



Lightning Strikes (Hudson)

By V.C. Andrews

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RAIN HAS SEARCHED FOR A PLACE TO CALL HOME. BUT THERE'S NOWHERE TO HIDE WHEN THE NIGHT SKY LIGHTS UP WITH TERROR....

Torn from the embrace of her poor but loving family, Rain Arnold now lives surrounded by opulent riches but feels more like an outsider than ever before. Her heart's true passion -- the theater -- may prove to be her salvation, as she embarks on a journey to unmask a legacy of long-buried family secrets. Enrolled in one of England's most prestigious drama schools, Rain is sent to London to live with her great-aunt, Lenora, of the renowned Endfield family. Their estate is breathtakingly austere, filled with antiques and a long, storied history. But something isn't right. Rain hears footsteps at night, and the high-pitched laughter of a little girl. She sees strange lights in rooms that are supposed to be closed off. And everything about the place -- the air, the silence, even the somber household staff -- is as cold and soulless as a museum. Behind the icy sheen of wealth and privilege lies something unspeakable. Something that could turn Rain's most precious dreams into an inescapable nightmare....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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

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Chapter One: A Grand Adventure

Grandmother Hudson sat there with an I-told-you-so smile on her face at the breakfast table after I returned from speaking with my mother on the phone.

"Well?" she asked when I sat in silence. I knew she wanted to hear she had been right. Spitefully, I wanted to keep her waiting. Actually, my reluctance to speak was more out of my own pain. No matter how brave a face I put on, I was still disappointed.

"She's not coming," I said quickly, my eyes downcast. "She says the attorney general is having them over for dinner. I'm supposed to call her if you dare make plans to go with me to England."

"I should go just for that," Grandmother Hudson said like a petulant little girl. "Have you packed everything?"

"Yes."

She slid a long white envelope over the table to me.

"What's this?"

"Extra spending money. I don't expect my sister will buy you anything you need. It's a bank draft, so soon after you arrive, ask Leonora to direct you to her bank and have it deposited. You know, of course, all the money will be changed to English pounds?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to learn the exchange rate so you understand what things will cost. Of course you'll speak the same language," she continued, "but there are many differences. My sister has become an Anglophile. She has an accent and all, although there were times even recently when I caught her sounding more like an American. It will take a little getting used to, but that will be part of the adventure." She paused, sat back and sighed. "I wish I was your age, going off somewhere. I feel like I've been chained to this chair and imprisoned by my own traitorous heart," she moaned.

"You've told me many times that you did a great deal of traveling and that you enjoy not having to drag off

somewhere," I reminded her.

"Yes, we did travel quite often until Everett became ill." She paused, looking thoughtful for a moment and then smirked at me. "No one told you that you have to memorize every last word I utter in this house and then throw them back at me."

I laughed at her and she smiled, wagging her head. Then she grew serious again.

"I should tell you a little about my sister Leonora and her husband Richard," she said sitting forward. "You already know he is a barrister, and Leonora will be the first to tell you how important he is. They live in a fancy part of London, Holland Park. I've actually only been there twice, once for a visit and once...for a funeral."

"Funeral?"

"They lost their only child Heather. She was seven at the time."

"How horrible. How did she die?"

"She was born with a defective heart valve and corrective surgery didn't solve the problem. One morning, they found she'd died in her sleep. It was very sad."

"What did you tell your sister about me?" I asked.

"What everyone else believes. It's better for us to leave it that way. My sister isn't as liberal minded as I am. For now, she thinks you're going there to live and help with the domestic chores while you attend the drama school. Since they have a maid, a cook, a butler and a chauffeur, I'm sure there won't be all that much for you to do. She's certainly not going to give up her maid and assign her duties to you. Having a team of servants is too much of a status symbol to Leonora."

"I'm not afraid of hard work, Grandmother."

"I know." She smiled and then her face turned somber to add, "It's not the work that will be hard. However, I wouldn't have agreed to send you over if I didn't feel you would do well, Rain. Mr. MacWaine will take good care of you, and I do hope to get there myself someday soon, despite my oppressive physician."

I nodded. I really did hope she would.

Later in the day while I was writing a letter to Roy, I heard Victoria come into the house. I could always tell when it was Victoria. Her heels tapped down on the tile floor like tiny hammers when she walked. Her steps were deliberate, each one falling with a vengeance. I suppose I could say she didn't walk as much as she marched, her long legs striding forcefully as her bony shoulders turned.

I could hear her voice, barely muffled behind Grandmother Hudson's closed door.

"I just learned of the expense of this ridiculous trip to England you're sponsoring, Mother. On top of it all, you're sending her first class?"

"You always travel first class, Victoria," I heard Grandmother Hudson remind her.

"That's me. I'm your daughter. I run the affairs here. I should travel first class. That...girl is a family disgrace, someone to hide, not blatantly wave about as if we're all so proud my sister had an illegitimate child with a black man. Daddy would turn over in his grave. He didn't even travel first class!"

"Your father never took advantage of his money. I never understood the reason for making it if you don't enjoy it," Grandmother Hudson said calmly.

"Exactly my point. She didn't make it, did she?"

"When will you understand that what I do with my money is my business, Victoria? We've had this conversation ad nauseam. If you want to be thrifty, be so with your own money and leave me alone."

"I saw how much that school is costing, too," Victoria said, ignoring Grandmother Hudson's wishes. "It's ridiculous to assume she has any talent on the basis of a school play. Conor MacWaine is robbing us. He probably enjoys taking advantage of stupid Americans."

"Are you calling me stupid?"

"It's not very bright to spend forty thousand dollars on...on that girl becoming an actress."

"If you're quite finished..."

"I'm not finished. I want to know when you're calling your attorney about the will, Mother."

"I told you what I've done I will not undo. When you make up your own will, you can leave her out."

"What?" Victoria's laugh was more like a thin squeal. "You don't think I'll ever include her in my will, do you? Oh, what's the use? I'm wasting my breath."

"Finally, you say something intelligent."

"Everyone shouldn't depend on me keeping my mouth shut forever about this, Mother. One of these days..."

"You'll do nothing," Grandmother Hudson snapped. "If you so much as suggest..."

"It's not right and it's...unhealthy to be coddling her like this. Megan should be ashamed of what she has done to the rest of us."

It grew quiet and then a few moments later, Victoria emerged from the room and stomped out of the house. I hoped she had marched out of my life. She was so bitter, with her teeth clenched all the time and her eyebrows turned in like someone with a continuous headache. She seemed to take pleasure in nothing. I didn't think she even liked herself, much less me. I imagined she lived in a house without mirrors so she could avoid looking at herself.

When I saw Grandmother Hudson later in the day, I didn't mention hearing any of the conversation between her and Victoria. I was sure she wanted me to forget it as quickly as she apparently did. She enjoyed so little in the way of pleasure from her children and grandchildren. It made me reconsider what it means to be rich and to be poor.

Just as he had promised, Jake was there early the next morning. We had barely finished breakfast when he arrived. After he stepped into the dining room, I realized I rarely, if ever, had seen Jake in the house. Occasionally he would bring in groceries or whatever packages had to be carried, but usually he waited outside by the car. This morning he looked spiffy. His uniform was cleaned and pressed and the brim of his cap glittered in the light of the chandelier.

"Morning, ladies," he declared as he took a tiny bow. "I am here to fetch the princess and her things for her journey to the Old World."

"Don't make a fool of yourself this early in the morning, Jake Marvin," Grandmother Hudson warned. She glanced quickly at me and then straightened with a military posture in her chair. "Everything is waiting in her room."

"Thank you, ladies," he replied with a smile on his lips, pivoted and paraded off to get my luggage.

"I'll miss Jake," I said, looking after him with a soft smile on my face.

"Yes, well, when you get to London, you'll see the way a chauffeur is supposed to behave, I'm sure. My sister wears her servants like ribbons on her chest. They're all properly uniformed and trained. My brother-in-law runs his home as if it was a Swiss timepiece. They live their lives according to the tick of that grandfather's clock. The English and their high tea.

"When I think of what a dizzy, foolish little girl Leonora was before she went to finishing school and then to England, I marvel at what one's ego can accomplish," Grandmother Hudson said.

"Don't you like your sister?"

"Like her? Of course I don't like her. I love her as I should love a sister, but we never got along. Now that I think of it, your mother takes after Leonora more than she takes after me. Some gene must have jumped ship when I wasn't looking," she added.

"Are you sure your sister really wants me there?" I asked, still suspicious about everyone's motives.

"Leonora doesn't do anything she doesn't want to do, even though she owes me more than she can ever repay. I don't mean to make her seem unpleasant. I have no doubt you'll enjoy your stay there and she'll be able to brag about the great charitable thing she's doing, and for an American no less!"

We heard Jake carrying my bags down the stairs. Grandmother Hudson glanced at the small clock in her hutch and then looked at me.

"You should get yourself ready," she said in a softer voice.

My heart began to thump like a tire that had gone flat. I still couldn't believe I was going to be taken to the airport and flown across the ocean. Grandmother Hudson had seen to my passport. Everything had been done. There was nothing left to do but go. I stood up slowly.

"I'm not good at good-byes," she said, "but I'll walk out with you."

"I was hoping you would come along to the airport," I said.

"Oh, I hate that ride. Besides, you have to learn how to be on your own from the get-go," she added firmly.

I swallowed back my anxiety and started out. She was right behind me.

Jake stood by the Rolls holding the rear door open for me. His smile glimmered in the morning sunlight. I hesitated on the steps, took a deep breath and started toward the car. Grandmother Hudson followed. When I got to the car, I turned and we looked at each other. I had a sinking feeling in my chest. What if we never saw each other again? I had said good-bye to too many people this year, I thought.

"Are you going to take better care of yourself?" I asked her.

"Do I have a choice with all these doctors poking their noses in my business?"

"No," I replied.

"Then you've answered your own question. Stop worrying about me. I'm an old lady. Worry about yourself, about becoming someone of whom we would all be proud, including your mama," she added.

It brought a smile to my face.

"Thank you." I glanced at Jake. The way he looked at us made me wonder if he knew more than he pretended to know. Impulsively, I stepped forward and gave Grandmother Hudson a hug. She stiffened as if it was unwelcomed, but in her eyes I saw the softness and affection that had drawn me closer to her all these months.

"I was afraid there was nobody in my family with a sense of propriety and the grit to do the right things. Don't disappoint me," she said.

"I won't." I couldn't hide the tears in my eyes.

"Good-byes are simply ridiculous," she muttered, spun around and headed back into the house.

Jake winked at me.

I got into the vehicle and he closed the door. Grandmother Hudson paused at the front door and looked back. I rolled the window down and we just gazed at each other. Then I lifted my hand as Jake started the engine. I waved once. She waved back and we were on our way. She watched us leave and then turned and entered the house.

How lonely she was, I thought, despite her brave and blustery act. She should be the one who goes off to drama school, not me. She's a much better actress. Both her daughters were disappointing to her and she didn't enjoy her grandchildren. Her friends were all society ladies who used her for her charity contributions. Her house was full of echoes, empty voices, dark memories, heavy whispers and heavier music drifting out of windows and caught in the wind.

"Don't worry about our queen," Jake said. He had been watching me in the rearview mirror. "I'll see that she does the right things and gets over to see you in short order."

"You?" I started to laugh, but there was a look on Jake's face that told me not to underestimate him. "I hope

so, Jake," I said.

As we rode to the airport, Jake told me stories of his own travels, filling them with little warnings about people, about scam artists.

"Be really careful about who you talk to and never show your money. Never show anyone where you're keeping it on you, Rain. Just take out a few bucks for gum and magazines and stash the rest safely, hear?"

"Yes, Jake."

"If you take your time and don't let anyone rush you along, you won't make mistakes. When you're in a strange place, it's always better to listen first and talk last."

"All right, Jake."

"Just go directly to your boarding gate and wait with your carry-on luggage right by you. If you leave it for a second, there'll be some creep ready to scoop it up. The airports are full of parasites who hang around just looking for someone like yourself who looks green."

"Me? Green?" I started to laugh, but Jake kept a serious expression.

"These people are experts, Rain. They know how to tell the difference between a seasoned traveler and an innocent young lady," he warned sternly.

"All right, Jake. I'll pay attention."

"Good."

"You should have had a dozen daughters," I told him.

He laughed, but I really meant it. Why was it people who didn't want children, who were too selfish to really care for them, were the ones who had them, and people like Jake who were generous and loving at heart went through life alone?

Mama used to live with the deep-set belief that ultimately fairness and right would win out at the end, that there was a good and just superior power taking care of us. Maybe it wasn't evident, but it was there.

Poor Mama, I thought. I wonder if she died still believing in good angels or if she had lost her faith in the end and died with disappointment blackening her pure heart.

It wasn't until the airport came into sight that I realized not only had I not flown overseas, I had never flown anywhere! I wondered if Jake knew that.

"It looks so busy," I commented seeing all the vehicles double-parking, people rushing about, skycaps rolling luggage, shuttle buses winding around cars, policemen screaming at drivers and waving on other cars. I thought it was pure chaos. "What a mess. How does anyone know where to go?"

"This isn't your first airplane ride, is it?" Jake finally asked.

"Yes."

"Oh man," he said. "All right. Don't worry about it. You'll have to check your luggage inside and show them your passport with your ticket. They won't let me park here, Rain, so you'll be on your own from the time I let you out. Of course, I could park in the lot and wait with you if you like," he offered.

"I'll be all right, Jake. Mrs. Hudson told me to be on my own from the get-go."

"She would because she thinks everyone was born with the same steel in her bones," he muttered.

"Victoria was," I said, thinking that was the best part of Grandmother Hudson to inherit.

"Yeah, that she was," Jake said, concentrating on squeezing the vehicle into an opening. As soon as he did, he stopped and jumped out of the car. He opened my door and went around to the trunk, signaling for a skycap.

"She's going to London," he told him. He helped load my luggage onto the small wagon and then turned to me. "He'll take you to the counter, Rain. Everyone will be helpful from there. Just remember the things I told you."

"All right, Jake."

"Well, the queen is right about one thing," Jake said. "Good-byes suck."

He and I laughed. I hugged him.

"Don't forget to send me pictures of Rain," I said referring to his colt.

"I will. You'd better get going, Princess," he said nodding at the terminal.

I started away.

"Show them English how good you are," he called.

"Okay, Jake."

He held up his hand a moment and then got into the Rolls.

"This way, lady," the skycap told me. I followed him, but I looked back at Jake and the car one last time. I would miss him more than I had dreamed. He had a quiet confidence like someone who knew important things and just stood in the background waiting for you to catch up.

Jake had been right about people being helpful. I was told that since I had a first-class ticket, I could wait in the lounge. It was comfortable and the flight attendants were friendly and helpful. One came to tell me when it was time to board. I followed a couple to the gate and boarded the plane. The man sitting beside me was an English businessman. He barely muttered his name and then went back to his paperwork. After the meal and the movie, he fell asleep. I don't think we spoke more than a dozen words and finally I dozed off myself.

It wasn't until the pilot announced that our landing was imminent that my English businessman asked me

where I was going in London. I told him about the Richard Burbage School of Drama. He raised his eyebrows and nodded softly, which was the extent of his reaction to anything, and then he returned to his paperwork. Were all Englishmen this reserved? I wondered. I'll be talking to myself most of the time.

After we landed and were herded through customs, I saw a stout man with a square jaw and dark, beady eyes holding up a small sign with my name printed in large block letters. He was in a dark blue chauffeur's uniform with little gold epaulets on his shoulders, which were as thick and wide as his neck. He looked like a wrestler who had been asked to don a servant's outfit. All of his facial features were harsh, especially his mouth because of the way his lower lip curled out a little.

"I'm Rain Arnold," I said stepping up to him.

He looked me over as if he was deciding whether or not to believe me. He didn't smile or even grimace, but his eyes darkened and he thrust his hand out as if his arm was a steel coil, grasping my carry-on.

"I'm Boggs," he finally said. "Mrs. Endfield will be waitin' in the car. Follow me to the luggage carousel," he ordered.

"All right," I said, but he didn't wait for my response. He pivoted and started away, expecting I would keep up with his quick pace. He walked with his head straight, eyes forward, never turning to see if I was following behind him.

I could barely keep my eyes in my head. Everywhere around me people were talking in foreign languages. I saw Arabs in their national dress, people from Africa with their heads wrapped in colorful turbans, people from India, and hundreds of Orientals as well as businessmen of all nationalities walking quickly and carrying briefcases.

Not in my wildest fantasies did I imagine that a girl like me, coming from where I came from, would have this opportunity. Maybe I really was caught up in the babbling brook of destiny, swept along by forces I couldn't begin to understand. Mama, I thought, wouldn't your eyes bulge too at the sounds and sights here.

When we arrived at the luggage carousel, Boggs put my carry-on down and finally turned to me.

"Point out yer pieces," he commanded.

"Pardon me?"

"Yer luggage. How many pieces?"

"Oh, three," I said. "There's one!" I cried pointing. He grabbed at it and picked it up with such ease, I thought someone might have emptied it and stolen my clothes.

After we retrieved the others, he gathered them under his arms and in his hands, nodding at my carry-on.

"You take that," he ordered.

Again, I practically had to jog to keep up with him. He led me down the walkway toward an older looking, but well-kept Rolls-Royce. Before he opened the trunk, he opened the rear door and I peered in.

There was my Great-aunt Leonora sitting in the far corner. She had a much thinner face than Grandmother Hudson, but I saw the similarity in her eyes and nose. Her dark brown hair was styled with a sweep over the left side of her forehead. Every strand looked pasted in place forever. She wore a gray tweed suit and pretty gold earrings spotted with tiny rubies. I saw she wore a great deal more makeup than Grandmother Hudson, especially the rouge on her cheeks.

"Welcome to London, dear," she said. "Get in quickly and while Boggs is putting your luggage in the boot, tell me how my sister is managing herself."

"Thank you," I said slipping into the car. Boggs closed the door and opened the car trunk.

As soon as I sat, my nostrils immediately filled with the scent of her pungently sweet perfume. I nearly choked on the overwhelming waves of it. In the semi-darkness I saw that my aunt had small brown spots on the right side of her jaw.

"Mrs. Hudson wanted me to tell you how sorry she was that she couldn't come over with me right now. Her doctors want to monitor her pacemaker a little longer."

"She must be furious. I know my sister Frances. You don't tell her not to go somewhere," Leonora said. "How was your trip?"

"It was fine."

"First time abroad, is it?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And I bet you're all excited about attending the school of drama. What a wonderful opportunity. I never would have thought my sister capable of such an enormous altruistic act. I know she is involved in this charity and that, but becoming someone's guardian so late in life is quite a responsibility."

She tilted her head a bit to look at me.

"I wonder from where she got this sudden, new motherly impulse? What have you done to charm my sister so?" she asked. There was a strange note of suspicion in her voice as her eyes widened with the question.

"I don't know," I said. "Mrs. Hudson has been very kind. It's as simple as that."

"Really? How interesting," she continued, still gazing at me with those scrutinizing eyes. "How are my nieces?" she followed.

"Fine, I guess. I don't see all that much of them," I added quickly. I felt my voice shaking. I hadn't expected to be put under such a cross-examination so quickly.

"Victoria is still not romantically involved with anyone."

"I wouldn't know, ma'am."

"She's been around often enough, hasn't she?"

"Yes, but not that often," I said.

"Hmm." She nodded slowly and then smiled. "I bet you're ravishingly hungry. We can stop along the way and get you some warm food, if you like. I know a nice new French restaurant that's not far. Do you like French food, dear?"

"I haven't eaten all that much of it," I said.

"Oh?"

"I'm really not that hungry," I said. "I ate enough on the plane. I'm okay."

I wanted to be polite and look at her when she spoke, but I wanted to look out the window, too. Where were the places I had read about in my history books? The Tower of London, Big Ben, Parliament, the National Gallery?

"Just yesterday," she said, "at tea at Lady Bishop's, I told everyone I was getting an au pair from America. It's usually just the opposite," she bragged with a short laugh.

"Excuse me? Au pair?"

"A foreign girl exchanging housework for room and board," she explained.

"Oh." How strange it was to consider myself a foreign girl, but that's exactly who I am here, I thought.

"When we arrive at Endfield Place, I'll have Mary Margaret show you to your sleeping quarters, and then you'll meet Mrs. Chester, our cook. Boggs will describe your duties to you, however. My husband has made Boggs the staff manager.

"What do you think of my new hairstyle? It's the rage in Paris. See how this side looks like it's floating?" She patted the side of her hair softly.

"How old are you again?" she asked, before I could say anything.

"I'm eighteen," I said, smiling to myself at the way she flitted from topic to topic. She reminded me of a hummingbird, buzzing over one flower and then rushing off to the next. It was as if she was afraid of being tied down for even a moment. She was either someone pursued or someone in pursuit, I thought and wondered if I would ever discover which it was.

"Eighteen. Yes, it seems like yesterday," she said wistfully. "Oh, I do hope you don't smoke," she said with a firm face of warning. "Richard won't permit anyone to light a fag in our home and he can smell it a mile away, so don't try to sneak one."

"Fag?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand. What's a fag?" I asked.

"Oh, it's what you Americans call a cigarette," she said, laughing. "I always forget whom I'm speaking to."

"Aren't you still an American?" I asked.

"Goodness, no. Richard wouldn't tolerate the idea." She gazed out the window and then turned back to me. "You're so lucky. We're having a week without showers, if you believe what you hear on the telly."

"Telly?"

"The television set, of course. Richard says Americans can't live a day without the telly. I don't suppose you're hooked on one of those dreadful soap things, are you?"

"Oh. Television. No, ma'am, I'm not," I said.

"Good. Just look there," she said pointing to a woman pushing a shopping cart full of cans and bottles. "I don't know what this country is coming to these days. I see more and more aluminum miners foraging for recyclables to get food. Dreadful."

"Homeless people," I said looking back at the woman with the cart. "It's the same back in the States."

"Richard just rages and rages about them. He thinks the government should get them off the streets. Just the other day, he met with the P.M., you know, and gave him a bloody what for."

"Is that the Prime Minister of England?"

"Of course, dear. Now I'll stop talking and you tell me about yourself. Pretend you're telling the story of your life. Go on. Where were you born?" she asked, resting her arms on her lap and sitting back as if I was about to tell her a fairy tale.

I started, describing my life in Washington, D.C., and what it was like growing up there. She listened and then suddenly, she leaned forward and tapped emphatically on the back of the driver's seat.

"Go the long way, Boggs. I'd like her to see the Gardens."

"Very good, Mrs. Endfield," he muttered and made a quick turn.

"Life is very difficult for black people in America, I know," she said. "Frances hasn't told you that our great-great-grandfather owned slaves, has she?"

Before I could reply, she shouted, "There!" and stabbed her finger in front of my face, "Kensington Gardens. Everything is in bloom."

"Lady Billings and I are going to sponsor a picnic for the orphans next month. Oh, I believe my sister said you were an orphan now. You must forget all that, my dear. Think of us as your surrogate family until...until whatever," she said laughing.

"Everyone tells me I could have been an actress. I have the talent for it. Boggs, can you drive a little faster? I promised Lady Billings I would ring her up this afternoon."

"Very good, Mrs. Endfield," he said quietly.

"You were saying?" she said, turning back to me and smiling. "Something about your sister Beni, I think. What a quaint name, Beni? Short for Beneatha? I knew a Beneatha. Oh yes, that dreadful East Ender who came around with the chimney sweep. Boggs, remember them?"

"Yes, Mrs. Endfield. I do indeed."

"Well, what happened to them?"

"I wouldn't know, Mrs. Endfield," Boggs replied.

"No, I don't suppose you would, Boggs. Dreadful people. You could see the soot in the very pores on their faces." She shook herself as if she had gotten a bad chill. Then she looked at me again and shook her head. "I don't know why you're not hungry, my dear. The food they serve on planes is just dreadful. However, Mrs. Chester will have something for you, I'm sure, even if it's tea and a fig biscuit. We're almost home. Endfield Place," she said grandly as if it was Tara from *Gone with the Wind*.

My head was spinning. A little while ago she had asked me something, but I forgot what it was myself. I really began to wonder how Grandmother Hudson and Leonora could be sisters.

"This is Holland Park," she said, "one of the nicest areas of London. My throat's suddenly so dry. I'll have a cup of tea myself when we finally get home. Thank goodness, we don't make the trip to the airport all that much, right Boggs?"

"Yes, indeed, Mrs. Endfield," he said. He was like a statue -- never turning his head once during the journey.

"Well, in any case, welcome to London, dear," she said as we turned into a cobblestone driveway toward a very large stone house.

As we circled toward the front entrance, I saw what looked like a quaint little cottage behind the house. Well-trimmed hedges lined the front of it with a small walkway in between. It looked like fresh flowers had been planted along the path. The cottage was different, sparkling like new. It was a wooden structure with Wedgwood blue cladding and pretty white shutters. I thought it looked more like a dollhouse.

"What a pretty cottage," I remarked. "Who lives in it?"

My Great-aunt Leonora turned slowly to me. Her face had changed, hardened so that her true age seeped out from under the makeup and deepened the crevices in her forehead and the lines at the corners of her mouth and eyes.

"No one lives there," she said. "And no one is ever to go there."

Her voice was deep, almost threatening.

Then she smiled and laughed. She was obviously someone who could hop from one emotion to another in an instant.

"Welcome to Endfield Place. Welcome to your new home, my dear."

I gazed at the grand house and beautiful grounds. Home, I thought, when will that word have any real meaning for me again?

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