

The Midnight Dancers

Chapter One

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

—Grimm

“Rachel!”

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

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

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

“RACHEL!”

She whirled around. “What?”

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

Rolling her eyes, Rachel looked into the pantry, and then grimaced. Eighteen-month old Jabez was sitting on the floor, with one chubby hand poked shoulder deep into a container of bread flour. Hearing his name, he raised his eyes, puckered over with brown stubs of eyebrow. His baby mouth was a round O. “Am I not supposed to be doing this?” his gaze clearly said.

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

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

“Why weren’t you girls watching Jabez?” Sallie retorted, instead of apologizing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The kitchen floor’s not mopped,” Rachel said.

“I did it!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ask Dad,” Rachel said absently.

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

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

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

But we aren’t even having devotions yet, Rachel silently fumed as she handed over the magazine. She stared at her denim skirt, which seemed to her to be unforgivably plain. The other girls were drifting into the living room now, and Jabez, in pajamas, toddled into the living room, tripped, and fell face-down on the carpet.

Amidst the wails, Rachel heard the phone on the end table beeping and picked it up. “Hello?”

“Uh, is Rachel there?”

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

“Hey, what’s up? It’s Alan.”

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

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

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

“Who are you talking to?”

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

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

“Who were you talking to?”

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

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

“Alan.” There was no helping it now.

“That Vonnegun boy, right?”

“Dad, he goes to our *church*.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I understand you, Dad,” she said.

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

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

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

“Then if you know the way, why you don’t follow it?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I know. How are you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rachel snorted. “Yeah. Sour balls.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“This room is too ancient,” she grumbled.

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

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

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

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

“Isn’t there something funny about that chimney?” Tammy said abruptly. “It looks too wide.”

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

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

Rachel held out her hands. “That’s how wide the kitchen chimney is,” she said. “I almost can’t get my hands around it.”

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

Rachel did, and was surprised. “You’re right, it’s about a foot and a half wider. Wonder why?”

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

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

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

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

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

“No, no. Push it in,” Tammy said. “It’s like, soft.”

“Soft?”

“Well, it gives under your hand.”

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

“That’s too strange,” she said. “What is it? A broom closet?”

“Yeah, for one broom,” Miriam said.

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