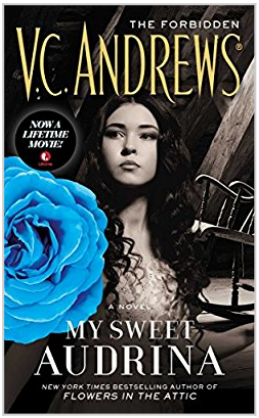

My Sweet Audrina (The Audrina Series Book 1)

By V.C. Andrews

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V.C. Andrews has enthralled millions with her suspenseful, gothic family sagas, including the bestselling Dollanganger series that began with *Flowers in the Attic*. Now, one of her strangest, most beloved classics *My Sweet Audrina*—a haunting story of love and deceit, innocence and betrayal, and the suffocating power of parental love—is soon to be a major Lifetime movie event.

The idea of her sister hovered above them all.

Audrina fiercely desired to be as good as her sister. She knew her father could not love her as he loved that other girl, for her sister was so special, so perfect—and dead.

Upstairs in a locked room awaited her sister's clothes and dolls, her animals and games—and her sacred rocking chair. Now Audrina will rock and rock and rock to reclaim all of her gone sister's special gifts.

And then finally she'll learn the secrets everyone else knows but her.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for Virginia Andrews: 'Beautifully written, macabre and thoroughly nasty... it is evocative of the nasty fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood and The Babes in the Wood, with a bit of Victorian Gothic thrown in. ... What does shine through is her ability to see the world through a child's eyes' Daily Express 'Makes horror irresistible' Glasgow Sunday Mail 'A gruesome saga... the storyline is compelling, many millions have no wish to put this down' Ms London 'There is strength in her books - the bizarre plots matched with the pathos of the entrapped' The Times

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.

My Sweet Audrina

Whitefern

There was something strange about the house where I grew up. There were shadows in the corners and whispers on the stairs and time was as irrelevant as honesty. Though how I knew that I couldn't say.

There was a war going on in our house, a silent war that sounded no guns, and the bodies that fell were only wishes that died and the bullets were only words and the blood that spilled was always called pride.

Though I'd never been to school—and I was seven years old and it was high time I was in school—it seemed I knew all about the Civil War. Around me the Civil War was still being waged, and though the future might stretch ahead for billions of years, it was still the war we'd never forget, for our pride had been injured, and our passions were lingering on. We'd lost the battle better won by the opposite side. Maybe that's why it still kept hurting.

Momma and my aunt Ellsbeth always said that men liked violent discussions about wars better than any other topic, but if there were other wars of any importance at all, they were never discussed in our house. Papa would read any book, see any movie, cut out any magazine photo that represented that war between brothers, even though his ancestors had fought against my maternal ones. He was Yankee born, but a Southerner by preference. At the dinner table he'd recount the plots of the long novels he read about General Robert E. Lee and give grisly accounts of all the bloody battles. And if most of what he read charmed me, it did not charm either my aunt, who preferred the television, or my mother, who preferred to read her own books, claiming Papa left out the best parts, which weren't fit for young ears to hear.

That meant my ears, and my cousin Vera's ears. Though most of the world believed Vera to be my sister, I

knew she was my unmarried aunt's illegitimate daughter—and that we had to shield her from the scorn of society by pretending she was my legitimate older sister. I did have a legitimate older sister, too, but she had died before I was born. Her name was also Audrina, and even though she had been dead a long time, still she lingered on. My papa never forgot the first and best Audrina, and still hoped that someday I would be as special as she was.

My cousin Vera liked people to think she was my sister. I didn't know her true age, for she refused to tell me that. Nobody in our house ever revealed their ages. Only my age was talked about all the time. It was Vera's boast that she could be any age she wanted to be—ten, twelve, fifteen, and even twenty. With a few elegant and sophisticated postures, truly she did change her manner and expression. She could look very mature—or very childlike—depending on her mood. She liked to ridicule me because I was so uncertain about time. Often Vera told me I'd hatched full blown from a giant ostrich egg at the age of seven. She always said that I had inherited that bird's famous habit of sticking its head in the sand and pretending nothing in the world was wrong. She didn't know about my dreams and the ugliness they gave me.

From the very beginning, I knew Vera was my enemy even when she pretended to be my friend. Though I wanted her for my friend in the worst way, I knew she hated me. She was jealous because I was an Audrina and she wasn't. Oh, how I wanted Vera to like and admire me, as sometimes I really liked and admired her. I envied her, too, because she was normal and didn't have to try to be like someone who was dead. No one seemed to care if Vera wasn't special. No one except Vera. Vera was fond of telling me that I wasn't really special, either, I was merely strange. To tell the truth, I thought there was something strange about me, too. I seemed to be unable to recall anything about my early childhood. I couldn't remember anything about the past—what I had done the week or even the day before. I didn't know how I had learned the things I knew, or why I seemed to know some things I shouldn't.

The many clocks scattered throughout our giant house confused me even more. The grandfather clocks in the halls chimed out different hours; the cuckoos in their wooden Swiss clocks popped in and out of small ornate doors, each contradicting all the others; the fancy French clock in my parents' bedroom had stopped long ago at midnight or noon, and a Chinese clock ran backwards. To my great distress, though I searched everywhere, there were no calendars in our house, not even old ones. And the newspapers never came on the day they were due. Our only magazines were old ones, stacked in closets, hidden in the attic. Nobody threw anything away in our house. It was kept, saved for our descendents, so they could sell it one day and make a fortune.

Much of my insecurity had to do with the first Audrina, who had died exactly nine years before I was born. She had died mysteriously in the woods after cruel and heartless boys had spoiled her in some indescribable way, and because of her, I was never supposed to enter the woods, even to go to school. And the woods were all around us, almost smothering us. They embraced us on three sides, the River Lyle on the fourth. To go anywhere we had to travel through the woods.

Everywhere in our home photographs of the First and Best Audrina were scattered. On Papa's desk, there were three framed portraits of her, at age one, two and three. There was not one single baby picture of me, not one, and that hurt. The First Audrina had been a beautiful little girl, and when I looked at her photographs, I felt oddly haunted, wanting to be her so badly I ached inside. I wanted to be her so I'd feel as loved, as special as everyone said she had been; and then again, contrarily, I wanted more than anything to be myself, and on my own merits gain the love I felt denied me.

Oh, the tales Papa could tell me about the wonders of his first daughter, and everyone he told made me know I was not the Best Audrina, not the perfect and special one—only the second and the inferior one.

My parents kept the first Audrina's bedroom like a shrine for a dead princess. It was left exactly as it had been on the day she met her fate, which was never explained in detail to me. That room was so full of toys it seemed more a playroom than a bedroom. Momma herself cleaned that room, and she hated housework. Just to see *her* room made me realize nothing had been too good for *her,* while my bedroom lacked toy shelves, and her vast array of playthings. I felt cheated, cheated of a real childhood. Audrina the First and Best had stolen my youth, and everyone talked so much about her that I couldn't remember anything about me. I believed it was because of her that my memory was so full of holes.

Papa would try to fill those holes by putting me in her rocking chair and making me rock and sing until I became "the empty pitcher that would fill with everything."

He wanted me to fill with her memories and capture her special powers since she was dead and didn't need them anymore.

And as if one ghost weren't enough, we had a second who came every Tuesday at four. "Teatime," we called Aunt Mercy Marie's day. There she'd sit on the piano, in her black and white photograph in a silver frame, her fat face beaming a vacuous smile, her pale blue eyes staring out as if she could see us, when she couldn't. She was dead, and yet undead, just like my dead sister.

My aunt and my mother would speak for Aunt Mercy Marie, and through her they would let loose all the venom they held back and saved for "teatimes." Strangely enough, my cousin Vera enjoyed these Tuesday teatimes so much she'd find any reason to play hookey from school, just to be there and hear all the ugly things my mother and her half sister could say to one another. They were White-fern sisters, and once upon a far ago time, that had meant something wonderful. Now it meant something sad, but they would never tell me exactly what.

Long ago the Whitefern family had been the most notable family in our Tidewater section of Virginia, giving the country senators and vice presidents. But we'd fallen out of favor not just with the villagers, but also with everyone, and we were no longer honored, or even respected.

Our house was far from the nearest city of any size.

Whitefern Village was fifteen miles down a lonely country road, but we seldom went there. It was as if long ago some secret war had been declared, and we in our castle (as Papa liked to call our home) were hated by the "serfs" in the lowlands. If anyplace in our vicinity could be called "highlands" it was the slight hill on which Whitefern sat.

Papa had to drive thirty miles to and from his stock-brokerage office. All the friends we had lived in the city. Our nearest neighbors were twelve miles away as a car drove, five as a crow flew. Papa drove our only car to work, leaving all of us without transportation. So often my aunt Ellsbeth would bemoan the day she'd sold her small car to buy the TV set.

My aunt, who'd never been married, loved her portable television set with a twelve-inch screen. She seldom allowed me to watch, though her daughter, Vera, could watch as much as she liked when she was home from school. That was another thing I couldn't understand: why Vera was allowed to go to school when I couldn't go. School was dangerous for me, but not for Vera.

Naturally I presumed there had to be something terribly wrong with me. My parents had to hide me away to keep me safe, if not from outsiders, then from myself. That was the scariest thought of all.

At the age of seven, while other children boarded yellow buses and rode off giggling and having fun, I sat down at the kitchen table and was taught how to read, write, add and subtract by my mother, who played the piano beautifully but was not good at teaching anything but how to play the piano. Fortunately, or maybe not, my aunt Ellsbeth was there to help. She had once been a grade-school teacher with ready slaps to deliver any boy who dared to call her a nasty name. Just one slap too many, and the parents had seen that my aunt was fired. Though she tried for many a year to find another teaching position, the word was out. My aunt had a ferocious temper and a ready hand.

Aunt Ellsbeth, like her daughter, Vera, also had ready comments to criticize our way of living. According to my aunt we were all as “antediluvian” as the house in which we lived. “Out of sync with the rest of the world,” she’d say.

In my dreams of home, Whitefern loomed up high and white against a dark and stormy sky, frightening to behold. It threatened in the night, but in the day it welcomed me with open arms. I had a habit of sitting outside on the lawn and admiring the grandness of Whitefern. It was a gingerbread Victorian house of many frills, with its white paint peeling, its dark blinds loose and crooked. It had three stories, with an attic and a basement toward the back half of the house where the spacious lawn inclined toward the River Lyle. As I stared at that house, I thought I had much in common with it. We were both antediluvian and “out of sync.”

Our windows were myriad, many of them beautiful stained glass. The shutters, about to fall off, were so darkly red they appeared black from a distance, like dried blood. From the outside the most marvelous thing of all were the balustrades on all the many porches, balconies and verandas, designed to look like stylized woodferns.

In the very center of the dark roof was a round cupola with a copper roof now turned green from tarnish. It formed a point that was topped by a golden ball whose gold leaf was coming off bit by bit each time it rained. The cupola was about fourteen feet in diameter, and every single one of its many windows was made of leaded stained glass with scenes to represent the angels of life and death.

Inside and out, ferns cascaded everywhere from wicker stands. There were other plants, but the ferns seemed to steal what moisture there was in the air so soon all other plants died.

On stealthy, timid feet I played my small lonely games in the great foyer where the stained glass from the double front doors threw colorful patterns on the floor. Rapier-sharp colors sometimes, stabbing into my brain and punching holes there. I also had little rhymes Vera had taught me that I said to protect myself from the colors:

Step on black, live forever in a shack.
Step on green, never be clean.
Step on blue, work will never be through.
Step on yellow, hear the world bellow.
Step on red, soon be dead.

Just so I wouldn’t have to step on any color, I stole along near the walls, keeping to the shadows, listening to the clocks ticking away the wrong times and the silly cuckoos going crazy in the night. When the wind blew hard, the shutters banged and the floors creaked, the furnace in the basement coughed, sputtered, groaned, and the wind chimes in the cupola tinkled, tinkled.

Yet in the daytime there were things so wondrously grand in our house that I felt like Alice lost in a house of

jewels. Art deco lamps and *objets d'art* were scattered hither and yon. Tiffany lamps rose up to throw more colors, to pattern the walls. Crystal prisms dangled from lamp shades, from wall sconces, from chandeliers, from gaslamps, catching colors, refracting rainbows that flashed like lightning whenever sunlight managed to steal through the lace curtains.

We had a fireplace in every room. There were eight of marble, many of elegantly carved wood and none were made of brick. Brick was not elegant enough for our type of house that seemed to despise simplicity.

Our ceilings were high, and carved with elaborate designs, making frames for Biblical or romantic scenes. In the olden days people had, or so it seemed to my young eyes, either too many clothes on, or too little that wanted to stay in place. I wondered why the Biblical scenes usually had more flesh showing than the ones where people were decidedly wicked. One could hardly believe those near-naked people were sincerely trying to follow where God would lead them.

Bare bosoms of impressive proportions protruded brazenly in every room of our house but mine. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and several other dead-eyed presidents gazed day after day at the naked lady lying on a chaise across the way as she forever dropped grapes into her gaping mouth. Naked baby boys flew about shamelessly shooting aimless arrows. But the men always modestly hid their maleness behind some strategically placed leaf or graceful flow of drapery. Women were not so apt to hide what they had, I'd often thought as I gazed at them. They looked shy, but acted bold. Aunt Ellsbeth had come up behind me once and explained bitterly that since most artists were men, it was only natural for them to delight in "exploiting" the nude female figure.

"Don't judge women by what you see in paintings and statues. Judge them only by what you yourself know about the women in your life. The day any man understands any woman will be the day the world comes to an end. Men are hateful, contrary creatures who say they want goddesses to put on pedestals. Once they have them up there, they rip off the halo, tear off the gown, slice off the wings so they can't fly and then kick the pedestal away so the woman falls at his feet and he can scream out as he kicks her, tramp!—or worse."

To hear my aunt Ellsbeth talk one would think she'd been married a dozen or more times, and one thousand men had disappointed her. As far as I knew, only one man had.

Our furniture had many styles, all of them fancy. It seemed each chair, each table, each sofa, lamp, pillow, hassock, desk was in competition, trying to outdo the others. Although Aunt Ellsbeth complained about the furniture, Momma would catch hold of my hand and lead me reverently from room to room, explaining that this table was a "Renaissance Revival" centerpiece, made by Berkey and Gay, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"All antiques, Audrina. All worth their weight in gold. The bed in my room is five hundred years old. Once kings and queens slept behind its curtains."

Behind us my aunt would snort her contempt and disbelief.

Other people had electricity in all their rooms; we had electricity only in our kitchen and bathrooms. In other rooms we used gaslamps because Momma thought them more flattering to her complexion. My aunt thought them a pain in—(But I wasn't supposed to use some of the words my aunt said readily.) Even more than gaslamps, Momma loved candles burning, and logs in the fireplace snapping and crackling and making shadows dance on the dark paneled walls. Our kitchen stuck out like a sore thumb with all its modern gadgets that made life bearable for Momma, who hated any kind of hard work but loved cooking the gourmet meals my father had to have.

The room we all favored most was the Roman Revival Salon. On its royal-purple velvet lounging chaise with the gold cording tarnished and falling off where it wasn't fastened by fancy tassels, Momma would lie dressed in some filmy negligee, or a soft summer dress. She didn't seem to notice that the stuffing was coming out and the springs poked through in a few places. Sprawled elegantly on that chaise, she'd read her romances and occasionally lift her eyes to stare dreamily off into space. I guessed she was imagining herself in the arms of the handsome lover on the colorful cover of her paperback novel. I told myself bravely that someday I was going to have the nerve to read novels like that, wicked and beautiful at the same time—though how I knew they were wicked books I couldn't say, since I'd never read one. But almost-naked people on the cover seemed awfully wicked.

Papa's huge round home office, directly under the cupola, held thousands of old-old books, and many fine editions of classics that nobody read but me and Aunt Ellsbeth. Papa said he didn't have time to read them, but he kept on adding to our leather-bound collection as if hoping all his friends would think he read them. Momma hid her paperbacks in her bedroom closets and pretended that she, too, loved the high-minded tales printed on fine paper and bound with beautiful leather.

Some of those classic books contained very wicked material, according to my cousin Vera, who always informed me about what was, or was not, wicked.

I liked to watch Momma lying on her couch. Behind her was a concert-sized grand piano that her father had given her when she had won a gold metal in a music competition. Many a time she'd told me she could have gone on to play in all the best concert halls, but Papa hadn't wanted a professional musician for his wife. "Don't expect to have too many talents, Audrina. Men won't approve if it's likely you'll earn more money than they do." Downward her hand would drift. Without even looking, she would cleverly find the very piece of chocolate she wanted and pop it into her mouth. My father often warned her about eating too much chocolate and becoming fat, but she never did.

My mother was tall, curvy where she should be and slender in all the places a woman should be. My papa often told me she was the greatest beauty on the East Coast and had been the catch of the season at her debutante ball. Many a handsome and rich man had asked for my momma's hand in marriage, but it had been Damian Jonathan Adare who had swept my mother off her feet with his dashing dark good looks and his winning charm. "He towered over every other man in my life, Audrina," my mother would tell me. "When your father came back from the sea, all the girls went gaga just to have him in the room. I felt so lucky when he had eyes only for me." Then she'd frown as if remembering some other girl Papa might have "had eyes for."

Vera liked to joke that my father had married my mother only because he admired her hair color so much. "Witchy hair," Vera called Momma's hair and mine. "Chameleon hair," Papa often called it. It was strange hair, and at times I believed Vera was right. Our hair didn't know which color it was supposed to be, and was, instead, all colors. Flaxen blonde, with gold, auburn, bright red, chestnut brown, copper and even some white. Papa loved the strange prismlike color of our hair. I believed he'd ordered God to give me the kind of hair I had; if He hadn't, Papa might have sent me back. For the first Audrina also had chameleon hair.

My papa, six-foot five and weighing well over two hundred pounds, was the tallest man I had ever seen, though Vera was always telling me there were many men who were taller, especially basketball players. Papa's hair was the darkest black, looking blue sometimes in the sunlight. He had beautiful almond-shaped eyes, so brown they appeared black, and his lashes were so long and thick they appeared false, even though they weren't. I knew; I'd tried to pull them off after I saw Momma glue some false ones on. His eyes were slick as oil, scary and wonderful, especially when they glittered. He had smooth, soft skin that often appeared

ruddy in the winters, and richly bronze in the summers. When Momma was displeased with Papa and his selfish ways of spending more on himself than on her, she'd call him a dandy and a fop, though what those words meant I didn't know. I suspected she meant that my huge, powerful papa cared more about clothes than he cared about principles.

He feared growing old, especially feared losing his hair. He checked his hairbrush each day, almost counting the hairs he found there. He saw the dentist four times a year. He flossed his teeth so often Momma grew disgusted. His doctor checked him over as much as the dentist did. He fretted about minor flaws no one would ever notice but him, such as thick, horny toenails he had difficulty clipping. Yet when he smiled, his charm was irresistible.

Principles were another thing I didn't understand, except Momma often said that Papa lacked them. Again I vaguely guessed she meant Papa wanted what he wanted, and no one had better get in his way and try to prevent him from taking what he had to have. Yet, sometimes when he was with me, and he was tender and loving, he'd give me my way. But only sometimes. There were other times—terrible other times.

It had been agreed when my aunt came back to live here when Vera was only one year old that she would do all the housework in exchange for her board and keep, while my mother did the cooking. Unreasonably, my aunt wanted to do the cooking (which she considered easier) instead of the housework, but no one could eat anything my aunt prepared. Momma despised housework, but she could throw anything into a pot or bowl without measuring and it would come out tasting divine. Papa said she was a "creative" cook, because she had an artist's mind, while Ellie (as only he called her) was born to be some man's slave. How my aunt glared when he said mean things like that.

My aunt was a fearsome woman. Tall, lean and mean was my father's description. "It's no wonder no man wants to marry you," my father often teased my aunt. "You've got the tongue of a shrew." Not only did she have a sharp tongue, as mean for me as for Vera, but she also had her golden rule about sparing the rod and spoiling the child. Neither Vera nor I were spared when she was in charge. Fortunately my parents seldom left us alone with her. In some ways, it seemed my aunt disliked her daughter even more than she disliked me. It had always been my belief that women were born to be loving mothers. Then, when I gave that more thought, I couldn't remember how I had arrived at that conclusion.

Momma *liked* for my aunt to chastise Vera, so then she could open her arms wide and welcome Vera into them, saying time and again to Vera, "It's all right, I'll love you even if your own mother can't."

"That's the weakness of being you, Lucietta," said my aunt sharply. "You can give love to anything."

As if her own daughter, Vera, was less than human.

Never would my aunt Ellsbeth name the man who was Vera's father. "He was a cheat and a liar. I don't *want* to remember his name," she'd say with scorn.

It was so difficult to understand what was going on in our house. Treacherous undercurrents, like the rivers that ran into the sea that wasn't so very far away.

It was true my aunt was tall, her face was long and she was skinny, even if she did eat three times more than my mother. Sometimes when Papa said cruel things to my aunt, her already thin lips would purse together to become a fine line. Her nostrils would flare, her hands would tighten into fists, as if she'd like to belt him one if she only had the nerve.

Maybe it was Aunt Ellsbeth who kept our city friends from coming more often. There had to be some reason why they came only when we threw a party. Then, Momma said, our “friends” popped out of the woodwork like insects come to feast on the picnic. Papa adored all parties until they were over. Then, for one reason or another, he would jump on Momma and punish her for some trivial thing he called a “social error,” such as looking at a handsome man for too long, or dancing with him too many times. Oh, it was difficult being a wife, I could tell. One never knew just what to do, or how friendly to be. Momma was expected to play the piano to entertain while people danced or sang. But she wasn’t supposed to play so well that some people cried and told her later that she’d been a fool to marry and give up her musical career.

No casual callers ever came to our doors. No salesmen were allowed either. Signs were posted everywhere: “No Solicitors Allowed,” and “Beware of the Dog,” and “Keep Off, This is Private Property. Trespassers will be Prosecuted.”

I often went to bed feeling unhappy with my life, feeling an undercurrent that was pulling my feet from under me, and I was floundering, floundering, bound to sink and drown. It seemed I heard a voice whispering, telling me there were rivers to cross and places to go, but I’d never go anywhere. There were people to know and fun to have, but I wouldn’t experience any of that. I woke up and heard the tinkle of the whispering wind chimes telling me over and over that I belonged where I was, and here I would stay forevermore, and nothing I did would matter in the long run. Shivering, I hugged my arms over my thin chest. In my ears I heard Papa’s voice, saying over and over again, “This is where you belong, safe with Papa, safe in your home.”

Why did I have to have an older sister dead and in her grave at the age of nine? Why did I have to be named after a dead girl? It seemed peculiar, unnatural. I hated the First Audrina, the Best Audrina, the Good and Perfect and Never Wrong Audrina. Yet I had to replace her if ever I was to win a permanent place in Papa’s heart. I hated the ritual of visiting her grave every Sunday after church services and putting flowers there bought from a florist, as if the flowers from our yard weren’t good enough.

In the morning I ran to Papa and right away he picked me up and held me close as the grandfather clocks in the hallways relentlessly ticked on. All about us the house was as silent as a grave, as if waiting for death to come and take us all, as it had taken the First and Best Audrina. Oh, how I hated and envied my older dead sister. How cursed I felt to bear her name.

“Where is everyone?” I whispered, glancing around fearfully.

“Out in the yard,” he said, hugging me closer. “It’s Saturday, my love. I know time isn’t important to you, but it is to me. Time is never important to special people with unusual gifts. Yet for me the weekend hours are the best ones. I knew you’d be frightened to find yourself alone in an empty house, so I stayed inside while the rest went out to harvest the rewards of their planting.”

“Papa, why can’t I remember every day like other people? I don’t remember last year, or the year before—why?”

“We are all victims of dual heritages,” he said softly, stroking my hair and gently rocking me back and forth in the rocker that my great-great-great-grandmother had used to nurse her twelve children in. “Each child inherits genes from both parents, and that determines his or her hair color, eye color and personality traits. Babies come into the world to be controlled by those genes and by the particular environment that surrounds them. You are still waiting to fill with your dead sister’s gifts. When you do, all that is good and beautiful in this world will belong to you, as it belonged to her. While you and I wait for that marvelous day when your

empty pitcher is filled, I am doing my damnedest to give you the very best."

At that moment my aunt and mother came into the kitchen, trailed by Vera, who carried a basket of freshly picked butter beans.

Aunt Ellsbeth must have overheard most of what Papa had just said, because she remarked sarcastically, "You should have been a philosopher instead of a stockbroker, Damian. Then maybe someone would care to listen to your words of wisdom."

I stared at her, dredging up from my treacherous memory something I might or might not have dreamed. It could even be a dream that belonged to the First Audrina, who'd been so clever, so beautiful and so everlastingly perfect. But before I could capture any illusive memory, all were gone, gone.

I sighed, unhappy with myself, unhappy with the adults who ruled me, with the cousin who insisted she was really my only sister because she wanted to steal my place, when already my place had been stolen by the First and Best Audrina, who was a dead Audrina.

And now I was supposed to act like her, talk like her and be everything that she'd been … and where was the real me supposed to go?

Sunday came, and as soon as the church services were over, Papa drove, as he always did, straight to the family cemetery near our house where the name Whitefern was engraved on a huge arching gateway through which we slowly drove. Beyond the archway the cemetery itself had to be approached on foot. We were all dressed in our best, and bearing expensive flowers. Papa tugged me from the car. I resisted, hating that grave we had to visit and that dead girl who stole everyone's love from me.

It seemed this was the first time I could clearly remember the words Papa must have said many times before. "There she lies, my first Audrina." Sorrowfully, he stared down at the flat grave with the slender white-marble headstone bearing my very own name, but her birth and death dates. I wondered when my parents would recover from the shock of her mysterious death. It seemed to me that if sixteen years hadn't healed their shock, maybe ninety wouldn't, either. I couldn't bear to look at that tombstone, so I stared up into my papa's handsome face so high above. This was the kind of perspective I would never have once I grew up, seeing his strong, square chin from underneath, next his heavy pouting lower lip, then his flaring nostrils and the fringe of his long lower dark lashes meeting with the upper ones as he blinked back his tears. It was just like looking up at God.

He seemed so powerful, so much in control. He smiled at me again. "My first Audrina is in that grave, dead at nine years of age. That wonderful, special Audrina—just as you are wonderful and special. Never doubt for one moment that you aren't just as wonderful and gifted as she was. Believe in what Papa tells you and you will never go wrong."

I swallowed. Visiting this grave and hearing about this Audrina always made my throat hurt. Of course I wasn't wonderful or special, yet how could I tell him that when he seemed so convinced? In my childish way I figured my value to him depended on just how special and wonderful I turned out to be later on.

"Oh, Papa," cried Vera, stumbling over to his side and clutching at his hand. "I loved her so much, so very much. She was so sweet and wonderful and special. And so beautiful. I don't think in a million years there will ever be another like your First Audrina." She flashed a wicked smile my way to tell me again that never would I be as pretty as the First and Best and Most Perfect Audrina. "And she was so brilliant in school, too.

It’s terrible the way she died, really awful. I’d be so ashamed if that happened to me, so ashamed I’d rather be dead.”

“Shut up!” roared Papa in a voice so mighty that the ducks on the river flew away. He hurried then to put his pot of flowers on that grave, and then he seized my hand and pulled me toward his car.

Momma began to cry.

Already I knew Vera was right. Whatever wonderful specialness the First Audrina had possessed was buried in the grave with her.

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