


Dancing with Darkness...

 Tired of the tight leash that she and her sisters are kept on by their parents, Rachel Durham is seeking for a way out: and one night, she unexpectedly finds one in their Chesapeake Bay home.

As the pull of the night world grows inexorably stronger upon Rachel, her anxious father enlists the aid of Paul Fester (soldier, medic, juggler, and ninja) to find out what his daughters are up to.

With the father's tentative consent, Paul embarks on a daring but difficult balancing act to win the girls' trust—before it's too late.

*The
Midnight
Dancers*

a fairy tale

retold

by regina doman

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*Once upon a time, there was a king who had
twelve beautiful daughters, each one more
lovely than the next.*

— Grimm



 *The king was beset by a carious problem...*

— *Grimm*



Paul felt a prickle in his spine as he set down his duffle bag at the airstrip. That usually made him think that something significant was going to happen. Most of the time, it was only his imagination, but occasionally, the prickle was right, so he paid attention. For a while, he kept glancing up at the other soldiers, officers, and Middle Eastern allied military that sporadically passed him by, wondering what it could mean.

Maybe he was about to meet someone. His heart skipped a bit eagerly at the thought, though by now—he was twenty-three years old—he had experienced enough heartache to not be completely optimistic. And there didn't seem to be any winsome girls strolling around the Army base terminal in this Middle Eastern desert. He tried to put the thought aside, but given his personality, he knew it would be difficult to do.

Who knows? Maybe she's inside the terminal, frustrated that her flight's gotten delayed, and she's on her way outside to catch some rays... That elusive she. He shook his head to dispel the thought. Better focus on getting ready for med school in the fall. Only a few more weeks till your tour of duty's up...only a few more "fews" left to go!

Still, he sighed as he pulled out his flute case. He was settling himself for a long wait. Another military delay meant that their flight wouldn't be happening for an hour.

He watched the heat shimmering in hypnotic waves over the desert sand as he assembled his slim silver instrument. There were few other people outside just now. Just the other guys in his squad leaning against their bags and dozing off in the hot sunshine, hats over their eyes, earplugs in, listening to music or Armed Forces Radio broadcasts.

One officer was standing a short distance from him, leaning on a railing and staring out at the desert, apparently lost in thought. When Paul began blowing softly into his flute, the officer turned with surprise and smiled. An older man, ruddy-faced, wearing his ACUs, with a black eagle on his uniform,

marking him as a full-bird colonel. He listened for a moment, then turned back to the desert and his own solitude, and pulled out his wallet. Paul could tell he was still listening, and encouraged, felt his way through the melody, making it up as he went along.

Then he heard the sound.

He opened his eyes and lowered his flute at the whistling sound starting in the distance. But too quickly he recognized the high-pitched scream.

"Incoming!" he and two other squad members shouted simultaneously. As Paul threw himself face forward on the ground, he barely registered the colonel turning away from the railing as something exploded against the concrete wall of the terminal.

There was a bright light, confusion and pandemonium, but the members of Paul's squad went into action immediately. Paul, who had been knocked over by the explosion, scrambled to his feet and half-hobbled, half-sprinted to the colonel. The officer was moaning, lying in a twisted position against the wall of the air terminal sprinkled with concrete dust and debris. Paul and another infantryman pulled him back away from the smoking mass the mortar round had left.

"Medic!" the infantryman yelled as the other members of Paul's squad hurried around him.

"On it!" Paul was already checking the man's vital signs. The officer was still in obvious pain, clutching his arm breathing fast. Paul pulled out his medic's kit and focused on the wounded man. His color was good, he was breathing okay. "What's your name, sir?"

"Durham. Colonel Robert Durham, Internal Affairs."

"You in pain?"

"Lots."

"Your arm?"

"Think I landed on it when I fell," the man grunted.

Paul did a check of the man's limbs and quickly discovered that his left arm was indeed broken. "Anything else hurting?" He put on his stethoscope and took a quick listen to the man's lungs, then tried to ascertain if there were any other injuries.

"Just my arm."

Paul glanced around. Apparently the colonel was the only victim of the mortar round: everyone else had cleared the vicinity.

"I'm going to try to splint your arm, sir, okay?"

But as soon as he started to lift the arm, the colonel gasped in pain. "Hold on, just a moment, sir," Paul said, pulling a pen from his pocket.

Probing for the right spot, he pressed it gently and firmly in the indentation of the man's upper ear, an acupuncture point for pain. The colonel's panic seemed to subside. Paul carefully set the broken arm in a splint and wrapped it with an ace bandage.

"My wallet..." the colonel said. "I had it out when I fell..."

Paul glanced around and saw the wallet lying on the ground, its contents scattered around him. Getting to his feet, he retrieved it. "Is this it sir?"

"Yes, it is," Colonel Durham said, and feebly tried to take it with his good arm.

"Don't move," Paul said. "Let me put it back together for you." He replaced the ID cards, money, and photographs. There was a prayer card with a wooden cross glued to it, and Paul brushed the debris off it and gave it a quick kiss of reverence before replacing it.

"You a Christian, corporal?" the colonel asked.

"Yup. Catholic, actually," Paul said.

"Hmph," the colonel said. He tried to look up. "They doing a QRF?"

Paul glanced around. One member of the squad was busy calling in a 9-line MEDIVAC report for the colonel's injury, and his squad leader was organizing the other members. "Yes sir, looks like they're going to go check out the fence line to see if they can get a shot at the OPFOR who shot off that round."

"Hope we get them before they hit us again," the colonel said, twisting around.

"Hope so too, sir. Just relax. We'll get you transport out of here." Paul decided to keep the colonel conscious and relaxed as long as possible. "Sir, if you don't mind my asking, are these all your kids?"

The officer glanced up at the photo Paul was holding. "They are now," he said. "Plus two more, both boys. That's our wedding photo. Sallie and I each brought six kids into the marriage."

"Six kids—each?" Paul looked closely at the photo and counted. In the photo, Colonel Durham stood next to a woman in a simple white dress, and two rows of six girls flanked them. "Twelve?"

The colonel cocked his head. "It's a bit unusual," he said. "My first wife died in a car accident. About a year later, our church was raising money for a woman whose husband died in a construction accident. She had six daughters too. That struck me, so I asked our pastor if he could put me in touch with her. Five years ago, we were married."

“Wow,” Paul said. “What a great story! My own parents have eight kids. Trying to fit eight kids into a split-level growing up was uh—an experience! But fourteen: that must be crazy! But fun,” he added.

“Well, it’s definitely crazy,” the colonel admitted with a sigh.

At last Paul spotted a medic humvee coming towards them and breathed a sigh of relief. Paul’s squad sergeant was hurrying over to him.

“You okay?”

The colonel didn’t answer, but Paul answered for him, “A broken arm, but I think he’s okay otherwise.”

“I meant you, corporal.”

Paul blinked and looked down. There was blood spreading over his pants leg, and he was suddenly aware of a throbbing pain in his thigh. His adrenaline rush must have masked it. “Uh, yeah, I guess I’ll need some treatment.”



“Where’s your flute, corporal?”

Paul, who had been dozing in his hospital bed, woke up with a start to find the colonel staring down at him, grinning, his arm in a sling. He returned the smile a bit faintly.

“I’m not sure, actually. I think my squad leader got my stuff,” Paul said, trying to sit up.

“At ease, soldier. I just wanted to come by and see the medic who helped get me through that close call. God bless you,” he shook his head. “They said you took some shrapnel to the leg.”

“Yeah, but they think I’ll be all right.” Paul said. “Lucky it missed the joint. If I can rest through the spring, I’ll be fine by the summer.”

“They sending you back stateside?”

“Yes sir. My tour of duty was almost up. And you?”

“I’m thinking it’s time for me to take the early retirement option.” The colonel laughed and sat down in the chair by Paul’s bed. “So where’d you learn to play the flute?”

“Oh, in college. A few friends and I had a juggling group. We used to go to festivals to juggle, and I learned so that I had something to play along in the background.”

“Sounds like a fun job.”

“It was, actually. If I recoup all right, I’m going to do some more of that this summer.”

“Now,” the colonel said in a fatherly tone, “I hope the army’s preparing you to do more than just juggle.”

“Well, I do acrobatics and aikido as well.” Paul couldn’t help saying. He grinned. “Sorry, that was a joke. No, juggling’s just a hobby. Actually, the Army’s paying for me to go to medical school. I’ll start in the fall.”

“Oh, really? Good for you. But if you’re pre-med, I’m surprised they didn’t place you in a medical core.”

“Well, I sort of liked being in a squad, you know? A bit more action. Plus my specialty is emergency medicine.”

“I can say you did a good job there. By the way, what was that you were doing in my ear that stopped the pain?”

“Acupressure points. I’ve been interested in acupuncture and Eastern medicine since high school. I’d like to get training in Eastern and Western medicine and use both in my practice.”

“Some would say there are profound differences between the two systems that make them incompatible,” the man said cautiously.

Paul shrugged. “I just don’t buy the whole Eastern versus Western divide. Human beings live in both places, and they all need healing.”

“Hmph,” the colonel said, “Well, that’s an interesting take on things. I wish you well in your recovery. Hope your folks weren’t too worried about you when they heard about your injury.”

“They’re glad I’m all right. And your family, sir?”

“Sallie thinks it’s God intervening on her behalf to get me back home to Maryland. I’ve been saying for the last couple years that I needed to stay stateside for a while. Our girls are mostly teenagers by now, and it’s probably better if I’m there to help out with the parenting.” He looked a bit gloomy.

“Sounds like a big job, handling a dozen teenagers,” Paul said, since the man had fallen silent.

“It is. You know, teenaged girls. Typical.” He changed the subject. “So, are you going to juggle at any festivals this summer?”

“Yes, actually,” Paul said. “My friends are all trying to hold down real jobs now, so I’m the only one left who can still do it. And the organizers at the Bayside Colonial Festival in Maryland wanted me to come back. So that’s where I’ll be going.”

“Bayside, Maryland?” The colonel looked surprised. “That’s our town!”

“Really?” Paul said. “Great little town. Right on the Chesapeake Bay, too.”

The colonel beamed as he stood up. "It is a great town," he said, pulling a card out of his wallet. "Look us up when you get there and come visit."

"Thanks! I'll look forward to it," Paul took the card.

The Durham Family

Robert Durham~~~~~Sallie Fendelman

Rachel, 18

Cheryl, 18

Miriam, 17

Tammy, 17

Priscilla, 15

Taren, 17

Rebecca, 14

Briifany, 15

Jydia, 13

Melanie, 13


Deborah, 11

Jinette, 11

Robbie, 3

Jabez, 1

one

 *The twelve princesses all slept together in a great room, their beds standing side by side.*

— Grimm



achel!"

Rachel Durham heard the voice distantly, but it was still far enough away to ignore. She had time. Chances were that Sallie would find another sister to help before thinking to call her oldest stepdaughter again.

So Rachel continued to lean out of the kitchen door and look down the lawn over the trees sloping to the bay. Soon the night would come. The wind was making flurries of ripples on the water, and the summer sunset was simmering off in the west, leaving a streak of pink like a road that seemed to be beckoning her to follow.

If only I could run away right now, she thought. The breeze was alluring, refreshing, and inside the house was stale and stifling, even in the air conditioning. She wanted to run through the woods and go down to the water, just to sit on a rock out in the bay. Just a taste of freedom...

"RACHEL!"

She whirled around. "What?"

The kitchen door slapped shut behind her, trapping her back in the light and noise and routine of the household. "Look at Jabez!" The sound of Sallie's voice cut through her senses as Rachel's eyes adjusted to the brightness of the kitchen. Her stepmother, thin blond hair falling out of a ponytail, was pointing into the pantry with one hand like a condemning Old Testament prophet. Her other hand was clutching a basket full of laundry.

Rolling her eyes, Rachel looked into the pantry, and then grimaced. Eighteen-month old Jabez was sitting on the floor, with one chubby hand poked shoulder deep into a container of bread flour. Hearing his name, he

raised his eyes, puckered over with brown stubs of eyebrow. His baby mouth was a round O. "Am I not supposed to be doing this?" his gaze clearly said.

"Please get him cleaned up!" Sallie said brusquely. "And finish the kitchen."

"The kitchen is finished!" Rachel said incredulously, looking around at the enormous room with its historical stone fireplace and newly-installed cabinets and appliances. The dishes were drip-drying on the countertop, while her sisters busied themselves with a few final chores.

"Why weren't you girls watching Jabez?" Sallie retorted, instead of apologizing.

"Maybe because we were too busy doing the kitchen," Rachel muttered, throwing down her towel and leaning down to get her baby brother. Sallie exited the kitchen, calling for the twins to come and get the laundry.

"Bad baby," Rachel pronounced, prying Jabez's hands gently off the flour container and tucking him under her arm like a sack. The pantry was a mess, but, she decided, that wasn't her problem. She was the oldest sister in the house: she could delegate.

Since seventeen-year-old Miriam, the second-in-command, was drying dishes, and Liddy and Becca were sweeping the floors, Rachel made up her mind that cleaning up the pantry was Prisca's job. But the fifteen-year old sister was nowhere to be seen. *Prisca's goofing off, as usual.*

Gritting her teeth, Rachel tried to diffuse her irritation by talking to Jabez. "Bad boy, bad boy," she chanted as she dusted him off, and he chuckled at her. She pressed a small kiss on his head, and he gleefully shoved both fists into her face, exuberantly careless in his affection. She sighed, appreciating his small-scale male energy in a house with so many girls.

"Got to put you to bed," Rachel said, putting him under her arm again. "And find the slacker."

She caught sight of herself in the mirror over the sideboard and half-smiled. She had skin with a touch of olive, mahogany hair and bright blue-green eyes she was quite proud of. Rachel Durham was attractive, and she knew it.

Whooshing a laughing Jabez along in her arms, she turned a corner to look into the side parlor. Her youngest sister Debbie was vacuuming, but no sign of Prisca. She turned another corner to go check the library. Sometimes Rachel was happy to be living in a rambling historical house, but at times like this, she wished there were less nooks and crannies where siblings skipping chores could hide.

Jabez was getting heavy, and he was about to start whining. Looking around for someone to take him, Rachel spotted Cheryl in the downstairs bathroom, leaning against the side of the shower wall, almost hidden by the curtain.

Her oldest stepsister was supposed to be cleaning, but Rachel guessed, from the bend of her head and the light glinting off her glasses, that she was reading a book. Cheryl was six months younger, and very different from Rachel: a nervous, insecure, dreamy type who was chronically disorganized.

Rachel's policy was to use a soft touch when it came to Sallie's daughters. In their blended family, there were enough problems without looking for more. Keeping her mouth shut, Rachel walked past the bathroom, getting more and more irritated with Prisca every moment.

Moving Jabez onto her shoulders, Rachel hurried up the steps to the girls' bedroom on the top floor. "Pris—CA!" she bellowed.

Her fifteen-year-old sister was crouched over on the lower bunk of her bed, reading a magazine, which she immediately rolled over to hide. "What?" Prisca said defensively.

"The kitchen floor's not mopped," Rachel said.

"I did it!"

Rachel shrugged. "Could have fooled me. Anyway, you'll have to do the pantry over. Jabez got into the flour."

Prisca swore, stuffed the magazine under her pillow and stormed downstairs, still spitting out profanity.

Rachel followed her out and down the steps. "You better not let Dad hear you talking like that."

"Oh, shut up!" Prisca said, her voice rising piercingly as she hurried downstairs. Prisca had always been a tad temperamental, but lately she had been even more so. Not wanting to exasperate the situation further, Rachel decided to give Prisca some space for the moment.

She met Brittany, one of the more easy-going Fendelman girls, coming out of the boys' bedroom with the vacuum cleaner. "Want to get him ready for bed?" Rachel said, indicating Jabez. "He had a flour adventure. I'll take the vacuum downstairs." Over Brittany's pompom ponytail, Rachel saw that the room was cleaned and straightened. "Hey, good job."

Instead of answering, Brittany shrugged, and then puffed out her cheeks in a goofy face for Jabez, who burst into riotous giggles. Brittany whisked him out of Rachel's arms and around the bedroom in some basketball moves.

Having gotten rid of her toddler burden, Rachel walked downstairs with the vacuum, rubbing her shoulder. She needed to make sure that Prisca had actually gotten to the kitchen.

She stowed the vacuum, and found Prisca in the pantry, sweeping up flour with quick angry strokes. The dish rack was empty and the girls were scattered. There was scum in the sink, and she picked a sponge and wiped it off, then looked around.

Done for the night. It had been a long day. Trucking her siblings to swimming lessons in the morning, grocery shopping in the afternoon, weeding the garden, picking raspberries from their bushes, making supper, and cleaning up—*man, summer is supposed to be a vacation*, she thought. *And I've barely done anything except work.*

I need a shower, she thought. *And some time to relax.* Thinking of the fashion magazine under Prisca's pillow, she turned her path towards the upstairs again. But as she opened the door to the back staircase, Dad's voice rang out, "Girls! Time for family devotions!"

She groaned out loud, and regretted it at once. Her dad's head snapped around the corner from the living room, his eyes hard. "What was that, young lady?"

"Nothing," Rachel said, massaging her shoulder and wincing as though she had just banged it. "Just hit myself with the door."

Her dad looked at her suspiciously, but Rachel, feigning innocence, slouched past him into the living room.

Ever since Dad had gotten back from his tour of duty, he had decreed that the time after dinner was "family hour." He wanted everyone hanging out in the living room for an hour or more so that they could have "quality time." But by the end of the day, Rachel was sick and tired of her family, and being around Dad wasn't helping much. He just didn't have the energy to deal with them all now, and Rachel knew it. She wished Dad would admit it to himself that his idea of a nice, happy time with his daughters just wasn't working out.

Only a few family members were in the living room. Rachel noticed that Linette had suddenly reappeared: the youngest Fendelman had vanished after dinner, leaving someone else to clear the table, and Cheryl hadn't done anything about it. Now Linette, adorable with blond curling hair and large brown eyes, was snuggling up against Sallie and listening to her read a library book. As usual she was pretending to be younger than her eleven years and skipping chores with no consequences. The Fendelmans were lousy at the chain of command.

With satisfaction, Rachel noticed that the youngest Durham sister, eleven-year-old Debbie, was industriously vacuuming crumbs under the dining room table. Noticing Rachel, Debbie made a face and rolled her eyes at Linette. Rachel grinned back knowingly. With dark hair and blue eyes, Debbie was arguably prettier than Linette. But Debbie was no slouch, even if she was a scamp.

"Devotions!" her dad called again, but no one was coming. Rachel sat down, and realized how long it had been since she had. A sigh escaped her, and she leaned back in the armchair and picked up one of Sallie's women's magazines. Recipes were not her thing, but she was bored. She turned the pages to an article on bedroom makeovers.

"Why can't we go on vacation there?" Debbie asked over her shoulder, pointing to an advertisement of a girl sunbathing on a Caribbean isle.

"Ask Dad," Rachel said absently.

"Dad!" Debbie started, but Rachel, realizing she had misspoken, pinched her.

"I didn't mean you should *really* ask him," Rachel said hastily. "Look at those dresses: aren't they gorgeous?"

Sallie looked up. "I don't think you should be looking at that magazine during devotions," she said, putting out a hand.

But we aren't even having devotions yet, Rachel silently fumed as she handed over the magazine. She stared at her denim skirt, which seemed to her to be unforgivably plain. The other girls were drifting into the living room now. Three-year-old Robbie bolted through the door and leapt onto the couch. Jabez, now in pajamas, toddled through the door after him, tripped, and fell face-down on the carpet.

Amidst the wails, Rachel heard the phone on the end table ringing and picked it up. "Hello?"

"Uh, is Rachel there?"

Warmth spread through her. "This is Rachel," she said quietly.

"Hey, what's up? It's Alan."

"Hi!" She glanced circumspectly around. Only a few of the girls noticed she was on the phone: Sallie was busy with Jabez.

"Hey, remember that CD we bought at the mall? I was wondering when I could get it back from you."

"Um, let me see," Rachel ran through her head. "Maybe on Monday when I go to the library..."

"Who are you talking to?"

Out of nowhere, her dad had appeared in front of her and was fixing her with a steely glance. Great. Perfect timing. Not only had Alan called, but he had managed to time his call to the moment when all fourteen children were finally in the living room.

“Uh—hey, I got to go,” Rachel hedged. “Family devotions.” She quickly hung up the phone and looked at her dad. “What?”

“Who were you talking to?”

“A friend from church. I need to return a CD, that’s all.”

“Which friend?” He put out his hand for the phone. Rachel knew she was sunk: Alan’s name was on the caller ID.

“Alan.” There was no helping it now.

“That Vonnegun boy, right?”

“Dad, he goes to our *church*.”

Her dad looked at her, arms folded. “Did you get the CD from him at church?”

“I ran into him at the mall,” Rachel said defensively.

“Did you run into him, or did you meet him there?”

Rachel threw up her hands. “Dad, I don’t see what the big deal is! What difference does it make?”

“Because you girls know that you are not allowed to be with boys unsupervised. That’s the rule in our house. You were disobeying. And setting a bad example for your younger sisters.” Her father’s blue eyes bored into her. “I want to talk with you about this after devotions.”

“Fine,” she said, and stared at the ground. The other girls waited in silence while Dad walked to his chair, picked up his Bible, sat down, and opened it. Devotions began.

Afterwards, Dad closed the Bible and said, “Rachel, I want to speak with you upstairs.”

She inclined her head and got up stiffly. Dad walked her upstairs, talking to her all the time. “You know perfectly well that you should not be sneaking off to hang out with boys. That is our family rule. You are eighteen years old, the oldest girl in this house, and you set the tone for the rest by how you behave. Do you understand me?”

“I understand you, Dad,” she said.

“Then why don’t you exhibit it in your actions?” he raised his eyebrows. “I don’t understand it. And I don’t understand why you can’t respond to a simple request without flouncing around. I don’t appreciate it. Your mother –” he barely paused, “doesn’t appreciate it. How can I keep the rest of your sisters in order if you don’t listen to me?”

Rachel pursed her lips but didn't reply. As they walked up the stairs to the attic, her father went on, "It's my responsibility before God to raise you up in the way you should go. I take that responsibility seriously. Have I made it clear to you, Rachel, the way you are supposed to behave? Haven't I shown you what goodness is, what the right way is? Have I made that clear to you?"

"Yes," she said, when his question became more than rhetorical.

"Then if you know the way, why you don't follow it?"

Because it's boring, stifling and rigid—like some kind of military exercise. But even Rachel didn't dare to say something like that to her father, not when he was like this. She looked away from him, knowing how she was supposed to respond, but unable to do so, any more than she could bend her knees backwards.

"I want you to go to your bedroom and think about what I've just said to you," her father said, and opened the door to the top floor. "You know I love you, Rachel. Good night."

He shut the door, and she stood in the room, hot tears on her face, a rage growing in her that even she could see was out of proportion to the situation. She flicked the fan switch "on," flung herself on her bed, grabbed her pillow fiercely, and thrust her face into it. Her tears stopped almost immediately, but the turbulence inside didn't die down. *Why is it always like this? He treats me like a child and sends me to my room. Ever since Dad had gotten back from the Middle East ... no, ever since Mom died ... he just doesn't know me. He just doesn't understand.*

Her eye caught the black and white photograph encased in a frame sitting on her dresser. It was a picture of her mother, laughing and looking extremely gorgeous in a black dress and pearls. To Rachel, that picture seemed to represent an era of her life that was unreachable. She was beyond wishing that Mom was still alive: she just felt bleak, grim acceptance.

After a moment, she heard the door close softly, footsteps came up the steps, and then thirteen-year-old Melanie Fendelman sat down on the bed. "Hey Ray," she said in her soft drawl, rubbing her fingers over her older stepsister's back.

That was Melanie for you, loyal and wanting to help out any way she could. Rachel had known that her younger stepsister would seek her out, and she was grateful.

"Thanks," Rachel turned over with a sigh at last, wiping her eyes. She stared at the sloped ceiling of their rooftop room and listened to the whirring of the fan. "You didn't need to come up."

"I know. How are you?"

“Stinky.” Despite her anger, Rachel couldn’t resist a smile as she looked at her young stepsister. She considered Melanie the prettiest of the Fendelman girls. Though not conventionally beautiful, Melanie had a round, still childlike face with amber eyes that squinted easily up into laugh lines, honey-colored wavy hair, and an open demeanor that made you love her as soon as you looked at her. It always gave Rachel a twinge of remorse, wishing that she could be more like Melanie, peaceful and friendly and accepting. She would trade all the Fendelmans plus a few of the Durhams, Rachel thought, so long as she could still have Melanie as her sister.

“What do you think, Melanie? I just don’t get Dad. And he is just clueless about me. What do you think?”

Melanie chewed the side of her mouth. “Maybe you’re just too much alike.”

“Yes, that’s possible,” Rachel said, rolling over. She stared at the ceiling. “Dear God, I just want out of here. I just want out. I’m just sick and tired of it.”

The door to the attic opened again, and Miriam came up, followed by Tammy, one of the Fendelman twins.

“Hi there!” Miriam said brightly. “All full of sunshine and candy?” A bit on the heavy side, she could always be counted on for a sarcastic comment.

Rachel snorted. “Yeah. Sour balls.”

Miriam chuckled and pushed open one of the large windows a bit further, then sat on her bunk bed, bumping her head. Exclaiming, she rubbed her dark brown hair. “You know, as soon as I get out of this house and get a job, do you know what I am going to do with my first credit card?”

“What?” Tammy asked, swinging onto her bed and throwing back her straight blond hair.

“I’m going to buy a huge California king-sized bed,” Miriam said impressively. “I will never ever sleep in a bunk bed again. Forgetaboutit!”

“You can switch with me sometime,” Tammy offered. She and Taren, her twin, slept in their own single beds.

“Oh, come on!” Rachel cried out. “I think bunk beds are so romantic! When I get married, I’ll tell my husband, ‘if you don’t want to sleep in a bunk bed, this is off!’”

The others giggled. “He won’t like that,” Tammy opined.

“Oh, I’ll let him choose whether he wants the top bunk or the bottom,” Rachel said generously. She rolled to her feet and sat up, staring around the room. “Come on. Let’s rearrange the room.”

The girls stared at their room, which Dad had been promising to break up into smaller sections ever since they had bought the house, but which he had never seemed to find time or money to have done. The vast whitewashed room had three bunk beds (staggered in the middle of the room, to take advantage of the highest point in the sloped ceiling), two single beds, and two double beds, along with a big long-mirrored dresser and two little dressers and a vanity. “No matter what we do with it, it’s still going to look like a camp cabin,” Miriam said dryly.

Rachel shrugged. “I need a new perspective. Something. Come on, let’s give a try. Tammy, help me with the big bed. It’s been in front of the chimney forever. Oh, here’s Cheryl. Give us a hand.”

“With what?” The oldest Fendelman girl had just walked upstairs.

“We’re rearranging furniture again,” Tammy said.

“Again? Why? At this hour?” Cheryl had her book in her hands, and she did look tired.

“Oh, come on. The room’s clean. If all five of us do it, it won’t take long.” Rachel said.

Reluctantly, the blond girl put down her book and found a place at the footboard. “Where are we moving this?”

As each of the beds had drawers beneath for storage, moving them was a chore. “Good thing you came in. It’ll take all five of us to move it, for sure.” Tammy figured.

“I just want to move it over by the window. And we can move the two dressers here, and put them together to make one big dresser. Well, sort of. It’s something I’ve thought about for a while,” Rachel said.

“That might look cool,” Melanie agreed. Cheryl sized up the situation, and began to get interested.

“We might be able to hang a canopy over the bed, from the ceiling beams,” she said.

“Hm! Yes, that’s a great idea!” Rachel said appreciatively. Good, she had a team.

So all four of them shoved the double bed out from the wall with Miriam complaining about the uneven floorboards.

“This room is too ancient,” she grumbled.

“I like old rooms,” Rachel retorted, struggling to get her hands under the headboard for another push. “It was once a sewing room—excuse me, a weaving room—when this house was built, before the Civil War. That’s why there’s so many windows—to let in light to work by.” She grunted and shoved and the bed slowly creaked forward three feet.

"You know, this will look very different," Melanie said, as they paused to rest. "We've rearranged before, but we've never moved this bed."

"Wonder why?" Miriam puffed sarcastically, putting an elbow on the footboard to rest.

"We always had it shoved up against the kitchen chimney," Cheryl pointed out. Rachel had chosen that spot for the biggest bed because the wide brick chimney against the wall was a natural focal point.

"Isn't there something funny about that chimney?" Tammy said abruptly. "It looks too wide."

"Too wide?" Rachel queried, running her hands over the worn red bricks, smoothed by time.

"Well, wider than the kitchen hearth is. I don't know. Brittany would be able to tell you. It's a spatial thing."

Rachel stretched out her arms. "That's how wide the kitchen chimney is," she said. "I almost can't get my hands around it."

"I think the chimney up here is wider. Measure and see," Tammy said.

Rachel did, and was surprised. "You're right, it's about a foot and a half wider."

"I always wondered why they needed such a wide chimney," Melanie said. "It's just to let smoke out with, right?"

"Right," Rachel agreed, ironically. "There's actually a hearth in the master bedroom—well, what used to be the master bedroom, which is now your mom's sewing room. I used to wish there was a hearth up here. It sure would be nice to have a fire in winter."

Tammy, intrigued, had gotten up and was trying to see if she could get her hands around the wide expanse of brick. "That's weird. You'd think they could measure. It's almost as though—hey!"

She put her hand on the wall board to the right side of the chimney, and it moved slightly. "This board is loose."

Rachel scrambled to her feet. "Let me see," she said, with proprietor's interest. She felt the board of the paneling. "What do you mean? It's not warped—the nails are in solidly."

"No, no. Push it in," Tammy said. "It's like, soft."

"Soft?"

"Well, it gives under your hand."


Rachel pushed on the board, and to her amazement, it—and several boards next to it—moved inward on an invisible hinge, a door about eighteen inches wide and five feet high.

"That's too strange," she said. "What is it? A broom closet?"

“Yeah, for one broom,” Miriam said.

Rachel pushed the door in as far as it could go, and the scent of air hit her nostrils—a clean, cool breath. The breath of adventure.

Two

 *Their room was locked with a great bolt and there was no way that the princesses should have been able to leave, but yet..*

— Grimm



Rachel's voice dropped to a low tone. "This is not a broom closet."

"What is it?" Cheryl asked, in a hushed voice.

They looked at the narrow opening.

"Miriam, get me a flashlight. Quickly, and quietly, and *don't* draw attention to yourself," Rachel said.

Miriam, stirred by her sister's voice, obeyed instantly.

Rachel felt inside the door. She had expected the chimney wall to form the left side of the closet, but instead there was no wall. Exploring with her hands, she found that what appeared to be, outside the closet, the side of the chimney was actually an extra two columns of bricks, placed to make the chimney appear wider than it was.

"I think," she said at last, "that this was designed for a person."

"But how?" Cheryl asked, pushing back her glasses with a finger.

"Look, the door bends all the way back. The hinges must be hidden in the paneling somehow. You slide through this narrow crack into this area here—" Rachel, unafraid, stepped into the darkness. "And then shut the door. Yes, there's a handle on this side. It's a hiding place—no!"

"What!" all three girls chorused at once.

Her foot had slipped into air. "No, it's not a closet. It's a hole—No! It's a step, a step down!"

"Is it a stair?" Melanie asked.

"I'm not sure," Rachel said, a rush of adrenaline pumping through her veins. "Where is Miriam?" She was giddy with that first step into the dark, but didn't want to go further without some guiding light.

Miriam came inside the bedroom and shut the door softly behind her, holding the flashlight. She flashed a wicked grin. "Should I lock the door downstairs?"

"Yes—no. Wait." Rachel took the flashlight and clicked it on. It shone into the narrow darkness. All the girls peered around the slit. There was a narrow staircase, leading down and around.

"Oh, this is too weird," Miriam breathed.

"Let's go in." Rachel said suddenly. "All of us."

"In there?" Cheryl asked, suddenly looking scared.

"Come on," Rachel insisted. She was nervous too, but figured if they were all in it together, she would be less scared.

"What if the staircase collapses?" Tammy demanded.

"Then the ones behind could pull us out. Come on!"

"I don't like dark narrow places," Cheryl objected.

"It's got to open out soon. Come on, let's give it a try," Rachel coaxed.

"I'll go with you," Melanie said, and Tammy nodded. Cheryl reluctantly bobbed her head, and they crowded into the slit, Rachel leading the way.

At first it was terrifyingly cramped. Rachel counted down as she edged along the wall, sideways. One step down. Two steps down. Three steps down. Four steps down. Five steps down. "Are we all inside?"

"Barely," said Miriam, "but I think I can make it."

"Then shut the door."

The room light was cut off abruptly, and the girls were alone in the confined space with only the flashlight cutting a narrow beam through the deep brown darkness.

"Right," Rachel whispered. "Slowly now!"

The stairs were steep and uneven, and the spiral made them tricky to navigate. Rachel felt them make a full circle turn as they descended down, still stepping sideways. After about twenty steps, Rachel found it hard to judge just how far down they had gone. "Are we at the level of the first floor?" she hissed.

"I can't tell," Cheryl said, second to last in line. "Listen."

They all halted. Faintly, they could hear the sound of the dishwasher running.

"We must be near the kitchen. Are there more steps?"

"Yes," Rachel said. "Gosh, we must be going down into the basement."

They continued treading downwards, the air growing fresher and cooler, until Rachel unexpectedly turned into a wooden wall. "Stop!" she breathed, and the girls came to a stop.

“Is it another door?” Cheryl asked anxiously.

“I think so—wait—no, on this side—” Rachel found a worn iron handle and pulled in. She stepped forward unexpectedly down, into open space, on gravel, and stumbled forwards. “I’m out! Watch your step! That last one is steep!”

They were still in blackness, but they could hear outdoor sounds—trees rustling in the wind, the noise of water, bird calls. “Where are we now?” Melanie asked, puzzled.

Rachel shone her flashlight around. A jumble of metal parts and spokes flickered in the light. “Bicycles!” Suddenly it all fit together. “We’re in the bike cave!”

Their house was set on a slight outcropping, and they had long ago discovered that if you went down to the bayside in a certain way, you would find a shallow cave in the side of the cliff, a place just big enough to keep things like bicycles out of the elements. Of course it had been exciting at the time to discover the bike cave, which Dad had said must have been a root cellar at one time, but that discovery seemed terribly tame compared to this one.

“The steps are behind the shelves,” Rachel said, shining her flashlight. “See? There’s the shelves of the old root cellar. We never thought to look behind them...”

There was silence for a moment, and then Rachel picked her way out around the bikes to the outside of the cave. The others followed her. They were now in a woody path leading down to the beach.

“What *was* that?” Melanie asked after a minute.

There was silence, but then Cheryl spoke up. “Maybe it was for the Underground Railroad. Remember? When we first bought this house, the people who lived in it told Mom that they thought it had once been a station on the Underground Railroad. You know, where they hid escaped slaves.”

“I see. They would hide the escaped slaves in the weaving room, and if they needed to get away fast, they could hide in the hidden staircase, and maybe escape out through the woods. Then out to the bay. That must have been convenient,” Rachel said.

Cheryl began to get excited. “Then we’ve made an important historical discovery! We could tell the museum folks and get pictures taken. I bet there’s some important archeological evidence around here...”

Rachel interrupted her. “No.” She shone the flashlight around the huddled group, looking at each of them in turn. “We don’t tell anyone.”

“Why not?” Tammy spoke up first.

“Because,” Rachel said calmly. “we can use this staircase now. For ourselves. To get out of the house at night, whenever we want to.”

“What for?” Cheryl asked.

Rachel looked up at the trees, and felt a wave of excitement come over her, carried on the night breeze. “After everyone goes to sleep,” she said. “we can come down here and go swimming.”

There was a current of excitement in the air, because Miriam squealed, and the other sisters shushed her quickly.

“Look around,” Rachel dropped the flashlight, and without its white radiance, the world around them changed from black to dark blue and silver. The moonlight glimmered on the beech trees overhead. “It’s a different world, waiting to be explored. So we must keep this a dead secret. Understand?”

She looked around at the darkened faces of her sisters, and saw them bob yes, one by one. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s go back up.”

Rachel insisted on going up the secret staircase first, and listened long and hard at the door to ascertain if any of the other sisters were in the room, even lying on the bed and reading. When she finally opened the door a crack and found it empty and the bedroom door shut, she breathed a sigh of relief and slipped in. The others followed her.

“What should we do now?” Tammy asked, but Rachel shook her head.

In a low voice she said, “We never talk about *that* out here.”

There was a respectful pause, and then Tammy said, “I mean, about the bed. Are we going to move it, or not?”

Rachel thought. If they moved the bed now, it would open up the chimney area, and someone else might discover the board. But they needed to keep the board door open somehow, in order to use it.

“Move it slightly to this side,” she said, after a moment. “Here. If we move down the next two dressers an inch or two, we can do it.”

“All right,” Cheryl said cheerfully, and they moved the furniture.

They were moving the last bunk bed when Prisca came up the steps and started. “Where were you guys?” she exclaimed.

Rachel, with presence of mind, shut the door, and then made Prisca sit down.

“I am serious,” Prisca said. “I was about to freak. I heard you all in here talking, then I went to the bathroom. Then I came back, and found you all gone. Where did you go?”

Rachel said only, “Did you tell anyone we were gone?”

Prisca, confused, said, “No. I thought I was imagining things, until I found you back in here. What gives?”

Rachel eyed each of her sisters, and poised the question at Cheryl and Miriam. Cheryl nodded, and Rachel, deciding to incline to her wishes, asked, “Can you keep a secret, Pris?”

“You know I can,” Prisca said. “What?”

“First, lower your voice. We’ll show you—but after the others are asleep,” Rachel dropped her voice as Taren and Linette came in. Prisca nodded her head dumbly.

The sisters who knew the secret got ready for bed in unusual silence. Tammy edged over to Rachel during an opportune moment and said in a low voice. “I can’t keep a secret from my twin,” and Rachel understood.

“Okay then,” she said.

When they were all in bed, Rachel kept the light on, reading. She heard her father and Sallie come up the steps and go into their bedroom. Fairly soon the sounds from their room faded into silence. It was late at night, nearly midnight. Outside the window, the silver moonlight and black shadows beckoned.

She carefully kept an eye on the other sisters, and when she was sure all those not in on the secret had dropped off to sleep, she got out of bed, walked quietly to the bedroom door, and locked it. Miriam and Cheryl were alerted, and got noiselessly out of bed. Melanie had been dropping off, but she climbed down from her bunk as well. Rachel touched Prisca, who rolled over and looked at her, then got out of bed. Rachel pressed a finger to her lips, warning quiet. Prisca nodded, and looked around at the others.

Then Tammy touched Taren, who had actually fallen asleep. Taren gave a huge yawn and raised her head. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Shhh!” came from all corners. Linette and Debbie instantly sat up in their beds. Miriam gave an audible groan.

“Are you guys having a secret meeting?” Debbie asked hopefully.

“No. Go back to sleep,” hissed Miriam, but Rachel shook her head wearily.

“Let them come,” she said. “We might as well bring everyone along. Wake up Liddy and Becca and Brittany too. But keep everyone quiet!”

What the heck, she figured. They might as well start out with having everyone involved. It would be easier in the long run.

When she saw that everyone was awake and hushed, she got out the flashlight from her pillow, and strode to the center of the room a finger on her lips. She looked around, confident that she had everyone’s attention, and

then approached the hidden door. It now looked so solid that her senses told her she was mistaken. But when she put a hand on the wood and pushed gently, the paneling yielded beneath her fingers. There were muffled gasps from some of the girls. The black crack widened, and Rachel clicked on the flashlight. Inside she went, into that second reality, and the darkness wrapped around her like a cloak.

She followed the beam of the light cautiously down the steps around and around, hearing her sisters behind her, breathing and making hushed exclamations. When she reached the bottom and had fiddled with the little clasp on the door, she pulled the shelving door open and stepped down, her bare foot touching cool gravel, a shimmer of excitement went through her. She bounded through the cave to the woods beyond, laughing to herself for the sheer delight of secret freedom.

Once outside, she clicked off the light and let herself be bathed in the glow of the full moon, the ground around her blotched with the shadows of the trees. It was an entirely different sensation from being bathed in sunlight.

She tossed her hair—she had coal and cobalt hair in the moonlight—back over her shoulders and looked at her sisters. A few of them were looking around uncertainly. Cheryl was explaining the possible origins of the secret stair to the younger ones.

“What are we going to do?” Liddy asked, her voice uncertain.

Rachel raised one eyebrow. “Whatever we like.”

“But what if Dad and Sallie find out?” Liddy pressed, her blue eyes shadowed with concern.

“They won’t find out,” Rachel said, putting the flashlight into a hollow by the door where she could easily find it on the way home. Over her shoulder, she cast a look around the circle. “So long as no one tells them.”

She meant that Dad would never find out, that none of the sisters would dream of breathing a word to him or Sallie. But she couldn’t impress that on them now. She had to show them how to explore the possibilities first.

“Come on,” she invited. “Let’s go swimming!”

She plunged along the path through the woods to the bay, and with muffled squeals and protests, her sisters followed. After about a quarter mile they came out of the woods to a short slope leading to the beach.

“But we don’t have our swimsuits!” Debbie pointed out, scrambling down beside Rachel breathlessly.

Rachel shrugged at her youngest sister. “Next time, we’ll wear our swimsuits to bed. So long as we can get them quietly without Dad and Sallie finding out.” She sat down on the pebble beach overhung with a willow tree,

and said, “Tomorrow I’ll put our swimsuits in the dryer during dinner and bring them upstairs with the laundry. Now, remember, try not to make too much noise.”

She stripped down to her underwear and splashed into the water. A few yards out she dove into the plum black water and swam. The colors of the water were so different now, beneath the moon—she plunged upward and out of the water, into the night. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the rest leaping into the bay, and heard their laughter echoing across the waves.

The water was warm, still heated by the long summer day, and she swam slowly, meditatively, feeling herself wrapped in its black beauty. Her hair hung down her back like a heavy seal-fur curtain, sleek as otter skin. She was beautiful in the night, and she knew it.

After a while, she swam to the rock near the shore and climbed lightly atop it to watch the rest. While they frolicked, she planned. Dad must never know about the door. They needed a strategy, a system, and most of all, a combined group secret. It was fortunate that Cheryl had been present for the discovery of the door, and that Tammy had discovered it. That made this a Fendelman effort as surely as a Durham effort. Both sets of girls had equal stake in the discovery. If she could present it to them in the right way, she could bring all of them to an understanding that this secret was too valuable to lose. And they would be unified.

And from there ... Rachel stretched. The horizons were limitless. They could do almost anything they pleased, here in the night. She looked up and down the Bay Shore, from one side to the other, and her eyes fell on the island.

It stood in the middle of their corner of the bay, dark spiky firs and green velvet lawns. In the embrace of the firs stood a fine house, nestled in its evergreens like a movie star wrapped in a mink coat. It was the summerhouse of a rich family, rarely used. Caretakers came and went occasionally by boat during the day, but it seemed to be deserted most of the time.

Deserted or no, there was enough wood and valley on the island’s ample shore to hide a dozen girls. If only they had a boat. But their father didn’t see a need for a boat, aside from an old canoe the girls used occasionally. And there was no way all twelve of them could fit into the canoe.

The rumble of a motor made her turn her head, and she saw, across the bay, a speedboat slicking through the wavelets like a silver knife cutting through butter, scattering glittering wakes as it passed, generously heaping up the waves. Rachel smiled. That was how it would have to be done. Other

people—men—had boats. She would have to be brave, and cunning, and careful, but it could be done.

“I *will* get to that island before the summer is over,” she promised herself. She slid off the rock and threw herself back into the purple waves and stroked back to the shore.

“Ready?” she said, all business once more. “Time to go back. Get your things together—be careful not to leave anything. If we’re going to keep this secret, we have to be careful. Prisca, get your other sock. Taren, is that yours? Right. All together? Then back up to the cave.”

Once they were at the door of the cave, Rachel surveyed the near-dozen wet and breathless faces.

“Okay,” Rachel said. “This is our secret. We tell nobody. Not our best friends, not Mom, not Dad, nobody. This is just for us sisters. But we never talk about it during the day. We never use it during the day, not for nipping out of chores, or anything. It doesn’t exist during the day. The only time we use it is when we all go down together, at night. After everyone else is asleep. We keep it a dead secret. We don’t volunteer that it exists, and if anyone asks us, we don’t admit to knowing anything. All agreed?”

Rachel looked at each of the Fendelman girls in turn. “Cheryl? Tammy? Taren? Brittany? Melanie? Linette?” They were with her. Then she looked at her biological sisters. “Miriam? Prisca? Becca? Liddy? Debbie? Anyone object? Anyone too scared?”

“I won’t be scared,” Liddy said, “not if we stick together.”

Rachel nodded. “That’s the whole point,” she said. “We sisters have got to stick together on this. It’s what we can do together, without anyone else supervising us or giving us rules. Right?”


All the girls—Fendelman and Durham—nodded.

“Good,” Rachel breathed. She had succeeded. They were all in on this as one. “Now back upstairs. I’ll keep this flashlight under my bed. Remember, keep quiet. When we get upstairs, no whispering, no talking. Just straight to sleep. Miriam, go last and latch the bottom door behind us.”

She led the way back up the stairs, and opened the top door quietly. She tiptoed inside and held the door open for each sister. Miriam came up last, nodding that everything was okay. Rachel shut the door quietly, pushed the flashlight under the bed, and lay down.

They had pulled it off.

Three

 *A poor soldier, recently returned from the wars,
heard of the king's mysterious problem...*

— Grimm



Paul reached the campgrounds after a long but carefree walk from the bus station. He paid the fee, and started to get settled in on his vacation. He wasn't thinking about anything in particular, just relishing the sweet taste of freedom. His doctor had declared him fully recovered from his war injury. Medical school didn't begin till the fall. So his tour was done, school was yet to start, and within this brief window, he could do as he pleased.

Trimming expenses to the absolute minimum meant that he had decided to go without a car for the summer. He had packed everything he needed into his backpack and the large colorful bag that held his juggling gear.

He took a bit of time to pick a campsite, and finally chose one within reach of the Bay, but sheltered from the constant breezes that swept over the waters. Clearing the ground and pitching his tent were done in the same leisurely fashion. When everything was arranged, he settled down on a fallen log and just sat for a while, feeling no inclination to move or do anything but be still.

This was his holiday, his treat before starting medical school, and he rejoiced within its limits. He planned to spend the next several weeks camping, hiking, and doing some stunts as a street musician and juggler at the Maryland Colonial Festival. Entertaining would pay for the campsite and some food for the next few weeks. If not, he could always ask his parents or one of his seven siblings for money to see him through, but he hoped he wouldn't need to fall back on that.

He started to whistle and picked up a stick, tossing it gently from hand to hand, planning a new tune for his flute. While he had to make time to practice his juggling routine for the festival, which started next week, for now, he could relax. He decided to start with a walk on the beach, maybe go for a swim.

So after tidying up his campsite, he walked down to the beach that bordered the campgrounds. The bay curved around him, and he looked with satisfaction at the green shore stretching out into the distance on either side of him. A few miles down the beach to the left were houses, but to his right the trees came right down to the water, and the land jutted out into a promontory on the bay. There was a house up there: he could see its chimneys through the trees. They must have a beautiful view of the surrounding bay.

He started down the beach to the left, enjoying the brisk breezes. After a while he broke into a jog.

The beach ahead was mostly deserted, but as he jogged on, he saw an older man walking in his direction wearing khakis and a windbreaker. As Paul drew near, the man paused and looked out at the bay. There was something familiar about him. When Paul was close enough, he thought he recognized him.

“Excuse me—Colonel Durham?”

The colonel turned, and his troubled expression was replaced with surprise. “That’s right.” He brightened up. “Corporal—what was your name? Jester?”

“Fester,” Paul said with a grin.

“That’s right,” the man said, shaking Paul’s hand warmly. “How’s your leg doing?”

“Doing really well,” Paul said. “How about your arm?”

The colonel lifted his arm. “It’s OK. My back’s a little stiff, but that would happen just by getting old,” he said. “It almost doesn’t count. But I’m working a desk job now. No more work overseas. My wife is grateful. So what are you doing now?”

“For the next few weeks, I’ll be at the Colonial Festival.”

The colonel snapped his fingers. “That’s right. Fester, jester. You juggle. I remember now. So what are you doing after that? You thinking of staying in the army?”

“Well, at least to get through medical school,” Paul said. “I start in the fall. It’s the only way I could afford to go.”

“Take my advice: don’t stay in if you get married.”

“Why do you say that, sir?”

The colonel looked out at the bay. “Too hard on the family. I’ve been in the army since I was nineteen. I’ve been on tour a lot. It’s always tough for the family, but you know, we worked through it. Even after I got married again, everything seemed okay. But coming back this time, it’s been different.

It's like I don't know my kids and they don't know me. I'm wondering if I paid too high a price."

After a moment, Paul said, "My dad was military too. He was a captain, in the Marines. We moved around a lot, until he retired a few years ago in Chicago. I don't know what he did differently, but you know, it was okay with us kids. I'm really proud of him."

He noticed the colonel was studying him. "Did you get along with your parents when you were a teenager?"

"Me? I did, I guess. I mean, we had a pretty open relationship."

"You'd tell them what was going on in your life?"

"Sure. Well, sometimes I wanted my own space, but yeah, I'd talk to them a lot."

"It's a mystery to me how that happens," Colonel Durham said. "I can't get my girls to talk to me at all. And they've been very—secretive lately."

"Maybe they're just getting to know you again," Paul ventured. "It takes time."

The colonel shook his head. "There's something going on with them," he said positively. "I can tell they're hiding something. The odd thing is that it's all of them: from the oldest right down to the youngest ones."

"Have you asked them about it?"

"Sure. Flat denial, all down the line. Sallie's asked them about it. Nothing. We finally just let it go, but I can't get the idea out of my head that they're up to something. I've been trying other tactics, but I'm up against a wall." He sighed heavily. "I have no idea what else I can do."

"Maybe it'll come out, in time," Paul said. "Maybe they'll tell you."

Again, Colonel Durham shook his head. "You don't know my daughters," he said positively. He seemed to change the subject. "Would you like to come to dinner, now that you're in town?"

"That would be great."

"How about tonight?"

Paul was taken aback. "Sure. If it's no trouble."

"No, no, it's fine." Colonel Durham said. "Besides, I'd like you to meet my girls. I'm sure you'll have a lot in common." He pointed up the beach in the direction from which Paul had come. "Our house is right up there. But you can reach it by the road as well. Will 5:30 work for you?"

"I'm free," Paul said, grinning. It was good to be on vacation.



“Rachel, look. That must be him, coming up the drive,” Prisca said, pushing aside the linen curtains with one finger.

“The new guy that Dad invited?” Rachel rolled her eyes, casting a glance at the other three older sisters sitting in the sewing room, where they were sorting laundry. “I bet he’s another spy.”

“Dad said he’s staying at the campsite near our house,” Miriam said.

They all studied the newcomer surreptitiously as he came up the drive.

“What a goofball,” Rachel said. “Will you look at those clothes? Who wears striped shirts these days?”

Tammy craned her neck. “So what, Rachel? He’s got a nice set of muscles.”

Her twin, Taren, agreed after a judicious look. “Plus a rather nice face, from what I can see. Kind of cute.”

“He looks too clean cut. Like a grown-up baby. No thanks! How much you want to bet he’s an upright young Christian man?” Rachel pronounced mockingly. “Dad would never invite over someone from the military unless he was a *nice* young man. A *very* nice young man.” The others stifled giggles.

Prisca said beneath her breath, “Who cares? At least he’s a man.” Which generated more mirth from everyone except Rachel.

“Whatever.” She sat down again, grabbed a fistful of socks, and began turning them over and laying them down one by one, looking for matches as though she were playing solitaire. “Well, he’s here, and we’re going to have to put up with him now.”

After the others left to deliver laundry or spy on the visitor, Rachel deliberately took her time in front of the mirror, putting up her hair. She was tired. Part of the secret pact, as she thought of it, was that when the sisters went out on one of their midnight adventures, no one was allowed to complain about being tired the next day, so as not to arouse suspicion. The sisters had taken to going to bed earlier, and snatching naps for themselves during the day (getting up later was not an option in the Durham family). Today had been a no-nap day for Rachel. At the moment she wasn’t feeling up to another outing tonight.

Still, swimming at night was so relaxing. And she had laid other plans, if only they would work out. Maybe tonight they would... Rachel chewed the end of her fingertip and cursed inwardly when she heard the doorbell.



Paul liked to approach people of any sort with a bold and friendly demeanor. However, when he had rounded the curve of the hidden driveway and saw the Durham house, he felt as though he had gone out of his league.

The large, obviously historical house sat on a promontory of land that jutted out into the bay. Three brick chimneys protruded from its weathered tile roof. This was the house Colonel Durham had pointed out to Paul earlier that morning on the beach. Paul guessed that the Durhams must own all the woodlands extending down to the campsite, and probably the beach running around the promontory as well. A low whistle escaped him, and he felt a sudden humility. This was a far cry from his parent's house in the Chicago suburbs. *Oh great*, he said under his breath, feeling apprehensive.

When he knocked on the door, it had been opened by, as he expected, a girl. This girl was about twelve years old, strikingly pretty, with bright blue eyes and long dark brown hair, wearing a skirt printed with small blue flowers and a white shirt. "Hi," said the girl, with a bright and careless attitude. "What do you want?"

Maybe she thought he was a landscaping assistant or a deliveryman. Paul asked, following the script, "Uh, is your father home?"

"Sure. Let me get him." She bounced off, swinging her arms. Paul could see a flagstone interior, and a simply furnished period style entranceway. He swallowed, and looked down again at his canvas shorts and striped shirt. He hadn't expected to be invited to anyone's house for dinner while on vacation, let alone to a house as upscale as this one.

Another brown haired girl came into the entranceway, wearing a denim jumper and pulling her hair up into a ponytail. She had a wide-eyed, faintly surprised expression. "Are you the guy who's coming to dinner?" she asked.

"Um, yes."

"Daddy said you were coming. I'll go get him," and she turned away and clattered up the stairs in sandaled feet.

"That's okay..." Paul tried to say, and gave up. He thrust his hands into his pockets and took them out again, unsure of how to look.

Then suddenly Colonel Durham was striding into the entranceway, beaming and smiling, trailed by the pretty younger girl. Seeing Paul on the doorstep, he took the girl's shoulders and said, "Debbie, we don't let our guests stand outside, we invite them in. Now, go fix your hair." And extending his hand to Paul, he said heartily, "Welcome! Come in!"

Paul returned the handshake and stepped into the house. "Thanks, again, very much," he said, relieved to see the man again. "This is a lovely house. When was it built?"

"I believe 1822—but that's a question you can ask my wife—come on in, and I'll introduce you," Colonel Durham led him through a dining room to a living room, where the willowy blond woman he recognized from the picture sat on the sofa, wearing a cotton print dress with a high neck and nursing a boy toddler. With large brown eyes and straight pale hair in a bun, she looked more subdued than her husband. A girl, a smaller copy of her, sat on the couch reading a book.

"Sallie, this is Paul Fester, the medic that put me back together after that mortar round almost took me out."

"Paul. So glad to meet you," Sallie said, lifting her eyes to his briefly with a smile. She dropped them right away, as though she were shy, or uncomfortable.

"Let me introduce you to some of my children," Colonel Durham said. "This is our son Jabez, and this here on the couch—stand up, please, Linette—is Linette."

"Hello," said Linette, not meeting his eyes.

Colonel Durham was looking around. "I just saw someone—oh, there you are. Brittany and Melanie, I'd like you to meet Paul Fester."

Two young teen girls, blond curly hair in ponytails, both wearing cotton print skirts that came below the knee. Paul was starting to see the pattern. The Durhams must belong to a church that believed that women and girls should always wear skirts, he guessed.

By the time they started to sit down at a table on the porch for dinner, he had met about seven girls, mostly younger ones. Some were blond and shy: others were brown-haired and energetic. It was easy to figure out which parent had begotten which children.

Some oldest girls came down last, as a group: three brunettes—tall and full-figured, and two blonds—twins with long straight hair pulled back from their slim tan faces. Despite the fact that they were wearing the same kind of clothing as their younger sisters, they carried themselves differently. There was an air of dismal sophistication about them, as though they were cuisine reviewers at a very poor restaurant. He was introduced to Rachel, Miriam, Priscilla, Tammy and Taren, and felt as though he was beneath their notice.

Colonel Durham had been mistaken, Paul saw clearly. *We don't have anything in common.*

"Let's sit down," Colonel Durham said, leading the way to a long table on the screened-in patio on one side of the house. They all took their places, and as they bowed their heads for grace, Paul automatically made the sign of the

cross, and sensed eyes upon him. He felt a little self-conscious as he crossed himself again when the prayer ended. *But after all, I'm Catholic. I can't hide it.*

When he looked up, he found himself under the bold, inquisitive stare of the girl he had heard introduced as Rachel. She was sitting right across from him. Up until now, he hadn't been sure she had noticed his existence, but she had clearly noted the Catholic gesture. She said nothing, but lowered her thick lashes as though she were hiding a smile in her blue-green eyes. He noticed again that her face and figure were quite attractive, but in a way that was almost too smooth and conventionally obvious to capture his lasting attention. He had known girls like that in high school—the class beauties, the prom queens—and he had never felt the slightest interest in them, nor they in him. Briefly, he wondered if Rachel Durham's world was allowed to include prom queens or beauty pageants.

So Paul focused his attention on the younger girls, who seemed to regard him more congenially. One of them, with wavy hair and tranquil eyes, sat next to Rachel.

"You're Melanie, right?" he asked.

She nodded, and a wide smile came over her face that he couldn't help returning.

"How old are you, Melanie?"

"Thirteen." Her soft voice had a slight drawl.

"What grade are you in school?"

"I'll be in eighth grade this year at Bayside Christian."

To Paul's surprise, Rachel, said, again with lowered lashes, "That's our school. It's a private Christian academy run by our church."

"Oh. Bayside Christian Fellowship, right?" Paul remembered.

Colonel Durham spoke up, "That's right. We joined the church around five years ago. It's been a real blessing." Paul noted a smile barely touched Rachel's lips at that remark. "We're all quite involved in the church. I'm on the board of directors, I lead the men's group, and Sallie hosts a woman's group. The girls are all part of the Young Christians group at our church, too." Colonel Durham passed down a dish to Paul. "Peas from our garden. The girls shelled them."

"That's great," Paul said. "My parents did gardening, too."

"How many kids were in your family again?"

"Eight."

"Really?" Sallie seemed surprised. "Where do you fall in?"

"I'm number seven," Paul answered after swallowing his food.

Rachel's eyebrows rose.

"Is that so?" Sallie said, "Robbie's number seven in our family."

Her husband caught her eye and chuckled, "He's number seven for both of us, that is."

Conversation continued rather agreeably for the remainder of dinner, and afterwards, Paul volunteered to help with the dishes. This seemed to soften the older girls' attitude towards him considerably, and they quickly set him up with soap and a scrubbing brush.

"Ah, back to boot camp, eh?" Colonel Durham looked into the kitchen. "If you'll excuse me, Paul, I've got to answer some email." Paul nodded, realizing that the colonel had deliberately left him alone with his daughters.

Paul doubted that the daughters were enthused. Rachel looked at him with narrowed eyes for a moment, and when one of the girls said something about "...when we're down on the beach," Rachel shushed her abruptly.

"So why are you here for the summer?" queried the stocky dark-haired girl with striking eyebrows over blue eyes, who he remembered was called Miriam. "Do you have a job here or are you on vacation?"

"Actually, a combination of both. I'll be entertaining at Colonial Festival this summer," Paul said, scrubbing the bottom of a pot.

"Really? Are you dressing up as a Revolutionary War soldier then?" Cheryl asked. She was the tallest of the blonds, with glasses, freckles, and short bobbed hair.

"No, I'm actually dressed as a harlequin. I have a routine I do—some juggling, some acrobatics, a few magic tricks, and playing the flute—that sort of thing."

"What's a harlequin?" Miriam asked.

"'Harlequin'—as in 'Harlequin Romance,'" Rachel put in, scraping leftover peas into a plastic container. "The little clown in diamond-patterned tights with a funny black hat. He's on their logo."

Paul colored slightly at her dismissive tone. "The harlequin's one of the traditional figures in the Italian commedia dell'arte. There was a dell'arte group at my college, and since I'm the tall acrobatic type, I got to play harlequin. My costume is mostly black, with a diamond-patched vest."

"What does that have to do with the Revolutionary War?" Cheryl asked, a little incredulous.

"Not much. The Harlequin tradition is pretty old, and I suppose they had them around during the Revolutionary War," Paul said. He could tell by their faintly smirking expressions that the older girls did not think that this was an appropriate activity for a guy. He tried hard not to let it bother him. *They're sheltered*, he realized. All the same, he was anxious to change the topic.

"You're right on the shore," he said, squinting out the kitchen window. "Do you get any chance to go boating on the bay?"

"I wish," Miriam said dismally, drying a serving bowl. "We have a canoe, but Dad won't buy us a motorboat."

"Mom's afraid of us drowning," one of the twins said airily, setting down a stack of plates.

"No, he's afraid we'll escape," a black-haired girl said.

"No, it's because we don't have a dock," another girl contradicted. "The old one was rotting when we bought the house, so Daddy had it knocked down. And he didn't want to spend the money to get a new one built and buy a boat."

"It's not fair. Our neighbors up and down on either side have docks and most of them have three or four boats. But here we are, the nicest house of the lot, and we don't have anything." Miriam complained, clattering the pots and pans as she put the dry ones away. "We're totally backward in this family. I mean, what's the point of having a house on the bay if you don't have a boat?"

"Never been boating? Well, what have you been doing then?" Paul quoted. The female faces around him looked blank. "From *The Wind in the Willows*," he explained. There was a silence. "Haven't any of you read it?"

"I've heard of it, but the literature teacher at Bayside Christian said she thought it had pagan parts to it, so I didn't read it," the blond twin said.

"Oh," Paul scanned his memory. "What, because of the scene with Pan? I guess so. Well, that's a shame you didn't read it. It's really a good book. I read it in college." He set the large pan he was washing in the dish drain. "It sounds like your school is pretty strict."

"Yes," Miriam said emphatically. "My gosh, you'd think we were in the Middle Ages."

"Well, actually, the High Middle Ages were a time of great intellectual inquiry," Paul said. "Maybe you mean, 'the Dark Ages?'"

She stared at him again quizzically. "Yeah, whatever."

Only Cheryl seemed to appreciate his remark. She tittered. "Seriously, they are *so* close-minded at our school. We're not allowed to read hardly anything except what they call 'Great Christian Classics,' like *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I keep in touch with my friends from North Carolina who are in public school and we aren't reading the same books at all."

"You might not be missing much. In Catholic school, we read some pretty trashy modern books in literature class," Paul said. "It's a shame that most high schools don't teach the real classics."

“Are you Catholic?” several voices asked.

“Yes,” Paul said.

“But are you a Christian?” Melanie asked. She had been leaning on the counter, listening, but hadn’t spoken until now.

“Of course he is. Catholics are Christians,” Rachel said, a bit edgily. Paul was surprised to hear her speak up.

“Not necessarily,” Cheryl said. “Just because you were born Catholic doesn’t make you a Christian, you know.”

“Oh, stop being stupid, Cheryl. There are Catholics at Bayside Christian Academy, and you know it. We’re not supposed to interrogate guests about their religious convictions. It’s not polite,” Rachel said, her voice sharpening.

Cheryl flushed, and Paul said, “Really, it’s all right. I’m not offended. I had several Protestant friends growing up and they were always asking me questions like that about my faith. I’m used to it.”

He looked at Melanie. “So what do you do around here for fun?” he asked. “Go swimming?”

She shrugged. “We don’t get much chance during the day,”

Two of the younger girls suddenly started smiling.

“We keep ourselves busy,” One of the blond twins, said airily, giving what was intended to be a sly wink to the others, some of whom tittered.

“Mostly after hours,” one of the younger ones said with a laugh, and was shushed by an older one.

“We sew,” Miriam said dryly, casting a hard look at the younger ones.

Melanie said, “We do things with our church group. But lately we’ve just been at home.”

Bored and up to something “after hours”—at night? Paul thought to himself. But he doubted that any of them were going to confide in a stranger like him.


“Do you really know how to juggle?” the youngest dark-haired girl, asked. For answer, Paul grabbed a handful of cooking utensils from the sink and began tossing them in the air. A spatula, ladle, serving spoon and wooden spoon were worked into a fountain. He juggled them for a few passes and then stopped, letting them splash back down one by one into the soapy water. He stared at the water.

“Yeah, I think so,” he said.


There were muffled giggles, and a little blond girl breathed, “That was so cool.”

Juggling is a great icebreaker, he thought.

FOUR

 *For the king had caused it to be proclaimed that whoever could discover the princesses' secret would have a rich reward. . .*

— Grimm

 Rachel, seeing that Paul was washing pots and keeping the younger entertained enough to actually finish their jobs, decided she was going to slough off her own chores. She shrugged off her denim apron which she had put over her summer dress. Conveniently, the phone rang just then, and she said, "I've got it," scooped up the handset, and stepped outside. "Hello?"

"Hi Rachel! Uh, is this Rachel?" It was Keith Kramer, from her class at school. Her antennae pricked up. Keith was a friend, but he never called the Durhams. It was odd.

"You know it is, Keith," she said. "What's up?" She was sure she had heard someone pick up the phone on the other end.

"I, uh, wanted to give Colonel Durham a message about the Bible outreach."

"Okay, I'll go get him." But Rachel stood still. If her dad had picked up, he could just intervene, right now.

"That's okay. Just tell him my dad and I won't be able to make the meeting on Wednesday. Uh—how have things been, Rachel?"

"Okay," she said, wondering if her dad was listening on the line or not. Was he testing her or something? Trying to see if she was going to obey him or not?

"Having a good summer?"

"Yeah, it's been quiet around here since graduation," Rachel said. If her dad was listening, it had to be clear to him that it was Keith Kramer, not her, who was initiating the conversation.

"So—what have you been up to?"

Aha, maybe that was it. Dad didn't need to listen in on the conversation. Dad was hoping that Keith would be a spy for him. Just like Dad was hoping that Paul would be a spy.

Flushed with anger, Rachel suddenly felt reckless. "Wouldn't you like to know?" she said softly.

"What was that?"

"Oh, come on Keith," Rachel said in a soft voice, staring at the golden row of windows on the house. "Wouldn't you like to know what I've been up to?"

There was a silence that seemed too long and Rachel wondered again, her heart racing, if her dad was listening on the phone after all. If he was, she had just given herself away. On a sudden impulse, she walked swiftly around the house.

"Uh," Keith said with an effort. "Yeah, that's why I'm asking."

Rachel didn't answer because she was hurrying, as fast as she could without breathing hard, around the house to the place where her dad's study was. Slowing to a halt, she peered in the window.

Her dad was typing on the computer. The phone was in its receiver—but maybe he had it on speakerphone?

I'm being way too paranoid, she chided herself. She had an idea. "Well, then," she said with a laugh. "Maybe you should talk to Taylor."

"Taylor from our class?"

"Yeah, maybe you should talk to him," she said. She had talked to Taylor at church last week. She had figured out that even though Taylor was in her dad's study group too, he wasn't going to be a spy.

"Okay, I'll do that," Keith said. "Uh, make sure you give your dad that message."

"Sure I will," she said, and hung up the phone.

She wandered up the path that ran between the vegetable gardens, feeling the breeze tugging her hair out of the bun, and planning. Glancing up, she saw Paul through the kitchen window and wondered idly if he were watching her. He probably thought she looked like some kind of old-fashioned heroine in her too-long skirt and blouse. *He would be mistaken*, she thought. *I'm trapped in this quaint Christian life by day, but now I have an escape.*

And that thought alone was invigorating.



After Paul had finished the dishes and helped the girls with the kitchen, the evening had darkened. Colonel Durham returned and offered to drive Paul back to his campsite.

Paul had a feeling that the man wanted to talk with him alone, so he said yes. After saying goodnight to the girls and Mrs. Durham, Paul got into the passenger side of the colonel's large town car. It was a comfortable car, but not ostentatious. The Durhams, he was starting to see, were well-off, but didn't live extravagantly. It was interesting to see Christian parents who took the challenge to live simply seriously. He admired that principle, although he could see the teenagers were chafing under it.

"Thanks very much for having me over," Paul said.

"We enjoyed having you as well," Mr. Durham said.

As they drove, Colonel Durham was quiet for a moment then said abruptly, "So, now you've met my daughters. You see the problem?"

Paul searched for words. "They're all very beautiful young ladies," he said slowly.

The Colonel gave a wry smile. "Yes, they are. I wonder if that's half the trouble. I wish God had given me godly daughters, but instead He gave me beautiful daughters. And that makes my job twice as hard. I don't know what it is about females and beauty, but if a girl's beautiful, she seems to think that she has a right to focus on that. But I guess that's human nature."

"Does there have to be a conflict between being beautiful and being good?" Paul couldn't help saying.

The colonel frowned. "I don't know if there *has* to, but in my experience, there often *is*," he said.

Fingering the medal around his neck and silently asking for guidance, Paul tried to think of where to start. "I was wondering...just thinking about how my own dad related to my sisters...Have you had much time to spend with them? How much do you see them during the week?"

"I'm working from home three days a week and Sallie's almost always home. They're practically never out of our sight. That's what's so puzzling to me. I don't see what they could be hiding. They couldn't be doing anything at nighttime: they'd have to walk right past our bedroom to get downstairs, and we always keep our door open. Yet I'm sure there's something going on. I just can't figure out what it is or when it's happening."

"Have you looked into getting any help?" Paul asked.

The man harrumphed. "I've tried to sound out some of their friends from church about it. A couple of their male classmates are in my Bible study group. I've asked them to try to find out. You know how sometimes teens will

only talk to other teens, and I know my girls are always trying to talk to these boys anyhow. But the boys have no idea. Either that, or they know what's going on and they're not telling me either."

"I meant, have you tried seeing a family counselor or something," Paul amended.

The colonel shook his head. "Been there, done that," he said. "We did the whole counseling thing when my first wife died. I don't know that it did much good." He turned off the car—they had reached the campsite. "Besides, I don't think this is psychological. It's all about trust. The girls don't trust me. I don't trust them. And frankly, I don't see what can be done about it."

He coughed and looked uncomfortable. "Like I said, I asked a couple of their friends already if they could find out what was going on. And I'm not sure if I can trust what they're telling me. I don't know if you'd consider trying your own hand, to see if you can find out what they're up to?"

Paul stared at him. "So you're asking me to spy on your daughters?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that. If you were to talk to them...get to know them...and happen to figure out what it is they're up to...you could let me know." He looked a bit aggravated. "I know it's an awkward request. I just don't see what else I can do, short of bugging the house or having chips implanted in their arms. The situation has deteriorated to this point."

Paul could see how frustrated the colonel was. The man was in a tough spot: he was spying on his daughters but he didn't want to have to spy.

Thoughtful, Paul leaned forward and looked down at his feet. "Let me ask you this," he said at last. "Which would you prefer—to have someone tell you what it is your daughters are doing? Or to have your daughters tell you themselves?"

"I'd rather my daughters told me themselves, of course," Colonel Durham said, looking searchingly at Paul. "Why? Do you think you could get them to do that? How?"

Paul drummed his fingers on his knees, thinking of the snatches of the girls' conversation he had inadvertently overheard. "Well, I don't know if I could. Part of it would depend on how much you're willing to trust me," he said at last.

The Colonel sat there, frowning and looking hard at Paul, suddenly looking formidable, the way that Army commanders can look when the need arises. Paul knew he was being scrutinized.

At last, the Colonel spoke. "Trust you—how?"

Paul took a deep breath, "I'll need to know if I can have your permission for two things."

“All right,” Colonel Durham said. “So what are they?”

“I would like your permission to be on your beach at night, without your knowledge. I mean, I would come and scout around the beach late at night, randomly, just to observe. I would come and go without attracting attention to myself, sir.” Paul realized he had fallen back automatically into the military manner of speaking.

Colonel Durham looked at Paul quizzically. “You think the girls are up to something on the beach at night?”

Paul continued deliberately. “And the second thing—and this is bigger—if I do find out, I need to be free to not tell you anything until I can persuade your daughters to tell you themselves. Like you said you would prefer.”

Colonel Durham was silent for a long moment, staring over the steering wheel into the darkness. Then he put his clasped hands to his chin and closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes a few seconds later, he looked at Paul.

“All right, corporal,” he said. “I’ll trust you.”

“Okay,” Paul said. “I’ll see what I can do.” He felt a pit opening out in his stomach as though he had just agreed to walk across a high-wire buffeted by crosswinds. In the dark.



Rachel waited until she was sure her parents were asleep for the night, then she rose out of bed. The other girls, alerted, followed, some stifling yawns. Most of them didn’t get changed into their night clothes any more, but simply put on comfortable clothes to go to bed, in anticipation of an outing.

But to Rachel’s surprise, Prisca got out of bed wearing an emerald green dress. “What are you doing?” Rachel hissed. The dress was an old semi-formal dress of their mother’s that had been hanging in the storage closet for as long as anyone could remember.

Prisca just shrugged, “I just wanted to wear Mom’s dress. Is that a problem?”

“Suit yourself.” Rachel let it go.

They filed quickly down the stairs to the cave, through the woods, and out into the cool moonlight on the beach. Rachel stretched and arched her back.

“So why are you dressed up?” Linette piped.

"I just wanted to," Prisca said, raising her eyebrows. She put her hands on her hips and spun around. The dress flared out, showing off her legs. "Rachel said we could do whatever we wanted."

"Sure. Whatever floats your boat," Rachel said. "Just make sure you don't ruin the dress."

"I felt like getting dressed up tonight." Prisca produced the zippered pencil case that served as her secret makeup bag. She usually hid it in her backpack during the school year, to make up her face as discreetly as possible after she reached school. Makeup was banned at Bayside Christian, but that didn't stop the girl students from trying to get away with as much as possible.

"Do my face too, Prisca, please!" Liddy begged.

"Let me do my own face first." Prisca spread out her makeup on a smooth rock, and began to pick out eye shadow. "That is, if I can," she said, "I don't have a light. This will be interesting." It was a full moon, but still different from daylight.

"I'll do your makeup for you," Becca said. "I can see to do you, and then you can do me."

"And me," Liddy insisted.

"Antsy pantsy. All right."

Rachel wandered away from the makeover to the water. The other girls followed her.

"Well! That was an ordeal at dinner tonight," she said. "What a name—Fester. Paul Fester. I wanted to laugh when we were introduced. Can you imagine having to go through life with a name like that?"

"Oh, come on," said Miriam. "He was okay."

"He's a geek," Rachel said. "What normal guy dresses up in a clown suit and goes out juggling?"

"Paul said he would teach me and Debbie to juggle," Linette said, skipping through the sand. "I showed him how I could do a frontward walkover, and he said he would teach me to do it backwards. He said that if we were really good we might be able to be in his act with him. He said he could jump through a flaming hoop if he had someone brave enough to hold it up for him. I said I wouldn't do it but Debbie said she would, if he showed her how."

Rachel rolled her eyes at Miriam. "Well, he certainly gets on well with the youngsters."

"That's probably why he wants to be a clown," Cheryl added.

"I like him. He's cool," Brittany spoke up unexpectedly.

"You're too young to know what cool is," said Taren disdainfully.

Brittany said nothing, but crossed her eyes, stuck out her tongue and touched her nose with it.

As they talked, they were making their way down the beach. Further down the shore, the beach turned into woods. Halting a few yards from the first trees, Rachel threw herself down on a sandy spot and sighed. "I'm so bored," she said.

"Maybe we should get Paul to come down here and juggle for us," Miriam suggested, and Rachel coughed, laughing.

"That's good," she said appreciatively. She kicked at a pebble with her toe, picked it up and threw it in the water. Inside she wondered if Taylor would come through tonight. She searched the deserted bay again for the hundredth time, disappointed.

Then she caught sight of a white plume rolling across the waters to her. A wake? A boat?

She stood up, hearing a motor, and scanned the darkness. Then she saw it. A motorboat. *Two* motorboats. Coming in their direction.

Now, not wanting to look too eager, she sat back down again on the sand. And that was okay, because the other girls were standing up, peering at the boats.

"I think they're coming this way," Miriam said in disbelief.

"Are they?" Cheryl said anxiously. "I'm going back up."

Rachel cast a glance at Cheryl, who was decently clothed. Fortunately no one had yet gone swimming tonight. "Just stay here. Wait."

Cheryl paused and the girls all watched as the two boats came close and cut their engines. Then they began to drift towards the shore.

"Hi there," came a voice from one of them.

Rachel stood up, attempting languidity. "Taylor?" she called.

"The same," the familiar voice said, and the twins exchanged delighted glances.

"You took your sweet time," Rachel said.

"Sorry."

"Well, come on in."

"Where's the best place to pull up?" a voice from the other boat asked. Rachel recognized Keith Kramer and smiled to herself.

"There's a deep spot there, under the willows. Maybe if you can get the nose of the boat in there..."

"All right," Taylor said.

The other girls had been listening to this exchange in silence. Rachel glanced at them. "Relax. It's just Keith and Taylor from school," she said. "Who else is with you?" she called.

"Rich and Pete."

"Pete! Omigosh, hi Pete!" Prisca's voice came shrilly from further up the beach. She scrambled down, her green dress shimmering in the moonlight. She was wearing far more makeup than she could have gotten away with either at Bayside Christian or in front of her father, and looking much more mature than her fifteen years. It was actually a bit scary.

"Hi Prisca," Pete said. "Uh, wow, you're dressed up."

"Oh, yeah, sort of. I was just trying it on. What are you doing here?"

"Rachel told us to come by, so we did."

All the girls looked at Rachel, who, raising an eyebrow, smiled. Taylor was edging his boat towards the willows. After a bit of maneuvering, he managed to get close enough for him to stagger onto the shore, followed by Pete and Rich, who were seniors like Rachel and Cheryl. The second boat followed, and Keith Kramer and Alan Vonnegun got out.

"Hey Alan," Rachel said. "Glad you could make it."

"So am I," he said. "Hey, when you are going to get me that CD?"

She laughed. Alan was a good friend: she was glad he had come along. "I'll get it to you."

"So what are you girls up to?" Taylor asked as he reached the girls.

Rachel grinned. "Escaping parental supervision."

"Seriously? Are all of you down here?"

"Yes. Like I told you, we've been doing this for the past couple weeks or so. It's been fun, but you know, it's always great to have company." She smiled artfully at Keith, who flushed.

Taylor was checking out the beach. "This is really private. Your parents can't see you from the house, can they?"

"No. Their bedroom faces the other way. I'm glad you cut your motors when you did. Just in case they could hear anything."

Rachel was dying to get off the beach, but she saw some preliminary socializing would be in order. So she sat down on the sand while the girls clustered around Taylor, Alan, Pete and Rich, chatting eagerly.

"So how did you make it out here?" Rachel asked, as Keith Kramer sat down beside her.

"Oh, my parents went to bed. Then I just took off," Keith said, with some exaggerated casualness. Rachel could see that he was reveling in the freedom of this nighttime adventure.

“And your parents let you take the boat out at night?” Rachel said innocently.

“Well, not exactly,” he said, “but if I fill up the tank with gas, my dad will never notice I was out.”

“So your parents don’t know what you’re up to,” she said with a smile.

“Uh...no.” He swallowed.

“Well,” Rachel teased, knowing she had him. “I won’t tell on you if *you* don’t tell on me.”

She sounded joking, but she had a feeling that Keith picked up on the threat, and realized he had made a big mistake.

“Nah, I’d never tell on you,” he said, a bit indignantly. He looked around. “Like Taylor said, this is a really neat... beach you have here.”

Keith scrambled to his feet and hurried over to Prisca, who was standing with the other boys, shrugging her shoulders, fluttering her eyelashes, and giggling to her heart’s content.

Rachel wanted to laugh. *So much for Dad’s spy.* But instead she walked down to the water where the youngest girls, who had quickly tired of the conversations, were splashing around. She started a splashing game with them, and then Taylor joined in. It was fun, but Rachel wasn’t anxious to get too wet, so after a few minutes, she sat down on a rock and Taylor sat next to her. As they talked, Melanie slipped over to sit with them, putting her head on Rachel’s shoulder.

After about a quarter hour, Rachel looked at Taylor and said coaxingly, “Taylor, take us for a boat ride.”

Taylor said, hesitantly, “Sure, but are you all going to come?”

“Just me and Melanie and Cheryl,” Rachel said. “The rest can stay here or go with Keith.”

“Man, Alan should have brought his family’s boat. I told him he should have. It’s huge.”

“He should have,” exclaimed Rachel, disappointed.

“Well... maybe I can ask him to bring it tomorrow.”

“Good.” She stood up. “Come on, Cheryl! Melanie and I are going for a boat ride.”

Rachel had picked Cheryl deliberately because she sensed the older girl was irritated by the twins’ flirting with boys who were Cheryl’s classmates. Also, Rachel calculated that Cheryl would hesitate to go on a boat ride at first, but would probably enjoy it once she got out there. A small outing like this was the perfect time to persuade her conservative stepsister that they had nothing to fear.

Cheryl grudgingly joined them, after Taylor asked her to, and Melanie seemed happy so long as she was accompanying Rachel. They clambered into the swaying boat and settled themselves. Cheryl asked for, and got, a life jacket for herself and Melanie, but Rachel sat up front in the boat next to Taylor, letting the wind stream around her neck and through her hair as the powerful engine gunned to life and pulled her away.

For the next half hour she lived in the rush of the wind and water, and by the time they headed back towards the shore, she was yearning for more. Only the need to keep their secret safe impelled her back home.

"*Never been boating? Well, what have you been doing then?*" The quotation came back to her—where had she heard that? She realized, disconcerted, that she had heard it that evening, from Paul Fester.

"Taylor," she said, as he let the boat drift back towards shore. "You have to tell the other guys that they can't let on to anyone that they saw us here. Right?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. I'll make sure I'll tell them," Taylor said, seriously.

"Keith won't chicken out, will he?"

"He better not, or he'll get us all in trouble," Taylor said. "Are you worried that your dad will try to crack him?"

"Yeah, sort of," Rachel said. "I mean, you know my dad. General Patton."


"He's been sounding out the guys in Bible group about what you girls have been up to. I was the only one who knew what he was getting at, and you know I won't tell." He grinned. "And now that the rest of them have been out here, I doubt they're going to tell him either. I mean, we'd have to admit to Colonel 'Patton' that we were out with his daughters at night—alone!"

"Yeah, right!" Rachel laughed. This was exactly as she had hoped. Now she didn't need to worry. "Thanks so much for coming by. Can you come again?"


"Absolutely."

"Good." Rachel felt another thrill go through her. This was working. She looked out at the island standing aloof in the bay, and appraised it like a diamond.

five

 *Therefore, the soldier presented himself at the front door of the castle . . .*

— *Grimm*

 Paul stood on the Durham's doorstep around ten o'clock the next morning, steeled with determination, and knocked. He wasn't entirely sure of what to do next, but it had occurred to him that this might be a decent idea.

When one of the girls answered the door, he asked to see their mother. In a few minutes, Sallie came to the door. She was dressed in a blue cotton jumper, and was holding baby Jabez, who looked recently cleaned.

"Good morning, Paul," she said, and her eyes were still a bit nervous, although she smiled. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to say thanks again for the great dinner last night. I really appreciated it."

"Well, you're very welcome, I'm sure."

"Last night, I had told your younger daughters, Debbie and Linette, that I could teach them juggling. They seemed to be interested so I wanted to find out if that was all right with you, and when would be a good time."

Sallie looked hesitant. "I would have to ask my husband. That's very kind of you to offer. Would you want to be paid for it?"

Paul shook his head. "Not at all. Actually, I'm scheduled to do this show next week at the Colonial festival. I could really use some assistants. If you and Colonel Durham were willing, and the girls as well, they could be my assistants in the show."

"Oh my! Well, that would keep them busy! Are you sure you could teach them in time?"

"Even if they learn a few things, they can help me out. It's really not that difficult."

She paused. "I'd have to check with my husband first. If he says it's okay, then maybe you could come by at noon to teach them? If the girls are finished with their chores. Would that work for you?"

"Sounds great!"

"All right," Sallie said, still seeming a little guarded. "I'll see you then, Mr. Fester."

"Call me Paul, please. Goodbye."

Paul walked away as the door closed, breathing deeply. He was fairly certain Colonel Durham would allow the lessons. The only difficulty was that he was sure he would be tired by noon.

I'd better go back to the tent and make up my sleep now, he thought. And I hope Debbie and Linette manage to make up their sleep too.



Rachel yawned over the laundry. *I must, I must get some sleep today.* She thought of the hammock outside in the sun. After she was done here, she would steal down there and doze off, if none of her sisters got there first.

Stepping up her pace, she finished the laundry a bit more quickly than usual, dabbed on some sunscreen, and slipped outside, stifling another yawn. The hammock hung in a corner of the yard, unoccupied. She lay down, closed her eyes against the sun, and was asleep almost instantly, swaying in the breeze.

A bit later on, she drifted to the surface of sleep and became aware of shrieks of laughter and shouts. She opened one eye, and saw some figures cavorting on the lawn. After watching them in a bored perplexity for some time, she remembered that Paul was supposed to come over to teach Debbie and Linette juggling, or tumbling, or something like that. She closed her eyes again.

Then she heard giggles coming closer. She opened an eye a bit irritated, and saw her two younger biological sisters Liddy and Becca, dressed in fancy dresses, come dancing up to the hammock, carrying a big plastic hamper between them.

"What are you doing?" she asked, a bit sharply.

Liddy, resplendent in royal blue, with ample costume jewelry said, "Becca and I are going to play dress up. In the cave."

"Won't Sallie think you're a bit old for dress-up?" Rachel asked mildly.

"Oh no. She saw us, and she said we looked very cute," said fourteen-year-old Becca. "Of course, we were doing it with the young ones, before Paul

came and stole them away from us. So we're just bringing the rest of the dresses down to the cave to wait for them."

"I see," Rachel said, "and you might just forget and leave them down there."

"We might," Liddy giggled.

"I see," Rachel said, and closed her eyes again. She wondered to herself if there was a dress somewhere in the house that she could wear. There was something about seeing guys on summer nights that made her want to dress up. But she didn't exactly want to go in an old dress-up gown or discarded bridesmaid dress. Her own bridesmaid dress from her father's second marriage had been made for her before she really hit her growth spurt—no question of her fitting into it now. Besides, it was pale blue cotton with ivory roses on it. At the time, she had picked out the fabric herself. But now it seemed like fabric for a naïve little girl, not for someone—well, like herself.

Remembering picking out the bridesmaid dresses turned over painful memories. Her mother's death was something she had pushed to the furthest reaches of her mind. For a long time her father had seemed so anxious that she not be psychologically disturbed by the tragedy, and had arranged a plethora of counseling services for her, and would probably do so again, instantly, if he had any idea that she was still struggling with it. But she was weary of talking about the pain, and just wanted it to die away quietly in the back of her mind, alone and unnoticed.

The one good outcome of Mom's dying was that for a while, it seemed, she and her father had been very close. He depended on her, the oldest, to keep the other girls together, to soak up their grief and more than that, to look after them, cook for them, feed them, keep them clothed, to run the household, especially when his military duties called.

Then he had met Sallie, and things had begun to change. Rachel remembered bitterly the night Dad had taken her, Rachel, out to dinner, and told her about his plans to marry again. "You've been taking on the responsibilities of an adult, and you shouldn't have to do that yet at your age. I want you to be free to be a child again, and enjoy being a young person."

Perhaps he meant it to be comforting, but for Rachel, he was stripping her of her newfound maturity. He was taking away part of her identity, even though he hadn't realized it. So here she was, capable of running a house, but unable to do it as she wanted, because it was no longer her house. Yet she still had to live under her father's roof, and be a child, and she was sick of being a child.

And her father, who at one point had begun to treat her as an equal, repented to her (at their new pastor's prodding) for placing too many burdens on her shoulders, and had proceeded, through his deeper involvement in their church, to become more and more clueless. He didn't understand her silent outrage at having to listen to Sallie, whose haphazard housekeeping drove Rachel nuts, or her resentment towards the church and its various ministries.

Her father had turned to the church for support in his time of bereavement, and now seemed to be caught in its stranglehold. Everything in the family schedule revolved around church groups, share groups, youth groups, men's groups, and women's groups. Church annual retreats had become more important than Christmas and Easter, it seemed. But Rachel could see how much comfort and happiness her father and his wife derived from the church and their church family. She didn't dare suggest they leave or pull back. Who was she, she thought dismally, to wreck the happiness of so many people?

So she was finding her own version of happiness, in different places. *Yes, what I need*, she thought, *is a dress*. A sleek black dress, not too formal, not too casual. And black sandals, with thin straps. There was nothing in her wardrobe—or her sisters'—or Sallie's—that remotely resembled the dress she was envisioning. Such dresses were common enough in the outside world, but not in the cotton-print fabric of their church and family life.

The other girls would need dresses, too. Dresses to dance in. Because they would go dancing, somehow. She felt the island would be a perfect place for a midnight dance.

She counted up dollars on her fingers. Last week she had gotten paid for several hours of filing at the church office. Perhaps next time she went into town, she could go to the Mission store—or better yet, the bargain-price clothing store that sold slightly defective brand name clothes. Next time she and Prisca went grocery shopping, they could arrange to split up and have one of them go to the store while the other went clothes shopping. Yes, that might work.

Turning over, she sighed, and gazed lazily over at the juggling class. She could see Linette tossing a club in the air and dropping it, while Paul stood in front of her, coaching her. Debbie was working with two clubs, and seemed to be doing just fine.

She wished she could get two sweet dresses for the younger girls as well, something still girlish and not too alluring. Part of her regretted that Debbie and Linette had found out about the secret. They were really too young,

even though Debbie was a tremendous flirt in her Sunday school class, attracting and casting off boys like an unusually pugnacious flower. No doubt she was more interested in Paul and his juggling than in any boy near her age.

“Rachel,” Cheryl’s voice called. Rachel groaned and rolled over in the hammock, wishing she had stayed asleep. The insistent note meant she was needed for something. She closed her eyes until her stepsister was standing right by the hammock, shaking her by the shoulder.

“What?” Rachel moaned pathetically.

“Mom wants you. You’re supposed to make bread today. For the Sabbath.”

“A pox on the Sabbath day,” Rachel murmured.

Cheryl, shocked, said reprovingly, “You really shouldn’t say that.”

Rachel opened one eye and saw Cheryl’s hand hanging down by her side, holding a book, her finger keeping her place. It was an older cloth-covered volume with scrolled black writing and an ominous title: *Babylon Mystery Religion*. Beneath the words was a lithograph of a rather crude statue of a woman holding a baby.

“What are you reading?” she asked.

“One of mom’s books. It’s all about the Roman Church.”

“You mean the Catholic Church?”

“It’s not really a church, Rachel. It’s a satanic system. See the statue on the front? Doesn’t it look like the statue of the Virgin Mary with Jesus you see in Catholic churches? But it’s actually a statue of the Babylonian goddesses Ishtar with her son, Nimrod the sun god. She was the moon goddess. Catholics are really just pagans under another name, worshipping the sun and moon.”

Rachel regarded the suggestive title with some amusement. “So Paul is an agent of Satan, trying to get us to...worship idols or something?”

“I hope not,” Cheryl said, her eyes worried. “This book is old, Rachel, and Mom said it’s still in print. It’s possible that not everything that it says is true, but there’s so much the author says that you just can’t argue with. It’s actually frightening.”

“Cheryl, you read too much,” Rachel blew her hair out of her eyes. “Just because a book is in print doesn’t mean anything. I mean, isn’t the Satanic Bible old? And that’s probably still in print.” She was irritated and got to her feet.

But as she stalked towards the house, she couldn’t help casting a furtive glance in Paul’s direction, picturing him as Cheryl’s agent of the devil, horns sprouting out of his short-cropped curly hair. The picture didn’t fit.

Everything about Paul screamed “Wholesome.” *What a simply tremendous disguise*, she marveled sarcastically. *You would never guess.*

Paul turned a full somersault and landed near her on the grass, breathless. He was sweating in the hot summer sun. A silver medal bounced on a chain around his neck, along with a couple of strings. Wiping his forehead, he picked up the medal, untangled it from the strings, and tucked it back under his shirt. Then he turned he seemed to become aware of her presence and started.

“Sorry, didn’t see you there,” he murmured.

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “What’s that around your neck?” she asked.

“Oh, that. Just a medal, and a cross, and a scapular. They tend to get all tangled when I’m tumbling.”

“What kind of medal? For bravery?” she pursued. Debbie giggled behind Paul’s back.

“Heck no. Not that kind of medal, just a Catholic thing.” He held out the medal. “It’s got a picture of Mary on it.”

She looked, but could barely make out a figure of a woman on it. To step closer would mean stepping closer to a tall, sweating man, and she was too aware of Paul’s masculine presence to do that. “Hm! Pretty.”

“What’s the string thing?” Debbie wanted to know.

“A scapular. Here—wait, I’ll take it off. Sorry, it’s pretty soaked. It’s made of wool.”

Paul held out a strange contraption, two brown felt squares dangling at the ends of two rather dirty brown strings. Another medal was strung on the string.

“What’s it for?” Debbie demanded, taking it. Rachel cast a glance at it, and saw that embroidered on the felt was a woman holding a baby, remarkably similar to the Babylonian goddess on Cheryl’s book. She felt an odd twinge in her stomach.

“It’s a sign of my devotion to the Mother of Christ,” Paul said, and held out his hand. Debbie gave it back, and he put it quickly to his lips then pulled the loop of string over his shoulders so one square hung down in the back and the other on the front. He tucked both back under his shirt. The girls all watched him with interest, not knowing what to make of this.

“Imagine, a pagan in our midst,” Rachel said to Cheryl as they strolled to the house.

“I can’t believe it—did you see that? Just like in the book!” Cheryl said in wonder. “He was kissing it like it was an idol.”

“Cheryl,” Rachel switched topics, “do you want to go to town with me?”

“What for?”

“Let’s see if your mom wants us to go to the grocery store. I feel a sudden urge for a new dress.”

That night, none of the girls wanted to be caught unawares again. If there were going to be boys on the beach, the girls were going to make the most of the opportunity. Rachel woke them up a bit sooner, and they pattered about upstairs for a bit, getting together a few essentials, which took so long that Rachel became impatient and shooed them all down the steps, despite protests.

In the cave, Prisca and Liddy pulled out the chest of dresses from against the wall. They had spent the afternoon clearing out the cave and stacking bikes against the wall so that there was considerably more room. “We tried to get one dress for everybody,” Prisca said. “There’s at least fourteen here, but I’m not sure who will fit into what.”

Taren exclaimed in dismay, “But some of these are so old! And out of style! You expect us to see boys in these?”

“Take your pick—the dresses or your PJs,” Prisca said briskly. “Or perhaps you’d rather get back into one of your ultra-cool denim jumpers?”

“Then at least give me the dark blue one. It will look black,” Taren begged.

“But that’s the one I picked out for Rachel!” Prisca objected.

“Whatever,” Rachel shrugged. “I’ll wear the green one. I don’t care. I’m saving up my money to buy a new dress anyhow.” She and Cheryl had made a quick trip to a fashion-clothing store to investigate styles and prices, and the lowest priced outfit was at least \$60.

The statement seemed to inspire the girls. “Yeah, I’m going to save up my money too!” Liddy exclaimed, buttoning up a periwinkle blue dress that had once been Sallie’s.

“We can get whatever kind of dress we want, can’t we?” Becca said. “There is this adorable purple dress I’ve been longing to get, but I’m sure Sallie and Dad would say it’s too short.”

“I didn’t see anything I cared for at the store,” Cheryl announced, putting on a pink flounced sundress that had been in the costume box for years, still relatively intact. “I’m probably just going to buy some fabric and make a dress.”

“Make a dress? How are you going to get away with that?” Tammy demanded.

"I'll sew when Mom's downstairs, or out at a meeting. If we take turns watching, we can get a lot of dresses made that way," Cheryl said. "I want something long and flowing and lacy and maybe white."

Rachel rolled her eyes as she got into the green dress Prisca had worn last night. It was a bit snug, but she could still fit in it.

"Hello?" said Miriam. "This dress is not my size, not even if I were half of what I am."

In the end, dresses were switched, modified, and taken on and off at least six times before all of them pronounced themselves at least temporarily satisfied.

"Gosh, we don't have any time," Prisca said. "I'm going to do my makeup now, quick!"

Rachel had already done hers upstairs in the bedroom, and now strolled outside the cave in her mom's old green dress. In the moonlight, you couldn't tell what color it was. She sidled down to the beach in her bare feet—she didn't have any shoes appropriate to the dress—and folded her legs under her, awaiting the boats.

The moon was an oval tonight, voluptuous and silver, and its reflection danced on the waves. Rachel had mulled over the problem of what to wear for a long time. Their church held that only modest dresses were appropriate for women and girls, as pants were man's attire and unfitting for females. Rachel privately thought this was insanity. The more moderate parents in the church allowed their teenage daughters to wear nice jeans and tops on some occasions. Perhaps she should spend her money on getting a nice pants outfit—but no. She had a good figure, and she *was* a girl, after all, and she wanted to make the most of it. A dress—not a homely plain dress, but a really cool dress—that was what she wanted.

Dresses to dance in, she thought. With short skirts skimming the thighs or swinging about the knees, and flirtatiously short sleeves or no sleeves at all. Somehow or other, she wanted to find a way to go dancing, in the darkness and warmth of summer nights.

There was a faint roar, and she saw the boats coming, and felt that breathless anticipation. Just for the fun of it, she put a hand in the bay water and ran it through her hair, so that it would glisten in the moonlight.

Three boats tonight—Taylor's, Alan's, Keith's. Rich and Pete were sitting in Taylor's boat. Thankfully, Taylor remembered to cut the engines before cutting in closer, and called to Alan to turn off his. Alan pulled out a paddle and started maneuvering his overlarge open fishing boat towards the willows. Seeing Rachel, he started pretending to sing an Italian boating song,

which the other guys picked up. The other sisters, hearing the motors, ran down to the beach, skidding down the sandy bank in their dresses, laughing and shushing each other.

As before, the boys edged their boats beneath the overhanging willows and tied them to the trunk.

“Man, are you girls going to a party or something?” Taylor asked, seeing the girls all decked out.

Rachel shrugged. “Are you bringing us to one?”

“We brought the party with us!” Alan cracked, pulling out a pack of cigarettes.

“Of course you did,” Prisca said. “Rachel, Alan is our own personal party.”

Taylor shot a glance over his shoulder and lowered his voice, “I did bring some drinks.”

“Really?” Rachel said, “You mean, alcohol?”

“I mean beer. Is that all right?”

Rachel considered swiftly. “It’s fine with me if you guys drink,” she said as she thought, rapidly sifting through her sisters’ potential reactions. “Don’t let the little girls have any. And you know we’re all dead if our dad finds empty cans on the beach.”

“Sure. Want one?”

“Maybe later. Thanks.” Rachel had to gauge the risk. She had never had a beer herself, though she suspected she would enjoy one. However, didn’t alcohol stay on the breath? The last thing she wanted was Sallie getting a whiff of something on one of the girls—that would be a dead giveaway. It was clear that Rachel would have to have a meeting with the girls and decide on rules for these types of situations ahead of time. Making decisions on the fly like this increased the risk dangerously.

She decided the best tactic would be to prevent the guys from breaking out the beers right away. “But first,” she said, “can you bring us all out for a ride? I’m dying to get out on the water.”

The other girls chorused agreement and Taylor said, “Sure. Who’s with me?”

Rachel, Cheryl, Debbie, and Linette chose to go with Taylor. The other sisters quickly clustered around their choices—Tammy and Taren were angling in on Keith and Rich, and went in Keith’s boat with Becca and Liddy.

Prisca had attached herself to Alan tonight, and Miriam went along with her and Pete (“Partly to keep Pete from getting ticked off at Prisca,” Miriam

said beneath her breath to Rachel. “Man, she’s a flirt!”), and Brittany and Melanie, the odd two out, went along for the ride.

Getting into the boats in the dark of the willows was tricky, and it was a difficult fit. “Sorry it’s a little crowded,” Taylor said regretfully, gunning the motor and they cruised out into the bay.

“That’s all right,” Rachel said over the noise of the engine. She looked behind her. Cheryl sat in the back, an arm around each of the little sisters. Rachel noticed that Cheryl’s face, which had been guardedly concerned since beer was mentioned, looked far more relaxed. Rachel smiled at her, took a deep breath and turned her face ahead into the night wind.

They rode for a while over the waves, and then Taylor said, “Where do you want to go now?”

Rachel looked over to the midnight jewel in the center of the bay. “Take us to the island,” she cried over the noise of the motor.

Taylor cast a glance at the island and said, “What? You want to go on there? You’re crazy. It’s private.”

“Yeah, but who’s ever there?” she challenged.

“Why do you want to go there?”

“Just because it’s there,” she said mischievously. “Come on, take us there.”

Taylor didn’t look too happy at the thought. “We could get in real trouble.”

Rachel pulled back. “Why not just ride around it and see if anyone’s home?” she suggested. “If someone’s there, there’ll be a boat in the dock.”

“Or a helicopter in the heliport,” Taylor said, dubiously.

“A helicopter?”

“Yeah. You can’t see it from your side of the bay, but there’s a heliport on the other side of the island. That’s how the rich people get on and off.”

“Oh. Shoot.” Rachel hadn’t considered this.

“Well, I’ll drive around it,” Taylor said. “It’s pretty big.”

He made a wide circle around the island. Rachel eagerly scanned the coastline, taking in new images of the island. The further side revealed more of the house, a lovely mansion lifting a stone-and-timber face to the ocean. The sight took Rachel’s breath away. She put her chin on her hand and drank it in. It would be beyond her dreams to actually enter a house like that. She didn’t dare to think much about that, not yet.

Taylor pointed out the heliport, a swath of flat green grass where the trees had been carefully shaved back.

“It’s empty,” Rachel said hopefully.

“Yes,” Taylor said. But Rachel could see that it wouldn’t be prudent to push him farther tonight. She had made the suggestion, and she would let it sink in.


They counted four boats in the dock, but they were all covered with canvas, a sign that they were not being used. “If they weren’t coming back, they’d be stored on dry land, though,” Taylor commented. Rachel had to agree.

“Look!” she said, and pointed to a flat stone dock on the far side of the island. Trees lined it, and there were no lights nearby. But in the moonlight, she could see a flat stone portico, obviously a receiving area. Stone steps led up to the house.

“It’s another dock,” Taylor said, oblivious to the implications. Rachel decided to remain silent about those. She would ease him into her plan. She had seen in a moment—it was a perfect outdoor dance floor.

“We have to go there,” she said beneath her breath. It was going to happen. She could taste it.

six

 *That night, the soldier slipped on his cloak of
invisibility . . .*

— *Grimm*



achel.”

Rachel winced at her father’s voice and looked up sharply.

“Yes?”

“I talked to Mrs. Pearson at church yesterday, and she said she could use some help over at the parsonage on Monday afternoon. I told her that you and some of your sisters would go over there today to help serve her.”

Rachel cringed. Mrs. Pearson was the pastor’s wife, and she almost always needed someone to help serve her. “But we were going to take the little girls and boys to go to the Andrews’ pool this afternoon!” she objected. “Sallie said it was okay.”

“I’m sorry you’ve made other plans, but I think the needs of the church come before our personal desires, don’t you?”

Rachel murmured something incomprehensible.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear what you said.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Rachel said defiantly. “Nothing worth repeating.”

Her father looked over at her. “It shouldn’t take too long. You know how difficult it is to be a pastor’s wife. She needs our support.”

Rachel nodded, and turned back into the other room. “Yes, but does she need my personal support?” she asked biting in her mind.

“The problem is, our family has no life outside of this church,” she said aloud as she came into the basement, hauling a load of laundry.

“Tell me about it!” Prisca agreed. “My gosh, it’s like we’re enslaved to this group of people.”

“The pastor’s personal slaves,” Miriam minced words. “If there’s a job to be done—‘oh, call those Durhams. He’s got plenty of kids—he can spare a few!”

“Your daughters are so capable,” Rachel quoted, pressing her hands to her breast. “They have been such a blessing to our church.”

She was referencing the last church anniversary, where the pastor’s wife had stood up before the congregation and praised the Durham family. The girls had been singled out as models of hard work and zeal for God, which had thoroughly embarrassed them, mostly because Rachel thought it wasn’t true.

“They don’t know anything about us,” she said. “For all of the ‘sharing’ and ‘testifying’ that goes on, they don’t really know what any of us likes, or wants, or cares about.”

Prisca giggled. “If they found out what we really wanted, they wouldn’t like us very much, would they?”

Rachel gave a bitter smile. “No, I doubt they would.” She had been around the parents enough to overhear their gossip about teenagers in the congregation that were perceived as ‘rebellious.’ “They’d hold us at arm’s length,” she said. Another thought occurred to her, and she went on grimly. “They’d start to think less of Dad and Sallie, too. They’d start out saying, ‘Poor Colonel Durham. Such a heart for God, but his daughters are out of control,’ and then they’d start carefully disconnecting themselves from him and Sallie. They’d pity them,” she spoke the last words distastefully.

“Damn them!” Prisca spoke out suddenly. “I hate the church! I hate it!” She slammed down her laundry basket.

“Don’t say that,” Rachel hissed, throwing a glance upstairs.

“Don’t curse,” Liddy said, eyes wide.

“But I do! I hate them! They don’t love us. Not really. And I hate having to bow to them!”

“Prisca,” Rachel said, thoughts running through her brain, “it’s wrong to hate.”

“So what?” Prisca looked up at her wildly. “I still hate them. I hate them all. I hate what they’re doing.”

“You can’t hate the church of God,” Liddy said, attempting to be reasonable. “That’s like hating Christ.”

“Oh shut up! Shut up!” Prisca sat down, folding her arms, and started sobbing.

There was silence. Rachel sat down next to her younger sister, and put a tentative arm around her. It frightened her when Prisca was like this, so violently emotional. But she steeled herself. *Distract her*, she thought.

“Prisca,” she said, invitingly, “we haven’t gone to Goodwill yet.”

Prisca wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands. “Can we go there after we get done slaving for Mrs. Pearson?”

“Absolutely,” Rachel squeezed her hand.

The cellar door banged, and Tammy bellowed downstairs, “Linette! Debbie!”

“They’re not down here,” Rachel called up warningly.

“Paul’s here for their lesson,” Tammy yelled, and walked away.

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “They won’t have to go to the Pearsons. Lucky Paul is in Dad’s good graces.”

“For now,” Prisca said. “Wait until he finds out that Paul’s actually a Babylonian Mystery Worshipper.” The joke had been making its rounds among the sisters, and hadn’t gotten old yet.

Rachel took out a load of bedspreads to hang up on the old clothesline. The dryer was full, and they would dry faster in the hot sun. Besides, she liked the smell of sun-dried sheets and spreads. As she hung up the spreads, she watched Paul coaching the young girls through some cartwheels and walkovers.

After she finished, he turned to her and said, “Gorgeous day, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said. *For swimming*, she thought bitterly. “Any plans for the day after your lesson with my sisters?”

“Nope. That’s the fun of being on vacation.”

She smiled at him sardonically. “All of us should be so blessed.”

He looked at her quizzically, and then cast his eyes around the property. “You girls must feel pretty lucky, growing up here.”

“I suppose we should.”

“I mean, you have so much land. And the bay. I guess since I grew up on a postage stamp in the suburbs, I’m jealous.” He grinned his baby boy’s grin at her. *So naïve*, she thought.

“I guess the kids have it good,” she said flippantly. “My little brothers get to run around and play as much as they like. And the young girls. They’re lucky.”

“Aren’t you lucky?” he asked.

“I suppose some people would think so,” she said slowly. “I’m supposed to be grateful, aren’t I? After all, I have father and stepmother who are married to each other, a nice house, and a good Christian upbringing. Yes, I should feel very grateful, shouldn’t I?”

Her eyes bored into his.

“But you’re not,” he said quietly. “Why?”

The thought of Prisca’s fierce tears curled her lips with disdain. But that was not something she could tell him. Would tell him.

"If you can't understand that, I'm not going to explain it to you," she said distantly, and turned away from him.



Paul had found it difficult to adjust to his new schedule. He had been dragging in the afternoons. At a certain time of day, no matter where he was, it seemed to him of utmost importance to get back to his tent and sleep.

The problem was, sometimes he wasn't anywhere near his tent. Finally, the inevitable happened that day. It was around three in the warm afternoon, and he was coaching Linette and Debbie through a second round of juggling, when he began to yawn prodigiously.

"Hey, are you tired?" Debbie asked, observing the obvious.

"A little," he confessed, trying to cover his gaping mouth.

"Why don't you go and take a nap?" Linette suggested. "You can lie down on the hammock."

"No—that's okay—" Paul's body began to go on automatic pilot. "I think I'd better go home now." He turned away, collecting his clubs. "See you later."

"Get some sleep!" Debbie yelled as they turned and ran back towards the house.

Paul stumbled towards the woods, intending a shortcut to the road. But his eyes were beginning to close. Then he spotted a hollow in the ground, plush with green moss, shaded by ferns.

Too perfect, he thought, and let his bag of juggling clubs fall. Without further ado, he curled up in the dell and fell fast asleep.

It was as though fairies had put a spell upon him, so thoroughly did he sleep. He wasn't certain how long he had been there when he heard the crack of a twig quite near him.

He slowly opened his eyes, but didn't move from his spot. Suddenly he heard voices close to him.

"Let me see, please, let me see!" a girl's voice begged in a whisper.

"Shhh! No! Not till we get to the cave!"

Then there was more cracking of twigs, and he heard, faintly, a rustle of plastic bag.

"Oh... my ... gosh... that is so gorgeous," was a hushed voice.

"Twelve bucks." Paul recognized Taren's voice.

"No way!"

“Yes. Mine, all mine. But if you like, you can borrow it after I’ve worn it a few times.”

“That is such a killer dress. Feel the material! How did you get it?”

“Well, Mom was looking for swimsuits for the boys, so I just started looking through the sales racks. And I found it! Then I just waited for her to go into a dressing room to try something on, and rushed up to the counter and paid for it with my babysitting money! See, it’s so little it folds into a nice packet. It fit right in my purse.”

“Your legs will look great in that.” Paul wasn’t sure who the other girl was, but he was sure it was one of Colonel Durham’s daughters.

“You bet. Now I just need to find decent shoes.”

There was a rustle of plastic, and then silence. A few minutes later Paul heard the two girls making their stealthy way back up through the woods.

He waited until they had passed him, and lifting his head gingerly, saw them going into the house.

After a long while, he rolled over and crept out of the woody hollow where he had unintentionally hidden. Following the trail carefully, he found it wound down the side of the cliff leading to the beach. Suddenly he came upon a dark opening in the side of the rock.

Casting a glance behind him, he went into the cave, blinking in the dim light. There were a few bicycles and a large wooden trunk of rough boards. It had a padlock on it.

He put a hand to the padlock, and realized it hadn’t been closed properly. Giving it a slight jerk, he opened it and slid it out of the ring.

He carefully raised the lid, and saw a jumble of dresses in a variety of colors. Folded on a plastic bag in one corner was a short brown tank dress of a suede material. They were all quite different from the dresses that the girls usually wore. Like night and day.

For a few moments he looked at the dresses, not moving, thinking. Then slowly he replaced the lid and the lock, closing it properly.

I’m taking a risk, he thought. But Colonel Durham had said he could.

Quietly he left the little cave and retraced his steps back to the spot where he had been napping, where his juggling bag still lay. He stood there in the woods, wondering what to do next.

Then he heard the screen door bang closed, and a girl came out of the house. He didn’t move.

She started to wander down towards the bay, her golden hair falling around her pensive round face. He recognized her—Melanie, the quiet smiling one.

When she was almost upon him, she looked up and saw him.

"You're still here, Paul," she said.

"I am."

"What are you doing?"

He indicated the dell. "I fell asleep here, and just woke up not too long ago."

"Oh." She looked toward the bay through the woods, still pensive, and then looked back at him. Seeing his serious face, she smiled.

When she smiled, her eyes crinkled into half moons. He couldn't help smiling back at the young girl, her face as open as the sunshine. She reminded him of his youngest sister.

"Can I ask you something about Mary?" she said, walking towards the bay.

"Of course," he said, swinging his bag over his shoulders and falling into step beside her.



"Meeting," Rachel said. The girls dressing in the cave by the light of the camping lamp stopped and looked at her.

Rachel, who had gotten into an old dress of her mother's, a sleeveless white sheath, said, "We've got to make some rules. In order to keep our secret." Given how Prisca had behaved this morning, Rachel was not entirely sure this conversation would go well. But she forged ahead. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," Miriam said, and Cheryl and the twins nodded. The other girls gave their assent.

"When we go out, we have to be careful how we behave, just so that nothing carries over into our lives the next day. For instance, smoking," she looked at Prisca, who had been sharing a smoke with Alan in the boat last night. Prisca had also been quite familiarly nestled up against him, which, Miriam had informed Rachel, had incensed Pete. "Smoke gets into clothes. And hair. And skin. It has a smell."

"A stink," Debbie volunteered, wrinkling her nose. Some of the sisters giggled.

"A smell," repeated Rachel, "which could tip off the parents, hmm?" The other girls considered. "Plus if you were to acquire a habit, just how are you going to satisfy that nicotine craving in the middle of the day? Running off in the minivan to spend your babysitting money on a pack of ciggies?"

“Mom and Dad would ask questions, and if they found out, all of us would be in trouble,” Cheryl spoke up, a bit self-righteously. Prisca scowled at her.

“All righty then!” she snapped.

“Same with alcohol,” Rachel said. “It has a smell. If you have any, you’d better brush your teeth at least three times before we go upstairs. Plus, if you take too much, you’ll have a hangover the next day. You want to run that risk?”

All the girls shook their heads no. *Good, that part was easy*, Rachel thought to herself. Lucky her sisters were inexperienced with drinking anyway.

“Third thing,” she said briskly. “A buddy system. We can’t have anyone falling overboard, drowning, getting drunk, whatever. We have to watch out for each other, at all times, or we’re going to be sorry. Can you live with that?”

This was the most ham-handed she had yet been, and she waited, a bit anxious, to see how her sisters would take it. She knew that some of the older girls were yearning to get alone with a particular guy, and this would put a crimp in their style. All the same, Rachel didn’t see any way around it. *I don’t mind us being risky, but not stupid*, she repeated to herself.

“Yeah, that sounds fair,” Brittany spoke up. The older girls were a bit silent. Cheryl said, “Who partners with who?”

“The same partners all the time,” Rachel said, forging ahead. “So you have to make sure you stick with your partner, even when you divide up into different boats, okay? You stick with your buddy, and your buddy sticks with you.”

She took a breath. “Cheryl, you and Brittany. Tammy with Liddy, Becca with Taren. Miriam with Linette. Melanie with Debbie. Prisca and me.”

It had taken her two days to come up with the combinations, and she prayed they would accept them without question. She had tried to split up natural rivals, had given the younger kids into the hands of the more sensible sisters, and had taken the most volatile of the group—Prisca—for herself. She didn’t trust anyone else to keep Prisca in line.

“All right,” Tammy said grudgingly, and Miriam said, “I got the best bud,” and high-fived Linette, who perked up immediately. Debbie edged over towards Melanie, who looked relieved.

“Can we use handcuffs?” Becca asked innocently, and Taren yelped.

“Yes, for *you*,” Taren shot back.

“If necessary,” a smile played around Rachel’s lips. “Okay. That’s it. Let’s get going.”

“Alan said he was going to get his neighbor to come on over with his boat,” Prisca announced, wiggling into her dress.

“How old is he? The neighbor?” Taren asked.

“Nineteen. And he’s not a Christian. At least, he doesn’t go to church. But he has a red speedboat,” Prisca boasted. Rachel downed a tiny sigh within herself. No more time with Taylor, she foresaw. Tonight, she would be guard-dogging her younger sister aboard a red speedboat.

Well, maybe that’s all right, she resigned herself. Give Cheryl a chance to talk to Taylor. He’s a fairly decent guy. Despite his nighttime rebellion, he was the sort of guy who would straighten out eventually, probably go for baptism to become a full member of the church. The kind of guy who would interest Cheryl.

The neighbor was named Kirk, and he turned out to be a lean, hawk-like sort of guy, not really good-looking, with a fierce haircut and a beady eye. She figured out he was a local hick, but decided to tolerate him.

She and Prisca were alone with him in the speedboat, and Prisca was chattering and flirting outrageously. Rachel only stepped into the conversation to break her sister’s momentum. She was a bit embarrassed for Prisca, but Kirk seemed to find Prisca amusing and not really interesting. Rachel could tell Kirk was more interested in herself.

To pass the time, she kept looking out at the other boats. The buddy system meant that Alan and Keith had full boats—five and six total, respectively, while Cheryl (with Brittany) had Taylor all to herself. It was awfully lopsided. *What we need*, she thought, *are six boats. If only we had our own boat.*

“Whatch you thinking?” Kirk asked her. Prisca had run out of things to say and was sitting breathless, looking out at the water.

Rachel decided to alter her thoughts. “I wish I knew how to drive a boat,” she said, lowering her lashes.

“Want to learn? ‘Seasy. I’ll show you. Move over here.”

Rachel wondered if he was going to use this as an attempt to put his arms around her, but Kirk was apparently not so fast. He sat back and named the parts of the boat—the throttle, the clutch, the steering—she paid attention and started to learn.

Pretty soon she was cautiously applying pressure on the gas and chugging gently over waves. “That’s it,” Kirk said over the engine. “Give her more power.”

Rachel did, and was enthralled at the response of the engine and the speed. Soon she was slicing through the waves while Prisca yelped and clutched the side.

"You're a natural!" Kirk yelled delightedly. When she finally stopped, breathless, she grinned, momentarily breaking her reserve.

"Thank you," she said.

"Man, you're a bit of a wild thing after all, you are," he said appreciatively. She knew he was right, but chose not to respond, merely smiled. She saw out of the corner of her eye that Prisca was insanely jealous. Perhaps this partnership was going to be more trouble than it was worth.



CRACK!

As soon as he heard the sound, Paul knew that something bad had happened. Swiftly catching all the other clubs in his hands, he stared at the one he had dropped, and the rock protruding from the ground which had split it from top to bottom.

Trying to suppress his frustration, he sat down, wiping the sweat from his brow. He picked up the broken club and tried to put the pieces back together. It was damaged, badly.

What made it worse was that these were the hand-carved wooden clubs he had borrowed from a friend, since they fit in with the Colonial period more than his plastic ones. Well, there was nothing to do now except pick up the pieces and try to do what he could to fix them. It was going to take time, and money. And it had to be done before the festival started tomorrow.

Gloomily he got to his feet, stashed the rest of the clubs safely into the tent, wrapped the broken pieces in a cloth and put them into his juggling bag. He was supposed to go teach Debbie and Linette soon, but he would have to get this club fixed first. He slung the bag over his shoulder, and headed into town dejectedly.

I should have been paying more careful attention to my juggling, he chastised himself as he jogged along. *Guess I have too much on my mind.*

While he was making some progress on the logistics of being an invisible bodyguard during the girls' midnight escapades, he felt he wasn't making very much progress towards his final goal. Maybe Debbie and Linette were beginning to trust him, but he was sure that Rachel disliked him and the other girls barely registered his existence when he was at the Durham house

during the day. He wasn't sure that Melanie and Sallie's other daughters didn't think he was some kind of pagan.

Eventually, Paul found the hardware store and went inside.

"Can I help you?" a cheerful older blond lady whose nametag read "Dolo" asked as soon as he walked in.

"Uh—sure. I need to repair these," he said, pulling the clubs out of his bag.

Dolo examined the clubs with a professional eye. "Some wood glue will do the trick," she said. "And some clamps. Aisles 2 and 5."

The wood glue wasn't much, but the clamps he needed to fix the club turned out to be expensive. With a sinking heart, he shelled out more of his food money to pay for them.

As Dolo rang up his bill, she remarked, "Night job getting you down?"

He looked at her, a bit startled. "Sort of," he said cautiously, fingering his miraculous medal.

She chuckled. "You just really look tired. If you don't mind me asking, are you Catholic?"

"Trying to be," he said.

She grinned back. "Have you been to the church on Plain Street?" she jerked a finger behind her. "It's not far from here. Sure beats hitchhiking into Baltimore if you're looking for a daily Mass."

"Really? I'll check it out!" Shouldering his juggling clubs, he added, "Thanks!"

"No problem, kid: keep the faith."

As he exited the hardware store, he checked the clock on the bank and saw he was late for his lessons with Debbie and Linette. *At least I'm becoming friends with them.* He raised his pace to a jog. *Maybe if I just continue to be open and friendly with them it will influence their older sisters.* To save time getting to the Durhams' house, he cut through the development off of Plain Street.

In the meantime, I just have to make sure none of them get hurt, he thought. *Man, now I feel like I'm juggling those girls on a high-wire.* He suddenly felt cold in his chest remembering the club he had so recently dropped. *What if you drop one of the girls? And there's no safety net? They could get hurt. Damaged. Permanently.*

Paul halted, panting, wondering if he had been foolish to get so involved with this situation.

He realized that he had stopped in front of a large brick building whose pedestrian shape made it look like an office building. But a sign on the front said: OUR LADY SEAT OF WISDOM ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSION.

Just where Dolo had said it would be. And the sign said there was a morning Mass here three times a week.

Dropping to his knees, he prayed with more intensity than he usually did. *Help me not to drop them. Any of them.*

Then he got to his feet, crossed himself, turned, and started running again.



Apparently God still saw fit to answer some of Rachel's prayers—if it was God who answered them—because the next night, Pete showed up driving a trim blue boat. Pete had told Miriam a couple nights ago that he was seriously considering buying a used boat, and it turned out that his parents had helped him buy this one. Pete's parents seemed to be more laid back than most of the parents in their midnight-outing group.

He had been hanging out with Miriam, having recovered from being slighted by Prisca, and Rachel approved. Anyone could see Miriam was sensible and fun to be with, even if she was on the heavier side. And Pete, who was a tall, gawky sort of guy, seemed to appreciate her personality.

That night, Rachel and Prisca were in Alan's boat with Melanie and Debbie. Despite Rachel's fears that she was going to have to endure Kirk's attentions, Prisca had turned her short attention span elsewhere. Now Rich, Alan's friend, a senior with muscles and short brown hair, was the object of her affection. And Tammy, surprising everyone, had professed a liking for Kirk's buzz haircut. She and Liddy were passengers in Kirk's red boat that night. The other girls remained with their usual partners.

Rachel settled herself on the ample seat of Alan's boat and sighed. The headache that had been nagging her all day had finally started to dissipate.

"The boat seems really slow tonight," Debbie said after they got started.

"Yeah? Well, I'm carrying the most weight," Alan said, looking over at her. "There's six of us here."

"Your boat is *always* slow, every time I ride in it," Debbie complained. "Why do you carry so much stuff around in it?"

Rachel looked around. It was true that part of Alan's boat was covered in canvas, and there were always lumpy objects beneath it.

"My parents insist on storing all their junk here," Alan said, irritated. "That's why."

Rachel shot Debbie a warning look. "How're your juggling lessons going, Debbie?"

“Very good. I like Paul,” Debbie said.

“We all know that,” Prisca said. “You’re the only one who does.”

“I like him too,” Melanie said. “Even if he is a Catholic.”

Rachel leaned back against the side. “You were talking with him a lot the other day,” she observed.

“I was asking him why he prays to Mary. He told me that Christ is like the sun, and Mary is like the moon. Because the sun gives out its own light, and the moon just reflects the sun’s light. So he honors Mary because she reflects God’s glory.”

“So Mary is like the moon,” Prisca repeated, nodding. Suddenly her eyes widened, and she clutched Rachel’s arm, crying in a choked voice. “Like—a moon goddess! It’s Babylonian Mystery Religion! Aaahh!”

Rachel burst out laughing, and then had to explain the joke to the guys. It didn’t seem quite as funny to them.

“But I don’t think it’s pagan at all,” Melanie said. “It looks weird, you know, but once Paul explained it, I could sort of understand, even if I didn’t quite agree. It was kind of a nice idea. He’s very good at explaining things.”

“Proof! Proof! He’s convinced Melanie! He is an agent of Satan!” Prisca hissed in Rachel’s ear.

“He knows a *lot* about the Bible,” Debbie said. “He’s read parts of it that I bet even our assistant pastor hasn’t read.”

“More proof!”

“A Bible scholar,” Rich commented, and Rachel smiled at his mock appreciation. “Is he going to be a pastor?”

“You can’t be a pastor if you’re Catholic,” Debbie said. “Not unless you become a priest. Paul said he doesn’t feel called to become a priest.”

“You asked him about that?”

“Oh sure. I ask him everything. He tells me everything.”

Prisca leaned forward. “Did you ask him if he likes any of us?”

“Yes.”

Heads turned. “What did he say?” Rachel asked, despite herself.

“He said something about gold and jewels. I think he was saying we were all very nice,” Debbie cocked her head, and winked devilishly. “But, he said Rachel is like the Queen of Sheba.”

“Oooh!” Prisca said. Rachel colored.

“So he thinks I’m high and mighty?” she asked. “I could have guessed that.”

“No, not like that. I asked him if he liked you, and he said he couldn’t think of liking you any more than he could like the Queen of Sheba.”

Rachel pursed her lips. "Backhanded compliment," she murmured to Prisca. "Did you ask him if he liked anyone else?"

"I was going to, but then he threw all the clubs at me at once, and I had to work hard to not drop them, and I did anyway, and then he laughed at me." Debbie bounced on her seat. "Alan, can you take us to the island?"

Rachel had planted the seeds in the other girls' minds gradually. She held her breath. Alan looked at Debbie. "You mean the big island? The private one?"

"Yes. Can't we just go and look around?"

Alan shrugged. "Hmm. Okay."

Rachel let out her breath and edged towards the front of the boat.

It seemed forever as Alan's boat cruised slowly towards the far side of the island. Then he drifted nearer, until they could see the house and the empty heliport. It was a dark night tonight, with a thin moon.

"I don't want to go on their docks," Alan mused. "Maybe we can go to one of the beaches and tie up under the trees."

"What about there?" Rachel pointed to the stone quay with the pillars. "You could drift up there and tie up under the trees to one side. That's out of sight."

"Good idea," he said.

Soon the boat was actually bobbing up and down in the waves beside the quay. Alan cut the engine, and Rachel stared, amazed at the enchanted land, now barely three feet from her.

She stood up unsteadily in the boat. "Do you want me to get out and tie us up?" she asked, clearing her throat.

"Sure. Go ahead," Alan said, and she put out a hand onto the stone, almost expecting it to dissolve into mist under her touch. But that was silly. It was solid, and she hopped onto the land and stood up, breathing hard.

"Toss me the rope," she said to Melanie, who groped around and threw out the rope.

Rachel gave a hand to her sisters before allowing herself to drink in the enchantment of it. When Alan and Rich were on land as well, the group of them stood on the edge of the quay, looking up at the ancient trees towering overhead, lush with swaying leaves.

"It's a magical place," Debbie said, hushed.

"Yeah," Rich said. "It almost seems like it."

Tentatively they walked forward. The quay was a stone portico, about a hundred feet wide by a hundred feet long. The pavement stones were


irregularly shaped, with moss growing between the cracks, but the surface was smooth with no unexpected steps.

“It’s like—a midnight dance floor,” Prisca said, her voice barely a whisper.

“Oooh!” Debbie said. Then, “We should have a dance here! Rachel, we should.”

She had foreseen it long ago, but did not mind seeming to give the credit to others. “That’s a wonderful idea,” Rachel said softly.

seven

 *After midnight, the princesses arose from their beds, put on splendid dresses, and hurried out of their room through the secret door, invisibly followed by the soldier. . .*

— Grimm



Paul breathed. The early morning light was dim around him as he stood on the shore of the bay, breathing, hands pushed together against his chest. The cool air hummed with the activities of insects and awakening birds. Breathing, he listened, he centered himself, and began his aikido exercises with an invocation to the Holy Spirit.

Full stretch. Up. Over. Pushing down, with both hands, he made a big grab of the space before him in the air, and as though it were a huge ball, pressed it down to the ground, “as though bringing your swollen ego down to the earth,” his aikido master used to say. Reach up again, he seized the nothingness and pushed it down. And centered himself again.

Now stance work—his knees bent, his body forward, he lunged. *Stance. Lunge. Stance again.* His war injury was a barely perceptible ache. *Good! Center. Center. Center.*

He knelt on the ground in the seiza position and, spreading and touching his fingers and thumbs to form the ceremonial triangle, he pressed his palms and forehead to the ground, seeking humility and discipline.

Discipline. Time to work on his joints. He sat up and methodically began to pull his wrists backwards against the joints until they hurt. The nikyo discipline increased his resistance to pain. He worked harder than usual on these, to ready his hands for the stress of juggling heavy clubs all day.

Then he leapt to his feet and stretched wide, making an expansive scooping motion with his arms while filling his lungs with air, then pushing the air out with a corresponding thrust of his arms. *Take it in, release it.* After

a few minutes of this, he exhaled completely from his gut and centered himself. All his movements would begin from his center, his *hara*. He was prepared.

Now he was ready to move. He began the agility exercises, stepping forward, twisting about, stepping back, the basic building blocks of all action. When he felt ready, he leapt forward and twisted about in a flip. Landing on his feet, he reached for the repaired juggling club and tossed it into the air. The twirl of the heavy, well-balanced instrument was a pleasure in and of itself, and he caught it, stilled it in an instant, and then tossed it again. His breathing regular, his mind alert, and his body prepared, he started into the routine he was practicing for the festival. Today was the first day.

He had hung out his juggling clothes—the black pants, loose white shirt, diamond-patched vest, and black mask—on a nearby branch. For shoes, he wore ninja shoes—lightweight, soft, black leather with flexible soles. Now he took off the black shirt and pants he had been wearing and changed into his costume. There was fruit and bread left over from yesterday’s meal, and he ate it for breakfast with a protein bar. By the time he was finished, the fire he had built earlier was burning brightly, and the water in his camping pot had boiled. Realizing he still had ample time, he made himself some tea and sat against a tree to drink it.

The Durham girls...he swirled the tealeaves in his cup and frowned. They were becoming almost as much a trouble to him as they were to Colonel Durham. He was beginning to think that the girls’ late night escapades were not so much the problem as they were the symptom of other deeper issues.

One big difficulty was that Colonel Durham didn’t seem particularly affectionate with his daughters. *You have to show your daughters that you love them or they’ll start looking for someone who will*, Paul’s dad had always said.

Paul wondered if part of the reason Colonel Durham was so reserved was that six of the girls were his stepdaughters. *Maybe he just feels awkward trying to be close to them? And he withholds affection from his biological daughters as well, so as not to play favorites?*

Paul tapped his fingers on his mug. There was something else that bothered him, but it was hard to express. He could find a lot of admirable aspects to the Durhams’ plain lifestyle. They were unpretentious people who had money but had chosen to live simply. Apparently the parents were happy, but he wasn’t sure this way of life was keeping the girls contented. The Durhams didn’t have a television, but he also noticed that they didn’t have many books, particularly storybooks. Except for Cheryl, who was mostly reading Christian romance novels, he had never seen the older girls reading

anything. It didn't seem as if they had much of an imaginative or intellectual life. From what he could tell, they spent most of their time doing housework, serving other church members, sewing plain dresses, or being bored.

They need something good to love besides 'being good,' he thought to himself. *Or else, they'll find something to love that's not good.*



Rachel had to plan her dress excursions carefully, interspersing them with legitimate errands. Between going to the grocery store and the eye doctor's, she had made a furtive dash into a clothing store and scoured the sales racks in vain. After going to the pharmacy, she had tried another store. No luck. And she had even stopped at the Salvation Army, to paw hopefully through the ripped prom dresses and dated bridesmaids frocks. In despair she had bought for twenty dollars a 1940's navy blue dress with a short swishy skirt, but it was years away from the svelte, sleek black dress she was dreaming about. As it was, she had taken too much time and would have to rush.

Now she stood in the library, jingling her car keys, having come to pick up Cheryl and the younger girls. They were still in the stacks, choosing their Christian paperback novels with care. Rachel stalked from side to side, antsy, and was shushed by a cross librarian, who pointed at her keys. Guiltily irritated, Rachel thrust them into the pocket of her blue denim dress and looked at the summertime reading display.

One book leaning against a model sailboat caught her eye—*The Wind and the Willows*. That was the book Paul had mentioned, wasn't it? She vaguely recalled seeing a silly Disney movie about weasels and racecars by that name.

She picked it up and paged through it. Yes, it was a book about talking animals, the sort of thing that held no interest for her. She fanned the pages and came across an illustration of a huge man with goat's feet and horns on his head, holding a set of pipes. He was looking down upon several cute, fuzzy animals, with an expression of love. The title bar above said *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*.

The figure was vaguely familiar—yes, it was Pan, one of the Greek gods. *This must be the pagan part,* she thought to herself. The part that had made one of the Bayside Christian Academy teachers warn her students against the book. Intrigued, Rachel creased the page and started scanning and reading.

All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.

'Rat!' he found breath to whisper, shaking. 'Are you afraid?'

'Afraid?' murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. 'Afraid? Of *Him*? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid!'

Chilled by the unexpected, she closed the book. *Here I am, reading children's literature for a naughty thrill*, she thought to herself. Feeling foolish and tawdry, she set it back on the shelf and studied it warily.

Maybe she should read it. It was obviously a children's book, with the fuzzballs and all. And she was an adult, almost, too big for things like this. But Paul had read it.

The thought sat in her mind, and she set the book back on the shelf, then abruptly picked it up again and slid it under her arm. *What the heck*, she thought. If it turned out to be boring and stupid, she could always bring it out when the girls were alone and read aloud parts for laughs. As she set it down on the counter, she looked again at the cover, which showed two animals rowing a boat down the river. There was a bright blue and black butterfly in the corner.

Then inspiration struck. That was what she wanted, she decided. A dress like that, blue and black. A bit of sparkle winking here and there. Yes, that would be a dress for the moonlight. But there was no question of her ever finding a dress like that. She would have to make one.

And the fabric store was an easier place to go without arousing parental suspicion than most dress stores. Yes, that would be her strategy.

Almost pleased, she leaned against the book counter, still waiting, but now planning. At last Cheryl came out of the stacks, staggering beneath a pile of romance novels. Rachel added her one book to the pile and hurried out to the car to wait for the girls to finish checking out.

When she reached it, she noticed that the family cell phone was blinking. She must have spent too long a time at the stores, including the extra errands she had made. Quickly she dialed voicemail and listened to the message.

It was her father. "Where are you?" his voice demanded. "This is the third time I've called and no one has answered the phone. I need you to get over here, pronto, to pick up these files and mail them out for me! Don't you remember?"

Rachel cursed. She had forgotten all about that errand, which her father had told her about at the breakfast table. Her father's message went on. "Please try and be less scatterbrained! I hope I'll be seeing you soon."

Rachel turned off the cell phone abruptly. It was after five now. The post office would be closed. It was no use. Tears sprung to her eyes. *Serves Dad right for treating me as his errand boy*, part of her said rebelliously, but another part of her insisted, *I should have remembered. I shouldn't have forgotten. At least, I should have brought the cell phone into the stores with me.*

It used to be so much easier to please her dad, she thought. Back when Mom was alive, back when she was the oldest of a smaller family. She remembered her dad boasting to his friends about how capable she was, just because she had learned to set the table when she was five. She used to run to him when he came home, eager to tell him what she had accomplished, and he had always seemed interested and happy. And even after Mom had died when she was a young teenager, he used to be so grateful to come home and find the table set and dinner made. But now, he was always preoccupied and distant, and coldly judgmental when she failed—

Why bother pleasing someone like that? she told herself angrily. *I'm not even going to try.*

That night Taren wore her brown suede dress, to the envy of all the girls. However, as Prisca admitted, not all of them could have fit into a dress like that. And now that Taren and Rachel had their own dresses, there were two more dresses to go around.

Rachel, in her navy blue skimmer, took it upon herself that night to find something to suit Melanie. She had noticed that Melanie, alone, always wore the print cotton bridesmaid's dress from Sallie and Dad's wedding. "Let's try something more grown-up," she suggested, and gave Melanie the white sheath dress to put on, and her younger sister obeyed.

"I really like wearing dresses with sleeves," Melanie objected. "I'm always cold."

"Oh, come on. Try this one once. Just for me," Rachel coaxed. When Melanie stood awkwardly in front of her in the slim white dress, Rachel adjusted her shoulders and said, "We've got to do something with your hair."

"Do we?" Melanie asked, fingering her tousled long honey-blond hair. "I like it down."

"Yes, but you look so young!" Rachel explained.

"Well, I *am* young."

“Let’s just try it this way, for once,” Rachel begged. She longed to see her younger stepsister sparkling and vibrant and attractive, and Melanie reluctantly agreed to the makeover.

Rachel piled Melanie’s hair on top of her head and skewered it with bobby pins. Then she wound a scarf around it. “That’s just for the boat,” she informed Melanie, “so that it won’t blow all over the place. There! I wish you could see yourself. How do you feel?”

“Cold,” Melanie confessed, hugging her bare arms and trying to smile.

“Oh, get her a sweater and stop fussing with her,” Tammy said, irritably. “She’s always complaining about being cold.”

“I’ll choose a sweater,” Rachel said, and found a white one with lacy knit sleeves. “Maybe not the best match in the sunlight, but in the moonlight—perfect!”

Melanie put on the sweater, but she still shivered. Rachel shepherded her down to the beach. “The boys will be here soon.”

The boats arrived, and Rachel was impatient to get going immediately. But not all the girls were ready, and the guys liked to stand on the beach and chat, so she indulged them while the boats bobbed up and down in the water beneath the willows.

As soon as she could politely do so, she suggested they leave. All the girls were agreed that tonight they would all go to the island.

“Just so long as no one’s home,” Taylor said dubiously.

“We can check,” Rachel said lightly. “No one seemed to mind us being there last night.”

“But that was only one boat. If someone was there, they might not care about that. But what are they going to think when they see three boats?” Taylor objected.

Rachel was glad she had left him to Cheryl—he was being a stick-in-the-mud. “Taylor,” Rachel said playfully, “can’t you live it up a little every once in a while?”

He grumbled, but when the other guys started teasing him, he relented, and the party got into the boats.

In the sloshing of the boarding, Alan’s boat bumped against Keith’s, splashing Prisca, who exclaimed. “There goes my mascara!”

“I just stepped on someone’s foot,” Debbie informed them in the darkness of the boat beneath the trees.

“Do you hear anyone complaining?” Rachel said, a little sharply.

“No. That’s why I said something. And I can’t find any place to sit. There’s no room back here.”

“Just move a bit of that canvas and sit squished next to me,” Rachel said, situating herself.

Alan turned on the engine and the boat slowly motored out into the bay.

The moon was at a half. Rachel breathed a deep sigh. Perhaps by the next full moon, she would have made the midnight butterfly dress, as she thought of it fondly. She looked over at her sister Melanie. The transformation she had hoped for had not occurred. Melanie wasn't sparkling—in fact, she looked deadened in the pale light, gray and colorless, shivering in the thin short dress, somehow less than her buoyant self. She actually would have looked better in the print bridesmaid's dress she usually wore.

Rachel felt a twinge of disappointment. Perhaps Melanie was too much a child of the sunshine, she decided. She wasn't at home in the night.

Like I am, she thought to herself. *The night is almost my real self.*

Prisca also seemed to be more herself at nighttime. The strong colors of night makeup highlighted Prisca's already dark coloring, and made her eyes darker, her lips redder. Right now, she was wearing a red knit tank dress, which looked good on her, accentuated her full figure. But there was something about Prisca that bothered Rachel. She was almost too jumpy and eager, too unsubtle. Rich seemed to be able to tell. Like most of the church guys, Rachel noted, he seemed to hang around Prisca but seemed uncomfortable being close to her. There was an air of volatility about her that seemed to make him nervous.

Debbie was wearing a purple striped dress that Rachel had scouted out for her at Goodwill. She still seemed like a child let out to be with the grownups. Even now, she was swinging her thin brown legs carelessly.

“I wonder whose foot I stepped on,” she said. “No one said ‘ouch.’”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Are you still going on about that?” she said.

Debbie ignored her. “Was it yours, Rich?”

Rich started and said, “No, I don't think so.”

“I was waiting to apologize,” Debbie said. “But no one said anything. I thought I really hurt someone because it was when I jumped onto the boat.”

“Maybe it was my foot, but since you're such a weenie I didn't feel it,” Prisca said with some irritation.

“No,” said Debbie decidedly, “It wasn't you. It was a big foot.”

“Then it must have been mine,” Rachel said.

“You do *not* have big feet,” Prisca interjected.

Rachel held up one of her size nine feet and pointed the toes. “Does that look big enough for you, Debbie?”

“No, it wasn’t yours. I stepped on the toes. I thought it was a guy’s foot,” Debbie said. “It was very strange.”

“Shut up,” Prisca said abruptly. “Alan, why are you stopping?”

Alan had cut the engine. He looked at the island. “Is there someone there?” he asked uncertainly.

“Ohh—” Rachel got up, along with the others. The boat rocked, and Rich and Prisca sat back down. “No, I don’t think so,” she said, after scrutinizing the heliport in the shadows.

“Were all those boats there last night?” he asked, pointing to the docks.

Worried, they all looked at the docks.

“Yes,” Prisca said suddenly. “There’s five boats there, just like last night. I counted.”

“Okay, just checking,” Alan said, and the engine roared to life. They soared towards the quay and soon they were docked beside it. Once again, Rachel got out first and tied up the boat. Rich jumped onto the quay and helped the other girls out.

“This is going to be perfect,” Prisca said, taking Rich’s hand and swinging onto the quay, leaning against him. “Oh my gosh! I almost fell! Sorry!”

Prisca had a small CD player with her, along with a few of her “contraband,” as she called them—CDs of pop music—that she listened to turned down low, underneath her pillow at home.

Now she cranked the CD player as loud as it would go. “What shall I put on first?” She pulled out a CD of dance songs and slid it into the dinky machine and pushed ‘play.’

“That’s like, a state of the art sound system you’ve got there,” Alan cracked, getting out of the boat.

“Do you have something better?” Prisca asked anxiously.

“Not here.”

“Are you having a dance here or something?” Rich asked, getting the prize for the most clueless remark of the evening, so far.

“Duh! Of course!” And Prisca grabbed his arms. “Come on, dance with me.” She and Debbie started to bop around, and Rich, at first embarrassed, fell in step.

“You want to?” Alan cast a glance at Rachel, who grinned.

“Of course!”

And he took her hand, and they started dancing. Despite the tinny sound and low volume, it was just enough music to dance by.

The roar of the other boats coming to join them temporarily superseded the music. Tammy and Liddy leapt from their boat, convulsed with laughter,

and jumped right into the dance. Cheryl came a bit more gingerly, but consented to dance when Taylor took her hand. Brittany struck her usual poker face and started doing the monster mash, which the young girls quickly picked up. Soon everyone was dancing.

It was glorious. The guys broke out some bottles of beer and bags of potato chips. Taren had managed to snag two six packs of soda from the family pantry, so the girls passed out sodas. They were careful to put all the bottles back on board the boat, Rachel reminding the guys that even a single smashed beer bottle would give them away. They played through all the songs on one CD and then restarted it to dance some more.

Rachel drank in the music as much as the beverages, throwing herself into the dance. As she swayed to the beat, she felt her own beauty like a barely-visible shadow, growing, blooming.

She and Prisca were dancing together when Prisca suddenly stopped, staring. "Who's that guy?" she said.

As if by some scent in the air, everyone on the portico froze in place, while the music from the CD played on and on. All of them were staring at the figure of a young man coming slowly down the steps from the big house.

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Summary: When teenaged Rachel Durham finds a way that she and her eleven stepsisters can sneak out of their Chesapeake Bayside home after midnight, their worried fundamentalist father enlists the help of Paul Fester, an ex-soldier and traveling juggler, to find out what the girls are up to. A modern retelling of the classic Brothers Grimm fairytale "The Twelve Dancing Princesses."

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