



Into the Darkness (The Casteel Family)

By V.C. Andrews

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As lovely as one of the precious gems at her parents' jewelry store, Amber Taylor is shy and introspective—qualities misread by others as being stuck up and superior. Facing a long, lonely summer working at the family shop, Amber's world lights up when the Matthews family suddenly moves in to the house next door, a property that has stood neglected for the longest time. And when she meets Brayden Matthews, an only child just like her, Amber soon becomes infatuated with this handsome, quirky young man who seems to know her innermost feelings almost before she does, who takes her places she never knew existed in her small town. Their connection is electrifying, unlike anything Amber's felt before. But as quickly as he appears, Brayden vanishes into the darkness. And finding out the truth about him will push Amber Taylor to the edge of madness. . . .

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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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V. C Andrews

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New Neighbor

“I met one of our new neighbors,” I said when my parents and I sat at the long, dark oak dining-room table for dinner.

The dining room was almost as large as our living room. Grandpa Taylor had had the wall between it and the kitchen removed to accommodate this handmade table. Grandpa had been a lot more political and involved with the local government than Dad. Dad said there had been many important business dinners held there with other important families. It had been my mother’s idea to take out the two small windows and have one big window made. We had a view of the woods and the field on this side of the house. My favorite time was autumn, when the colors of the leaves rivaled those of all the jewelry in our store. My mother once whispered to me that although my grandfather believed I was named after amber jewelry, I was really named after the amber leaves.

Tonight Mom and I had prepared one of Dad’s favorite meals, chicken piccata with Israeli couscous. I did the salad and heated the bread. Dad opened a bottle of Chardonnay and poured each of us a glass. Ever since I was fourteen, my parents had permitted me to have wine with them at dinner. Dad was proud of his knowledge of wines and never lost an opportunity to talk about them, either with us or with customers at the store. Tonight we were having a California Chardonnay from Sonoma. He described it as just a touch dry but with a nice clarity.

Neither of my parents had mentioned the new neighbors since I had told them about someone new coming to the street. There was never a For Rent or For Sale sign in front of the house after the previous occupants had sold it. Someone came periodically to cut the lawn and trim the bushes, but other than that, nothing much was done. The paint was still chipped on the porch railings and the window frames, and the steps on the front stoop looked as if they needed some reinforcement, if not outright replacement.

I suppose it wasn't all that unusual for us not to know that the house was going to have new tenants or owners. We had grown accustomed to seeing it unoccupied. No one on the street bothered to talk much about it anymore. It hadn't fallen enough into ill repair to warrant the city taking any action. It was easier for everyone simply to ignore it. My parents were very busy at the jewelry store with tourists from Canada and the States pouring into the area. I had been the only one at home when the truck had appeared and the men had begun carrying in things. My parents had been at the store doing an inventory. Dad wanted enough raw materials for him to work up his unique bracelets and pendants.

"You met one of the new neighbors?" Mom repeated.

Dad was still standing with the bottle of wine in his hand as if he had forgotten to pour someone a glass and was trying to figure out who that was.

"I was beginning to think that house would remain vacant forever. What's it been, four years since the Sloans moved to Dallas?" he asked, then put the bottle on the table and sat.

"More like five," Mom said. She tasted the dressing I had prepared for the salad and smiled. "You're getting very good at this, Amber. We should open a restaurant."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Dad said. "I see how Von Richards has aged. The man's only a year older than I am and could be mistaken for my father. He was quite an athlete in high school, too. But that restaurant is a vampire, draining him. He's always complaining about his help and the price of food, not to mention the picky customers he has to serve. Soon he'll set the place on fire."

"Oh, it's not that bad," Mom said. "But I agree that there is a lot more stress with a restaurant than there is with a jewelry store."

"Speak for yourself when it comes to measuring the stress," Dad said, and laughed before she could slam back a retort. Both of us could see it coming. He winked at me. I knew he was just teasing her. I wondered how many girls in my class were as synchronized with their fathers as I was with mine. "So, whom did you meet, Amber Light? I don't even know their names. Do you know their names, Noreen?" Dad asked.

Mom shook her head. "Been too busy to get involved with neighbors. I know that's not nice, but who told them to move in at the start of our busy season?"

"Right," Dad said, raising his glass. "Anyway, to the new neighbors, whoever they are, as long as they don't have an annoying barking dog or something."

Mom lifted her wineglass. I lifted mine, too.

"Their last name is Matthews," I said after we all had taken a sip.

"Oh?" Dad began his salad. "This is a good dressing."

"I didn't meet the husband and wife, just their son."

"What's his name?"

"Brayden."

“Brayden. That’s an unusual name,” Dad said. “Interesting.”

“Which fits him,” I said.

“Why?”

“He seems unusual.”

“In a good or bad way?” Dad quickly followed up.

I thought a moment and shrugged. “Good.”

“How old is he?” Mom asked, suddenly looking suspicious at the way I had responded to my father’s question.

“About my age, maybe a little older,” I said.

“Sooooo,” she said, raising her eyebrows and looking at Dad, who broadened his smile. “Good-looking? On a scale of one to ten,” she added, fixing her gaze on Dad. “If men can do it, rate women all the time the way some people rate diamonds . . .”

Dad put up his hands. “Who has time to rate women?”

“Yes, like it takes time,” Mom said. She turned to me. “Well?”

I shrugged. “Eleven, I guess,” I said, and they both went into stop action. That made me laugh. “We just spoke for a few minutes. Apparently, they travel a great deal. His father is some kind of genius who works in something called a brain trust.”

“Is that so? What do they study?” Dad asked.

“Economics . . . world economics, top-secret stuff, he said.”

“Good. Maybe he’ll help me find a way to lower my insurance costs.”

“I got the feeling he works mainly in theories and not . . .”

“Mundane, everyday stuff like me,” Dad said.

“What do you mean, you? I think that description fits my job description more than yours,” Mom said.

Dad raised his hands again. “Well rebuked. I admit it. I had trouble with simple multiplication and division. Your mother is an absolute whiz with numbers. If it weren’t for her, we’d be bankrupt.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Mom said.

“I’m not looking to go anywhere else,” Dad said. Mom laughed and then began to serve our main dish.

I suppose I should say I was blessed having parents like mine. For one thing, they seemed continually in

love. I knew everyone's mother and father were supposed to be in love, but when I met any of them or spent time with any of them, I had the feeling that, yes, maybe they had fallen in love once, but somehow life had put a sort of crust around their feelings. I think they had gotten too used to each other and took everything for granted, even smiles and laughter. For my parents, almost everything one of them said still seemed surprising to the other. I could see the delight on their faces.

Maybe it was corny, but to me, they seemed never to grow tired of looking at each other with what I had come to understand was pure desire. They wanted to be together, to go out together, and to go on trips together. It seemed so important that any discovery either one made be immediately shared, and anything they could discover together was always extra special.

If any of her female friends asked her why it was so important they always do so much together, Mom loved to quote Dante Gabriel Rossetti's line, "Beauty without the beloved is like a sword through the heart."

Some of her friends nodded and smiled; some looked completely puzzled but were obviously afraid to ask for a further explanation.

"Tell us more about him," Mom said. "This eleven, Brayden Matthews."

"I don't know all that much yet. In fact," I said, "I don't know anything except that he likes reading Thoreau."

"Thoreau?" Dad shook his head. "'Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.'"

"Why, Gregory Taylor, the only things I ever hear you quote these days are prices on rings and bracelets," Mom teased.

"Is that so? I want you both to know that I won the English award at high school graduation. I used to dream of living the life Thoreau proposed. If we all did, there would be fewer heart attacks, strokes, and nervous breakdowns," he said, waving his extended right forefinger like some soap-box orator.

"Big shot," Mom said, pointing her fork at him. She turned to me. "This is the man who wants us to get a new television set because ours isn't high-definition. That's not very Thoreau-like, Mr. Taylor."

"Well, if we're going to work ourselves to the bone . . ." Dad paused and thought a moment. "I said I dreamed of living like Thoreau. I also remember dreaming of being Superman."

We both laughed.

"So, why was this eleven talking about Thoreau?" Mom asked.

"He asked me to take a walk, and when I hesitated, he quoted Thoreau to emphasize how important it was to get out of the house and into nature."

"Now, there's a new approach," Dad said. "Quoting famous authors to win over a young maiden's heart."

"Really? As I recall, you quoted poetry when we first met, Gregory Taylor," Mom said. She sat back and narrowed her eyes in a pose of faux suspicion. "Was it just a slick come-on or did you mean it?"

Dad tugged his left earlobe as if he was hoping to shake the right response out of his brain. “It happened to be spontaneous. The moment I set eyes on you, I thought, ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate . . .’”

“That wasn’t the quote,” Mom said.

“It wasn’t?”

“No. You were a John Denver fan.”

“Oh, right.” Dad smiled. “You’re so beautiful, I can’t believe my eyes each time I see you again.”

“I thought he had made it up until he played the song for me,” Mom told me. “Of course, I wondered how many girls he used that line on, but he swore I was the first,” she added, looking at him suspiciously again.

“You were—the first and only, Noreen, and always will be.”

Mom’s eyes glittered like the eyes of diamonds that Dad anticipated I would someday have for a certain special man.

In fact, if someone really wanted to know why I was so hard to please when it came to boyfriends, he or she simply had to spend a few minutes with my parents. The man I fell in love with would have to have eyes full of me the way my father’s eyes were full of my mother, I thought. I’d never be some man’s stopover on his way to finding someone he believed was right for him. Maybe that was my problem. I was adamant about it. I had seen too many of my girlfriends devastated by boys they had thought were special. Of course, the same was very true for boys who thought that of girls. Sometimes, I thought, it was all just too complex. Think less, feel more, I told myself, but I didn’t listen to myself, at least not right then.

“So, are you going on this walk?” Mom asked.

“I guess. It’s just a walk.”

“Nothing is just anything,” Dad said, assuming the role of elder statesman in our house. “Everything leads to something else, young lady. Shall I review history, the causes of the First World War, the . . .”

“Spare us, Gregory. Besides, did you ever think that’s what she’s hoping for, something leading to something? Don’t throw cold water.”

I felt myself blush. “No. Really. It’s just a walk. I don’t even know if I like him or anything. I just spoke to him for a few minutes. I mean, I hardly . . .”

I struggled to find the right words. Both of them laughed.

I felt as embarrassed as a little girl who had stumbled on something very sophisticated, like the time I asked how women without husbands could still make babies.

“Oh, we’re just funning you,” Mom said, reaching for my hand. “You just go and enjoy yourself.”

“I don’t know,” Dad said. “Eleven or not, I should meet this boy first. He might be a young Jack the Ripper.

Rumor was that Jack the Ripper was a handsome man who could easily tempt the young women.”

“Stop it, Gregory,” Mom snapped. “She doesn’t need to be frightened off.” Her eyes could widen and flame with such fury that I was sure anyone she targeted, including Dad, would cower like a frightened puppy. I knew why she was a little upset. They were both worried about my not having much of a social life. Sometimes I thought they worried about it a lot more than I did or should.

Parents could be so confusing, so filled with contradictions. On one hand, they would be full of great concern and warning, suspicious of everything you did and anyone you knew, but on the other hand, they wanted you to participate, to have a so-called normal youth. Secretly, they dreaded the day the first boy came to take you out, drive you off, because now they would be nervous and concerned, watch the clocks, and fear ringing phones. But then there was the pride in their eyes when you dressed up and looked older.

“She knows I’m just kidding,” Dad said, winking at me again. “Right, Amber Light? Besides, he’s right next door. I know where to go if you’re not back in four or five days.”

Mom relaxed with a slight smile. We both had that gentle, almost habitual softening in our lips and eyes. More times than I could count, people had remarked to me how my mother was always so up, so friendly and pleasant to talk to. I think some people stopped in the store to do just that and in passing might pick up a small gift for a relative’s or friend’s birthday.

She turned to me. “Don’t worry about the dishes tonight, Amber. Go for your walk. Get to know the neighbors, and find out all the dirt on them before Risa Donald does and burns up a few cell phones spreading stories.”

Dad laughed.

“What are you laughing about, Gregory Morton Taylor? She was the first to spread that rumor that we were in economic trouble during the recession, and all those people who had orders with us were worried about their deposits.”

“I go with Katharine Hepburn,” Dad said. “I don’t care what they say about me as long as it isn’t true.”

“Who’s Katharine Hepburn?” I asked.

“Who’s . . .” Dad’s smile started to fade until Mom and I laughed. “You be careful, young lady,” he said, waving his right forefinger at me again, “or I’ll force you to watch a Turner Classic Movie marathon.”

After dinner, I went upstairs and checked my hair and my lipstick and did Mom’s favorite little trick: spraying the air with her cologne and then walking into it. I looked at myself in the mirror and fiddled with some strands and then debated putting on some eyeliner. Some men, like my father, were put off by a woman who wore too much makeup. Dad always compared this one or that one to Mrs. Hessler, an eighty-four-year-old widow who had her face so caked that Dad said she had it done by Michael Tooey, the funeral director, just so she wouldn’t look much different in the coffin.

“Why are you carrying on so much about your hair and your makeup, Amber Taylor?” I asked my mirror image. “You just spoke to this boy for five minutes, if that. You didn’t get this concerned when you went on dates with boys you’ve known almost all your life. Get hold of yourself.”

I stared at my image and then suddenly saw a little rage flow into my eyes.

“I don’t feel like getting hold of myself,” I said with defiance. “I feel like loosening those reins I keep on myself. Tonight I’d like to gallop,” I added, and then smiled at one of my pretend multiple personalities. Moments later, I was bouncing down the stairs as if it was my sixteenth birthday again and I was looking forward to wonderful presents. My parents couldn’t help but hear me.

“I’ll be back in a little while,” I shouted. “Don’t call Sherlock Holmes if I’m gone more than a half hour.”

“You know who Sherlock Holmes is?” Dad returned.

“I saw the remake,” I replied.

“Oh. Well, watch out for Risa Donald,” Dad continued from the living room. “Word has it she’s hiding in the bushes with binoculars and just waiting for new gossip.”

I heard Mom’s laugh as I went out the front door. For a few moments, I just stood there, wondering what to do next. How would Brayden know I was coming out of the house unless he had been waiting and watching my front door for the last hour? I didn’t have to wonder long. He was there in the street, just vaguely visible in the glow of the moonlight through some hazy clouds. Our street had no lights. No one in the neighborhood wanted them. They were willing to sacrifice the feeling of security for a more natural northwestern sky, often dazzling with shooting stars.

He raised his hand, and I walked slowly to our front gate. He didn’t come forward. He waited for me to reach him, with a look of self-satisfaction on his face. I thought, That’s a bit arrogant. I certainly didn’t like being taken for granted, certainly not by someone I had just met. He hadn’t even changed his clothes, whereas I had agonized over what would be attractive to wear on a walk.

“What were you doing? Waiting out here for a few hours?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“You weren’t being a Peeping Tom again, were you?” I asked, now suspicious. Had he planted himself at one of our windows and therefore known when we had finished dinner and when I had gone upstairs to get ready? Or maybe he had been watching my bedroom and seen me make all those preparations, fussing about. I couldn’t remember now if my curtains were fully closed, but if he had seen that, I would be almost as embarrassed as I would had he seen me naked.

“Absolutely not,” he said, raising his hand to imitate someone on the witness stand in a courtroom. “I learned my lesson about gawking and peeping.”

I looked at his house. There were barely any lights on. The entire downstairs was dark.

“Are your parents at home?”

“My father’s gone on a trip somewhere in the Middle East. My mother is upstairs, painting.” He turned around and started down the street.

I walked quickly to catch up. It was as if he were going with me or without me. I thought that was rude, too,

but I didn't complain or turn back. It would be a long time before I would decide for sure whether it was good or bad that I had continued. So many things we do in our lives seem right or wrong at the time but take on a different meaning when years pass and wisdom and experience change our views.

"Painting? What do you mean, painting the house inside?"

"No, hardly," he said, continuing what I thought was a rather fast pace for a get-to-know-you walk. Why was he in such a rush to get away from his house? "My mother is an artist. Some of her work has been in MoMA."

"MoMA?"

"The Museum of Modern Art in New York. And other places, especially art magazines. She goes by the name Saraswati."

"Sara what?"

He laughed. "It's her little joke, I think. Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of all the creative arts. Most people just think it's her real name."

"Is your mother Hindu?"

He finally slowed down but showed no signs of being out of breath. He looked back at his house. Had he just left without telling his mother? Would she be annoyed or something? Whether he knew it or not, he was making me feel uncomfortable.

"Well?" I said when he didn't respond.

"Not exactly, but she does believe in reincarnation, one of the main Hindu beliefs."

"She believes you can have more than one life?"

"Absolutely. If you're good, you come back as something or someone better. If you're bad, just the opposite."

"So, were you good or bad in your previous life?"

"I'm still deciding," he said. "And so is she," he added, but he dropped his voice until it was close to a whisper.

"Most of the parents I know think their children are God's gift," I said, and he laughed.

"Ain't that the truth." He paused and looked toward the lake. "I found a path that will take us to the lake quickly. Want to try it?"

"There are No Trespassing signs everywhere around Echo Lake. It has no public access."

"I don't think they have armed guards watching, do you? Besides, I can't believe you're so law-abiding. I bet you jaywalk."

“Most of the year, there’s not enough traffic here for it to matter.”

“Rationalization,” he said. “Well? Want to risk going to prison with me?”

I looked in the direction he wanted us to head. It went through thick woods. Even with the moonlight, it was quite dark. I had expected that when he suggested a walk, he meant a walk to the village, maybe to have a soda or something. Why did I spend so much time on my face and my hair if I was going to walk in the darkness?

“Are you afraid of being in the dark with me?” he asked when I continued to hesitate.

“It’s not just you being a stranger. You just moved here days ago. How do you know how to navigate through the woods and all? I certainly don’t and I’ve been here all my life.”

“Oh, I have radar like bats. I haven’t been sitting inside the house. I’ve been exploring. Trust me,” he said. “It’s worth the walk.”

“If I ruin these shoes . . .” I’d had no idea that he wanted to go off the road. I was wearing a relatively new pair of soft buck leather comfort shoes.

“We come to any puddles or mud, I carry you across. Guaranteed. Well?”

There was something about the way his eyes picked up the moonlight when it sidestepped the clouds. They didn’t reflect it; they absorbed it. They seemed to grow larger, brighter. Maybe he did have radar. I was a little annoyed at the way he smiled at me as I considered where he wanted us to go, but I was also quite intrigued. It was more like a challenge, as if he expected that I would back away and run home or something, and yet he looked as if he was really enjoying the debate I was having within myself.

“What are we going to see?”

“No way to describe it,” he said. “But I’ll bet it’s a view of the lake you’ve never experienced.”

“How could you know that? You haven’t been here long enough to know more than I do about my hometown and what I’ve seen and not seen of the lake.”

“If I’m wrong, I’ll apologize,” he said.

Was this crazy? Was I about to go deep into the darkest part of the woods in our village with a boy I had just met literally hours ago and with whom I had spent no more than fifteen minutes? All I knew about him was that he had a mother who was an artist who believed in reincarnation and a father who was gone most of the time doing top-secret economic research or something. Their house looked barely inhabited, and he wouldn’t even tell me exactly where he was from. Daddy’s joke about Jack the Ripper came tumbling back through my mind.

But then he reached for my hand and took it so gently I stopped thinking bad thoughts instantly.

“Okay?”

“Yes,” I said. For a moment, I felt hypnotized. During that moment, it was as if I would follow him

anywhere, even through a raging fire.

He held on to my hand, and we crossed in between the Knottses' and the Littlefields' houses. We could hear the televisions going in both, since both families had their windows open. It was a cool summer night, the kind of night when you at least wanted the air flowing through your home, if you didn't go out for a walk or something as we were doing.

"I bet if you could check, you would be hard-pressed to find a house in this village or any town or city where young people our age aren't planted in front of a TV set or a computer screen right now."

"So?" I said.

"So? So, it's a Facebook world where no one sees himself or herself anymore. They look into the new mirrors of our world, and instead of discovering who they really are, they see who they dream of being."

He nodded at the Littlefield house and continued.

"They swim in illusions and disappointments. The sound of someone's voice, the feel of her hands in yours, the scent of her hair, and the electricity of her very life in her eyes is diffused and filtered until what was once warm and human is now a matter of megabytes. I have seen best friends trapped in flash drives."

I stood there, mesmerized. "You don't have a computer?"

"With a father like mine, how could I not have a computer? He had a laptop in the delivery room."

I laughed, but I felt energized, inspired. How bright was he? "What grade are you in?" I asked.

"When I left, I was in the eleventh. You're going to be a senior this year."

"I don't remember telling you that."

"Just like for a walk in the woods, I research first," he replied.

"So we could have classes together?"

"I don't know how long I'll be here."

"What?" I paused. "I don't understand. Your parents rented the house?"

"Sorta."

"How can you sort of rent a house?" I asked.

He started us walking again. We sidestepped a ditch and stepped through a patch of blueberry bushes.

"So?"

"It's like a test run."

“Test run? You mean, to see if you like it, like living here?”

“Yes, exactly. We’ve done that before—many times before, actually.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense. When you say ‘many times before,’ what do you mean? How many?”

“Ten, twelve.”

“I don’t know what it must be like to move so much. I’ve lived only in one place, one house.”

“Believe me, you’re lucky,” he said. “No matter what you think of your hometown.”

“I don’t think badly of my hometown. I know I’m supposed to. I’m supposed to be like everyone else and talk incessantly about when I’ll finally get out. Some of them make it sound like we’re in a prison.”

“We’re all in one sort of prison or another,” he said. “Wait until they get to live in big urban centers and feel the indifference. Nothing makes you feel insignificant as much as walking down a street with about five thousand other people. They’ll wish they were back here.”

“You talk like you’ve lived for centuries.”

“It’s not how long you live; it’s what you live, where you’ve been, what you’ve done. Life’s like a glass you can fill with either water or wine.”

I realized how interesting, even exciting, it would be to have someone like him in my school, in my classes—actually, in my life.

“Well, in case you do stay on and attend our school, you know we have a summer reading list with reports to make and . . .”

“I’m sure I’ve read everything you’ve been assigned,” he said, not with disdain as much as with self-confidence.

“How can you be so sure of that without seeing the list?”

“Watch it!” he cried instead of answering, and then tugged me a little more toward him to avoid a large dip in the ground. For a moment, he wrapped his right arm around my shoulders. I didn’t pull away, but he released me. “Sorry, if I was too rough, but I was worried about those shoes.”

“No, it was fine. Thanks.”

He stared at the gaping hole. It was about two feet wide.

“It looks like a mini-sinkhole,” he said. “I saw some enormous ones two years ago when we were in Israel. They were at the Dead Sea. Could easily swallow up a house when the ground collapsed.”

“You’ve been to Israel?”

“One of my father’s conferences. Something to do with technology and satellites.”

“Where else have you been?” I asked as we continued walking carefully.

“Italy, France, Germany, England, and yes, Greece, but I was pretty young for most of those trips and probably got little more out of them than I would have from Disneyland. We just go between those two tall pine trees,” he said, nodding ahead. It was obvious that he did know exactly where he was going and how to get there.

“When were you here? When did you make this fantastic discovery?”

“Last night,” he said. “There’s a lot of pine up here, and nothing is cooler than being in a pine forest in the summer. Oh, I forgot Switzerland. My father had a major conference in Zurich. My mother and I took a train to Paris and visited the Louvre. I was in seventh grade then, so I remember all of that well. It’s where you can see the Venus de Milo,” he added.

“I’ve been to Los Angeles and to New York twice. That’s where my father’s sister, my aunt May, lives. She’s married to a surgeon who works at Sloan-Kettering. I have two cousins on my father’s side, Eden and Keith. Keith is a senior at Columbia planning to be a doctor also, and Eden is attending William and Mary. She plans on becoming an international journalist. If it weren’t for the Internet, I wouldn’t have much to do with them. They’re so far away, and they never seem to have time to come here. My aunt wasn’t happy living here. She says she felt out of touch with everything going on in the world. We’re too rural for her, and she didn’t want any part of our family’s jewelry business. Look at me,” I said, pausing. “Running off at the mouth. I hate the way I sound.”

“Why? You have a beautiful voice. I loved every syllable,” Brayden said. “You don’t have any relatives on your mother’s side?”

“She was an only child, like me.”

“And me,” Brayden said. “We should form a club. We can call it the Club for Those Smarter Than Their Brothers or Sisters.”

“Ha ha.”

We paused, and then he nodded at the path in the woods.

“Just walk right behind me. It is kind of dark through here,” he said.

How could he see so well? I wondered. The moon was blocked again, and the forest looked more like a solid dark wall.

“Maybe we went far enough?”

“You’ll see we didn’t in a few minutes,” he promised.

I stayed right behind him, almost walking on his feet at times, but just as he predicted, we came out at a place on the lake I had never been. It was a small lagoon. How could he have known, made such a discovery so quickly? Why hadn’t I ever seen it?

As the moon broke free again, the water glistened, and we could see about a dozen Canadian geese floating

just a few feet from shore. I turned at the call of a Northern goshawk looking down at us as if we had intruded in his space. Off to the left were about a half-dozen Great Blue herons.

“Look,” Brayden said, pointing toward the cattails and reeds in the water. “Two yellow-headed blackbirds. Aren’t they beautiful?”

In all the years I had lived in Echo Lake, I had never seen so many different varieties of birds gathered in one area. Like most everyone my age I knew, I took it all for granted. Unless we were assigned some science project involving birds, I didn’t pay them as much attention as they obviously deserved.

It wasn’t only the birds and the surprise opening on the shore that gave us a wide view of the lake, with the moonlight and stars making the water dazzling, that impressed and delighted me. It was the unique silence when so many beautiful things seemed asleep or even, I should say, meditating. Never before had I felt so much a part of it all. It was as if I had suddenly come to appreciate my own home. I felt like someone who had been wearing blinders all her life and suddenly had them removed.

“I can’t believe you’ve been here only a matter of days and you found this spot so quickly,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. I didn’t want to disturb even a water bug.

He said nothing. He just stared out with what was now a soft smile set in a face framed with such longing I felt my own heart ache.

“Anything wrong?” I asked.

“What? No. Am I forgiven for making you trek through the bushes and woods?”

“Absolutely. I wonder what it’s like here in the daytime.”

“It’s pretty, but it’s not the same. Darkness always adds something special. Ironically, it’s as though the light blinds us, washes away important things that are right next to us or right in front of us.”

“Is that why your family keeps the lights so low?”

He looked at me strangely. I thought there was some anger in his eyes, anger and annoyance.

“I was just curious,” I said.

He looked out at the lake again and was silent so long I thought he would say no more. I was about to suggest that we start back when he turned to me again and said, “My mother is not well.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. What’s wrong?”

“She suffers from severe depression. Because of that, she sleeps most of the day and retreats to her art studio for most of the night. It’s not uncommon to see the light on in the attic and nowhere else, no other room lit, so don’t be surprised. And don’t be surprised if you rarely see her outside during the daytime. My father has arranged for things to be delivered regularly. She doesn’t like shopping.”

“How sad. Especially when you think of her being in a strange new place without any friends. I mean, you don’t know anyone here, do you?”

“No, but that’s not so unusual for us. Or it hasn’t been, and now, with the way she is, it might not matter.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “Can’t someone help her?”

“I do what I can.”

“No, I mean, well, your father, of course, but doctors?”

“She’s seen doctors. She’s on some medication and is seeing a therapist now. My father . . . my father is more comfortable with statistics than with people. He’s not much help when it comes to something like this.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I hated repeating myself, but what else could I say? As it was, I felt I had stumbled into more information than he wanted to give, but I also knew how hard it would be for him to live in a town as small as Echo Lake and keep people from knowing what his family life was like. I suspected that most of the boys and even most of the girls, despite his good looks, would be turned off.

“I’d rather, if you can avoid it, you not talk about us with your friends,” he said, as if he could read my thoughts. “It would be horrible for my mother if people came around to gawk or something. That’s mainly why my father wanted to move here. He thought it was far enough away from . . . that it was innocuous. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Of course.”

“I knew you would.”

“I hate gossip. My mother hates it the most. My father acts indifferent about it, but it bothers him, too. I can tell you this for sure, my phone rings the least of any of my classmates’. They know that if they tell me something, it dies with me, and that’s no fun.”

“No boys scratching at the doors and windows?”

“None I care to let in at the moment,” I said, and he finally smiled again.

Then he nodded to the right. “Someone once lived out here.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a small, very old cabin about a thousand yards farther down. It’s hidden by the overgrowth. None of your friends knows about it?”

“We don’t hang out on lake property much. They have regular lake patrols, and the Echo Lake police will jump if someone in the Echo Lake Corporation calls. The properties around the lake are the most expensive and owned by very influential people.”

“No one seems to be doing anything with this area,” he said.

“I’ll find out why not. I’m sure whoever owns it is just keeping it to wait for a better price or something.”

“Whatever. It’s my favorite place, so don’t talk too much about it and suddenly have dozens of your friends

sneaking onto the property to have little private parties.”

“This is your favorite place? How can you have a favorite place? You haven’t seen very much of the town, have you?”

“Enough to know that this place is special.”

I said nothing. We stood looking out at the water, drawing from its energy and beauty. I felt his hand find mine in the darkness.

“Maybe we should go back,” he said, turning. “I’m sure you told your parents you were taking a walk with the strange new neighbor who was gawking at you through the hedges. They’re probably sitting on pins and needles.”

“I didn’t mention the gawking, and I didn’t say you were strange. My father wouldn’t have let me out of the house,” I replied, following him.

He paused. “You really don’t find me strange?”

“Not strange—different.”

“Different works,” he said, nodding. We walked on silently for a while until we were out of the woods and he could reach for my hand again. I gave it to him without hesitation this time.

“Are you going to try to get a job or something for the summer?” I asked.

“No. I have to take care of my mother. You might not see that much of me.”

“If there’s anything I can do to help . . .”

“That’s nice of you. No, there’s nothing, but if you’re around when I’m around, and you don’t mind doing simple things with me occasionally . . .”

“Thoreau things?”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t mind,” I said.

We passed between the Knottses’ and the Littlefields’ again. The TVs were still going, but now we could hear music from upstairs in the Littlefields’ house. Angie Littlefield surely had some of her friends over. She was a year behind me but more popular than most of the girls in my class when it came to the boys in my class.

Brayden caught me looking up at her bedroom windows.

“Why are you really so uninterested in doing things with kids your age, Amber?”

“How do you know that’s true?”

“Isn’t it?”

“Maybe.”

He nodded.

“What?”

“Something frightens you,” he said.

“Frightens me? Okay, what, Dr. Phil?”

He hesitated, staring at me.

“So?”

“The same thing that frightens me now.”

“And what’s that, oh, wise know-it-all?”

He didn’t laugh. He walked on, cloaked in those same moments of silence that just as before made me think he would not answer. As we drew closer to his house, he paused and looked at me.

“You’re frightened about revealing too much about yourself.”

“Like what?”

“Things you won’t even admit to yourself,” he replied. He nodded at the now dark house. “Gotta go. See you,” he said, and headed toward the front door. “Oh,” he added, pausing to look back. “Thanks for walking with me.”

“I enjoyed it. I think,” I said. “It was like walking with Socrates or someone.”

He laughed.

“Maybe you were. Remember,” he said, “reincarnation.”

He laughed again, and then I thought I heard his mother calling for him the way she had when I first met him, her voice sounding so far-off and thin.

Or maybe it was just the breeze strengthening and weaving its way over rain gutters, over wires, and through trees. I looked up and then back toward town.

When I turned to look back at him, he was gone, and again, I hadn’t even heard him open the front door. Maybe he had to tiptoe around her, I thought. Maybe he was forced to live in the same world of silence.

What had he said about prisons? We all lived in one sort or another.

Having a mother like his put him in a sort of prison for sure, I thought.

How sad for him, and yet he didn't seem depressed. He just seemed more thoughtful, like someone who had been forced to put away childish things.

A part of me envied him for that, but another, perhaps stronger, part pitied him, too.

One thing I knew for sure from just this short time I had spent with him. He didn't like being pitied.

He didn't want sympathy.

“What does he want?” I whispered to myself.

The sound of his mother calling his name lingered like a dream that would never be forgotten.

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