

Narrator Catherine Dollanganger, 12, is the second of four children, following older brother Chris (14) and preceding twins Cory and Carrie (5). Cathy and her siblings live lovely blissful lives in Gladstone, Pennsylvania. Their father, Christopher Sr., works as a P.R. man for a computer company. Their mother, Corinne Dollanganger, is a housewife and cares for Cathy, Chris Jr. and the twins. Each member of the family sports flaxen blond hair, blue eyes and fair skin. Chris Sr.'s best friend nicknamed them 'The Dresden Dolls' because of their resemblance to porcelain dolls.

Sadly, Cathy's life in Gladstone ends upon her father's tragic death in a road accident. Facing financial destitution, Corinne decides to move herself and her children back to her family home in [Charlottesville, Virginia](#).

Corinne informs the children that their grandfather Malcolm, on his death bed, is a rich man and that despite their mother being estranged from her family since the age of eighteen, she is the only heir to his vast fortune since her brothers died years before. Unfortunately, any hopes of a short stay such as promised by Corinne to the kids are dashed when they arrive and meet the cold-hearted Olivia, the children's grandmother and Corinne's mother. Upon arriving at their grandparents' estate, Foxworth Hall, the four children are immediately sequestered in a locked bedroom at the end of the northern wing. The bedroom has an adjoining bathroom, and in the closet is a narrow staircase leading to the vast attic.

Corinne is taken to speak to her mother in private. When she returns to her children, she has been savagely horse whipped by Olivia, who explains to the children that their parents were half-uncle and niece; their father had been Malcolm's half-brother, the son of Garland Foxworth and his second wife Alicia. If Corinne has any hope of gaining her father's approval, the existence of the children must be kept secret. So the children are told that they must remain in seclusion in the end bedroom and the attic of their grandparents' vast mansion until Malcolm's death.

At first, Corinne lavishes the children with expensive gifts and promises of a bright future. However, as time goes by, she slowly loses interest in her children, particularly Cory and Carrie who have almost stopped growing due to the stress of being locked inside. Corinne continues to favor Chris, though this love for her eldest does not motivate her to free her children.

The children initially spend most of their time decorating the attic to make it less scary for the twins. They turn it into their own paper-made garden; flowers and animals. Chris makes a swing for them to make the flowers move like there's really a breeze flowing through the attic. As time progresses, Cathy practices ballet in the attic, Chris and Cathy become voracious readers, and the twins are taught to read and write.

Corinne's abandonment forces the 'Dresden Dolls' to rely on one another for comfort and friendship. This leads to the formation of a new family unit, with Chris and Cathy assuming the roles of mother and father for their beloved twins. Chris and Cathy resolve to teach the twins schoolwork in a makeshift school room in the attic. And to keep themselves occupied, Chris and Cathy pursue their own dreams of becoming a doctor and the world's best Prima Ballerina respectively.

The children are gradually fed and looked after less well, culminating in the grandmother pouring hot tar on Cathy's hair and starving the children for a period of time, and Corinne visits

less and less often, eventually getting married to Bart Winslow, a local lawyer. Her eventual abandonment leaves them in the cruel care of Olivia, who regards the children as "Devil's Spawn".

As Cathy and Chris grow into young adults, they begin to develop sexual feelings towards one another, largely due to their confinement. This confuses and terrifies them, leading them to wonder if their grandmother is right about them.

Meanwhile, Olivia continues to abuse the children mentally and physically. They wither away from malnutrition as well as lack of sunlight, fresh air, physical activity and medical treatment. Eventually health problems force Chris and Cathy to start making plans for an escape, with Chris leaving their attic prison to explore the further reaches of Foxworth Hall with a wooden key that he had molded from the last time his mother visited. He steals small amounts of cash for their eventual escape and marvels at the opulent treasures the Foxworths own.

Later on, Chris has become ill, leaving Cathy to go and loot the Foxworth Mansion instead. Upon entering her mother's room, Cathy spots Bart Winslow, her new stepfather. Bart is sleeping in a chair and does not notice Cathy; Cathy is dazzled by how handsome he is and before she can stop herself, kisses him while he slumbers. Chris finds out about this kiss sometime later by eavesdropping on his mother and stepfather. An enraged Chris returns to the attic, confronts Cathy about the incident and [rapes](#) her, then pleads for forgiveness, stating that he did not mean to take advantage of her. Cathy forgives him, believing that she could have stopped him if she had really wanted to.

Cory becomes increasingly ill as they plan their escape, which leads both Cathy and Chris to plead with the grandmother and Corinne to take Cory to the hospital. Corinne balks; going so far as to slap Cathy for her insistence, but Olivia surprisingly intervenes on Cathy's behalf and agrees that Cory must go to a hospital. Corinne and Olivia take Cory away that very evening, ostensibly to a hospital, and it is the last time his brother and sisters ever see Cory alive. Corinne visits her children the next day and informs them that Cory had been stricken with pneumonia and had died while in the hospital. Corinne adds stoically that there will be no funeral, as Cory's body had already been buried under an assumed name.

Cathy and Chris mourn the loss of their brother, whom they had thought of as a son. They fear for Carrie's health, as she has become distant from Cathy and Chris because of her twin brother's untimely death. It is because of Cory's death that Chris finally decides to take every dime, every diamond, anything of value in Corinne's room and flee Foxworth Hall.

This declaration comes too late, for Corinne and Bart have left Foxworth Hall once more and, it appears, for good. This leads Chris to wander the mansion in search of items worth pawning. While scavenging the mansion, Chris finds Olivia's room, where he discovers that his grandmother wears a wig because she is actually bald, with a few strands of gray hair on her head. Chris then finds his way to his grandfather's room, where he is forced to hide behind a sofa to avoid being spotted by butler John Amos Jackson (Olivia's distant cousin) and a maid.

It is through them that Chris discovers the horrible truth: Malcolm Foxworth died months ago. Corinne, as stated in her father's will, would not be allowed to bear children in her future

marriages, and if it were ever discovered that she had borne children in her first marriage to Chris Sr., she would be stripped of her inheritance and would be left penniless.

Chris also overhears that the servants were given the impression that rats lurked in the attic, in an effort to explain the noise the children made. The grandmother had also told the servants to never enter a particular room in the north wing because she left food covered with [arsenic](#) in the room in order to kill the rats who stole down the adjoining attic stairs.

Horrified, Chris connects the nearly untraceable poison to powdered sugar doughnuts the children had started receiving during their third year of confinement. After testing one of the doughnuts on Mickey, a mouse that Cory had kept as a pet, Chris and Cathy's suspicions are confirmed. The doughnuts were laced with arsenic, and Cory had not died of natural causes; he had been murdered.

Finally, the three remaining children are able to escape after over three years of confinement. Chris is almost 18 years old, Cathy is 15, and Carrie is 8 years old. Chris says they will travel to [Sarasota, Florida](#), where the flowers blossom every day of the year.