



Twilight's Child (Cutler Book 3)

By V.C. Andrews

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Yet Dawn cannot quell her forebodings of evil. She can sense Grandmother Cutler's presence everywhere...can feel her bitter hatred as if the old lady plotted her vengeance from the grave. When Dawn discovers that her brother, Philip, still clings to his mad, shameful passion for her, she is heartstricken. Her spiteful, jealous sister, Clara, is far easier to ignore...until the day Clara's childish rage explodes into violence, destroying Dawn's most cherished, precious dream.

Then Christie's father, debonair singing star Michael Sutton, returns. Now, as the heartaches and scandals of the past threaten to engulf her, Dawn must fight for her steadfast Jimmy...for only with Jimmy's love can she find the rainbow at the end of the storm.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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

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The Battle for Christie

The Virginia countryside flew by as Jimmy and I drove toward Saddle Creek, a suburb of Richmond. My heart was pounding in anticipation because the road signs announced that we were drawing closer and closer to our destination. Soon I would be holding my baby in my arms. I had barely had a chance to look at Christie when I gave birth to her at The Meadows, for soon after she was born she was taken away from me. It was the last in a series of horrible things Grandmother Cutler had done to me before she had died, bitter and broken, hating me right up until the end for reasons I didn't come to understand until the reading of the wills.

"It won't be much longer now," Jimmy said, smiling at me. He was almost as excited about my retrieving Christie as I was. I was so happy that Jimmy was willing to consider Christie his own.

While Jimmy had been in the army and away in Europe I had fallen in love with Michael Sutton, my vocal teacher at the Sarah Bernhardt School of Performing Arts. But rather than being disappointed in me for not waiting for his return, Jimmy had told me he understood how I had fallen under Michael's spell. As soon as he had learned that I had become pregnant and that Michael had deserted me, Jimmy came searching for me and rescued me from the clutches of horrid Emily Booth, Grandmother Cutler's older sister. He was truly my hero, whisking me out of that strange plantation house where I had been sent to have my baby in secret. Jimmy arrived shortly after Christie had been born. And when we found out what Grandmother Cutler had arranged -- the immediate giving away of my child -- we both vowed that we wouldn't rest until I had her back in my arms again.

But joyful anticipation wasn't the only thing that made my heart pitter-patter so fast it made me dizzy. I couldn't help but be overwhelmed by the quick sequence of events that had literally changed my life and determined my future. Two wills had been read after Grandmother Cutler's death: hers and a secret letter and will left by the man I had once thought to be my grandfather and now knew had been my father. To repent for what he had considered the sin of my birth, he left me a majority interest in the family hotel. For all practical purposes, I was suddenly the true owner of Cutler's Cove.

But did I want to be, and perhaps even more importantly, could I be? I could still hear my half-sister Clara Sue screaming at me just before we set out to retrieve Christie. Her shock and envy had been fueled by the jealousy she had always held against me.

"You couldn't fill Grandmother's shoes!" she cried, twisting her mouth, her hands on her hips. "You'll be the laughingstock of the Virginia shore. If Grandmother was alive, she would die laughing."

Clara Sue's words taunted me. It was almost as if the stern, vicious old woman were speaking through Clara Sue and smirking skeptically. I felt the challenge, but I also feared what inheriting the hotel and all the responsibility would do to my dreams of becoming a singer. Then again, I thought, perhaps all those dreams had died the day Michael deserted me. Maybe I wasn't meant to dwell in the show business world after all. Maybe everything that had happened had happened for the best.

Jimmy seemed to think so. All during our trip today he had been making plans and promises.

"As soon as I'm discharged from the army, we'll get married," he pledged.

"And live at the hotel with my crazy family?" I asked.

"They don't bother me. Besides, you're the real boss now, Dawn. I'll become the maintenance manager. I've learned a lot about motors and electricity and engines...."

"I don't know if I can do it, Jimmy. It frightens me thinking about it," I confessed.

"Nonsense. Mr. Updike, the family attorney, said he would help you, and Mr. Dorfman, the hotel's comptroller, promised to do everything he could, too. No one expects you to bear all that responsibility immediately. Cutler's Cove will become your new school," he said, laughing. "And as soon as I'm discharged I'll be there at your side, always," he promised, and he squeezed my hand.

I believed him. He was at my side now, when I needed him the most, wasn't he? And I was tired of the lies and the deceit and the pain. I wanted my life with Jimmy and Christie to begin on a happy note, and the prospect of holding Christie in my arms promised to bring just that: music of joy, blissful, sweet, hopeful.

But promises, like rainbows, usually come only after storms, and this was to be no different.

When Grandmother Cutler had died unexpectedly, we feared we might never find Christie. However, Mr. Updike had been involved and knew of her whereabouts. Before we had left Cutler's Cove he had told us the couple who had Christie, Sanford and Patricia Compton, were expecting us and were fully aware of the situation. However, we found a different reality when we went calling on them.

Saddle Creek was a prim and proper suburb of Richmond where the homes looked like dollhouses, everything perfect -- the lawns fresh and green, the magnolias, roses and petunias bright and colorful. The bright late-summer day, with its fluffy white clouds pasted here and there on the soft blue sky, made it seem as if we had entered a make-believe world. Everything was clean and freshly painted. For a moment I remember thinking that maybe Christie was better off here after all. It was certainly a happier world than the one to which I would bring her.

But then I recalled how painful it had been for me to learn about my real family. Nothing -- not even wealth and high position -- was worth more than the truth when it came to who you were and where you belonged. That was a lesson I had to learn at the end of a trail of pain and suffering. I was determined that my daughter would never face such a fate.

A kind policeman sitting in a patrol car on a corner gave us exact directions to the Comptons' house. Sanford Compton owned and operated the biggest business in the area, a linen factory. The Comptons' home was one of the prettiest and largest houses on the street: a two-story, red-brick colonial with a set of triple windows on each side of the first floor front.

After we parked we got out and walked in between two square white posts crowned with brass balls and then started up a slate walkway. On both sides were waist-high hedges. There were fountains with cupids in them

and fountains with marble birds, the water streaming out of their beaks. Everywhere we looked we saw beds of roses: yellow, red, pink and white. I had never seen such perfect lawns and hedges.

"Is this a home or a museum?" Jimmy wondered aloud.

"A home like the one I hope we will live in one day," I said wistfully.

"Home? I thought we decided we're going to live in the hotel," Jimmy reminded me.

"Yes, but someday we'll build a house like this and live off the hotel grounds," I promised. "Wouldn't you rather we did that?"

"Sure. Why not?" Jimmy said, smiling, his dark eyes twinkling with mischief. "I'll start building it myself."

We both laughed. We couldn't have been in better spirits. In moments I would have Christie again.

The door chimes seemed to go on forever and ever, playing what sounded like the Nutcracker Suite.

"That beats any old ding-dong," Jimmy said. Finally the tall, light-oak door was opened by a butler, a thin black man.

"My name is Dawn Cutler," I said. "And this is Jimmy Longchamp. We're here to see Mr. or Mrs. Compton."

"That's all right, Frazer," we heard a deep male voice say. "I'll handle this."

The butler stepped back, his eyes wide with surprise, as a tall man with short carrot-red hair appeared from behind. His face was speckled with freckles, and he looked out at us with ice-blue eyes. His nose was quite thin and a bit too long, which caused his eyes to look as if they sank deeper. Although he was easily over six feet two or three, his shoulders turned in and downward, making him appear shorter.

He seized the door handle to pull it open farther with an abruptness that made Jimmy and I look quickly at each other.

"You're Lillian Cutler's grandchild?" he snapped at me.

"Yes, I am," I said.

He stared at me for a moment and nodded softly. "Well, come in, and we'll make this fast," he said, stepping back with a show of reluctance.

A ripple of apprehension shot down my spine. I reached for Jimmy's hand, and we walked into the marble-floor entryway. The house had a perfumed, flowery scent, redolent of dozens and dozens of roses. We looked down the corridor and saw a slightly curved stairway with paintings all along the wall going up. Just about all the paintings were of children -- some simply portraits, while others were pictures of children at play or children reading. The steps of the stairway were covered with a soft-looking blue velvet carpet.

"Into the sitting room, please," Mr. Compton said in a tone of command, and he gestured toward the doorway on the right. Jimmy and I moved quickly to it.

At first neither of us saw Patricia Compton sitting there. She was perfectly still and wore a white cotton dress that matched the silk drapes over the window behind her so that she blended into the room. All of the furniture was done in lightcolored silk. To our right was a curio case at least eight feet tall containing dozens

of precious figurines: glass figures of animals, hand-painted Chinese men and women, and hand-painted figures of children with mothers or with animals.

Because the room looked so immaculate and so unused, both Jimmy and I hesitated to step in. It was like entering a pretty painting. Then I saw Patricia sitting there on the sofa, her dark eyes wide, her long, thin mouth drooping at the corners. She looked like a sad clown at the circus.

"Go on in and sit down," Sanford Compton ordered as he walked in past us and took a seat in one of the wing-back chairs, crossing his long legs. Jimmy and I moved toward the settee. "This is my wife Patricia," Sanford said, barely nodding toward her. A tiny smile came and went on pale lips that seemed to have forgotten how to smile. She said nothing, not even mouthing a hello.

"Hello," I said, and I smiled. Mrs. Compton did not take her eyes off us, eyes that resembled dark pools in a forest, deep, melancholy eyes, wells for tears. Her entire face looked like a nest for sadness. She was very slim, fragile and delicate looking. I saw that she had long, lean fingers. She kept her hands clasped tightly together in her lap and sat with her back so straight it seemed she was on an invisible hanger. She swallowed nervously, her gaze glued on us.

She had very light blond hair, so light it was nearly white, I thought, and it was pinned up softly.

"We've come for my daughter Christie," I said quickly. I came right to the point in order to break the ice. The moment I mentioned "my daughter," Mrs. Compton moaned, her right hand lifting and fluttering to the base of her neck.

"Easy," Sanford Compton said without turning to her. His eyes were fixed firmly on Jimmy and me.

"This is quite outrageous," he finally said.

"Pardon?" I looked at Jimmy, who sat up firmly, his shoulders back in military posture. "Mr. Updike spoke to you, didn't he?"

"We received a phone call from your grandmother's attorney, yes," Sanford Compton replied. "Why didn't your grandmother call us herself?" he demanded.

"My grandmother passed away. Unexpectedly," I added.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Compton said. With her left hand she brought a lace handkerchief to her eyes. She had been clutching it so tightly in her hands, I hadn't seen it before.

"Don't start," Sanford Compton snapped under his breath. Patricia Compton stifled her sob by pressing her lips in and holding her breath. Her fragile shoulders lifted and fell, but she kept her back straight, her small bosom barely outlined in the bodice of her dress.

"Now, then," Sanford continued, "we went through all the legal procedures. We signed papers, and signed papers were given to us. We did nothing wrong; everything we did was on the up and up."

"I understand that, sir," I said. My heart had begun to thump against my chest, shortening my breath. "But Mr. Updike must have explained the circumstances."

"We understood the baby was born out of wedlock," he quickly responded, a clear tone of accusation in his voice. "And it was an embarrassment to the Cutler family."

"She wasn't an embarrassment to me," I shot back. "Only to my grandmother."

"What's the difference?" Jimmy piped up. "It's her baby," he added, his hands out, palms turned up.

"Whose baby it is remains to be seen," Sanford Compton replied.

"What?" My mouth gaped open, and I sat forward. "You mean you don't have Christie ready for us to take home?"

"Christie's name has been changed to Violet. She's been named after my mother, and Violet," he said, punctuating the name sharply, "*is* home."

"Oh, no," I cried, turning to Jimmy. This couldn't be happening! I couldn't lose Christie. Not again! Especially not after finally finding her!

"Wait a minute," Jimmy said in a controlled voice. "Are you telling us that you won't give Dawn her baby back?"

"We did what we were supposed to do legally. Babies are not toys," Sanford Compton lectured. "They're not things you give and take back, things you exchange lightly. Violet has a home here now, a home in which she is loved and cherished, a home in which she will grow happily and have all the best things life has to offer. You can't cast her off one day and reel her in the next like some fish you throw back into the water."

"But I didn't throw her back into the water!" I exclaimed. "My grandmother stole my baby and forged my signature on documents. Didn't Mr. Updike make that clear?" I cried out in dismay.

"All Mr. Updike said was minds have changed; you want the baby back. I have been in contact with my lawyers, and they have advised me I have a legal position. I intend to enforce it."

His words sent shivers down my spine. I felt as if someone had thrown a pail of ice water over me -- a legal battle? For my own baby? Grandmother Cutler's revenge continued even after her death. She was still controlling my life and happiness, even from her grave.

"Look," Jimmy said, still trying to quiet his temper, "you're making a big mistake here. Maybe you don't understand what happened. Dawn never agreed to -- "

"We were offered an infant that a mother didn't want," Sanford interrupted. "My wife and I have been trying to have our own child for years now. While we want a child desperately, other people," he said, spitting his words in my direction, "have them in a very cavalier manner and then want to get rid of them. Well, we didn't question all the details; we accepted the conditions, signed papers and were given the child."

"Now you come here and want to undo all that has been done. Some time has passed. We love Violet, and, as unlikely as it might seem to you, Violet has taken to us, especially to my wife. You can't play with people like you play with dolls."

"That's not fair, Mr. Compton!" I exclaimed.

"That's stupid," Jimmy snapped back.

"Jimmy!"

"No, he has no right to talk to us this way. He doesn't know anything," Jimmy sneered.

"I know we're not turning the baby over to you," Sanford Compton said, standing up abruptly, "and I know I would like you two to leave my house immediately."

"You can't keep her baby!" Jimmy shouted, rising to his feet.

"I told you," Sanford Compton said calmly, "it's not her baby anymore. Violet is our baby."

"Like hell she is," Jimmy flared. "Come on, Dawn. We'll go to the police. These people are stealing your baby."

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Compton said, and this time she could not hold back her sobs.

"Now look what you've done -- you've upset my wife. I must insist you leave, or I will be the one to call the police."

"Don't worry about it," Jimmy said, reaching for my hand. "We'll see the police, and we'll be back. All you're doing is making unnecessary trouble for everyone."

The butler appeared in the doorway as if Sanford Compton had pushed an invisible button calling for him.

"Frazer, see these people out, please."

I looked at Mrs. Compton before leaving.

"I'm sorry," I said to her, "but I never agreed to the giving away of my baby. It's not my fault. I didn't intend for this to happen."

Patricia Compton began to sob harder.

"Please leave," Sanford commanded.

Jimmy and I walked out. The butler stepped back and then moved forward to open the front door for us.

"Damn stupid people," Jimmy muttered loud enough for them to hear.

We stepped back into the sunlight, only to me the day had turned pale gray. It might as well be raining, I thought. Would nothing be easy for me, ever? Mistakes haunted me like ghosts. I had begun to believe that because I was a child born from evil I would be cursed forever. The sins of the fathers do rest on the heads of their children. I couldn't keep my own tears back, and before we had left the portico I was sobbing hysterically. Jimmy embraced me quickly and kissed my cheek.

"Hey, don't cry. Don't worry. This isn't going to be hard," he promised.

"Oh, Jimmy, don't you see that everything's going to be hard? I don't know why you would want to marry me. You're only going to suffer along with me. I'm cursed!"

"Come on, Dawn. Take it easy. It's not you; it's what that evil old lady did. Well, we'll just see it undone. That guy's stupid and asking for trouble."

"I can't blame these people, Jimmy. He wasn't all wrong. And did you see the expression on that woman's face? She finally got a baby she could call her own, and we're here to take it away," I moaned.

"But you want to, don't you? You want Christie back?" Jimmy asked.

"Yes, of course I do. I just can't stand all this pain and suffering. Why was one old woman given so much power to hurt other people?" I cried.

"I don't know. She did it, and it's over with. Now we've got to make it right. I guess we'll go to the police first," he said.

"No, we had better check into a hotel someplace close by and call Mr. Updike. The police can't help us. Sanford Compton is right -- it's going to be a legal battle."

I looked back at the house once, trying to imagine which room Christie was in. I was sure they had bought her the finest crib and the most expensive baby clothes. Just a baby, she didn't know where she was or what had happened to her. She was probably as content as she could possibly be. In a short while I would disturb that contentment; but I had to believe that even an infant as young as Christie would sense her own mother when she was finally placed in my arms, and that would give her a deeper, more complete sense of security and love. Armed with that faith, I hurried off with Jimmy to begin our battle for custody of my own child.

We checked into a small hotel just outside of Richmond. It was a restored old mansion, and the rooms were quiet, large and comfortable, but we were not able to enjoy anything. Our time here was to be filled with waiting for phone calls and preparation for a hearing.

When I phoned Mr. Updike I was surprised at his reaction.

"Maybe it would be wiser just to leave things be," he suggested. "The baby's in a very good home and will be very well taken care of. Sanford Compton is wealthy and powerful in his community."

"I don't care how wealthy he is, Mr. Updike. Christie is my baby, and I want her back," I said sharply. "I thought you had explained it all to the Comptons," I continued, not disguising my annoyance. If he intended to continue as the family's attorney, he would have to satisfy me now that I was the majority owner of the hotel and property.

"I didn't get into the nitty-gritty details with them," he confessed. "I was just trying to protect the Cutler name. You can imagine what a field day the newspaper people would have with such a story, and that might very well reflect on the hotel."

"Mr. Updike," I said, speaking through clenched teeth, "if I don't get Christie back and get her back soon, I will feed the story to the newspapers myself!" I flared.

"I see," he said. "I just want you to understand what will be exposed -- your affair with this older man, your pregnancy out of wedlock, your -- "

"I know what I've done, and I know what has happened, Mr. Updike. My baby is more important to me than any of that. If you can't help me and help me quickly, I will see another attorney," I said, no longer veiling any threat or anger.

He cleared his throat.

"Oh, I'll help you. I just wanted you to understand all the aspects of this," he quickly explained.

"What do we do next?" I demanded.

"Well, I know some people there. I'll get right on it. Maybe we can settle this in a closed hearing in front of a judge with just the attorneys and parties present. I'll work toward that, and hopefully -- "

"Then Jimmy and I will remain here and await your making the arrangements quickly," I emphasized.

"Okay. I'll call you. Where are you?"

I gave him the place and the number and repeated my desire to have the problem solved as quickly as possible. He promised to get right on it.

The day after I had first phoned Mr. Updike he finally called to say he had managed to get the Comptons and their attorney to agree to a hearing in front of a supreme court judge, Judge Powell, who was both a friend of the Comptons and an acquaintance of Mr. Updike.

"If Mr. Compton is so powerful around here and this judge is his friend, will he be fair?" I asked with concern.

"Well, this is sort of an off-the-record hearing, a favor the judge is doing for both of us," Mr. Updike explained. "We can always turn to formal legal remedies afterward if we're not satisfied with the outcome. The Comptons aren't happy about the prospect of a public hearing either."

He gave me the address and time to be at the judge's chambers and told us he would meet us there an hour earlier. It was an afternoon meeting. I was so nervous about it, I couldn't eat a thing for lunch.

"It's going to be okay," Jimmy continued to assure me. "Once everyone understands the truth of what happened, it will be settled simply and quickly."

"Oh, Jimmy, I'm not as confident as you are. Mr. Updike keeps emphasizing just how powerful Sanford Compton is, a man of great influence with politicians and lawyers alike, and he's forever reminding me about the sordid details of my background."

"I don't care about any of that," Jimmy insisted. "The truth is the truth, and Christie is your baby," he said with a firmness that helped me to revive some of my own confidence.

"I'm so glad you're with me, Jimmy. I couldn't do any of this without you," I told him. He reached across the table in the restaurant where we were having our lunch and put his hand over mine.

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but at your side, Dawn. Now and forever."

I wanted to kiss him there and then, but we were surrounded by people, all well-dressed and sophisticated looking. It was a fancy restaurant, too, and I was sensitive about doing anything that might attract attention and gossip. Jimmy said events were making me paranoid, but I couldn't help it. He laughed but made me promise to kiss him twice as much when we were alone.

The afternoon of the hearing was gray and even a bit chilly. Fall was creeping in like a wolf on the prowl around a chicken coop. It cast its shadow first. Birds seemed more restless around us, their biological clocks ticking closer and closer to that hour when they would be nudged to go off and seek warmer climates. Clouds looked darker and more ominous, and the wind was stronger. Leaves weakened by age snapped off branches and began their slow singsong descents to the ground, while other leaves had begun to take on tints of orange and yellow and brown.

Mr. Updike met us in the lobby. Although he was an elderly man, easily in his early seventies, he carried

himself with an air of strength and authority characteristic of men much younger. His cap of white hair still had a slight wave in front, and he stood firm with broad shoulders and a bit of a barrel chest. The sight of him and the sound of his deep, resonant voice restored some faith and confidence in me. He shook hands with Jimmy firmly and described quickly how he wanted to conduct the meeting.

"Just let me do all the talking until Judge Powell asks you questions."

I nodded. Just then we saw Sanford and Patricia Compton enter the building with their attorney. Mr. Compton was holding Mrs. Compton at the elbow as if she had to be guided along. She had her lace handkerchief closed in her small left fist. I saw the terror and fear in her face when she glanced our way. It sent shivers of ice through my heart.

The Comptons' attorney was a shorter man with a much slimmer build but a surprisingly beautiful speaking voice. As a musician and singer, I couldn't help but notice. His name was Felix Humbrick, and the moment he began to talk I knew we were in for a time of it.

We all gathered in the judge's chambers, a large office on the second floor. It had marble floors, and both walls were lined with shelves containing volumes and volumes of law books. On the wall behind the judge's large, dark oak desk were framed pictures of Judge Powell shaking hands with politicians, even one showing him with the president. All of it gave the office a magisterial air of authenticity and officialdom. There was a feeling we should whisper when we spoke.

The Comptons and their attorney took one side of the room, and we took the other, with both attorneys sitting in the leather chairs closest to the desk. Mr. Compton refused to look our way, but every once in a while Patricia Compton gazed at me, her eyes glassy.

Judge Powell was an intense man, focusing sharply on whoever spoke as if he could see into the speaker's face, behind his words. Of course, I studied his face for some hint as to what he was feeling, but when he began to conduct the hearing his face became a mask -- his lips unmoving, his eyes simply reflecting what he saw and not reacting. Not even his eyebrows lifted. He was as still as the statue of Justice herself.

"I would like it understood at the start," the judge began, "that this is an informal hearing requested and agreed to by both sides concerned, and therefore I have not asked for a stenographer to take down any notes or record the proceedings. Also, any recommendations I might make at the conclusion of this informal hearing are not binding on either party, nor can they be used as evidence or testimony in any formal hearing that might result. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Your Honor," Mr. Updike said quickly.

"Quite clear, Your Honor," Felix Humbrick said.

"As agreed to beforehand, then, we will begin with Mr. Humbrick," the judge said, and he turned his swivel chair slightly so that he was looking directly at Felix Humbrick. Jimmy took my hand and squeezed it gently.

"Thank you, Your Honor. As you know, my clients, Sanford and Patricia Compton, were interested in adopting a newborn infant. Naturally, they were concerned about the child's background and were very happy to learn from a friend of theirs that the birth of a baby whose background was clearly known was imminent. This friend, who has asked that his name not be brought into the matter unless absolutely necessary, was a close friend of Lillian Cutter, the owner and operator of Cutler's Cove Hotel.

"Mrs. Cutler had passed on the information that her granddaughter had had an illicit affair. In short, she was seduced by an older man while she was away at school in New York City. As a result she became pregnant.

"Mrs. Cutler and her granddaughter, for obvious reasons, wanted the matter kept confidential, so Mrs. Cutler arranged for her granddaughter to leave school and reside at Mrs. Cutler's sister's home until such time as the baby was born. Mrs. Cutler's sister is an experienced midwife.

"Faced with the prospect of having a child at such a young age, and a child out of wedlock at that, and hoping to continue her own musical career, Mrs. Cutler's granddaughter agreed to have her child placed for adoption. She signed documents to this effect, willingly giving her child to Mr. and Mrs. Compton immediately after the baby's birth.

"The events followed suit as outlined. The Comptons accepted the infant in their home, proceeded to take all necessary medical steps to insure the baby's well-being and quickly developed an emotional tie to the infant. They have even named the baby after Mr. Compton's deceased mother.

"Now, as you know, Mrs. Cutler's granddaughter wishes the child to be returned. We feel her request is unreasonable, arbitrary, a violation of a contract entered into in good faith. In point of fact, the contract was drawn up by the Cutler family counsel himself, and none of the covenants were challenged. One of these covenants reads, 'Mr. and Mrs. Sanford Compton of 12 Hardy Drive accept full responsibility for the health and welfare of said infant from the date of delivery and agree not to make any additional demands on the Cutler family concerning the said infant, to wit the life and limb of said infant will from this day forward remain their sole responsibility.'

"I emphasize 'sole responsibility,' Your Honor, a stipulation to which they wholeheartedly agreed and which they undertook, for which Dawn Cutler and the Cutler family then agreed to make no other demands or inquiries concerning the said infant.

"This is all signed, sealed and delivered," he concluded, sliding the document onto the judge's desk. Judge Powell looked at it quickly, turning to the page for signatures, and then nodded without expression. He swung his swivel chair in our direction.

"Mr. Updike, your presentation?"

"We don't contest the contract, Your Honor. We are here today, however, to present some new facts, the main fact being that Dawn Cutler did not agree to this, nor was she aware of it."

"Not aware of it?"

"No, Your Honor," Mr. Updike said. I couldn't see the expression on his face, but I could feel his embarrassment.

"You drew this up without speaking with the mother?"

"I...yes. I had been assured by my client that the mother agreed to all of it. Dawn was some distance away, living under the circumstances described. Mrs. Cutler assured me that the decision to give up the infant was one she, Dawn's mother and father, and Dawn herself thought best for all concerned."

"And the signature on this document?" the judge asked.

Mr. Updike seemed uncomfortable in his seat now. He shifted, cleared his throat and spoke.

"Apparently it is forged."

0 "Forged?" The judge finally reacted to something. His eyebrows lifted slightly. "You didn't bother to

compare it with samples, I assume?"

"I had no reason to be suspicious, Your Honor. I have been the Cutler family's attorney for quite a number of years now, and my experience has always been that Mrs. Cutler, especially, conducted her affairs with the utmost honesty and business acumen."

"Your Honor?" Felix Humbrick interrupted.

"Yes?"

"We have other samples of Dawn Cutler's signature here, and they match perfectly. It is our contention that it is not forged." He submitted the documents. The judge looked at them.

"Mr. Updike, I'm not a handwriting expert, but these do look quite similar." He handed the documents to our lawyer. Mr. Updike gazed at them and then took off his glasses, folded them and placed them in his upper pocket.

"Your Honor, I don't know how the forgery was committed, but I have no doubt that it was," he said.

"I see," Judge Powell replied. "Can you share your reasoning with us?"

Mr. Updike turned to look my way. He saw in my face that I wanted him to go on and do and say whatever was necessary for me to get Christie back.

"Your Honor, Mrs. Cutler recently passed away, at which time wills and other documents were unsealed. It was learned -- painfully learned -- that Dawn Cutler is not Mrs. Cutler's granddaughter."

Patricia Compton, who had been staring down throughout all this, lifted her head sharply and looked across the office at me with new interest.

"I see. Go on," Judge Powell said.

"Apparently Dawn Cutler was Lillian Cutler's husband's child."

"You mean she is her daughter?"

"No, Your Honor."

"I see," Judge Powell said quickly. "You don't have to go into those details any further."

"I don't understand," Sanford Compton said angrily. "What does this base behavior have to do with anything?"

"Mr. Updike is suggesting another possible motive for the actions Mrs. Cutler took. There is a clear history of subterfuge and deception here. Miss Cutler," the judge said, turning to me. The moment he did, I felt my heart jump and the heat rise in my neck and face. "Do you deny signing this contract?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you intend to do when your baby was born?" he asked softly.

"I don't know, Your Honor. I wanted my baby very much and was shocked to discover she had been given away."

"Mrs. Cutler didn't threaten you or advise you of the difficulties that lay ahead and as a result convince you to sign this document?"

"No, sir. I never saw Grandmother Cutler after I left New York to go to The Meadows."

"The Meadows?" He looked at Mr. Updike.

"Mrs. Cutler's sister's home."

"I see. So until you returned you had no knowledge of Mr. and Mrs. Compton?"

"That's correct, Your Honor."

"Why did you agree to have your baby in secret if you had no intention of giving her away?" the judge asked.

"Your Honor, I wasn't in any position to disagree with anything Grandmother Cutler demanded or suggested at the time, but I never knew what her full intentions were. Of course, now I understand why she hated me and why she wouldn't have wanted any child of mine in her presence."

"I see." Judge Powell turned away and sat back a moment. Then he lifted his eyes toward the Comptons.

"Mr. and Mrs. Compton, the information Mr. Updike has presented does create some definite gray areas. While it is true you do have an apparently legal contract, there is some reason for it to be challenged. Any formal court hearing will obviously bring all this new information to bear, and I suspect that Mr. Updike has only scratched the surface of it here today.

"In short, unfortunate as it might be for you, you should take into consideration the ugly atmosphere in which this case will be argued. It doesn't bode well for the future of the child even if your position should prevail." He leaned forward. "It could very well become a media circus."

Mrs. Compton began to sob. Sanford Compton nodded and then embraced her.

"We had no idea about all these other circumstances," he said angrily.

"Of course not," the judge said in a soothing voice. He sat back. "Mr. Humbrick, I recommend -- informally recommend -- that you advise your clients to return the infant to its mother forthwith."

"We will take your advice under serious consideration Your Honor," Felix Humbrick replied. "Sanford," he said softly.

"Thank you, Judge," Sanford Compton said. He helped his wife to her feet, and they started out of the judge's chambers, Mrs. Compton's sobbing growing harder. Felix Humbrick rose and turned to Mr. Updike.

"Are you staying anywhere in town?"

"I wasn't intending on it. Why don't I phone your office? How long do you want?"

"Give me two hours," Mr. Humbrick replied. They shook hands, and he followed the Comptons out.

The judge stood up and gazed down at Jimmy and me. My legs felt so weak and wobbly, I was afraid to stand.

"Well," Judge Powell said, "something like this is very unpleasant. You have a great deal to overcome, young lady, some of it not your fault, but some of the blame rests with YOU."

"I know, Your Honor."

"Apparently you have found a champion to stand at your side," he said, his eyes twinkling at Jimmy. "I can only wish you good luck from now on."

"Thank you," I said. Jimmy and I stood up.

"I'll be right out," Mr. Updike said. We left him with the judge and retreated to the lobby. We could see Sanford Compton speaking heatedly with Mr. Humbrick outside. Patricia had apparently already gone to their car. A few moments later they left, too.

Mr. Updike decided we should return to our hotel. I was so nervous and frightened, I could barely walk or speak. My heart felt as if it were filled with tiny moths all flapping their paper-thin wings at once. Mr. Updike kept telling us how sorry he was all this had happened, how Grandmother Cutler's actions had been so out of character for her. I understood he had great respect for her, and when he described her in her early days I almost wished I had been alive then to see her in a different light.

Two hours later Mr. Updike called Felix Humbrick and learned the Comptons had agreed to give up the fight. I broke into a flood of hysterical tears of happiness. Even Jimmy had tears in his eyes as he embraced me.

"Sanford Compton has asked that you stop by as soon as possible to get the baby. He doesn't want their pain and agony to last a moment longer than necessary," Mr. Updike told us.

"Of course," Jimmy said. "We'll go right over."

"Thank you, Mr. Updike," I said. "I know how difficult this was for you."

I had a suspicion Judge Powell had chastised him for not being more assured that I had been a party to the agreement. He didn't strike me as the kind of man who made such mistakes. But in a real sense, he had been violated by Grandmother Cutler, too. He was just unwilling to face up to that, for reasons I had yet to understand.

Some of the shadows and the skeletons in the closets of the Cutler family had been exposed and revealed, but deep in my heart I knew there were closet doors yet to be opened.

Sanford Compton was a different man when Jimmy and I arrived at the house to get Christie this time. He allowed Frazer to show us in, and he greeted us in the hallway standing beside a box, which, he explained, contained things he had bought for Christie.

"Some baby clothing, diapers, crib toys and the formula our pediatrician recommended. Even though I am sure you have your own doctor who might recommend something different, it will tide you over," he said. He gazed behind him at the stairway. "Patricia will be along any moment with the baby."

"I'll just get this out to the car," Jimmy said, picking up the carton. "Thank you."

"I am sorry how all this worked out," Sanford said when he and I were alone for a moment. "It was never our intention to add to anyone's suffering."

"No, no. It wasn't your fault. You weren't told the truth," I said.

"If I had been, you can be damn sure it wouldn't have gone this far," he replied, his eyes icy blue again. "Your grandmother, or the woman who called herself that, must have been some piece of work."

I couldn't help but laugh at his description, but my joviality was short-lived, for when I lifted my gaze toward the stairway I saw Patricia Compton coming down slowly, baby Christie in her arms. My heart began to pitter-patter, both in anticipation and in anxiety, because Patricia walked as if she were under a spell. To me it appeared she could fold up at any moment and topple down the staircase, dropping the baby out of her embrace.

"I wanted to do all of this," Sanford whispered, "but she insisted."

I stepped forward quickly to greet her at the base of the stairway. She stopped two steps from the bottom and stared at me. Christie was wrapped in a pink blanket, her tiny nose and chin barely visible. Patricia continued to gaze at me silently. Her sad eyes and trembling lips kept me from simply reaching out to seize Christie.

"She's just been fed, and she's dozing," Patricia finally said. "She always drops right off after a feeding. Sometimes" -- Patricia smiled -- "sometimes she falls asleep with the nipple of the bottle still in her lips. She just stops suckling and closes her eyes and drifts off, contented. She's a wonderful baby."

Her eyes shifted to Sanford. Jimmy returned and approached slowly.

"Give Miss Cutler her child now, Patricia," Sanford said firmly but softly.

"What? Oh, yes, yes." She lifted the baby toward me, and I stepped forward quickly to take Christie in my arms. When I looked down into her little face I finally felt the shadow lift from my heart, filling with sunshine and joy. I had forgotten how blond her hair was. It looked like a crown of gold.

"Thank you," I said, turning back to Patricia. "I am truly sorry for the pain you are suffering now."

Patricia's lips trembled harder. Her chin began to wrinkle, and her shoulders started to shake.

"Patricia. You promised," Sanford reminded her.

She took a deep breath and pressed her small fists into her bosom as if to hold her sorrow inside.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"We'd better be going, Dawn," Jimmy said. "We have a long ride back."

"Yes. Thank you for the baby's things," I told Sanford. He nodded, but I could see he, too, was holding back a flood of tears. Jimmy and I started out of the house. Just as Frazer closed the door behind us we heard Patricia Compton's wail. It was a loud, shrill scream, the moan any mother would express if her child were being taken away.

The heavy front door was closed rapidly, and it mercifully entrapped the wail within. Even so, Jimmy and I hurried down the walkway, driven along by the horror of Patricia Compton's agony. Neither of us spoke until Jimmy had started the engine and driven off. I couldn't help but gaze back once more at the house and grounds that might have been Christie's home. Then I closed my eyes and drove the image back into the deepest closets of my memory. When I opened my eyes again I gazed down at my baby, her tiny pink face just waiting for my kisses.

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