions. She hated the idea of strangers knowing anything intimate about us. She would have had me keep it all locked inside, no matter what damage it did to me. In her way of thinking, you swallowed the bad with the good and you locked it inside and it worked, worked, worked, keeping yourself busy to forget whatever was unpleasant or ugly.

“Doctor Marlowe never referred to it as a clinic, Mother. You know we went to her office in her home. You make it sound terrible, like a hospital or a research lab or something with the four of us being treated like guinea pigs,” I told her.

She grimaced again, only with more disgust this time. Geraldine could twist her mouth until it almost looked like a corkscrew. She was so thin these days, she hardly had a cheek to pull in, but it dipped in like the center of a saucer when she turned her lips.

“It’s just a bunch of hocus-pocus, all this psychological mumbo-jumbo. What did people do before all this counsel and analysis, huh? I’ll tell you,” she said quickly. As she often did, Geraldine asked a question that she had already answered to her liking in her own mind. “They gritted their teeth and they endured. It made them stronger.

“Nowadays, you have all these moaners and groaners, crying and complaining as soon as they’re faced with the least bit of difficulty. They’re even on television—television! And why? To tell the most personable things! People have no shame anymore. They are willing to tell complete strangers their most private secrets and business, for the whole world to see and know. Disgusting.

“We’re just thinning the blood with all this stupidity,” she insisted, “thinning the blood, making ourselves weak and pitiful. There’s no grit. People have no self-respect and these so-called doctors just encourage it all.”

“Doctor Marlowe has helped us, Mother, helped all of us through very difficult times,” I insisted.

“Um,” she said, grinding her teeth. “Well, I don’t want you associating yourself with such girls. I didn’t like the idea of that doctor bringing you all together like that in the first place. It wasn’t healthy.”

“But I like them and they like me. We have...”

“What?” she snapped. “What do you have?”

“A lot in common,” I said.

She stared at me, her eyes turning red with fear and shock.

“You mean, they... their daddies...”

“No, they each have a different problem, none of them like mine,” I said quickly.

She recovered instantly, whipping her upper body ramrod straight. She hated anything that even vaguely suggested what had happened.

“What good will come of you being around girls with problems, Cathy? You’re just going to poison the well some more. They can’t be good influences. If you were sick with pneumonia, would it be good for you to hang around with patients sick with tuberculosis? No, of course not. If this Doctor Marlowe thought you were in need of help, why would she mix you in with other girls who were sick too? To make more money, faster, that’s why,” she said.

“No, that’s not true. It was a technique...”

“Technique,” she spat. “They have all sorts of words, to cloud the truth and get away with the hocus-pocus. I don’t want you having anything more to do with those girls, hear?”

“But—”

“No but’s, Cathy. I have all the responsibility now. Always did,” she spat. “You go off and get into trouble with some disturbed teenage girls and I have more to handle. It’s enough running this household and making sure you get what you need.”

“But I need friends, too!”

“Friends, yes, but not mental cripples,” she insisted, and turned her back on me.

“They’re not mental cripples. If they’re mental cripples, what am I?”

She was silent.

“I’m going,” I asserted.

She slammed a pot down on the counter so hard, I felt my insides jump into my throat. Then she

turned toward me, wagging the pot she gripped in her hand like a club.

~~“You’ll not be disobedient now,” she warned. “I’m legally your mother and I’m still the one responsible for you, and you’ll obey, hear?”~~

I stared at her. Suddenly, she turned from flushed red to the whitest pale and fell back against the counter.

“Mother, what’s wrong?” I cried.

She waved me off.

“Nothing,” she said, taking a deep, and what looked like a painful, breath. “It’s just a little dizzy spell. Go tend to your own chores. I’ll be calling you to set the table soon.”

She clutched her stomach and chest as if to keep everything inside and turned her back to me. I waited and watched until she straightened up her bony shoulders, this time with more effort, and then returned to what she was doing. She moaned under her breath, but said no more. I watched her for a moment before leaving the kitchen.

I was determined to go to Jade’s house. I wouldn’t be shut out. I hadn’t told Geraldine that the brunch was tomorrow. I would sneak out and go, I thought. I would just use her golden rule: what she doesn’t know, won’t hurt her. Hide the truth. The truth can bring pain. Why bring her any pain? Sometimes it’s kinder to lie.

Because I didn’t talk about the brunch anymore, Geraldine didn’t mention it again and the subject drifted off like so many unpleasant thoughts and words in our house. Sometimes, when I looked around my home, I thought the already dark walls were becoming even darker as more vile, nasty, and ugly words were splattered over them.

Geraldine liked the house this way. She kept the curtains drawn tight most of the day so “people couldn’t gape through our windows and snoop.” As if anyone really cared what went on in our little home, I thought. We had to be the most boring people on the street. Who’d want to know about us? Geraldine never participated in any social events and rarely spoke to anyone. She liked keeping herself, keeping the lights low, the doors shut tight, the world at bay.

After dinner, I managed to get to the phone to call Jade without Geraldine overhearing. She had gone upstairs to the bathroom. She didn’t like using the downstairs bathroom. She was always afraid either I or my adoptive father when he was here could hear her. I knew that was the reason because she always yelled at me after I used the downstairs bathroom and said, “When you go, start with some toilet tissue in the water so you don’t make any disgusting noises. These walls and doors are so thin, you can hear someone’s stomach gurgle.”

I should have asked her if the walls and doors were so thin, why didn’t you ever hear what went on behind mine? She hadn’t heard me when I needed her most, and now as I reached for the phone, I hoped her voluntary deafness would continue.

“It’s Cathy. I have a problem,” I began, when Jade answered her phone.

“Oh no,” she cried. “I knew your mother wouldn’t let you come. And I’m having this great brunch prepared for us. Star and Misty are definitely coming. Please don’t tell me you can’t come.”

“No,” I said, laughing at her skepticism, “I’m coming too, only I have to keep it from my mother for now. She doesn’t want me to go to your house.”

“Why?” she demanded. I could hear the indignation, like some bubble, expanding in her eyes during that passing moment. Only Star could stand up to that explosion when it occurred. “Does she think she’s better than me and my family?”

“She was never in favor of my going to Doctor Marlowe in the first place, remember? She thinks we’re all going to be bad influences on each other.”

“What about her? What about her influence or lack of it? She let all that happen to you right under her snooty nose. She’s about the worst excuse for a mother—”

“Please,” I pleaded, thinking if she only knew the truth.

“Well, what do you want me to do?”

“Tell your driver I’ll be waiting on the corner and not at my house.”

I gave her the cross street and assured her I would be there when he came.

“Great,” she said. “Tomorrow, the police will come and accuse me and my chauffeur of kidnapping you. Your mother will press charges, for sure.”

“No, she won’t,” I said, laughing.

“All right,” she concluded. “At least you have the guts to do the right thing and not let her intimidate you. The girls will be proud of you,” she added.

It made me feel good to hear her say that and I realized I wanted nothing as much as I wanted the respect. I wanted it much more than I wanted Geraldine’s.

“Thanks. Should I bring anything?”

“Yes,” she said, “you.”

I laughed again and quickly hung up just as I heard Geraldine’s footsteps on the stairs. I knew how good she was at seeing deceit in my eyes, so I finished putting away the dishes quickly and told her I had a headache and was going to lie down. That was the one excuse she always seemed to buy. I think that was because she had headaches so much herself.

“All right,” she said, retiring to the living room to look for something “decent” on television. “Don’t forget. I’ll be doing the week’s shopping in the morning.”

I didn’t volunteer to go along and she didn’t ask. We did so little together. We never went to a restaurant, to the movies, or even to the mall. It made her nervous when I accompanied her to stores because she was always watching the way men looked at me and then telling me to close my coat more or hold my arms up higher so my upper body didn’t swing so much. She made me so self-conscious about myself, I didn’t enjoy being with her anyway.

As quickly as I could, I went upstairs to my room and closed the door. That was one of her house rules...keep your bedroom door closed, guard your privacy, and don’t expose yourself and therefore make someone else uncomfortable. With my father gone and just she and I here, what did it matter now? Even though I wondered, I didn’t question it. It was easier to simply let her dictate her laws of behavior and let them float on through the house like birds without eyes, bumping into everything until they settled somewhere and waited to be nudged again.

I went to sleep that night dreaming about the girls, about having friends and doing fun things together, maybe even having parties and meeting boys.

I met Misty, Star, and Jade when Dr. Marlowe put us together for group therapy. We were all so different, and yet, we were all alike in one way: we were all victimized somehow by our own parents.

It had been a while since we had last seen each other. Every time the phone rang, which it didn’t do often, I was hoping it was one of them. Who else would care to call me? Geraldine had no family to speak of, no sisters or brothers, other than me, of course. Our mother and her father were long gone and my adoptive father’s family, none of whom had wanted anything much to do with him anyway, were now as much persona non grata as he was. It got so I welcomed solicitors, just to hear another voice over the phone. Geraldine was always right nearby going, “Hang up, hang up, just hang up.”

But Jade had finally called. She had called!

The hardest thing for me to do was conceal my excitement the next morning. I took the easiest way out. Since Geraldine never wanted to know about my periods, she had no idea when they should be occurring. I complained about menstrual cramps and told her I didn’t have much of an appetite. As usual she put her hands over her ears and shut her eyes if I said anything like that.

“If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a hundred times, Cathy. You don’t talk about those things. Those things are personal and should be kept locked up inside your own head. They’re not for the ear-

of strangers.”

“You’re not a stranger, Mother,” I pointed out, even though I thought she behaved like one sometimes.

She shook her head.

“That’s not the point. What happens in your body is nobody’s business, not even mine,” she insisted.

We’d had this same discussion on and off before. Sometimes, I liked to have it just to get a rise out of her, to see and hear her say the same things. It was as if I needed constant proof that she was the way she was and she actually believed the strange things she said.

Once I said, “But what if something’s wrong? How will I know if I don’t tell you?”

“You’ll know,” she insisted. “Your body is your best judge of itself.”

If that’s true, I better head right for the mental hospital, I wanted to say, but sealed my lips and gave up instead.

To avoid any more discussion and especially any nitty-gritty details I might let slip from my mouth after what I had told her about my period this morning, Geraldine hurried along, diving into her chores like someone jumping into a pool to get out of the hot sun. She had already eaten her breakfast, which was usually just a piece of toast and a cup of tea, followed by one of her herbal panaceas. My father used to make fun of them, but she ignored him. I never took them and she never offered them. I encouraged me to take them. It was as if she had some secret super-remedy for everything and didn’t want to share it.

This morning I just had some juice and a little bowl of cereal. Before she went up to her bedroom to change into what she called appropriate clothes for the public, she told me she would like me to clean out the food pantry.

“Take everything off the shelves and dust around, and then make an inventory. I’ve got an idea about what we have and what we need, of course, but I want it better organized,” she instructed.

Geraldine ran the house as if it was a nuclear submarine, polishing, cleaning, checking, and rechecking every nook and cranny. At times she made me feel like some sort of junior officer or, worse, a grunt. While most girls my age were enjoying their summer vacation, going to the beach, the malls, and movies, meeting friends and having parties, I was at work in our backyard, on our patio in our house, straightening and reorganizing things I had straightened and reorganized only a week or so before. Once, while I watched a squirrel working hard to accumulate its food, going through the same motions, I thought, I’m not much different. Maybe that’s why he stops, gazes at me, and goes on without any concern.

I thought the best thing to do was get right into the pantry so she would think things were clicking along just as she had expected. She came downstairs all dressed, her cloth shopping bag in hand, and looked in on me.

“Good,” she said, watching me clean out one of the shelves. “Take your time and do it right. It won’t be any longer than usual.”

I waited until I heard the front door close and then I quickly went up to my room to choose something nice to wear. It was a warm day, but I didn’t own a single pair of shorts. Geraldine wouldn’t buy me any, but I had a pair of jeans I had cut at the knees without her knowing. I had the pieces stuffed in the leg of another pair.

I put them on and found a light pink cotton sweater she hadn’t thrown out. She often sifted through my meager wardrobe, searching for anything I might have grown out of, and then either donated it to the thrift shop or simply put it in the garbage. Anything that might have become slightly tight or even suggested being too short was doomed.

The girls at Doctor Marlowe’s had always been critical of the way I kept my hair. It wasn’t entirely

my own fault. Geraldine trimmed it unevenly and wouldn't let me go to a beauty parlor. She thought that was a big waste of money.

"They call themselves stylists," she said, "and then they can charge you twice as much as they should. Most of the time, all they do is look in some magazines and try to copy what they see even if it doesn't fit you."

I didn't argue with her. She didn't even look to see if I nodded or looked like I disagreed. Geraldine always expected that whatever words of wisdom she cast my way would fall into my net and be held dear by me. Why shouldn't she believe that? I thought. I rarely gave her any reason to doubt me. Unlike most girls my age, at least up until now, I would avoid arguments, speaking back, or being defiant.

I must say my heart was pounding so hard when I started out of the house, I thought my legs would turn to wet noodles and I would faint at the door. She would come home and find me sprawled on the floor and tell me that's what I get for trying to defy her wishes. I almost expected to feel an electric shock when I reached for the polished brass doorknob and turned it. Taking a deep breath, closing my eyes and opening them, I stepped out of the house into the bright warm sunshine.

It was a glorious day and certainly not one to spend boxed up in a food pantry, cleaning and polishing shelves and taking inventory. The clouds looked like thick smears of whipped cream over blue frosting. The sidewalk and streets glittered, and the Santa Ana breeze was warm and gentle. All of it gave me more courage.

I hurried down our narrow sidewalk and onto the street, turning right and walking quickly without looking back once. If I did, I thought, I might hesitate and hesitation might lead to my returning home.

I was hoping the limousine would be there already and I wouldn't have to wait, but it wasn't. Seconds seemed more like minutes. I strained my neck to look down the street for signs of the long black car I had seen bringing Jade to Doctor Marlowe's or waiting for her afterward. It wasn't in sight.

I glanced at my watch and looked fearfully in the direction from which Geraldine would be coming. It was far too early for her to be returning, but nevertheless, I couldn't help worrying that she might have forgotten something or simply decided to come home to check on me. She often had these spurts of paranoia, jumping up to see if doors and windows were locked or if I was doing whatever chores I was supposed to be doing.

It was surely only my imagination, but it seemed to me that every passing driver looked at me with suspicion and wondered why I was loitering at the corner. Fortunately, Geraldine had no interest in our neighbors so I didn't have to worry about any of them calling her or telling her they had seen me. She hated gossip and compared it to dogs barking at each other or cats hissing. It was all meaningless and wasteful and led only to unhappiness and trouble. Idle talk was worse than idle hands. If you had nothing of value to say, keep your lips firmly shut was Geraldine's motto.

Finally, I saw the sleek shiny black automobile turn up the street and glide toward the corner where I waited. The chauffeur slowed and pulled to the side. Before he could get out to open the door, it flew open and Misty cried, "Get your booty in here, Cat!"

I glanced once toward my house and then practically lunged into the big automobile. Star was sitting there cool and collected, her beautiful pearl black skin never looking more radiant and smooth than her eyes like black diamonds. She had her hair freshly braided and wore a khaki knee-length cotton skirt and a matching cotton blouse. I slipped in beside her and Misty closed the door.

"Onward," she cried.

The driver nodded and smiled, and we pulled away from the curb.

Misty wore a pair of leggings with an oversize T-shirt that read *How's my walking? Call 555-454*. She was a petite girl, but complained about her figure being too boyish. I was willing to trade bodies with her anyway. Her blue eyes seemed to sparkle with impish joy at the sight of me.

“That’s not your real phone number, is it?” I quickly asked, nodding at the T-shirt.

“No. It’s the Motor Vehicle bureau. I had it made up on the boardwalk in Venice Beach.”

“Can’t you get into trouble for that?” I asked.

“Now how is she going to get into trouble for that?” Star questioned. “Cat, you’re about as timid as a church mouse. I bet you only cross the street at crosswalks,” she added.

“As a matter of fact, that’s true,” I said.

Star laughed.

“Stop picking on her,” Misty ordered, and turned back to me. “How have you been?” she cried, reaching forward to squeeze my hands. “Can you believe we’re really getting together? And how about this limousine?”

“You should have seen when it pulled up to my house,” Star said. “The neighbors were staring and Granny kept shaking her head and muttering, ‘Lordy be, Lordy be. My grandchild, riding in the chariot.’”

I could easily imagine the scene.

“What are you going to tell people when you return?” Misty asked her.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll tell them I was in a movie,” she suggested.

“What happens when they find out you’re not in a movie?” I followed.

“Who cares?” she replied. “They don’t have any right sticking their noses in my business anyway, do they?” she demanded, her eyes wide and furious.

I shrugged.

She stared at me a moment, still looking furious, and then she smiled and laughed.

“You act like the sidewalk is thin ice and you’re made of lead and heavy stones. You don’t have any reason to be scared of anyone anymore. You’re a member of the OWP’s. Go on, tell her, Misty,” she said.

“That’s right,” Misty said. She grew serious for a moment. “Have you gone back to see Doctor Marlowe?”

“Not yet,” I said. “She called and spoke with my mother once, but no appointment has been set. What about you two?”

“I’ve been back to see her,” Star said. “But I’m finished now.”

“Me too,” Misty said. “I think Jade is too. You’re the only one left.”

“She told me to call her any time,” Star said, “but I hope I don’t need to.” She gazed at me. “Just go see her and finish it,” she continued. “The longer you hold off doing something you’re scared of doing or you don’t think is pleasant, the worse it seems.”

“She’s right,” Misty said.

“Of course I’m right. I don’t need you telling everyone I’m right.”

Misty just threw one of her small shrugs and pretty little smiles back at her.

“I’m hungry,” she said. “I deliberately just nibbled on breakfast so I’d have a good appetite. Jade said she was making sure we had a special buffet. I can’t even imagine what it will be like.”

“It’s just food whether a fancy cook from France prepares it or not,” Star said.

“Wrong,” Misty sang. She marked the air with her right forefinger, making an X.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Star demanded.

“I’m keeping track of your boo-boo’s,” Misty replied.

Star shifted in the seat, shook her head, and looked at me.

“So what have you been doing with yourself, huh? You’re sitting there like some Buddha while we gobble like turkeys.”

“Just helping around the house, reading, taking a walk sometimes. There’s a lot to do in the yard. My mother fired the gardener we had. She said we have to be economical because we’re going to be

living only on our interest income.”

“Why doesn’t she go out and get a job then?” Star asked.

“She makes it all sound critical, but I know we have a good income. There was money she inherited, besides the money my father had to surrender.”

“He should have had to surrender more than money,” Star muttered. “And you know what I’m referring to, Cat.”

I felt myself turn red, the heat rising quickly up my neck and into my face.

Misty glanced at her with a look of reprimand and Star turned to gaze out the window. We were a quiet for a moment, but Misty hated silences. They made her fidget.

“That’s a nice sweater,” she told me.

“Yeah,” Star said. “The way it fits, I’m surprised your mother let you wear it.”

“She doesn’t know,” I said. “She doesn’t even know I have these cut-off jeans.”

“You snuck out, didn’t you?” Star realized. “That was why you wanted to be picked up at the corner?” she demanded.

“Yes,” I said.

“What’s going to happen when she finds out?” Misty said.

“I don’t know.”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” Star insisted. “Don’t make her more scared than she already is.” Star turned to me. “She’ll bitch a little and then she’ll realize you can’t be treated like some infant.

“Parents,” she added, nodding, “have to grow up too.”

“Amen to that,” Misty said, imitating her.

Star gave her one of her Star looks and then smiled and shook her head.

“Well, look at this,” she said, and we leaned over to gaze out the window at the security booth at the gate that led into Jade’s neighborhood. “That girl does live like some princess. No wonder she’s spoiled rotten.”

The guard waved us through and the large gate swung open. We all gaped at the beautiful enormous houses, each one custom-made.

“Wow,” Misty said. “These make my house look like a bungalow.”

“What do you think it does to my granny’s? I guess I live in a dog house,” Star said.

The streets in the development were wide and lined with palm trees. There was even a sidewalk. Occasionally, the houses were broken up with free space, trees, and lawn, and there was a lake at the center, around which all the houses were built. All of them had good-size yards behind them, too.

“Are we still in America?” Misty cried.

“Not my America,” Star said.

The limousine slowed and then turned into a circular driveway. We continued to gape as Jade’s house came into view. It was as big as she had described. I remembered how proudly she had described it.

It certainly held my attention. The limousine came to a stop and the chauffeur got out quickly to open the door for us. For a moment, none of us moved. We just stared.

“Well, what are we acting like a bunch of silly tourists for?” Star cried. “It’s just a big house. C’mon,” she said, and stepped out first.

Misty and I followed, neither of us able to stop gaping. As we started toward the tall double front door, it was flung open and Jade appeared.

“I’m absolutely famished,” she announced to us, her hands on her hips. “I skipped breakfast waiting for you guys. At least you can walk faster,” she added.

Jade was truly the most elegant looking teenage girl I knew. She had long, lush brown hair with a reddish tint that flowed gently down to her shoulders. Her eyes were green and almond shaped. Her

high cheekbones gave her face an impressive angular line that swept gracefully into her jaw and perfectly shaped lips. Her nose was a little small, but also just slightly turned up and she was always stylishly dressed and perfectly made-up.

“It’s not our fault you live out in the boondocks,” Star quipped.

“Boondocks! This is probably the most desirable gated community in Los Angeles, maybe even the whole West Coast!” Jade bragged.

Star looked around as if deciding whether or not she wanted to move in.

“Um. No graffiti at least,” she said, and Jade laughed.

“C’mon, c’mon. Everything is set up for us in the back. Did you bring bathing suits?” Jade asked.

“No one told me to,” Star said.

“I didn’t think of it,” Misty said, shaking her head.

I was ashamed to say I didn’t even own one.

“That’s all right. I’ll find something for each of you. Worse comes to worse,” she added with a confident smile, “we’ll skinny-dip.”

“What?” I cried.

“Just kidding,” she said, and took my hand. “Cat, stop worrying,” she ordered. “We’re going to have a good time for a change. You have to leave your sadness and troubles outside the door.”

“She doesn’t know how to stop worrying,” Star said.

“Well, let that be the first commandment of the OWP’s: no worries.”

“Right,” Misty said. “Isn’t this great?” she added. “We’re together, forever.”

She threaded her arm through mine and squealed with delight.

“Right,” Star muttered, taking my other arm, “misery loves company.”

They were all around me. I looked again at the beautiful mansion. How could anyone be miserable here, especially me? I wondered, as I entered with my best friends in all the world, my only friends in all the world. We had each had our private storms and now, all our bright and hopeful smiles made one united, special rainbow.



Together Again

The entryway in Jade's house was almost as big as my living room. The floor glittered with rich-looking golden brown tiles. On my right was a wall-size oval mirror that caught the three of us gaping ahead at the widest, most dramatic staircase I had ever seen in real life. The steps were carpeted in red velvet.

"I feel like I just stepped into *Gone With the Wind*," Misty declared.

On the wall to the left of the stairway was an enormous oil painting of a watery meadow with some sort of mill in the background, all under a windy sky.

"That's the biggest picture I ever saw," Star said, impressed.

"It's a Jonathan Sandler. He's an American artist who worked in the late nineteenth century imitating the Dutch landscape painters. My father got it as part of a package deal he made with some wealthy builder in Virginia. There are lots of paintings in this house," she continued. Her matter-of-fact tone made it sound more like she was bored with it than boasting. "Some my mother bought and some my father acquired so there's a mixture of styles. They never agreed on much of anything, why should they agree on paintings?" she offered.

Misty nodded knowingly. Her parents weren't much different from Jade's in that regard.

All of the rooms in the house were large and opulent. Besides the works of art on the walls, there were vases and clocks, crystals and small statues almost everywhere. I didn't see much empty space which made me think it was as big and as full as a museum.

We three continued to gawk as Jade led us through the house to the den, a long room with paneled walls, a built-in big-screen television and a wall of bookshelves that nearly reached the ceiling. She walked us through French doors that opened onto a large, tiled patio. To the right on the patio were long narrow tables arranged with the buffet spread over them. A maid and the butler waited to serve us.

It looked like enough food for a wedding. One table was covered with dishes of salads, framed with breads and rolls; another table had platters of meats, shrimp, and even small lobster tails. There were soft drinks, lemonade, and juices on a third table, and after that were the desserts: small cakes, cookies, two pies, and bowls of mixed fruit.

"Who all is coming?" Star asked, breathless with awe.

"Coming? No one's coming. My mother's on a business trip and my father is in Nashville talking to investors who want to build a music theater."

"You mean that this is all for us?" Star followed.

"I wasn't sure what everyone liked, so I asked them to prepare a variety."

"Variety? Some supermarkets don't have this much variety. What happens to all the food we don't eat?" Star pursued.

"I don't know," Jade said, starting to get annoyed. "The servants do things with leftovers. That's why they're here. Let's get some food and sit."

"I'm glad I didn't eat much for breakfast," Misty cried, and started for the tables. The maid handed

her a dish immediately and the butler waited to hear what she wanted. He then served her.

~~I didn't know what to choose first. I tried taking a little of everything, but the butler put too big portion of everything I chose on my plate.~~

Jade took the least of any of us. We sat around a large table under an umbrella. The butler and the maid then brought us whatever we wanted to drink. They stood back by the tables and watched waiting to see if anyone wanted anything else.

"Do you always eat like this?" Star asked. "With servants and all?"

"No. Most of the time, I have a fruit shake or just some yogurt, but this is a special occasion."

"I'll say. I didn't know how special an occasion it was," Star said, and we all laughed, even me.

As we sat, ate, and talked, I gazed at the beautiful grounds. The grass looked more like carpet. All the bushes and flowers were arranged and trimmed to perfection. It was as if one of those famous artists whose paintings hung on the walls inside had planned the landscaping. The pool was kidney shaped with a whirlpool at the far end, over which the blue green water flowed back into the pool itself. There were heavy cushioned pink lounge chairs around the patio and a small cabana to the right with an outside shower.

"It really is beautiful here," I suddenly blurted. The others stopped talking and looked at each other and laughed.

"You sound like you just woke up," Star said.

"I don't know if I'm awake or dreaming."

"You want to make her head fatter than it already is?" Star warned, nodding at Jade.

"Don't worry about it, Star. If I stray, you'll be there to knock me back."

"That's the truth," Star said. Misty laughed and we were all silent for a long moment.

"I can't help it. It still feels like we're all back at Doctor Marlowe's," Misty said. "I keep expecting one of us to start talking about her family problems."

"Well, let's make another rule right now...no references to that stuff unless we all decide it's okay...okay?"

"What will we talk about?" Misty asked.

"There are lots of other things going on besides our miserable family lives," Jade insisted. "Family starters, anyone seeing anyone?"

She gazed around the table.

"I'm not. Not yet," Star added cryptically.

"What's that supposed to mean, 'not yet'?" Jade followed, her perfectly trimmed eyebrows dipping toward each other.

"Well, I was over at Lily Porter's house the other day and I saw a picture of her cousin Larry. He's in the army and he sent her this picture of himself all dressed up in his uniform, standing by a tank. He's over in Germany, but he's coming back soon."

"So?" Jade said.

"So, I thought he was fine, and she told me as far as she knows, he's not involved with anyone back here. She's going to introduce me as soon as he's home. She said she'll have a party or something."

"Right, and he'll just topple over the moment he sets eyes on you," Jade said.

Star's eyes grew small for a moment and then she smiled.

"Well, maybe I'll borrow one of your expensive outfits and dazzle him like you dazzle every man that sees you."

Jade laughed.

"Sure. Choose anything you want. I have magic clothes, guaranteed to win you the man you love."

"What about you? Someone set your heart on fire these days?" Star challenged.

Misty and I were like observers at a verbal tennis match. Our heads turned from one to the other.

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