

ONCE UPON A FAIRY TALE

by Marilyn and Debbie Ristick

PROLOGUE

A myriad of lights from the city's skyscrapers shimmered like tiny, counterfeit stars across the moonless expanse, as Vincent lowered himself onto Catherine's balcony. Wind-burdened rain from an early spring storm lashed against the tiles and whipped around the edges of his cloak, creating small, slick puddles under his feet.

He paused for a moment, turning his face to the drops, inhaling deeply of air that had been scrubbed clean. It was laden with the sweet scent of water, mingled with a rich, loamy fragrance usually found far below in the park. Now, miraculously, it had risen eighteen stories above the labyrinths of concrete and glass to Catherine's balcony.

And why shouldn't it be so? It was a subtle promise of things to come, of budding trees and burgeoning flowers, after the long, bare months of winter. Was it merely a coincidence, he asked himself, that he had found her three years before this night, lying unconscious and near death in a dense copse of trees? Or had it somehow, somewhere, been decreed an eternity ago that their paths should cross, that she would, quite simply, become the most important part of his life, that he would love her forever?

Tonight, the balcony was dark, deserted. Last April twelfth, it had been illuminated by the dancing flame of countless candles and Catherine's glowing beauty. And yet the darkness had visited them, in the disembodied voice of a watcher who taunted them, threatened to reveal their love, and stalked Catherine in a haunting spectre of death.

Vincent shuddered at the memory. She had wanted him to step over the threshold into her apartment. Such a simple request. One he had wanted so desperately to grant her. Hesitantly, he had gathered his courage and taken one tentative step when the phone had rung, an alarm, stopping him. Their celebration had ended then and the terror had begun.

This night would be different. He knew that with certainty. In a moment, they would be together, truly together; he would make it so because, at last, he intended to make her wish come true.

He stepped from the shadows into the pool of pale light filtered through her drapes. Candles were everywhere inside, filling the room with a wash of gold. He raised his hand to tap on the pane, but stopped short, his breath caught in his throat; she was crossing the room, a vision in blue satin.

She turned, and at the same instant his heart contracted, an echo of her own, as she hurried to fling the doors wide.

"Vincent!" Ignoring the rain that beat against them, she stepped outside and into his waiting arms. Quickly, he drew his cloak around them both, holding her tight, shielding her from the storm.

She looked up at him, smiling. "I wanted to bring the candles out here for you, for us, but the weather...." She shrugged apologetically.

"Catherine, wherever you are, there is light. You are my light." He lowered his head to softly nuzzle her hair, whispering in her ear. "And should there have been a raging blizzard tonight, it could not have kept me from coming to you."

"I know," she breathed, burrowing into him, tucking her head under his chin.

He realized the moment would never be more right than it was now. "Catherine, it's much too cold and wet for us to stay out here. Would it be possible.... could I step inside?" The trembling in his voice was not from the cold, nor the rain. "It is my gift to you tonight, if you wish it to be so."

"Oh yes, Vincent, I do!"

She leaned back in his arms and their eyes locked and held. He saw in the luminous green depths a flicker of disbelief, felt through the bond the tumble of her emotions, wonder at his offer, excitement and gratitude for the possibility of spending a whole evening with him, when she must have believed she would see him for only a few moments.

Then there was nothing but her pure joy washing over him, through him, as she reached for his hand and slowly led him across the threshold. And when he stepped from the darkness to the light, he seemed to hear stones shatter and crumble, the invisible wall he'd erected so long ago nothing more now than a dusty pile at his feet.

Once inside, she motioned toward the twin sofas in the living room. "We could sit down, if you want."

He nodded and shrugged off his cloak, laying it over a chair.

"I.... I was hoping you'd come in, Vincent. I have something very special I want to share with you."

"Yes?" Despite doubts that lingered like the faint smoke of the candles, he sensed her happiness, saw it in the bright glitter of her eyes, and his own heart was reassured.

"I.... rented a movie today, a wonderful movie that I thought you'd enjoy. Would you like to see it?" Before he could answer, she leaned over and picked up an oblong box from the small end table. "It's about a couple who meet somewhere in time, in another century."

He captured her eyes with his own. "Do they fall in love?" he asked softly.

"Yes.... and they live happily ever after."

"Then nothing would give me greater pleasure than to watch it with you."

"Good! I was hoping so." She smiled up at him and put her arms around his waist, hugging him in obvious delight. "Vincent, do you like popcorn?"

"Very much."

"I'm glad, because I made plenty!"

He waited as she disappeared into the kitchen and returned with two huge bowls. Then, she took his hand and gently pulled him down beside her on the pliant cushions. He put his arm around her small shoulder, drawing her close as she curled into him, lifting her feet off the floor and tucking them beneath her.

He watched, fascinated, when she picked up the remote control device and pressed a button. The television came to life with the opening credits of the movie and hauntingly beautiful background music.

He felt himself begin to relax as the story started to unfold and he became entranced by the moving images, the breathtaking colorful landscapes that appeared before him on the screen. The setting was the last 1800's and there were horse-drawn carriages, grand houses filled with opulent furnishings, and a wonderful, if poignant, romance between two people whose depthless love moved him to the point of tears. As the actors brought the characters to life, he became one with them, feeling their joy, the cruel wrench of their heartache when circumstances forced them apart, and wanting, more desperately than he could have imagined, for them to be reunited, to be together forever. When, at last their dream was fully realized, sealed by a kiss of passion, he breathed a sigh of relief that stirred the silky strands of Catherine's

hair and caused her to look up at him.

"You liked it, didn't you?" Her question startled him back to the present.

"Yes, very much." He gazed into her eyes and saw the glimmer of tears that were reflected in his own.

"Catherine, perhaps do you think we might watch this movie again?"

She turned in his embrace and laid her hand against the soft suede of his vest, over his heart. "We could do that, Vincent," she responded quietly, her face close to his. "It will only take me a few minutes to rewind the tape."

He knew she wanted him to stay, that she didn't want this night to end, but as she bent over, stifling a yawn, he felt a twinge of guilt and wondered at the propriety of his request. It was the end of a long day for her and she must be very tired.

"The hour grows late, Catherine. Forgive me. I shouldn't have asked...."

"No, Vincent... please." She took hold of his hand, her eyes searching his, reassuring him. "This is our night, our special night to be together. I want to see this movie again with you. And, if I should fall asleep, promise you'll wake me when it get to the good part, the part where the lovers are reunited?"

"I promise I will." He raised her hand to his cheek, relishing its warmth against his skin.

They settled back as the opening credits rolled again and he folded Catherine close. Through the bond, he sensed her peace, her contentment, as she rested her head next to his heart. Soon, despite her good intentions, her breathing grew slower, deeper, and he knew she had drifted into a dream-filled sleep.

The nineteenth century returned to the screen in front of him and in the quiet of Catherine's living room, he couldn't help wondering what his life, and hers, might have been like had they been born a hundred years ago. Would they have met? Would destiny have brought them together as surely as it had three short years before? Was their love always meant to be, like the star-crossed lovers in the movie? He found himself mesmerized by the images floating across the screen and by his own musings. Unable to resist, he gave himself up to the twilight world of dreams and followed Catherine to another place, a life that might have been, somewhere in time.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY SUMMER 1887

"Last Call! All aboard!" The conductor's gravelly voice rose an octave to match the violent hiss from the engine as steam billowed in white clouds along the shiny rails, obscuring the men and women crowded around the train. Catherine Chandler looked back once at the clusters of people waiting on the platform, then lifted the folds of her green brocade skirt. The fabric rustled in her hands as she hurried up the three steps of the long pullman car and entered the compartment that matched the number of her ticket. The train shuddered to life and lurched forward, causing her to stagger as she tried to keep her footing. She grabbed wildly for the metal rod securing the curtain at the doorway and nearly dropped the bulky case clutched in her right hand. Embarrassed, she glanced over her shoulder, wondering how silly she must appear to the other passengers who, she suspected, were much more adept than she at keeping their balance on moving trains.

"Here, miss, let me have that." The deep but kindly voice belonged to a porter dressed in a neatly starched navy blue uniform. He plucked the satchel from her hand, carefully setting it down inside the tiny cubicle.

Catherine gave him an appraising look. He was tall, slender, and had an earnest, friendly face -- rather good-

looking if not outright handsome; she decided he was perhaps a little younger than her twenty-four years. He moved with grace, gently taking her arm to assist her into the small upholstered settee occupying part of the tiny sleeper compartment.

"Thank you so much." She smiled at him, appreciative of his aid, and reached in her purse for a coin.

A crimson flush colored his cheeks as he refused the proffered coin, his eyes meeting hers. "It was my pleasure to be of help, Miss...."

"Chandler," she supplied with a grateful smile.

"Ah, Chandler. yes." Sketching a slight bow, he pivoted on his heel and disappeared out the door, leaving her alone.

She giggled at his flustered exit and leaned over, wisps of her upswept hair falling over the smooth jacket she wore. She replaced the coin, snapped shut the handbag, and laid it on the shelf beside the settee, brushing back the golden brown strands of hair. Settling into the plush cushions of her seat, she watched as the train began to pull away from the cavernous station, trailing long fingers of elusive steam on its wake.

She turned her attention to the wide window that formed the wall of her compartment and the panorama slowly changed as they left the tangle of narrow, steel tracks and started to pick up speed. The train, six cars in length, jolted and tilted sharply as they entered a steep curve and she saw the glint of late-day sun reflected off the East River on the far horizon. She pressed her face close to the glass and caught a glimpse of the yachts that frequented the harbor in July. Beyond them, framed as if in a picture, stood the tall pillars and struts of the Brooklyn Bridge.

'Yes,' she thought sadly as her mouth silently formed the words, '*The Bridge*.' She closed her eyes at the memory burned forever in her mind, and behind the darkened lids, more than a thousand colorful fireworks exploded in the midnight sky, casting their countless red and gold streamers against the velvet blackness, as if in promise of a brighter tomorrow, searing her heart with renewed hope.....

It had been May 24, 1883, and the occasion was the grand opening of the newly-constructed wonder of the age, an imposing span of woven steel and concrete, a feat thought never to be duplicated anywhere else in the world. This was the bridge that would finally link the boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan; to change, in an instant of time, the city and the lives of its people. She and her father had spent that joyous day together. How proud she was to be on the arm of Charles Chandler, the epitome of a gentlemen in everyone's eyes, especially her own, prejudiced as they were. Prominent New York attorney, man about town, urbane; a friend to all who knew him.

After her mother's death fourteen years before, she had grown increasingly close to her father. Each struggled with bitterness and grief in the months following Carolyn Chandler's passing and sought solace in the other's company. Yet, as the years passed, their lives had gotten so busy, so complicated, the closeness they'd always cherished seemed threatened and, slowly, it began to slip away.

But, on this day, they forgot the pain and, instead, laughed and joked about their '*date*,' a rare time when they might, once more, enjoy each other's companionship.

The hours sped by as they reveled in the carnival-like atmosphere that permeated the grand event. After lunch, they listened to the enthusiastic speeches given by President Chester A. Arthur and Governor Grover Cleveland, followed at last by the opening of the span itself. An eager crush of people poured onto the bridge, pressing along its quarter mile length, until a virtual sea of humanity stretched from borough to borough high above the water. The air buzzed with animated conversation. Arm-in-arm, father and daughter joined the swelling procession, swept up in the tide of fellow New Yorkers. They stopped in the middle, gazing down at the many ships and smaller craft in the busy harbor below. Ocean liners and small sailing vessels alike were festooned with flags. At the time, she had thought the tiny boats, dwarfed by the bulky

ships of trade, resembled nothing so much as colorful bits of paper littering the bay, each adding its own special touch to the pageantry of the occasion.

The large freighters filled the air with the deafening blasts of their foghorns and she covered her ears, as she and her father continued onto the other side and the borough of Brooklyn. It seemed everywhere they turned there was a familiar face, warm and smiling; it didn't surprise her when Charles Chandler instantly spotted a profile in the crowd when their feet touched ground on the far side of the bridge.

"Thomas Gunther, isn't it?" Charles exclaimed, tapping the tall, dark-haired man on the shoulder to capture his attention.

The man spun around and a grin broke across his craggy face as he extended a hand to Catherine's father. "Charles! Well, what a pleasure it is to see you!" Then, at once, as if drawn by an irresistible force, his eyes lighted on her.

"Thomas, I'd like you to meet my daughter, Catherine," Charles offered, his eyes sparkling mischievously with delight.

"Then it's a double pleasure that we should meet again, Charles." He turned a dazzling smile on Catherine and bowed elegantly, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips with a practiced touch.

She smiled politely, wishing he would release her hand. "It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Gunther." Taking in the sharp, yet handsome face, she mentally noted he was not too much older than she. She sized him up and decided he was successful, debonair and much too smooth.

"Tom," he replied, breaking her reverie. "Please call me Tom. Everyone else does." Reluctantly, deliberately, he released her hand, yet his eyes held hers until she had to look away, unnerved by the electricity coursing from the brown depths.

Thomas Gunther. His name was Tom....

"Tickets! Passengers, please have your tickets ready."

The sound of the conductor's voice intruded on her thoughts as the train lurched around another bend. Catherine opened her eyes with a frown. The name that had caused such fascination on that day now left a bitter taste on her tongue.

Her thoughts returned to the present and she peered around the doorway. She saw a stocky, middle-aged man in uniform slowly making his way down the narrow aisle. He swayed from side to side, his gait matching the steady rhythm of the rocking coach. He paused beside each compartment to collect the tickets; snatches of conversation bounced along the corridor as he made small talk with each passenger in turn.

When he poked his head around the curtain of Catherine's door, she handed him the one-way ticket she'd kept tucked away in her beaded handbag.

He bent down to kneel beside her until his ruddy face was even with hers. Examining the ticket, he read the destination aloud, as he punched a hole in the square piece of paper.

"MillBrook Station!" He broke out in a toothy grin. "Are you just paying a short visit or would you be staying awhile?" he queried after a brief pause.

Returning his warm smile, Catherine said, "Actually, I'm moving there permanently."

"I see. Well, it's lovely country up there, really beautiful!" His head bobbed up and down enthusiastically. "I had a sister who lived near MillBrook for a number of years before she decided to come back to the city. Such a nice, amiable place she always said, wonderful people, except for....." His voice trailed off and his

smile faded.

Catherine's eyes met his and she saw a shadow pass over the grey depths, a flicker of something -- was it fear? Surely not, but....?

"Except what?" she prompted, curious. A strange sense of misgiving crept into her heart; she had no idea why.

"Ah, never mind. I'm sure It's nothing. I'm sorry if I upset you, Miss Chandler. Rumors, tales; every place has 'em, you know. People get funny ideas. Now you think nothing more about it. Enjoy your trip and I hope you like your new home. We should be there by noon tomorrow."

Abruptly, he got to his feet and before she could question him further, he'd disappeared out the door.

"Th... Thank you," she stammered to his retreating form, wondering at his words, his sudden change of expression. "Rumors, tales," he had said. What did he mean? Why wouldn't he tell what worried him? Sighing, she leaned back into the plush cushions once more. Now, she'd likely never learn what had caused the flash of anxiety in his jovial eyes. Was there something, some danger, he wanted to warn her of? He was gone and she didn't want to risk embarrassment by calling after him. She turned her gaze back to the ever-changing scenery outside her window, trying to forget the disturbing conversation.

The river had retreated from view and in its place, tall brick buildings dotted the skyline. Row after row, they pressed close to the harbor - businesses that fed the life-blood of the city. A bright collection of signs graced the entryways; their large, ornate letters blurred together as the train gathered speed. Although she did recognize some of them by shape and color, the familiar names were lost on her; Chesapeake Bay Fur Traders, Boston Harbor Imports. But it was one name alone she sought as she leaned forward, squinting into the glass, searching for the distinct blue and gold sign she knew above all others.

The train raced by the two-story wooden structure so quickly she nearly missed it; yet it was there, a brief image that flashed across her eyes, the vision of it burned upon her mind forever. The building was boarded up now, empty and desolate, its paint already beginning to peel, the sign white-washed, its message gone. Her heart thudded loudly in her chest, drowning out even the hypnotic music of the rails, and she collapsed against the seat. A wave of intense sadness washed over her; she was lost in a sea of hollow memories. She buried her face in the faintly musty cushion, as the past claimed her again.

Catherine had found that Tom Gunther was a man not easily dissuaded. That much she'd understood from the beginning, from that fateful day they'd met across the Brooklyn Bridge. Without hesitation, Tom accepted Charles Chandler's gracious invitation to join him and his daughter for the rest of the festivities. Through the afternoon, Tom had proved to be charming, if a bit aggressive; a young man who, it seemed, was more than determined to win Catherine's heart. He engaged her father in lively conversation, showing animated interest in Charles' prosperous firm, asking all the right questions. And it turned out that Tom was no less ambitious himself. Owner of a thriving import business, he confided that he had his sights set on capturing the office of Mayor. Charles had been duly impressed and more than a little intrigued by Tom's stories. He was enraptured by the travels and exploits that had taken Tom around the world, in search of fine goods that would command outrageous sums of money in the exclusive shops that lined the city's boulevards. But Catherine had been bored.

A gala fireworks display capped the day's events and Catherine found herself more than glad when the black edges of night finally swallowed the heat of the sun. Tens of thousands of people streamed back onto the bridge in expectation of the show about to begin and she fidgeted with the pearl buttons of her blouse, as the swell of people forced her into closer contact with Tom. He moved nearer to her, his body molded snugly against hers, and she felt suddenly dizzy, flustered by his boldness. She knew he used the cramped

conditions as an excuse to touch her and it angered her. She resented his attentions, wishing only that the light show would be over. Under any other circumstances, she was sure she would have enjoyed the brilliant bursts of color that elicited cries of delight from the crowd. Now, she wanted desperately to be rid of this new suitor and go home.

When the show neared the grand finale, Tom put his hand slightly on her arm. She tensed and it was much to her relief, when the last rocket flared in an arc across the sky and burst into a thousand blue and white shards. As falling points of light rained back to earth, a loud round of applause and whistles filled the air; it was over, and people dispersed in all directions. Catherine tugged at her father's sleeve in silent plea. She wanted to go, too.

They parted company with Tom then, but not before he'd obtained the address of her father's law firm and an invitation to stop by at his earliest convenience. Not three days later, he called, arriving on the pretense of asking her father's advice on a legal matter. Catherine knew his real intent involved her. He had designs on her; it made her feel like a trapped animal. She realized she must be polite to him, since she took care of her father's books and, on occasion, assisted him with a few cases, researching information and filing reports. She had at one time harbored the desire to be an attorney as well, but proper young ladies didn't practice law. Her father compensated as best he could, by giving her a generous taste of the intriguing field he had chosen.

Tom's motives, as suspected, were less than noble. He expressed admiration for her intelligence and ambitions, yet pursued her with the vengeance of a hound after a fox. He intended to make her his wife, mold her into an image that suited his tastes, and finally settle her into his prestigious brownstone, with the prospect of eventually filling it with a large family.

In the end, after two years of his dogged courting, she gave in, against her better judgement and the wishes of her heart. She was tired of fighting him, tired of fighting her father as well. Charles liked Tom immensely, and on more than one occasion had hinted, not very subtly, that she could do much worse than marrying Thomas Gunther.

They became engaged June 12, 1886; strangely, it was not much later that Tom began to distance himself from her. His withdrawal was barely noticeable at first - a couple of forgotten dates, followed by profuse apologies, or an important party missed with no clue of where he'd been and why he'd cancelled their plans. As the weeks wore into months, his moods grew darker, punctuated by sharp bursts of anger; still he refused to tell her what troubled him. When she threatened to call off the engagement unless he told her what was bothering him, he fixed her with an icy stare and told her she would do no such thing - there was too much involved; his reputation was at stake; he would not allow her to humiliate him. Then, he abruptly announced that he was leaving on an extended journey to the European continent and that he expected them to wed on his return. She heard nothing from him as autumn lengthened into winter. In December, she took off the large, oval diamond he'd given her six months before, put it away in a velvet-lined box and never took it out again.

Her father died suddenly of heart failure the first Friday of January, and the following Tuesday the front page headlines of the Daily News announced the arrest of Thomas Gunther for arms smuggling and piracy of illegal goods. Still numb with grief over her father's passing, Catherine went to see the man she was supposed to marry on his return. She sat across from him, cold steel bars separating the tables when they faced each other in the county jail.

She asked him just one question. "Why, Tom?"

His eyes lowered, and his shoulders slumped in resignation; he was a defeated man now, broken, unable to meet her steady gaze. He gave no reply, only shook his head slowly back and forth in shame.

Knowing there were no more words for either of them to say, she got up to leave. As she turned away, she heard him whisper "I'm sorry."

She pretended not to hear him and walked out, never looking back. Shortly after his indictment in the bitterly cold month of February, she received the sealed letter informing her of Charlotte Grafton's death, and with it, the inheritance that now passed into her hands as Charlotte's only surviving heir.

Unable to face the future alone in the city, wondering at this unexpected opportunity that had come her way, she made arrangements for her eventual move to upstate New York and a life she knew nothing of - one which, she hoped, would be better than the aching, empty existence she had endured since the loss of her father and her fiancé.

"Excuse me, Miss Chandler!" Catherine started at the voice and her hand unconsciously flew to her hair, her cheek. She was shocked to feel the warm wetness there; she hadn't realized she was crying.

She hastily wiped away the tears and called out, "Yes? Come in please."

The fresh face of the young porter peered around the doorway. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but it'll be dark soon. Would you like me to light the lantern in your compartment?"

"No, thank you. I - I feel a little sleepy; I'll be retiring soon." She didn't tell him that she welcomed the secret darkness of the night and the comfort sleep might bring.

"All right. I'll wish you a good night then!" he replied cheerily, and was gone.

"Good night," she breathed, the words little more than a whisper.

She turned to open her case and sighed, feeling the chain she wore around her neck catch on a button. She undid the clasp and examined the precious piece of jewelry. It had been her mother's locket, a cherished and valuable heirloom, presented to Catherine by her father shortly after the funeral. Now, on this swaying train, she opened its jeweled compartment, smiling wistfully at the faces staring back at her with such love. Her memories were bittersweet, perhaps even tragic - but they were hers, and no one, not even the man who had betrayed her, could take them away.

Stifling a yawn, Catherine blinked back the sleep her body craved and began to prepare herself for the night. The settee opened into a small bed, big enough for one. As she smoothed down the covers, she saw the deep purple of the sky visible through the window; the arc lights that always graced the New York skyline were nowhere to be found. She sat on the edge of the bed for a moment to gaze out; all she could see was the gentle undulation of the far away hills. The miles were falling behind her, taking her further and further from the empty dreams of her lonely nights, closer and closer toward the advancing light of a new morn.

With a sigh, she fell back on the clean, white sheets. Closing weary eyes, she allowed the gentle rocking motion of the train to relax her. And just before she fell asleep, she wondered if she would dream again of the tall, mysterious man with cascading amber hair. His face had been hidden from her in the repetitious dreams that had begun two weeks before. But, each night, he had drawn nearer in her image-filled sleep. Perhaps tonight, the shroud that enveloped him would be lifted and she would see him at last and understand the dream's significance.

CHAPTER TWO

Despite a fresh change of clothing assembled in the tiny confines of the sleeper booth, Catherine felt far less than presentable when she emerged from the one-room depot at Millbrook Station. Her legs were uncharacteristically shaky, threatening to give way under her, too recently accustomed to the gentle rocking

motion of the train.

She recalled the conductor saying they should arrive in MillBrook by noon; now it was nearly three pm. They'd been delayed by an unforeseen emergency, when a deer chose the wrong moment to cross the tracks. It had been the middle of the night when the poor animal was struck by the engine. One of the large front wheels had been set out of alignment and the shock had been just enough to rouse most of the passengers, herself included. Workers with lanterns had scurried onto the track like fireflies; it took them most of the night to repair the damage and get the wheel reset on the rails.

Now, standing at the edge of Main Street in this tiny village, she wondered if it was too late to secure a carriage for the rest of her journey to Grafton Estate. From what she'd seen through the window as the train pulled into the station, she surmised the town had perhaps a population of two hundred people, not counting the horses and dogs. Surely, there must be at least one hotel or boarding house where she could spend the night if necessary.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a light tap on the shoulder as someone came up behind her. Slowly she turned around, still unsure of her balance, and found herself staring into the brown eyes of the young porter who had been so kind to her on the train.

"You look a little lost, Miss Chandler. Is there any way I can be of assistance to you?"

Grateful for his offer, she smiled at him in relief. "You've been so kind to me, Mr... ah?" She realized she had no idea of his name though he knew hers.

"Michael," he supplied, "Michael Ames. And I'd be pleased if you'd feel free to call me Michael."

"I will, if you'll call me Miss Catherine," she responded with a smile, noticing that her legs felt a bit steadier.

He grinned, bowing slightly in acknowledgement. "Miss Catherine it is then."

"What I really need, Michael, is a carriage to take me out to the Grafton Estate. Do you know where I might secure one?" She fumbled in her case for the letter and deed that gave her official title of the property of the late Miss Grafton. She withdrew the folded documents and handed them to Michael. "I've just been given claim to Grafton by inheritance. My aunt's will mentioned there were a number of servants living there. Several weeks ago, I wrote the estate, informing them of my intention to move here. With many items of business to attend to in New York, I couldn't be specific about the exact date of my arrival, so no one is here to meet me.

Michael listened with interest and carefully examined the papers before handing them back to her. "So then, **YOU** are the new mistress of Grafton?"

"You knew I was coming?" she asked, her green eyes growing wide with surprise. She imagined the gossip that must, even now, be circulating through the village, the speculation and tales spreading about the new mistress. Glancing around her, she half-expected to see others staring at her, maybe even pointing or whispering behind their hands. Much to her relief, of the few people on the street, no one seemed to be paying any attention.

Michael shifted uncomfortably and offered an apologetic smile. "Yes, I knew you were coming. It's hard to keep a thing like this secret in a small place. Mind you, the talk around MillBrook isn't bad at all. Most people are just curious about you."

"I understand," she replied, relaxing a little. It would be natural for others to be interested in this sort of news. "Actually, I was quite surprised when I received the letter informing me that Charlotte Grafton had bequeathed her estate to me. Though she was my aunt, I barely knew her. The only time we met was when she came to New York fourteen years ago." Catherine didn't mention the occasion was her mother's funeral.

"It's very sad, Michael. I can hardly remember what she looked like."

"Yes, I'm sure then it would come as quite a surprise," he agreed; he glanced at her shyly, his cheeks flushed as before. "I, for one, am mighty glad she remembered you. I would be most pleased to take you to Grafton, Miss Catherine. As a matter of fact, I would just be terribly offended if you turned down my offer."

"Then, I won't," she assured him, a flood of relief washing over her. She wouldn't have to find a room for the night after all.

"Now I have several errands I must attend to first, so our journey may be delayed for a brief while. I do promise to deliver you safely there - before dark," Michael added, the tenor of his voice changing slightly.

Glancing at him, she was startled to see a shadow of unease pass over his face, a flash of uncertainty in his warm, brown eyes. It reminded her of the conductor's face when he spoke of MillBrook, the sudden change in his countenance.

'Rumors, tales,' the conductor's words whispered through her mind. *'Every place has 'em, you know....'*

Was there something she should be fearful of? Some nasty secret harbored by this picturesque village and its people? Would it come to touch her own life in some way? All this she considered, yet said nothing of it to Michael.

Instead, she told him, "I don't mind waiting for you. And, of course, I will pay you well for your services." He put out his hand in protest and shook his head. "I want no payment for you, Miss Catherine. Knowing I can help is reward enough."

She met his eyes and saw his attraction to her reflected in their warm depths, as he cleared his throat and shifted his gaze to the bulky satchel at her feet. "Ah, you must hve more luggage than this," he stammered.

"Yes, I do," she assured him. "There are four trunks, and they're very heavy, I'm afraid."

"Well," Michael smiled, regaining his composure, "it's not a real problem, Miss Catherine. But we won't be able to take them with us today, though. I can make plans to deliver the trunks to Grafton first thing tomorrow morning, if that would be all right."

Touching his arm in thanks, Catherine nodded, her eyes filled with both amusement and gratitude. "That would be just fine, Michael. You've been more than kind to me." At that moment, her stomach chose to protest its empty state.

"Oh," he laughed. "You must be hungry! There is a place close by with wonderful food, and good company. Are you interested?"

With so much going on, she honestly hadn't thought about eating, but now remembered that the ham sandwiches and small bag of fruit she'd brought with her for the trip had been finished the night before.

"Yes, I believe I am," she replied. "I haven't eaten since yesterday."

He took her arm and turned her around so that she faced north. "Just two blocks up this street," he said, pointing the way up the twisted main street of the village. "It's the Hamilton Hotel," he explained, showing her the large, red brick building rising above the other small store-fronts. "The owner is a personal friend of mine. Her name is Elizabeth Brooks, but everyone calls her Betsy. Please, go in and rest awhile, and tell her I said she'd take good care of you. She will, Miss Catherine."

Again, Catherine was touched by his sincerity, his humble demeanor. She truly believed she could trust this young man with her very life, should it be necessary. She turned to face him and squeezed his hand. "I'll tell her, Michael, and I'll wait for you there as well."

Catherine raised the heavy blue pitcher and watched the thick amber honey drizzle onto the flaky biscuit she held in her other hand.

"Is there anything else you'd care for, Miss Chandler? Some more biscuits, perhaps? Or some tea?"

Looking up into the cheerful face of Betsy Brooks, Catherine smiled. The large, middle-aged woman had met her at the front door of the Hamilton Hotel. She'd prepared a place for Catherine at a small table and offered her a wonderful assortment of foods to choose from. She'd also insisted that Catherine called her '*Betsy*', at once putting Catherine at ease as they talked about her new home.

"No, thank you, Betsy. I'm so full right now I don't think I'll eat another bite for a week!" Then, eyeing the honey-laden biscuit, she added ruefully. "Well, I might be able to finish this! Everything was delicious - the best food I've eaten in years!"

Betsy's full cheeks flushed with pleasure at the compliment. "I'm pleased you liked it; I hope it was a fitting welcome to MillBrook."

"It was, I assure you." Catherine smiled at the woman who so obviously enjoyed the fruits of her labor. Michael had been more than right. Betsy Brooks was the embodiment of graciousness and hospitality.

Soon the empty plates were efficiently whisked away and Catherine leaned back in the upholstered chair. She gazed out of the high, wide window beside her table, drinking in the view.

Across the cobblestone street, colorful storefronts crowded against each other in patchwork fashion, marching along wooden sidewalks that were dotted here and there with small evergreen bushes and tubs of bright flowers.

Just two days before she had jostled her way down the busy sidewalks of New York City, and now she sat in a homey hotel, in this small village surrounded by rolling hills. Would the beauty of her new home bring her the peace she so desperately sought, she wondered. Would it banish, at last, the misery and aloneness that haunted her every waking moment and followed her even in sleep to invade her dreams? Or would it cause a deeper pain than the one threatening to devour her heart?

A gentle tap on her arm startled her; she gazed up to see Michael staring at her with concern.

"Are you all right, Miss Catherine? You look kind of sad."

Catherine sat up and brushed a tear from her cheek, hoping Michael wouldn't notice. "Yes, I'm all right. Just a little tired."

Michael simply nodded. "You've had a very long trip and it won't be too much longer now, I assure you. I've got the carriage waiting outside."

Betsy came up behind Michael with a grin, putting her arm around his affectionately. "This is my boy, you know," she told Catherine with pride. "He's always been just like a son to me."

"Betsy helped me after my father died," Michael explained. "She let me wait tables - she even gave us food if our money ran short before payday came."

"That's really wonderful," Catherine replied gently. "To have help carrying the pain, someone who cares..." She felt the tears welling in the corners of her eyes and bent over her handbag, drawing out a bill and several coins. She counted them slowly, deliberately, hoping Betsy and Michael hadn't seen the evidence of her own grief.

"There's no charge for what I gave you, Miss Chandler." Laying a hand on her arm, Betsy Brooks shook her head. "Now you put your money away. Please, consider the meal a gift - a welcoming gift to MillBrook."

Her kindness touched Catherine anew. "Thank you so very much, Betsy, and please call me Miss Catherine."

"All right, Miss Catherine. I'm glad I could be of help to you on your first day here. But you must remember to come by the hotel to see me whenever you're in town on business."

"I will," Catherine promised, then followed Michael out the door and into the sunny street beyond.

He put the heavy suitcase in the rear of the coach and carefully helped Catherine onto the wide seat. He hoisted himself up beside her and turned to her, lingering concern in his expression.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," she gave him a tremulous smile, biting her full lower lip. "At least I think I am."

Michael squeezed her hand briefly, before picking up the reins and urging his dappled mare into a trot. As they passed slowly along the almost-deserted Main Street, he pointed out some of the enterprises lining the sidewalk. She welcomed this diversion, hoping it would take her mind off the sorrow that had welled in her heart moments before, and the apprehension she couldn't help feeling about the life that lay ahead.

"MillBrook isn't big as towns go," he explained, gesturing toward the row of storefronts. "But it has just about any kind of service you would ever need. Over there to your left is the MillBrook Bank, next to it is Harper's General Store. Mr. Harper carries most everything from food to dry goods and hardware. He's a nice man and if he doesn't have what you need, he'll move heaven and earth to get it for you." He gave Catherine an impish wink. "Now, on this side over here is old Doc Watkins' office. He's a physician, and undertaker."

Catherine grimaced at the thought. "Sounds a little gruesome."

"I guess it does," Michael laughed, teasing. "But, look at it this way - he can just bury his mistakes."

This time she couldn't help laughing out loud, and the tension that knotted her muscles eased a little. She hoped Michael would continue his running commentary.

He did. "Mr. Greer, the tailor, is right next door in that small alcove and just down a bit. See there, is Pete Steele's blacksmith shop. He's about the busiest man around these parts, and if you've got horses, you'll make his acquaintance real fast."

When they reached the end of the street, Michael jerked the reins sharply to the left, directing the mare onto a gravel road.

Catherine squinted into the sun, now hanging low and shimmering, intensely hot, in the hazy, humid air. All she could see was a dusty trail that snaked its way endlessly across a series of undulating, green hills.

"This is the way to Grafton." She spoke the words more to herself than to Michael. Then, in a louder voice, she asked, "How far is Grafton?"

"About seven and a half miles, at least as the crows flies. Don't worry, Miss Catherine. I'll have you there before nightfall."

"I'm not worried." She sensed a slight uneasiness in him, as he shifted on the seat. In that moment, she remembered his earlier words, and the shadow of fear in his eyes when he promised to arrive at Grafton Estate before dark. She didn't question him further. Instead she chose to ask about his life, remembering him mentioning his father's death. It seemed he had known heartache, too.

Michael told her that he had been born in the larger town of Bedford, twenty miles to the north. His family had moved to MillBrook when he was eleven years old, and after that, life had not been easy for them. His father contracted a virulent strain of tuberculosis and died the following winter, leaving behind a wife and three sons. His mother, an expert seamstress, soon was always in short supply, and at sixteen, he was forced to find employment. He was taken on as a porter with the up-and-coming Chesapeake Railroad and had been with them ever since. At present, he worked the route between New York City and Niagara Falls, riding

the train eight days straight, then four days off. He proudly told her of his acquisition of a team of horses and a wagon. For several years he had spent his time off delivering goods to the many estates scattered in the hills, earning a bit of extra money.

"Have you ever been to Grafton?" Catherine inquired, hoping he might tell her something of the place.

"I have been," he nodded. "Only a few times, though, and not recently. It's a beautiful place, Miss Catherine. A little mysterious. The great house is stately, well-kept. Dense woods border the property on two sides, so the grounds themselves are small. The only access I know of is a lane that was cleared through the trees."

"And my aunt, did you ever meet her?"

"Once, yes, about two years ago. I had been instructed to pull the wagon around to the service entrance for my deliveries. Usually, the maid or groundskeeper answered the door. On this one occasion, it was Miss Grafton who opened the door for me. She was a frail-looking little woman, but she had a strength about her you could see; I liked her right away."

He smiled at the memory. "Our conversation, of course, was brief, but she was nice, real polite; she sent me to the back room for something to eat. She didn't have to do that." He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. "I wish I could tell you more, but that's about all I know."

"Is there something else?" Sensing his hesitancy, she believed he wanted to tell her more. "When you offered to take me to the estate, Michael, you seemed..." She searched for the right word to describe the change in his demeanor. "You seemed a little afraid. You feel it is important that I arrive before nightfall. Is there some reason why you feel that way?"

He squared his shoulders and looked away from her, clearly uneasy with her questions. When at last he met her steady gaze, she saw the trepidation on his face. He didn't say anything at all; instead he carefully reined in the mare, bringing her to a halt.

Turning to face him, Michael stared down at his hands for a long moment. "There is.... really only stories I've heard. I don't want to frighten you, Miss Catherine."

"I'm not...." Catherine started to protest her lack of fear, but he held up his hand, stopping her.

He took a deep breath and continued. "As I said before, what I know are only stories, tales - tall tales I'll bet.

"About seven years ago, a man was found dead in the woods behind your property. He was pretty far back in the trees, mind you. He had deep gashes all over his back and stomach like he'd been clawed by a wild animal - a lion maybe." Nervously, he looked away from her intense eyes.

"No one around here had ever seen him before; he might have been a Gypsy. They pass through the area and camp out there, especially in the summer time. Some people from town saw the body when they took him up to the undertaker, and one of the men said his daughter had been attacked by that man, but rescued by something making lots of noise and wearing all black. Then he went on to say that the man was no good, and he deserved to die that way. He didn't know who or what it was that rescued his daughter, but he was plenty thankful. Nothing else happened after that, so folks pretty well put it out of their minds.

"Then, last year, a man with a reputation for violence claimed he was attacked over at Grafton by a beast of some sort - half-human, he said, with giant claws and fangs, long hair and the face of a ..."

He paused, swallowing hard. "The face of a demon, Miss Catherine, that's how he described it. I don't rightly know for sure. These stories have circulated around Millbrook. But that man, well, he'd been doing more than a bit of drinking. After awhile, nobody really believed he'd been attacked by anything. It was more like he made it up."

Catherine hadn't expected to hear a story about monsters; even though she considered it all the eerie

product of a few people's over-active imaginations, she felt a shiver start at the base of her spine and travel up her back, causing her entire body to convulse instantly. Michael was contrite. He took her shoulders gently and turned her to face him.

"I'm sorry, Miss Catherine, so sorry. I should not have told you. Really, please don't worry about this. You know how rumors get started, get out of hand at times. First thing you know, a new story gets added to it and people get to believing it as well."

She looked at him, her eyes wide. "Do **YOU** believe the story, Michael?"

With a sigh, he shrugged. "I don't know. It seems too crazy to be true. Still, they found that body, cut up pretty bad, and to this day that woman insists something rescued her. Like I said, the other man was drinking. However, now that I really think about it, he did have some deep scratches on him and his shirt was torn almost in half. Nobody knows how it happened - maybe a mountain lion. It seems the most likely answer. I just didn't want to take any chances at all with your safety, Miss Catherine."

"I deeply appreciate that, but I'm not afraid," she reassured him. "Often, tales are just that. Did you know that even in New York City, there were stories of monsters! One of them roamed the streets every year at the first full moon in the spring, seeking vengeance for the curse put on him by a jilted lover. That particular story kept me pretty frightened until I turned thirteen and decided there were no such things as monsters after all."

They both laughed then at the absurdity of it all. Michael picked up the reins to set the carriage in motion again, changing the subject, asking her about the life she'd left behind in the city.

Catherine acknowledged there would be many things she'd miss and told him some of the happy memories of her childhood before her mother died. Every Sunday her parents had planned a special outing, sometimes taking a picnic to the park, other times exploring the various wonders and sights of the city. She confided that during the dark days following her mother's death, she and her father had grown closer and had been determined to continue their practice of setting Sundays apart. Somehow, she believed it made the memories of her mother's passing a little less painful.

When Michael asked what had made her decide to move to Grafton permanently, she mentally picked through the disturbing events of the past several years and finally told him sketchy details of what had prompted her to leave New York. She knew, in her heart, she wasn't ready yet to share the utter despair and never-ending agony caused by her father's death and Tom's betrayal. The wounds were too fresh, too devastating, and she knew it would take someone extraordinary, someone she might never meet, to draw the painful memories from the hidden recesses of her mind, to offer the words of comfort she longed to hear, the words that might, at least, heal her shattered heart.

They fell silent for the rest of the trip and she let her head fall back against the high, lightly-padded seat.

Closing her eyes, she gave herself up to the ethereal scent of the wildflowers that grew in gold and purple profusion beside the road. The fields beyond had come alive with a mixed chorus of crickets and kadydids, welcoming the fast approaching night.

The last of the summer sun was beginning to dip from sight, as Michael slowed the mare to a walk. They were coming to a sharp bend in the road. When she opened her eyes, she saw a dense grove of elm trees, and an undergrowth of bramble bushes that blocked what lay behind them.

"Grafton is right through there," Michael said softly, letting go of the reins to point in the direction of the thicket.

It wasn't until they rounded the curve, that she caught her first glimpse of a winding gravel lane and the great white house at its end. The sight caused her heart to miss a beat. This was Grafton and it was **HERS**.

Tears welled in her eyes at the very idea that something so beautiful could belong to **HER**. "Why, it's lovely, Michael. Please, stop here," she begged.

Obediently, he brought the carriage to a halt, and with one swift move she stepped down from the high seat, landing gracefully on the path. "I'll walk the rest of the way, if you'll just hand me my case."

"Miss Catherine," he exclaimed, balking at her request. "I'd rather you let me escort you up the lane. It's nearly dark. I'd just rest easier if I could see you all the way to the door."

"You don't **REALLY** believe in monsters, do you?" she teased. Then, more seriously, she added; "I'd like to be alone for a few minutes." A slight breeze, cool against her skin, stirred in the tops of the trees and somewhere a nightingale began its haunting song.

She raised her head expectantly, looking at Michael. He still seemed uneasy with her request, but reached for the case, setting it down on the ground beside her.

"I appreciate everything you've done for me, I'm so glad we met." She extended her hand to him and pressed a dollar bill into his palm. When he tried to give it back, she closed his fingers around the money.

"No, you must take it. I will never forget your kindness, all that you've done for me."

He ducked his head, shyly averting his gaze. "It was my pleasure, Miss Catherine. First thing tomorrow morning, I'll deliver the rest of your luggage."

"I shall look forward to it," she smiled at his modesty. Picking up the heavy satchel, she turned away from him and headed down the path to a new life.

CHAPTER THREE

The last faltering rays of sun burned through the sheltered grove of trees alongside the lane. Their crimson fire fell past the coming night and was caught by the slanted, feral eyes of a masculine figure fully hidden by the stand of elm and poplar. An ebony hood of patched wool and other fabric had been drawn over his head so that what lay beneath was obscured by deep shadows. His gloved hand reached up to brush back long strands of saffron hair, so that he might have an unobstructed view of the young woman getting down from the carriage.

He stood in silence, intensely curious as she exchanged a few words with the tall, slender man who held the reins. Then, his heart contracted violently as he saw her begin to walk, with determination, down the cobblestone path.

He knew who she was, of course. Her name was Catherine Chandler and she was the new mistress of Grafton. Shortly before the ailing Charlotte Grafton died, she had asked her lawyer to draw up a new will that bequeathed the house and grounds to her only remaining heir, a niece from New York city she hardly knew. When the servants first heard the news, the entire estate had buzzed with excitement amid much speculation and gossip about the heiress and the changes she might bring along with her to Grafton.

Even he had not been left out of the rumors or the growing restlessness permeating in the air, in the days before her arrival. Anna, the maid, and Benton, the groundskeeper, had told him as much as they knew. They had warned him as well, of the changes that were certain to come after Miss Chandler's arrival. They cautioned him, fretted over him, worrying what might happen should the new mistress learn of his existence. In turn, he had comforted them, assured them their worries were unfounded. He, better than anyone else, knew of the greater need to keep himself hidden as never before.

But now, as she drew closer, then paused for a moment to turn toward the thicket where he stood, he

wondered if she somehow sensed his presence. And, even though he knew it was impossible, that she could not see him, his heart pounded wildly in his chest; a strangled gasp rose in his throat when he saw her breathtaking beauty. She was so near, he could almost touch her arm; he froze, unable to move, until she turned back down the winding path, unaware of her secret companion.

When he tried to follow, the long, sinuous muscles of his legs shook under his weight, threatening to topple him, and the adrenaline rushing through his veins throbbed painfully against his temples. Never before had he allowed his eyes to feast on such fragile loveliness. Never before had he permitted his heart to drink so wantonly from the well of a delirious, forbidden dream.

In his adult life, he had finally come to terms with and accepted the fact that he would never know the warm intimacy of a lover's touch, that his differences decreed he must always live apart from others and never be able to share in the life most took for granted. And, sadly, his solitary lifestyle served to temper the feelings that sometimes boiled to the surface and rendered him weak with wanting - his need for the very things that would never be his. There were times when the pain of his aloneness became almost too much to bear.

Winter nights, in particular - in the cold, moonless hours before dawn - he would waken from elusive dreams, where his differences melted like snow on an April morn, his features evened out, totally human then, if not handsome. Harsh reality would cause him to cry out in anguish for the passions forbidden him, for the soft, comforting warmth of one who would hold him near in a lover's embrace, would fill him with the heady wine of her kisses - would make him feel beautiful.

In recent weeks, the dreams had been more frequent, more insistent and puzzling. They were filled with hazy images of a woman - images that nearly drove him mad during his waking hours as he tried to bring them into sharper focus. Almost from the beginning of his life, he'd been blessed with empathic powers, powers that enabled him to know others' feelings, to sense their needs, to help and comfort them in times of trouble. And, while acknowledging these powers, he wondered if they were a gift bestowed on him by a higher source, whose infinite wisdom sought to offer him solace for the differences that so troubled him. He would never really know.

By now, besotted with this woman's beauty, unable to stop his trembling feet from matching her footsteps stride for stride behind the veil of trees, he knew with shattering certainty that she was the one he searched for, longed for, in his empathic dreams. Catherine Chandler was the woman he envisioned in his bed, entangled willingly in the loving strength of his arms. She was the one who brought him to the edge of insanity with her sweet kisses - told him he was beautiful beyond words. Her hair, the color of dark honey - yes, they were the same silken strands that played across his mouth, gleaming golden in the flickering flame of the candle in his chamber. Her scent was the same delicate hint of roses that filled his nostrils with delight, drowning his senses. Ah, such exquisite and wonderful dreams, such utterly impossible dreams.

In the hushed silence, her full skirt and petticoats rustled softly, brushing against the heavy suitcase she carried. He wanted nothing more than to step out beside her, to gallantly offer his assistance and take the heavy burden from her hand, to gently hold her arm and guide her to the front door of her new home.

Instead, he continued his journey alongside her, without her knowledge, his eyes never leaving her until the line of trees ended several yards from the great houses. He stopped, a haunted figure in the deep purple dusk, alone, watching as she slowly mounted the four steps to the veranda. She hesitated for a long moment, looking up and down the sweeping porch curving around the home. Abruptly, she turned full circle, her eyes taking in the panorama of the verdant grounds and the tunnel of trees she'd just passed through. At last she raised her hand to the brass knocker and tapped loudly on the massive door.

More seconds passed before the door opened, revealing a stout woman with snow white hair piled on top of her head. Without a word, she ushered the new mistress inside.

Unbeknown to either woman, the hooded figure collapsed against a sturdy elm, shutting his eyes.

"Catherine," he whispered hoarsely. Her presence rose in the dark places behind his closed lids, illuminating his mind with her beauty. And, in the secret recesses of his soul, in the hidden chambers of his heart, she could be called '*Catherine*,' only and forever '*Catherine*'...

He turned back toward the house and gazed longingly at the door. A light glowed in the window of the upstairs bedroom - someone had lit a lantern to guide her there and make her comfortable. After a moment, the curtains were drawn shut. He had no doubt it was the room Anna had prepared for Catherine's use, at least for that single night.

He could vaguely picture the splendor and grandeur of the great house; he had not been inside since his childhood, except to visit Charlotte Grafton during her lingering illness and to bid her a tearful farewell. Yet, he could see its elegantly furnished rooms, its gleaming brass mantels and balustrades.

In the cold grip of past Decembers, he had imagined the roaring hearth fire in its kitchen, and if he tried hard enough, he might chance to smell the yeasty scent of fresh-baked loaves made especially for him. But on this warm evening in June, he wanted desperately to invade that private space, rush to Catherine's side, kneel by her bed, to tell her... tell her... what?

Forcing himself to look away, he set his jaw as fierce determination settled in his heart. It blazed in him, seethed through him and erupted in a strangled vow.

Through clenched teeth, he pledged; "Never, Catherine, never will I allow you to look upon me. Never will you tremble in fear because of what sets me apart from you, nor will you shrink in horror at the sight of my face!"

He turned and spun away from all that could never be his. Through hot tears falling unheeded down his high, wide cheekbones, he headed down the twisted footpath that would take him home, to the simple and secluded haven he called his own - to the only place in the world where he belonged.

When the massive front door of the great house opened, Catherine stepped from one world into another, finding herself in the capable and stern hands of the matronly housekeeper. Annabelle Simpson, '*Anna*,' as most people called her, bobbed a slight curtsy and introduced herself, while taking the heavy case from the new mistress' hands.

After a brief greeting, Anna escorted Catherine through a small, elegant foyer and up a wide, winding staircase to the second floor of Grafton Estate. Reaching the top of the stairs, Anna glanced over her shoulder and spoke in a crisp, formal voice.

"All the rooms on the upper floor were Miss Grafton's living quarters. Now they will be yours, Miss Chandler."

Catherine reached out to the older woman and smiled. "Please stop, Anna... and please call me Miss Catherine." She hoped her request would serve to dispel a bit of the nervousness and tension she sensed not only in herself, but in the housekeeper as well.

Anna nodded curtly and paused, as if weighing the propriety of her new mistress' words. "All right, Miss Catherine it is." she replied, her tone a bit hesitant. "Then, if you'll follow me."

She led Catherine into a high-ceilinged, tastefully-furnished bedroom, lit by the soft glow of two ornate oil lamps. She put the heavy satchel on the large bed, then gestured wordlessly for Catherine to sit in a blue velvet chair in the corner. Without asking permission, Anna opened the heavy case, surveying the contents with a practiced eye. After a moment, she began to pull assorted garments and various bundles from the

bag, then bustled across the room, arms laden with skirts and blouses that had been hastily packed two nights before.

"Now," she said, turning to her new mistress with a stiff smile, "We'll just put these in here." Flinging open the doors of a long, deep closet, Anna hung the apparel inside, taking great care so that each item would hang evenly.

Next, she removed the petticoats and corsets from the satchel, examining them with a critical eye before tucking them into the drawers of a shiny oak dresser. When she happened to come upon a petticoat that possessed a small tear in its lace folds, she chuckled softly, wiggling her fingers through the hole and tossing it aside, marking it for the mending basket.

Feeling a bit useless and more than a little bewildered, Catherine watched, hoping to capture the older woman's attention.

She leaned forward in her chair and cleared her throat. "Anna, while you work, do you think you could tell me a little about Grafton? The letter sent by Mr. Maxwell, Aunt Charlotte's attorney, was really very sketchy. About all I know is that the estate occupies some fifty acres and there are twelve servants employed here."

Anna stopped folding the slip she held and turned her full attention to her new mistress. "Seven," she said shaking her head. "There are seven servants now." Her tone of voice served to discourage any further questions on this subject for the moment.

Then, with a kinder demeanor, she said, "Much of the property, you'll learn, Miss Catherine, is dense woods. For years, the open land was planted in wheat, corn and barley with a small portion in hay. The last two years, Miss Grafton left the land to lie fallow. After she took to her bed, well, I'm afraid all you'll find now are weeds."

"And my Aunt Charlotte?" Catherine gripped the arms of the chair. "Did she, I mean, was she ill for a very long time?"

Anna's grief was more than apparent, as she turned stricken eyes to Catherine. Even through the rigid formality, when she spoke her voice trembled, the words coming with halting slowness.

"Perhaps others would not think so, but it was long enough. It was about a year altogether, from when she first took sick until the end." Bowing her head with remembered sadness, she picked up the discarded slip. "I hated to see her suffer so; it was enough that she was bedridden, but no one should have to endure that kind of pain."

Catherine rose from her chair and crossed the room, stretching her hands toward the older woman. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, suddenly stricken with remorse for having asked, yet sensing that Anna might want, might even need to tell her about it.

Anna turned and offered Catherine a grateful smile. "Oh, I think you'll get to know more about her in the months to come. You see, Miss Grafton was a bright, intelligent woman. She wanted to keep this place safe, beautiful-- just like it was when her father first built it. You know, old Mr. Grafton did much of the work himself, though he employed a few tradesmen. Miss Grafton remembered all the trouble he went to, all the work that went into this place. She never gave up, even when...." The older woman stopped, unable to continue, and an air of haunting sadness filled the space between them.

The room was at once unbearably hot - almost stifling - and Catherine felt her heart racing all the way to her temples.

She tried to clear her throat, wondering if the words she wanted to say would come. "There's really no need to discuss this any further tonight, Anna. There will be other times."

Catherine vowed, in that moment, to do everything within her power to win this woman's trust and respect, and to insure that Grafton Estate would always honour the memory of the courageous woman who was now nothing more than a distant and hazy memory of her childhood.

Lost in her own thoughts, Anna replied, "Yes, there will be plenty of time." She attempted to occupy herself in the task of arranging the plump bed pillows and turning back the coverlet, but Catherine caught the glimmer of tears reflected by the muted light of the lamps.

After several silent minutes, Anna regained composure, and came to stand beside Catherine. Her face was lined with emotions that obviously weighed heavy upon her heart. "I'll bid you goodnight now, Miss Catherine," she said and moved to the large dressing table across the room.

Removing a set of towels, she placed them alongside the large porcelain basin and pitcher resting on the shiny surface, then turned to Catherine. "Please, forgive me. I've neglected to ask if I should draw your bath tonight?"

With a tired smile, Catherine shook her head. "I'd really rather rest tonight, Anna. I can always bathe in the morning."

Anna lifted wary eyes to meet Catherine's gaze. "You might wish to know that Miss Grafton took her breakfast promptly at eight every morning." One bushy eyebrow was cocked, as if this statement were some kind of test, perhaps a small but significant indication of how the new mistress would conduct her daily affairs.

"Eight o'clock is quite suitable," Catherine assured her evenly, wishing to end the reticence that lingered between them. She was rewarded with a slight upturn of Anna's tight little mouth.

"Good! Now, Miss Catherine, when you come down the stairs tomorrow, follow the hallway on your right. The dining room is the next to last entryway."

"Thank you, Anna, for everything."

Catherine watched until the short, plump woman disappeared through the door, then collapsed with a sigh into the plush, padded chair beside the bed. She closed her eyes, willing her mind to slow the myriad of thoughts and images, snatches of conversations whispering of a life left behind - of fireworks exploding in the black night; of city sounds, distant yet comforting in their nearness; of arc lights strung like dim pearls across the sky. And the shattered dreams of a man, his once proud head bowed in shame, his eyes unable to meet the fire in hers when she asked him one question.

"Why?" Catherine started at the sound of her own voice and she shook her head in remorse at the memory of Tom Gunther.

She willed herself to consider the future and thought about this new life offered unexpectedly; it was going to be challenging, exciting beyond reason, she decided, and very frightening, too. To think of the responsibilities thrust upon her slim shoulders! Still, her inheritance held out to her the kind of fragile hope that always comes with change. More importantly, it was a chance to forget a past that lay like leaden gray clouds over her heart.

A loud tapping noise pierced the silence of the room, intruding on her reverie. Her eyes flew open, daring around wildly, her senses at once alert.

It came from somewhere outside; Catherine rose from the chair and crossed to where the drapes covered the latticed window. A cool breeze played around the folds of her skirt where the window was opened slightly and she turned to extinguish the oil lamps before pulling the curtains apart. She stepped back, watching as the full summer moon spilled its riches across the floor in a silver stream. The tapping came again; she saw its source was the long, feathery branch of a stately pine brushing against the glass pane.

Her eyes were drawn irresistibly downward to the small patch of yard, cut in two by a single slanted line of light. The dark expanse beyond where the dense copse of trees followed the land looked eerily foreboding, even mysterious, and she shivered, recalling the uneasy feeling she'd had in the lane - as if someone were watching her from a hidden place. She was surrounded by whispers, by visions; darkness and light, mysteries and things not easily understood.

'Rumors and tales - every place has them, you know.' *'A man found dead in the woods near Grafton; it was like he'd been clawed by a wild animal.'* The conductor's voice, Michael's - and her own strange dreams of a mysterious man... Was it all an omen of some kind?

Nevertheless, the quiet enveloped her, broken only by the cadence of a faraway chorus of kadydids and the lonely chirping of a single cricket. An unexpected sense of peace settled over her like a soft, warm blanket, blocking the turmoil of her thoughts and the cauldron of her spent emotions. Her eyes looked up to the place where a lone star twinkled in eternal glory, and a comforting presence surrounded her, filled her.

Was it an angel calling to her from that icy home so far away, she wondered whimsically. No matter the source, it took away her fears, and relieved the weariness of her journey, offering her in its place a calmness she would not have thought possible.

Before, she doubted she would sleep at all this night. Now, she was barely able to stumble out of her clothing. Fumbling with the small buttons on her blouse, she finally unfastened them, then pulled it from her weary body, laying it over the chair before the dressing table. She stepped out of her skirt and petticoat, then managed to undo the hook on her corset. Groping in the dark, she found the silk nightgown laid carefully in its drawer and slipped it over her head.

The bed looked so inviting now, its lacy coverlet shimmering in the natural light. She fell across it as a disphannous cloud skimmed by the ripe summer moon and, somewhere outside of time, an owl called to its mate, a beguiling cry that spoke of love. The night closed in around her. With a tired sigh, she succumbed to its languor, knowing deep inside herself, that no matter what kind of life had led her to this place, tomorrow she would truly begin to live.

CHAPTER FOUR

The pure, warm light of the sun shattered the darkness behind her lids, drawing her from sleep. With a soft moan, she grasped at the pillow beneath her head, attempting to raise herself up on one elbow. Pushing, long sleep-tousled strands of hair from her face, she squinted into the white glare in a futile endeavor to open her eyes. At last she was forced to turn away from the harshness in confusion, wondering why the heavy drapes in her bedroom were open, and why the morning sun was blinding her when she knew her room in the brownstone faced due north.

Slowly, as her eyes struggled to focus on the shapes around her, she realized that she wasn't in her own bed, wasn't in her comfortable, familiar home. She wasn't even in New York City.

With a sharp intake of air, she sat up, lowering her legs over the edge of the bed to the carpeted floor. She was in the guest bedroom at Grafton, where she'd just spent her first night.

She got up quickly and looked around, taking in the elegance that had surrounded her in sleep. Hazy images from the night before cleared and her eyes were drawn to the huge four poster bed with white lace canopy above her, the ivory satin sheets never touched, the rumpled, yet delicate coverlet she'd lain on all night. *'I must have slept quite well,'* she thought, for she didn't recall dreaming at all and it seemed only a moment ago that her head had drifted down onto the plump pillow.

Crossing the room, she nearly fell over the large brass tub set almost squarely in the middle of the floor. "That wasn't there last night," she mumbled to herself. "Oh, my goodness!" She drew in another breath, remembering she had requested a bath this morning. She checked the tub and saw that it was partially filled with water. A china pitcher had been placed strategically on the table beside it. Testing the water, she groaned. It was tepid, nearly cold, and upon examining the pitcher, she was not surprised to find it was also cool to the touch.

With horror, she looked around her, searching for a clock - there was none! Was it possible that she had overslept? She ran to the window and noted that the sun was far above the horizon; she knew the hour must be much later than eight. Briefly, she paused, glancing down. The mysterious shadows and shapes of the night before had been chased away by the brilliance of this June morning. The lawn below swept away toward the lane like a carpet of green velvet; several trees and small flowering shrubs dotted the yard. At any other time, she would have been captivated by the view, but now her mind raced with anxiety. How could she have overslept on her first morning at Grafton?

Anna's words returned to her then, haunting her memory. "Miss Grafton always took a breakfast at eight," she'd said. What would the stern housekeeper think of her now? The older woman did seem capable of making unfair judgements. Would she make a swift judgement and deem her new mistress irresponsible?

"You're not being fair," Catherine said aloud, chiding herself for doing just what she feared Anna would - make a swift, unfair judgement.

A light knock at the door caused her to jump and whirl around. "Who is it?" she asked, shaken.

"Miss Catherine?" The inquiring voice was Anna's. After a brief pause, she called again. "Miss Catherine, are you all right?"

'As if on cue,' Catherine grimaced to herself. "Yes, Anna," she answered, trying to compose herself. "I'm fine. Just a moment, please." Flustered, she rushed to the closet, finding and pulling out a soft, cotton robe. She shrugged into it as she reached the door and opened it breathlessly.

"Anna, I must apologize. I'm afraid I've slept far too long."

Anna looked at her curiously, as if Catherine were an errant child about to be scolded, but all she said was, "No need to apologize, Miss Catherine." Her face softened as she added, "I can understand, after your trip and all, you were bound to sleep a bit longer. I'm afraid, though, your breakfast's gone cold. I'll have to ask William to prepare another for you."

As Anna turned to go, Catherine touched her arm, feeling like she was ten again and deserved the tongue-lashing which hadn't come. "No, please, don't have him go to all that trouble. If you could ask him to fix a bowl of porridge, that would be more than adequate."

"As you wish," Anna replied, then hurried around the corner into the hall before Catherine could say another word.

Catherine stood in silence, shaking her head. What should she do now? Should she go ahead and take a bath in the chilly water? Or could she do without and wait until tonight? Whichever one she chose, she would have to do it soon; Anna must not be kept waiting again!

"The basin will have to do," she assured herself, reaching for the large pitcher. After pouring a sufficient amount of water into the bowl, she washed herself as thoroughly as she could. She wiped herself dry with one of the thick towels from the dresser and turned to the closet, choosing a simple cotton blouse and skirt.

As she dressed, she mentally went over the things she needed to accomplish this first day at Grafton. Following breakfast, she would ask Anna to have the servants assemble in the drawing room so she could meet them, learn their names and duties. She wanted to discuss the estate with the groundskeeper,

possibly look around the immediate grounds with him. If there was still time left after that, she would pay a visit to the stables and look over the horses before lunch, then stay inside the rest of the day to get to know the great house itself. She hoped to go exploring - but that might have to wait for a day or two; Michael would be bringing the rest of the luggage, so she would have to spend some time sorting through the trunks. And she would need Anna's assistance to organize her closets.

Picking up the hairbrush Anna had laid on the dresser, she began to slide it through her tangled hair. She bent over and brushed the length of it, smoothing out the small snarls. With a practiced touch, she twisted and secured the silky locks on top of her head, using several long pins and a tortoise-shell comb. When she was finished, she gave herself an appraising glance in the beveled mirror above the dresser.

"Not bad," she murmured under her breath. Luminous green eyes stared back, arresting her for a moment. She softly asked the reflection, "Well, Miss Catherine, are you ready for your duties?" In silent answer, the reflection nodded back; the full, sensuous lips parted in a tentative smile.

Determined not to make Anna wait another moment, she headed out the door and found the wide sweep of stairs just to her left. Taking the steps two at a time, she ran her hand lightly along the shiny brass railing when she reached the bottom. She paused just long enough to admire the small, marble foyer. Two beautiful glass lanterns were set on either side of the walls and a small parsons table held a huge china vase filled with a fragrant bouquet of roses.

She inhaled the sweet scent of the flowers and found herself wondering if they had just been put there. She was certain they weren't there the night before. Impulsively, she reached out to pluck a small, red bloom, handling the stem gingerly as she broke it in two, careful not to touch the jagged thorns. Taking the comb from her hair, she placed the stem between its teeth, then pushed the comb back into place.

She followed Anna's instructions and hurried down the hallway until she neared its end. At the sound of voices, she pulled up short, surmising it must be the kitchen quarters. She recognized the woman's voice as Anna's and stepped closer, drawn by the anxious tone of the older woman's words. She rested her cheek against the coolness of the wall, barely breathing, and strained to hear what was said, struck with the knowledge that she really had no right to intrude on the servants' privacy.

"I can't help but be worried about him." Anna's voice wavered, laced with something very much like fear. "You know he's like my own son. With the new mistress here and all..."

"Now, Anna," the man's voice responded, deep and soothing. "You know we've discussed this many times before."

"I know, Benton, but I can't help but worry about him! What will become of him now? What if Miss Catherine should find out about him - if he comes to any harm because of her? I would never forgive myself!"

"The responsibility for his safety is not only yours, Anna. It belongs to all of us! He does have more than just the two of us, you know - there are the others. Together, we will protect him."

Catherine's throat constricted at what she heard and she waited, trembling, until the man Anna had called Benton continued.

"And don't forget, Anna. He's had lots of practice keeping himself hidden. He knows what's at stake."

"I hope so," Anna replied, obviously crying. "You know, Miss Grafton loved him so; I couldn't bear it if anything happened to him now. I just couldn't!"

"Please, try not to worry," Benton answered, scraping a chair across the floor. "William was almost finished fixing the porridge when I was in there, so why don't you stop worrying about the new mistress, and go get it for her. She'll be down in a few minutes and you know she must be hungry after sleeping so long. I have to

go out to the garden now. There's some new lettuce waiting to be picked and William wants some of it for tonight's salad."

Catherine's heart pounded so fiercely against her ribs, that she wondered if the servants might hear it. Frantically gathering the folds of her skirt, she raced on tiptoe to the far end of the corridor. She whirled around and touched the wall for support, drawing a shaky breath, as her mind reeled with the implications of what Anna and Benton had unwittingly revealed to her.

She froze as a tall, thin man emerged from the kitchen entryway, but he didn't look in her direction. Instead he turned and walked through a door at the end of the hall that must lead outside.

A quiver began in the pit of her stomach and turned into a shudder racing up her spine. How could she face Anna now? Would this betrayal of the housekeeper's privacy be evident in the look of guilt she knew must be written on her face? The undercurrent of distrust she'd sensed in Anna **HAD** been real; it was more than her being a stranger here. The walls of Grafton held secrets; something or someone, a man, with circumstances so dire it forced a conspiracy among the servants to see that he was protected - but, from **HER**? It didn't make sense; she vowed to find out what this was all about and prove in time that their secrecy was completely unwarranted.

Head held high, Catherine tried to will her shaky knees to steady themselves so she could walk down the hallway with some semblance of normalcy, should Anna suddenly come out of the kitchen. She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. She walked slowly, her apprehension almost palpable as she struggled to remain calm. At the entrance to the dining room, she cleared her throat the exact moment Anna emerged from the kitchen quarters.

The older woman seemed to have calmed herself, her demeanor stoic. In one hand she had a steaming bowl, and in the other, some other kind of container.

"Miss Grafton always sat at the place near the window," she said without a smile, motioning her mistress toward the large, oval table.

Unsure of what to do, Catherine licked her lips, watching as Anna placed the dish and silverware at that very seat. The housekeeper proceeded to pull out the chair and look toward her, questioning.

Catherine hoped her voice bore no signs of her own churning emotions, as she tried to smile. "Thank you, Anna."

"There's some fresh fruit for you to stir in the porridge if you like," Anna advised, pointing to the colorful array of sliced peaches and berries tumbled together in a cut glass bowl.

Noting that the vulnerable tone in Anna's voice was gone, Catherine picked up a spoon. "It looks delicious."

Anna stood rigidly before her, not acknowledging the compliment or meeting her eyes. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Catherine laid the spoon aside. "Yes," she replied. "If possible, I would like to meet with the rest of the staff as soon as I'm finished eating. Then, I would like to make an inspection of the immediate grounds. Is this possible?"

The older woman's facial expression never changed. "I'll inform the staff of your request, Miss Catherine. You could meet them all in the drawing room, if you like. I will also inform Benton of your desire to see the grounds."

Catherine offered a grateful smile and looked down at the fruit before her. "That would be fine, Anna. Thank you."

Anna turned to go, pausing at the doorway to clear her throat. "I forgot, Miss Catherine. Michael Ames was

here a bit earlier; he left your luggage. I'll have someone take it upstairs after our meeting. We can go over the contents later if you wish."

"I'm sorry I missed him." She was upset with herself all over again for having slept so long. "Is there someone who could deliver a message to his home. I would like to express my thanks to him once more. He was most kind to me."

"Well, Miss Catherine," Anna began, "I do believe William has to go into MillBrook tomorrow for supplies. Would that be soon enough to carry your message?"

"That would be fine," Catherine said.

After watching Anna leave, she began to stir aimlessly through the thick, steaming mixture in the bowl, her stomach knotted with anxiety. She suddenly doubted her ability to choke down even the slightest bit of the gruel. She'd decided the man she'd seen leave the kitchen was Benton, the man Anna had said could show her around the grounds. Would he prove to be as stony and distant with her as Anna had been? It was painfully obvious that both of them distrusted her and had judged her character long before she arrived at Grafton. It was unfair, and she felt a sharp stab of anger.

Taking her fork, she speared a peach slice, then cut it into pieces with a vengeance before tossing it in the bowl before her. She picked up a bit of the porridge in her spoon and raised it to her lips. It tasted fairly sweet, and with forced concentration, she thrust the spoon back into the bowl again for another taste. Somehow she must get through breakfast, meet Benton and the rest of her staff. It would help her to know them and their daily assignments; it might make all the difference once they got to know her. It would also help if she pushed herself to complete her agenda - to accomplish what she intended on this first day at Grafton.

"This is Jamie," Anna said, pushing forward a tall, thin girl who possessed large, beautiful eyes. She seemed nervous, as though she were shy. "She's my niece," the older woman continued. "A short time before Miss Grafton died, I began her training. You see, Miss Grafton thought she would make a fine ladies' maid. I've done the best I can with her and, if it's all right with you, she could serve you. You might have to put up with a mistake here or there, but mostly I think she'll do good for you."

Nodding slightly, Catherine turned appraising green eyes toward the younger woman.

"Hello, Jamie," she smiled, holding out her hand. "I would be very happy to have you as my maid. I can overlook honest mistakes, but you must promise to do your best for me."

"I will, Miss Catherine." Jamie blushed with obvious excitement. "I'll go up to your room now and start unpacking your cases, if you like."

Catherine touched the girl's arm. "We can always go that later, Jamie. It's not a job for one person. Instead, could you straighten the room, please?"

After watching the young girl leave, Anna turned to her mistress. "Thank you, Miss Catherine. I was worried about the girl, you know. She doesn't have enough training to try her luck outside Grafton yet, and well, I appreciate you giving her a chance."

Catherine turned to the older woman and smiled. In the hour since she'd finished her porridge, she'd met the entire staff of the estate, greeted each of them formally, and listened to them as they explained their duties to her. She knew that her own knowledge of running a household had amazed Anna during their meeting, but she'd run her father's house for many years and her understanding of the assignments and problems of each staff member would definitely assist her in the months ahead. Even Mary the laundress, had seemed taken with Catherine's understanding of fabrics. And William, the ruddy-faced cook, had

confided in her ear that Mary was not easily impressed.

Now, as Catherine looked in Anna's still distrusting eyes, she made a decision. It was time to stop being uncertain of herself in this situation - time for her to stop doubting the abilities she'd acquired as she'd grown up. After all, she thought to herself, she **WAS** mistress here; all these people would answer to her. If there would ever be a time to win them over to her side and make them realize their secrets and concerns were hers as well, it had to be in these first crucial days. It was necessary for her to take control - to act like the mistress she was.

"I'm very easy to get along with. I understand the difficulties and problems of running a large house. I am counting on you to assist me in the next few weeks, Anna. As for Jamie, if she is loyal to me and does her best, you won't find me complaining."

Casting her eyes to the large bay window, Anna seemed momentarily speechless.

"And since William has gone to the kitchen to start lunch, I'd better hurry onto the stable." As she reached the door, Catherine added, "Anna, I forgot to ask William to provide me with an inventory of the stores we have; perhaps you can ask him to speak to me after I return from my tour with Benton?"

"Of course," Anna replied evenly, though her raised eyebrows betrayed surprise at the sudden interest her new mistress was taking in Grafton. "The groom will be expecting you, Miss Catherine. He's very proud of his stables, and of Grafton's horses. I'm sure he will be pleased to show you everything. He takes great care of the animals - as though they were his children."

"That's fine. While I'm gone, will you please gather the books together? I want to begin going over them in the next day or so. I will also need to know the salaries of the servants so they may be paid." Meeting Anna's eyes, Catherine tried to ascertain exactly what the woman was thinking now. "Also, I would like to see Aunt Charlotte's room later."

The older woman nodded stiffly. "Will you be moving there, then?"

"I didn't say that, Anna," Catherine replied. "I simply want to inspect the room, as I will every room in my living quarters. Can you make sure it is open for me when I return?"

"As you wish."

Catherine left the housekeeper behind and made her way through the foyer to the front door. She had until one o'clock to look around, then lunch would be served. It didn't give her much time, but she was firm in her decision to see the horses, choose a mount for herself and see at least some of the immediate grounds. "Perhaps," she thought aloud, "in a few days, once I'm finished with my unpacking and exploration of the upstairs rooms, I would ask the groom to show me the rest of the estate. Until then, I will show them all how good a mistress I can be..."

CHAPTER FIVE

Catherine stood before the closed door, lantern in hand, uncertain whether she could go through with what she intended. She wanted desperately to spend time exploring the upstairs rooms, discovering all the secrets Grafton possessed. Yet for reasons she couldn't explain, even to herself, she felt like an intruder, a stranger about to pry into the life of a relative she barely remembered. With a determined shake of her head, she inserted the key in the lock and turned the latch. She should not feel this way, she told herself as the door creaked open. This house belonged to her now - every room and all of its contents. She hesitated for a moment, then stepped across the threshold, holding the lantern in front of her.

Her aunt's bedchamber was large, furnished with sturdy oak furniture that had, until this afternoon, been covered with ample white sheets. The four-poster bed against the far wall was framed on either side by large bay windows. Anna had opened them earlier to let the room air out a bit.

Catherine smiled as she lit the several candles strategically placed around the chamber. Her eyes surveyed the room, drinking in its extravagance. Though the furniture was faded and dusty, she could tell that Charlotte Grafton had enjoyed lavish, yet comfortable quarters. She moved to the window and ran her hand over the heavy brocade draperies tied back to the wall. Her aunt must have spared no expense when this room was decorated; her personal tastes would have dictated the selection of every piece of furniture, every bolt of costly fabric. The durable headboard possessed tiny, detailed carvings and Catherine saw, leaning closer, that the mirror above the large dresser was etched with the same design.

She turned full circle, trying to envision what the room had looked like when the canopy adorned the bed, when the finest of satin sheets were stretched across the thick mattress. Perhaps there had been lacy covers for the bedside table and dresser and a fine, hand-stitched cushion for the carved, upholstered chair by the window. Another one might have rested on the trunk in the corner....

'The trunk!' Catherine's eyes were drawn to the large object. She crossed the room to where it stood and set the lantern down on a nearby stand. Kneeling beside the chest, she ran her fingers lightly over its scrolled lid. The trunk had to be very old, yet appeared adequate for long journeys by land or sea. Its corners were ragged, but still sturdy, showing signs of extensive use. Catherine pondered what kind of travels her aunt had engaged in throughout her lifetime.

Her curiosity piqued, Catherine touched the lock, wondering if the ring of keys in her pocket held the one that would grant her entry. Fumbling slightly, she withdrew the ring and tried each key; the last, so rusted that she was sure it would never work, turned the lock with a resolute click. She pulled the heavy lid open and peered into the trunk's interior, her heart pounding in anticipation.

First she saw several beaded handbags, their sequins sparkling in the golden light as she lifted them out. She pressed one to her cheek, admiring its beauty. After examining each bag, she moved them aside and pulled out a skein of neatly-folded fabric. She shook it out and discovered it was a large, wool shawl, deep blue in color, with elaborate fringes. It would make an attractive and warm cape, one she imagined Charlotte had worn often on winter nights.

Deciding the investigation was going to take awhile, Catherine pulled the upholstered chair next to the trunk and made herself comfortable.

There were a couple of hatboxes beneath the shawl, decorated with feathers and baubles that might have been fashioned by French artisans.

She wondered if Charlotte had journeyed as far as the European continent. Behind the colorful boxes lay a large, musty-smelling book. She stopped, gazing at it for a moment before lifting it out and blowing away the thick dust on its cover. Inside, she discovered, were neatly organized notes and she quickly determined them to be lists of household expenses. The receipts and expenditures went back at least forty years. Interestingly, the last entry in the book was dated January 26, 1887.

She set the book aside, pleased with her find. Later, she would take the time to go over every entry in detail. But for now there was something else that caught her eye, something that had been half-hidden by the huge financial ledger.

It was a grouping of smaller books laid in stacks across the bottom of the trunk. They were tied together in fours with delicate lace ribbons, each stack labeled on top with a date. After she'd pulled out a dozen bound sets, she realized they were journals arranged in chronological order. They were undoubtedly the private writings of Charlotte Grafton. Catherine sighed as a twinge of guilt pricked at her conscience. *What would*

she do with the journals now that she had found them? It seemed likely that her aunt had put them away in this special place to protect them from the meddling eyes of others.

The desire to inspect the diaries, to investigate their contents was strong. "Aunt Charlotte would want me to know of her life," she whispered, reasoning to herself as she hugged a ribbon-tied bundle close to her breast. "I need to know... to understand." She decided then that she would read the diaries - and deal with her conscience later.

She pulled the chair back to the window where there was more light, carrying several stacks of journals with her. She spread them out on the bed, attempting to arrange them in some semblance of order. All the leather covers were smooth with age, the neatly penned numerals difficult to read. At last she located what she believed was the first journal, dated 1826.

She picked it up and leafed through, reading excerpts and brief notations, deducing that they were the writings of a very precocious but well-educated child.

She spend the next few hours skimming the accounts of Charlotte's early years, but the first diary she began to read with any thoroughness was dated 1835. A quick calculation told Catherine that her aunt would have been almost eighteen years old. It told of a adventurous young woman fresh from Madame Toullaird's School of Young Ladies located just outside of London - a young woman whose fervent dream of meeting the Princess Victoria of England had come true. It told, too, of a woman ready to set aside impulsive childhood fantasies and embrace life and all it might offer. Most of all, it told of a homesick young woman thankful to be back on familiar soil - overcome with tears as she saw the parents she'd left behind waiting for her when she departed her ship.

Catherine paused for a moment. Would she have had the courage her Aunt Charlotte had obviously possessed? She tried to imagine sailing across the wide Atlantic and attending school on another continent. Catherine had no doubt that young Charlotte had learned how to be a proper young lady while, at the same time, prepared herself for the role of mistress, wife and mother. Yet, as heiress to Grafton, her aunt must have known she would always be well provided for – that she would never want for anything the rest of her life, whether she married or remained single.

Lost in the detailed writing, Catherine frowned in concentration. The entries revealed that the first days after Charlotte's return to New York were spent exploring the new house that had been built during her absence. Her father, Samuel Grafton, had been an architect at heart; he had designed the home himself, spending countless hours with the builders who supervised the construction. Samuel's wife, Amelia, had eagerly supported him in the huge building project and was more than ready when the time came to decorate and furnish their newly-completed home.

And it was to a mansion that Charlotte was taken; open-mouthed with wonder, she had run from room to room, forgetting the lessons she'd learned from the Madame about the proper way for a young lady to behave - and suddenly not caring!

'My room overlooks a long path that juts its way through a large piece of empty land. My father insists this barrenness will one day be lined with trees. Imagine how beautiful it will be! Now I can only dream of walking home down a cobblestone lane surrounded on both sides by lovely trees....'

Catherine glanced up, her eyes drawn to the window. Looking down at the very path her aunt described, she felt a chill sweep through her. "I wonder what it might have been like to see it then..." She sighed, her eyes drawn back to the page before her.

'Mama was quite insistent with Papa that I be able to choose my own furniture. He agreed, though I believe it was with reluctance. She says I may have a four-poster bed with canopy and as long as I render the necessary care, the new spaniel puppy given to us by Doctor Wells may sleep in my room with me. Of course,

Mama said this situation may change when I one day marry. A man might not take kindly to sharing his bed with a dog, as well as with a wife. For the time being, I will spend my time giving Mama assistance with the great task of decorating our new home and I will ask to have a small gathering, so I might reacquaint myself with friends I have not seen since I left for England. I would particularly like to see Dr. Wells' son Jacob; he was always a special friend to me - so much like the brother I never had. We were inseparable as children and I still think of him with fondness. I remember Papa always liked him and perhaps saw Jacob as the son Mama was never able to give him...'

Catherine closed her eyes, unconsciously biting her lip. Hadn't Anna said that a Dr. Jacob Wells lived near Grafton, and was likely to present himself to her sometime soon? Could it possibly be the same man Charlotte mentioned in her journals?

The long shadows that fell across the carpet told the new mistress of Grafton that the sun was going down; suddenly the air was filled with wonderful smells wafting up from below, from William's kitchen. They told her dinner time was near, yet Catherine didn't want to stop reading.

"Just for now," she told herself, marking her place in the book. "This will keep until after the evening meal when you can sit alone in your room and not worry about anyone interrupting you..."

With a loud click of the lock on her door, Catherine found herself alone - even Jamie had been sent off to her own room early, looking quite disappointed when told her services would no longer be required this night.

After surrounding herself with a lantern and several candles, Catherine opened the journal, once again immersing herself in the precisely penned words. It had been hard on Charlotte after those first joyous months. Succeeding pages were filled with details of the dire illness Amelia had contracted.

Her health had failed rapidly until, one short year after her only child returned from England, she had died. The notations after that were sometimes days apart, terse, with no coherent description of Charlotte's feelings. But Catherine found herself understanding the emotions of the writer all too well. Her own mother's death had left her devoid of soul, afraid to feel anything; Charlotte was no different. She had suffered acutely from the loss and looked to her father for guidance to help her through the endless days.

But Samuel, who had become withdrawn since losing his wife, was no help. At times, the words revealed, he wouldn't even acknowledge Charlotte when they passed each other in the hallway. To make matters worse, less than twelve months later, he had become infatuated with a woman and, seemingly overnight, had changed. He began to dress up after the noon meal and leave in the carriage, telling Charlotte nothing of his plans. Often, he wouldn't come home until well after Charlotte's bedtime. It hadn't taken long for Charlotte to realize what was happening. He was courting this woman with a vengeance - sending her flowers, writing her poetry - captivated, no doubt, by her charms. At first Charlotte had wanted to believe that it would pass quickly; but to her horror, the courtship evolved into engagement and the engagement into marriage. She soon found herself an outcast in her own home with a step-mother only three years older than herself!

'Although I would say that Daphne is outwardly a pleasant enough woman, I don't believe I quite like the way in which she addresses me. It would suit her well, I think, should some man come along right this moment and sweep me off my feet. She could be rid of me and have Papa and the house he built for my mother to herself!'

With a swipe at the tears coursing down her face, Catherine dropped the book into her lap, and stared out the window. How many nights had Charlotte Grafton spent looking at this view, the disappointment and sense of betrayal she felt toward her father growing daily?

Catherine stifled a yawn. It was getting late and her muscles were weary from the hours spent hunched over

the journals. She knew she should try to sleep, but she felt compelled to continue reading. She moved the candles to the small table, crawling under the comforter on the bed.

'I can't believe the change in Papa since he and Daphne returned from their honeymoon-trip. He has become more attentive toward me and has even gone riding with me a few times. It was during our ride today that he mentioned someone new had joined his company. He described him as a fine young man with a spotless reputation. Papa also said he was quite handsome and would I object should he invite him to have dinner with us this Saturday? Of course I said it would be nice, but something in the back of my mind tells me to use caution - to be leery of this man and my father right now. Could this stranger be in league with Daphne to rid the estate of me? I must not think such things, yet I feel so alone....'

The journal ended there and Catherine picked up the next volume. The year was 1837; she flipped to the first page, eager to learn the outcome of the dinner. The leading entry made her smile, for it simply said, *'Today, I met the man I've been waiting for all my life; after dinner, Papa allowed us to sit by ourselves in the gazebo. He kissed my hand when he departed, promising to visit again soon. His name is John...'*

The account continued, describing times Charlotte and John spent talking in the gazebo, though always under the watchful eyes of either Samuel, Daphne or some discreetly-placed servant. It spoke of rides through the fields, exciting parties and other numerous social engagements. It told of the magical night six months after they met, when John kissed her in the carriage, as he escorted her home from church, begging her permission to speak with Samuel about the two of them. Consent was granted readily and sealed with more kisses; each was described in passionate detail by a woman trapped in love's embrace and never wanting to be released. The entries became brighter, filled with the satisfaction of a woman freed from the grief of her mother's passing and ready to march straight ahead into the life awaiting her.

Catherine frowned, reading on. After the engagement was announced, Charlotte had yet another trial to face. Daphne, the step-mother she didn't really like or approve of, became pregnant and Samuel began to hope fervently for a son. He had coddled his wife and once more shunned the companionship of the daughter who loved him so much. When the time for the wedding began to draw near, he spared no expense on the lavish wedding that was ordered, or on the foundation for the home he had insisted on building for them on the land running next to Grafton. He also willingly arranged for passage on a ship, so that Charlotte could have the honeymoon she'd always wanted. He had his banker draw up a document that set aside a large sum of money especially for his daughter's use. *'Perhaps,'* wrote Charlotte, *'Papa believes he can now buy my affections.'*

It was a week before the wedding when Charlotte's world came crashing in around her. *'I couldn't believe my ears when I descended the stairs this morning and heard Daphne and John talking in the foyer. I knew I shouldn't eavesdrop on what was so obviously a private conversation, but it must have been fate that made me stop and listen. They were discussing the futility of their lives only two years ago. John said that through Daphne's marriage to Papa and his impending marriage to me, the two of them would soon have complete control of Grafton. The fortune Papa had amassed over the years would then belong to them. They would become rich and powerful - Daphne's child would cement her relationship to Papa and, afterwards, she could spurn his attentions and return to her former love...'*

Bile rose in Catherine's throat as she realized that Daphne and John were not the people they had professed to be - that they had moved into the lives of Samuel and Charlotte Grafton with the sole intent of stealing their affections and leaving them with nothing.

'How can I tell Papa? How can I even look at John's face again without showing utter contempt and calling him every forbidden name I can think of? I must let him know that I see him for what he is. I could never marry John now - I will not! I would rather be disinherited and turned out than live the rest of my life with this faithless man. But I must gather my wits about me. I must listen and learn more so that Papa will believe

me when I inform him of my decision. Daphne must **NOT** bear a son! I must not be pushed aside by the child of a harlot!'

The pain and venom in Charlotte's words caused Catherine to grit her teeth. It was completely dark outside and she pulled the burning candles close, as though their small flames could stay the chill that coursed up her back. She felt the weight of John's betrayal, the deep hurt that Charlotte had suffered at their hands. She had known terrible betrayal herself.

'John was not amused when I confronted him today. He appeared calm, yet I sensed his unease, his guilt in the way he shifted his eyes away from mine when he spoke. He told me he didn't know what I was talking about - that I had simply misunderstood what I'd heard. I remained resolute and did not back down from my position. I knew John was lying to me and that knowledge gave me the courage to take off the large engagement ring he'd put on my finger. I fairly threw it at him and told him I would never marry him! I also informed him that he and Daphne would soon be exposed to my father - that their charade was over. Without warning, he slapped me! I wanted to run to Papa then, to feel the comfort of his arms around me, but he was closeted with young Benton, going over plans for the spring planting. He could not have heard me even if I had screamed. After several moments, I regained my composure, never taking my eyes from John's. Hatred blazed in those cold, gray depths as I told him to leave our home and never return. He laughed in derision and pointed his finger at me sternly, warning me that one day I would regret this. One day I would pay for everything I denied him now...'

Catherine's body begged for sleep but her heart compelled her to learn the outcome of the tragic situation Charlotte had been drawn into. What she read next made her stomach tighten into a knot.

'Papa was more than dismayed when I said I would not marry John. But, when I revealed the conversation I'd overheard, he stared at me a long time, then went into the drawing room where Daphne sat. There was a dreadful argument - one that everyone in the house heard quite clearly. Papa ordered Daphne to prepare herself for a journey, that after the baby was born, she would not be welcome in his house any longer. In the midst of all this excitement, Daphne went into labor and old Henry was sent to bring Dr. Wells. I refused to attend Daphne during the labor - I couldn't bear the thought of facing her, knowing she'd usurped mother's place under false pretenses. She didn't love my father and never had.

'As I write this, Dr. Wells' carriage is leaving the front door and Henry had been sent to town to get the undertaker. Daphne did not survive the delivery; she died giving birth to my half-sister. Papa wept and said he didn't want the child. He begged Dr. Wells to take her and find a good home for her. But, between the two of us, we were able to get Papa to change his mind. How can he blame this tiny baby for the sins of her mother? After hearing those words from me, he relented, whispering that the babe may stay. I will care for her myself. The prospect frightens and excites me at the same time, for I know nothing of being a mother.

'To my relief, Papa agreed that I may also secure a nanny and a wet nurse. He has retired to his chambers, leaving me to set all to rights. I must speak to the undertaker and arrange for a simple funeral - but Daphne will not be buried in the Grafton plot. I may organize a simple christening for the little one and personally stand in as her Godmother. I have already selected a name. I will call her Caroline.'

The book fell to the floor from suddenly nerveless fingers. Catherine sat up, her mind numb, her breathing labored, as disbelief coursed through her. Feelings of denial and incredulity washed over her at the truth just revealed. *'The child was born in 1837. The child was name Caroline.'* There was no doubt at all, she thought, bending over to retrieve the fallen journal. The daughter Daphne Grafton had delivered was Catherine's own mother....

CHAPTER SIX

The early morning sun spilled across the carpet where Catherine stood in front of the full-length, beveled mirror. A night's passing with little sleep had done nothing to ease the shock of the disturbing secrets she'd learned from her aunt's journals. Instead, her dreams had been filled with images of her mother, vivid memories of a happy childhood cut short by Caroline Chandler's death. And now the truths Catherine had discovered caused a surge of emotions to well in her heart - intense love for her mother, respect for the aunt she never knew, but who had suffered unspeakable tragedy and still sacrificed much to insure her half-sister had every chance for happiness.

Catherine's eyes narrowed, squinting against the light, as she forced herself to concentrate on the reflection in the distorted glass. She noted the supple, light tan breeches still fit her as well as they did the first time she'd worn them. They skimmed from her narrow waist down over the soft curve of her hips, accentuating her slender thighs and shapely legs in just the right places.

Before her foray into Charlotte's trunk, she'd found a slight tear in the inseam of the pants. She bent down to examine the repair she'd requested. The tear was barely visible, the material pulled together by precise, neat stitches.

Catherine recalled the housekeeper's startled expression when she'd shown her the breeches. And though the humor of the situation was lost on her now, in the wake of the troubling secrets she'd uncovered, at the time it was all she could do not to laugh. Anna's bushy eyebrows had risen to sharp angles above her eyes. Her mute and icy demeanor had reminded Catherine of her father's similar reaction when she'd told him, at the age of seventeen, that she had absolutely no intention of riding a horse side-saddle; she didn't care if it was the *'proper'* way for young ladies to mount a steed. She had considered it not only silly, but dangerous as well.

She had known her outburst would add to her father's worries, but despite his vehement protests and the deepening furrows of concern on his brow, he had given in to her wishes, unable to deny his only child anything she might ask for - no matter how scandalous and foolhardy he thought it to be. In time, his trepidation gave way to quiet respect, when she displayed a remarkable gift for not just learning to stay astride the saddle, but riding gracefully at a brisk trot.

After that, Sundays were usually spent on horseback together, covering the secluded, winding trails in the vast park hugging the East River. She remembered those days as peaceful times, when father and daughter drew close, indulging in intimate talk and laughter. After awhile, they ignored the wide-eyed stares and gossip of the citizenry, who talked behind their hands of the bold young woman who dared display herself in men's clothes and straddle a horse. And though her attire broke all rules of polite society, her father never wavered in his support of her; she loved him all the more for it.

Then Tom had entered her life and everything, including her riding habits, had changed. He lived across the East River and neither he nor his society friends knew of the uproar she had caused on the far side of the newly-constructed Brooklyn Bridge. And so, instead of Sunday outings in the park with her father, she had given in to the whirlwind of parties Tom insisted they attend. There were formal teas where the ladies were dressed in cotton and lace and the gentlemen in tails and bow ties. And could she ever forget the concerts held in stuffy auditoriums, where the music was wonderful, but the company was not?

Once, after much pleading and cajoling, Tom reluctantly consented to take her riding. His eyes had darkened with anger when she appeared at the head of the winding staircase of her father's house dressed in the breeches, a riding jacket and high, black boots. The afternoon had gone from bad to worse, the normally exhilarating ride completed in stony silence. They had never spoken of it after that; Tom, an accomplished

horseman, had never asked her to accompany him again.

Catherine shivered at the memory despite the warmth of the sun on her face. Today, she would push all thoughts of Tom from her mind. It would be far less easy to dismiss the memory of her aunt's neatly-penned words.

She leaned over, straightening the lapel of her riding jacket, making sure the garment fit smoothly over her trousers. Her hair was piled on top of her head; with a practiced touch, she patted back the few errant strands that had escaped.

She gave the reflection in the mirror one last, critical look, satisfied that she was presentable. The gleam of the locket suspended around her neck caught her eye and she lifted it lovingly, pressing it against her cheek. Today, it seemed infinitely more precious than ever before. As she lost herself for a moment in the memory of her parents, she decided the secret of her mother's birth would remain just that. It mattered not in the least that Caroline Grafton Chandler was not the daughter of Amelia Grafton. All that would ever be important was that she had been Catherine's mother. And, decided Catherine, there must have been some good in Daphne Grafton. After all, she had given birth to one of the kindest, gentlest of women.

Catherine opened the locket, staring at the pictures for a moment. She pressed a quick kiss on both faded photographs before heading out the door and down the spiral staircase.

The sunlight that only moments before had danced through the tops of the trees disappeared; the gentle breeze that made the hot, humid day more bearable was gone, lost in a strange cross-current of wind that rattled the brittle, bare branches of the older elms. Casting a wary glance at the skies, Catherine saw nothing unusual but the hint of a few clouds that hadn't been there before. Since late morning, she and the groom had been in the vast thicket of trees that formed the western border of the estate. They had covered about a third of the acreage, then stopped for lunch. She'd been amazed by the diversity of the land encompassing Grafton; the verdant, rolling hills, cropland that stood barren, pitifully overgrown with weeds. She fervently hoped to see those fields planted come spring and made a mental note to ask Benton to assess the condition of the land before the arrival of winter.

The property surrounding her new home was lovely, but what had captivated her the most was the dense, dark forests, redolent with the scent of pine. Fragrant, low bushes were weighed to the ground with wild rose and small purple flowers she couldn't identify. According to her wishes, the groom, an odd young man named simply '*Mouse*,' had guided their horses through the twisted trails of the woods.

She had become lost in its beauty; in the high, sweet notes of the songbirds, who built their nests in the leafy branches; the secret, rustling sounds of the tiny animals, who burrowed their way under the jungle-like growth near the forest floor. She had no consciousness of the passing of time, nor did it seem to matter until a low, rumbling noise, like the volley of distant gunfire, alerted her to the subtle changes in the atmosphere above the canopy of trees. It was thunder; she looked expectantly at *Mouse* as the little mare she'd named '*Beauty*' pranced in a skittish circle.

Mouse, it seemed, had not lost sight of the changing weather. He stopped his horse a few paces ahead and waited for Catherine to catch up. He nodded in quick confirmation as he looked toward the heavens.

"Storm coming, Miss Catherine."

Pulling back on the reins, she drew her nervous mare alongside *Mouse*'s larger gelding. At their first meeting, she'd been taken aback by the boy's lack of proper speech. However, in the few days since, and the time she'd spent with him this morning, she had learned he was a gentle young man. He said little, but when he spoke, it counted for something.

She met his soft, blue eyes, then scanned the sky, her own apprehension growing. "What do you think?"

"Go home now," he exclaimed, trying to calm his own mount. "Storm come fast, come hard. Maybe we make it back, maybe not."

"Do you think we'd be safe here, waiting under the cover of these trees?" She tried to disguise the anxiety in her voice, but knew she failed. The idea of getting drenched in a sudden downpour held little appeal to her.

He paused for a moment, considering her question. "Maybe good, but maybe not. Hurry now; best go home to Grafton. Safe there." He blushed as he gifted her with a rare smile. "Follow path here. Rain comes, stay under trees."

"All right, whatever you say," she agreed, anxious to go as far as possible in the waning light.

The shadows of the forest, a welcome respite from the sunshine, had deepened. They cast dark, ominous shapes across the narrow path. When they emerged at last onto an open field, Catherine was surprised to see the black clouds that billowed across the sky, swallowing the sun. Lightning cracked in warning from their boiling depths, arching from cloud to cloud. A drum roll of thunder echoed in the hills and she lifted her face just as the first, fat drops of rain fell against her cheek.

Mouse looked back over his shoulder with a frown. "No good, no good, Miss Catherine!" His words were lost on the rising wind.

Waving her hand, she signaled him to go ahead, as she tugged on the reins, hoping the nervous mare wouldn't bolt.

The lightning strike came with blinding fury, just as the horses entered the first line of tall trees. The eruption split the sky in two. It shook the ground beneath them with a force of an earthquake. The stench of sulfur filled her nostrils, nauseating her, choking her with its overpowering smell. Sensing what would come next, she gripped the reins tighter, pressing her knees firmly into the mare's sides.

The little mare reared in the air, pawing frantically; she was determined to rid herself of the demon pursuing her. She turned in a state of frenzied fear and charged back into the black hole of the woods. The reins were jerked from Catherine's hands as she sped by the frightened figure of Mouse, his face a stricken mask of horror. She saw him lunge for her and miss. She heard his strangled cry. She strained to understand the words he spoke, but they were consumed by the raging tempest that swirled around them.

The storm swallowed her whole; the driven rain came in sheets, whipping through the trees, flinging its fury against her face. The wind howled past her, mocking her like the voice of some insane banshee. Clutching fistfuls of sodden, slippery mane in her nearly frozen fingers, she leaned into the mare; she bent herself double against the horse, willing the terrified animal to end its race with death. She saw nothing ahead except grotesque images - gray shapes that rose up before her and then vanished. Madly, they raced on. Sharp, unyielding branches struck her, slicing her forehead and cheeks with their razor-sharp edges.

"Stop, Beauty, please stop!" she pleaded, yet knew the frightened horse was beyond obeying her commands, beyond reason. Charging along the twisted trails, they headed down an overgrown path. She guessed it must lead into the heart of the forest. Catherine raised her head once and the jagged limb of a pine tree scoured her face, leaving its mark in tiny gashes and drops of blood. She had no awareness but the burning need to stay alive. With all her remaining strength, she clung to the coarse, rain-soaked mane.

The air was dark and still as she felt her grip loosen, her muscles numb from the cold, her fingers no longer able to heel her fierce demands. Finally, the last of the mane slipped from her hands. Her stamina gone, she knew she was about to fall and believed she would die. Her father's words, heard above the storm, called to her - instructions she'd heard many years ago when she had been thrown from a horse for the first time - *'Fall free, Catherine! Roll away from the horse now! Fall free.....'*

Screaming, she tumbled off the mare's back and plunged headfirst to the ground. The world turned upside down around her in a sickening pool of misty gray and went black.

Somewhere, lost in the void of her dreamless sleep, she still heard the rain. It was far away, beating out a muffled tune, luring her from the dark tides of night. She struggled toward the rising sun where oblivion waited to claim her. She watched, horrified, as her arms and legs, numb with cold, were torn uselessly away from her. The frenzied waves pulled her down once more, covering her with their foamy crests. Helpless in their wake, she surrendered to the storm's greater power. The wind had disappeared, leaving only the murky water, seductively inviting, deceptive in its deadly calm.

Yet, she knew she was not alone. She sensed that someone had followed her here, someone who had come to free her from this watery prison. Instinctively, she responded to the presence, wanting, desperately needing the warmth of whoever had drawn near.

She surfaced above the rolling sea and a voice, like that of an angel, spoke to her. She opened her eyes, turning toward the sound of that strangely melodic voice; she saw her father kneeling at her feet. He held a large bible in his hands - it was the one he had read from every night when she was a child.

In a low scolding tone, he said, *'Don't you know, Catherine? Don't you know there is no power or wisdom in the grave? Please, you must fight now - fight hard! There isn't much time!'*

Her father faded from view; she was saddened, wondering how she could fight death if he wasn't there to help her. Without him, she knew there was nothing left, nothing at all, but to become one with the savage storm, the stinging gray sheets that surrounded her body like a pale shroud. It welcomed her, frightened her; its terrible finality was all-consuming.

In the midst of the storm she heard thunder. It pounded against her with a swift beat, one of intense, driving pain. It throbbed, filling her with its madness. The bitter cold that had demanded her surrender disappeared; the comforting presence she'd felt in the watery tomb remained as a guidepost outside of time. Was it her angel? She silently pleaded for his help and he came, ready to avenge and defeat the darkness - to push back the unrelenting bonds of the tempest.

She never saw him, but recognized his fierce beauty in the arms that lifted her limp body with infinite gentleness and wrapped her in their wondrous protection. Willingly, she gave herself up to his beguiling strength, begging to be taken wherever he might choose to go, whether it be to heaven itself, or somewhere in between.

"No!" A voice cried in the darkness. **"No, stop!"** She recognized the voice as her own, calling out from a great distance, its supplication echoing strangely in her eyes.

"Please, don't be afraid. You're safe, now."

It was the angel's voice, or nearly so - it was a man's voice, too. Rough and sweet, it was soothing in its gentleness - harsh and resolute in its potency, unlike any she'd ever heard before.

Something touched her flesh; she quivered at the feel of the incredible softness as it whispered against her skin.

"You must lie still," the voice instructed. "You've been injured."

"Injured?" The word was forced through the throbbing darkness and she wasn't sure she'd actually spoken.

"Yes. You fell from your mare when it was frightened by the storm. You were unconscious. I found you and brought you to my home to treat your injuries."

'Injured'... She tried to open her eyes and focus. If she were only hurt. *'But why?'* She shook her head. "Then

"I'm....." Her mind would not function; it was a maelstrom of disconnected thoughts, her tongue too clumsy to form an intelligent sentence. "I'm... I'm... not dead?"

"No." His voice softened. "You're not dead. But you do have wounds; you must rest. Your cheek and brow are badly cut. I've put a compress on your face to stop the bleeding and help the pain."

"Badly ... cut?" She tried to form the words as her eyelids fought, once more, to open. "Where am... I?" she asked. She made a feeble attempt to lift her head from the pillow. "In ... the great... house?"

"No, but you're near. I'll take you there soon. I'm going to remove the cloth and freshen it. Then you must try to sleep a little longer. It will help."

Catherine felt the heavy wetness lifted from her face; slowly, she realized why it had been so hard to see. Now that the compress was gone, she shook her head again. Tentatively, she opened her eyes. She squinted and saw nothing except hazy images of gray and gold; streaming from their center was a wavering flame. She believed it might be a distant candle. Pain arched across her brow when she tried to raise her head to follow the light. A shadow, large and dark, loomed before her, rising above her, quickly vanishing without a trace. She knew it had to be her rescuer. Attempting to pull herself up to see him, a wave of dizziness overtook her, forcing her to lie back down on the smooth folds of what she realized was a large divan or bed. It must be his.

He returned a moment later and carefully placed the cold cloth across her face once more. There was a gentleness in his actions, a tenderness evident in his ministrations.

"Please, Catherine," he said gently, "you must try not to move. Rest now."

"Catherine...." The utterance of her name was a whisper - a caress, and though she felt herself tumbling helplessly into that place of raging wind and pelting rain, she marveled that this stranger knew her name - and more than that had dared to speak it with such bold intimacy.

When she woke, hours later, she decided that it must be morning; once again she was late for breakfast. A movement nearby caught her attention, and she strained to hear what it was.

"Anna?" she asked, moaning as she imagined the housekeeper's sullen frown when the new mistress stumbled down the stairs with yet another excuse. "It was all a bad dream...." she assured herself and tried to sit up.

"No, Catherine!" The voice from her dreams broke through to her as large hands gently grasped her shoulders and eased her back against the mattress. She raised her arm, frantically searching for whatever it was that obscured her vision. Panic gripped her along with determination as she tried to remove the offending obstacle, to see the one who held her so tenderly, so firmly. She wanted to look on the face of her savior. She must confirm that what he told her was true - that the whole thing had not been a terrible nightmare - that she had not wakened in her own bed.

Her lips pursed in concentration and she moved her hand to her face, trying to pull the soaked compress off her eyes. A hand stopped her and she recognized the incredible softness that touched her again. It was a glove, fashioned, she guessed, of velour or some equally plush material. Clasping it in her own small hand, she heard a sharp, indrawn breath as the fingers beneath her stiffened.

"Catherine." His voice was a ragged whisper. "You must not remove the cloth -- not yet.... please."

Something in his tone - in the sincere petition of his words - made her drop her arm, unprotesting.

After a moment of silence, he seemed to recover, though she still could hear the catch in his breath. "I... I've made a tasty broth for you. It will nourish and strengthen you, Catherine. Will you eat some now?"

Still wondering at the power his voice held over her, she nodded. And, through the pain in her head and the

confusion that kept all coherent thoughts at bay, she understood his sincere concern for her well-being. It touched her heart. It made her want to give herself wholly into his care. She trusted him.

"I will feed you, Catherine."

She nodded her agreement, then waited patiently for the first spoonful to be guided to her swollen mouth. Her lips parted slightly in anticipation of the hot liquid. Much to her surprise, it went down smoothly, trickling through her with its warmth. It was tasty, too, just as he had promised. She found herself wanting another spoonful and another until there was no more.

"Sleep now, Catherine," he said, "just a little longer."

There was a rustling sound and she sensed that he had risen from his place beside her; he was going to leave her alone. At once she felt vulnerable, scared and though she couldn't say why, she wanted - no, needed - him near. "Please," she begged, holding out her hand. "Please, tell me your name."

"Vincent," he said softly.

"Vincent," she repeated with a half-smile. The name echoed through her mind as though she'd known it even before he said it - had heard it many years ago in a distant time, in a far away place. She tried to remember where and when, but her memory gave no clues, so she left the matter alone for the moment.

He took a deep breath, and the muffled sound of footsteps told her he had returned to the bed. "I'll read to you if you like," he offered. "It might help."

Before she could form a reply, she heard a small whisper of air as he once more left the room and returned. The quiet swish of his clothing was comforting to her, as he settled himself close by. Her nostrils picked up the faint smell of candle-wax and worn leather, and another scent, elusive yet pleasing.

"I hope you enjoy Tennyson," he said, pausing. Then he began to read, his lush voice flowing over the words, caressing them as it had caressed her name. He was reciting a poem, one that was hauntingly familiar to her. Unable to identify it, she didn't care as she found herself slipping under the delicious spell of his voice; the lines melted together in a languorous stream, taking her on a gentle journey, holding her in their hypnotic sway. They chased her fears with their beauty, soothing away her pain... coaxing her to sleep...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beyond the gates of that moonless night, in a room filled with the light of a hundred candles, she lay in the sheltered circle of his arms; her breath was a soft sigh, warm and unbearably sweet against his skin.

He had saved her from the ravages of the storm and bore her unconscious form to his chamber rooms. He had lain her tenderly across his own bed and cared for her there. He had soothed her fevered brow with cool cloths and when she finally awakened, he had fed her nourishing broth from a silver spoon.....

She responded to his ministrations and he felt in her a peace, a sense of complete trust that he would never have believed possible. It was the miracle of his life, the answer to his most fervent prayer. She wanted to stay... here... with him forever.

As if she could read his thoughts, she snuggled closer, raising her head to look at him with eyes the color of the sea, her desire reflected in the clear depths. And, in that moment, as he drew her closer, he was lost, as a hapless moth is drawn to the flame, immolated as young tinder consumed by a fire.

She reached for him, burying her trembling fingers in his hair, and in the velvet darkness, her lips whispered against his mouth enticingly beautiful, impossible words of love....

Vincent woke with a start, the dream drawing him from his restless sleep. One hand clutched the folds of his sweat-soaked nightshirt, and with effort he loosened shaking fingers in an attempt to wipe the beads of perspiration from his brow. He blinked hard, trying to focus blurry eyes. When they cleared, his gaze swept across the empty room. He saw, with dismay, no one was there and he knew the dream had been only that.

He sighed and bowed his head. His despair in waking alone and the realization he'd slept only an hour caused him to groan. The soft sound echoed through the silence of his chamber. As though in mocking answer, the one candle he'd left burning sputtered in its saucer.

He knew sleep was no longer possible. Wearily, he pushed his leaden legs over the side of the bed and got up. He crossed to the other side of the room and took a match from the small box in his desk drawer to light a thick white taper.

He pulled back the heavy chair from the desk and sat down. With unsteady hands, he picked up the journal that lay open in front of him. Each evening, he'd made it a habit to record his observations and thoughts on the day just past. But after what had happened, just hours before, he had been unable to write even one coherent sentence; the page for this day was blank. It tempted him now with possibilities, with the hope that he might be free from the anguish of his emotions once they were set to paper.

He released a pent-up breath, as his hands slowly closed the book and caressed the smooth leather cover. His fingers trembled at the feel of the cool, supple binding so soft against his skin. Soft, yes, though not nearly as soft as... nothing, he decided, could be as soft as Catherine's cheek.

He'd found her in the late afternoon, lost in the fierce storm that raged across the land. Her body lay in a crumpled heap on the soaked earth, like some mortally-wounded prey, barely visible in the dark, howling tempest. He bent over her, his great form shielding her fragility, as he lifted her in his arms and carried her the short distance to his home. And at that moment, a barrier in his world was breached.

Once inside, the heavy door battened against the ferocity of the storm, he took her to his bed and laid her on the thick, patched comforter. Untangling her limp arms from where he'd placed them about his neck, he knelt beside her, distress furrowing his wide brow. With one gloved hand, he reverently brushed the wet hair from her face. Her skin was pale except for blood oozing from cuts on her forehead; she looked as though she were in a deep sleep.

He removed his gloves and began to examine her closely, his fingers exploring, careful to turn the lethally sharp nails away from her delicate skin as he probed the gashes along her cheek and brow. He winced at the amount of blood seeping from the cuts at the slight pressure of his touch. On closer scrutiny, he determined that the wounds were not serious. He decided it must have been the force of her fall that had caused her unconsciousness rather than a serious blow to the head.

He placed his thumb against her neck and found her pulse, surprisingly strong and steady. The rise and fall of her chest told him that her breathing, too, was slow and regular, not shallow; it was a good sign.

He turned away from her and got up to fetch several large towels and a washcloth from a nearby cabinet. Taking a basin from the shelf underneath, he filled it with water from a large pail.

He returned to the bed and sat down beside her, dipping the washcloth in the cold water to cleanse her wounds. In doing so, he discovered several smaller lacerations. Gently, he dabbed the blood from the cuts and dried the area with a clean towel. The bleeding seemed to have stopped. He lifted her head and began to dry her hair as best he could. Even wet, it was like fine silk slipping through his fingers, delightfully smooth. It was the same honey-brown hair he had caressed in his dreams, but never had it felt as wonderful as this.

Turning his attention to the rest of her drenched body, he removed her outer garment and drew a towel along the length of her arms, soaking up the wetness from her blouse with slow, deliberate strokes. He

massaged the exposed skin until it turned pink, knowing he must work quickly so that she would not become ill from the cold. Satisfied, he slid off the bed, kneeling beside her once more. He tugged at her high-top boots, loosening them. He wrapped each leg in a thirsty towel and tucked another towel under her feet. He teased bits of the nubby fabric between her toes and finished his task of drawing the excess water from the breeches that clung to her slender legs.

When he was finished, he leaned back and, at last, allowed himself to look at her - at the angel sleeping on his bed. She was so breathtakingly beautiful; she appeared so innocent, even more so this night than the night he had seen her in the lane leading to Grafton. With deep gratitude, he knew she would be all right; he sensed it with a sureness he was not about to question. In many years of experience, rarely had his empathic powers failed him. Now in the subtle stream that pulsed between himself and Catherine, he knew what she needed was rest, to sleep and heal... here, in his bed.

Before he could think to stop himself, his hand touched her cheek, now flushed with color. One large finger whispered down the line of her cheekbone and paused, trembling against the sensuous curve of her full lips, parted in the languor of her dreams. He bent closer, his hair falling in a shiny curtain of gold across her eyes, his breath a sigh upon her flesh. If it could always be so... he could wish for nothing more than to keep her here after she healed, to protect her - to hold her in his arms for eternity.

A violent shudder coursed through him; he jerked his hand away from her skin as though it were painfully hot. He turned from her and bowed his head in shame. *'What were you thinking?'* he demanded silently of himself. *'It was no more than a dream....'*

To have all he ever desired so near was almost more than he could bear. With effort, he got to his feet and took the cloth from her forehead. He freshened it, then placed it once more over the wounds. He looked at her with longing as he slowly put his gloves back on, then moved into the next room to wait until she awakened.

Now, filled with memories of her and unable to control the tumult of his emotions, Vincent rose from the chair, roughly pushing it aside. He crossed to the small bedroom and picked up the volume of Tennyson that lay open on the bedside table. Under his breath, he began to read the poignant words:

.....*With a cry she woke,
And all this trouble did not pass but grew;
Till ev'n the clear face of the guileless King,
And trustful courtesies of household life,
Became her bane; and at the last she said,
O Lancelot, get thee hence out thine own land,
For if thou tarry we shall meet again,
And if we meet again, some evil chance
Will make the smouldering scandal break and blaze
Before the people, and our lord the King,
And Lancelot ever promised, but remain'd,
And still they met and met. Again she said,
O Lancelot, if thou love me get thee hence.*

*And then they were agreed upon a night
(When the good King should not be there) to meet
And part forever. Passion-pale they met
And greeted; hands in hands, and eye to eye,
Low on the border of her couch they sat
Stammering and staring; it was their last hour,
A madness of farewells.....*

Lost in the beauty of the poet's words, Vincent closed the book and was about to return it to its rightful place when he stopped. An overwhelming desire to see Catherine burned through him, searing him with its intensity. He yearned to go to her, under cover of the moonless sky, and tell her how very much he loved her.

Yet he knew it was more than foolish to think he dare see her again. It could bring him nothing but unbearable heartache. She had already caught a glimpse of him as his hood had slipped carelessly from his head. He couldn't be certain how much she'd seen, though her stifled gasp of surprise had held no hint of fear and he had felt her desire to see all of his face.

"No!" he told himself harshly. Whether she should be frightened - or whether she should accept his appearance - didn't matter. There was no place in her world for him. For her there was the hope of finding someone to love; *'someone,'* he thought ironically, *'who would gladly become her Lord and King'.* For himself, no such possibility existed. His love for Catherine must forever remain a secret; his days filled with bittersweet longing for a life that could never be.

He braced himself against the wall, his breathing shallow and ragged as he tried to control his churning emotions. For a moment, rational thought prevailed and he remembered the vow he had made one short week before - the night she arrived at Grafton. *'Never, Catherine, never will I allow you to look upon me.'* Had not that vow already been broken? And so, the pendulum of his thoughts took him in another direction, beguiling him with impossible dreams of a happy life - the two of them together.

How long he stood there, engaged in his fierce inner battle, he had no idea. When at last the large clock in the corner chimed out the four of four, he lowered his head in defeat, accepting that the war within had been lost, accepting as well that his tormented soul would be allowed no peace unless he might go to her - unless he might find a way to see her one more time.

With the return of rational thought, came the awareness that the book was still clutched to his breast, his fingers tightly curled around the leather binding. It felt heavy in his hands. Slowly, he let go of it, watching as it dropped with a muffled thud onto the marred surface of the table. He straightened the small volume until it lay face up; his fingers traced a lazy circle as he brooded about the day ahead. Soon the sun would blaze a path across the sky and he must stay hidden until the darkness returned. He thought of Tennyson's poem; he ached to read it to Catherine, to finish what he'd begun when she lay healing in his bed. He wanted to share with her the story of Guinevere and her fearless knight, Sir Lancelot.

The hands of the clock continued their relentless journey. Soon the first blush of dawn would tint the sky and the deep shadows outside his small world would retreat into the heart of the forest. He, too, would stay hidden until the darkness returned.

Though he had slept little, he knew it was useless to go back to bed - to believe he might lose himself in sleep when all it promised was impossible dreams - dreams of Catherine wrapped in his arms. He let out a

slow, deliberate breath. There was nothing to be done, except force himself to get dressed and clear away any reminders of the night just past.

Looking down at the bed, he frowned. The covers lay in disarray, the patched quilt half on the floor, testimony to his restless sleep. He picked up the down-filled pillow, drawing it to his face, inhaling deeply. The faint scent was still there - reminiscent of dew-kissed roses and rain; it belonged to Catherine. Through the dream-filled hour that he'd slept, it had teased at his senses. Now he was left weak with wanting. He rocked back and forth, cradling the pillow, remembering her as she lay in his arms on the ride back to Grafton. She had burrowed into him and lain her cheek against his vest as if she belonged there, wanted to be there. It had seemed so right to hold her close; when he had wrapped his arms more tightly around her, she had not pulled away.

He was losing himself in the pleasurable memories and the moan that escaped his lips served as a warning. With effort, he placed the pillow where it belonged against the carved headboard and gathered the edges of the worn comforter. As he shook it out, his keen eyes saw something bright tumble to the floor. Crouching on his knees, he swept his hands over the rough wood until he retrieved the small object. He cradled it in his palm and moved closer to the guttering candle. Standing by the meager light, his heart lurched when he saw the intricate heart-shaped locket. Tenderly, he traced the delicate 'C' etched in the middle of the gold surface.

"Catherine," he whispered. With no hesitation he opened the tiny clasp. On one side of the locket was the portrait of a young woman, almost a mirror image of Catherine. It was her mother. The smooth upswept hair, the luminous eyes and sensuous mouth were identical to Catherine's. The only visible difference was in the shape of the face. Catherine had higher cheekbones and her face wasn't quite as full as her mother's.

Vincent's eyes were drawn to the other half of the open locket and the picture of a man. Her father. He was distinguished-looking, handsome. The resemblance to Catherine was less pronounced, yet there in the strong jut of his jaw and the small, well-defined nose.

Vincent contemplated the faded photographs. He stared at one, then the other, memorizing every feature. He knew they were both dead. Anna had learned from Charlotte Grafton that Catherine was alone in the world. Her mother had died when she was a young child; her father, shortly before Charlotte's own death.

Through the tears clouding his eyes, he whispered, "Orphans." He and Catherine were both orphans, or so it seemed.

He had never seen his own mother and father. There were no photographs or memories of his natural parents. All he knew for certain was what Charlotte and the man he called '*Father*' had told him. They had found him on a cold winter's night, a tiny babe, ill and abandoned. They had taken him in, nursed and cared for him. They had loved and cherished him as their own. Nurtured in this way, he loved them deeply in return, determined to honor them always.

Yet he could not forget the doubts, the mysteries surrounding his natural parents. He could not dismiss the questions about his birth and the differences that set him apart from other men. At a crucial point during his adolescence, he had grown bitter and decided that his parents were dead. Any other possibility had become too painful to contemplate. Though the bitterness later subsided, the questions remained. Had his mother ever looked upon him with love? Had his father ever felt pity in his heart for his little son? Did either one think of him now?

Over the years, he'd come to accept the solitary life his differences had dictated and had found a measure of contentment. But that contentment was threatened. He had found someone to love in a way he had never believed possible for himself, and the unknown truth of his origins haunted him. Who was he? '*What*' was he?

He closed the locket, pressing it against his cheek. The tear that escaped his eye slid down his face and over the cool metal, gleaming in the diffuse light.

"Ah Catherine," he breathed. She must miss her parents terribly. How fresh the grief must still be from her father's passing. If only he might find a way to comfort her and heal her pain. If only she could heal his....

Surely, soon she would discover her locket was missing; he knew the regret that would fill her heart would be great. The decision he made was swift and immediate. She must not be allowed to suffer the belief that it was lost to her forever! He would forge together the broken chain. This very morning, he would restore it to its former condition so that she would not be able to detect which link had broken. He would arrange to have it sent.... No! He himself must see that it was delivered safely into her hands. He would go to her... he would see her one last time.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When she first opened her eyes, Catherine felt as though her head was wrapped in thick cotton. Her ears rang and her temples pulsed with a dull throbbing ache that made even thinking painful. Groaning softly, she tried to sit up, but was forced to lie back down by an intense wave of dizziness.

"Vincent?" she asked in a low voice, not realizing what she said as she struggled to wake herself.

The only response was a sharp gasp. "Who's there?" she said, unable to hide her apprehension.

"It's me, Miss Catherine."

She was relieved at the sound of the young, eager voice and she dared opening her eyes again. "Am I... at Grafton, Jamie?"

"Yes, Miss Catherine. You're in your own room. Anna asked if you were awake because you have a visitor downstairs."

"Who is it?" Catherine slowly turned her head toward her attendant. "Who... who's here?"

Jamie looked down at her mistress, eyes filled with concern. "It's Dr. Wells. He's come to check your injuries and make sure you don't need stitches."

So it **WAS** true - she **HAD** been injured. Catherine sighed, raising a hand to her forehead and burrowing her face in the plump pillow. "Please ask him to come up." She waited until the maid was gone, then forced herself into a sitting position.

Sunlight streaming through the open windows made her squint, as the room seemed to move in a slow circle around her. How much of what she remembered was a dream? Her injuries, the pain, were very real... the other....

There was a stranger, someone who had saved her, someone with a voice so like an angel's... Was he real? He had spoken her name, caressing the syllables as though he cherished them. His presence had soothed and comforted her. He had smelled of candles... and night rain, and he had held her in his warm embrace. Never had she felt so safe.

Had she really seen him.... or was he no more than a figment of her dreams? There was an image, hovering on the edge of her consciousness. She couldn't draw it up, but it was there, cloaked in ebony and amber.... was it him?

Despite the disturbing questions, when she heard a soft knock at her door, she thought of her appearance; hurriedly, she tried to smooth back the matted hair that clung to her cheek.

She turned her head, just as an older man entered the room; though he walked with a pronounced limp, he was quickly at her bedside.

"Well, Miss Chandler," he said, looking down at her with bemused eyes, "I understand that you have had an accident. I was told you took a fall from a horse."

"Yes," she said, sensing his concern. She looked into his kindly face and he smiled in encouragement as she explained. "My mare was frightened during the storm. I couldn't control her and she ran into the forest. Somehow.... I don't remember... I fell off."

"I see," he responded. "Well then, with your permission, I'd like to perform an examination just to assure myself that you haven't sustained any serious injuries."

"Yes," Catherine nodded her agreement. "Of course you may."

She appreciated his gentle manner during the thorough examination and his efforts to put her at ease. He chatted with her as he probed and pressed the sore flesh on her face and shoulders. He drew her out with questions, showing genuine interest not only in her physical condition but her recent move to Grafton, her previous life in the city. She felt comfortable with him and was surprised to find herself confiding in him, much as she would a trusted friend, much as she once confided in her father.

He listened as Catherine spoke of her uncertainties and misgivings in taking on the responsibility of running an estate. Then he slowly removed the stethoscope from around his neck and rested his hand lightly on her arm.

"Now, Miss Chandler....."

"Dr. Wells, I'd be pleased if you would call me by my given name, Catherine."

"All right then, Catherine," he amended. "And in turn you may call me Dr. Jacob. Catherine, I'm glad to say I've found no other injuries except a few nasty bruises and the two lacerations on your face. You will feel rather sore for a couple of days and I would recommend bed rest for that. It is also possible that you suffered a mild concussion. All things considered, you are a very fortunate young woman."

"Yes, I know," she agreed, "and thank you for coming today."

"You're most welcome." His eyes twinkled as he smiled at her.

She realized that, despite the dull ache in her head and the lingering wooziness, she didn't want him to leave. There were things she wanted to ask him, questions that he might be willing to answer.

"Please, Dr. Jacob, won't you stay for a little while yet?"

"I would love to stay for a few moments. Are you sure you're feeling up to it?"

"I'm quite sure." She motioned for him to sit in the comfortable upholstered chair. "Your estate borders mine then?"

"Yes, I own the property that borders Grafton on the south and west. My father, Devin Wells, and Charlotte's father, Samuel were good friends. They helped settle the land around MillBrook a very long time ago. Samuel wanted to be a builder and my father wanted to be a doctor. Each made their wish come true."

"You were well acquainted with my Aunt Charlotte?" She thought of the journals, the secrets she had stumbled upon and she hoped he wouldn't detect the wistfulness in her voice.

"Oh yes," he nodded. "I knew Charlotte Grafton very well. We were children together and often shared the same tutor. I was always quite envious of her, you know," he said with a self-deprecating smile. "She was so gifted at her studies. I suppose that was why her mother insisted Samuel send her to school in England."

"I... I only met her once, when I was ten. All I remember is that I thought she was very beautiful."

"Ah yes, indeed she was." He looked away, lost in a memory. "There was a time.... shortly after Samuel's second wife Daphne died, that... that I considered courting Charlotte. However, my father had other ideas. His heart was set on me marrying another. So, being the dutiful son that I was, I gave into his wishes."

Her next question seemed to flow naturally from his confession. "Were you in love with Charlotte?" she asked quietly.

He cleared his throat and shook his head. "Catherine, love can be a very enigmatic thing. But... yes, I would have to say that I loved Charlotte. Please understand. I married a fine young woman from Boston - the daughter of my father's college roommate. She was a good woman and a faithful wife. She brought me much of the wealth I now possess. How different, though, it might have turned out had I married Charlotte..." He raised his head and met Catherine's eyes.

"Did you have children?"

"A son. I'm afraid I haven't seen him for a very long time. He wanted to see the world - go to faraway places. He wanted what MillBrook could never offer him." His voice trailed away for a moment and he studied his hands. "Well now, I've taken up enough of your time for one day." He stood and began to pack the stethoscope and other instruments into a small leather satchel. "You, young lady, need to rest and recover. Your other neighbors and I have talked it over and we'd like you to attend a party - a picnic in fact - next week on the grounds of my home. Would you honor us with your presence?"

"Oh, yes." Catherine brightened at the unexpected invitation. "I would like to get to know my neighbors. And if they are all as pleasant as you, then it will be doubly pleasurable."

His cheeks reddened as he reached over to give her a fatherly pat on the hand. "Thank you, my dear. Now then, I shall give Anna instructions to see that you rest for the next two or three days. And I don't want you to worry about anything during that time. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Dr. Jacob. I promise I'll do as you say."

As he made his way to the door, leaning heavily on his cane, she thought of something else she wanted to ask him. It was worth a try. "Dr. Jacob, do you... did Anna tell you who found me in the storm?"

He stopped, his hand frozen on the knob, and paused a moment before looking back at her. "Ah... I believe it was one of the servants. I'm not certain which one."

He offered no other information and, as he disappeared out the door, she was left to wonder whether there was something more, something he didn't want to tell her. She tried to dismiss the thought as well as her own puzzling questions about her dreams and how much of them were real. And it was then, as her hand went to her throat to tie the laces on her gown, that she realized the locket was missing. She quickly searched the bedding and the floor, but knew it wouldn't be there. She was certain the fragile chain must have broken during her fall, or perhaps even before - she would never have noticed it at the time.

No matter that it was irreplaceable; it was lying somewhere on the forest floor, likely buried in mud, never to be found. She shuddered at the thought and fell back against the pillow as a tear coursed down her cheek. She was grateful for the kindness of Dr. Jacob Wells, more than grateful to be alive. She wiped the tear away and set her jaw. She had survived; she would maintain that same spirit of determination she'd had when she made her decision to accept her role as new mistress.

'I cannot help but be impressed by Caroline,' Charlotte Grafton has written. 'She excels at her studies and has even bested young Devin Wells on horseback. I must soon consider what I'm to do so that she may

complete her education. It weighs heavy on my mind. If anyone deserves to attend finishing school, it is Caroline.'

Catherine couldn't help but smile, remembering the many times her mother had lectured her about studying. And, she knew how well Caroline Grafton had done in school. The diploma she'd earned had hung in Charles Chandler's office. Now it was packed away in some trunk, left behind in storage.

Catherine turned her attention back to the open pages. She was pleased to discover that the years Charlotte had spent raising Caroline had brought her a measure of happiness. Yet for Charlotte, in particular, they were lonely ones, too.

The poignant lines revealed a woman who longed for love - the love of a man who would hold her in his arms and murmur words of comfort on cold nights; a man who would cherish her forever. It was not to be.

Catherine closed the cover of the journal, her hands absentmindedly caressing the worn leather binding. Hours had passed and morning had drifted into afternoon. Her headache was almost gone and her mind had cleared, as she lost herself in the intriguing accounts. She placed the small book on top of the others, amazed to realize that the stack of completed journals had grown by two since Dr. Wells' visit.

She reflected on the things she'd read, the close relationship of the half-sisters - sisters and more because Charlotte had willingly accepted the role of being a mother to Caroline as well. Catherine wondered if her mother might have occupied the same room as she did now. As a young girl hovering on the brink of adulthood, had Caroline stared out the window at the lane below and dreamed of one day leaving Grafton behind for a life in the city? Has she, too, dreamed of finding love and one day marrying and raising a family?

Catherine considered a more troubling question; whose life would her own more closely parallel? Her mother's or her aunt's? Caroline Chandler had moved from Grafton to the city, Catherine from the city to Grafton. Could it be possible that she would find the happiness she so desperately desired in this remote place? Or would fate be less kind she destined to a life alone, like Charlotte Grafton before her?

She brushed a tear from her cheek and reached for the next journal. She opened the front cover and a dried, pressed rose fell out. She held it to her nose, inhaling deeply. It seemed as if the faint sweet scent of roses still clung to the faded petals. She looked at the date; 1855. Caroline would have been seventeen years old. Catherine recalled that it was in that year her mother had traveled to New York; in 1856, she had met the man she would eventually marry.

Catherine began to read, noticing that her aunt's usually precise penmanship was a bit shaky in the opening pages; it might have been a betrayal of her inner conflict.

'How can I refuse to allow Caroline to try her wings? Inside I cry 'no', but I must give her this opportunity so that she may learn to be a proper young lady and meet others socially. I have tried to be more than a mother to Caroline and in this I believe I have succeeded. Her love for me is strong and it brings me great delight. She trusts me, but she is also eager to begin experiencing life for herself. She reminds me so of myself at her age - now my own youth seems so long ago.'

'I have contacted a friend of Jacob's. His name is Dr. Peter Alcott and he lives on the island of Manhattan. Since this is where Caroline wishes to attend finishing school, I am pleased there will be someone there who can watch over her. I have written the school and Dr. Alcott will contact them to arrange for Caroline to spend weekends and holidays with him and his family. I am greatly relieved and appreciative of his kindness and generosity.'

As Catherine turned the pages, her aunt's feelings became her own - the joy as well as the pain, the pride as well as the loneliness. There was no doubt that in the deepest sense of the words, Charlotte was Caroline's mother.

'She's been gone for three months and though she had been dutiful in her letters to me, I can't help miss hearing her laughter. The house is so cold and lonely without her, though Jacob has come by often. But in his company, there is sadness, too. His wife is very ill; I regret to say I never got to know her. He doesn't want to burden me with his own sorrows; even so, I have tried to draw him out. When he speaks of her illness, I see the strain, the agony.

'This may seem a strange thing to say, but Jacob has always been able to touch my heart in a way few others have. It almost shames me to admit he is the only person I have allowed to become close to me since John's betrayal. I find tremendous comfort in Jacob's friendship - though I am fully aware it will never be more than that. Our relationship is based on trust and love in its purest form. It is not something I could easily give up. At one time in our youth, he was intent on courting me and I welcomed it. His father had other plans and they did not include me. So, I was forced to accept Jacob's marriage to another. If it could have been otherwise, I believe he would have made it so. Now, too many years have passed. But one thing I do know; if my home must be desolate and empty without my Caroline, then, please dear God, let me have the consolation Jacob offers. Without that, I have nothing.'

The shadows across the room had lengthened considerably when there was a knock at Catherine's door and Anna appeared bearing a tray of food.

"William has prepared a lovely dinner for you, Miss Catherine. Dr. Wells told me you may eat whatever you like. I hope you're feeling better tonight and will be tempted by some of this." She set the tray down and removed the domed lid.

The aromas from the plate piled high with roast beef and vegetables had the desired effect and Catherine laid the journal aside.

Yes, thank you, Anna, I am feeling much better and dinner looks wonderful."

When she looked up at the housekeeper, Catherine saw the older woman's eyes were fixed on the diary and there was a tone of haunting sadness in her voice when she spoke.

"Well now, Miss Catherine, I see you've found Miss Charlotte's journals."

"Yes... yes, I did." Catherine shifted uncomfortably, wondering if Anna somehow viewed this as a breach of her former mistress' privacy. Even though Catherine knew that legally everything in this house belonged to her, she felt as though she owed the loyal housekeeping some explanation.

"As you know, Anna, I never really had the chance to get acquainted with my aunt. When I discovered these journals in the bottom of her trunk, I... I simply couldn't pass up the opportunity to learn about her life, to understand the hardships and the joys she experienced. I've been able to do that..." Her voice trailed off as she thought of the secrets she'd just uncovered, the sacrifices Charlotte had made out of love.

"There's no need to explain."

The words were spoken softly, but there was an undercurrent, something in the housekeeper's tone of voice that seemed to denote nervousness - or fear.

Catherine wondered at it and considered the possibility that the mention of the journals stirred painful memories in the older woman. Her years of service and devotion to Charlotte Grafton had been considerable, and she would know, perhaps first-hand, of the tragedies that had visited Charlotte's life. Catherine decided it would be best to change the subject.

"I'll ring when I'm finished with the tray, Anna. In the meantime, would you ask Jamie to prepare my bath?"

"Yes, Miss Catherine," Anna said, her voice barely audible. "I'll send for her straightaway."

After the housekeeper left, the aura of sadness lingered. Catherine picked up her knife and fork and began to cut the tender meat, pondering over Anna's reaction on seeing the diaries, wondering what other secrets she might yet discover in them.

'Jacob's wife was buried today and I could not help but feel deep sorrow for him. He seemed almost bewildered, though for weeks he had tried to prepare himself for her death. Somehow, he managed a smile and offered his hand, as I came down from my coach. For once, I did not know what to say to him and, so, said nothing; the look that passed between us told me he understood.'

'I stayed at the grave-site until the service was over, then offered my condolences along with friends and servants, who had gathered to watch as the casket was lowered into the frozen earth. I don't believe I will ever forget the sight of Jacob, alone, kneeling by his wife's tombstone, his hat in his hand. The sky was overcast and the wind bitter cold; as I got into my carriage, I thought he looked like a man who had lost everything.'

'On the journey home, it began to snow. By the time I arrived back at Grafton, the ground was white. it was as though the heavens grieved for him.'

Catherine laid the book down on the table. Jacob's loss, Charlotte's feeling of grief and love for him, touched a response deep within Catherine's own heart. She felt a sense of despair at the unfairness of it all. Why did it seem the world always conspired to keep lovers apart? Jacob had been a faithful husband, but it was Charlotte he had truly loved. His wife, too, had been dealt a less than fair hand. Why had she been bound to suffer the ravages of an illness that cut her life short?

Catherine picked up the journal again and opened to the place where she had left off, trying to shake the feeling of melancholy.

'I received word from Caroline yesterday; she was quite sorry about Mrs. Wells' death. Perhaps I unconsciously wanted to forget how well Caroline had known her. My Caroline and young Devin were practically raised together. It grieved her to know that Devin had not been present at the funeral and that he could not be located.'

'She informed me that a party had been given in her honor by Dr. Alcott and she had met an up-and-coming attorney by the name of Charles Chandler. The Doctor speaks nothing but praise about Charles and recommends him to me. I must trust his word in this matter, for now is not the season for long journeys. Though my heart longs to see Caroline and meet this young man, I must stay here.'

'I am sure in the next weeks my time will be occupied, for young Benton has informed me that a troop of gypsies has set up camp on my land. They may be the same ones who were here last year; on that occasion, much of the forest in that area was destroyed and we suspect they stole several of Jacob's horses.'

The book fell against the bedside table and Catherine woke at the noise. She looked around and saw the dinner tray had been removed and all traces of the bath were gone. Her servants were very capable, it seemed.

She stretched and got up, her sore muscles protesting the cramped position she had slept in. She walked slowly to the window and gazed down at the copse of trees beside the lane.

She had dreamed again; she wondered if she would ever be able to sort the hazy images from reality. Once more the question plagued her mind. Who had rescued her? She thought of Dr. Jacob's evasive answer when she'd asked him if he knew who had found her in the storm. *'One of the servants,'* he had said - he wasn't sure which one.

*The white mist, like a face-cloth to the face,
Clung to the dead earth, and the land was still.....*

Where had she heard those starkly beautiful lines? Only in her dreams? It seemed unlikely.

And who was the man who had stole into her sleep - the one whose face she couldn't see? Had her hungry heart made him up? Was he no more than a product of her own wishful longing?

Even though her mind was more lucid now, Dr. Jacob had said she might have suffered a concussion. She decided that must account for the reason she couldn't remember what happened after she fell off Beauty's back.

Yet even in her confused state, she was certain that she had not imagined the voice that was like an angel's, had not dreamed the warmth of her savior's arms around her, nor the comforting beat of his heart as she lay against him.....

When she turned away from the window, she noticed almost all the candles had extinguished themselves in pools of wax. It was late and she knew she should sleep. Though the desire to resume reading the journals was strong, she hesitated only a moment before drawing the drapes shut and snuffing out the remaining candles. She crawled beneath the light comforter on the bed and buried her face in the downy softness of the pillow. Reading could wait. After all, there was always tomorrow....

It was mid-afternoon the next day when she woke again. A tiny sliver of sunshine poked its way through an opening in the curtains, as she raised her head to look around. The room was dark and quiet, but another covered tray had been placed on the bedside table, evidence that Anna or Jamie had been there.

Catherine pulled herself into a sitting position, stretching as she pushed back her sleep-tousled hair. Even before she was fully awake, she realized that she felt much better. There was no trace of a headache although her muscles still felt stiff and sore and the lacerations on her face were tender to the touch.

She removed the lid on the tray and found a sandwich cut in fourths and several pieces of fresh fruit. The arrangement looked enticing and she was grateful that someone had left it for her. She picked up the tray and the journal she's put on the table the night before. Some fresh air was what she needed, she decided. She thought of the balcony that skirted the den and upstairs parlor. It would be the perfect place to eat her lunch and read.

The bench at the far corner of the balcony seemed made for curling up with a good book; the view of the small, manicured lawn and forest beyond was serenely beautiful.

A mild breeze lifted Catherine's freshly-washed hair; she smoothed the strands back, tucking them behind her ear as she made herself comfortable on the padded bench. She selected a pear slice and leafed through the journal to the place where she'd left off. Then she began to read the page dated December 12th.

'The gypsies are gone and though It seems they have not committed any crimes against my estate, I am uneasy. Jacob had sent word earlier that he would visit and I was greatly relieved when he walked in the door. He asked me to go for a ride in his carriage. The weather had been harsh for days and I had not been out of the house, so I welcomed his invitation. How could we have anticipated that on our return, something would be waiting for us that would change our lives forever?'

A sudden gust of wind rustled the leaves in the trees that bordered the small yard and Catherine looked up, her eyes drawn to the secret darkness of the woods. But her mind was on her aunt's words. The air grew

still and she resumed her reading.

'Our ride was not a long one, but the privacy afforded by the carriage, the serenity of the snow-covered lanes we traveled seemed to bring Jacob a sense of freedom. For the first time since his wife's death, he spoke about his feelings - the measure of guilt that weighed on his mind, in the wake of her terminal illness, the terrible aloneness that filled his days, and a certain restlessness and uncertainty as to what he should do with the remainder of his own life. He said that he had been considering resuming the practice of medicine. Even though he had been called upon to deliver babies and treat occasional cases of colic or other illness, his practice had really ended after he married and took over the affairs of his late father's estate.

'I was pleased that he had taken me into his confidence in this matter and when we arrived back at Grafton, it seemed only fitting that I should ask him to join me for a late dinner. He readily agreed and it was as we were making our way from the carriage to the veranda that we saw it. At first we were not certain what the object was, but as we drew closer, we determined it was a large basket woven from reeds or similar materials. It had been placed very near the door so that we could not miss it.

'Jacob went ahead of me and reached the basket first. He gasped as he bent over it. It was then that I heard the weak and pitiful cries coming from inside. Anger rose in my throat as I imagined that someone had abandoned a small puppy or kitten. It would not have been the first time.

'Jacob held up his hand, motioning for me to stop, but my curiosity was aroused and I knelt down beside him. How can I describe what I saw in the cold depths of that crudely-woven basket? How can I describe my feelings at that moment? For it was an infant bundled from head to toe in a ragged blanket. At first all I could make out were its eyes - they were blue, blue as the sky on a summer's day. They stared back at me, almost as though comprehending what was taking place on that bitter cold night.

'Jacob reached a tentative hand toward the babe and gently pulled back the blanket. We both cried out then - in shock, in disbelief - and I took hold of Jacob's hands as his other arm came around me for support. The infant was - how can I possibly describe that little face? It was human, to be sure, yet different, so... so much more than a human face. The tiny nose was flattened and covered with gold, downy hair. The eyebrows arched wildly over those electrifying blue eyes. And the mouth... a deep cleft split the upper lip and my own lips quivered at the sight. I laid my hand against one tiny cheek, touching the head capped with more of the golden hair, soft curls that yielded to the slight pressure of my fingers. The babe was so unlike any we had ever seen before.

'Jacob and I looked at each other in silent question, and with no need for words, picked up the basket between us and took it inside. We went immediately to the parlor and it was there, on closer examination, that Jacob determined the infant was a boy and that he was very, very ill. His little body shook with fever and he began to cry in earnest. His high-pitched wails echoed through the silent house and soon brought Anna running from her chamber.

'I held the babe in my arms and tried to soothe him as best I could, as Jacob went to his carriage to retrieve the medical bag he kept there for emergencies. On his return, he gave the infant a thorough examination and sent Anna to fetch some cold cloths to help bring down the fever. We took the infant to my chambers and Jacob stayed the night, each of us taking turns rocking the infant, reading to him, anything we could think of to ease his suffering.

'That night turned into three days. Jacob sent word by the servants that he would not return home for some time. Anna and Benton have been invaluable to us during this difficult time. Their devotion and immediate acceptance of this unique child have increased their value in my eyes.

'As I write this, the babe is asleep, the fever broken, and we are exhausted, but grateful. Just a few hours ago, he managed to take nourishment, the first since we found him. We are encouraged; we have hope that

he will survive.

'What will be do with him now? Can there be any doubt in our minds? Jacob and I have talked it over and we have decided that, between us, we will raise the little one. Already he has won our hearts. How we - and the child himself - will cope with his differences as he grows, I cannot say. All I know is that when I look into his eyes, I feel drawn to him; I feel as though fate has destined for this to be so. I believe it was meant for Jacob and me to protect and love this special child. Who has parents are, and how he came to be the way he is, we will probably never know. It doesn't matter. He needs us, our love and our resources. We must nurture him, and in time, educate him.'

'We have discussed a name for him. He has been victorious and has conquered whatever neglect he has suffered. He has overcome the illness that might have quickly taken his life. No other name seems to fit, so we will call him Vincent.'

"Vincent!" Catherine said the name aloud, her heart thudding wildly at the discovery she'd made. The journal dropped, unnoticed, to the balcony floor as she stood, bracing shaky arms against the railing.

"Vincent..." she repeated, the words her aunt had written long ago tapping memories that were obscured in the aftermath of her fall. Released now, the truth crystallized in her mind - fragments that convinced her she had not dreamed her rescuer. He was real - and his name was Vincent. He had told her that much himself. He had told her, too, *'you fell from your mare ... you were unconscious ... I brought you to my home...'*

His home. It was there she had laid on his bed as he placed cold cloths over her eyes to ease the pain of her injuries. The rich scents of candleway and leather had permeated the air and, though she had seen little, there was a brief glimpse of golden light and something else; a shadow that quickly disappeared when she tried to raise her head for a better look. It was him....

She had no doubt that he was the one Anna and Benton were talking about her first morning at Grafton when she had happened upon their secret conversation. And she understood why they wanted to protect him. The differences Charlotte had described in the infant would dictate that as he grew to adulthood, he would likely be forced to lead a solitary life.

The wind stirred the leaves again and Catherine's eyes were drawn to the trees skirting the lawn. The sky above was bright and blue, the woods dense and dark, a place where a person could hide from others. It seemed logical that Vincent would have been the one to find her lying unconscious in the heart of the forest.

She shivered, remembering the sound of his voice. No longer just a dream. It played like a melody through her mind - as he had spoken her name with an intimacy she was unaccustomed to. He had read to her, a poem. She recalled it now. *'Idylls of the King'* by Tennyson.

She closed her eyes, trying to reconcile her aunt's description of the tiny babe with anything she might have seen. There was something, a fleeting impression, an image etched in black and white. She must have drifted to sleep as he read to her, because when she had awakened, it was to the soft sound of rain overhead. They were outdoors and he was holding her in his arm together, they'd swayed rhythmically back and forth. She had felt safe, comforted, and had pressed closer into the warmth he offered...

It was after that, she had felt herself being lifted and her feet touched the ground. He was beside her, murmuring words of encouragement, supporting her weight in his arms. In that moment, in a brief silver flash of light, whatever garment he wore had slipped from his head and she had seen, dimly, a tangle of long hair, washed white by the moon, and the shadow of a face - alien, yet strangely beautiful. And again, she had lost consciousness.

Catherine had opened her eyes, vaguely aware of the journal held to her breast. What should she do?

Should she tell the servants that she knew about this man who had saved her life, the one they loved and protected? She thought of Anna's nervousness when she saw the journals lying on the bedside table and decided that, for the present, it would be prudent to say nothing.

Yet, in some inexplicable way, she believed that destiny had played a role. Her dreams of the mysterious man swathed in ebony, with flowing amber hair, were more than just a figment of her imagination. The man she had dreamed of was Vincent. And now she was left to wonder whether their paths would ever cross again. It seemed unlikely, though the intensity with which she wished it could be so startled her.

'There was no use speculating', she told herself, as she turned away from the view of the woods and picked up the remnants of her lunch. But as she opened the balcony door and stepped into the parlor, she resolved in her heart that Vincent needn't worry. Whatever happened next, the secret of his existence would be safe with her. She would never betray him.

CHAPTER NINE

When the columns of tiny, black numerals began to look as though they were merging together, Catherine closed the huge ledger and pressed her palms against her temples to quell the beginnings of a headache. Soon, Mouse would arrive with the carriage to take her to the Wells' Estate. She wanted to be at her best for the picnic her neighbors were giving to welcome her. But what she'd learned several days before had so upset her, that she hadn't had a full night's sleep since.

At first she had been impressed with the detailed records her aunt had kept. She had skimmed through the rows of debits and credits for the earlier years and noted the prosperity Grafton had enjoyed during those decades. Then, for inexplicable reasons, everything had changed in 1877. Catherine had found in that year income from crops of corn, hay, and barley had dropped off sharply, while expenditures had risen aspace. Even more disturbing, she'd discovered a significant sum of money in the debit column that was unaccounted for; she had wondered if her aunt had made a serious mistake in her calculations. When, in each succeeding year, the same debit appeared with no justification for it, Catherine had concluded the deduction was not due to human error.

For reasons known only to herself, Charlotte Grafton had withdrawn the money from the household account. What she had used it for, or to whom it had gone, was a mystery Catherine feared might never be solved. At the same time, income from Grafton's croplands had continued to diminish over the past decade with none reported in 1886.

Catherine looked down at the closed ledger as her fingers played nervously along the frayed bindings. There would be no money from crops in 1887 either, though she held out hope for a planting in the spring. She had already asked Benton to inspect the farrow fields and was praying for a good report. She must sow crops next year - supplies for the remainder of this year were already low. The sum left over in the household account was alarmingly small and staples such as flour, oats and molasses would have to be purchased before winter. She doubted the fund would cover the estate's expenses for longer than a few more months. She thought of the Will spelling out the details of her inheritance. It had stated there were twelve servants employed at Grafton. Now she better understood Anna's reluctance to discuss the reduction of the staff to seven. Troubling questions filled her mind, ones not easily dismissed. Why had her aunt found it necessary to withdraw large amounts of money from her shrinking account? Further, why had she bequeathed her estate to her only niece, knowing its future was, at best, uncertain? Or had she known? Perhaps someone had stolen the money - an even more disturbing idea, one Catherine dismissed as unlikely.

Charlotte's personal writings, as well as the respect she had commanded from her servants, left Catherine with no doubt as to her aunt's intelligence and shrewdness. Speculating on the matter would only lead to more questions. Catherine decided it would be prudent to journey to MillBrook soon and consult with her aunt's attorney, a Mr. Joseph Maxwell. Perhaps he could help her find an explanation to the riddle of the missing funds - and a solution to her estate's financial troubles.

She got up and walked over to the large trunk where she'd found the ledger and her aunt's journals. Kneeling down, she opened the lid and peered inside. In the two weeks since her arrival, she'd discovered other secrets. Charlotte Grafton's diaries had told of her heart-breaking love affair with the man named John; revealing the shocking circumstances surrounding Caroline Grafton-Chandler's birth; and had given Catherine proof that the mysterious man named Vincent was, indeed, real - and living in seclusion on the estate.

There was a knock at the door; she got up quickly, closing the lid just as the young maid, Jamie, peeked around the corner.

"Yes, Jamie, come in please."

The girl looked down, her hands locked in front of her. "Uh.... Miss Catherine, Mouse is waiting to take you to Dr. Wells' home."

Catherine reached out to touch the girl's thin arm. "Thank you, Jamie. Would you tell him I'll be down in a moment."

"Yes, Miss Catheirne." Jamie bent her knees in an awkward curtsy and hurried from the room.

As Catherine watched her leave, she decided that, with experience, the girl would soon be a fine personal maid.

A hand took hold of her elbow, cupping it gently but firmly. "Please, Catherine, allow me."

She turned and looked up into the face of the tall man who had persistently sought her company that afternoon. His name was Elliot Burch and she'd all too quickly learned that he owned the estate bordering hers on the north and east. He was good-looking, though not quite handsome in her estimation. But it was his singular charm and attentiveness to her every need that had caused Catherine more than a little embarrassment at the picnic. More than once, she had been the object of covetous glances from the other ladies in attendance - including Elliot's companion, a young woman named Rebecca.

He was gazing at Catherine now with obvious interest. She lowered her eyes, deciding another reason for her unease was the resemblance Elliot bore to the man who had asked for her hand in marriage and then betrayed her. The physical similarities were apparent - both were tall with dark hair and eyes - but it was the air of confidence and sophistication Elliot projected that made her wary. Tom Gunther had presented himself to her in an almost identical manner. She knew she wasn't being fair to her new acquaintance; still, the comparison seemed inevitable.

She looked up at Elliot and forced a smile, accepting his help in boarding her carriage. Before she could withdraw from his grasp, he slid his hand down her arm and took her hand. Bowing gracefully, he brushed a kiss across the back of her outstretched fingers. Her cheeks felt flushed and she was sure she was blushing. She averted her eyes and, to her chagrin, saw Rebecca standing in the shade of a nearby tree. Catherine plainly detected the pouting frown on the petite woman's face. She didn't blame Rebecca and wished desperately she could reassure her that there was no cause of jealousy.

"Elliot, I should be going now."

"Catherine, do forgive me. I should not have detained you." The look in his eyes and his firm hold on her hand told her he wished to detain her for a very long time. "There is one thing I wanted to ask you. Next Saturday, I will be hosting a small dinner party at my home. Just a few of the neighbors you've met today - Randall Hardesty and his wife; Judge Clayton and his fiancée, Meg; and the Bishop family. I would be greatly honored if you would agree to come, too."

She was taken off guard by his invitation and all she could do was stammer a reply. "A ... a dinner party? Yes... I would be pleased to accept your invitation. Thank you."

"It will be my pleasure, I assure you." He bowed to kiss her hand once more. "My personal carriage will come for you, Catherine. Shall we say two o'clock?"

It sounded very early for a dinner party, but not wanting to appear ill-mannered, she said, "Of course. Two o'clock is fine."

"Good! That will allow me time to show you the grounds of my estate before the other guests arrive. I'm certain you will find the tour very enjoyable."

His smile unnerved her and she was relieved when he finally released her hand and stepped back from the carriage. She felt sure Mouse had overheard everything, but he gave no indication of it as he picked up the reins and turned the gelding into the cobblestone lane. Catherine leaned forward and looked back just in time to see Rebecca take possessive hold of Elliot's arm. It appeared that he might be in for a tongue-lashing from his pretty blond companion.

Vincent pulled the hood of his cloak more firmly around his face as he stole silently across the narrow side lawn. At the corner of the great house he looked up, his eye drawn to the pale stream of light spilling onto the balcony. A shadow passed over the filmy curtains and his heart thudded in response. Catherine was there, in the small upstairs parlor.

The memory of her face, her lustrous brown hair shining in the candlelight of his chamber, burned in his mind. He trembled from the intensity of the image and braced himself against a tree, questioning his reasons for coming here tonight. He studied the delicate locket clutched in his gloved hand, the volume of Tennyson with the red rose pressed inside the cover. Had he deluded himself into believing he could be content with one brief glimpse of her? If he had, he knew now he should have pronounced himself a fool.

He didn't belong here - not anymore. Maybe once, as a child, when Charlotte and Jacob Wells had loved and protected him, sheltered him from the world outside Grafton's acres. But Charlotte was gone, and Vincent himself was no longer that innocent child. It was his own desire, his own longing for something he could never have, that had drawn him here in the darkness.

Grafton belonged to Catherine, and the world she was part of as new mistress extended far beyond the estate's boundaries. It was a world of tastefully-furnished homes and quiet luxury; of elegant parties enjoyed in genteel company. He had nothing to offer her - but his love.

He looked toward the deeper shadows of the forest at the edge of the lawn. His gelding waited for him there, in a thicket of tall, fragrant pines. The sensible thing would be to leave and arrange for the locket to be delivered to Catherine in the morning. He could stop by the stables and entrust it to Mouse. He could knock on the servant's entrance and whisper his request to Anna. He could....

He sagged against the tree, closing his eyes. One gloved hand already rested on the sturdy wooden trellis

that soared from the ground to the roof above her balcony. In his heart he knew it was too late. There would be no turning back.

Inside the softly-lit parlor, Catherine sat on one end of a plush divan, her feet tucked under her, a leather-bound journal in her hand.

'I have just received a letter from Caroline and there is exciting news. She is expecting a child. My heart rejoices - I know how badly she has wanted to conceive - and yet I am saddened, too. It seems for every joy in my life, there is an accompanying sorrow. I long to go to Caroline, to be with her when the baby is born. Yet I cannot. My responsibilities toward Vincent are too great. I love this unique child with all my heart; he is my life now and he needs me - needs the care and nurturing that only Jacob and I can give him. So I must remain at Grafton. Though I have never met him, I am comforted in knowing Charles is a fine husband to Caroline. He will look after her and the little one yet to be born. And Caroline assures me that she and Charles will bring the child for a visit as soon as Dr. Alcott believes it is advisable. Yet there are times..... I fear I may never see her again.....'

Tears in her eyes, Catherine laid the journal in her lap. How prophetic her aunt's words had proven to be! Even as a very young child, Catherine had been aware of her mother's ill health. Her bouts of sickness had started when Catherine was two. Though she remembered her parents discussing a trip by train to upstate New York, it was not to be. Caroline Chandler rapidly grew weaker and a long journey would only have hastened her death.

Catherine wiped the wetness from her cheek and bent her head to continue reading. A noise, muffled and indistinct, caught her attention and she dropped the journal on the divan. It seemed to come from the balcony; she rose and went over to the double doors, cautiously opening one and peering into the darkness. She saw nothing as she stepped outside until her shoe bumped against something hard. Kneeling down, she discovered a book bound in leather. She picked it up and held it to the light. Her heart lurched when she saw the title embossed in gold. *'Collected Poems of Alfred Tennyson.'* There was something sandwiched inside.

With shaking hands, she slowly opened the cover. A pressed red rose fell out and along with it a necklace. She gasped as she lifted the fragile chain and saw the familiar heart-shaped case. It was her locket - the one she had lost in the storm; the one she knew she'd never see again. Carefully, she undid the tiny clamp to reveal the beloved faces inside.

She smiled tremulously as she raised her head to search the corners of the balcony. There was no doubt in her heart as to who had found the locket - and returned it. And she was not surprised when she saw him standing by the trellis, a shadow himself among formless shadows. His broad back was turned to her, his massive shoulders and height blocking the view beyond. He wore a long cloak; her mind flashed back to that moment of consciousness when his hood had slipped and she had glimpsed his face.

Her heart pounded and her mouth felt dry, as though she'd swallowed cotton. She must say something to him, to allay the fear that surely had rendered him unable to move, surprised as he was by her sudden appearance on the balcony. "Vincent...."

There was no response other than his gloved hand reached out to curl around a thick wooden slat of the trellis. She wondered if he would bolt over the side and disappear into the dark night, leaving her alone.

"Vincent, please.....please don't go. I.....want to thank you for returning my locket."

Fear and uncertainty were evident in his sharp, indrawn breath, the squaring of his shoulders.

Her voice was shaking and her words echoed softly in the corners where he stood like a trapped animal.

"This locket means so much to me, Vincent. Where did you find it?"

His fingers slowly loosened their grip on the trellis and his hand dropped to his side. "I found it... in my bed, Catherine. The chain... was broken."

She swayed, closing her eyes at the sound of his voice - the angel's voice in all its rough, sweet glory and potent power. She wished he would say her name again. "It's... it's not broken now."

"No," he whispered. "I fixed it."

Her lower lip quivered and she bit it, resisting the urge to go to him, to touch the patched fabric of his cloak and hold him there. She longed to tell him that his appearance didn't matter - that his secret would forever be safe with her.

"You... saved my life. How can I thank you? If you hadn't found me... I owe you everything, Vincent."

"No, Catherine. You... owe me nothing."

The words were filled with such poignancy, she felt the weight of his sorrow in her own heart. "Please, let me see you." Her words were a plea.

"Catherine, you do not know what you are asking. My appearance...."

"I'm not afraid. Please, you must trust me."

"I do trust you, Catherine. I... can feel what you are feeling."

She was trembling again, astonished by his confession, wondering what it meant. "You can?" She cautiously moved toward him, the only sounds the soft swish of her skirt, the gentle stirring of the leaves in the wind.

"Yes. When you're sad.... your pain is my pain. When your heart is filled with joy, your laughter echoes in my own heart. I can't tell you how it is possible. Just believe this is true, Catherine."

"I believe you," she whispered, tears misting her eyes. She did believe him - how or why it could be so, she would be helpless to explain. But there was something she understood now with perfect clarity. The mysterious man she'd dreamed about - the one whose face was always turned away from her, his amber hair flowing down the back of his dark cloak - was Vincent.

"Then know what I'm feeling now - that I'm not afraid. Know how very much I want to see you."

She stretched her hand out to touch a fold of his cloak; the fabric felt soft against her skin. He gasped when her fingers found his arm beneath the shabby garment, but he did not pull away. Instead, he began to slowly turn toward her. A gust of air blew across the balcony and, as in her dream, his cloak billowed away from him, revealing his long legs, the unleashed power evident there. She heard his ragged breathing, saw the labored rise and fall of his chest as he came to face her fully. Her eyes traveled upward until they met his, gleaming inside the shadowed folds of his hood. Even with his face still hidden in the darkness, her heart as well as her eyes saw the half-remembered beauty there.

He stood before her; silent minutes passed before she raised her hands to the patched mantle that kept his face concealed. With shaking fingers, she grasped the satin edges of the garment. It carried the scent of candle smoke and leather and the sweet fragrance of a summer's night. She lifted it so that it fell away easily, and he shuddered as the long strands of his hair were freed. Part of her could not believe that he would allow this intimate gesture; another part of her was not surprised at all.

'I can feel what you are feeling...' Something she dared not question at this moment, only accept as true - for this silent communication would tell him more now than her words ever could.

She studied his face with rapt wonder - the strong, proud line of his jaw dusted with gold stubble that sparkled in the wan light; the upper lip split deeply in two and the flattened nose sprinkled with downy

hairs; the high cheekbones and upswept brows; and above it all, flowing down over his shoulders, a wild mane the color of flax. In all the fierce beauty she saw there, it was his eyes that captured and held her attention. Sky blue, reflecting the lantern's gold, they gazed at her with fear and longing and a hundred other emotions that defied identification.

Finally, she managed to speak. "Vincent, what can I say to you except ... how could you believe I would fear you?"

He bowed his head, his hair falling in a curtain around his face. His own voice was filled with trembling and awe. "Catherine, I... your acceptance... humbles me."

"Of course I accept you," she said softly. She trembled, too, with the vulnerability he must feel for permitting her to see what he kept hidden from strangers' eyes. And if he felt her acceptance... She looked down at the gloved hands clenched at his sides. Gently, she reached for one and took it in her own small hands. She caressed the same soft material that had brushed against her cheek when she lay on his bed after her fall.

"May I?" she whispered.

He nodded his permission and she began to work the velvet material loose from his fingers. The glove slid off and she felt the warmth of his hand against hers. He gasped as she turned his hand over. The long fingers were covered with amber hair and tapered to sharp talon-like nails. She knew that his hands, his face, were outside the limits of human definition; yet in her soul, there was only a poignant longing - to comfort him... and more.

"Thank you, Vincent. Thank you for your trust tonight. I want you to know I count it a privilege that you would allow me to see you."

"Catherine, you are a woman of great courage; a woman with a generous heart."

He sounded perilously close to tears and her eyes misted over at the sincerity of his choked words. He turned to look out over the edge of the balcony.

Suddenly, afraid he would leave, certain he was contemplating it, she begged, "Vincent, please come and sit down with me ... just for a little while."

"I... have no place here," he said, "no place in this world you've inherited. I must go." He put his glove back on and reached out to grasp the wooden slat he'd held so tightly an eternity before.

"No! No, don't say that!" She was shocked by the quiet vehemence of her plea. "I want you to stay. I want to talk to you. It's.... it's dark." She added hopefully. She touched his arm; when he turned, she saw in his eyes his desperate desire to accept her invitation - and that her words had won out over his fears.

"Come," she said drawing him down before her on the cozy bench. She picked up the book and rose she had unconsciously laid there. "Tell me," she asked, placing the book in his hands. "How did you know I love the writings of Tennyson?"

Soft golden light filtered through the dense stand of trees and bramble bushes surrounding the secluded cottage. Vincent leaned back against the rough-hewn door of his small house and tilted his face to the sun's benevolent rays, aware that a greater fire burned in his blood. It was fed by memories of the night just past, stoked by vivid images of Catherine's heart-stopping beauty.

The hours he'd spent with her, in the sheltered corner of her balcony, should have been only another aching impossible dream. Instead, it had been sweet reality, for no dream could have imitated the soft, seductive warmth of her voice when she had spoken his name; the sparkling radiance of her eyes, her smile

as she'd listened to him read from the volume of Tennyson. And if more proof were needed of where he'd spent the hours before dawn, his cloak carried the faint, sweet smell of dew-kissed roses and rain - the same scent that had clung to his pillow after she had lain, healing, in his bed eight days before.

He would never have believed he could reveal his face to her the way he had; never have believed he would spend the night sitting beside her on the small corner bench of her balcony. But, she had begged him not to leave and he had stayed until the first pink hint of dawn fringed the eastern sky. Now, his face turned toward that same sky, the daylight no longer seemed a thing to fear, for one brief, shining moment, he allowed himself to indulge in the fantasy of a life where his aloneness was consumed in the searing flames of love - Catherine's love.

His mind told him such a life could never be, but his heart remembered nothing but her eager question, his immediate answer - yes, she would see him again. Soon he would return. Of course, he would read to her... Tennyson's *'Idylls of the King'*; Shakespeare's *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'*; Shelly's *'Prometheus Unbound'* yes... yes, he would gladly read to her... always... forever.

Lost in the memory of her request, he groaned. Turning toward the door, he lifted the latch and let himself inside. The interior of the cottage was dark; he moved to the large oak desk and lit several thick candles. They flickered to life, their light dancing across the pages of his journal - left blank since the day he'd found Catherine in the storm.

It beckoned to him now and he knew its pages would be filled again - with the treasured remembrance of Catherine's words, her smile, her touch that set a fire in his soul. Yes, he would record all the trembling thoughts, all the forbidden feelings that he must never give voice to.

As he picked up his quill pen, he could not bear to consider the implications of the path he'd so heedlessly chosen - the danger and certain heartbreak that waited for him at its end. For today, it would be enough to live moment by moment; to bask in the sweet knowledge that Catherine accepted him - accepted the mystery of who and what he was. It was enough that she wanted to see him again... and enough to endure the interminable minutes and hours until he could return once more to the balcony where their shadows would merge as one in the protective darkness.

CHAPTER TEN

AUTUMN

Catherine sat on the corner bench of the balcony. She unfolded the sheet of ivory vellum in her hand, reading its simple message for what seemed the hundredth time.

***'Tonight, at the gazebo,
after the others are asleep. There
is something I wish to share with you.***

V'

She tucked the piece of paper back into her skirt pocket and gazed down at the small summerhouse. How often had he returned, since that night four months ago when he'd brought back her locket? Closing her eyes, she could still remember his face as he sat beside her on the bench, his uniquely beautiful features etched in silver by the moonlight. Weeks later, he had again stayed until nearly dawn, reading to her, finishing the poem he'd begun when she lay, healing, in his bed....

*'And likewise for the high rank she had borne,
Was chosen Abbess, there, an Abbess lived
For three brief years, and there, an Abbess past,
To where beyond those voices there is peace.'*

He had closed the book and laid it aside as she turned to meet the clear sapphire of his eyes, whispering, "Guinevere lost her kind. But he forgave her still, though it was Lancelot she truly loved."

"Yes..."

His breath had been sweet and hot against her face as he leaned closer, the desire coursing through their bond so strongly, he had been unable to turn away. Instead, he had reached for her the same moment she fell into his arms....

Now, she wondered, could it be the same tonight? Would the dark privacy of the gazebo free him from the invisible prison of his fears? Would their shadows melt and merge, joining them as one in the intimate embrace she hungered for?

She got up from the bench and sought the railing, dizzy from the rush of her emotions. Only months had passed since she'd discovered the sweet reality of his existence. It seemed like an eternity, and there was an undeniable truth that no amount of level-headed reasoning could alter - he alone offered her the solace her hungry heart craved; he alone fed her courage with his own; and he alone, with one look from those intensely blue eyes, could ignite a fire in her blood.

Today it was courage - and comfort - she most needed, though the idea of becoming lost in his arms held its own enchanting possibilities. Her morning had a good portion of her afternoon had been spent pouring over the huge financial ledger, searching for a plausible explanation for the missing sums of money. None had been found and the worrisome riddle remained unsolved. Even Joseph Maxwell's timely visit had turned up nothing more than a few small errors that were easily rectified.

He'd accepted her invitation to stay for lunch; she had enjoyed his company, but was left afterward with the prospect that a reason for the missing funds might never be found. According to his careful calculations, the household account would cover the expenses of her estate for only a few more months, just as she'd suspected all along. It had been her third consultation with the attorney and he had promised to meet with her again in two weeks. She harbored little hope that a solution could be found. The future looked bleak and she would be forced to use her own inheritance. Though Joseph had strongly advised her against it, she knew she would do whatever was necessary to buy time; to forestall the impending financial crisis that would surely mean the end of Grafton.

She looked up at the darkened sky. The trees were already turning color and the bright red and gold of the leaves appeared to deepen in the changing light, like quiet flames smouldering against the purple expanse. After dinner, she had gone to her aunt's trunk and again selected the one journal that intrigued her the most, not knowing why she felt compelled to read over and over about Charlotte Grafton's tragic love affair and her mother's own birth.

She was glad she'd finally had the courage to ask Vincent about the man who betrayed her aunt. She wasn't sure what he might know of the tragic tale, but the way his eyes had narrowed with anger at the mention of John's name, revealed his feelings on the subject. He had hesitated for a moment, looking away. Then, in a voice edged with steel, he told her of the few occasions Jacob Wells had spoken of the matter. John's full name was John Pater and the evil he and his lover, Daphne, had plotted against Samuel Grafton and his daughter had cast a shadow over Charlotte for the rest of her life.

Formerly open and trusting, Charlotte had grown melancholy and withdrawn, though the years spent raising her half-sister, and then Vincent, had given her a measure of happiness. According to Jacob, it was common knowledge that John Pater had vanished after his scheme of deception failed. But Jacob had been a painful witness to the fear that, at times, threatened to consume Charlotte, as if John still held influence over her. Strangely, it had grown stronger with time. Though her courage had never wavered, her only solace was in Jacob holding her in his arms, offering what little comfort he could.

After she and Vincent had talked of John Pater and the pall he cast over Charlotte's life, Vincent had shared with her stories of his childhood. He had told her of the great sacrifices his adopted parents had made to ensure that his existence would never be known outside the boundaries of Grafton. They had given him a pony when he was eight and taught him to ride, acquainting him with the secret trails and dark hiding places of the forest. Aided by his own keen instinct, he had quickly learned the skills necessary to survive on his own.

His life would always be bound by his differences, but that fact had not kept Jacob and Charlotte from educating him, teaching him to read. They had opened up a world that he might never have known about, a world he still longed to see for himself. When his small cottage was built, his bookshelves had been stocked with a generous sampling of the Classics as well as contemporary works.

In turn, Catherine had shared memories of her own childhood and the conversation had somehow led to her more recent life in the city. Under Vincent's quiet gaze, she was, at last, able to talk of the terrible void left by her father's passing and the torment of her own betrayal by the man she was to marry. It wasn't until she grew silent, that she had realized there were tears in both their eyes. The intimacy of their conversation had drawn them closer and neither wanted to deny what he confessed as he rose to leave - that the bond burned brighter still in his heart, as though, he had whispered, their souls were inexplicably joined.

She had known, without asking, that their dreams were one as well, a fact she had agonized over ever since. What path might lead them to the fulfillment of those dreams?

As she considered that beckoning path, she acknowledged that the shiver coursing through her was not from the chill autumn wind. The treasure of Vincent's friendship, his trust, was not without risks. She was entangled in a seductive web, leading a divided life that was fast becoming impossible. A part of her wanted nothing more than to stay forever, within the secluded acres of her estate; his world - and hers as mistress. But another part of her was obliged to put on a pretense of the social courtesies expected of one in her position. An endless round of formal dinners and teas given by her neighbors and reciprocated by herself seemed to conspire to keep her in the company of a man whose wealth and power were legend in the area.

Elliot Burch owned the most prosperous estate in the region, perhaps in all of New York, and Catherine soon found he hadn't earned his reputation as a stubborn, persistent man for nothing. When he wanted something, he pursued it with grim determination. She'd discovered that much from their first meeting at the picnic on Jacob Wells' estate. What he wanted most quickly became evident; he wanted to win her heart, to claim her hand in marriage. He hadn't formally asked her ... yet. But the implications were clear. His overtures and the less-than-subtle hints of several of her acquaintances, only added to her growing discomfort. No matter his intentions, she would never love him ... she knew that with certainty.

Shuddering, she dismissed the image of Elliot Burch from her mind. There was someone who claimed her attention without even trying; someone she would willingly sacrifice everything for and not give it a second thought. He lived in her heart, a tangible force, and she wanted nothing to mar her eager expectations for this evening. It was almost dark and a pale quarter moon was rising above the trees. Soon, she told herself, soon he would come.....

He was waiting for her when she crossed the slip of lawn to the tiny gazebo at the edge of the trees.

Wordlessly, she ran into his outstretched arms, as the tide rushes to greet the endless shore. Burying her head in the quilting of his vest, she whispered, "I've missed you so."

His arms tightened possessively around her. "I've missed you, Catherine."

Whenever he spoke, it was with an economy of words; yet, she had come to realize what when they were directed at her, she could read volumes between them.

"Have you been well?"

"Yes, and I'm better still now that you're here," she said, her voice muffled against the heavy fabric. She pulled back to gaze into his face and what she saw stole her voice, leaving only a breathy whisper. "I... I've been dying of curiosity ... wondering what you have to share with me.:

His unique features, the hollows and ridges of his cheeks and brow, were washed white by the moonlight that splashed through the gazebo. His eyes, half-hidden by a wild touse of mane, were dark, glittering pools.

She leaned forward in response, but all he said was, "Then, I will keep you in suspense no longer, Catherine. Last night I found a poem that I knew you must hear."

"Will you read it to me now?"

He nodded and released her, withdrawing a small book from the folds of his cloak. Opening it, he found the page he wanted.

She swayed toward him as they stood facing each other at the gazebo's railing. He began to read and she watched his mouth, coveting its uniqueness as it lovingly caressed the words...

*If every morn of summer past
Has left me pleading in its wake
To tip its golen chalice still
Upon some sad, forgotten lake*

*And every star that ever blazed
Across the gauzy frame of night
Has fallen in the far abyss
Extinguished there its meager light.*

*Then every spark that sought to burn
In sickly candles trembling low
Would sacrifice its eager flame
Upon bright alters here below*

*And fiery suns that whisper now
Warm words of hope and then are gone
Would first appear as frosty moons
Against the silent siege of dawn*

*For I must find thee in the veil
Of fragile dreams that once were mine
And beg thee lay upon my breast
And pledge my soul is only thine*

*And thou would touch me like the rain
That plunders once the depthless sea
If I accept thy fervent kiss
And dare to give myself to thee*

*Within thy closed, thy secret rooms,
No light will pierce this darkened shore
Where we will drown in love-tossed waves
And lie, imprisoned, evermore.*

He closed the book and looked down at her, anticipating her response. Their faces were inches apart as she whispered, "It was beautiful, Vincent. More than beautiful.... sad. How did you know I would love it so?"

"Because," he said, putting his arm around her once more, drawing her into his embrace, "it was written by someone who understood impossible dreams."

"Dreams... of love?"

"Yes...."

'*You can never choose love, Cathy.... It chooses you....*' Something her mother had said so long ago, shortly before she died. Catherine hadn't understood the meaning of those words, then. Now, gazing into the eyes that held her spellbound, she knew exactly what her mother had meant.

A breeze whispered through the gazebo and she turned slightly, so that her head rested against his chest. The tremor that she felt in him told her of his own peace and contentment in holding her near. They stood in silence for a time, the bond between them alive with feelings that needed no words to define them.

Finally, she lifted her head and he pulled back to look at her upturned face. There was a question that had played through her mind since their discussion about John Pater and the shared memories of their

childhoods. It was a request she wondered if he would be uncomfortable with, perhaps one too bold, and yet... the time seemed right.

"Vincent, do you remember when you told me about your childhood and riding through the forest at night?"

"I remember," he said softly, moving her back so that she was at arm's length. His face was exposed now to the full light of the moon, the curiosity she'd aroused in him clearly evident.

Her voice faltered only a little, but the words she blurted out were not what she intended. "I... there is something I want to do with you, Vincent."

"Yes? What is it you wish to do with me, Catherine?" His own voice held a hint of teasing, that she'd never heard before, and the tilt of his head showed her she had his rapt attention.

"I.... want to see Grafton by moonlight. I want to ride the secret trails of the forest and explore the woods at night... with you. Would you be willing to do that?" she asked in a whisper.

He looked away, gazing out from the shelter of the gazebo to where the shadows of the trees dipped and swayed across the lawn. Immediately, she regretted her request, wondering if it would cause him to retreat from the closeness they'd shared this evening.

But when he turned back and gently placed his hands on her shoulders, drawing her near, her fears vanished like snow under an April sun.

"Catherine, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to show you Grafton by moonlight. Would tomorrow night be soon enough, after the sun sets behind the far hills?"

"I'll be waiting for you," was all she could manage, as he lowered his head and buried his face in her hair.

Vincent stood beside the gelding, his head bowed against the thick, white mane. He closed his eyes, remembering- remembering Catherine, her ethereally beautiful face framed by the soft, low light of the moon.

They had ridden the trails of Grafton almost every night for the past two weeks, exploring the mysteries and wonders of her estate. He had shown her everything from the dense, fragrant pine forest of its northernmost border to the undulating hills that rolled endlessly away to the south. He knew the secluded acres of Grafton better than anyone else, and had always loved the land's diversity, the safe shelter it afforded him. Yet never had he appreciated its splendor and beauty as much as he did now - because now he had seen it through Catherine's eyes.

The night past, they had arrived at the great house just as the first gray streaks of light appeared on the eastern horizon. He had not wanted to leave her even then and they had lingered at the edge of the trees bordering the lawn, each reluctant to say goodbye. Many hours before, they had somehow ended up here, at his cottage. To her whispered question, he had taken her inside and shown her his simple home. In his bedroom, she had touched the patched comforter, pressed her hand against the silken smoothness of the pillow where she'd lain, unconscious, four months before. The gesture had been so unbearably intimate that he'd trembled and turned away for a moment.

He'd led her into the next room, where his collection of books lined one wall. Together, they had studied the titles and she had selected one, a heavy volume with a frayed binding. It was Shakespeare and she handed it to him, asking him to read from it. The first page he'd opened to was the tragic love story of Romeo and Juliet and as he began to read, she had curled against him, resting her head on his shoulder. Afterward, he

had closed the book and they talked. He had already been aware of the estate's impending financial crisis and gently, he had drawn her out until she confessed to him her own fears and her futile efforts to solve the mystery of the missing funds. With tears in her eyes, she had told him she was prepared to do anything - anything to save Grafton and to keep him safe. Desperately, he had wanted to ease the terrible burden that weighed on her heart, but all he could do was cradle her in his arms and whisper hollow words of consolation...

He began to weep into the gelding's mane, cursing Fate, clutching the long, coarse hair, as though it could provide the anchor he must have in the rising storm of his rage.

"Catherine, how I love you," he sobbed. "How I... long to give you what you need...." His roar of anguish crashed and echoed through the dense woods, but there was no one to hear.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Catherine stepped outside the door bearing the neatly-stenciled sign, closing it behind her. She had met with Joseph Maxwell for more than two hours that morning. Though he had been eager to help ease her worries over Grafton's financial crisis, there was little he could do. He had searched her household ledger yet again to find some plausible explanation for the missing sums of money. Two days before, Catherine had discovered a small box filled with receipts in the back of one of her aunt's closets. Together she and Joseph had gone over them in painstaking detail, but none matched the mysterious withdrawals.

Main Street looked deserted as Catherine started up the narrow sidewalk. She glanced nervously at the dark, lowering clouds. There had been heavy showers most of the night and the sky threatened more rain before the day was over. The road into MillBrook had been full of large puddles and deep ruts created by the downpour. Only Mouse's agile handling of the horse and carriage had prevented them from getting mired in one of the muddy holes.

Despite the chill air, she stopped in front of the millinery shop. A display of colorful hats filled the tiny window. Catherine stared at them, unseeing, her mind troubled. What she would do next to solve her estate's financial crisis, she had no idea. Joseph Maxwell was a kind man; she trusted him and knew he had done everything possible for her. Still... it wasn't enough. Nothing he - or she - could do was enough to save Grafton.

In the end, Joseph Maxwell had leaned across his desk, his hands folded, and advised her to take her own inheritance - a substantial sum - and return to the city. He could arrange for the sale of her estate. He had assured her that the profits from the proposed sale would be adequate to keep her for the rest of her life, in the manner to which she'd been accustomed. She'd expressed her gratitude for his assistance, but knew she would not heed his counsel - could not. She closed her eyes and saw Vincent's face. They had spent almost every night of the past two weeks together, until the rains came. He had shown her the estate by moonlight as he'd promised. They had ridden over the trails. He had held her in his arms amid the deep shadows of the forest; in the cozy warmth of his cottager by the first, soft light of dawn. He was strong... intelligent... fiercely protective of her... and... she loved him. Her lips quivered at the memory of his beautiful face so close to hers, his breath mingling with her own. She'd wanted him to kiss her - he almost had...

"Catherine!"

Her eyes flew open and she drew in a sharp breath at the sound of the familiar voice. "Elliot!" She turned just as he came to stand beside her.

"Catherine.... I've been... calling to you for blocks." He was panting and he realized he'd been running - to

catch up with her. "I see your attention was elsewhere."

'If he knew.....'

"Am I safe in assuming you have a fondness for hats?" He grinned at her and leaned forward, laying a hand on her arm. "Ah! Let me guess which one you had your eye on. Mmmmm ... Yes... I would say it is that one." He pointed to a hat decked with large, lavender feathers and bright sequins - the one hat in the display she would never have chosen.

Before she could reply, he took hold of her hand and led her into the tiny shop.

"Well, Mr Burch! What a pleasure it is to see you!" A large-bosomed woman of indeterminate age came from behind the counter and bustled over to them, reeking of perfume and talcum powder.

"The pleasure is all mine, Madame Gwendolyn. Have you met my new neighbor yet?"

Despite the woman's heavily rouged cheek, Catherine could swear Madame Gwendolyn was blushing. "No, I don't believe I have, Mr. Burch." She eyed Catherine curiously, as if she hadn't noticed Elliot's companion.

"Allow me. Catherine Chandler is the new mistress of Grafton Estate. Catherine, the Burch family - the ladies, that is - have bought Madame Gwendolyn's creations for as long as I can remember."

Catherine exchanged greetings with the proprietress, who was leaning toward Elliot as though she might enjoy taking hold of his arm.

"Yes, it's true, my dear. Mr Burch's family and I go back a long way. In fact, I could tell you a little story about Mr. Burch. That is, if he wouldn't mind."

Elliot shifted his feet and glanced away, then turned to give Madame a solicitous smile. "Now, you wouldn't be baring my faults to Miss Chandler, would you?"

"Why, I didn't know you had any faults, Mr. Burch." Madame Gwendolyn gazed up at him under lowered lashes, as she touched Catherine's arm. "It's such a charming story...."

"I'd love to hear it." Catherine was perversely enjoying Elliot's discomfort.

"Well, you see, Mrs. Burch was one of my most faithful customers. She bought all of her hats from me for thirty years. When Mr. Burch was just a small boy, he would tag along with her and... you know, my dear, I believe he enjoyed coming in to see me as much as his mother did."

"Yes?" Catherine smiled, encouraging Madame to continue.

"Yes, he did. Didn't you, Mr. Burch?"

Elliot merely nodded.

"He would come in and then... he would go through my shop and try on every hat." The woman's voice lowered to a whisper as she leaned toward Elliot again. "Every... one of them."

"You don't say?" Catherine glanced sideways at Elliot. Was his face flushed?

"And I can tell you something else, Miss Chandler." Madame's voice returned to normal. "He looked ever so much prettier in some of them than many of the ladies did."

Catherine laughed out loud, picturing a young Elliot in a frilly, feathered creation, smiling and bowing for his mother and Madame.

"I don't suppose you would be in the mood for trying on hats today, would you, Mr. Burch?"

Elliot cleared his throat and gave the proprietress a weak smile. "Ah... no. Those days are long past, I'm afraid. But, Madame, I do think Miss Chandler would like to try on this one." He quickly pointed to the hat in

question, no doubt anxious to have the focus of the conversation shift to his companion.

The hat was removed from the window and Madame Gwendolyn made a sweeping gesture in Catherine's direction. "Come, Miss Chandler, sit over here by the mirror where you can see yourself."

Catherine turned to Elliot. "Elliot, I...."

He held up his hand, silencing her. "Now, Catherine, not another word."

She tried not to grimace as she sat down and the hat was fitted firmly on top of her neatly-coiffed hair. Madame fussed for a minute with the largest feather on the hat, adjusting it so that it stuck out at a more conspicuous angle than before.

"There! It's the perfect size! And you look positively ravishing in it, Miss Chandler. Don't you agree, Mr. Burch?"

"Oh, indeed! Ravishing!"

'Such good fortune.' thought Catherine grimly, detesting the hat even more now that she was wearing it - and detesting Elliot at that moment for insisting she try it on. After a polite interval that seemed like an eternity, she carefully removed it, noting the price tag as she handed the hat back to Madame. "It's... very beautiful, Madame Gwendolyn, but... I'm afraid, far too expensive."

"Catherine, please, allow me," Elliot stepped closer and fumbled in his pocket, withdrawing a money clip bulging with dollar bills.

The blood rose with alarming swiftness to Catherine's face; she turned and fixed him with an icy stare. First, he had commandeered her into the store, not bothering to ask if she wanted to try on any hat, let alone this one. And now....

"Really, Elliot!" she sputtered as she pushed the chair back, barely missing his toes, and brushed past him out the door.

Her cheeks felt on fire and her knees were shaking, as she drew in a deep breath of air. She ducked her head, hurrying by the millinery window, wanting only to get away from the object of her anger. She hadn't gone more than twenty yards when he caught up with her, gasping for air as he took hold of her arm.

"Catherine, please. I... I had no idea."

His voice sounded choked, desperate, and she whirled around to face him, prepared to do battle, if necessary. The hurt evident in his eyes stopped her short and she forgot what she was about to say. His face was scrunched up in pain, much as a child who's been caught doing something naughty - and fears the worst.

"Catherine... will you... can you forgive me? I had no right... no right..." He shook his head and lowered his eyes to a study of the sidewalk.

She felt a stab of regret and reached out to touch his arm, realizing that, in his eagerness, he had wanted to please her. "Yes, Elliot. You're forgiven."

He glanced up at her, almost shy, then took hold of her hand. "Promise?"

"Promise." She forced a smile, wishing to end the conversation and be on her way.

He didn't let go of her hand as his face relaxed into a smile. "Catherine.... if all is forgiven, you must allow me to make up for my grave error by taking you to dinner at the Hamilton Hotel." He seemed to have recovered admirably from his embarrassment.

Though she had felt a bit hungry when she'd left Joseph's office, her appetite fled at Elliot's unexpected

invitation. "I'm ... afraid not, Elliot."

"No? You haven't eaten, have you?"

"I had a very large breakfast."

"Well, that would have been hours ago. It's past noon now. Come!"

"But Mouse... my groom, that is, will be along shortly for me." In truth she had asked Mouse to stop by Joseph Maxwell's office and pick up the heavy case containing the ledger and receipts. She'd told him he could find her in one of the stores on this side of Main Street.

"That's no problem at all. I shall run back and have Madame watch for him. She can send the boy onto the hotel. And I'll make sure Betsy Brooks gives him a hot meal in the kitchen."

Before Catherine could answer, he was gone and frustration rose in her breast again. Why did Elliot always seem to have his way with her? She was no more comfortable now in his presence than when they'd first met. If she was honest with herself, she knew the reason. He was courting her - with a vengeance.

Elliot returned as quickly as he'd disappeared; he took her hand, placing it in the crook of his arm.

"Catherine," he said, his face inches from hers, "Did you know that Betsy makes the tastiest biscuits in all of New York?"

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Burch?"

"Nothing Betsy, unless.... Catherine, would you care for some tea, or coffee, perhaps?"

"No. No, thank you, Elliot. A glass of water will be just fine."

She looked up and saw Betsy smiling down at her, hands folded against her apron. It seemed everyone but herself was pleased that she was with Elliot. She knew Elliot had the singular reputation of being the most eligible bachelor in the MillBrook area. On more than one occasion, several of her acquaintances had reminded Catherine that he had spurned his former companion, Rebecca, and turned his attention to her.

Catherine glanced around at the other diners in the crowded room, wondering if they, too, might be looking at her and smiling. To her relief, no one but Betsy seemed to be watching her.

She studied the plate of steaming, chunky stew that Betsy had set in front of her. The colorful mixture of meat and vegetables looked - and smelled - delicious. It was a shame that it would go to waste. Distracted as she was by Elliot, Catherine doubted she could eat a single bite. She stole a glance at him and saw he had his fork in one hand, half a buttered biscuit in the other. It appeared that his appetite was intact. She picked up her own fork and lifted out a small piece of meat and a carrot slice, brought the food slowly to her mouth.

"Ummmm.... this is wonderful. Isn't it, Catherine?"

She dropped her fork and looked up. He was gazing at her in a way that told her he was referring to more than the food.

"Yes. It's very good stew, Elliot."

They ate in silence for a few moments, and she found that if she focused on the meal instead of Elliot, she could force herself to take several forkfuls of the stew.

Finally, Elliot laid his utensils down and reached across the table for her hand. "You cannot imagine how much I enjoy your company, Catherine. When I'm with you... I...." His voice trailed off and he shook his head,

at a rare loss for words. He cleared his throat and began again. "Catherine, what I want to say is that when I'm with you, I'm happier than I've ever been... in my whole life."

She bit her lip and looked down at the table, wondering why he had chosen to make such a confession. She was more than concerned where the conversation might lead.

"Catherine?"

"Yes, Elliot. I'm sorry... I was just thinking... how crowded the dining room is today."

"No, you weren't."

She shook her head at his softly spoken words. "Please, Elliot."

"Catherine, You were thinking about what I just said. I know it." He squeezed her hand and continued in a low voice. "Maybe the dining room of the Hamilton Hotel isn't the best place for me to tell you what's been on my mind... and in my heart. Heaven knows, this is not how I planned it. But, at the moment, I can't think of a more appropriate place. We're here... together..."

A feeling of dread started in the pit of her stomach, as though she instinctively knew what he would say next. The thought of escape flashed through her mind and she tried to imagine what the other patrons might do if she were to bolt from her chair, her skirt and petticoats flying as she made a mad dash for the kitchen. She envisioned a befuddled Mouse as her unlikely rescuer, whisking her away on his arm - out the back door and into the sanctuary of her waiting carriage.

Elliot's hand cupped her chin and he turned her face to his. "Catherine... hear me out. There is no easy way for me to say this but, I'm... ummmmm... aware of the financial crisis that threatens your estate."

Her eyes widened even as he took her hand and pressed it against his cheek. "I know it must be a shock to hear this, but believe me, in a community as small as MillBrook, well... it's very hard to keep one's financial affairs a secret. When Charlotte Grafton dismissed nearly half of her staff and let her croplands lie fallow, it didn't take long before...."

"Elliot!"

Catherine gasped at the sound of the booming voice and Elliot's hand let go of hers, jerking back. She looked up and saw Randall Hardesty towering them. He was tall, well-built for his age, with a shock of white hair that always seemed in want of a good combing.

"Randall! What... a surprise."

"I apologize for interrupting your dinner. Good day, Miss Chandler." The older man made a brief bow in her direction.

"Mr. Hardesty, how nice to see you." He couldn't possibly know how *'nice'*.

"Elliot, the neighbors have called a meeting for next Saturday at Judge Clayton's home."

"Why? What is the meeting about?" Elliot got up from his chair, looking puzzled, and took Randall's arm.

"Well, it seems the poacher's back again this year."

"Is that so, Randall?"

"It is. The Judge and I have found his traps down by Wiggins Creek. We think he's gone onto your land, too. My man Briggs found footprints in the snow on your side of the water. But, we'll get him this year - if we all pull together."

Though Randall Hardesty was several inches taller and a good deal heavier than Elliot, Catherine noticed he was being steered away from the table by his smaller neighbor.

"Catherine, would you excuse Randall and me for a moment?"

"Yes, of course. Please, take your time." She watched until they walked through the door on the other side of the room, then fell back in her chair. She welcomed the brief respite - and worried what Elliot might say to her when he returned.

No sooner had Elliot left the room than she heard someone call her name. She turned and peered up into the boyish, smiling face of Michael Ames. He was standing beside her, balancing a large tray of coffee cups in one hand.

"Michael!"

"I hope I didn't startle you, Miss Catherine."

"No, not at all. It's good to see you. Are you waiting tables today?"

"Yes... just filling in for my brother, John." He looked away, lowering his head bashfully, as he had when he'd first offered her assistance with her luggage on the train. "I would have come over to your table sooner, but I saw you and Mr. Burch were talking and... I didn't want to disturb you."

He couldn't know how much she would have welcomed his '*disturbance*'. "I'm so glad you came over now, Michael."

"How is everything at Grafton?"

"Doing very well." She felt a small stab of guilt at the little lie. "It's a beautiful estate."

"Yes, it is, Miss Catherine," he agreed.

"And how have you been, Michael?"

"Good. Matter of fact, I'm up for a transfer."

"Are you? A promotion?" He nodded and she saw the quiet pride evident in his posture. "Will you be moving then?"

"Yes. I've been made Assistant Conductor on the New York-to-Washington route. I'll be leaving MillBrook in a few weeks for the city."

"You'll be living in New York City?"

"That's right. And, If things work out, my mother and brother John may move there, too."

"That's a wonderful opportunity, Michael. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Miss Catherine." His cheeks reddened and he averted his eyes, glancing around the room. "I'd better be getting back to my job here, before these cups of coffee get cold."

"I wish you all the best."

"And my best to you, too, Miss Catherine." He bowed and started to leave, then looked back at her. "I... don't suppose you've seen any monsters in the woods lately, have you, Miss Catherine?"

Though his words held a hint of gentle amusement, her heart thudded loudly in her chest at his question and she took a moment to answer. She prayed her own voice sounded as lightly teasing as his. "I'm.... afraid not, Michael. If I do, I promise you'll be the first to know."

"Good!" He grinned at her and strode away, the huge tray balanced expertly in his hand.

'Definitely no monsters,' she thought as she watched him cross the room, though the expression on the conductor's face, his stammered reply to her question; Michael's own cautiousness, his words - were still fresh in her mind..... *'rumors and tales'; 'a man found dead in the woods'; 'like he'd been clawed by a wild*

animal.....'

She'd barely noticed that Elliot had returned until he sat down and reached for her hand. She tried to withdraw from his touch, but he was quicker, possessively interlacing her fingers with his. When she looked up, he was smiling at her.

"Ah.... so deep in thought, Catherine. I wonder what it is you're contemplating. I apologize for the interruption. I believe when I left, we were discussing our future."

Her head snapped up and a wave of near panic gripped her; she stiffened in anticipation of his next words.

"Catherine, I know you must be very concerned about your estate and what will happen when... shall we say... your resources are depleted. There's a way for you to keep Grafton, you know. There is... that is..." he stuttered, gazing down at their entwined hands. He gave a short laugh. "Forgive me. I'm stammering like a schoolboy. What I want to say is that I love you - more than you can imagine, Catherine. And I... I'm asking for your hand in marriage. Would you... will you marry me?"

Her reply was immediately, more a reflex than a thought-out answer. "No, Elliot. No... I'm sorry... I can't marry you." She regretted her abrupt reply and hoped her apology would soften her rejection of the proposal.

"Catherine..." He ducked his head, but not soon enough to hide the deep shadow of hurt and disappointment in his dark eyes. "Please, don't give me your answer now. I won't accept it. Don't say something you may later regret."

'Regret.' How little he knew of regret! *'Regret'....* would be knowing she'd never again hear the sweet, seductive whisper of her name as she sat cradled in Vincent's arms. *'Regret'* would be realizing she'd never again see the heavenly face she adored; believing she could no longer protect the one she loved. *'Regret'...* would be failing to honor Charlotte Grafton's memory by losing all that she had held dear.

"Elliot... I won't change my mind."

"Shhhhhh. I won't listen, Catherine, because I believe you will change your mind. I caught you by surprise today; I appreciate that. However, you must consider your options. The future of your estate is in grave danger and I'm certain you don't want to lose Grafton."

He raised her hand to his lips and smoothed a kiss across the palm. "I love you. That won't change. I'm convinced here," he laid his hand over his heart, "that I can make you happy.... if you'll give me the chance. Catherine, I can save your estate."

He straightened suddenly; Catherine turned her head to see Betsy Brooks approaching their table.

"Well, Mr. Burch, Miss Catherine, how about a piece of warm apple pie for dessert?"

"Catherine?"

"No, not today, thank you -- though it sounds delicious."

"Why, Miss Catherine, you've hardly touched your meal! I hope the food is to your liking?"

"Yes, Betsy." Catherine nodded her head in reassurance. "The stew was wonderful. It's just that... I had such a large breakfast today."

Betsy looked at her for a moment, then leaned over to take her plate. "I understand. I'll leave you two alone then. I've fed your groom, Miss Catherine, and he wanted me to tell you he'll be waiting for you at your carriage. It's parked around the side of the hotel."

"Thank you, Betsy." The pleasant woman gave Catherine's hand a gentle pat, and as she turned to go, Catherine was left to speculate on what Betsy might conclude about the young couple lingering so long at

their table. She decided there was no better time for her to make her own exit. "Elliot, I really must be going, too. Thank you for dinner."

He got up as she did and was at her side before she could leave. He helped her with her shawl, then took her arm, following her through the now empty dining room.

"Catherine, I'm not going to let you get away from me. I'll be reminding you of our conversation today and... I'll be anticipating your answer." He bent close, whispering in her ear, "Have I told you that I can be a very patient man when I'm convinced something is worth waiting for?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

WINTER

Clad in a white gossamer gown, Catherine stood at the entrance of the small chamber where one candle had been left burning. She couldn't see him, but knew he waited for her in the soft shadows that merged with the darkness.

He called her name and she lifted her eyes. He was kneeling in the middle of their bridal bed on a sea of ivory silk. He was serenely beautiful, eminently masculine, his sculpted body illuminated in the faint light like some elaborate statue carved to her specifications. His flowing mane tumbled around his face in a fiery tangle of burnished gold; his eyes were blue flames that beckoned her with their silent, siren song, banishing the cold night.

Willingly, she went into his arms, drawn by the potent power of his love. In the warmth of his embrace, she heard his murmured words of love, calling her home; she felt her breath, hot and sweet, against her face as he drew her down into the inviting depths of the satin comforter. She ran her fingers longingly over the hard strength of his back, wanting him, welcoming his touch and seeking its fire; in his answering sigh, she felt his doubts retreat, his fear vanish.

With great reverence, he traced her cheek, her brow, his clawed fingertips brushing against her fevered skin. He framed her face in his hands, gazing at her with adoration. Then, his lips took hers with savage tenderness and nothing remained but their love - their world reduced to one thought, one need....

"NO!" The voice was cold as steel, harder than stone; it dripped with vengeance, thundering through the still air. She jerked back, withdrawing from the arms that held her tight. Her eyes madly searched the black corners of the room. Her lips, moist and quivering, parted to speak, but there were no words.

"She does not belong with YOU... beast! Catherine is mine!"

Her hands flew up in horror and defense at the icy threat. Yet she was helpless against its venom and raw power. She lowered her feet to the floor; ignoring the pleading of her heart, she abandoned the lover who began to weep quietly of the bed, begging her to stay.

The voice, low and commanding, lured her on. She turned in its direction and walked into the devouring shadow of a man with dark hair and darker eyes. He took her arm and led her away. She went meekly, without protest, knowing that whatever he asked, whatever he demanded of her, she must do....

"VINCENT!" She woke with a start and sat bolt upright, gasping for air. Disoriented, desperate to rid her mind of the nightmare, she groped with one hand until she found the sturdy bolster of the bed.

Bracing shaky arms against the solid wood, she shook her head and groaned softly in the quiet darkness of her own room. "No..." she whispered. "No..." She wondered, in her confusion, where the nightmare ended and reality began.

Could it be true? Had she been with him... in his bed? Or, was he here now... with her? She wanted him with a fierceness that made the blood pound at her temples. If he was here, why wasn't she in his arms? Why wasn't he giving her what she ached for, needed? Where was the healing power of his touch, the soothing balm of his words?

She turned and pressed her palm into the place where she'd just lain. The sheet and heavy quilt were warm and rumpled, betraying her restless sleep. Fearfully, she slid her hand to the other side of the bed. The covers there lay smooth and cool beneath her fingers. Her thoughts began to clear and the knowledge of where she was and what she'd dreamed crystallized beyond the storm of images that cluttered her mind.

She blinked and tried to focus on the familiar shapes and delicate patterns of the night-darkened room. On unsteady legs, she got up and walked to the window. A sliver of light intruded through the partially open drapes. She looked down at the black expanse of lawn, then up at the heavens, noting the half-crescent moon was still low in the sky. She knew, with dismay, that she couldn't have been asleep more than an hour at most.

A brisk wind fanned the tops of the tall, ice-tipped trees, clattering its way through the naked branches. Shivering, she pulled the folds of her flannel gown tighter around her breast. It was the dead of winter and, for weeks, the weather had been unbearably dreary; the sun had rarely broken through the leaden, gray clouds. Now the stark scene etched in the frosty glass mocked the emptiness in her heart. The dream had seemed so real. It ended in a nightmare; it began with the whispered promise of love fulfilled....

A chilling finger of guilt edged up her spine. The truth was far different, though it was disguised in the dream, as the shadowy form and voice that stopped her with a force greater than the fire of her lover's kiss. It was Elliot - his voice, his hated words, that stole her happiness, that made her abandon Vincent.

In reality, after weeks of tortured debate, she had finally given in and agreed to Elliot's persistent proposals. But even as the words had left her mouth, her heart had recoiled at the finality of her decision. If she hadn't run out of options, had found another way - any way - to save Grafton, to keep the man she loved safe.

If only the barren ground could have been made ready for planting in the spring as she'd hoped. She closed her eyes, seeing Benton as he'd come to her with the bad news. Her stomach had contracted violently in anticipation of what he would tell her.

His head was bowed when he spoke. *'I'm sorry, Miss Catherine... The soil's been depleted... Three years at least before we can plant....'*

Looking back, she knew that however much Benton might have wanted to spare her, he had to tell her the truth. Without any deliberation on the matter, she had decided she would use her own savings. But after examining the estate's financial records one last time, Joseph Maxwell had sadly informed her that her resources could not keep Grafton solvent. Again, he had advised her to sell her estate and return to the city.

Grafton was doomed and there was no way out... no way for her, for the one she loved, for the servants, no way except....

She shuddered, remembering Elliot's face, fiercely proud, when she'd consented two weeks before to be his wife. He had looked triumphant, as though he'd gambled for a prize and won. He had not wanted to acknowledge her melancholy, the tears of regret that welled in her eyes, the bared pain of her forced smile. Instead, he had taken her in his arms and passionately kissed her, murmuring words of love against her resisting mouth.

The next evening he had returned with a small box wrapped in burgundy velvet, tied with a gold ribbon. She had opened it and a heavy necklace tumbled out, liberally encrusted with tiny emeralds and diamonds that winked defiantly when she held them to the light. He had scooped the lavish gift out of her shaking hands, never noticed that she tried to pull away, as he bent to place it around her neck. With a self-satisfied smile,

he hurried to fasten the clasp, gently scolding her to hold still until he completed the task.

Hours later, after he had left, she immediately removed it, handling it as though the flame in its jewels might burn her. Deliberately, she had dropped it in the same box that held the ring Tom had given her an eternity ago. She had closed the lid and not been able to bear the sight of the necklace since.

In two more days, she would have to take it out and wear it to the ball Elliot was planning as a celebration of their engagement. After their marriage, she would have to wear the necklace whenever he wanted her to. She would have to do whatever pleased him - she would belong to him. She would spend every night for the rest of her life lying in his bed, in his arms.

Fresh tears spilled onto her cheeks, blurring her vision of the inky copse of trees below. If only Vincent were there now..... he must know of her distress, her need of him. Had he entered her dream and been tormented by the anguish of their unfulfilled love?

She tensed, straining to hear the familiar, soft tapping at the balcony doors, yet knew he couldn't come. She was certain Anna or Benton would have told Vincent of her engagement. She'd wanted to believe that someday they would be together. They both hungered for it, though she knew Vincent had tried to deny the possibility. Now it was too late. Whatever path they might have taken was closed to them.

Questions plagued her mind. Would she always wait, like this, for him to come in the night and claim her love? Would she ignore the man who slept by her side and lose herself in fantasies of the one who owned her heart? Would she close her eyes and be captured in the seductive strength of his embrace, forever ravaged by the sweet agony of his kisses?

Questions whose answers would bring no peace in the endless, gray days ahead. She believed she would never see Vincent again. He would not allow himself to come and free her from the lonely prison of her marriage to Elliot. Vincent would be living in a prison of his own, apart from her - for eternity.

Spent from her churning questions, she turned from the window and sought the solace of the familiar blue chair. Burying her head in her hands, she sobbed, "What have you done?"

"No... No..." The low, guttural chant increased in intensity, throbbing through the empty night, drawing closer, growing louder...

Vincent woke with a roar that shattered the stillness of his small bedroom. Panting, he sat up, dazed and disoriented. His eyes darted wildly around the room, searching the shadowed corners.

"Catherine?" The word was a whispered question, a plea. He turned to the other side of the bed as though he might find her hiding beneath the patched, worn quilt. Harsh reality came fast on the heels of his discovery that he was alone. His heart thudded in his chest, as he buried his head in shaking hands. He tried to sort through the confusion of images that tumbled across his mind, willing himself to remember.

Catherine wasn't there. She was in her own bed in the luxury of the great house. Of that much he was sure. It was in the veil of his sleep that he had drifted into her dream and stayed. The vivid memory of it swirled in a tantalizing mirage around him; it had been their wedding night; Catherine had come to him, radiantly beautiful, and they had lain in a sea of ivory satin. She was in his arms, her soft moans a seductive melody in his ears as the sweet tyranny of his kisses claimed her, raining on her face... her neck. Without shame, he had taken them both to the breathless brink of ecstasy... then it had ended with the hated presence of another, an intruder who stole her away and he had been powerless to stop it...

Now, the cold truth took deadly aim at his heart. Catherine was to marry Elliot Burch. **He** was the dark

stranger in the dream. **He** was the one who would soon possess her.

Vincent remembered the day Anna had appeared at his door, trembling and on the verge of tears, bringing him the hated news of Catherine's betrothal. It mattered little that he knew why Catherine had taken this fateful step, that it was because of him - to protect him and save Grafton from financial ruin. He felt the weight of his own guilt, his stubborn denial that they could find a way to be together - truly together. He believed himself unworthy of her love.

What could he give her but a life of shadows and darkness, a life of hiding? In the uncompromising light of day, he had to confront his aloneness, the differences that dictated he must keep himself apart from others. But under cover of night, when the darkness was his friend, he struggled against the desires that rose with alarming swiftness to claim him. He longed to feel the soft warmth of her body next to his; he ached to hear her murmured words of love; her fierce declaration that he, alone, filled the empty places in her heart.

He cursed the Fates for his sense of hopelessness, even as her pleading reached him through the bond. What would be left for either of them after her marriage to Elliot? A life that was unbearable....

Tears welled in his eyes and he looked down at his hands, the sharp nails gleaming darkly through the tufts of amber fur that covered the huge fingers. They seemed to mock him in the pale light. Slowly, he raised one hand to touch the deep cleft of his upper lip. His fingers slid down the sharp canine that edged between his parted lips. Farther up, they traveled over the flattened nose sprinkled with downy hairs, the dramatically arched brows, the wild tangle of mane. They blazed a trail over the very features that set him apart from other men.

Didn't Catherine see that his hands were not made to give love, that they were meant to be used as instruments of vengeance... and weapons of death? Yes, he acknowledged to himself, she saw and with every longing look, every covetous glance, she told him it didn't matter. She wanted him... loved him.

Though the miracle of her unquestioning acceptance continued to humble him, from the beginning, he had determined that he must remain alone; because of his love for her, he could not subject her to the clearly defined limits of his own life. She deserved so much more than that, so much more than he could ever give her...

But now, as an ultimate sacrifice - for him - she was going to marry Elliot Burch. She would soon spend each night, through the unceasing turn of the seasons, every year to come, lying in Elliot's arms, giving herself to a man she could barely tolerate.

A strangled sob echoed through the quiet chamber, as he lowered his head into his hands. The bond between himself and Catherine would never die. He would know of every tear she shed, every whispered plea, every moment of utter despair. Through eternity, it would be a mocking reminder of what she had done for love. Desperately, he wanted her with him... forever. It could never be. She must forget him. He knew she never would. He must not allow himself to think of her, to entertain even the possibility of seeing her again. But already his shattered heart was scheming for a way to make it so....

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Catherine, may I get you some more punch, another tea cake, perhaps?" Elliot hovered over her, a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"No, thank you, Elliot. I wouldn't be able to drink, or eat, another thing."

"You **ARE** all right?" The frown deepened and his brow furrowed, betraying his eagerness to please her; his

concern that she enjoy herself on this special night.... and his nagging doubts that she would ever love him in the way he loved her.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine." She forced a smile, hoping she sounded sincere; wishing he would just go away and leave her alone. "I'm just a little tired, that's all."

"I know just the thing!" His face brightened as he took her arm and led her through the crowded ballroom to the row of high-backed chairs lining one wall. "I fear the excitement has been too much for you and I must apologize. You've met so many people. And don't think I haven't noticed that every gentleman in the room has asked you for a dance. That, of course, will change with our marriage." He thrust his face close to hers, winking at her in an undisguised attempt to lighten her mood.

The flippant remark only served to irritate her. As he helped her into one of the chairs, handling her as though she were a piece of delicate china, her reply was tinged with anger. ***"Please, Elliot. I'm not as fragile as you seem to think. I haven't broken in two yet."***

"I didn't mean to imply that you are." He stepped back, his pride noticeably wounded; he took a deep breath and tried again. "It's just that... well, you've made me so very happy, Catherine, accepting my proposal. You might not know it, but you've granted me my most fervent wish - to have you as my wife. I want to make you happy, too." He reached to pluck a pink rose bud from a vase laded with fresh flowers. Taking her hand, he placed the peace offering in her open palm.

She forced another smile, struggling to be civil. *'He WAS trying'*, she reminded himself. "I know, Elliot."

His chagrined expression told her it wasn't what he wanted to hear. Unable to bear the intensity of his gaze, she looked down at the small rose. How could she tell him that, despite their engagement, her affections would never be his; her heart, torn and bleeding, belonged to another? How could she tell him that she cried herself to sleep each night, longing for the arms of someone he didn't even know existed? And how could she tell him that she didn't fully trust him, and nothing he might say or do could change that?

At last she glanced up, whispering, "Thank you for the flower, Elliot."

"You're welcome." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Now, you sit here as long as you like, Catherine. I'll go and talk to Randall Hardesty a few moments, but I'll be back. I promise."

His earnest brown eyes looked troubled and she made herself put her hand on his arm. "Please, go ahead and enjoy yourself. I'll be fine. Just give me a little while alone."

"Your wish is my command, my beautiful bride." He bowed elegantly and gave her a dazzling smile, covering up his uncertainty. Then he turned and, to her relief, disappeared in the crush of people who milled about the high-ceilinged room.

She waited until she was sure he was gone, before leaning back in the chair and closing her eyes. Her hands went to her temples, massaging the beginnings of a headache. She wondered at her staggering sense of fatigue. Was it due to the strain of meeting so many people, as Elliot had suggested? Brutal honesty forced her to admit it was not. It was Elliot himself, his smothering attention, his dogged persistence in wanting her to play the happy bride-to-be.

Her eyes flew open at the sensation of choking that made her gasp for air. She sat up straight, trying to clear her throat, and remove whatever obstacle threatened to suffocate her. The room suddenly took on a dream-like quality, shimmering and hazy; she feared she would faint. A wave of dizziness rocked her and beads of perspiration broke out on her brow, her palms; making her feel cold and clammy.

Desperate to stem the panic rising in her breast, she pushed back the chair and looked for an escape. The large room started to close in around her, as she frantically searched the sea of faces for Elliot. At last she saw him standing at the far side of the room, by the buffet table. He and Randall Hardesty were laughing.

With the din of noise in the room, he would never hear her. *'Good,'* her racing heart whispered.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted the double French doors that led outside. Hastily, she grabbed her shawl and rose on shaking legs. She groped for the wall, as she made her way down the short corridor to the doors... and freedom. She glanced back, but no one seemed to notice she was gone. She pushed open one of the doors and stepped out onto the small vernada.

Her stomach churned and her head throbbed painfully as she took careful steps and moved off the porch into the protective shadow of a large juniper bush. She clutched at the heavy necklace, nearly ripping it off as she struggled to gain control over her emotions. She took deep, frantic breaths of chill air, welcoming the breeze that teased around her hiding place. Hot tears spilled onto her flaming cheeks, their salty wetness moistening her parched lips.

Pale light from the many lanterns inside cast an eerie glow across the wide yard and she decided to venture farther, wanting only to put as much distance as possible between herself and her intended bridegroom.

The grass, long dead and brittle, crunched under her feet. She wondered if she were going mad. She didn't care, because she desperately needed to find a place to be alone until she could compose herself and muster enough courage to face Elliot again.

'Never mind,' she told herself, *'If Elliot should come looking for me. It doesn't matter that I will soon have to face his probing questions.'*

There was a thicket of trees near the house and she hurried toward it, seeking the refuge it promised. The smell of pine needles filled her nostrils and she inhaled, taking comfort in their heady scent. She leaned against the sturdy trunk of a tree, hugging it, as the sense of panic ebbed away. She chided herself for allowing her emotions to override her determination. She must **NOT** lose control of herself now. There was too much at stake. The survival of Grafton hung in the balance of her impending marriage.

She tilted her head back to see meager rays of moonlight filtering through the tops of the trees, lacing the clouds with silver. Her muscles began to relax and she looked around. The subdued light cut across a bed of pine needles and dried grass that formed a small clearing in the grove. A gust of wind caught at the folds of her gown and she gave herself up to the gentle buffeting, a welcome contrast to the noisy confusion in the ballroom. Her ears tuned now to the stillness, she heard the orchestra from inside begin to play a familiar waltz. She began to move in time to the lilting melody, humming along as she picked up the folds of her full skirt. Stepping into the small pool of light, she became caught up in the dance she loved so well. Her petticoats rustled as she swayed back and forth, lost in the giddy, seductive rhythm. And, inexplicably, her excitement grew - as though someone were watching her, smiling on her with approval. It was a presence so palpable, she believed she could touch it...

'Vincent' Had he called out to her through the bond? Had he known of her distress and reached out to comfort her in the only way possible?

The music stopped as she came to a halt. A different sound, nearer than the distant chatter from the ballroom, made her tense. Her ears strained to hear it again. It seemed to come from the shadows just behind her and her heart stumbled, trying to catch up with the apprehension that was fast rising in her throat. Her mind raced with possibilities. Had someone followed her outside? Had they watched as she danced, thinking her a fool? Or did they have a more sinister intent? She dismissed the absurd notion and decided it must be nothing more than a small animal scurrying through the dried leaves and pine needles. Whatever it was, served as a warning to her that this place wasn't as secluded as it seemed. She gathered her skirt and petticoats, preparing to go back, to face the displeasure she knew would be waiting for her when she saw Elliot.

"Catherine!"

Her name was softly spoken, caressed by that lush hypnotic voice - the voice she cherished.

'It couldn't be,' she told herself, 'not him... not here. It must be her imagination, feeding on her own wild desires, or the wind, imitating his voice as it moaned through the trees.'

Still, she stopped, praying to hear it again.

"Catherine!"

This time she knew it wasn't her imagination, nor the wind; she turned, squinting into the blackness for some clue of his presence.

"Vincent?" she said; her own voice sounded pitifully small in the quietness of the grove.

She saw him as he stepped forward, tall and too magnificent for words; he stood, half in shadow, half in glorious light, no more than a heartbeat away from her.

"Vincent!" The joyous cry was lost in her strangled gasp for air. Later, she had no memory of breathing his name, nor of either of them taking a step, but the next instant she was in his arms, her face buried in the warm expanse of his chest.

She cried his name again and tightened her arms around him, never wanting to let go. She burrowed deeper into his strength, searching for the steady, comforting rhythm of his heart. This was heaven... and she had missed it so....

He responded with a groan as he pulled her closer, his hands splayed against her quivering back, matching her desperate desire for touch. He sheltered her from the wind, burying his head in her hair, stirring the silky strands by her ear with his murmured words.

How long they stood there, clasped in each other's arms, she had no idea; time had no meaning. She was here, with him, where she belonged. It was the only reality that mattered.

The silence between them was broken by the sharp cry of a nighthawk and Vincent drew back, looking down at her as though he didn't believe she was in his arms.

"I never thought, Catherine... I've missed you so... you do not know, you cannot know...." His voice was hoarse with emotion and she saw the reflected gleam of tears in his eyes.

"I do know...," she whispered, her own voice choked with her love for him. "How, Vincent?"

"How did I come to be here tonight? How did I know you would need me?" He tenderly brushed a strand of hair back from her wet cheek.

"Yes."

"Anna told me of Elliot's plans. This celebration is for you, Catherine. For you... and Elliot."

"Then you do not know?" Her heart crumpled with the agony she saw written on his noble face.

"Yes...." He abruptly turned his head, as though he couldn't bear the pain so evident in her eyes. "Catherine, what happened? I felt your distress. I wanted so desperately to come to you... to help you." He looked back at her, imploring. "Your heart tells me you do not love this man, Elliot. Yet you are to marry him. Is that what troubles you so tonight? Please, Catherine... I must know." His words betrayed his own desolation of heart as midnight blue eyes searched hers, begging to be told the truth.

She couldn't bear the misery written in every line of his face, his body. She sought the solidity of a nearby tree, bracing her hand against its rough trunk, missing his warmth. She tried to gain control over her rolling emotions, the cauldron that was threatening to erupt in a torrid profession of love.

"Elliot will be worried about you, Catherine. He will come for you."

"I know. But, Vincent..." What could she tell him now? "I... I'm...." The dam burst inside, and she was powerless to stop the tide that spilled from her lips... an outpouring of words that would lay bare her need of him.

"Yes, Vincent, Elliot is my fiance. No... I do not love him. And if it is the truth you must hear, it is **YOU** I want by my side, have always wanted. It is **YOUR** face I hunger to see across a crowded room, **YOUR** hand I want to hold in mine, **YOUR** voice whispering my name, **YOUR** touch.... **YOUR** caress... it would be all that I've ever dreamed of, all that I've ever desired.... to have you... you know that..." Her voice faltered and she bowed her head, embarrassed, unable to meet his eyes.

"Catherine." Her name escaped him in a strangled sob as he pulled her close, crushing her against him in a desperate embrace.

She buried her face in the folds of his cloak as he caressed her hair with trembling fingers.

"Catherine, please...."

She raised her head and he took her face in his hands, tenderly framing it. "Catherine, these past weeks.... you have filled my dreams. In them, you are.... you have been dreaming as well."

His answer could only confirm what she knew in her heart. "You were there... in my dreams?"

"Yes." His breath sighed against her cheek as one finger traced the line of her jaw. Taut muscles belied the tentative gesture, his own passion barely contained as he fought for control. "Catherine... I... I couldn't bear not being near you tonight. I came to hear the music, to perhaps see you at a window. And... to imagine myself, inside, with you; to feel you in my arms as we danced together, our joy complete. To know that your eyes saw only me, your heart desired only me.... no one but me.... forever."

He threw his head back in agony and dropped his arms, exhausted by the confession torn from his soul.

The wind whipped around her, causing her to shiver as she reached out for him, pleading to be taken back into his arms.

Unable to deny her need, indistinguishable from his own, he whispered, "Forgive me," as he gave her the refuge she sought.

Her shawl fell away, fluttering to the ground and she sensed the intimacy of their shared confession was beginning to ensnare them in a tender trap. She tilted her face up to his, suddenly shy. "You saw me... when the music played?"

He gently guided her face closer, the fire in his eyes visible in the dark. "Yes, I saw you dancing alone and it was beautiful. You looked so... lovely."

She studied him, drinking in his unique beauty, noticing for the first time what he wore. The ebony cloak was draped across his shoulders as usual, but underneath was a shirt of fine silk, tied in an ascot at the neck. She allowed her fingers the pleasure of skimming down the ivory swell of fabric that covered his chest, stopped at the fringed tips of a suede vest, barely visible beneath the folds of his cloak. A thought jolted her; he was dressed as though he **DID** intend to step through the double doors into the ballroom; as though **HE** were the intended bridegroom ready to accept the good wishes of his guests.

In the cloud shadows that spun across the moon, his mane had taken on the look of polished silver and she ached to run her fingers through it. She craved to show him how much she loved him; she wanted to prove true his words.

If there had ever been any doubts in her own mind about the rightness of their dream to be together, they were sacrificed in the searing pleasure of his touch, as they stood locked in one another's arms, silhouetted against the sky. This was meant to be and no amount of rational reasoning could convince her otherwise.

Here, the heat and noise of the ballroom were as distant as the faint stars twinkling in some far-off universe. His gaze had never left her face, as she contemplated these realities and the passion pulsing between them had become a tangible force of its own, reflecting the endless, yearning need that no wall of fear, however carefully erected, could stop.

She could almost hear it crumbling at their feet; she breathed words meant for him alone. "Vincent, you are so beautiful."

He lowered his eyes, his voice holding her hypnotized as he caressed her palms with his thumbs. "Others would call me many things, Catherine, but I'm afraid '*beautiful*' is not one of them. The beauty you see is a reflection of your own, what is in your heart. It causes you to look beyond this face, to see what is in my own heart... to know that it beats only for you... that it always will."

The night closed in around them, securing them in its dark embrace, and from the ballroom the music of the orchestra drifted out to them. It was a waltz.

"Strauss," she whispered.

"Yes...."

"Do you dance, Vincent?"

He answered with his eyes, his touch, as he grasped her waist and placed her free hand in his, beginning to lead her through the steps of a dance that suddenly seemed centuries old.

Their eyes locked and held, as he taught her the mysteries of something she thought she'd understood so well. Their souls, their bodies, joined in the slow, sensuous rhythm. They moved gracefully across the shadows, into the light and back again, in a ever-widening circle until she felt giddy from watching the world swirl slowly past her.

When the music ended they came to a reluctant stop, but the insistent beat still pounded through her, in her mind, her heart. It removed every doubt, silenced ever fear he might ever have had, rejected all thoughts but one....

Then without warning, he dropped his hands, releasing her, and turned away. For one terrifying moment, she believed he would run from her, leaving her alone, embarrassed, wanting.

Instead he looked back at her and what she saw made her gasp. His face was a mask of longing, his eyes shimmering tide pools of silver, bright with agony, dark with desire.

"Catherine, for so long, I've wanted... I've needed... I.. I want to kiss you... Please."

"Yes, Vincent..."

As soon as he touched her, she collapsed with a shudder into his arms. He lowered his face to hers and took her lips with exquisite tenderness. For the first time, apart from her dreams, she knew the pleasure of his unique mouth molded against hers. He trembled and she responded, pressing closer, closer into the soft cleft of his upper lip.

The kiss lasted only a moment, but when he drew back, his adoring gaze spoke of possession and its heady message thrilled her beyond reason. His hand came up to carefully brush away a strand of his hair that had caught on her moist lips.

Her fingers shook, as she brought them up to daringly trace the fullness of his lower lip, following it around to the feature that set him apart from other men.

"Please, Vincent," she breathed, "Please....."

His answer was a soft moan as his arms tightened around her, pulling her into himself, and his mouth found hers again. Her arms went around his neck, her fingers teasing through the satiny tangle of his hair, caressing the golden strands. Tugging gently, she silently asked him to deepen the kiss. He responded, ravishing her with his tenderness, taking her where she'd never been before.....

The world broke around them and shattered. The wind howled at their door and gained no entrance. They were swept away, two lovers lost in another universe, standing together – alone - on some mist-shrouded island outside of time.

They rocked back and forth. She knew the thrill of his huge hands moving reverently over her back, infinitely gentle, as he claimed her love. In wordless answer, she clutched his mane, stroking down its length, soothing him, inflaming him.....

The night was perfect, they were complete, each belonging to the other at last.

In some dim recess of her mind, a warning sounded; a noise she wanted to ignore filtered through to her. She felt Vincent stiffen against her, his keen ears alert to any danger that lurked in the shadows. She held him tighter, clinging to him, determined that nothing must come between them.

Before she could make any rational decision, he tore his mouth from hers. In one swift move, he withdrew and disappeared like an apparition in the dark. The hated wind stung her face, her arms, stronger than before - colder; a shiver coursed down her spine as she opened her mouth to call after him.

Panicked, she wondered if she had imagined it all. But when she put a trembling finger to her lips and drew away the moistness, she knew he had been there. Her lips were still wet with the sweetness of his kisses and the throbbing tenderness told her it had not been an illusion.

"Catherine?!"

The voice made her jump and she drew in a sharp breath at the harsh tone.

"Catherine! What in heaven's name are you doing out here? Do you have any idea how worried I've been?" Elliot stepped from the shadows, bearing down on her with determined strides. He stopped directly in front of her. **"Have you lost your mind? All the guests are frantic over your disappearance! How could you do this to me?"**

His eyes were narrow slits, anger evident in his posture, and she leaned away from him. If he only knew the truth.... For one frantic second, she wondered if he saw the evidence of her recent passion. But his next words dispelled the idea.

"Catherine," he said, his voice softening, "What's wrong? Are you ill?"

"I.... you remember I was feeling a bit tired. I thought I might faint and I came outside... for some air," she added weakly.

He took her hand and though she cringed at his touch, she made herself return his gentle squeeze.

"Catherine.... Catherine. You should have told me. I would have brought you outside."

His voice held a hint of accusation, and wounded pride for the embarrassment she'd caused him. "In any case, you shouldn't have wandered so far. What if you had fainted? I might never have found you." He brought her hand to his lips, brushing a kiss across the palm, touching his tongue provocatively to each of her fingers in turn.

Now she did feel ill and she fought down a wave of nausea. "I... I'm sorry, Elliot, but I must go home. I fear I may be coming down with something."

Instantly contrite, he placed his arm around her waist. "But, of course, Catherine. I'll have my carriage called

for at once. I don't want you to be ill, my precious love."

Vincent stood, his hands braced against a massive tree, so close he could have reached out and touched them both. He longed to step from the shadows, to boldly claim Catherine as his; speak the words of love imprisoned, until now, in his heart. He wanted to tell Elliot that she was rightfully his and that he would fulfill her desires in a way Elliot never could.

His breath came in short gasps as he waited for them to disappear back inside the door she had stepped out of an eternity ago. It **HAD** been an eternity when miracles had been wrought and, in the fragile span of a heartbeat, he knew he could love as a man. She wanted, needed from him what he'd only dared to imagine in his passionate dreams. And yet... the precious gift she would so willingly give him could never be his.

His tongue darted across his lips. The taste of her kisses lingered there, torturing his senses, taunting him with forbidden promises. He must hoard the memory of them and pray it would bring him solace in the cold endless nights to come.

At last he pushed himself away from the trunk of the tree. Despite unsteady legs, he moved swiftly and silently through the glen to where his steed waited. The horse pawed the ground, whinnying softly at his master's approach. With quick, leonine grace, Vincent mounted the gelding. Not looking back, he spurred the animal and turned him in the direction of home.

The night descended with more certainty, as horse and rider traversed the trails of the deserted hills. Thick clouds billowed across the sky, their ragged edges laced with silver from the waning slip of a moon. The bitter wind rose from the north, moaning through the narrow chasms and rifts. It signaled a decided change in the weather, promising more than a hint of snow before morning.

The elements held no terror for Vincent; instead he welcomed the fierceness of the coming storm. His senses were consumed with the remembrance of her soft, yielding body molded against his, the beguiling taste of her tender lips... lips he wanted to possess again and again until there was no other reality but himself and Catherine, lost in the fire of their love.

He urged the gelding on, over the steep terrain, through the valleys of the monotonous, sleeping land. Faster and faster he rode, one with the brooding sky, desperate for release from his tortured thoughts.

The wind whistled past him, a mournful voice that mocked his hopelessness. The first jagged ice crystals stung his face and congealed the tears that fell, unnoticed, down his cheeks.

Unable to endure his anguish any longer, he sharply reined in the gelding. The animal pitched and nearly stumbled as Vincent threw back his head and sent a shattering roar across the turbulent night. The cry was carried by the wind through the barren hills. The steed pawed frantically; its white heels flashed in the last stroke of the dying moon and its own high-pitched wail joined that of its master.

Spent, Vincent slumped over in defeat: a last plea escaped his lips in a hoarse whisper. He bowed his head, his long, shaggy hair forming a veil over his stricken face. Shuddering sobs racked his body, as silent tears rained down on the gelding's coarse mane. He wept for all that he had dared to dream; for the desire that consumed his heart; the fire that would always rage in his soul; the life that he and Catherine could never share.

When there were no more tears left and the weeping subsided to a soft sigh, he lifted his eyes and breathed

her name once, the cherished sound a final benediction. His heart heavy with the knowledge that he must somehow forget what they'd shared, he lifted the reins and turned his horse down the trail that would take him home.

Catherine stood by the darkened window, watching until the lights on Elliot's carriage disappeared down the lane, swallowed by the now moonless night.

When she was sure he was gone, she slumped over, bowing her head, her cheek touching the pane. Her eyes closed at the feel of cold glass against her skin, a contrast to the fierce determination burning through her veins. She drew strength from its intense fire, as her hungry heart hoarded the remembrance of Vincent's kisses and shoved aside the disturbing memory of Elliot's unwanted advances.

She knew what she must do. She must find Vincent. There was no hesitancy or doubt as to the propriety of her decision. She was compelled to seek out the warm comfort of his arms, to know again the sweet feel of his lips on hers. She must tell him the cherished truth, the deceptively simple words that had gone unspoken between them. She might have to marry Elliot, but tonight would be theirs....

"I love you," she whispered, wishing he could hear the words across the miles that separated them.

She felt the agony of his torment. It pounded through her with the same intensity that fueled her own despair, that asked the same insistent questions. How could they live without each other now? After what they had shared, how could she bear the kisses of a man she would never love? How could Vincent endure his aloneness, after experiencing the ecstasy of a lover's touch? They were questions that has haunted her before. Now she could not live with the answers unless she went to him one last time.

She groaned and the soft sound echoed down the still, empty corridors of the great house. Her fingers trembled as she undid the buttons of her dress and carefully stepped out of it. It fell in a shiny pool at her feet. Her petticoat did the same as she released it and reached inside her closet for the familiar breeches and a high-necked blouse.

Outside, the wind howled through the trees, a grim reminder of the storm that had blown in unexpectedly from the north. She hesitated only a moment before selecting the heaviest coat in her wardrobe.

The stables were as dark, and quiet as the great house and much draftier. Catherine struck a match, protecting its small flame with her hand as she held it to the wick of a kerosene lantern. The dim, yellow light cast dancing shadows on both sides of her. She made her way down the wide aisle to Beauty's stall, setting the lantern down and removing the tack and bridle from a large hook.

The cold air frosted her breath as Catherine spoke in soothing whispers to the curious animal. The last thing she wanted was to wake Mouse, and be forced to answer his excited questions about why she was preparing Beauty for a ride in the middle of a cold winter night. She worked quickly, talking in hushed tones. Beauty responded with a soft nicker when her mistress slipped the bit into her mouth and positioned the saddle on her back.

As she led her horse from the stall, Catherine picked up the lantern, offering a silent prayer that Vincent would know of her intentions and accept the fervent pledge that welled in her heart. She thought of the way he had looked at her when they kissed, the adoration that openly blazed in the blue depths, the passion she had made no effort to conceal in her own eyes.

The proclamation that rose in her throat ached for release; her steps quickened in response. She pushed open the door at the end of the barn and pulled herself up into the saddle. A flurry of ice crystals stung her face and she shivered. He was out there, too, in the storm. She would find him... they would find each other.

The snow was steadily coming down, large flakes mingled with the hard pellets of frozen rain. There was no trace of moon or stars in the heavens, only the reflected glitter of swirling snow in the meager glow of the lantern.

The world around her was reduced to gray shadows and sparkling ice. Catherine had no sense of time, as the little mare continued to plod along the winding trail; yet, the lateness of the hour and the vagaries of the weather seemed of little consequence, until they came to a split in the narrow path. During her months at Grafton, Catherine had become acquainted with many of the trails of the forest. She had ridden over them with Vincent and it had bolstered her confidence in her ability to find her own way.

Now all the familiar landmarks seemed to merge with the darkness and melt into drifted white mounds, leaving her suddenly confused and uncertain. A choice loomed ahead, a crooked fork in the trail, and she forced herself to consider the possibility that she had stumbled onto an unknown way, a path that might lead her away from Vincent and into danger. She tried to dismiss the disconcerting thought from her mind, even as she brought Beauty to a halt and dismounted for a closer look.

She held the lantern high in front of her. The left fork veered sharply, beckoning to her from beyond the small pool of light. The right fork looked narrower and more convoluted. She wavered, uncertain. Which was the path that would end at the steep knoll near Vincent's cottage?

She took a few tentative steps forward to get a better look when her booted foot touched something hard, unyielding. Reflexively, she jumped back, gasping in surprise. She swung the lantern around and saw the wide-set jaws of a steel trap, gleaming cold, half-buried under the fallen snow.

Her nerves were set on edge as bits of fragmented conversation swirled through her head. The day she'd had lunch with Elliot, the day he'd first proposed to her. Randall Hardesty had mentioned finding traps on his land. He and Elliot had discussed the possibility that a poacher was in the area; she had paid little attention, her mind on other things. Now she realized that someone had trespassed on her property and set this trap. Chances were great it was not the only one.

She shuddered at the prospect even as she bent over, her eyes searching the snow-covered ground, determined that at least one animal would be spared the agony of being caught in the deadly jaws. By chance or fate, she spotted a bare branch jutting from a snowbank. Grasping it, she teased it against the jagged teeth. At the first touch, they closed over the brittle wood, snapping it in two.

She shut her eyes, biting her lip as she imagined a hare bounding through the area, one moment wild and free, the next ensnared in the lethal jaws, its leg broken. She drew in a sharp breath at the intense image and wondered how many animals had been taken illegally on her land. Hatred flared in her heart for whoever had set the snare and dared disturb the safety of these trails. She vowed she would find the one responsible and see that justice was done.

She turned away from the trap just as the long shadow fell across her path. A hand reached out to take hold of her arm, gripping it tightly through the heavy wool fabric.

"Whatcha think you're doin', pretty lady?"

Her head snapped up in horrified surprise at the sound of the gruff voice; she looked into eyes that were as cold and hard as the steel trap he'd so obviously set.

"Don't think I didn't see what you was up to. Nobody messes with Toby's traps, you understand?"

Her heart thudded with fear at the unexpected confrontation and his hold on her tightened. The smell of cheap whiskey hung between them in the frigid air, increasing her anxiety. She tried to open her mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

He forced her around so that, for an instant, she saw his face in full light. Greasy strands of dark hair clung to his dirty cheeks and his mustache was frosted white by foul breath meeting icy air. The patched coat he wore hung, ill-fitting, from his massive shoulders.

Panic rose swiftly in her and she wanted nothing but to wrench free from his painful grasp. Something in the dark, calculating eyes that met hers told her she might be better served if she stood her ground.

She raised herself up to full height, all too aware of how small she must appear beside his hulking frame. The minute space between them was charged with a current of foreboding as she found her courage and her voice.

"I would ask you the same question, too. What are you doing on my property? You must know that poaching is illegal. And if you don't leave immediately and take your traps with you, I will have you arrested."

"Is that so?" He gave a snort of laughter and lowered his bearded face close to hers. "An' who'll do the arrestin'? ***YOU?***"

The last word was hurled at her in contempt and she drew back, desperate to break free. Her mind raced with possibilities. If she could reach Beauty, mount quickly and escape from this madman... The fleeting thought was replaced with the knowledge that she was trapped, much as the unsuspecting animal she had envisioned moments before.

She willed herself to meet his defiant gaze, hoping she might catch him off guard. The corners of her mouth curled up in tight smile, as though to imply she had enjoyed his little joke. She felt his grip loosen; with a decisive move, she pulled free, raking sharp fingernails across his face, raising her booted foot to deal a blow to his shin.

She heard his cry of pain, his muttered curses as she scrambled past him and headed for the line of trees at the side of the trail. She didn't look back, but sensed his presence; she knew he was right behind her. She was running, heedless of where she was going, self-preservation alone guiding her. The heavy coat and drifted snow slowed her down, causing her to stumble and almost fall in her haste.

She hadn't gone more than a few yards in the dense thicket when his grimy hand fell on her shoulder. She turned, drawing in frantic, ragged breaths as his fingers closed around her again. She felt his own breath, hot on his face, and his hand savagely tore through the layers of her clothing to reveal her bare flesh. With the last of her strength, she pushed against his chest, hoping to throw him off balance.

It only served to enrage him. He swore again, the vile words thick with anger. She started to fall and her hand caught the cold handle of a knife tucked inside his belt. In desperation, she lunged for it, but his derisive laugh cut her short. He roughly grabbed her hand and drew out the knife himself in one move. Overcome by a swell of nausea, she slumped forward in defeat, her legs buckling under the unabated waves of fear. She knew it was over. Whatever he wanted to do with her, he would do.

He pulled her back toward the light and pinned her against a tree, the sharp edge of steel hovering at her throat.

"Who'll be the prisoner now? Tell me that!" He brought his free hand up to her shoulder, smoothing the callused palm over the exposed flesh in a rough caress.

The implications of his question, his touch, struck terror in her heart and with all the strength she could muster, she screamed.

The roar that shattered the air found its answer in the agony of her cry and her own frantic plea.

"VINCENT!"

What came next happened so fast, that later all she would remember was the swirl of his ebony cloak, the wild amber of his hair. He plunged from the darkness, snarling, advancing with unleashed vengeance on her assailant.

The tables were turned; the man who had held her captive seconds before released her, pushing her aside in a desperate effort to save his own life. His gruff voice seemed no more than a whimper, compared to the raw power that challenged him.

She turned away from the fury of Vincent's attack, closing her eyes to the onslaught. She heard a choked gasp, a thud and nothing more. She knew the outcome without looking. It pierced her own soul and spoke of everything that Vincent had come to mean to her. It echoed, too in the litany stuck in her mind - *'rumors and tales; 'a man found dead in the woods; '...like he'd been attacked by a wild animal; 'the man deserved to die for what he'd done....'*

When she dared to look up, she saw Vincent standing over the lifeless body, his back to her. His hands were clenched in tight fists at his sides, his shoulders heaving as he drew in deep gulps of air. He was only a few feet away from her, yet he didn't acknowledge her presence or meet her eyes, eyes that were shining with tears of gratitude.

"Vincent?" she called across the small space, that might as well have been miles.

He bowed his head and didn't respond. His mane fell around his face, shielding even his profile from her questing gaze. She waited, giving him a chance to compose himself. She had witnessed it now - the protective rage he was capable of calling upon when an innocent life was threatened. And while she was shaking from head to toe from her own brush with death, she had never loved him more. Wordlessly, though the bond, she tried to reassure him, to convey her need of him, the need to hear him speak her name, to be taken into the warmth of his embrace; the need to know that the memory of the intimacy they had shared had not been tarnished by what just happened.

Finally, he raised his head and looked at her. She took a step toward him, but his guarded expression and sharp, indrawn breath made her stop.

"No, Catherine... please."

Tears welled in her eyes at the shame written on his face, the tremor in the hushed velvet voice. "Why, Vincent? I... I don't understand. What happened just now.... don't you know what that man would have done to me?"

She looked past him at the body, at the pool of crimson seeping from the still form, spreading across the pristine snow. The knowledge that it could as easily have been her lying there, a victim of her attacker's knife, brought the sobs that she could no longer hold back.

Vincent came to her even as he breathed her name. He drew her into himself, wrapping the solid strength of his body around her. He rocked her gently, soothing her, whispering words of comfort in her ear.

She dared a glance up, her eyes still brimming, wondering if he would accept the fierce declaration of her love. Before she could say anything, his eyes lighted on her shoulder and he saw the gaping hole, the pale skin exposed, mute testimony to the brutality of her assailant.

"Catherine...." Hands that had just been used as instruments of vengeance tenderly drew the material

together, covering her.

She raised her own hand, touching him briefly before clutching the folds of the wool fabric. "Vincent," she began, "how can I... how can I tell you...."

"Catherine, please." He tensed against her, stopping the flow of words with his simple protest. "What you saw in me... the rage."

He stepped away from her and she staggered under the impossible weight of his guilt. "Vincent, what I saw... what I saw was the man I love saving my life. How can that be wrong?" There, the words were out, the depth of her feelings laid bare. What he would do with it....

He stood in stunned silence and she noticed in those fleeting moments how utterly quiet it had become around them. The wind had stopped its bitter complaining, the snow that had for miles whipped past her in squalls, was now no more than flurries falling softly at their feet. She shivered, realizing that despite the deceptive calm, the temperature must be well below freezing.

His head snapped up, his eyes burning sapphire in the dim circle of lantern light. "Catherine, you are cold. Forgive me."

"No." She denied the truth of his statement, choosing instead to challenge him. "Vincent, please. Tell me what you're thinking."

He shook his head and looked at his hands, spreading the huge fingers, holding them up as if for inspection. "It is not the first time, Catherine. Not the first time I...."

"Not the first time you saved someone's life? That you defended someone who couldn't defend themselves?" She had cut him off purposely and he looked at her in astonishment. "There is no shame in that, Vincent."

If she had thought her words of quiet conviction would dispel his burden of shame, she found in his swift reply that she had judged him wrong.

"For me there is. Your acceptance of me, your trust are gifts that I will cherish.... always. But this is something you do not understand, couldn't understand because I cannot understand it myself." He turned his head, averting his gaze. "There is a darkness in me, a part of me over which I have no control. There are times... when I am lost in it." He glanced over his shoulder at the body lying in the snow as if to confirm the truth of his confession.

"Vincent, how can you condemn yourself for something that is a part of human nature? There are dark places in all of us. We are all capable of deeds and of great good.... and evil." She wanted nothing but to go to him and confront the terror that haunted him, to banish it with her kiss. She longed to put her arms around him and comfort him as she might a distraught child. She knew before she took one more step toward him that he would not allow it.

"Human nature? **"NO, Catherine! Look at me!"** The sharp command startled her. Her head jerked up in response and she winced at the torment evident in his darkened eyes.

"Look at my face, my hands. Tell me what you see?" He advanced on her, not waiting for an answer. **"Would you have me believe I am like other men? Is it not obvious way I must hide myself from others, that my appearance would strike terror in their hearts? And now, Catherine, you know why our dream, our hope of one day being together could never come true."**

"I never thought our dream was impossible, Vincent."

"Believe it now!"

The last was hurled at her as he stood towering over her, exuding power, too exquisitely beautiful for words.

Her heart was in her throat and it seemed her whole life hung in the balance of what she would say next. "What we shared tonight - was that a dream, Vincent? How can I begin to tell you what I felt when you touched me, kissed me? Can you deny the happiness, the ecstasy we shared? It was in your eyes, too. I saw it."

She was close to losing control and she saw in his face, his hands clenched at his sides that he could barely contain the emotion that coursed wildly through their bond.

"I don't deny it, Catherine." His voice was a whisper and he paused, as though marshalling his strength for what he must say next. When he looked at her, his eyes bored into hers with an intensity she had never seen before.

"But, that changes nothing. Nothing! You must forget what happened between us, Catherine. You must forget me... forget that you ever knew me."

"How can you say that? It is impossible! I won't... I can't forget you!" She was trembling. Would he have the willpower to turn away from the supplication in her voice, her outstretched arms begging him to hold her?

Turn he did as he slowly, deliberately pulled the ebony hood of his cloak over his head, shutting her out.

"Catherine... I must take you home."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Miss Catherine?" The soft inquiry was followed by a light knock on the partially opened door.

Catherine turned from the window where she'd been watching the sun struggle to break free of snow-laden clouds. She hastily dabbed at her wet cheeks, hoping her swollen eyes wouldn't betray the fact she'd been crying all night.

"Yes, Jamie, come in please," she said, with as much normalcy as she could muster. It had been five days since she'd last seen Vincent, one hundred hours since their final parting. The passing of time had done nothing to lessen her grief and the feelings of doom that circled her heart.

All she could see was the haunting agony of his face; all she could hear were his hoarsely whispered words; *'You must forget, Catherine... you must....'*

Her life had been reduced to the most basic of needs - to eat, sleep; to breathe. Anything more would have demanded too much of her taxed mind, her ragged emotions. Though her servants would never breach the propriety their positions dictated, their concern for her was painfully evident in the way they lowered their heads in her presence, the sadness in their eyes when she spoke to them. The only one who had openly acknowledged the apparent hopelessness of her circumstances had been Anna. Catherine was certain they all knew of her relationship with Vincent and the real reason why she was marrying Elliot Burch. But only Anna had approached her and, with tears in her eyes, touched Catherine's arm. Anna alone had assured her that she understood her mistress' decision and wished for nothing but Catherine's own happiness - if only it were possible.....

Lost in thought, Catherine wasn't aware that Jamie had come to stand in front of her. When the girl cleared her throat, Catherine looked up, startled by the wide-eyed expression on the young maid's face. She took Jamie's hand, chiding herself for being too wrapped up in her own misery to take note of her servants' needs.

"Please, Jamie, sit down." Strange how calm her voice sounded as she motioned for Jamie to take the blue upholstered chair. "Tell me what it is. What's troubling you?"

"Well...." Jamie cleared her throat again and withdrew her hand to nervously search the pockets of her apron. She took out a small handkerchief and began to twist the piece of cloth around her trembling fingers. "It's Mouse, Miss Catherine. He.... He asked me to come get you. Says its **REAL** important that he talk to you."

"Did he say what it is that's so important?"

"Sort of.... yes.... says it's about Mr. Burch. That's all I know," she added quickly.

'Too quickly,' decided Catherine, her heart giving a lurch at the mention of Elliot's name. She rose and touched Jamie's shoulder. "Thank you, Jamie. Would you please run along and tell Mouse I'll be there in a few moments."

As Jamie bolted from the room, Catherine thought the girl looked like nothing so much as a frightened doe.

The cobblestone path had never seemed more treacherous, as Catherine made her way over the uneven pebbles, almost stumbling in her haste to reach the stables.

The wind blew coldly around the corner of the wooden structure. Shivering, Catherine pulled the woolen shawl across her breast and took firm hold of the latch on the heavy door. It opened with a groan of protest and a thought, detached and lucid, occurred to her.

'I must tell Mouse to oil those hinges.' The idea was lost when she stepped into the dim, drafty aisle of the barn and saw Mouse standing at the other end, his back to her.

"Mouse?" The word echoed down the aisle and through the cavernous building.

He spun around, shrugging his shoulders in a gesture that she knew might denote guilt... or indifference.

"Knew you were there. Heard you come in. Can't fool Mouse, you know."

"Yes, I know." She managed a smile and moved toward him, past Beauty's stall. Over the months, she had grown accustomed to the boy's eccentricities and become quite fond of him. In turn, he had been strangely protective of her, since the day he'd lost her in the storm, and she came to realize he was more than pleased about her relationship with Vincent. Mouse loved Vincent, too.

"Jamie said you had something to tell me."

"Jamie knows...." He stopped in front of her, then backed off a pace, as though he didn't want to come too close. "Told her." He turned from her and gestured wildly before giving her a broad grin.

"Told her what, Mouse?"

"What I saw, heard. Big plans... no good!"

"Jamie mentioned... Mr. Burch. Does he have anything to do with these big plans?" The familiar sickening swell rose in her stomach and she felt suddenly weak, as though everything depended on Mouse's stammered explanation.

Mouse frowned, then looked up at her, his arms lowered to his sides. "Saw Mr. Burch... heard him," he said softly.

"Where? How?" Impossible to stem the panic rising in her throat.

"In the woods. Last night when Mouse went to visit Vincent." Mouse whirled away from her and began to pace, throwing his next words over his shoulder before coming to a standstill. "Vincent's my friend, you know."

"Yes, I know." She was the one who looked away this time.

"How... was Vincent?"

"Vincent's sad, Miss Catherine. Vincent's sad... Mouse is sad."

"Yes..." The lantern light seemed to waver and grow dim as she wiped the tears from her eyes. She hoped Mouse wouldn't see, though he was sure to. Nothing escaped his attention. She forced herself to concentrate on the questions she needed to ask.

"You... say Mr. Burch was in the woods. Was he with someone?"

"With servant maybe or friend. Don't know. Mouse stayed behind a tree. But heard him make big plans. Build new house, tear down old. No good! No good!"

He stared up at her, his small blue eyes beseeching hers.

"Did you... are you positive that's what he said?"

"Mouse knows what he heard. No mistake. Tear house down, build another. No good!" He threw his arms in the air in a gesture of frustration. "Mouse not wrong, Miss Catherine."

"No. No, of course not. Forgive me, Mouse. I... just needed to be sure."

She reached out to steady herself against one of the stalls and drew a deep, shaky breath. The air inside the barn was charged with a terrible sorrow and a sense of doom that begged for her to do something – anything - to obliterate it. Swiftly, her decision was made.

"Mouse, would you saddle Beauty for me immediately. Secure an extra blanket, please, and... tell Anna that I've gone to see Mr. Burch."

His mouth dropped open, but he said nothing. Instead, he turned from her and took off running for the tack stored at the other end of the barn.

"And Mouse..."

He stopped suddenly and looked back over his shoulder.

"Thank you. I want you to know you did the right thing in telling me what you overheard."

His eyes held nothing but adoration for her. "Okay, good! Okay, fine, Miss Catherine!"

Love for Vincent thundered in her heart. Each fierce beat drew her closer, giving her courage to take another step... another...

She lifted the folds of her skirt and almost ran across the cobblestone path to the wide veranda, only then realizing she had not even bothered to change into her tan breeches. Perhaps it was for the best - she shuddered to imagine what Elliot's reaction might be to the riding costume, and she wanted nothing to interfere with the intent of her visit. Without hesitation, she grasped the heavy brass knocker in her hand and sounded her presence.

Elliot himself opened the door wide, standing tall and elegant in a burgundy coat and black trousers.

"Catherine, what a wonderful surprise! I wasn't expecting to see you until tomorrow." His gaze swept appreciatively over her even as he took hold of her arm and led her inside.

Her muscles tensed at his touch and she fought the impulse to pull away. But when he bent to place a kiss on her mouth, she turned so that his lips grazed her cheek instead.

He stepped back and looked at her, puzzled. "What is it, Catherine? Is something wrong? You **are** feeling better?" His tone was tender, yet there was a subtle edge to the words that told her he more than remembered her strange behavior at their engagement party, and didn't want anything to upset his expectations for their wedding only weeks away.

She bit her lower lip, praying the determination that had carried her this far wouldn't fail her now. It couldn't... She reminded herself that she was there to find out if what Mouse had overheard was, indeed, true and what Elliot meant by building a new house, tearing down the old.

"Elliot, we have to talk. There are... questions I need to ask you, things that must be cleared up before our marriage."

His face relaxed in an eager smile and he lowered his voice as he leaned closer. "Of course we must talk, Catherine." His fingers curled possessively around her elbow in a gesture reminiscent of the day they'd first met, when he had helped her into her waiting carriage.

He guided her down a long hall to the huge parlor which also served as his office. When he seemed sure they were out of earshot of the servants, he took her in his arms, whispering, "I believe I know what's troubling you. Soon, you'll be my bride and you're nervous." He brushed a kiss across her lips before she could turn away. "Mmmmmmm.... I don't blame you. I do want you so much.... But, I have a little secret to share with you. I'm a bit nervous, too, darling."

"Elliot..."

"Shhhhhh. Just listen to me now. I'm not insensitive to your feelings, Catherine. Believe me. You fear in my eagerness I will hurt you on our wedding night." He raised his hands to her shoulders in a seductive caress. "My father spoke with me about these matters years ago and I assure you I haven't forgotten his lecture. I swear to you, Catherine, when we first join, I will be very gentle. I will restrain my passion... though I can't promise you it will always be so. Who knows, my dearest love, after our marriage, you may well overwhelm me with your own passion."

His words fell on her burning ears and slithered with deadly accuracy to coil death-like around her heart. Visions of lying beside him on their bridal bed reeled through her mind; revulsion at the idea tightened the knot in her stomach. How could she ever bear to have Elliot touch in an intimate way? After Vincent's kisses, his caresses that ignited a fire in her veins, how could she allow Elliot to violate her - for that was what it amounted to.

Mercifully, he said no more on the subject as he steered her across the cavernous room to the desk in the middle. A large sheet of paper covered the shiny top. He leaned over it, motioning for her to stand beside him.

"Catherine," he said, "I have something wonderful to show you. I'm sure it will take your mind off our honeymoon - for the moment, that is."

His sly grin made her shudder. She couldn't imagine what he could tell her that would ease the dread creeping through her as the date of their joining inched closer. Numbly, she gazed down and saw the map of Grafton he'd requested from her weeks earlier. It looked different now, altered by black 'X's' and bold lines. For one panicked moment, she thought of fleeing, with no explanation, without asking the questions that preyed on her mind. She feared she already knew the answers, the mute evidence displayed in front of her. 'No,' she told herself. She would see it through, hear the words from Elliot's own mouth - words that would vindicate or convince him.... if her suspicions were not true, she would be bound to marry him.

Vincent's love loomed before her like a devouring shadow, his beautiful, haunted face burned forever in her memory.

"Catherine?"

She turned her head, dazed by the intensity of the image in her mind, and looked into Elliot's frowning face.

"Is something wrong? Have you heard anything I've just said?"

"Elliot, I'm sorry. I... have something very important on my mind. We **NEED** to talk."

"But, we just DID, Catherine."

It was apparent his patience was wearing thin and there was an edge to her own voice when she asked,
"What is it you want to show me, Elliot?"

"Ah... that's what I've been **TRYING** to do, if you'd only pay better attention, my darling. Now, as you can see, we have here the map of your estate that you so graciously loaned me. You'll notice I've made a few changes, additions."

He rushed on. "Of course, we've already agreed that when we marry, the Burch and Grafton estates will become one, as well. Catherine, I feel very confident that I can turn things around on your property. Oh, I know the land's been abused and we can't plant for a while. But that's no problem. We will live off the riches of my estate. In three or four years, we'll sow corn, oats, barley, perhaps hay on your fellow cropland and then sit back and reap the rewards. This, Catherine, is what I especially wanted to show you." His fingers hovered above a small black 'X' near the edge of the map.

She nodded, her eyes fixed on the tiny mark, the knot in her stomach twisting into an unbearable ache.

"Good! I have your full attention, at last. This, my lovely bride, is where we will build the new Burch mansion. I've already had some preliminary floor plans drawn up. I can't wait for you to see them. It will be magnificent, a home built for you, Catherine, for **YOU**. Of course, in time, we will have to dismantle the present great house there and turn the grounds into pasturage for...."

His words were lost in the waves of dizziness that sent her reeling. She clutched the sides of the desk for support. Mouse had **NOT** been wrong. If she'd ever had a thread of doubt... She recognized the terrain where Elliot planned to build. It was where Vincent lived, or nearly so; no more than a breath away from the secluded cottage that sheltered him, safe from the eyes of the world. A home that surely held more grandeur than the most palatial mansion because he was there....

Elliot's voice droned on. "There will be a lot of preparatory work to be done. We'll need to clear out this large stand of trees over here."

'No!' her mind screamed. **NO**, not where she and Vincent took long rides under cover of darkness, the moonlight turning his hair into a tangle of silver beneath her touch.

"And here we'll take out the shrub bush and old oak trees." Elliot's finger moved to the left, closer still....."I thought we might put in a garden, perhaps add a gazebo later."

"NO!" The cry was wrenched from her and she spat the word at him with such vehemence that he jerked backward. She raised her chin a notch and met his stupefied expression. "No, Elliot, **NO!"**

He recovered enough to give her a withering look, as though she'd gone mad. **"No? What exactly do you mean, telling me 'no,' Catherine?"**

"NO, we'll not build a home there." She tapped her finger against the tiny, black 'X.' **"No, the great house at Grafton will not be dismantled. No, we'll not take out the bushes, the trees. No, NO!"** Hurling the words at him, she turned, her knees threatening to give way and topple her to the floor.

"Catherine, look at me!" He grabbed her chin and roughly forced her attention. **"I don't know why you're acting this way, but I intend to find out. I was so glad you came to see me today. I thought, naively**

perhaps, that you'd be as pleased as I am with my plans for our estate. After all, I'm doing this for YOU." He paused, then continued in a steely voice. ***"There is something you must understand now, before we marry. When you become my wife, I will make the decisions that affect our lives. I will determine what will work for our greatest good."***

He stalked away from her and stared out the window. The silence between them was accompanied by the loud tick of the mantle clock. When he returned to stand beside her, he took her hands and whispered, pleading.

"Please, Catherine, **PLEASE** be reasonable. I would do anything for you - anything. You will live like a queen, want for nothing, in a mansion that will be the envy of all of New York. You need only say the word, Catherine, and whatever you wish will be yours."

"Don't build the new house, Elliot. Please.... .don't build."

"Catherine..." He looked at her as though she were a stubborn child who needed reprimanding. "I would do **ANYTHING** for you... except cancel the plans for our new house. You don't know what you're saying, do you? I swear to you - you will be happy. I promise."

"NO! If you won't agree not to build, then I can't marry you." She took a trembling step away from him, withdrawing from his touch.

"What?! I can't believe you're saying this? You HAVE gone mad, Catherine." He shook his head in disbelief, then his eyes narrowed as he studied her face. "Oh...." he said, at last. "I should have seen it; forgive me for being so inattentive. You ARE ill. Your cheeks are flushed just as they were when I found you wandering outside the ballroom. Are you chilled, Catherine? Come, I'll take you to the parlor and have Carrie fetch a cloth for your head."

He started to put his arm around her and she jerked away from him as though he had slapped her, recoiling from his touch.

"Please, Catherine. You have a fever. I'll call for Dr. Watkins from town... .or better yet, I'll have my groom send a message to Jacob... I'll..." He faltered, his shoulders slumping in confusion. He must have realized that he himself sounded delirious, beating the air with his words.

Catherine took a shuddering breath and raised herself erect. "Elliot, please, I'm not ill. But... I haven't been entirely truthful with you. I cannot marry you; I won't marry you because... I do not love you."

"So, now you do not love me. That's it." His tone changed to one of sarcasm, his face a careful mask. ***"Well, that is not an entirely new revelation. I've suspected it for some time though I had hoped... I thought you had come to... ah... terms with your decision to marry me. I thought you knew it was for the best."*** A tight smile wound its way through the pain. "If you would only give me a chance, Catherine, I know you would come to love me as much as I love you. Won't you give me that chance?" he whispered.

She shook her head, incapable of saying the word aloud.

"I see. So, you have made up your mind then. You know that you will lose Grafton. That is - without my assistance."

"Perhaps." *"Why did the word sound so hollow?"* she wondered. There was no hope; even with Joseph Maxwell's considerable help, no clue had been found as to the missing monies and her own generous savings would not sustain Grafton for much longer. Yet it mattered little to her if she ended up a pauper. Her love for Vincent was all that mattered now, all that would ever matter. They would find a way to be together....

"Catherine, listen to me. Is there something you're not telling me? You know what is at stake here and

you're willing to sacrifice your entire estate rather than marry me. Is there someone else?" he asked quietly. "Are you in love with another man?"

The questions tore at her heart. Secrets. So many secrets she was bound to keep. Still, she owed Elliot something, an explanation - however lame - to justify her decision. "Yes, Elliot. There is someone."

Elliot's reaction was immediate and she realized, too late, that her confession was not what he wanted to hear. His eyes bore accusingly into hers. ***"I should have known! Who is he? Ah... let me guess... It's that puny lawyer, Joseph Maxwell. Am I not right?"***

She could easily carry the deception further, but she would not implicate the man who was now her friend as well as her attorney. "No, it's not Joseph."

"Then WHO?!" he demanded. ***"You owe me this much, Catherine. Do you have any idea of the humiliation I will bear because you have chosen to toy with my emotions? Do you realize the gossip that will spread about us, about me, when people find out our marriage has been called off?"***

"I'm sorry, Elliot, truly sorry. You must believe it would have been a worse charade for us to marry when I cannot love you in the way you expect."

"You still haven't told me who he is? Do you think I am of such low intelligence that I will not find out in time? And what can he offer you that I cannot? ***Tell me!"***

'Everything,' she wanted to scream, 'everything I have ever dreamed of, longed for, everything I will ever need to feel complete.' Her reply was a whisper. "He's not from around here. He... lives far away. I doubt that you will ever meet him."

"I see. And you believe you can content yourself with such a relationship? What folly, Catherine!"

"I have nothing further to say, Elliot."

She turned to go. He followed, easily blocking her exit with his arms. "You will lose Grafton."

"Not if I can help it. Now, if you'll please step aside."

"No, I will not step aside." He stared her down until she looked away. Then, with surprising gentleness, he lifted her chin in his hand, guiding her face close to him. "Catherine, you may be foolish, but I still love you. You can't possibly know how much you've hurt me, cut out my heart. But however much you are convinced that you do not love me, I want you to know that I'm not a bad person, I won't be your enemy. I want to help you. I want to buy a parcel of your land, enough to keep you solvent until your crops can be planted."

She tried to raise her hand in protest; he silenced her, taking her arm and lowering it to her side. "No! Hear me out. I don't care what acreage you sell me; it can be forest, open meadow, even a briar patch. You decide and I'll put it to use. If you're not interested in selling, then lease me the land year to year. Catherine, don't let your pride stand in the way of saving Grafton."

Her heart contracted at the unexpected offer, the earnestness in his voice. Despite the terrible hurt she'd just inflicted on him, he was giving her the chance she so desperately needed. If she accepted his proposal, not only would Elliot be helping her save Grafton, but, unwittingly, the man she loved.

"I don't know what to say, Elliot."

'Say yes.'

"I....."

"Good, it's settled then!" He straightened, victory evident in his posture, though it was apparent the spoils would be bittersweet. "I'll have my attorney draw up preliminary papers in the morning and send them over to you. We can complete the particulars later."

"Thank you." She bowed her head, looking at him under lowered lashes.

"There is one more thing, Catherine." He pinned her with his gaze and she saw the fire that blazed for her in the brooding eyes.

"Rest assured that however much I love you, I **WILL** marry. Even without your help, I will produce an heir. There is someone who has been waiting for me a very long time, someone more than anxious to become my wife and share my bed."

"Rebecca," she whispered.

"Ah, you are perceptive. There is, however, a price you must pay, a burden of truth you must carry with you. You will be reminded of it every time you see me."

She shivered at the implication of his words, the brazen tone that crept into his voice.

"When Rebecca comes to me on our wedding night and I take her in my arms, when her lips seek mine and her caresses excite me, it will be **YOU**, Catherine, **YOU** I am making love to! You alone, that night and every night for the rest of my life!"

His words struck like swift arrows to the heart. She gasped, her cheeks feeling as though they were ablaze. She twisted from his grasp and ran from the room. In her haste, she nearly fell over the small steps in the foyer. He was right behind her and he gave a short laugh when she stumbled, but made no move to help her. Nor did she want his help.

Chilled to the bone, Catherine stood before the warming fire in the huge parlor. She shivered violently as she rubbed her hands together in vain, knowing no amount of heat could melt the icy memory of Elliot's last words to her. He had been right, of course. The knowledge that he would always love her, the weight of it, was the price she must pay for rejecting him. And still, she reminded herself, his generous offer would save Grafton. How could she be less than grateful for that? Vincent would be safe....

'*Vincent.*' He was all that mattered, all that would ever matter. She offered a silent prayer that he would come to her tonight. Through the bond, he must feel her aching need to see him---- no, devour him with her famished eyes - to hear the ragged whisper of her name, as he cradled her in the welcome warmth of his embrace. And to offer tangible proof of her need, she had sent him a note by way of Mouse. He might be reading it even now.

Would he allow himself to go beyond the dream that drew them together in a tangled web of forbidden bliss? Would he finally dare banish the fear that held him in its power and believe that the only truth that mattered was the one their hearts revealed? This past week, when he wakened each morning, had he found his own pillow wet with tears, the bitter taste of despair heavy on his tongue? If so, surely, there could no longer be room for doubt.

When the shadows lengthened across her balcony, she would light just one lantern. She would listen for the soft sound of his footsteps, the gentle tapping on her door that would tell her he had come. He would whisper her name; she would shout his from the highest cornice of the rooftop when his lips touched hers with trembling....

"Excuse me, Miss Catherine."

She gasped at the sound of the familiar voice and turned to find Anna coming over the threshold into the parlor.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Miss Catherine, but there is a guest to see you."

Catherine felt the flush in her cheeks as she stammered, "A a guest, Anna?" *'Elliot!'* Her mind raced wildly with the thought that he might be here.

"It's Dr. Wells," Anna said. "I wouldn't have disturbed you, except he told me it's real important."

Catherine nodded mutely, grateful for her housekeeper's intuitiveness. "It's all right, Anna." She laid her hand on the woman's arm. "Please, show him in."

A moment later, the older man limped through the doorway, bundled in a bulky coat and leaning heavily on his cane.

"Dr. Jacob, what a wonderful surprise! I'm so glad to see you."

"Ah, Catherine." He took her in his arms and placed an affectionate kiss on her cheek. "You look lovely as always."

"Thank you." She blushed at the compliment and motioned toward the padded divan. "Won't you sit down? And may Anna get you a cup of tea?"

"How kind of you, but no."

Anna appeared at his elbow the moment he loosened the buttons on his coat. With a practiced touch, she helped him out of the garment and disappeared from the room. "Thank you, Anna," he called after her, then arranged himself against the plush cushions of the small sofa.

"What brings you out in this weather, Dr. Jacob?"

"Yes, it has turned rather nasty, hasn't it?" He paused and leaned forward to withdraw a large brown parcel from inside his suit. "Catherine, despite the vagaries of the weather, there is something I wanted to give you. In view of your... ah... impending marriage, I felt it imperative that I not wait any longer."

She noticed that the word *'marriage'* caught on his tongue and she wondered just how much he knew. He had not attended her engagement ball and she had thought at the time that he must have been aware, perhaps weeks or months before, of her love for his adopted son. She had felt terrible regret over any hurt the older man suffered because of her decision to marry Elliot. Perhaps he, too, had entertained the hope that she and Vincent would find a way to be together, to have a happy life. Now, she could tell him that the marriage had been called off. She could assure him that she had every intention of loving Vincent - completely, in every way - until her last breath. The sight of the large envelope in Jacob Wells' hands made her pause, deciding that common courtesy would dictate she let him speak first.

"Please, Dr. Jacob, go on."

He cleared his throat and turned over the sealed parcel. "Catherine, what I have to tell you concerns your aunt. One week before Charlotte died, she called for me, saying it was most urgent that I come at once, that... there wasn't much time left." His voice wavered with emotion. He looked away until he regained his composure.

"She was in great pain, yet lucid when I arrived at her bedside. In her... discomfort, it took great effort to her to speak, but she managed to direct me to a drawer in her bureau. She instructed me to remove a sealed envelope - this envelope." He held it up for a moment, as though offering proof. "Charlotte begged that I take it home with me, that I tell no one of its existence. She appeared frightened, though she said only that the envelope contained documents the new mistress would need. You are aware, Catherine, that Charlotte and I had a relationship based on trust and respect; of course, I agreed to take the envelope. I learned that there was one more condition."

"What was that?" Catherine barely recognized the hushed voice as her own.

"Charlotte asked that I keep the envelope for one year after your arrival. At the end of that year, I was to

entrust the envelope and its contest to you. I knew then it was the last thing I would be able to do for Charlotte - to grant her dying wish."

Catherine touched his hand in sympathy. "It must have been so difficult... for you. But, why are you telling me this, Dr. Jacob? Only seven months have passed since I came to Grafton."

"Yes," He sighed, "that is quite true. However, after I heard the news of your betrothal, I carefully considered the matter and decided you should have whatever documents may be in this envelope. You will need them when... the Grafton and Burch estates are merged."

"Is this not a betrayal of your promise to Aunt Charlotte?"

He shifted his weight, his eyes lowered to a study of the carpet. "No, I don't believe it is, Catherine. Your willingness to sacrifice your own interests for those of Grafton are humbling. And your devotion to someone both Charlotte and I have dearly loved, has more than earned you the privilege of receiving this now."

His words moved her to tears and confirmed her suspicions. Jacob Wells was fully aware of how much she loved his adopted son. Further, he understood why she had agreed to marry Elliot Burch. Now was the time to tell him. She held up her hand in protest as he leaned over to give her the envelope.

"There's no need, Dr. Jacob. The marriage has been called off."

"Called off?" His eyebrows shot up in surprise and he gripped the arm of the small divan.

"Yes, I won't be marrying Elliot."

"Dear Catherine...." He gazed at her for a moment with undisguised sympathy. "How?"

"Just this morning I learned of certain... plans that Elliot had made without my knowledge. It would have meant an end to Grafton. He was going to... to tear down this house and build a new mansion where... Vincent lives." She lowered her head, trying to hid the tears that welled in her eyes.

"Dear God!"

She withdraw a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at her wet cheeks. Her voice cracked when she spoke. "I... couldn't let Elliot do that. If anyone were to find out about Vincent, I..." She couldn't finish and she felt the warmth of Jacob Wells' hand on her arm.

"Catherine, you... you must have faith that everything will be all right. You did all that you could under the circumstances. And now.... I, too, have a confession to make."

"What is that?" she asked tremulously.

"Yesterday Vincent came to see me. He was quite upset, in a terrible turmoil actually. I surmised his... distress had to do with you, your impending marriage. Vincent told me that just days before, you had declared your love for him and that he loved you as well. Of course, I knew that much almost from the beginning. But for him to make this confession openly to me.... He broke down and through tears begged me to tell him how he could live with this knowledge the rest of his days - the knowledge that you and he could never be together."

"He did?" Her heart thudded in her chest and fresh tears coursed wildly down her cheeks and onto the white muslin of her blouse.

"Yes, dear Catherine, he did." He patted her hand and for many minutes they sat quietly, the only sounds her soft sobs and the gentle crackling of the hearth fire.

At last, he got to his feet and made his way over to the window. He gazed up at the first flakes of snow falling from the heavy clouds and predicted, "We'll have two inches or more by morning."

She understood that his mind was not on the weather as she came to stand beside him. "Vincent and I will be together, Dr. Jacob. I won't let him hide any longer behind his fears."

"And I believe that with all my heart." He raised her hand to his cheek, then kissed it. "You have nothing but my blessings. There was a time... for many years I was convinced that, whatever cruel twist of fate made Vincent the way he is, he would be bound to live alone, without ever knowing the companionship and love of a woman. Now everything had changed for him - because of you. Catherine, you are the miracle of his life."

"As he is of mine," she said softly.

He shook his head and smiled at her. "Your capacity to love and accept him for who and what he is gives evidence of your great courage. It is truly amazing."

"The only thing that's amazing, Dr. Jacob, is the love Vincent and I have for each other."

He considered her statement for a moment. "You are right, of course. But what of Grafton?"

She knew he must hate to bring up the painful subject when it appeared her estate was doomed. "As it turns out, Elliot Burch is a man of honor, after all. When I told him I would not marry him, he took me completely by surprise. He offered to buy a parcel of my land. Though he was angry and hurt by my rejection of him, He knew I would soon lose Grafton and he didn't want to see that happen. So, he will make a purchase of enough acreage to keep my estate solvent until we can plant crops again."

Jacob Wells looked at her with incredulity. "That is truly remarkable. Catherine, I couldn't be happier for you. Perhaps Mr. Burch is a man of some honor as you say, despite my judgements to the contrary. And now," he turned and retrieved the envelope from the sofa, "I believe this belongs to you."

"Thank you, for everything." She reached up and kissed his cheek.

"You're welcome, my dear."

They stood looking at each other for a moment, then began to walk, arm in arm, through the hallway, stopping to pick up his coat from the closet where Anna had hung it.

"Goodbye, Catherine."

"Goodbye, Dr. Jacob, for now."

He limped out into the swirling snow and carefully made his way down the steps to his waiting carriage.

Catherine watched through the narrow window of that foyer, clutching the envelope to her breast, until his carriage completely disappeared in a cloud of white.

Vincent cradled the small piece of paper in his hands, reading its message over and over.

He lifted it to his lips, pressing a lingering kiss against the rich linen stock. It smelled of dew-kissed roses and rain.

"Catherine," he breathed, her image dazzling and bright in his mind and heart. "Forgive me, Catherine...." His tongue touched the paper and he trembled with the memory of her soft, warm lips moving gently against his, inviting him to taste....

In his shame, he had shut her out, the heated words spilling from the depths of his own loathing for what she had seen -- *'Forget you ever knew me, Catherine... you must forget.... you must...'*

The days since their parting had been a slow torture of minutes, hollow, purposeless save for the need to

breathe, to sleep.

He felt drugged with desire, lost in a nether-world where only his dreams had meaning, filled with the slow, sweet ecstasy of her kisses. *'Soon,'* he told himself, drawing a ragged breath, *'soon, we will have more than dreams.'*

He forced his shaking hands to fold the bit of paper and place it beneath his vest, next to his heart. Gathering his cloak, he made his way outside. He stepped into the dense thicket of bramble bushes and trees that concealed his cottage. Above, thick clouds still hid the sun, but he knew it hung low in the winter sky. He shrugged the patched cloak over his broad shoulders and carefully tucked the long strands of his mane inside the ebony hood. Leaning against the gnarled trunk of an old tree, he braced one foot on a flat outcropping of rock. There he would wait for night to come.

After an early dinner, Catherine retired to the upstairs parlor. Hours before, a fire had been laid in the stone fireplace; she watched as a half-burned log disintegrated and fell against the iron grate, sending a shower of sparks up the massive chimney.

Tucking her feet under her on the small divan, she pulled an afghan over her legs to ward off the wind whistling around the balcony doors. It had been snowing steadily since Jacob Wells' visit; he had said; *'We'll have two inches or more by morning.'*

It mattered little to her whether two inches or two feet of snow fell during the night, Vincent was coming - she felt it in the gentle stir of her emotions, the accelerated beat of her heart. There had been a definite sense of satisfaction in discovering that Dr. Jacob not only understood her love for his adopted son, but approved of it. More than that, he had been so moved by her willingness to sacrifice her own happiness for Vincent's welfare, that he had given her the sealed envelope entrusted to him by Charlotte Grafton.

Catherine turned the envelope over in her hands, her joy tempered by regret. Her aunt would never know of the love that existed between her only niece and Vincent; of Catherine's determination to banish the painful memories that haunted him - and the belief that he was not worthy of a woman's love. What ecstasy it would be proving to him, over and again, with her hands, her lips, how wrong he'd been - and how devastatingly beautiful, how utterly desirable he was.

It was dusk outside. Catherine couldn't wait for night to come with its curtain of darkness. She longed to see Vincent, to touch him. But wait she must and she would put the time to good use discovering what was inside the mysterious envelope. With care, she tore open one end and shook the contents onto her lap.

A brass key tumbled out along with several pieces of rolled parchment and a fat, white envelope. One by one, she spread out the parchment scrolls, flattening their yellowed and bent edges. She held each up to the light; though the ink had dimmed with time, she saw that the largest one was a deed to her estate. It bore the signature of Samuel Grafton. The others carried the seal of the MillBrook Bank and appeared to be receipts and cancelled drafts. It was useless to try and read the faded writing and numbers in the meager lantern light; she would set them aside to be examined during the day.

Picking up the key, she placed it in her open palm, wondering what it might unlock. She laid it on top of the bank drafts and turned over the white envelope. Her name was written on the outside; she recognized the precise, cramped style as her aunt's. Her heart thudded as she lifted off the wax seal and pulled out the envelope's contents. There were two folded sheets of ivory vellum, covered front and back with Charlotte Grafton's handwriting, and a packet of papers tied with pink satin ribbons. Catherine spread open the loose sheets; bending closer to the light, she began to read what was unmistakably a letter.

Dear Catherine;

Outside my bedroom window, the snow is falling as I write to you - a letter I know you won't receive until long after my death. Soon I will entrust it to Jacob Wells. I know Jacob cannot refuse to grant my request - the last wishes of a dying woman. Through the years, he has been a trusted friend, always. He has given me comfort during the dark times in my life.

If you are the intelligent, conscientious young woman I believe you to be, you already know of my fondness for Jacob - you have become acquainted with me through the pages of my personal journals and you are aware of Grafton's secrets, as well.

When I first saw you at your mother's funeral many years ago, I wanted so desperately to reach out to you and Charles, to tell you that I understood and shared your grief. I could not, for I was overwhelmed by my own sorrow. On reading my journals, I am certain you now understand why. You know Caroline was more than my sister. She was, in the deepest sense, my child, too, as though born of my own flesh. I saw so much of myself in her and when I first saw you, you... reminded me of Caroline as a young girl. It was painful for me. The only way I could bear my own burden of grief, was to distance myself from you and your father and return to Grafton. Shortly after my arrival home, I had a new Will drawn up, bequeathing my estate to you as my only niece. I believed then, as I do today, that you would not betray my trust. Soon I will rest, assured that Grafton will be left in capable hands.

I have prayed that, through my journals, you have also come to know someone else who is very dear to me. I speak of Vincent. It is my fervent desire that someday you might meet him. If you do, I can assure you whatever shock you may experience on first seeing him will quickly fade. He is the gentlest, wisest of men and... I love him so. He has brought me much joy... and sorrow. Because of his differences, I have been forced to keep another secret - one I could not bring myself to record in my journals. It is a secret so disturbing I can only now bear to write of it.

It began one August night eleven years ago. I was sitting with Vincent in the gazebo; there was a quarter moon and by its pale light, he read to me from his favorite volume of Shakespeare - his eyesight has always amazed me.

It must have been after midnight when he left. The weather was mild; there was a cool breeze and I decided to stay in the gazebo for a time. I was enjoying the solitude when I saw a shadow fall across the wooden floor. I started to get up, thinking that perhaps Vincent had returned for some reason. It was then I heard soft laughter and someone calling my name. Panic rose in my throat at the familiar voice; I turned just as John Pater, my former fiance, emerged from the bushes and stepped into the dark corner where I sat. Before I could move, he took hold of my wrists, kneeling in front of me. I tried to break free and demanded to know what he was doing there. His grip on me tightened; harshly, he told me of his promise to return one day and exact payment for my rejection of him. I shivered at his icy words; even in the shadows, I saw the cold gleam in his deadly gray eyes.

He leaned close and mockingly said that my taste in men had improved over the years. Then he asked me how I had degraded myself so that I would associate with someone who was little more than a beast, a freak who belonged in a Gypsy sideshow. I cried out, but there was no one to hear. The servants had long ago retired to their quarters and Vincent must have been safely home at his secluded cottage in the woods. I thanked God that Vincent could not hear John's hateful taunts. He threatened to tell others of Vincent's existence unless I paid him handsomely. He said Vincent would be taken from me and killed - or worse, put in a cage for the world to see.

John got up, pushing me aside; with a wave of his fist, he warned that I would soon hear from him. He disappeared into the dark night and I sat, shaken and alone, until dawn, too frightened to weep, unable to think. True to his word, John sent me a letter before the month was out. Dear Catherine, you must believe

that I had no choice; I could never have lived with myself if ... if anything should have happened to Vincent. I decided I must tell no one of John's evil scheme - not even Jacob. I knew it would only bring Jacob unbearable heartache. And so, I have borne this secret alone these past eleven years.

The enclosed packet tied with ribbon is evidence against John - his letters and receipts of my bank drafts, proof that he has blackmailed me. I have paid dearly and Grafton has suffered to the point that it must have appeared you had inherited an estate you would soon lose. You have no doubt wondered why I would leave you with such a legacy.

Yet it is also because of John that I can now assure you that Grafton's future will be secure for years to come. You may recall from my journals that upon my engagement to John, my father gave me a large sum of money - to be used for a honeymoon and the construction of a home for John and myself. When the engagement was broken off and John and Daphne's cunning plan exposed, Father insisted I keep the money. I believe that, in his own way, he was trying to make up for the sorrow he had brought upon us both by his foolish infatuation and marriage to Daphne. He urged me to take the money and leave Grafton for a time. He thought a journey to the European continent might benefit me.

I had no wish to travel then, so I invested the money. Through the years, it drew interest to the point where it doubled in value. The night John returned to threaten me, I determined he must never claim the money meant for our marriage. I withdrew the entire sum and placed it in a deposite box at the MillBrook bank - a box bearing both my name and yours. After paying John dearly for eight years, I feigned poverty, dismissing many of my servants and allowing my croplands to lie fallow. I hoped that John might believe there was no more to be gained by his blackmail - though I continued to receive his letters and sent him two last checks.

Finally, it ended, though not in the way I had expected. Four months ago, I received a newspaper clipping which I have enclosed with John's letters. It is his obituary. He died the way he lived - violently - his body found outside a barroom in a village twenty miles from MillBrook. His throat was slit. Before my own death, I have had the satisfaction of knowing he will never cause you terror; you need not fear for your own safety - nor Vincent's.

I am afraid that my fields have fallen victim to neglect. Heavy rains the past two summers and soil erosion have no doubt taken their toll. It matters little because the funds stored in my deposit box should easily carry you through the next years until crops can be planted again. Dear Catherine, the money lies waiting for you - use it wisely.

Though I am in pain much of the time, since learning of John's death, my sleep is sweeter now, free of the nightmares that plagued me for so long. Please do not grieve for me, Catherine - only grant me this one request. Take care of Grafton and those who depend on you for their welfare. Learn from the painful lessons of my life and never be foolish in matters of the heart. May God grant you prosperity and bless you with the companionship of someone who will love and cherish you for all of your days.

With Affection

Charlotte Grafton

Catherine was weeping before she finished the letter. Tears of relief and joy mingled with tears of sorrow. She knew it was her aunt's foresight and wisdom that had secured Grafton's future. It meant that Catherine herself need not depend on the generosity of Elliot Burch - a man she could never fully trust; a man who boldly declared he would betray his future wife in his heart every time they made love.

She took a linen handkerchief from her pocket and dried her eyes. The time for weeping was past, though her hands shook as she folded the letter and laid it aside. Reading it had proven to be a release from the burdens and grief of her own life. It was time to look to the future; to believe that she and Vincent were

now free to live - and love each other - forever in the secluded paradise of Grafton.

"I love you... I love you..." The hoarsely whispered words were repeated over and over, seductive words she had thought never to hear; words that banished the aching need in her heart, that sated the unimaginable hunger in her soul.

"Forgive me, Catherine. Please... forgive me." His choked plea was answered by the tightening of her arms around him, her urgent reply.

"There is nothing to forgive, Vincent... nothing. my love." She buried her face in the tawny softness of his mane, pressed her mouth against the hard column of his neck. His pulse raced wildly beneath her lips and still she was half-afraid to trust the precious warmth of his body so close to hers, the heat of his breath on her cheek. Shuddering, she closed her eyes and wondered if she would soon waken from yet another tortured dream and find herself alone... disconsolate... longing for his kiss.

But there was no denying the reality of his touch, his embrace, as he pulled her into himself, wrapping his cloak around her until both of them were enfolded in the patched, ebony cocoon.

They were one shadow cast on the snow-dusted balcony floor. She tilted her head back to study the face she adored and saw he was dressed in the same shirt of fine silk, the same soft suede vest and high boots he'd worn five nights before. The thought that had jolted her then, surprised her anew with its potent, unalterable truth - he was the bridegroom come, at last, to claim his bride, his passion fed by the flames of her love, her parted lips that begged him to taste. She knew with absolute certainty that tonight she would not let him turn away in doubt - nor retreat behind the wall of fear that had long held him captive, bound by the shackles of his aloneness.

A gust of wind tore past the partially protected corner of the balcony where they stood. It brought with it a swirling cloud of snow and ice pellets that stung her cheeks, reminding her that winter granted no special favor to lovers.

His eyes deepened to the color of a moonless sky as he bent to brush his mouth across her brow, her softly tangled hair. He murmured her name. The utterance was no more than an echo in her heart, but its meaning was crystal-clear, as enchanted as the secret, silver night around them.

Her reply was a tremulous smile and one tear that traced a silent path down her cheek and told him everything in its passing. There was so much she wanted to say; she would when the time was right. For now, the only words needed were those that joined their souls, inseparable in the eternal mystery of their bond.

Vincent looked past her at the pale glow spilling through the filmy drapes. Could there any longer be even a whisper of a doubt in his mind?

If there was... She held him closer, her words a soft plea. "Yes, Vincent... yes..."

He lifted her and, with trembling arms, gently cradled her to his breast as he carried her to the doors. He reached out, tripping the latch on the nearest one until it opened. Faces close now, breath mingled in the icy air with heated breath, heart beat fiercely against heart in the stillness encompassing the great house. And when he crossed the threshold from the cold to the warmth, from the darkness to the welcome light, he was kissing her tenderly, passionately, in sweet promise of dreams about to come true.

EPILOGUE

Dreams fulfilled... sweet, impossible dreams - of Catherine lying in his embrace, her face illuminated in the lantern light; her lips blazing a tender trail over his cheek, his brow; her murmured words of love, a sweet fire burning in his veins, whispering his name.... 'Vincent... Vincent'

"Vincent."

There were no limits now. They were together, wrapped in each other's arms, and never again would he be alone, a victim of the dark, despairing night; a prisoner of the icy wind howling down some canyon of the dawn....

She was his, completely and rightfully his. He need only open his eyes; claim the satiny softness of her mouth - and be lost in the flames once more.

"Vincent."

He saw her face then, framed in deep shadow, her eyes sparkling like dark diamonds. She smiled and lightly touched his cheek. "You were sleeping, too."

It wasn't a question and he blinked, uncertain. Where was the hearth fire, crackling low; the plush divan where she lay curled against him.

"Vincent?" He looked down at her as her fingers caressed his cheekbone, the stubble of his bearded chin. "It's funny. I don't remember falling asleep, but..." She shook her head, adding, "I know I dreamed."

Everything around them was unnaturally quiet. There was no wind rattling the balcony doors; no snow swirling in silent, silver drifts outside a secluded mansion. There was only the soft splash of rain against the terrace tiles; the far-away hum of traffic eighteen stories below.

He put both arms around her, pulling her closer as he whispered against her hair, "A wonderful dream, Catherine."

She leaned back, her eyes wide. "Vincent, you mean... you?"

"Yes. I shared your dream, Catherine and it.... was beautiful beyond imagining." He lowered his eyes to where her crystal lay against her alabaster skin, flickering fire in the candlelight.

"It was over too soon." She cupped his chin; he brought his hand up to smooth back a strand of hair that had fallen across her forehead, pausing to trace the crooked scar that was a symbol to them both.

"All dreams must end, Catherine."

Her hands worked their way under the mantle of his hair. "This one doesn't have to, Vincent. When my father died, I asked you if.... you thought we would ever be together. Do you remember what you said then?"

"I remember." He nodded, caught in the tender snare of her touch, her fingers warm on his flesh.

"You said we must go with courage and great care. We've done that."

"Yes..." How could he refute what was so obviously true? All she had ever asked of him was to believe in the rightness of their love. How many times had he betrayed that belief, by sending her away when his fears became too much to bear? How many times had she told him that she loved him, only to be answered by silence? In the dream, he had overcome his fears and realized that what he had to offer her - himself, his

love - was all she had ever wanted. Tonight, he had taken another step on this journey they had begun together. Was the time right? Did he dare take one more?

"Catherine..." His mouth skimmed across the silky softness of her hair. Involuntarily, his eyes closed at the faint fragrance of roses, the sweet scent of rain. "There is something I must... something I want to tell you."

"Yes?"

"Catherine, I... I love you." He shuddered against her as he held her fiercely to himself. Her gasp of surprise, her joy were reflected in her fingers tangling in his hair, her lips pressed against the hollow base of his throat. Perhaps the next step... He closed his eyes again, considering that step, knowing with certainty that he would take it – yes - and certain, too, that no matter how long the journey might be, their courage would carry them through; they would reach its end, to forever reside on the safe shores of their love.

THE END