

# CHATTERTON PLACE

THE INHERITANCE

BOOK ONE

By Patricia Carol Garlitz

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Smashwords Edition

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## Dedication

Dedicated to my loving family without their support

I'd still be just another author looking to

Be published

Cover by Charlotte Alire

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## Preface

Michael Chase stood motionless before the window in the dark room, safely out of sight of his defiant wife forcing sleeping bags into the trunk of their little car in the driveway. Pinching his blue eyes closed, he leaned against the window frame and silently reprimanded himself for not being able to convince her not to go; they had heatedly discussed this trip to examine a plot of land that her Grandmother had never mentioned, for nearly a week.

Emma never spoke of her Father's side of the family at all. It was her one saving grace when she met his father. How his father had known of her connecting to a strange family living in southern Utah, Michael would never know, but her lack of knowledge was the only reason his father had even considered giving him permission to marry her. Of course he too had to promise to ensure she never found the secret.

It was a promise that had carried them back and forth across the United States, to seven different locations, ten different job positions, and dozens of different homes. Even through the birth of four children ... the first three in rapid succession and then Jason three years later. With the exception of a few must returns: the death of her mother, and then a dear Aunt a few years later, he had managed to keep Emma out of Utah for nearly twenty years.

Where had he gone wrong? How could he have known a simple moving truck repair would leave him jobless in Salt Lake City. Shaking his head he reminded himself; it wasn't the moving truck repairs that had cost him his job, actually it hadn't cost him anything he had merely been notified that the Hotel deal his company had in the works had fallen through, taking his position with it ... Oh but there was a light at the end of the tunnel; they could find him a position there in Salt Lake. There, where he really didn't want to be, furthermore his family was homeless. The money he had deposited on a new home in Reno, had left them with little in the bank, and was

going to take months to retrieve. He was grateful when Beth; Emma's younger sister, offered to move into her own basement in order to make enough room for his family on their main floor. Then the job crunch came along and Rob her husband lost his construction job. Overnight he had become the sole bread winner in the house.

Spring brought new job prospects, and few more coins in his pocket. Allowing the innocent trip to a local swap meet, where a precariously placed china plate caught her attention and before he knew it she is the proud owner of a set of chine dishes she insisted would match the one they had packed all over the country. The set of dishes they had feasted on their first year of marriage, but had been carefully tucked away when money became more available. He knew she clung to them for memories, but thought they were their memories of a year spent without children. Never had he heard the story of the china's journey to this country, until she compared the two sets. Suddenly he was sick to his stomach thinking how he had carried the catalyst with him the whole time.

When she discovered the envelope marked; return for reward, at the bottom of the crate, he hoped it would include returning the dishes. But he should have known better. His father's stern warning echoed in his head for hours when she returned from the Attorney's office declaring she had just inherited land in southern Utah.

That twenty year old warning had returned to haunt him. "Keep her out of Utah son or run the risk of her discovering her true destiny." He had not seen his father's eye's glow with such intense hatred, since he would sit at the edge of his bed reciting the dark story of the legend to him as a goodnight story. A nightmare was what it really was. Perhaps it was more in his father's head than in real life. Because when Mike attended school in Southern Utah, the family members he had met that recalled it; looked upon it more as a myth or made up legend than the reality his father had always placed upon it.

Glancing back out the window, he pondered why he had never told her of the story. Now it was too late. Now she would think him crazy, manipulative, a poor loser. And a loser he surely was to come, for if the demons were real; it was his promise to father that he would put a stop to it; to her if need be, before the world was lost forever.

## CHAPTER ONE THE INHERITANCE

The dark clad figure that rose from the tailgate of the rickety black truck the moment her tires hit the soft shoulder of the road, carried no resemblance of the eighty-year-old man Mr. Becksted had said would meet them. Half praying she hadn't taken the wrong cut off Emma hesitated before rolling down the window. The valley had been so beautiful from the lofty spot at the top of the mountain pass were she had stopped to overlook her Grandmother great secret, that she

had lost track of time. If she were lost, the real caretaker may soon give up hope of her coming, and the secret Chatterton Estate will have to wait another day to be found.

"Thought I might have to come up and get you there for a minute." The man's deep voice rattled recklessly her empty stomach, but her anticipated arrival was soothing to her wondering soul.

"You're Mr. Mason I presume." Emma felt her voice fell short of hospitable, but after a nearly six-hour drive, during which she had spoken rarely she felt it understandable. What was not was the way her trembling fingers was unable to snap the seat belt free from across her chest.

"And you must be Mrs. Haager's daughter." His horse voice fell silent the moment she adjusted to look up at him. "NO", his heart cried silently.

The black eyes that filled her delicate face lay no resemblance to the fair faced old woman— Mr. Becksted had asked him to show around the property. It was obvious she was not related to Mrs. Haager. His mind was whirling faster than the innocent smile developing beneath her perfect nose. In the background the first line of an old Steve Lawrence classic spewed from the radio in the cab of his truck— echoing his hearts sentiments— "Go away little girl— I'm not supposed to be alone with you."

"I'm Mrs. Chase." She corrected his misconception, "Mr. Becksted called, didn't he?" His steely blue eyes shadowed darkly beneath the broad brim of his black cowboy hat, toyed tantalizingly with her memory, yet she was sure they had never met. Nothing about this man was forgettable. The heavy shepherders coat camouflaged him to some extent but even it could not hide his massive shoulders and extreme height. The overwhelming masculinity and power emanating from his dark figure caused the frailty her older brothers had played upon to become real to her again.

"Ch - Chase?" The taut voice he repeated her last name with expelled more disbelief than strength. "I - - I mean" He forced himself to shake off her mystical spell sweeping up his spine. Stepping back he made room for her to open the door she seemed to be fumbling with inside.

Clearing her throat, she twisted her feet to the pavement and stood up. Closing some of the distance between them she felt less vulnerable and an equal collaborate in the conversation. "Mr. Becksted called, didn't he?" The question still sounded more like a plea to her ears than a question.

"Yes. No." Realizing he was sounding like a silly schoolgirl, he swallowed hard and grabbed for the upper hand in the conversation. "Damn it Girl! Of course he called, what in the hell do you think I'm doing here if he hadn't?" As usual, he had over done it. The barked demand had her tilting back on her heels, with signs of fear filling her face. "I ... I was expecting someone older." Much older he thought, awed by her youthful grace.

"So was I. Mr. Becksted said—"

"He was talking about Dad. He's been gone since last January."

She was so busy searching her memory for an incident to pin the familiarity of his features that she was only half listening to his explanation but the mention of his Father's death triggered an instinctive reaction for his loss. "I'm sorry. I know what it's like to lose your Father." Her voice softened, as did the tension on her face.

Since he was unsure how to proceed, he decided to let her take the lead. "It did take me a bit by surprise when Mom called me to the phone and Mr. B. started to ramble on like we were old friends." Surprise wasn't quite the word he meant but it would have to do, he thought, bending down to brush the red dust clinging to the knees of his black jeans. "So I guess you're anxious to see this place?"

While scanning the lush spring beauty the secluded valley held, she brushed the heavy morning dew from her rosy cheek and pondered the meaning of "Anxious". It slightly described the excitement growing in the pit of her stomach, but more adequately the trembling a bit lower, burning like a virgin's passionate wants - Fear mingling sweetly with lust. Yes, oh Yes, she was anxious to see this place - this land held in secret captivity from her sight - from even her Fathers sight, by a woman she felt could hold no secrets. But why she had chosen to keep it a secret was the real reason Emma had come for. And why she couldn't convince her husband of that left her bewildered.

Owning a piece of land - any land - was more than she could wish for. It was one of her illusive wants that lay just beyond her grasp, across yet another of Michael; her husband's invisible lines. Refusing to think of how many hours she had spent counting her excursions across those lines in the past week, she focused on the many more spent sleeplessly trying to figure out what had caused her Grandmother to keep the inheritance silent. Somehow, somewhere she had to have told someone about it, Emma thought allowing her eye to continue the thorough scan of that portion of the valley exposed to her. *It's too large to have just forgotten about it.*

"Mrs. Chase." His deep voice interrupted her thought, had the words actually crossed her lips. "Are you ready to go?" The intense scrutiny he was giving her face sent waves of weakness washing across her spirit. All men are the same thing she thought shifting her position to divert his burning gaze from her breasts. They size you up, only to better understand how to pin you down. "Tell me first, Mr. Mason," she lifted her chin in defiance to meet his harsh stare. "Have you never met a woman from the city before?"

The direct assault caught him off guard, leaving him speechless, "I - A - Like I said! I was expecting someone much older." Somehow, he managed to stutter out his apology, but it was lost among the snickering giggles flowing loudly from the car's interior. Startled he diverted his attention to where the noise came from, so did she. She had nearly forgotten the girls, tucked away in the car awaiting an indication from her that it was safe.

Casting a look of surprise in her direction, he stepped a bit closer to the car and bowed at the waist for a better view of his unannounced audience.

"Sorry. I should've introduced you before. These are my girls, Shelly and Crystal."

He had been so caught up in a twenty-five-year-old memory; it had not occurred to him that she might have children ... least of all teenage children - girls - who each expelled their Mothers youthful poise.

"Hi." Responded the shimmering blue-eyed blond shyly, from the far side of the front seat.

"Sorry we laughed at you but Mom has never said anything like that before." Shelly; Emma's black-eyed reflection, remarked between chuckles from the back seat.

Feeling the blood rush to her cheeks, Emma had to agree with the girls. It wasn't like her at all to make such an argumentative statement, but three older brothers and a husband, was where she planned to draw the line for allowing men to tell her what to do.

"Who's who?" He questioned looking from one to the other.

Laying a delicate hand across the back seat, the black-eyed beauty, with hair just as dark falling softly about her shoulders, flashed him a warm smile and said. "I'm Michelle."

Tipping the rim of his hat in response, he looked to the other and understood the purity of her name. "So you must be Crystal?"

A mischievous twinkle in her eye and a brisk smile was his only answer, as she asked, "Are you really a cowboy?"

"What she means, is there still cowboys?" The more mature voice drew his attention to the backseat again.

"You might say so."

"Of course, there are still cowboys!" Emma imposed, embarrassed by their lack of knowledge about the world at large. "Someone's got to supply Mickey Dee's you know."

"Not me though." He rose to address her. Squaring his broad shoulders, he removed the daunting hat from his head and ran his long fingers through the thick blue-black mat beneath, causing waves of loose curls to appear. "After all Southern Utah is known as the land of milk and honey - not big Mac's."

"You raise milk cows, don't you?" Crystal's observation interrupted Emma's desperate attempt to place his face among those of the Vision, but it wasn't right. They were different - old. No, she thought turning away from his softened gaze, not old - their clothing was out dated but their faces were young and old alike. Still it wasn't there she had seen him. Too many other questions

filled her mind right then, to search through ten years of working with the public for a time and place. If we've met, he probably wouldn't remember me anyway she thought, besides the question sounds too much like a come on, to be coming from my mouth.

I should have listened, she thought kicking at the pink sandstone sand beneath her feet, while the girls covered her retreat with idle chat. She sighed softly feeling the pull of two very different worlds at her heart. The girl's flood of questions soon blurred into the background, as the previous Sunday billowed into view of her mind's eye.

Shortly after entering one of Salt Lakes largest flea market a flash of light had caught her eye. Side stepped the blinding glare, she considered what she saw behind the blast of sunlight. Unconscious of the growing excitement in her chest, she had impatiently pulled at Mike's arm hoping to get a better view of the glossy object. Then momentarily the flea market crowd cleared and she saw it. Precariously placed atop an old crate on a flimsy folding table that swayed with an onslaught of people the way her bottom lip had started to quiver, sat a delicate replica of her Grandmother's China. The rapid pace Mike's long legs demanded made absolute identification impossible, but the emotional cords the brief sighting stroked deep within screamed for attention.

Gazing into different faces as Mike continued his lengthy stride toward some undisclosed destination, with her elbow neatly tucked into the crook of his arm. She pondered for a moment what those people knew that made their eyes sing with joy, and she feared she might never find it. When suddenly she recalled the way the sun danced across the china plate's smooth surface, and she stopped immediately. "Wait."

"For what?" Mike responded tugging at her arm— his clear blue eyes glistening impatiently.

Dare she say it knowing fully well, how he felt about buying something that belonged to someone else? A moment of indecision and once more he towed her on unwillingly. "It's like my old dishes."

"What is?" He responded coolly not pausing to listen to what she was really saying, in his pursuit of something only he knew.

"That China plate back there." She whispered, pointing over her shoulder. "It's like my set."

"So?"

"So! I want to look at it."

"We'll look in a minute. I have to get to the computer guy before he's all sold out."

"Another program," she whispered under her breath. Glancing over her shoulder as he steadily marched her forward. Fear suddenly flooded her senses. It won't be there when we get back and he knows it.

The silly piece of china, as he would call it, would most definitely go against his view of holding onto sentimental family items she thought, but it represented her very roots. If it matched!

The odds were against her, not once had she come across a single piece matching her Grandmother's unique set. Several times she had found pieces that held the soft crimson rose pattern with its crisp emerald leaves pointing out at the fluted gold trim. Once she even came across a small cup that held the romantic blue ribbons, woven into a braid beneath the fluted gold trim, but never had she found anything that held both within its shimmering boundaries.

"Please Mike!"

"In a minute Em. In a minute." It was easy enough for him to pay little attention to her childish plea, but her desperate tone had suddenly unlocked years of forgotten pain. Memories of her childhood flooded her thoughts and blurred her vision. Emotions of a frightened child washed over her, dulling her senses to the crowd pushing against her, as he relentlessly led the way.

Mentally picturing herself as a child climb onto her sweet grandmother's lap, she was filled with warmth and a sense of security that was only to be found there. Hour after hour, she was content to sit listening to the whispering tones of her Grandmother telling the story of the china's great journey, and the people who had brought them to the Promised Land. Lost in the descriptive narration of people and places, made larger than life by her Grandmother's flare for words, Emma would lose herself and the agonizing pain of having her Mother in the hospital again.

Then came the times she shared that broad lap with her younger sister; Beth, during even more hospitalizations, and later she stood at the side when her youngest brother; Jake, was cradled there. After his birth, only one additional hospital stay separated them from their Mother and soon her renewed health sliced at the precious time spent listening to the stories in the loving woman's home. Soon she was off to school and an expanding world to discover. And all too soon, the grace was taken from her altogether. Only in that loss, had she discovered her Mother's lap held just as much warmth and understanding.

It was with her blessing and support that Emma had stood against her Father after his Mother's death, and demanded to keep the partial china set. He wished nothing except his memories, and her Aunt's wanted only the best. The un-chipped remains of her family's prized possessions had been placed in a tattered box, marked Goodwill. She could have had anything within the old woman's home, but to her they meant more than the house itself. They represented the old woman at her best. Her lap full of children, their heads filled with her stories.

The question of it being a match should have been the only thing left to respond too. But Mike's reaction to such an inquiry, kept forcing inlets into her thoughts, clouding the decision at hand.

She and Mike, Her emotions and his logic, like oil and water they found little ground in common, and yet against all adversity together they had stood through nineteen years of



marriage. Of those who knew them, some called it a miracle, but most referred to it as compromise. It was only she that knew the full cost. Beyond his many invisible lines, logically drawn in the sands of time, lay some of her most treasured wants. The china plate fit into one of those categories.

Recalling again the warmth shared on her Grandmother's lap; she unconsciously began to smile. It was an acknowledging smile. For if the plate matched it would not be for herself, she would buy it. It would not even be for her children that someday may inherit it. This she would do for her Grandmother and a memory she refused to let be swept beneath his logical indifference.

Life itself seemed stacked against her. She had only traveled but a few steps after breaking free from his grasp. When the borrowed clip of Shelly's holding her long black hair close to the back of her graceful neck, snapped free and crashed to the asphalt drive. She knew she had to stop and retrieve it— It wasn't hers to lose. Sweat beaded beneath her arms. A mixture of anticipation and a coat, he had required everyone to put on before leaving home that morning.

His stinging words of reprimand attacked her self-worth, even before his soft penny loafers appeared where the bow had lain. "Christ Em, sometimes I think the kids have more sense."

Swallowing the yearning to be treated as a grown-up, she pushed back the soft strands of hair that had fallen gently about her porcelain complexion and gazed up at him, with those big black wanting eyes of a child on Christmas. Tiny droplets appearing beneath her thick lashes was her only form of telling him how much she disliked being talked down to, under the inquisitive gaze of strangers?

Standing up she squared her shoulders for the lecture. She knew she must take responsibility for the tossed appearance of his naturally well-kept golden hair and the square appearance the deep breaths of cool air had added to his already broad chest, but the glowing pink hue slowly appearing beneath his slicing blue eyes, she could blame on the unexpected warmth of the day.

"Oh Mike PLEASE! I have to see it!" When his square jaw softened, she knew she had won - at least the ability to examine the supposed replica. The minute the mournful sigh creased his emotionless lips, "Oh all right," she refused to hear the reluctance of its tone and shot off again in pursuit of the treasured item, leaving his remaining words of caution to fall ineffectively upon the ears of the unconcerned crowd.

Reaching the table at last, breathless in fear someone may have already snatched it up, her heart rejoiced, then fluttered with resolution. "It does," pressed across her bow shaped ruby lips, drawing the attention of the white haired man standing at the far end of the wobbly table, talking a rather plump woman into buying an iron skillet. His smile was inviting as she reached to stroke the plate's glossy surface, wondering what the remaining items still wearing their crisp newspaper coats beneath it looked like.

Mike's watchful words snapped her hand back with a gentle slap. "Careful!" He was reminding her of the broken coffee mug earlier in the day, but she had already fallen deep into the plate's enticing spell. There was no turning back she had to have it.

Standing silently at his side, she forced her free hand into the coat pocket and toyed with the weathered bill hidden there. It was the last of her smaller than usual paycheck. The rest had been surrendered to him the day before to meet their obligations. Guilt trickled from her conscious mind - she knew it wasn't right skimming money from the top before turning it over to him, but it was her sanity money, the change required to send the kids to the show, or steal a chocolate bar when he wasn't watching. Yet if she pulled it out now, he may never trust her to cash her check alone again.

From the corner of her eye, she watched as the elderly man carefully folded the tendered bills and slipped it into his breast pocket, before strolling their way. "Nice isn't it?" His voice was jagged but soothing at the same time. "It's China you know?"

"Could be." Mike's skeptical tone sent shivers down her spine, but he was right, they were looking at only one piece.

"Why haven't you un-wrapped the rest?" Her question clarified Mike's but what she really wished was to know if the singular ten-dollar bill in her pocket was going to be enough.

"Well ...To tell you the truth. I'm all thumbs." He responded holding up his hands, like that really was the case. "Afraid I may break them." He finished.

"Is it a set?" Mike spoke up, wishing to make the point more for Emma's sake than the salesman.

"I don't know." The gentleman's voice smoothed with practice. "The wife picked them up outside an old house, in the avenues." Emma knew he meant perhaps the oldest portion of Salt Lake, and that alone made her want the china even more— it increased the chance of it being about the same age as her Grandmothers set. "She ain't here but if you'd like to look, have at it." Again Emma reached for the delicate plate and again Mike's voice stopped her.

"What do you want for the box?"

The round face of the fat man grew even broader as he pinched his lips together tightly, considering his cost.

"As you can see its real china." He repeated, stroking his chin.

"Might be Real china." Mike said reminding him once more they were only looking at one plate.

"Twenty" the fat man finally responded.

Emma's heart plummeted and she felt Mike twinge beside her. She was sure he was about to walk away. If that was to be the case, she had to touch the plate just once. Teetering forward, at last she was able to stroke its smooth surface, but it was anything except her Grandmother's warmth in that touch. She felt as if she were struck by lightning. Energy surged up her outstretched arm and exploded before her eyes. A picture flashed in her head, then it was gone.

She jerked her arm back with such force her elbow was thrust into Mike's firm rib cage. "Ten!" blurted from his red face and he grabbed his stomach. "Sold" Briskly flew from the fat man's thin lips immediately. Whirling around Emma looked into Mike's shocked face. She wanted to tell him not to buy the dishes but stopped short recalling the picture she had seen.

It wasn't very clear, nor a place she recalled ever seeing before but amongst the large well lit home and the numerous people wandering about, she found familiarity. Blankly she was left staring into Mike's clean shaven face. "It's YOURS" he proclaimed still rubbing his chest "All you had to do was ask."

Quickly the round faced gentleman wrapped the single plate and snugly secured it back into the wooden box, as their rather one sided conversation continued.

"You know I can never tell you No."

Emma was sure Mike's last statement, was added for the benefit of the salesman, more than her. "Thank you." She responded anyway, throwing her arms around his neck and tugging him down for a grateful kiss. When he pulled her even closer and smothered her mouth with his, she understood his generosity. When sex had become a game of reward, she couldn't remember but it had managed to get her many things she otherwise would have never received.

She could tell the wooden crate wasn't exactly light, still she offered to carry it. Of course, Mike declined, if he would allow her to do so he would have to admit she was capable of doing something, anything, by herself; and that was most unlikely to occur. However, there may have been another reason for his decline. Kit; Christopher their oldest son, was headed straight toward them. His cheery disposition would always be a light in her heart. His arms contained the bulk his fathers were lacking to muscle the wooden crate to the car's trunk nearly two blocks away. His sandy colored hair and deep dark brown eyes, in addition to his nearly six foot height, had more than a few girls throwing themselves at him. The large BYU parka loosely draped across his shoulders spoke of his slight rebellion toward his Father's opinion, but that was more credit, than the other three children offered when they happened upon them at the taco stand, awaiting the arrival of their ordered sodas.

Jason her youngest, saw them first and quickly grabbed his coat from the bench next to him. It was too late though, Dad had already seen the only thing being warmed by the coats were the booth. While he proceeded to lecture them on the stack of Dr. Bills sitting on his desk. She

pulled the hidden bill from her pocket nonchalantly and bought three additional large Coke's, for them to drink on the way to the car.

The haunting picture that kept filling her mind was tantalizingly familiar, yet just beyond recognition. Abstract faces, clothing of an era gone by, a brilliantly lit home larger than any she had ever known. It built a kaleidoscope of pieces, nicely framed with the outline of the china's woven blue ribbons and gold edging.

Taking a soda from her hand, Mike asked staring into her absent face. "Ok, what is it this time?"

Shaking off the clouded air about her head, she gave him a look of bewilderment. "What?"

"I know that look - You're worried about something. I'm not mad about the elbowing."

"No" she corrected his misconception "I - I'm worried they might be broken." There was no way she was going to mention the flash and picture. He'd never understood before, she couldn't see how he would this time. Especially since she— herself didn't understand where it had come from. Beth; her sister, always called it a gift, but this was different from anything she had ever experienced before. Sure, she could tell when something wasn't exactly right, but never before had she ever actually witnessed something. It was not as if she had asked for the gift ... nor had she ever sought to use it but it was a part of her. A part she couldn't deny, and when it warned her of danger she had learned to listen and gave thanks to God for it. But what was there to fear from a big house, brightly lit and open, with fiddle music and laughter flooding out?

Looking over his shoulder to catch a fading glimpse of Kit, weaving his way through the crowd, Mike offered, "I'm sure they'll be fine. Kit's pretty careful about your things." Then turning to look back at her, he added, "Now tell me why you felt you had to do that."

She had just raised the large straw to her lips, so instead of swallowing right away she simply raised her narrow eyebrows and shrugged her petite shoulders. Maybe if she played dumb, she thought, he would drop the subject.

"None of this bull shit Em! Tell me what's going on here."

Swallowing hard, she uttered just above a breath. "You don't want to know."

Quickly pulling the cup from his mouth, he exclaimed, "Shit Em, will you just say it."

"I can't explain it." She fought for an explanation but it was like grasping at air. The kids had trailed off after Kit, so at least she was not afraid of them over hearing one of her strange stories, as he referred to them. "When I touched that plate, it felt like I was hit by lightning." She had decided the truth would be the less bothersome. She so wanted him to listen but figured he would just shrug it off, the way he did all of her emotional based stories.

"Lightning Hah?" he questioned looking up at the beautiful blue sky.

"I said it felt like lightening!" She exclaimed, storming off toward the car. *Why do I try? . . . He never listens anyway.* The large soda splashed onto the arm of her coat, then dripped to the ground. *And why in the hell, am I wearing this stupid thing. It must be 60 degrees out here . . . I must look like a fool.* She continued cursing herself under her breath, as she marched off.

"Wait!" Mike called after her, but she wasn't about to let him get his digs in again. Instead, she quickened her pace wishing to put more space between them.

"Emma, Wait!" He called from her heels. A minute later, she felt his nimble fingers slide beneath her moist underarm, yanking her to a stop. The coke splashed so violently in her hand, she had trouble holding on to it, and again it covered her sleeve.

"You have to learn to control these things." He demanded, breathing heavily through his clinched white teeth.

Control it hell! He can't even control his reaction to it. How am I supposed to control the real thing? "How?" She shouted into his face "Just how do I do that?"

Jerking her arm free, again she turned and started off, leaving him to contemplate the question. She'd never asked for the gift, so just how did he expect her to shut it off. Turning to look back at him, she shouted. "It's not like I got a damn switch, you know."

Silently he stood there looking longingly at her. "I don't know, but you can't let these things run your life."

"I don't!" She shouted back, even though he was no longer demanding. He looked like a child afraid to move. The pained expression on his face led her to believe that somehow she had opened an old wound. The moment he realized, she could see it. He shifted his feet and walked around her, looking only at the ground. Not another word was spoken by either, until they were home.

She would have been pleased to slide the old crate into the bottom of the closet. Satisfied with the knowledge that she had found a plate that matched her Grandmother's set, had it not been for his open dare.

Beth and Rob: her sister and brother-in-law, were busy packing groceries in the front door, as Kit retrieves the wooden crate from the trunk.

"Whatcha got there?" Beth called, coming out the front door for another armload.

"Dishes." Emma explained as they passed on the walk.

"Yeah, if we're to believe her." Mike spoke up and Emma shrunk in her shoes, hoping he would not tell the story in front of the kids. "They'll match her old set of dishes."

Forcing a sigh of relief through her whistle shaped lips that he hadn't mentioned the lightening, she had continued into the house and down the back steps to Beth's apartment. Stopping at the bottom, she called a hardy hello, to whom ever was left behind. Rob, responded with a husky. "Come in."

Once they made eye contact, she explained she needed to look through the closet holding her storage, and then proceeded to unpack the crowded space. After removing, an old box of clothing and having Mike's discarded bowling ball nearly crush her toes. She collected the tattered cardboard box from beneath everything else, and paraded back up the steps, where she placed it next to the wooden crate on the kitchen table.

"So what's in it?" Shelly asked, reaching for the wooden box.

"Shelly" Mike shouted from the doorway, "Don't." Immediately she jerked her hand back to her side, with a shocked expression sweeping rapidly across her face.

Emma wondered if he actually believed her story. His frantic tone left something to be desired. Shelly had obviously heard it too. Stepping back from the table, she demanded, "So what's so important about those dishes?"

She may have carried Emma's coloration and structure, but she certainly had Mike's temperament.

"Your Mother would have us believe, they'll match her old set that I guess, belong to her Grandmother once."

"They will match!" Emma exclaimed flared by his tone of disbelief, before Shelly could force a sound through her round shaped lips, forming the word "So?"

Carefully she un-wrapped a dish from her Grandmother's set and placed it on the table. Then cautiously, fearful of receiving another shock, Emma chose what appeared to be a cup from the new set. Holding onto the newspaper more than anything else, she un-wrapped it too.

"IT MATCHES!" Jason exclaimed with an air of self-accomplishment.

"It seems to." Mike still didn't sound so sure. So setting the cup - still holding the newspaper - on the table, she reached for another item, a plate this time. Again holding firmly to the paper, she un-wrapped it as well. As soon as the delicate blue ribbon and gold edge appeared, Mike exclaimed, "Well, I'll be."

Emma could only smile. The two plates matched so perfectly, it sent a chill up her back. Turning each over carefully she examined their creator's initials imprinted on the back. They matched, as did the little fire pot marks just below them. Musing how this could be possible, she stared down at the two plates, and started to recite the story her Grandmother told of the dishes. "Grandma Lizzy, my Father's Mother. Used to tell me the story of these dishes, when I was

younger than you." She paused and looked up to insure the children were still there. "You see they were given to her by her Grandma Emme."

"Is that where you got your name?" Crystal interrupted.

"Yeah, you might say so." She said shaking her head, unconsciously in agreement. Crystal smiled with contentment and took a seat at the far end of the table. The other's soon followed, except Mike who was busy at the sink drawing water for coffee. "And her Grandmother had received them as a wedding gift, from her Grandma Emma."

"Wait a Minute, Em" Mike interrupted, joining them at the table with his empty coffee cup. "Let me get this straight. Your Grandmother Lizzy, got them from her Grandmother Emme. Who got them as a wedding gift from her Grandmother Emma?"

"Yeah" She responded, hoping he wasn't going to stop her from telling the story, or at least the portion of it she had long ago determined to be the shred of truth, buried beneath her Grandmother's spun tales. "Now remember, Grandma's given name was Emma too. She just always went by Lizzy. You know its short for Elizabeth; Her middle name."

"Wow!" Shelly, blurted out, "Four generations named Emma. Why didn't you name one of us Emma?"

"It's more generations than that remember I said Grandma every time the dishes changed hands."

"I get it." Crystal spoke up. "One of us would have to name our daughter Emma, right?"

Mike's face filled with shock and something else, something that moved like a shadow across his strong face, but she did not recognize the emotion. On the other hand Kit looked like she was forcing him to listen against his will and Jason sat motionless.

Realizing his mother was looking at him, Jason leaned forward placing his elbow on the table and said. "That makes those dishes nearly 200 years old."

"Shit Em, why didn't you tell me how old those dishes were?" Mike said jumping to his feet.

"I'd never thought about it." She tried to explain, watching the shadow grow darker inside of him. "To me they were just a piece of Grandma. Besides, the set is not complete. I only have a few of the pieces."

"Like what?" He demanded sternly and her stomach churned with regret for not just putting the dishes in the closet, but flustered as she was, she managed to recite off the pieces of her Grandmother's set, forgetting only the round bellied tea pot.

"Still" Mike spoke up "It's nearly 200 years old. You have to take that in to consideration."

She was sure she could see dollar signs twinkling in his eyes but she really didn't care. He had just given her permission to finish the tale of their journey. "To say the least, some of it was probably lost when the ship that brought my Great Great Grandparents to the U.S., ran into trouble off the east coast, with a Man of War from France."

"What kind of man of War?" Jason ears suddenly perked up.

"It's a name for an old ship, Jason." His father answered, in an impatient tone, from behind her.

"Or when the steam boat, they took up the Mississippi river, blew up." She forged on, fearful he was going to change his mind and shut her up at any minute.

"Blew up?" Crystal exclaimed, her shimmering blue eyes the size of half dollars.

"Damn Em, What a story." Mike again put his two sense in, but allowed her to continue.

"Did that really happen?" Jason questioned.

"Of course it did, or Mom wouldn't have said so." Kit's judgmental tone struck blood, her blood. More than once her older brother's had spoken to her with that tone, even recently they had condemned her for not owning the home that now housed her extended family.

"Kit, that's no way to talk to your brother." Her voice was stern. She would not allow Kit to dominate Jason the way her brothers had her, but she knew better than to dwell on the subject for more than a passing moment either. Addressing Jason she continued the story "It was a steam boat, Jason. Sometimes they would build up to much pressure or at least this one did and then blew up. I'm sure it doesn't happen often. Anyway, Grandma said that's what happened to my Great Great Grandparents boat. Of course, it didn't sink or the dishes would have been lost. Anyway, if all that wasn't enough" she plowed on, casting a glance at Mike's stunned expression.

"They ended up having to push a hand cart across the plains, to join Brigham Young here in the Valley of the mountains." At last taking a deep breath she was done, and Mike still had not replied negatively. She was sure the minute she added the prophet's name he would have something to say, but uncharacteristically he had not even opened his mouth.

Shelly was the first to speak. "Can you imagine? Believing in something so much, as to endure all that and not be turned back?"

Emma thought her heart was going to explode with pride. Shelly had got it. She really understands, Emma thought, it's more than the age of the dishes. It's the journey and the people that brought them.

Suddenly Emma was drawn back to the present by Mr. Mason's hearty laugh behind her, after Crystal had asked about growing cows.



“We raise cattle; child but we do grow corn as well.” His voice was soft and accepting of the child’s innocent comment. And he continued to grin at Emma as he looked down upon her face, signally to Emma the girls were safe in his presence, so again she gazed out upon the immense landscaping laying beyond her and was dragged back to the conversation that had taken place around the table that day.

Shelly's comment had left everyone as speechless as she was, undoubtedly touching Mike's heart as well. The dollar signs she thought she had seen in his eyes were gone, replaced with a soft glow and perhaps even a slight dampness. "She's right." He finally spoke, noticing Emma watching him. "Those dishes have been to hell and back. Don't mix them up." He instructed, "After all you know the history of your set. Guess, I need to get you that china hutch I've been promising." He added as he headed for the counter top.

Emma shifted her attention back to the two sets sitting before her, but his reactions were so out of character that she could not shake the questions from her mind. Why had he not stopped her from telling the story? He hated her stories of her family. She knew his childhood had not been the joy she was raised in, and she avoided the subject whenever possible, but he generally stopped her from finishing the stories anyway. He had not even objected when she mentioned the prophet, which was truly crossing his invisible lines, but it was his last suggestion that had thrown her off balance. The thought of him offering to buy her a hutch to put silly sentimental items in, was not at all like him.

She continued anyway to open and examine every piece of the new set, as she thought about his bewildering reactions. Before she knew it, she had a well-dressed table of fine china. Shelly's calming voice calling out the name of every piece as she un-wrapped it, had disturbed her thoughts little. Carefully peeling the crisp paper from the last piece, she was drawn back into the circle.

"It's a salt shaker." Shelly concluded, suggesting a spot for it in the relish dish, but it did not fit.

"Great, now we have Two incomplete sets." Mike proclaimed playing with the coffee maker, his cup still empty. Emma wasn't really listening though— she had noticed a large Manila envelope at the bottom of the box quite some time ago. At first she thought it was there for support but realizing the wooden crate needed little support, so she finally picked it up. The flap was stuck down and the clasp folded flat. Turning it over she discovered, **RETURN TO MR. BECKSTED AT 555-8726 FOR A REWARD** printed in bold lettering.

"Em!" It was Mike's trumpeting voice that caught her attention this time. "Look at this!"

"What?" She asked since all she could see was a small paper laying on the table in front of Jason.

"Jason's figured it out." Shelly proclaimed, sounding as excited as her father does.

"But we helped him remember all the pieces." Crystal interjected.

"Explain it, Jason." Mike commanded, as Emma stepped a little closer, so she could see what her genius son had discovered this time.

"It's a set of twelve." He proclaimed waving the paper in front of her face.

"Indeed." She said laying the envelope down on the counter, to capture his computations from the air. After a quick glance at the figures she determined her young son was right as usual. By combining the two sets, it was a complete set of twelve, plus an odd amount of canisters and odd items. Her Grandmother had so cherished the few pieces she owned, that it made Emma ponder if she would be proud of her for finding the rest of them.

She was about to tell the others about the envelope when out of the corner of her eye, she could see it lying in a puddle of coffee on the counter. Quickly turning she grabbed it with one hand and with the other she grabbed the dishtowel to blot it dry. Mike fumbled with the drawer, and then pulled a few more towels to assist her in drying the counter.

"What is it?" He demanded with an air of frustration as he struggled to catch his breath.

"I don't know. I found it in the bottom of the box."

Taking it from her, he turned it over and read the message on the other side. She watched him mouth the word REWARD. Fearful he might open it, she hurried to the phone and asked the number. After reading it off to her, he laid it on the table with a small grunt and attended to the broken coffee maker.

An answering machine took her call after the fourth ring. There is probably nothing more irritating she thought than an answering machine, except of course when she reaches a Doctor or a Lawyer's machine, as in this case.

"MR. BECKSTED is an ATTORNEY," she proclaimed hanging up the phone, and placing the envelope on the top of the refrigerator.

"Well, perhaps it will be enough to buy you a hutch." Mike added stiffly, making his way down the narrow hallway to the bedroom where she knew he meant her to follow.

Teetering dangerously close to crossing Mike's only well-defined line of not becoming emotionally attached to a ridiculous piece of land, Emma's heart volleyed back and forth with the beauty that filled her sight. Her mind reeled over the valley spread before her, as the girls continued their discussion of cowboys and cows with Mr. Mason but Mike's harsh words of disapproval gnawed at her conscious. "It's in the middle of nowhere. Nothing will grow in that desert, not even kids. You couldn't pay people to visit you, least of all expect them to pay you for staying at your bed and breakfast." If only he could see this, she thought, as she continued to live over the important details of the past week.

A brief twenty hour was all the time she was given to examine the china before Mr. Becksted returned her call. Just enough time to determine the flash was a vision, as Beth chose to call it, since she was the only one Emma trusted to talk about strange things that occurred in her life. They determine it had been meant for someone else to see, someone like the owner of the envelope.

She was up to her elbows in a sink full of dishes when the phone rang. Mr. Becksted sounding extremely excited was on the other end. After agreeing to meet with him around one, she hung up the phone and informed Mike of the appointment. At first he was excited ... about the REWARD, but then he suddenly decided not to go. So instead he asked Beth to go with her the minute he saw her. Like Beth was going to protect her or something. The thought made Emma laugh, poor Beth could not weigh more than one hundred pounds, wringing wet. Of course, her short butch cut hair did make her look a bit like a boy, but only if you stood a distance away. One close look at her giant greenish-blue eyes and rosy cheeks, and even the bulky sweater she had chosen to wear that day could not hide her very feminine aspects.

The address turned out to be one of the exclusive high raise buildings in downtown Salt Lake City. The decor of the front office was expensive and plush. As Emma stood in the hallway gazing apprehensively through the large glass door, she knew she would have chickened out had it not been for Beth's nudge. Once inside, she knew she must take the lead and do what she had come to do; return the envelope to its rightful owner. Besides Beth had always looked to her for courage, so there was no way she could have just laid the envelope on the receptionist desk and left, without some ribbing on the way home.

Taking a seat where the young woman seated behind the white colonial desk suggested, Emma silently cursed Mike for not coming along. He would have taken the lead without fear of being judged incompetent she thought.

Beth had chosen to sit to her left. Emma was too busy agonizing over what to say when presenting the envelope to the attorney, without tipping him off to the china, so it was not until she felt the small nudge in her ribs that she looked into Beth's darkening eyes. In that single glance she knew Beth was just as intimidated as she, it was only under stress that Beth's eyes shaded that dark. But before she could reassure her, an older gentleman with white hair neatly combed and a full white beard stepped into the room and called her by name.

"Mrs. Chase," When she looked up he immediately stepped closer and thrust a welcoming hand in her direction. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Now if you'll just follow me."

Although his hand was as warm and friendly as the smile peeking out from beneath his blanketed lip, she figured there was as good a spot as any to make her intentions known. "Mr. Becksted, I just came to return the envelope. I know you must be busy, so..."

"Nonsense, you are my only guess this afternoon." He quickly cut her off before she could hand him the plundered item, and escape without telling a lie about the china. Then with a slight tug of her hand he continued, "I'm sure you'll feel more comfortable in my office. Perhaps you would like a cup of tea?" Before she could open her mouth to decline his generous offer, he loosely draped his arm across her shoulder and declared, "We'll all have tea, Sue." addressing the young woman now standing at attention. "In my office."

It took a gentle tug to get Beth to follow, but she soon caught up with the two of them. She knew the minute she met him she liked this man, although he displayed the typical male dominance all men did when she was around. It often amazed her how they could so rapidly place her under their wings and how she seldom fought for the right to stand-alone again.

He led them back to another office equally as nice. His, she presumed. Offering them a seat, he took his place behind the large desk and as he proceeded to open the envelope.

"This really isn't necessary," She took a seat with opposition. "I just wanted to see to it that you got the envelope."

He paid her little attention; instead he continued to read the legal paper he had pulled from the envelope. She was just about to get up and leave, when a broad smile developed under his white beard and his eyes began to twinkle. "Mrs. Chase" he spoke up "I guess I should explain."

"Really it's not necessary." She interrupted, standing up, "I just wanted to see the rightful owner received the envelope." She went on to add, since he appeared to be listening, "There's really no need for a REWARD."

She couldn't believe she had said it, Mike would kill her. By that time Beth had joined her standing before the desk, but Mr. Becksted simply had begun to grin. Even before she had finished her speech, he was handing her the envelope.

"You mean?" she questioned.

"You bought the china didn't you?" He asked.

How had he known about the china? Emma wondered, but shook her head in acknowledgement anyway, unable to lie.

"Well then this belongs to you." He went on, waving the legal papers at her.

Emma lowered herself back into the chair, again Beth followed suit like a puppet taking a seat next to her. His facial expression never changed, perhaps it was his gray white beard and hair, but Emma felt he would make a great Santa Clause.

"Perhaps, we should listen." Beth uttered, after a slight silence. Emma only nodded her head in agreement, laying the envelope down once again on his desk.

"You see Mrs. Haager, apparently decided that the burden, had become too much for her." He started by picking up the envelope. "By placing those dishes and this letter in the box, she turned the task over to God, and quietly slipped away."

Emma gasped, thinking the awesome responsibility must have worn her to death. She also felt sorrow, as if she had known the poor woman personally.

"If you have the time, I'll gladly go over the history of the Chatterton Estate, with you." He went on.

"Chatterton?" Emma questioned the name.

Shaking his head yes, he asked. "Do you know someone with that last name?"

"Only my Grandmother" she and Beth answered in unison, as they did often. Emma knew she was smiling, because she could not think of her loving Grandma Lizzy without smiling.

"Really" he said, pulling himself closer to the desk, "What was her name?"

"Lizzy." Beth responded.

"Emma Elizabeth!" Emma corrected her, but only because, it was she whom actually carried her Grandmother's first name and no one ever recognized the fact because Beth had been given her middle name, the name they both had shortened to fit their lifestyles.

Mr. Becksted's reaction was anything but predictable, suddenly the color drained from his cheeks and he toppled over backwards in his chair; exclaiming at the top of his horse voice, "My God! It can't be true."

His raised voice brought the young women, tea tray in hand, rushing in from the outer office. "MR. Becksted! What is it? Are you OK? Do you need the Doctor?"

"Yes, No, Yes," he tried desperately to keep up with her questions, but his hands waving in a frantic motion seemed to be a contradiction to what was coming from his blue lips.

Emma feared she had said something wrong, but what? Before the young women could assist him, he was up dancing about the room commanding this file and that file. Hastily the young women met his ever command, racing in and out more times than Emma could keep track. Only to be followed by several other people, every time she re-entered the office.

After several minutes of watching the circus perform she considered slipping away, but the confusion was so great, she feared they might be trampled in their retreat, so she smiled at Beth and just sat still hoping the ringmaster would return quickly. Alas, he took his place behind the large desk and commanded the others to be gone.

"Ok, Emma." He started with a renewed strength in his tone, "Emma, Elizabeth, Chatterton, West, had two sons. One died around the age of"

"Four" Emma interrupted "By falling in to a tub of hot water."

"I don't know how he died," He replied with an intense look about his face. "Her other son, disappeared sometime before the age of eight."

"NO!" Emma found her voice had risen as she interrupted again. "He took the name of his stepfather about that time. Reed; was the name he was baptized under, as well as married, and it was the name he gave to each of us."

"Woe, Woe, Stop." He jumped up and she feared the place was going to be turned upside down again but instead, he calmly walked to the door and invited the young woman, to join them with her note pad.

Before returning to his chair he pulled up another one for his secretary, then he went on. "Your Father's name is Robert?"

She had never heard anyone ever call him that but that was the name on his head stone. Of course, Arthur was underlined, indicating that was the name he went by.

"Yes. But no one ever called him that. He used his middle name Arthur, Art for short."

"And my Grandma had four children." Beth added "Not two. She had the two boys from Grandpa West but then she had two girls from Grandpa Reed." Emma had not realized he had not mentioned her Aunts.

"Really?" He said, running his fingers through his beard that appeared to be soft, unlike any Mike had ever grown.

"Yes." Emma answered "But what does that envelope have to do with my Dad?"

He looked puzzled for a moment, like she should have understood what he was talking about, then looking directly into her eyes he asked. "How old are your Aunts?"

The world she sat in was strange, its heavy scent of paper and ink weighing on her mind, but the male constitution was unchanged; he figured he could brush her request aside with little regard. "I don't understand what this has to do with my Father or for that matter any of his family. So

before we tell you anything else, I think I need an explanation." She forced a stern tone to her voice but it never seemed adequate in pinning down the male ego.

His response was delivered with more regard to her feelings however. "Look Emma if I'm not wrong, everything in YOUR future." By the way, he tipped his head aside first weighing the response, it was obvious he wanted to tell her something but chose not to reveal it quite yet. "But I need you to answer a few more questions, first." The way his bushy eyebrows peeked delivering, the last demand made her hand start to quiver in her lap. A bit confused with his mystical response, she looked to Beth for help.

"What's it going to hurt?" Was Beth's only response. She was right, Emma thought, what did her Father have to hide anyway.

"OK, fire away." she responded with a deep sigh.

"How many children did your Aunt's have and what are their sexes, and how old are they?" She almost regretted agreeing. "Before we start Emma, I want you to know, this really has more to do with my own curiosity than the legal matters of Chatterton Place." She didn't understand what he meant by Chatterton Place, but went on to answer all of his questions anyway, even confirming three times that she and Beth were her Grandmothers only granddaughters.

She also had to explain the great difference in age between her, and her older brothers. As if she could really find an explanation for the twenty-year gap in child rearing, her parents had experienced.

With each answer, Mr. Becksted seemed to get more and more excited. Finally, the questions wound down to who was the oldest, she or Beth. Shyly raising her hand, she said "Me"

He collapsed into his chair like a puppet with a broken string, declaring, "How did I know that?"

"She looks older!" Beth responded with a chuckle and Emma couldn't help reach over and tap her on the arm.

Leaning forward on the desk almost as if for support he said, "Mrs. Haager obviously, knew what she was doing when she turned it over to God. For believe it or not, Emma . . . you not only purchased the Chatterton ESTATE," The word stuck in her head "You're also the one person, everyone has been looking for, for nearly 50 years. IT'S YOUR INHERITANCE."

"Girl." Mr. Mason's deep voice had drawn her back to the present, "You sure you're it?"

It had been ages since anyone had called her a girl, it made her smile. "Yah, I'm it." she could hardly control the laugh that followed.

If it were possible his face somehow seemed to soften, and he chuckled with her. "Well, Okay then let's get this show on the road." was his response, as he started towards the cab of the truck. "Just follow me."

The girls were filled with questions, as she slid back into the car and refastened her belt. "Doesn't he think you're old enough to own the land?" Crystal asked.

"He's really a cowboy isn't he Mom?" Shelly asked. Emma had to admit, that he filled his boots well.

"He sure looks like a cowboy to me." she answered Shelly's question first.

"Isn't he going to let you have your land?" Crystal seemed concerned, that this tall cowboy could somehow keep it from them.

"Crystal I think he must have been expecting my Grandma."

"But she's dead. She can't do anything with It." the statement nearly made Emma laugh.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to show him we can take care of the place, Crystal." she really hadn't answered Crystal's question but the statement gave her something new to think about, and in turn would keep her busy for a few minutes. For fifteen she managed to remind Emma every day of the innocents of that age.

She followed him back on the main road and then turned off to the left, right where she'd thought, while standing at the top of the mountain. It seemed to be made of the same material the main road was, smooth to drive on but rough in appearance. After only a short ways, he pulled off to the side and stopped. He then got out of the truck and waved her to do the same, Emma wasn't sure what he had planned but exited the car just the same. The girl's got out as well this time.

Pausing at the front of the car for the girls, she bent down to touch the strange looking road base. Realizing what she was looking at, Jim started telling them how the Founding Fathers had laid it shortly after establishing their home in the canyon.

"It's the same stuff you'll find all over Europe. At least that's what my father said. He saw a lot of it in the War."



Just as the tips of her fingers touched the ground, there was a flash of light. It was like the first time she touched the china plate. The picture was clearer this time. Several people stood on a long porch, dressed in odd clothing. The men even had on tall black hats. She couldn't see their faces but the large two-story frame home behind them seemed to glow. Light was twinkling from every window and the front door was open. More people could be seen moving around inside, and music was playing, then it was gone. She suddenly felt light headed, and losing her balance she toppled over.

"Mrs. Chase" Jim called, as he raced to her side, but the girls were already there.

"Mom" they both cried. "Are you ok? What's wrong?"

What was she going to say? She didn't want him thinking she was crazy, even before she'd a chance to move there. Shelly solved her dilemma,

"I think it has something to do with her balance. She did this once when we were up in the mountains."

"I get it." Mr. Mason responded, "It's her equilibrium." He said, and then he spoke very slowly to her. "Mrs. Chase, open your mouth wide."

She did as he'd said, pretending that her ears popped. Then she opened her eyes, insisting she was fine while attempting to sit up, but found a heavy hand holding her down.

"Don't." he said, "Wait a few minutes." Then he stood up and walked to the truck. Crystal was all over her. "Mom, are you okay?" her frantic voice and pail face, made her realize that she was scaring them.

"I'm okay sweetheart." she said softly "Really, I am." With those words, she sat up. Crystal leaned back on her legs, and gave a half-witted smile. She could see Jim headed back towards them with several sodas in his hands.

"If you feel like it, I think you'll enjoy the view from the other side of the truck better." He stuck out his free hand and help lift her to a standing position. Shelly wrapped her arm around her waist, as if she really needed it to hold her up.

"Really I'm okay." She said looking at Shelly, "Thanks for helping me."

After giving her oldest daughter a light kiss on the cheek, they all walked behind the truck and to the far side, where indeed they had a better view. There, positioned above the valley floor, engulfed in the first line of a dense forest, sat the sun harvest gold, two story home of her visions.

Leaning back against the truck's wide wheel well to steady her knocking knees, Emma understood better the strange experience, she'd felt as they had put the sleeping bags into the trunk of the car that morning. The black outline the house cast against the gray sky, had reminded her of something lost or forgotten. She knew right then her life was about to change. Now she was only left wondering what those changes would include. It was obvious that both the china and the house had something to do with her. What the connection was, she didn't know, but she was sure of one thing. She'd have to find out, or risk never sleeping again.

"Are you sure you're, alright?" Mr. Mason's voice flooded into her thoughts. She had to act normal, never mind the terror that pulsed through her.

"Yeah, I should've brought some gum." she responded pushing herself away from the truck "I'm embarrassed, but not hurt."

"Why embarrassed?" he asked strolling towards a large rock, off to the front side of the truck.

"A ... well, you know. Maybe you might think I've been drinking or something." she shrugged her shoulders in response.

"That's your choice isn't it?" he looked sincere. She figured he indulged, or low and behold she'd actually found someone who thought the way she did.

"Mom doesn't drink!" Shelly exclaimed, in her defense, but she was more interested in where Crystal had gone; when she went skipping over the small embankment, she'd quickly disappeared from sight a moment earlier. Stepping forward, Emma realized that her youngest was busy splashing about in a small stream, flowing below. She recalled seeing a small stream but had, had the distinct impression that it ran closer to the middle of the valley.

"Mrs. CHASE." His impatient tone drew her attention right away. Turning to look over to where he'd taken a seat on the large rock, she said,

"Please call me Emma."

"How about a coke Emma, It might help clear your head."

"Thanks, it might help." she sighed as she took a seat next to Shelly on a large flat rock. "I just can't get over the beauty of this place."

"The real question, is, what's a nice girl like you doing way out here?" It may have been a come on line, but he certainly knew how to execute it. Suddenly she wished she'd chosen to wear something besides her old blue jeans, but he wasn't looking at them anyway. His steely blue eyes were locked on hers. Popping the top of the soda, she thought about the question.

"I guess, you could say Family duty." She answered looking beyond his piercing glare, to the house, and then on to scan the horizon.

Large pines protruded from the top of every ridge, below them were aspen trees, almost level with them were groves of fruit trees. The flat lands glistened green and lush. About a hundred feet from where they sat, the road made an abrupt right hand turn arching over a solid rock bridge that spanned the small stream. She could see several smaller building dotting the landscape besides the frame home that sat directly across, a large field from them.

"I still can't believe the beauty this place has to offer." she finished her statement, moving her eyes back to meet his. His expression had changed, his eyes were almost misty and a broad smile wrapped from ear to ear.

"I think you're going to work out here just fine." He half whispered and even his voice was softer, "Yes sir, just enough spunk, and an eye for beauty. You'll do just fine." he stood up brushing the dust from his backside. It sounded like he'd selected her, from some catalog, the same way the old miner's use to order a bride.

"Mrs. Haager," he went on "did all she could, for a woman of her age that was." His eyes were now scanning the property, as he walked to the road. "You know." he looked back at her questionably "She completed old Johnny's plans for lighting this place."

Standing to follow him up the slight incline, she shook her head. "I don't know anything about the lady or the house."

"Sorry." he quickly turned away, to hide his open-mouthed expression. "I thought—, well Mr. B. said you inherited the place."

"I did." she answered, removing the clip from the back of her hair, allowing it to flow freely in the brisk breeze that had come up, hoping it would cool her face down "But" she paused to rest against the hood of the truck, "Well."

"Either you did or not." He spoke plainly, turning to look back at her.

"Mom got it from her Grandma." Shelly inserted "She didn't even know she was rich."

"Shelly," Emma hushed her, she didn't consider herself rich, and she didn't think it was right to tell family information to complete strangers.

"If you didn't know Mrs. Haager," he looked at her perplexed, and then as if someone had switched a light on, he added "Then you must be the CHATTERTON granddaughter."

The hair on the back of her neck came to a standing salute at the way he pronounced Chatterton. He made it sound like it was haunted, or she was a ghost.

"You can't be." He declared. "You can't be as old as me."

"Mom's thirty seven." Shelly again answered.

Emma was ready to give up even trying to talk. Turning to lay her back against the hood, she contemplated telling him the story of her strange family. If someone today has a child after forty, they say it was planned that way. She wasn't planned and she knew it. Beth and Jake, were planned, she... she was an accident. No one goes twenty years without a child and then decides suddenly to have another one.

"My father was forty seven when I was born." She finally answered.

"Well. I'll be." was his only utterance, as he stepped around her and absent mindedly headed for the cab. "You ready to go see this place?"

Looking up at the majestic beauty that over looked the peaceful valley, she drew a deep breath and answered "Let's Roll."

After crossing the arched masterpiece, the road turned further to the right. Soon the house was out of sight. The road seemed to be heading more towards the mountain then the house and then from out of nowhere, there was another house. Not the one they had seen from the bridge, but a smaller white house. Still it probably had more rooms then would be required to start a bed and breakfast.

She wondered if this was the house he'd really been showing them, and they had just thought it was the other house. She was sure the large house wasn't white, it appeared to be yellow, or all most gold as they crossed the rock bridge.

Mr. Mason's black truck didn't even slow down as they passed in front of the house. Despite its suitable appearance, Emma released a sigh of relief. Not because the house wasn't nice, but because she knew in her heart that the other house was the one in her vision. For the first time, she knew, she had a distinct reason to be there. She didn't know what it was but she knew she had to find out.

"Whose house is that?" Crystal asked, but Emma only shook her head, and Crystal understood. The girls had been very quiet ever since they had left the stream.

"Are you girls okay?" she asked while turning to catch a glimpse of them.

"Sure" answered Shelly "It's all so beautiful," she paused for a moment to look at her Mom. "I just can't find the words to describe it."

"Dido" Crystal responded with one of her favorite words. Emma found herself feeling that very way, how could anyone give this up for the city? It made no sense to her.

Just then, they turned a sharp curve to the left, and there only a few hundred feet in front of them was the house— as yellow as a sun set in August. The white porch was more like the veranda's she'd read about in the East. It wrapped the two sides she could see, the delicate looking trellis that covered the porch was supported, every ten feet by large white pillars. A railing ran between the pillars, and down the three or four steps near the front door. The door itself was similar to the French doors off her kitchen, but the glass was all stained. So was some of the glass in the large front windows. There were eight windows on the second floor all arched with stained glass in the arch area and there were four small windows above them in the attic but none had stained glass in them.

Mr. Mason pulled to a stop near what appeared to be a sidewalk at one time. She wheeled the car in beside him, but never took her eyes off the house. The front yard was over grown with all sorts of weeds, but she could still identify a few bushes.

Her eyes were drawn to what appeared to be an addition, built on the far right side of the first floor. It had large windows like a kitchen or a family area, the porch ran across it front and again French doors faced the front of the house. However, there was no stained glass, in this area at all. From where they sat it appeared that there were large white sheets draped over the interior.

"MOM, are you coming in or not?" Crystal had already opened the door and exited. Shelly was who asked, as she pushed her way out from the back seat.

Unable to name the emotion that had her heart racing. Excitement or fear, Emma wasn't sure. She knew she couldn't drive all that way, to just to sit in the car. Sitting before her, was her family's home. She had to find out why her Grandmother had never said anything about it.

"Mom, are you coming?" Shelly glared back at her.

"Sure." she answered, forcing herself to open the door and step to the front of the car. It somehow seemed more inviting from that point of view than it had in the car. Even the knot in her stomach was loosening. A sweet fragrance filled the air.

Mr. Mason had noticed her apprehension. "Emma you don't need to go inside if you don't feel like it right now." She didn't know what she'd done to clue him in on that fact, but she did feel better knowing that he understood her feelings.

"Oh Mom, we have to go inside." Shelly looked disappointed.

"No Shelly," His response was soft but firm. "She really doesn't have to." Quickly he turned to look back at her. His eyes were soft and seemed to have more understanding than she had originally thought. Resting her back against the hood of the car, she stared up at the arched windows.

"Well can we at least look around than?" Crystal asked.

Emma couldn't find her voice so she simply nodded. Within a moment, she was alone with a man that seemed to know what she was feeling even before she did.

"You know" he said as he walked a bit closer "it's okay. I mean ... you seem to be fearful of going inside, and it's okay to be afraid of things you don't know." He stopped only a few feet from her, his voice was comforting in a firm way.

The place had been an awesome sight from the bridge, but there it was over whelming. It must have enough rooms to open a small hotel, she thought, running her fingers through her hair.

"I just can't get over the size of the place. It's ..." she had ran out of description words.

"I know what you mean, Kind of strange to find a house like this way the hell out here, Ha?" he responded, turning to rest against the car as well.

"It amazes me how much detail they put into the house's back then, Too bad they don't do that now." she answered, considering what a person would have to go through to build the delicate lace like trim around the roof line.

"Really they just throw them together now days. They don't even take the time to figure how long the house will be in use. This one's been here for over a hundred years, yet it's just as functional as the new ones."

She hoped he was referring to private baths. If she was indeed to be considering the place as an Inn, that would be a requirement. Actually, she was looking at more than the house. She was looking into her own mind. What had her holding back? Reflecting upon the flash picture, she knew she would be fine until it grew dark, but by then she'd have a motel room. No matter if she had enough money or not. She wasn't about to spend a night there alone or even with the girls, until she figures out what the visions have to do with her, no one was going to stay there.

The girls were wondering from one window to another, trying to look inside, when Mr. Mason asked.

"Is it just the size of the place that is frightening you off?" his voice was concerned but the words still sounded like he was calling her a chicken.

"Nothings got me scared!" she exclaimed, righting her-self and squaring her shoulders. She must have looked like a peacock, set for a fight.

"Okay, I'm sorry, I must of got the wrong impression." he remarked, walking towards the front door.

She reprimanded herself, for jumping down his throat. She was trying to build her own courage. She didn't need to snap at him. "Mr. Mason, I'm sorry. You're right, I'm a bit fearful of going in there."

He stopped and walked back toward her. "It's alright. You've never been here before, and you don't know me from Adam."

"Which Adam?" she remarked trying to be smart. It worked, at least it drew a smile, and again his eyes twinkled.

"Alright smarty pants which Adam?" He chuckled as he continued, "The one on the big continent or the ones in south America and on the islands."

Her face must have showed her surprise in his recognition of the things her Grandmother had told her while sitting on her lap. His eyes twinkled with delight.

"You say you've never heard of this place?" She only shook her head, in response. "Then why ask me about the different Adam's?"

"What does Adam have to do with this place? Are you telling me, that—?"

Before she could finish asking if her Great Grandparents might have believed that God had created many Adam to get the world going, Crystal was shouting for her "Come see, Come see Mom." From the excitement in her tone, she could tell they'd found a place to look in.

They were standing by the addition with the large windows. As she grew closer, she could see that they were looking through a split in the sheet that covered the window. They had carefully positioned themselves, so not to step on the delicate flowers blooming next to the wall.

Taking great care not to crush anything, she pressed her face to the windowpane. Slowly unfolding it's self before her, was the largest room she could remember seeing, at least in a house. It looked more like a restaurant dining room. Even though all the windows seemed to be draped, the room was filled with light, making it Eerie but inviting. The far wall (once the outer

wall of the original house) displayed modern floral print wallpaper, and a large fireplace that seemed from where she stood to be open clear through to the front room.

Towards the back of the room, there was a step into another room. The doorway appeared to have been the left over section of an old bay window. Only a few feet further stood the back wall, again probably part of the original home. It was completely covered with shelves enclosed behind glass doors. The other two walls, she noticed as she'd approached the girls, were windows.

Six or seven large wooden, bladed, fans hung from the ceiling. Three tulip shaped light covers were positioned at the bottom of each. The room certainly was inviting, just the sight of it cast warmth over her.

"Mom we have to go inside. We have to." The girls pleaded in unison. Drawing a deep breath, the fragrant blossoms beneath her feet, filled the empty hollow of her soul. Giving her the extra strength, she needed.

Mr. Mason was more than willing to lead them back to the front door and unlock the front door. The house was surprisingly warm, inside the entrance hall the light that managed to get through the sheets on the window, cast dark shadows everywhere. They had to go. Every one grabbed a sheet, and soon dust was filtering through the bright light that flooded the area.

She stood speechless. Although there wasn't a stitch of furniture in the place, it didn't sound or feel empty. Wooden floors stretched as far as she could see, all highly polished, under the dust and cobwebs.

Directly in front of her stood a large staircase, flared at the bottom with a landing and L-shaped, climbing the vaulting walls. From where she stood, she could see several of the rooms upstairs.

A good five or six foot wide, hallway shot back out of sight. She guessed to another hallway at the back of the house by its design. It appeared similar to several homes she'd seen before. The first owners used to build a small house at first, then as funds grew, a larger home would be built directly behind the first, causing a T-shape home to appear.

A rich dark wood paneling covered the walls, directly above her head hung a magnificent crystal chandelier. Through a large arched doorway, off to her left, expanded what probably once was a sitting room. It used to be called that because that was where guests were seated, while the party they wished to see was called. Her Grandmother had said that room was the only proper place, a beau or boyfriend was allowed in the house.

The girls rushed in before her, pulling down the dusty sheets. Windows nearly encircled the front of the room, and French doors directly across from her opened onto a wide porch. Beyond



the porch was what appeared to be a garden? Marble slab benches had been carefully placed on each side.

Before she could drink in the view, the girls rushed back past her and into the room on the other side of the hall. Soon light filled that room as well. It took a minute for the dust to clear then slowly before her eyes, developed perhaps the most beautiful fireplace on earth. It must have taken a fine mason, many months to erect such a masterpiece. At first, she thought it was marble, then she realized it was granite. Miraculously a large wooden mantel, adorned its front.

"How?" she uttered, "It must be twelve feet tall."

"I don't know." Mr. Mason responded, "The benches in the garden are made of it too."

Identical bookcases adorned either side of the grand showcase. Technologically, more difficult than the slab it held was the fact, that the fireplace was indeed open on the other side as she had thought. Directing her attention to the front of the house, she was struck by the balance the three windows gave the room. Each separated by an equal distance from each other and from the corners. The stain glass panels in them cast an eerie dance of color about the room.

The wooden floor felt rougher where she stood now than it had in the entrance. She concluded, running her foot from the smooth to the ruff spot, that a large area rug must have lain in that spot for quite some time.

Directly above her hung a simple light fixture, with the exception of the base. The broad plaster base, with delicate rose shapes served as a clue, that it hadn't always been so plain.

Another smaller room jettied off towards the back of the house. As she entered it, the brightly colored rose pattern wallpaper, was what caught her eye. It was nearly the same pattern as the china, and it matched the light base in the front room. From the size and the position of the room, she decided that it must have been the original dining room. She could just imagine a large china hutch, sitting between the two doors on the back wall. A Chandelier adorned this room too.

It was obvious that the extra-large room lying just through the open French doors, was a new addition as she'd thought. She didn't remember them being open, while they had peaked in from outside. Therefore, that meant she would find the girls in there.

A loud piercing scream, rang throughout the house. Instantly she knew it was Crystal, a moment later Shelly yelled "MOM".

Barging past Mr. Mason, she flew in to the large area. It was empty. A quick touch on the shoulder and she jumped. Somehow managing to control the scream, she whirled around to see him, streaking through a door at the end of the glass case, she hadn't seen before. Racing to join

him, she pushed the swinging door open and plowed right in to his strong backside. Peeking around his arm, she could see the girls, standing halfway between them and a raccoon, up on its hind legs. Squealing for all it was worth.

"Don't scare it." He commanded. "Now, slowly start backing up towards us."

They didn't need to be told twice. Quickly they too slipped behind him, and she gave each a big squeeze but the little thing didn't need to be asked to leave. It quickly shot across the floor towards the back door and out a hole in the screen.

"What was it?" Crystal exclaimed.

"It's just a raccoon child." He responded, walking across the kitchen floor to close the door.

Actually, Emma didn't feel like she'd just entered a kitchen, at all. The place looked more like something out of a hospital, Stainless Steel cover every surface.

"That poor little thing was as scared as you were." He went on. "Wonder how this door got open."

"Wasn't us." Shelly proclaimed, "We were looking in the freezers, when it ran out and scared us."

"Really Mr. Jim, we didn't let it in." Crystal backed her sister.

"Oh, I believe you. I just can't figure out why this door was open."

Emma was not paying much attention to what they were saying. She was busy walking from one new appliance to the next, each still displaying the new sticker on its door.

"Holy Cow" Slipped from her lips.

"It's totally awesome ha?" Shelly responded probably the only one that had heard her.

"Yah" Crystal added, "Beth could even bake a cake in that oven for all of us." She was pointing to a restaurant-sized appliance next to the wall.

"She could feed an army out of this kitchen." Emma stated.

Mr. Mason merely looked puzzled, by their comments.

"My sister Beth lives with us." she added "And since she knows how to cook better than I. She does all the cooking."

"Oh," he said bending down to retrieve his hat from the floor. "I see."

"Why such a big Kitchen" Emma asked as he stroked his hair into place before replacing the hat.

"Well, Mrs. Haager had some pretty big plans for this place"

Pushing a door open on the other wall, they were led down the back hallway, she had been guessing about since entering the house. He then went on to tell them, how Mrs. Haager had planned to turn the estate into a bed and breakfast or a small resort. Including the fact that she'd even gone through the city to get the okay and permits needed.

"She even picked up some furniture from an old hotel in Hawaii, when she was there just before she got too sick to finish the place."

His rendition had carried them through the entire main floor tour. Emma was totally overwhelmed by the amount of reconstruction the old woman had accomplished. Each of the bedrooms was small suites, consisting of two large spaces and a bath. The main area had a door opening to the hallway. All had a fireplace with matching bookshelves on each side, and a large window. In the case of the room they were standing, facing the back of the house. The other side of the room had no obvious features, except the door to the bath and of course its own window. Each bathroom was equipped with a shower, in addition to a claw-footed tub. There also was a sink and vanity, which appeared to be marble.

As they neared the front door, again he turned and asked. "What you got planned for the place?" Oh, she had plenty of plans. However, that wasn't going to be the deciding factor, money was her big worry.

"My dad works in a Hotel in Salt Lake." Crystal responded.

"Mom, use to too." Shelly added "till a few years ago."

Trying not to give anything away, Emma added "But it's going to take a lot of money to finish this place." Pausing at the foot of the staircase, she completed her thought "And that is something we don't have a lot of."

"Money!" he chuckled, "You need to talk to Mr. Becksted some more."

What did he mean? Money was one of the subjects she tried to avoid, along with religion.

"How many bedrooms in all." Her question was out of context, and a clear attempt to change the subject, as she pointed up the staircase.

"Twenty or so I think." he answered with a look of puzzlement.

Suddenly her heart started to race. She and Mike had dreamt of this place their entire marriage. At least since, he got his degree in Hotel Motel Administration. But he had never wanted to be the one to own the place. He just wanted to run it.

"Are we going to stay here tonight?" Crystal asked interrupting her mother train of thought. Curling her bottom lip, back against her white teeth, Emma actually pondered the question for a minute before answering.

"I think it'll be better if we get a motel room for the night." She finally answered.

"I won't hear of it" Mr. Mason spoke up "Mom would kill me if I let you do that."

Emma tried to say no, but not too hard, since she had only brought gas money and a couple sleeping bags with them. Reluctantly, she gave in.

The girls skipped down the steps and on to the car, while she stayed on the porch as He locked up. A quick glance at her watch and she understood the rumbling in her stomach, she couldn't believe they had spent nearly four hours looking through an empty house, and hadn't even seen the second floor. Then again, she had taken an extra-long time in each of the mini suites; trying to imagine how it would look with furniture.

"Hey Girl," he tapped her on the shoulder "Are you always in your own world?" She didn't have her own world, although most the time she wished she had.

"Sorry, that place is just overwhelming."

"I was just asking if you'd like to stop and talk to Mom, before I buy you lunch or after."

"You don't have to buy us lunch. I brought something along with us, so I appreciate your kindness, but I think we'll pass." What she really wanted to do was go back into town and check out the hotel competition.

"Well then, you should take these." he was handing her the big key ring.

"No, I don't know when we'll get back down here." She suddenly remembered Mike's disapproval.

"You'll be back. You belong here." He sounded so certain, it left her feeling he just might be right.

After opening the car door for her, he went on to say, "I've got to get the water to the upper fields and some business in town tonight, but I'll show you to the house first."

She followed him back to the main road, and then up the junction were they had met him. She couldn't believe the immensity of the valley. It felt like they had driven for hours, weaving in and out of little canyons, until at last a two story home came clearly into view, behind it stood a large red barn and silo.

He was out of the truck and bounding up the front steps before she got the car stopped, all the time shouting at the top of his lungs for his Mother. She wondered if he knew just how lucky he was to have a mom, her own Mother had died, just before Crystal was born and even before she and Mike were married.

She started to fear there might be something wrong, when neither of them met her and the girls at the door. She hesitated but then finally just walked in. He was standing just inside the door telling his mother all about the strange woman that had come to visit. Not that she actually heard a word of it, but she could just imagine what he thought of his "city girl".

She'd never really thought of herself as a city girl, if her father didn't have her busy traipsing all over the backwoods of the Uinta's, she spent a good amount of time at her Grandfather West's home, only about fifty miles to the north. She loved the outdoors. Sure, there were the drawbacks. Like the lack of health care, and the miles you had to drive to receive it, but in general, she thought she could get used to living a few mile away from her closest neighbor.

Salt Lake had grown to three times its intended size, in just the nineties alone. She hated the overcrowded conditions. Every hour of the day was rush hour. As the winter just past, had managed to prove, clean air had become a scarce commodity. Why anyone would want to go to a place you couldn't see the mountain you were skiing on, was beside her.

Oh of course, everywhere with a ski business had grown, everywhere except where she was currently standing, that was. Perhaps they didn't want to grow. That might be a problem, if she indeed was able to convince Mike to come down.

"Mom" Shelly nudged her in the side. "This is Jim's Mother Jesse." Again, she'd lost part of the conversation.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Mason." she reacted out of courtesy, by lifting her hand in the direction of the elderly woman.

"Please dear, call me Jesse." the sweet face woman of sixty replied, taking her hand and patting it. "James was just telling me that you're going to be spending the night. You'll have to forgive the condition of the house, I just don't get around as well as I use to."

As if she really had something to complain about, Emma thought, she would love to see her home look as clean as this one appeared.

"My goodness, don't worry about us looking into any unclean corner. You would probably keel over in fright if you saw my place." she tried to reassure the woman that her home looked fine.

"Of course we have twelve or thirteen, people wandering about all the time." Shelly added what she'd heard her mother say a million times, in excuse, for the mess that she called home.

"Thirteen!" Jim exclaimed, and then stuttered over the mere word "People."

"I told you my sister lives with us." she attempted to ease his mind, while throwing Shelly a dirty look.

"So does my Uncle Jake." Crystal added, thinking it would help her mother explain.

"Three families live in one house!" Emma wasn't sure if that was a question or if he was merely a gasp for air.

"James, you've spent too much time in this big place all alone. Of course, three families can live in a house. Any house, as long as there's room in the heart, there's room in the house."

Emma's thoughts exactly, of course there were those times she really wished for some space of her own.

"We do keep separate, living spaces. Jake has the attic and Beth the basement. So it's really only when we're all trying to get through the front door, at the same time it becomes unbearable."

"No wonder you can slip in and out of this world so easily. You would have to, with that many people running around all the time." No longer did he think of her as a city slicker, now she was a crazy city slicker, she thought, from the look of amazement on his face.

Before long, it was time to start dinner and she hadn't even fed the girl's lunch, maybe he was right. Maybe she really could just slip in and out of the real world. If so, why didn't it work, when she wanted it to?

The girl's weren't complaining, in fact they seemed to be enjoying themselves more than she could've dreamed possible. Jesse told them all about how she'd come to live there, also about the good old days when her James was alive. Emma was left to figure out, that her James was, her husband.

In the meantime, Jim had totally disappeared, which let her breathe a bit easier. She was beginning to think, he really thought she was crazy. Moreover, that constant twinkle in his eye made her worry that he knew something she didn't, as if he was going to kill them all in their sleep.

And above all she hadn't come up with a reasonable explanation for the vision. Maybe it was a way of telling her where she was supposed to be. She was still pondering the question, when it came time to set the table. It was obvious that they very seldom used the dining room, but that was where Jesse insisted the girls set the table.

"Shouldn't we wait for Jim?" she'd asked when the girls carried the plates in to the other room.

"Oh dear, he'll be here before we're finished, but only to change his clothes and head for town. He hasn't eaten dinner with me in—" from the pause, Emma figured a might long time. "Well not since Jimmy, was here visiting last." The loving woman finally finished.

"Jimmy?" She asked, mentally acknowledging she had heard him call himself Jim and Jesse referred to her husband as James, but she had not said anything about Jimmy since they had arrived.

"James's oldest, he's off at college this year, in California." Jesse responded.

Why she had not thought to ask about a wife, made Emma ponder herself. It probably had something to do with being taken home to meet his mother.

The girls continued to listen to everything Jesse had to say, and with such intent, that she found the way their eyebrows moved with the highs and lows amusing. She was in fact, so wrapped up watching their faces that she hardly noticed when Jim slid in to the seat next to her.

He smelt as fresh and clean as an Irish spring itself. Passing him the potatoes, she couldn't help but notice, that he'd changed his clothes and shaved. Some poor unsuspecting woman in town, was in for a night of bliss. Later she decided it was the fatigue written on his face, which made her pay him the attention, Jesse wasn't. Before she realized what she was doing she'd even buttered his bread, but the moment there was a low in the conversation, he still sought his Mother's attention first.

"Did Emma tell you that, she was an afterthought too?" He blurted out when Jesse looked his direction.

"James!" his mother immediately shot back, "You weren't an afterthought. And what gives you the right to make a statement like that of this sweet woman?"

She'd often thought of herself as an afterthought. Since that was the way, her mother had described it. However, she took offence in him insinuating it, as well.

"Mom said we were God's blessing for her old age." Emma finally replies, when the silence insisted she speak.

"That's it" Jesse spoke up "You were something this world couldn't live without."

Lord, Emma thought, I hope she hasn't been filling him full of that bull all his life.

"I was just trying to say, that Emma was born late in her Mother's life too." He attempted to defend himself. "Really I was just trying to ease into the fact, that she's the Chatterton Granddaughter Mrs. Haager was looking for."

At least he hadn't said the name, as if it had a curse attached. Jesse's expression did that for him. "She couldn't be."

"Mom didn't even know her Grandmother used to live here." Shelly remarked, not mentioning how rich her Grandmother appeared to have been at one time. Emma at least took comfort in that fact.

Lowering her cup to the table, before she dropped it, Jesse exclaimed with a note of delight, "Then that explains it, just look at these girls James. One's as delicate as a flower and filled with the morning light and the other sweet and warm as the evening fire. Like her mother." A more accurate description, Emma couldn't have supplied herself. "You have different father's right?" she went on directing her question directly to them. Both shook their heads no.

"Mom's only been married once." Crystal added. "I look like my aunt Beth, she's blond too."

"So is your father." Emma quickly added

"OH MY SWEET LORD—I hoped"

"She probably hoped she could claim one of them" Jim cut her off rudely, and with a dirty look directed at his mother that Emma couldn't help but notice, silenced her. She really didn't know what to think about the exchange of looks that flew before her. She read everything from confusion, to concern on Jesse's face, the last coming first.

"Mom," he finally spoke up, "Emma doesn't know a thing about the place. Her Grandmother never told her."

"Told me what?" Emma couldn't contain her curiosity, one minute more.

"Anything" He insisted, piling his mouth full of food.

"Nothing" Jesse asked, looking to her for an answer.

"Nothing" Emma responded looking at Jim. "No one in the family knew this place was here. Till," she'd almost slipped and said until she saw it in a vision. "Well, I bought a set of dishes



and in the bottom of the box was an envelope” She continued on to tell them the strange story, at least all that she’d told everyone else.

They listened intensely to every word, as the girls cleared the table. With the table clear Jim rose and walks into the living room and right to the mantle where he rested his arm and expressed his disbelief.

"It's amazing, how many people in this world could've bought those dishes and yet they ended up in your hands."

"The God's were looking over her that day." Jesse concluded, taking a seat on the high backed sofa.

Emma herself didn't quite know what to say, but followed the crowd into the living room and took a seat in a chair next to the large fireplace.

"So you really don't have any idea, what a strong traditional family you come from?" Jesse asked picking up her knitting from a basket on the floor. As she did, a small ball of wool rolled into the middle of the floor.

"Grandma talked about the Mormon influence on our family. She just never said anything about this place. I can't imagine her ever leaving a place like this, and if Dad knew about it," Emma paused and shook her head. "He deserved a place like this." she finished looking up at Jim.

Emptying his pipe, he took a seat in the other chair sitting in front of the fireplace and said, "You really thought a lot him, didn't you?"

He was reading her face again. "Yeah, Mom always said he was a bit of rogue when he was younger, but I guess he'd had time to smooth out before I was born. He was about the most stable person I'd ever meet. He worked hard every day of the week, and when he played, he played just as hard. But I really want to hear about this place not tell you my life story." She turned her attention to Jesse, who had been intensely watching the two of them.

"Tell me, everything you know about this place?"

Jesse wove a tapestry of color, intertwined with historical facts, and people whom Emma would never know. She'd no idea that her Great Great Grandfather had four wives. Her own Great Great Grandmother Emme, was the only one she'd found a marriage record for, but that didn't mean much in an area entrenched in Mormonism. After the proclamation to reject plural marriages in order to receive Statehood, many of the second and third wives retained their maiden names, for legal protection.

The size of the original land grant was something else she found beyond her grasp of understanding as well. Her G G Grandfather had actually owned everything east of the town and a large portion to the west at one time. Jesse told of how at his death, it was all divided among his wives, and then handed down to the oldest boy of each.

Except in her case, Emme had maintained it had to be handed down to her oldest Granddaughter; Emma's Grandmother, despite what Old Johnny thought or pressed Emme to do.

"But why?" It was the first time she'd interrupted, since Jesse had started talking. Even when the girls came in, they hadn't said a thing.

Jesse looked as if she didn't want to discuss it, so Jim answered instead, "It was part of her family's tradition. She'd received her inheritance from her Grandmother and she was required to pass it on to her Granddaughter."

"I understand what Mr. Becksted was talking about now when he said I was the only one that fit the bill." she responded to Jim's answer.

"He was righter then he thought," Jim remarked with an arrogant grin. "I doubt there's another woman around with those eyes"

His comment made her blush, as she tried to wipe the red from her cheeks, she noticed the girls had fallen asleep.

"I think I'd better put them to bed."

"My dear you're right, they shouldn't be lying on that cold floor." Jesse stepped forward to assist her in waking them.

"Actually, it's getting late, if you would just show me where you put our bags, I'll just say good night for now." She rattled off, while helping Crystal to her feet.

"You spook ease." Jim commented taking Shelly about the waist, to assist her up the steps. There was no doubt in her mind that he was referring to her blushing.

"You caught me off guard."

"No, I don't think so. You just have a way of protecting yourself from being read. I had to be downright forward, to get a straight forward expression." He continued on, stopping in front of a room with a couple small beds. He was trying to analyzer her, she thought.

"So you think you've got me figure out do you?" she teased, pulling the quilt back from one the beds, looking up to where he helped Shelly through the door.

"No, I was just being truthful. I could've said that the three of you look more like sisters than mother and daughters." She was glad she'd already turned her back to him, assisting Crystal into the other bed. At least that way he wouldn't think he could get a blush out of her, every time he said something nice.

"Your room's across the hall, and I think the extra color adds to your beauty."

How did he know? She wondered, twirling around to look straight at him. The grin on his face said he'd been bluffing, but he now knew how accurate he was.

"Here, I'll show you." After making sure the girls were comfortable, even though they still wore the clothes of the day, she followed him across the dimly lit hall to an additional bedroom.

Safely inside she closed the door and tried to lock his dancing eyes away, but the feeling she'd received when he said he was just next door, still had her heart beating out of control. No longer was there an ounce of fear in her that he may try something strange. Her only fear now, was why she felt the way she did towards him.

She'd never been attracted to another man, in all the time she'd known Mike. Even when it looked like he would never be hers. She hadn't sought out someone else. What was there about this guy that left her feeling weak in the knees all of a sudden? She had to admit he wasn't exactly bad looking, but he was a complete opposite to Mike, in every aspect of the word.

Pulling off her jeans and on the old nightgown, she decided she was reading more into it than there was. A moment later when his radio went on low in the next room, she doubted he ever made it to town. She felt bad for spoiling his evening, but did enjoy being lulled to sleep by the oldies.

Morning came early, as it does to all farming communities. If the girls had stirred during the night, Emma hadn't heard them. In fact the only thing she heard all night was the crickets below her window. She couldn't recall experiencing such silence before. Even when they were camping high in the Uinta's, there was still the sound of trucks and cars on the hwy.

Pushing the hand-sewn quilt back, she quickly dressed and slipped across the hall to check on the girls. Only to find empty beds, spread up neatly.

The sound of clanging dishes, and the alluring smell of bacon, alerted her to their whereabouts. Although the Mason home was old, it wasn't as old as the big house, nor even the size of the little white house, they had passed the day before. However, it definitely was more than the two of them needed, or could care for. White dust covers draped nearly all the furniture on the second floor. However, it was easy to tell, from the warmth that filled the empty rooms, that it had once been filled to its brim with loved children.

Loving care had been taken over the years, to ensure that every detail remained intact. The evidence was everywhere she looked, like the sturdy doorframe, with the carved headboard, she stroked as she entered the bright kitchen. The back wall facing south, she thought, was nearly an entire window. The checkered yellow curtains added an additional glow to the room.

She figured it to be about 6 am. A quick glance around the warmly decorated kitchen and she was able to confirm her suspicions by the clock hanging over the sink.

"Come in, Come in." Jesse chanted as she pushed her chair back and headed for the large cast iron stove.

"Sit" Jim commanded, pulling out a chair next to himself.

"Please don't fuss." Emma pleaded but to no avail.

"Fuss, don't be silly, It's my pleasure." Jesse responded, sliding a plate of hot cakes in front of her. "I don't get to cook much these days, at least not since Jimmy went off to college." she paused and drew a deep breath, as if she missed him very much. "Well it's just not the same." She added heading back to the counter.

"Mom thinks of Jimmy as her own." Jim leaned over and half whispered.

"I have the right," she said turning to face them "After all, I just about raised him. Didn't I?"

"Yes Mom, you sure enough did." Jim replied almost sheepishly, after being caught in a whisper.

"He thinks I'm losing my hearing." She said as she took her seat at the table with the others.

The girls had been too busy feeding their faces to say anything, but with the last swallow of her milk Shelly asked where they got it, because she'd never had milk that coated the glass that way before. Jim proudly spoke up, letting them know it had come from their own cows. Adding the fact that as soon as their mom got the dairy going again they would be able to drink all they wanted.

"Girls, you can help yourself to as much as you would like." Jesse spoke up, throwing Jim a nasty look. "Don't let this kidder pull your leg. It's in the refrigerator, over there."

Turning her attention back to Emma, she asked, "Well, tell me Emma" her piercing blue eyes, seemed to be searching Emma soul. "Have you decided to keep the place?"

That thought had never entered Emma's mind. Of course, these people had no idea of how long she'd wanted her own piece of land. She'd never hoped for a large plot of land, just one with a home and enough land to have a small garden. She loved to grow all kinds of things.

"Of course" Emma blurted out. After hurrying to swallow a mouth full of pancakes. "You ask that like any one in their right mind would be able to just sell that piece of land and walk away." she finished her thought.

Jim chuckled, "You might be surprised."

"Not Us!" Shelly defended her mother's stance. "Mom's wanted a piece of land as long as I can remember."

"And we'll take good care of it." Crystal's voice pleaded "huh Mom?"

"We sure will." Emma knew Crystal had returned to the conversation of the day before.

"Well then girls what do you think your mother should do with the place?"

"Simple," Shelly answered before Emma could respond, "Finish what that other lady started."

"You know she feels that's going to be a big job," Jim added not looking up from his plate, "You girls think she's up to it?"

"Sure!" Crystal exclaimed, "They've been working in Motels since before I was born."

Emma watched closely her host's expressions. Jim's expression never changed a bit but he'd heard the girls say things like that the day before. Jesse sat her fork slowly to the table, and her face looked blank.

"Does that bother you?" Emma asked. Knowing the best thing she could hope for was neighbor's that supported the growth and development.

"No of course not" Jesse Mason responded first. "I just had the strangest feeling, like you really are the answer to Mrs. Haager's prayers."

"Really" Jim added. "She was one for making sure what she planned got done."

"It would be a sin not to go through with what she started." Jesse picked up the conversation "She certainly worked hard enough to that end."

Wiping his mouth and getting up, Jim stated, "I have to make sure the water gets on the upper half today, so if you girls think you can find your way back to the big house I'll be going."

After traveling into the little town, at the base of the mountain for a closer look around. They returned to the valley where the girls wanted to wander around the little white house, but her interest was still the big house so she simply dropped them off and continued on.

She saw the old lady sitting on the bottom step of the porch the moment she got out of the car. At first, she thought she might be sick, for there she sat on the front porch, with her face in her hands, only her silvery gray hair visible. Emma called several times to her, as she approached, but to no avail.

"Ma'am, are you Ok." She tried again, quickening her steps. What if she is ill or even dead Emma thought racing forward, "Can I help?"

Just as Emma was about to reach down and touch the lady, she suddenly looked up into Emma's eyes. Her eyes were as black as her own; red and puffy it was obvious she had been crying for a while. Emma nearly toppled over backwards with fright, but there was a familiar look to her face too. Breathing a sigh of relief that she wasn't dead, Emma asked again, more directly. "May I help you?"

"Oh you're just arriving" the lady looked puzzled but pleased. "I thought you had already gone. I was worried it had all gone to waste." the elderly lady spoke softly as righting herself to a standing position, closing the distance between them.

"I don't understand" Emma addressed her with confusion. She'd just about made her mind up the lady was lost or perhaps confusing her with someone else.

Stepping down from the first step, the little woman started to walk towards the new addition.

"This house was built to house a loving family." Stopping she looked back to Emma and asked, "where have they all gone?" She asked pointing to the empty house. She continued to walk around the large porch.

Emma had no idea what or whom she was referring to, but followed like a puppy. As they walked in silence for a while, Emma suddenly could smell roses, yet she told herself it wasn't time for them. They were approaching the back door, when Emma heard a car coming up the road. Figuring that whoever had let her out there was now returning to pick her up. She turned and started back towards the front of the house. The elderly lady simply stood still and watched her. Approaching the corner of the house, Emma turned to look back at her. Then she went on to where she could see the car, but before she was around the corner the strange woman called,

"Take care of it Emma, Love it."

How'd she know my name? Emma wondered turning to face her. But she was gone.

"Shoot," Emma shouted. Figuring she'd slipped in the back door, the same way the raccoon had the day before. But instead of following her Emma decided to get help, so she continued on to the front yard.

Jim was just wheeling his black relic to a stop next to hers; the girls were with him.

The minute the truck stopped, He was out the door. "What is it Emma" he shouted flying around the front of the truck like the house was on fire.

She was just about to ask his help in locating the old lady, when out of the corner of her eye, she saw her going through the bushes heading in the direction of the little white house. She probably lives there, Emma thought to herself, that's why she knows my name.

"Emma!" Jim exclaimed. "You look like you've seen a ghost"

"Not yet." Emma answered "but I thought that lady from the little white house was, at first. Or at least I thought she was dead."

"What lady?" Jim looked in the direction she'd pointed.

"No one lives in that house Mom." Shelly proclaimed jumping from the running board of the truck.

"Does this house have ghosts?" Crystal voice shuttered as she climbed down as well.

"No. For heaven's sake" Emma proclaimed, "I don't know who she is but she's most definitely not a ghost."

"How do you know?" Crystal wasn't about to let it go.

"I touched her." Emma announced, hoping to reassure the child; knowing full well she hadn't.  
"Can you touch ghosts, can you?"

"Depends" Jim uttered, under his breath but the girls still heard.

"On what" Crystal leaped toward her mother.

Every eye was fixed on him. Emma suddenly wished she had touched the old woman.

"What!" He exclaimed, jumping back against the truck with his arms in the air, as if he'd been cornered by the local posse.

"Depends on what?" Shelly spoke plainly.

"My God girls," he lowered his arms "I thought you guys would know I was just kidding. Of course you can't touch a ghost."

Drawing a breath of air with the girls, Emma flashed him a dirty look.

"I just couldn't resist." He continued to add, "You all looked so serious."

The last thing she wanted to do, was to try moving her children in to a house they thought was haunted. Therefore, she allowed the conversation to drop. Once inside the house the girls headed right for the kitchen, just to insure there were no little animals hanging about. With a minute alone, she decided to approach Jim about the lady again. She had to ease her own mind. He seemed to be anticipating the question.

"So who do you think she was?"

"I don't know?" he answered too quickly.

"Do you think she was lost?" Emma went on, although he appeared to be avoiding the question, by looking around the room for something.

"Nope," he said looking back to her, "Did you really touch her?"

Shameful of lying earlier, she only shook her head no.

"Doesn't she live in the little white house?"

He only shook his head in response.

"No one lives there?" he answered while taking a seat on the bottom step of the staircase.

There was no way she was going to believe that lovely gray haired lady, was dead.

"Did she even notice you were there?" He asked looking up at her and rubbing his chin with the thumb of his right hand.

"She even knew my name." Emma answered

He let his hand fall to his knee, and then slowly he raised it, pushing his hat back a little further, Showing his deep blue eyes.

"Maybe" he started "It was someone from down in town. Mom went down for groceries yesterday." His voice didn't show it but he sighed with relief.

Emma felt as if a large weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She was willing to believe almost anything at this point, at least anything that was reasonable. "That must be It." she exclaimed "But what was she doing up here."

"Sight-seeing" he answered with a chuckle "You guys are a sight not to be missed, don't you know?"



She knew he was making light of the situation; laughing at her, but there again his dancing eyes causing her chest to burn.

"Okay wise guy, so who does own that little white house?"

Dismay swept across his handsome face "You do, I thought you knew that. You keep referring to it as the Lytle-White house."

"I do?" She stammered over the thought of suddenly owning two homes, she who had never owned anything. Impossible . . . No it wouldn't be right . . . She didn't deserve it. She wasn't the only grandchild. Neither Beth nor Jake owned a home either.

He chuckled again before answering but Emma didn't mind. His chuckle was a bit contagious. It caused her to smile every time. "Yes, Emma you do, you own all the land and everything on it. Everything except what Mom owns, of course."

His confirmation only deepened her guilt, but her mind had raced on to new questions anyway. "Why did you pronounce the little white house that way?"

The questions just kept going round and around in her head. Why she chose to ask about the way he'd pronounced the small house's description like a name, she wasn't exactly sure; after all, it belonged to her and she could call it anything she wanted.

"It's named for Sara LYTLE and Rebecca White, Old Johnny's second and third wives." "It's full of white rotten furniture." Crystal announced, obviously she had overheard part of their conversation.

"Rattan furniture" Jim quickly corrected the child's mispronounced description "Better known as Wicker."

Emma couldn't help but laugh, even though she knew Crystal was embarrassed. Laying her hand on the red-faced child's shoulder, she forced her apology through uncontrollable snickers. "I'm sorry babe, but rotten furniture!"

"Mom" Crystal exclaimed, "I didn't know." Her clear eyes filled with tears and Emma quickly stopped laughing and wrapped her arms around her for a hug. Snapping his hand to his mouth Jim attempted to control his laughter too, but Shelly never even tried. Soon Crystal's laugh rattled against Emma's chest, as she burst into wild laughter that grew and spread.

The first wood splitting crash would've been lost among wild waves of laughter had it not been for Jim's immediate response. The second chill shattering blow sounded as if the roof was coming down upon them.

### CHAPTER THREE DARK EYED PORTRAIT

A loud bang from upstairs silenced them all. Wiping the tears from her face, Emma turned to find Jim doing the same.

"It's a loose shutter." Jim said, "The wind's blowing."

Emma released a sigh of relief. At first, she thought the old lady had returned or worse, brought someone with her. Again, the crashing sound split the silence.

"I'd better find it and tie it down." Jim said, "Before it breaks the window" he added shooting up the staircase.

The girls looked puzzled at her, "its piece of wood that covers the windows, when the weather is bad." She gave them the explanation but halfway through her explanation, the lights went on in their heads, and they both shot up the steps to join Jim who was just disappearing at the top of the staircase. Not ready to be alone, she started after them but the second she grabbed the handrail, she didn't move an inch further.

The scene before her instantly changed, brightly colored floral wallpaper covered the dark paneling of the hall and even wrapped around the staircase. Although it was hard to tell with all the portraits, that covered the wall to her left.

As if a testament to the person within, a larger than life hand painted picture hung at the landing of a dark haired man, with a graying beard. He wore a black suit, white shirt with stiff collar and cuffs, and a tall stovepipe hat adorned his head. The picture was dark in general, but his eyes were especially intensive.

Her heart was racing, as she continued to stare at the portrait. The eyes were piercing. It was as if he knew everything good and bad about her; even though it was just a portrait, Emma felt as if this man knew her every thought ... wish ... her very soul.

She fought to look away but his eyes were hypnotic, she couldn't turn away, she couldn't even release her grip of the rail. Seconds ticked away like hours, minutes like days. Finally, she realized that a group of words were creeping in to the upper corner of the picture.

She concentrated on making sense of the backward letters. HOME that was it home. The spell was broken but not her hold on the arm rail. Quickly she turned to find the source of the words. The giant chandelier hung directly above her, but it wasn't the source. Above the door was an arched, fan shaped stain glass window. With the words, 'HOME SWEET HOME' enclosed. Light

streamed through it like a rainbow, reflecting in the mirror and hat rack that hung next to the door.

The door was different from the one she knew too. It was a large solid wood door with shiny gate style hinges, instead of the French doors of her time.

Quickly looking about to see if anyone was present. She noted the same effect occurring in the living room. Brightly colored letters adorned the highly polished floor. At least part of it, the others letters were strung across a finely braided rug, in the middle of the floor. Emma recalled the difference in the texture of the floor. There lay the answer.

CH- ON- glistened up at her from the polished wood, ATT, was barely visible on the rug CHATTERTON, she exclaimed. Carelessly she allowed the word to slip past her lips. Chatterton Place? Why not House or Home. Why place? It made no sense to her.

The thought wasn't held long before a voice rang through the empty home.

"EMMA" a man called, it had come from somewhere above her. Fear gripped her frozen body. She knew better than to look back towards the picture, but that was just what she was going to have to do. She could now hear footsteps, approaching the staircase.

From out of nowhere, a strong gust of wind struck her back. Forcing her forward, Breaking her hold on the arm rail. At that moment, she saw a wishful, girl, perhaps in her teens, standing at the top of the stairs. The thrust had been so strong, she soon found herself lying across the next four steps, with the girls voice ringing in her head.

"Coming Grandfather"

Frantically she grabbed for the rail, to stop her forward plunge. But again she was pushed down by the wind. Rolling to her back, she discovered the French doors had been blown open, and hailstones now pellet the wooden floor.

Swiftly Emma lunged for the doors, in a desperate effort to close them. Her feet flying in all directions, except that of the door. She couldn't get her tennis shoes to grip on anything, the marble-like pebbles beneath her rolled instead of crushing. She slipped and swirled about like a crazed puppet, finally coming to rest on her backside.

The thud was a finish to her frantic dance, she felt as if she'd lost the war. Righting herself to a sitting position though, she realized she could close the banging doors from where she sat. With the wind shut out, Emma assessed the puddle of ice and water she had come to rest in. Crawling to a dry spot, she stood up and attempted to smooth her already tight jeans.

"It's no use." she uttered, "I look like a drowned rat."

"You sure do" Jim responded from the landing the picture had hung on.

"What in the world." Shelly exclaimed, joining him.

She wondered how long he'd been standing there. Had he seen her crazed attempt at closing the door?

"I was just about to ask, the same thing." He said, as he bound down the steps, three at a time.

They had no idea how glad she was to see them, but she attempted to control her enthusiasm.

"Where in the heck, did that storm come from?" She asked turning to the mirror, to straighten her hair. It wasn't there neither was the bench. What made her think they would be? Was she losing her mind?

"What are you looking for?" Shelly asked, descending the step at a much slower pace.

"Nothing" Emma responded abruptly, realizing she was scanning the area. "I just wanted to see what damage was done."

"None, I can see." Jim proclaimed, not once taking his eyes from her.

"Where's Crystal!" Emma demanded. Realizing her youngest daughter hadn't followed the others.

"Right—" Shelly's answer fell silent, as she twirled around.

Silent words flashed between the two of them. Instantly they both ran up the step, the same way Jim had descended. Emma was careful not to touch anything.

Shelly raced to the spot she'd last seen her sister, Emma but a step behind her but she wasn't there. It wasn't like Crystal to be out of sight during a thunderstorm, she hated them.

"That was the shutter that was banging." Shelly whispered, too out of breath to speak any louder.

The room was very much like the ones on the main floor, with the exception of the window. A large fan shaped stained glass window topped it, causing the arched appearance she'd seen from the outside of the house. The room was empty.

"I've got her." Jim's voice filled the hallway,

"Where" Emma shouted back already on the move

"Here, at the bookcase." He answered.

"Bookcase" Emma uttered, entering the hall. Every room has a bookcase, she thought.

"I know." Shelly announced, racing past her.

Emma followed closely, past the next two doors, the steps, and then two additional doors. There she spied her youngest daughter. Curled up on a box seat, that was attached to an extremely large bookcase.

She just knew there had to be something wrong with the child. Jim stood over her, silent. Kneeling down, she gently touched Crystal's golden locks, instantly she popped up and began wiping the sleep from her half-opened eyes.

"What's wrong?" She asked, noticing the look on her mother's face. "How'd you get all wet?"

Emma couldn't believe what she was seeing, Crystal asleep during a storm. She dropped her head to the cushioned box seat and drew a deep breath. Lifting her head, to look up at Jim and Shelly, she whispered, "She was just sleeping."

"Of course she was," he responded as he helped her to her feet. "What did you think?"

If he only knew what she'd been through, he wouldn't be asking. Not about to give it away, she simply answered. "Crystal doesn't like thunder."

"THUNDER...WHERE" Crystal shouted, jumping to her mother's arms.

Indeed, it had stopped. An insulated hush now filled the house. "Are you sure," Emma addressed her fair skinned, blue-eyed child. "You're okay?"

Pushing herself away from her mother's wet clothing, again she asked again "How did you get WET?"

"She's kept us waiting to hear that story, as well." Jim proclaimed before Emma could say a thing.

She proceeded to tell how she'd had a fight with the front doors and a windstorm, all the time eyeing the oversized bookcase. It's finely crafted hand carved wood panels, handsome fluted top crest, and beveled shelves, told of a master carpenter at work. She so wanted to touch its smooth surface but refrained due to current events.

"And the doors obviously won!" Jim added with a laugh.

How Emma wished she could laugh but right that minute the only thing she had on her mind was getting out of that house, which she nearly achieved, only to be turned back at the spot of the attack. The storm had grown worse, during their search for Crystal.

The penetrating hailstorm had turned into a blizzard – she couldn't even see her car anymore. Light was quickly being swept away by the hovering dark cloud that had descended the valley, blanketing all that stood still in a heavy coat of snow.

As they stood there, weighing their options, there was one thing Emma was positive of, she wasn't going to stay in that house another minute. Unfortunately, that decision lay in God's hands, and it appeared that was just what she was going to do.

"Well" Emma finally said after weighing all the odds "If we're going to stay here, we'd better find something to burn."

"For what" Jim asked, rather puzzled by her statement.

"So we don't freeze."

"Wait here." As he turned and headed off down the darkened hallway, she'd no sooner heard him stop walking, and then the lights come on. "Better?" he asked, standing there with his arms up stretched as if he'd performed a miracle.

The doom that had fill the air only a moment earlier had been washed away with the light, that seemed to be coming from every nook and corner of the room, although there were no visible light fixtures.

"Recessed- lighting." He announced, starting back up the hallway.

"Why's it still on?" she puzzled as he swung past her, After all it had been three years, since anyone had been there, at least that was what she thought he'd said.

Turning to look back at them from the living room, he said.

"Well, you might say, it comes with its own supply."

"What?" the girls asked.

"I'll explain in a minute." he answered without looking back, but instead picked up the dusty sheets removed from the windows the day before, turning he tossed all but one on the floor, in front of the fire place.

"Here" he commanded, tossing the last one to her, "Get those wet clothes off." Annoyed, she knew he was right again. "I'll get some wood to dry them." he added, "I'll be back in a minute."

As soon as he disappeared through one of the doors in the old dining room, she quickly undressed and wrapped the large sheet around herself. She had the girls help tie a few knots, and before long, she was properly covered, without fear of the sheet slipping.

"All clear" He asked from the kitchen.

When she responded that it was, he came in carrying an arm full of logs, some appeared to be wet, but for the most part the rest were dry. Gently he rolled them from his arms in front of the fireplace.

"Not bad," he said with a grin, as he turned around "for a dust cover."

Emma felt the blood rush to her cheeks, but accepted the complement any way.

"We had to tie the knots, Mom couldn't reach." Crystal made sure they got their credit.

"Not bad girls, not bad at all." he continued on, turning around again to stack the wood, in the fireplace.

"Will that be enough?" Emma asked. Wondering where he got it and if it might be wise to bring in more before it was too covered with snow.

"To dry your clothes" he responded, "If you hadn't noticed the house is already warmer than outside."

She'd noticed but attributed it to sturdy construction. Once she said this, he said he'd turned up the heat.

"Heat" The word popped out before she realized she'd said it.

"Yes Emma, Heat." He answered, not looking up. The tone of his voice told her he was getting tired of her surprised reactions, but she couldn't help it. Everything about the place was a surprise and she didn't know any other way of expressing herself.

Once the flames were dancing, he settled into the half circle, the three of them had made in front of the fire.

"Oh" he said with the look of someone who had forgotten something. "You should call home, while the lines are still up."

"Sure Jim" she answered "How?"

"The phone in the kitchen" Shelly answered.

"I'll show you Mom." Crystal jumped to her feet ready to go. Jim just tossed her an "I TOLD YOU SO" look, with his eye brows raised.

"I've got It." she proclaimed as she stood up "The waters on too. AND if I just sprinkle it around the house the furniture will suddenly appear, Right"

He shook "No," then added, "That you'll have to move in for yourself. HOWEVER, the water's always on, around here. No water company, you know."

She didn't know what he was talking about, no water company. She repeated the words as she followed Crystal to the kitchen. Suddenly it hit her, its well water. She stopped at the sink, just to make sure, before proceeding on to the phone. Sure-enough, although rusty brown at first, it was running.

Kit, her oldest answered. It felt like years since she'd spoken to him on the phone, and she could hear the rest of the family in the background. After a brief conversation with him, she spoke to Beth. Who'd informed her of how bad the weather was there, while thankful that Emma wasn't in it. She reassured Emma that everything would be fine there.

"So just take care of yourself." Beth added. "And please don't try driving back tonight."

Emma took the opportunity to leave a message for Mike, when he finally was able to get home from work.

Returning to the front room, she felt more at ease, the thought of staying in the house that night didn't even scare her. The girls were stretched out on the floor, with the sleeping bags from the car, and a picnic box Emma had never seen before. It was apparent from his wet pants that Jim had made the trek to the car.

"The welcome Wagon came and you didn't call me." Emma asked, announcing her return.

"Jim got them." Shelly said bouncing to her feet. "He got you some clothes too, Mom." he was pushing a pair of jeans and shirt towards her.

"What is this?" Emma questioned, flashing a look of disappointment in his direction "Got tired of my duster?"

He only smiled warmly back at her, "I don't know if they'll fit." He said eyeing her again. "But you'll probably feel better, with clothes on. By the way, how's the family?"

Emma told them all about the storm in Salt Lake, before she slipped through the old dining room and into the door just across the hall. It was the first bedroom off the kitchen. Inside the door, she could still see the other three sitting on the front room floor.

She used the minute alone to ponder the events of the day, Emma had experienced many strange things in her life, but these were different. Her Grandmother had said they were a blessing, and



at times, they were, but it was beginning to scare her. Beth always, referred to it as her sixth sense. Of course Beth always, tried not to let anyone know she had it, she even went so far as to do just what her senses told her not to do.

After her first marriage broke up, she'd confided in Emma that she'd been warned not to marry him. It had been a tough life for her, but she was more fearful of believing the warning. If she believed them to be correct, then she'd have to admit she had the ability she wanted to deny.

When Emma had asked how she handled the events, she'd answered that she stopped asking questions. The answer had confused Emma at first, but suddenly she realized what Beth had meant. She had been asking questions since finding the dishes and she had only received the impressions after she asked a question that no one on earth could answer.

"That's it." She said opening the door, to step in to the hall. "I've been asking the questions."

"What questions?" It was Jim directly behind her but she had screamed, before she realized it. Her heart had jumped into her throat, and she felt her feet leave the floor momentarily before his strong arms were around her waist. "I didn't mean to scare you," he uttered breathless.

She thought she might just pass out with fright, but his strong, grip about her waist, made everything right.

"I thought you were talking to me." He continued, when she pulled away to look directly at him. "Or is there someone in there I didn't see." he finished, sticking his head into the room she stepped out of.

Talking to herself was one of her biggest problems, and she hated to admit it, but when he popped his head back out of the room with a knowing look, she had to say something.

"I was just thinking out loud." She announced, trying to rub the flush from her face.

"So what was the question?" he went on walking towards where the girls were still lying, as if they hadn't heard her scream.

"Oh, I was just reminding myself, I'd already asked you how many bedrooms there are, but I can't remember what you said." she was bluffing, and remarkable it was working.

"I think there's twenty one or two" he answered Then went on to add "And twenty five, baths."

"Why so many?" she thought about the number in terms of a single family this time and not a small hotel.

"There used to be only half that number before Mrs. Haager got a hold of it, but she knew if she was going to turn it into a bed and breakfast, she'd have to give every room a private facility."

She was pleased to know she wouldn't have to convert them, however, that wasn't the answer she was looking for.

"No" she decided to phrase it differently "Why was there so many bedrooms?"

"Oh, I see what you meant. Old Johnny must have felt they were a bit of a necessity, with forty of so kids running about the place."

"FORTY!" The number was over whelming to her. She'd spent the better part of the last year with eight children running around and thought she was losing her mind most of the time. Of course, they weren't all hers, but just the same, they were still all there. Jim only nodded his head as he started to push the embers about in the fireplace.

"Mom, just think how crazy you'd be with that group." Shelly added.

"I wouldn't be crazy, I'd be dead." Emma responded. Then they all laughed, as she crossed the room to look at the progress of the storm.

"Old Johnny loved kids. Besides you have to remember he had four wives." Jim added, standing up.

Emma wondered if that picture was old' Johnny, if so, he didn't look like he loved anything, least of all Kid's. Just the thought of the picture sent a chill up her spine.

Crystal rummaged through her purse and pulled out a pick to hand to her. Shelly was asking Jim why he kept referring to him as Old Johnny. The girls had been unusually quiet up until then. She worried they might have been as afraid of the place, as she was. But she needn't have worried. They had just been busy feeding their faces.

Standing before the window, she tugged all the snarl's from her hair and allowed it to fall softly across her shoulders. As she turned to hear Jim's reasoning behind the name, she found them up on their knee's listening intensely to his explanation – they never listen to her that way. Oh sure, they listened to what she had to say, but never with both ears perked.

Usually it was through a blaring radio, or with a phone attached to the other ear. The quiet time they used to have at dinner to talk, was lost with the joining of the other families. Now it seemed the only place they can have a private conversation, was in the car.

She watched their eyes twinkle as Jim simply explained, his father had been known throughout the area as little John, or in other word, it was used to distinguish, which John they were talking about.

"Why didn't they simply call him, Jonathan?" Crystal asked, "That's what my Mom does."

Jim looked over to her standing next to the window, "Yah, I'll bet she has a streak of respect running through her, Ha?" The girls didn't know what he was talking about and looked confused. "You know, she probably calls every one by their full first names, right?" he asked scratching under his chin.

"Yah" Crystal responded, "She does. Like she told us we should call you Mr. Mason, not Jim."

"Well, I'm telling you to call me Jim. Mr. Mason was my father's name."

Emma laughed aloud. She always felt people were referring to Mike's Mom, when they called her Mrs. Chase. She knew she'd just given herself away, so quickly she turned her gaze, out the window but not before she'd caught the smile exploding on Jim's face.

He went on to tell them some cock-in-bull story, about him working with Robin Hood little John that was. She'd taken him for a storyteller, right from the very first. He just reminded her of a few people she'd met as a child, often much older adults like her Grandfather, Her real Grandfather that was.

He'd popped back up, after her father was married. She guessed he tried to make trouble, about her father taking the Reed name; at least that was the story she got. How he'd thought he could erase a twenty-year absence, she couldn't fathom.

Anyway, as she was growing up, her father had come to acknowledge, him as being his father more and more. After her grandfather Reed died. Her father had gotten to know his real father better. Later, after her Grandmother's death, he'd even started to visit him in southern Utah. That's where she'd gotten to hear his stories. At night as the kid's would curl up on the floor to go to bed; He would tell her father of how it used to be back in the good old days; when he was a teenager. He talked about riding with the rowdy boy's, later she found out that was the name of the sun-dance kid's gang. Later in his life, he told of how he'd sat down with Bonnie and Clyde for dinner. The stories had filled her head with visions of famous people she had seen movies made about. However, when she found out he'd been in prison, he scared her. In her teens she started to research the people he'd spoken of, and sure enough he could've done all he said, and that thought frightened her even more.

But what she'd learned about the man was very different though, he was gentle, loving, and not at all the way he said he'd been. Besides, he told other stories too. Some even kept her wondering, to that day how true they were. For the most part though, she'd labeled him a storyteller. Yet she still didn't know why he spent time in prison, or even how long he was there.

During that time she had learned to only half listen to storytellers, and that was what she was doing. She was much more content, to gaze at the blanketed valley of snow. It reminded her of

a Christmas card, one with the shimmering stuff on it. The more she watched the peaceful scene before her, the more she forgot about the picture on the landing.

"It's funny." She said when she noted a lull in the conversation.

Turning to address the three of them, she found the girls were nearly asleep and Jim was propped up against the mantle with his pipe in the corner of his mouth. The picture would've been complete had there been two high backed chairs, in front of him.

"What's funny?" he responded, removing the pipe. But she had nearly forgotten what she was going to say.

"Oh" she uttered being taken back "The only thing, I wanted to do with this house a few hours ago, was get out of it."

"My God Girl, does this house scare you that much?" His voice showed his concern bringing the girls back to their knees.

"What scares you Mom." Shelly looked about the room.

"NO, it's nothing Hun. Please lay back down." she could only throw him a dirty look, for waking them back up. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"But you were?" Crystal asked.

"Yeah, I was." She joined them on the floor "But I'm not now."

They both settled down, but remained sitting, waiting for an explanation. Jim was fussing with the fire again. She figured he'd gotten the impression.

"Well, you got to remember a few hours ago I'd just lost a fight with the front doors." It appeared they were buying her excuse.

The girls settled down after that to go to sleep. Before they had though, she reminded Jim, he had some explaining to do. He had now taken up a position on his side with his head being propped up by his left hand and his feet near the fireplace.

"Yeah" Crystal exclaimed, "Tell us about the house. Do you think it's haunted?"

"NO." he exclaimed loudly "Of course it's not haunted," He then went on to tell all he knew about the house but first he asked if she knew where her G.G.Grandfather was from. She responded with what she'd been told "England." To which he responded, "Correct, at least that was where he came to America from."

Emma explained that was all she'd been able to find out at the genealogy library about him. "My Grandma, Lizzy, was always doing research but no one seems to know where it all went when she died."

"They lost it." Shelly proclaimed, with an air of disappointment.

"Probably not," Jim answered. "I doubt she was able to find much." Noticing Emma's intense look he added, "At least we haven't been able to."

She'd forgotten they shared the same G.G. Grandfather, but as he continued to talk, he gave no reason for the question either. Instead, he rolled over on to his back and stared up at the ceiling. Soon she got so entrenched in his descriptive recital of the history of the house she forgot all about it. At one point, she feared he'd fallen asleep, because he'd just simply stopped talking.

"James!" she prodded.

Instantly he sat up and stared directly into her eyes demanding, "Why'd you call me that?"

Obviously, she'd struck a raw nerve, "I didn't mean to." She blurted out, "Really I thought you had gone to sleep."

Even though she was stumbling over her words, he'd gotten the meaning, and his temper returned to normal. "I'm sorry," he said "My – Wife used to call me that." he finally answered resting his head in hands.

"I didn't mean to." She said again, "I have an uncle named that." She tried to explain but it didn't seem to be helping. "Perhaps, if you tell me about her," Emma tried to make him feel better.

"I can't." he finally said, looking up at her.

"Is she dead?" she still tried.

"For hell sakes, NO" he blurted out standing to his feet and crossing the floor to the window. "She left me." he shouted turning around to look right at her, "There, is that what you wanted to know."

"NO," she shouted as well. "I thought you were morning her, I Just wanted to help you."

His expression changed to sorrow, and when he said how sorry he was, she knew he meant it.

"I have no right intruding in to your life" she went on "and that's not what I meant to do, at all."

"I know, Emma." He whispered as he looked back out the window. "I don't think you could deliberately hurt anyone."

She thought it a strange statement coming from a man she'd only known a day and half. Nevertheless, he was right. She would never hurt anyone, even if it meant her life.

She left him alone for a moment and went to find a bathroom, when she returned he was once again stirring the fire. As she took a seat next to where the girls lay, He started to talk about the house again. She wished she'd had a tape recorder to catch everything he said, but no such luck. She'd just have to remember it.

For the next four hours, he wove a story so in depth, she wondered the next morning if she'd dreamt the whole thing. He'd gone back to the start and filled in with such detail she could see, the valley unfold before her eyes.

The valley had always been a prosperous place, filled with deer, fish, and all sorts of other edible things. "Like the wild berry patches that cover the hills behind the house." He said.

Word by word, step by step, he painted the valley floor.

The size of the land title was so large she'd trouble even imagining it. He included what was planted and where, and spoke a little about the three houses and hunting lodge.

He told her about the natural springs, hot and cold, and her ingenious G.G. Grandfather, who had discovered uses for them. He added, in color the way Mrs. Haager had improved the place, by adding electricity, to the method Old Johnny, had used.

Suddenly she understood the phrase "its own supply". Her G.G. Grandfather had run water from the hot water springs, into the house for heat. Later Mrs. Haager had come along and updated his method, by adding a conversion plant that produced electricity, how she'd been worried the old pipes would leak, and finally he closed with the decay the place had under gone in the last few years.

Although he spoke about the different family members, And when they all went their separate ways, he never talked about her Grandmother. When she'd asked him about her, he said he only knew what he'd heard.

"She was driven off, by old Johnny, himself. They said he was very disappointed in her and it crushed his spirit when he had to do it."

Laying on her back with a dust cover for a pillow, she watched the flickering fire send an eerie glow about the room. The moon had risen, and its yellow glow mingled with that of the fire. Piece by piece, she retraced the valley on the inside of her eyelids. She wasn't sure where fact and dream merged.

When she awoke, the independence the valley offered was more than clear in her mind. With little exceptions, everything to sustain life was to be found within her mountain walled paradise. All that was left to do was to convince Mike of it.

As the morning light etched its way across the valley, she reconciled her thoughts. Whether she'd slipped in to the past or not, whether the old lady was a ghost, no matter what strange events lay in the future for her, she knew, this was where she was going to grow old.

Quietly she scooted, away from the others, and strolled to the bottom of the steps. She wasn't going let anything take, the peace she'd found, from her. Firmly gripping the arm rail, she climbed one-step at a time. At the landing, she turned to peer down on the others, still silently sleeping below, and then proceeded on to the second floor.

The giant bookcase drew her attention. As she stood there examining, the soft light cast by the morning sun, captured her soul, and she was led into the first room. The stained glass fan, cast a delicate pattern on the wooden floor, as the first rays of the lavender sky emerged over the blanketed hills.

Reverently stepping to the window, she was caught up in the rapture of the moment. Silver shadows of clouds, hung on the emerging crimson sky, the mountains hazy purple outline, etched with a dusting of newly fallen snow, sent wave after wave of untold joy pulsating through her chilled body.

She had no control of time. Neither capable of turning back, nor strong enough to forge forward. Motionless she stood there waiting. Deep inside she knew this moment would come. Blazed in her memory, near on twenty-five years earlier in a dream. The scene before her was all too familiar, every morning she raced to watch the sunrise. Knowing full way, this morning would come. Was this to be the day? The mountains shadows were deep enough, the snow glistened bright enough, and the crimson glow of the sun was warm enough, it even rose in the right locality, she was even sure she was in the right place.

She searched the darkened rooms of her mind, looking for the lost pieces. It still wasn't quite right. Something was missing. Someone was missing. Mike was to be standing at her side. That was it, Jim at her back where he now stood and Mike—.

Whirling around she peered in to his soft blue eyes, she hadn't even heard him enter, nor felt him lay his hand upon her back. Her heart was racing like there was no tomorrow. That thought caused her to look immediately back to the sunrise. Again, she was caught up in the bliss that lay before her. She recalled the bonds that tethered the two of them together, as his hand securely wrapped her waist.

The thought, was lost again to this world, as the brilliant orange ball, exploded across the pink and lavender sky, sending a fan shaped ray of light streaming in all directions. She couldn't breathe. The moment had come at last. However, where were the angels?

A minute later and the rays were gone. Her legs felt like jelly, she was exhausted, and may have even hit the floor, had it not been for Jim's strong arm about her waist. He held her erect, and close. To close, for a complete stranger, but that was not how she thought of him any longer. The two of them shared a bond, a bond she just couldn't recall right then, but he would never be a stranger in her life again.

Pressing his free hand to her shoulder, he whispered softly into the nap of her neck. "What was it you were watching out there?"

How was she to explain it? What was it she'd been watching? "The sunrise" her mouth felt to dry to talk.

Whirling her around, but not releasing his hold on her, he again asked, "No, what did you see?"

Staring up into a pair of piercing blue eyes she thought might believe anything she said, she uttered "The sun rise."

Anger, was what she first sensed, but as he raised his hand and gently brushed a few strands of hair from her face, that quickly disappeared and he softly said "If a sunrise can get your heart beating like that, just wait till you see the birth of a fawn."

#### CHAPTER FOUR THE DECISION

The drive home that morning was not as bad as Emma had expected. She stopped in town for gas and munchies, and while there, she picked up a notebook, so one of the girls could write down the stories Emma retold from Jims stories the night before. Although the miles soon started adding up, she found it extremely difficult to leave the pristine valley, mainly, the unexpected peace that had filled her heart as she watched the sunrise over the snow crusted hill behind the big house.

The illusive dream that had drawn her to every sunrise since she'd originally dreamt it, now seemed possible. Yet even as she stood before the second story window and witnessed the sunrise in just the right location above the small dimple in the mountains ridge directly behind the house, she knew there was still something missing – Mike!

He was going to be a larger challenge then even that which she'd endured over the weekend. Hailstorms, haunting pictures, and even strange ladies that smelled of roses in early spring, were



no match for his harsh stares and unspoken reprimands. She was going to have to find a way to convince him the estate was just what they had been waiting for. Still, as she watched the icy road and gripped the steering wheel with both hands, she knew how rarely she was able to hold her ground when it came to him. In fact, she couldn't think of a single argument she'd won in nearly nineteen years of marriage. The pristine valley with its mysterious houses and haunting pictures was where she belonged. Although she didn't know why, it was one fact she knew as well as she knew her own name.

Emma began dictating the history as best she could remember. By choosing her words carefully, Emma tried to paint a picture of the valley that was as clear as the one Jim had painted for her, but Shelly was not as willing to sit silent as she had the night before. Her endless questioning of detail soon had Emma feeling a bit lost. Some of her questions Emma could answer, but there were more than a few, she couldn't. The one that struck her as odd was about the three houses and the hunting lodge.

"So, where's the other house?"

"What other house?" Emma responded quickly retracing the conversation up until then, hoping to finish the outline before all detailed faded from sight.

"You said: The last of the three houses was built before the turn of the century. And that Old Johnny built the hunting lodge before the First World War, before the great depression."

"Right"

"So where's the other house? I heard Jim say the hunting lodge was at the other end of the valley, up next to a big lake, but where'd he say the other house was?"

Even after several minutes of silence, Emma was unable to answer. Her memory had failed her, as she'd feared. If Jim had said where the other house was, it had now become lost in the garbled mess of other details cluttering her mind. "Too bad you fell asleep so soon last night, you would've been an excellent replacement for the tape recorder I wished I'd had."

They stopped for lunch and topped of the gas tank in Nephi at the base of Mount Nebo, one of Utah's rare glaciers covered mountains. Then it was back on the freeway again, until just outside of Salt Lake where they took the alternant route west toward home. It was obvious from the red bronco in the drive that her oldest nephew Alex was there.

The girls had run ahead, and were already telling of their unusual weekend, when Emma entered the back door. First one then the other spoke, telling of everything from Mrs. Mason's storytelling, to Emma's fight with a pair of French doors. The moment one would run out of breath, the other would pick up where she'd left off, and continue the adventure.

Mike was slow to respond to her entrance, but then again making his way around the crowded kitchen, was a feat in itself. Alex seated at the back of the table, smiled a warm hello, as she lowered the bundle from her arms to the floor with an exhausted sigh. To his right Jake's chocolate eyes scrutinized the girls sweeping movement as they gave life to the events of their story. Rob, his long arm wrapped around Beth's narrow shoulders sat at the front of the table, with their eyes glued on the girls also, but a slight fear filling their faces. After watching the girls for a moment, Emma understood why Rob looked as if he were protecting Beth from some undefined terror. The girl's movements had grown so vigorous there was a distinct possibility of being hit.

The boys, Kit and Jason, standing between them and the refrigerator were the first ones that shuffled, giving clear passage to their Father. As he stepped around the girls, he gently suppressed their enthusiasm by holding their hands down long enough to kiss each on the cheek. Then making his way on to her he folded her chilled body into his chest and laid a soft kiss on her cheek as well, but the embrace was cold and lifeless. The small hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention immediately, it was obvious her absents had not caused his heart to grow warm. He was still mad about her disrespect for his advice concerning the property, but it wasn't I told you so that slid from his lips. "Whose clothes are those" Was his first brisk demand.

"Jim's," Shelly quickly responded, fitting it into her rendition of what happened after Emma's fight with the doors. A quick acknowledgement of the name filling his stiff face, but was contradicted a second later when he asked. "Who in the hell is Jim?"

An immediate lump swelled in the back of Emma's throat blocking her response, but she wasn't to worry. The girls continued their story, filling in how they met Jim, and his last name, as if they'd not seen the steam, spilling from his ears.

"That's enough girls! It sounds like your Mother's had a weekend from hell. Pack those sleeping bags back into the closet, will you. I don't think they'll be needed again until summer." Mike's abrupt words put a stop to the story telling, but they also left deep question marks appearing between Alex's generally soothing eyebrows.

When Beth's emerald eyes searched her face for an explanation, Emma shrugged her shoulders with denial, hoping her little sister would get the message and not ask any more questions in Mike's presents. It worked.

"How about some coffee" Beth asked, offering her a full cup of the hot liquid from the decanter in the middle of the table. From the comfortable appearance of the cups arranged on the table, it appeared the group had been waiting quite some time, obviously too long for Mike.

"Just what the doctor ordered." She remarked taking the cup with a thankful expression.

"Now you understand why I didn't want you to go." Mike snapped. "You could've been stranded out there for days. I know those storms down there."

"Good, because I want all us to go down next weekend," Emma found the words slipping from her lips even though she knew they shouldn't. The intense glare of his eyes met her face, causing her to stumble over the remaining words. "T . . . That, is if the weather is good"

"Is it really worth taking a second look?" Beth asked more as a response to Mike's intense look, then her own curiosity about the newly found home of her Grandmother's. He'd been like a caged animal, even worse after discovering the storm had trapped her there.

After stepping backwards, so the girls could pass her, to put the sleeping bags up. Emma carefully moved next to Alex, at the back of the table so she could have a better view of Mike's reactions. Besides, if he really lost his temper with her, she knew Alex's massive arms would never allow the blow to land. Not that he'd ever really raised his hand to her, but more than once she'd wished Alex were present to protect her while she made her point known, the way he'd done their entire childhood.

Reveling in her silent giant's unconditional support, she felt required to tell all she'd found out of the secret land's attributes. "I can't even tell you how much it's worth. I guess that's something you're going to have to fill in for yourselves." From there she went on to tell all she could remember. Then drawing from her notes, she filled in the details she'd forgotten.

With each new subject the groups eyes grew wider and wider, but each seemed interested in different items. Alex's blue green eyes twinkled at the mention of the hot water springs and how they were used in the heating and lighting of the homes. Beth's enticement was the shiny new kitchen, as the girls had expected, mainly because it offered an oven large enough to bake a sheet cake. For Rob it was the clean environment, and even sarcastic Mike commented with a touch of excitement about how Mrs. Haager's plans seemed to indicate she'd researched the sight before starting to convert the place into a Bed and Breakfast.

"It's exactly what we've always wanted." Emma addressed her comment directly at him. "And best of all The Lytle White house is full of furniture, so the investment we'd have to put into the place would be minimal."

With the euphoria that filled the room and fed the conversation, it would've been impossible for Mike to disagree. However, Emma knew it was really, what he'd say when they were alone that mattered. In knowing that, she pressed until everyone present, including her skeptical younger brother Jake, committed to having another look, before she yawned deeply and stretched her arms above her head indicating her fatigue.

After the children settled down and started preparations for school the next day, she followed him into the bedroom. He'd grown quiet during the later part of the conversation, but when he whirled on her, his eyes flashing with anger, it nearly sucked the breath from her chest.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Awe, what do you mean?"

"Making that place sound like God's salvation. For Christ sake's, Em . . . We sure in the hell aren't going to move down there."

"I never said we were."

"You sure made it sound like it was a possibility though."

"It should be."

"It's not" His eyes blazed a hole in her face as he rolled his shirt up and threw it at the bed. "And it never will be. I don't give a damn if it's in the mountains or the middle of the desert. You're not going to be able to make a living down there. No one can. Just where in the hell do you propose they find jobs?" He raised his hand and pointed back to the kitchen where everyone had stood but a few minutes earlier. "Those people down there are having a hard enough time finding jobs for themselves, they sure in the hell don't need a herd of city dwellers coming in and taking the food out of their kid's mouths."

She stood with her mouth ajar, unable to believe the way he was attacking her intelligence. Admittedly, she hadn't thought about anyone seeking work. The conversation hadn't even got that far, but had it, she'd have told them straight out that the homes were in such dryer need of repair, that there was plenty of work to go round. As it was though, the only thing everyone had agreed to do was take a more in-depth look at the place. No one had agreed to move. "Oh for heaven's sake Mike, settle down. Who said anything about them moving down there? All we talked about was..."

"I'm not deaf. I know damned well what you were talking about." He fired back before she could make her point. Then banging the door to the closet open he pulled his dress clothes out and started getting dressed for work.

"If anyone in this house was talking about moving, it's you. You know darn well if it were up to me, we'd never move again. But it's never up to me." His demands had her head reeling to fast to think clearly enough to battle with what she really thought, so instead she battled back with what had become the constant battleground between them, his continuous need to move.

"Fine" He shouted pulling on his pants "Throw it all in my face again. As if I've dragged you all over hell, for no reason what so ever. And of course we talk about it before we decide to move."

Yeah, she thought, just as we are now. I object, and you demand until I give in. Then we move, when and where you wish. It won't work this time! It can't! I have to be there! I have— suddenly the reason she felt she had to live within the secluded mountain valley, slipped from her. She realized that fighting with him was going to get her nowhere, fast, so instead of declaring her intentions right out, she sucked a deep breath into her burning chest and tried the other approach.

"Mike please, I'm not throwing anything in your face." It took drawing upon strength she didn't know she had to lower her voice and calm it, but the effect once achieved seemed to install a sense of sanity to the conversation that continued. "Look, the only thing that was discussed tonight was taking a second look at the houses. If nothing else comes of it, I owe that much to Beth and Jake, and even Alex. It was where our Grandmother was raised. They have a right to at least see the place." perhaps a lot more, she thought, but the blameless reply had been enough to settle the nerve twitching above his right eye.

"Damn you Em!" He cursed, feeling the fight slip from his control. "You always do this to me. You always make me out to be the... Well I'm telling you now, that place is nothing but trouble." He wanted to tell her more but it wouldn't have done him any good. The tiny silver tear appearing at the corner of her bewitching black eyes, told him it was already too late. She'd already fallen under the spell of the land, and right that minute she felt she was doing it for her family. She never thinks of herself, he thought. She has no idea how fragile she really is. How fast our life together could be snuffed out, she just didn't see life through the same eyes he did. She never had. Although it made him mad, her clear sight (those very same attributes that now had his arms trembling with anger) made him love her so much.

Closing his eyes, he fell back onto the bed and whispered, "Your right as usual. I'm being an ass."

"No." She uttered softly dropping to the bed next to him. "You just didn't see that place."

"And I don't intend too." He snapped moving from beneath her touch as if it were a hot poker. "It's senseless to pretend that place is ever going to be anything but a bottomless pit to drop money into."

"Mike please!" She pleaded catching hold of his hand before he could move clear of the bed. "At least give it a chance. Take a look at the place, before you decide it's not worth it."

He knew it was crazy. He knew right where they were headed, but the child-like expression on her face had captured him once more. "If only" he cursed silently, raising his hand to brush the warm tear from her cheek. If only, I could tell her No, just this once and mean it.

The following Thursday night it felt as if all of her dreams were coming together, as a small caravan of cars departed her home for the large valley. In addition to Alex, Beth and Rob, her younger brother Jake had joined in the adventure, along with his two older girls.

Not that Emma really foresaw a time all her family would live in the valley, but she'd already experienced a singular goal. Mike was going to look, it was a start, and the others were an added bonus. If she could just get him involved, she had a chance. Mr. Becksted had assured her that they could be handsomely paid for their involvement.

He'd made it very clear the only thing she couldn't do was what she'd first planned on, (Dividing the property among her family members), so she'd decided to do the next best thing. Make them a part of it, right from the very start. She would offer it to them as a RIVENDALE, as J.J. Token had written of, a safe haven, for whatever reason they needed. NO questions asked, unless it sounded illegal of course. She'd talked to every family member, in the last week. Those she couldn't reach (more than a few) she'd left a message. It seemed the only drawback, was the distance. No one wanted to travel two hundred and fifty miles, for a little peace and quiet.

Darkness had encompassed the fruitful valley, by the time the caravan arrived. Emma had so hoped they would be able to catch their first glimpse of the valley the way she had, from the top of the hill.

Instead, the secluded valley location, made the night seem even darker. The headlights jetted in front of the car, like a knife slicing through muddy water. Making only what they fell upon illuminated. It filled Emma with a fear of missing the turn off. Mike had chosen to let her drive, for that very reason.

She'd driven up the mountain road now for what seemed to be an eternity, Fearful of looking away, fully aware that she might miss the left hand turn in the dark. Mike didn't even seem to be breathing, although he sat only a few inches away, it was undistinguishable. Once again, the road widened, as it had a couple times before. This time it was the turn off.

Quickly Emma cut her wheels to the left and then took the opportunity to look back over her shoulder to insure everyone else was accounted for. Five sets of headlights spaced a safe distance apart each made the correct turn as well.

Now all she had to worry about was the rock bridge. The road made an abrupt right turn over it. Again, she crawled to a near halt but her fears were all in vain.

About a hundred feet away from the arching masterpiece, headlights from a car on the other side of the stream suddenly cut through the darkness, bringing her to a complete stop. She figured whoever it was could use the narrow bridge first, and then her little band would carry on.

However, the other car had stopped, and didn't seem to be in much of a hurry to move.

"Who in the world is that?" Mike asked catching the movement of someone crossing the bridge.

The figure was immersed in light, leaving only the dark outline of a man carrying a gun. Her fears had her instantly checking her door locks. Her heart was racing so loudly, she hardly heard Crystal exclaim.

"It's Jim."

"Who's Jim?" Mike asked

With the vial of fear ripped from her eyes, the stranger's familiar appearance shone through, even before he stepped into her headlights. Emma tried to explain Jim was the man who had helped them the week before but Mike was fixated on the gun.

It didn't seem Jim had made the connection either. Emma decided to stay in the car, so not to startle him. After all, he had the gun. He walked, straight to the passenger side and with a thump on the door shouted.

"No partying up here tonight!"

The thought of a complete stranger striking his car, outraged Mike, who immediately opened his door, abruptly repelling Jim over the embankment

She couldn't think of anything else but the gun. The lock wouldn't come up as easily as it had gone down, pushing the door open she shouted

"It's Mrs. Chase. Mr. Mason." but she'd forgotten about the seat belt that held her firmly in place. She was all thumbs. Finally braking free she shot around the car, screaming. "Don't shoot. It's my Mike!"

After cresting the embankment herself, she could see the two of them in the stream. Jim was on his butt and Mike face down. Suddenly the kid's shouts turned to screams of fear, looking back over her shoulder she realized the car was rolling. In her great rush to exit, she'd forgotten to take it out of gear. It now was on a direct course, with the rock bridge.

She'd hardly got her direction altered, when two wet individuals raced by her, Mike with a foot or two lead. Cresting the top of the hill as fast as she was able, she discovered the two had the

car stopped. Mike at the driver's door and Jim pressed up against the hood, only a few feet lay between him and the sides of the arched bridge.

Hurrah's filled the night air. Alex caught her slumping body and propped her back up.

"I was just about their" he said leaning in close "But I was just too damn far."

She squeezed his hand surrounding her waist and responded, "it is alright, their fine." then drawing a deep breath she pulled loose and headed for the car.

She had to hold in check Mike's rage, and Jim needed introduced, but they had everything under control by the time she arrived.

Jim was pushing his dark cowboy hat back onto his head as she checked on the kids. Kit was apologetic, for not being able to reach the brake. The others were rambling about how they saw it happen. She listened for a minute, and then closing the door again, she turned to look at Jim first.

"So" he said, "This is your Mike." playing on her description of him, a minute earlier.

"Yep" was all she said "And Mike this is Mr. Mason. Remember I told you about him and his mother."

"What's the gun for?" Mike asked harshly, walking around the car.

"What gun" Jim exclaimed, throwing his arms up into the air. "It was a stick." He pointed down to an item he'd dropped, when he started to run. "We get kid's coming up her every weekend, trying to party, I have to watch out for the place."

Mike didn't seem to be buying it, the expression on his face told Emma he was still mad. "You didn't have to hit the car." he demanded as he approached her, he was wet from head to toe and smelled wet as well.

"Look" Jim proclaimed, as he too, walked towards her. He appeared to be wet from the waist down. "I didn't know who you were."

"So that makes it OK." Mike shot back.

"I'll pay for any damage. I really didn't mean to" Jim was interrupted by Alex who had been inspecting the car door "There isn't any damage Mike."

She wasn't sure if it was the news, or the fact he knew he was going to lose but he finally allowed his shoulder's to drop. Indicating to Emma, he was ready to let it drop. Jim acknowledged the same thing and presented his hand in a friendly jester,



"Let's start over."

"Fine" Mike said, but instead of taking his hand, he turned towards the car, looking for himself. Jim's hand dropped limp, to his side. Then without looking back at her, he walked to the other side of the bridge and got in his truck, where he remained until they all had crossed.

She hadn't expected him to, but he followed them up to the house and made sure everything was on. He also took the time to introduce himself to everyone else before he left. However, he never approached Mike again, and she just knew she might never see him offer him his hand again.

It was finally determined the new addition would do just fine for everyone to stay in, even though it only had a wooden floor, the space was adequate to sleep the crowd.

As the first rays, of sun light, burst over the mountaintops and flooded in to the sleepy room. Emma detected a few small movements, from the other bundled up bumps on the floor. She'd lain there quietly for a few minutes, contemplating the goals of the day, or at least those she wished to accomplish.

Within minutes, the room vibrated with enthusiasm. Recalling her own first day, and the girls zest for exploration, she had to find a way to delay the exploration until after the furniture came, or at least till she was able to make sure the house was clean enough to receive it. She had to let everyone in on the secret she'd been carrying since speaking to Mr. Becksted, and going through the paper's on Wednesday. Mike was the one who seemed blown away by the news, not so much the fact that she'd located the furniture, but that she'd kept it a secret.

She had to apologize for not including the work description in her invitation, and that she would understand if no one wanted to help. Fortunately, they were the people she knew them to be.

"A little work never hurt anyone." Beth responded.

"Besides, it was a bit of a giveaway when you asked us to bring the vacuums and cleaning supplies." Alex added in a gentle giant tone.

Emma promised it wouldn't take long, if everyone put his or her shoulder to the wheel, and it didn't. Two people per room and the place was done, in only a little over four hours. Since lunch was the best reward, she could think of, it was her treat.

On the trip back into the valley, they were able to experience the full visual effect from the top of the hill, when they stopped at the Lytle-White house, she was able to hear their impressions, and obviously, they were touched.

There really wasn't much work to be done in that house either, the big problem was all the rattan furniture stacked to the ceiling. In a home with twelve-foot ceilings, it could be quite a problem. There had to be enough to furnish all three homes, if they could find the third house.

It was finally determined that it would just have to stay there until they could find a place to store it. Crystal suggested the hunting lodge, Emma had forgotten all about it. Jim had mentioned it was located at the upper part of the valley on the main road, so that was their next stop.

At first the landscape was that of a patchwork quilt, neat almost square sections flanked the road, slowly giving way to a rocky terrain, dotted with small pines, and then they were engulfed in a dense forest. When they emerged on the other side, greeted by towering purple and red sandstone cliffs, plunging over one was a shimmering blue ribbon of water, into a motionless pond below. It in turn heaved forth three smaller, roaring falls, then another thirty feet to the glassy surface of a large, rainbow colored lake.

Even after stopping the car and getting out, it took Emma a few minutes to discover the reason for the strange coloration. The smooth lake surface reacted as a mirror to its surroundings, casting a rainbow of colors back to the sky. She wondered if she'd just entered the gates of heaven, obviously, the others were feeling it as well, each emerging from their various vehicles, Stepping softly, as if a loud sound may bring it all down.

Silently they stood shoulder to shoulder, drinking in the sight. This was no fabricated affair, no large boulders, and cement to hold back the water, and no naked beaches. Below the sky supporting cliffs, stretched large pines growing from the lakes edge. On the south and east shore, it lapped up to the red sandstone cliffs.

Her eyes were drawn to the north side, where gentle rolling hills laid back off the towering cliffs. Each covered with foliage as dense as what they had just driven through, below them was a small reddish/purple sand beach. She studied the lush green hills a bit longer, noticing the bright red sharply steeped roof positioned on a small bluff, behind a smaller hill. Alex must have seen it about the same time.

"There," he said pointing to the red spot and breaking the silence.

Every one turned to locate what he was pointing at, his abrupt tone sent a herd of deer rushing across the road, only about fifty feet away. How no one had seen them until then was a wonder, but no one had. The spell was broken, a few white geese or ducks fluttered up from the water's edge, and the high pitch chatter of some squirrels could be heard off in the distance.

Crystal softly slipped her hand into Emma's and whispered, "I thought I'd died."

A soft, low laugh, started to grow, soon everyone was heard to say, "I thought the same thing." or "I felt that way too."

"I once heard that southern Utah would make a believer out of even an atheist." slipped from her own lips

"It's obvious God's hand has touched this land." Rob added. " There's no denying that.

While loading back into the car, Emma spotted another red spot, and then another. At first, she was afraid it might be fire. After pointing them out to Mike, he pointed out a few more, and insisted it couldn't be a fire, not with four points of origin. The more they drove towards the large red roof, the more they saw. Until at last, the first of ten small cottages, Lay directly in front of them. It's weathered, white clapboard, siding marred with age.

"No one said they were here." Emma exclaimed as they passed.

Mike's only response as the second one slipped past was "It seems there are a lot of things No one said anything about."

She knew he was referring to the secret she'd kept about the furniture. The road wove back and forth between the ten silent relics. Obviously not built during the romantic period of Mormonism, each looked the same as the one before, single story, rectangular homes, offering two or three bedrooms at the most. Each had its own little yard, surrounded and separated by white picket fences. They didn't stop to look inside. The afternoon was wearing on and storage had to be secured for the rattan furniture in the Lytle-White house.

Mike drove on to the Lodge. It was in as good of condition, as the two homes. With a little dusting and vacuuming, the place would be ready for furniture too.

She'd been correct about the small hill sitting in front of a bluff. The hunting lodge looked almost directly east, over the lake. The two-tiered waterfall was immediately in front of it on the other side of the lake. A more beautiful sight she couldn't remember seeing. It filled her head with ways to promote the place, advertising pictures, pamphlets, etc.

Jake pointed out that another road ran around the foot of the small hill and entered the lodge from the front. Beth suggested that the guests could use that road instead of the one running through the VILLAGE.

"The Village" Emma asked

"Well don't you think that would be a good name for the place?" Beth shot back, as if Emma has asked the wrong question.

"OH. Most definitely" She answered, rapidly, hoping Beth was about to lead the other's into proclaiming it home. Thankfully that's just what happened, first Beth and Rob, Then Alex, suggested that they wouldn't take much to repair, and be livable.

"After all, you're going to need some help, getting this place going." Alex added.

Her heart soared. It was working, and soon so would they, HARD, she made sure they knew what they were getting themselves into.

"No one ever said life was going to be easy." Beth announced. "We just want a start."

Emma knew just what she meant. Many times, she'd been in the same place, full of energy and no place to put it. Their offer and her acceptance meant the largest commitment in her life. Now, she thought, as they got into the van for the ride back to the big house, I've got to make a go of this place, for them, as well as for me.

Later, after a dinner of canned chili and hot dogs, they went out to find where the road in front of the big house went. They followed it off towards the west, and the setting sunset. They found six or seven, rather well taken care of horses in a large corral, just a few hundred yards from the house. Farther on, they discovered two large barns, silos and all, and the milking facilities Jim had spoken of the week earlier. It was all so amazing, to Emma that she was speechless.

There was still no third house though. Just before the barn's, the road had split off to the left, so after examining the different trucks, trailer, and tractors parked about the yard, along with the other farm equipment. They drove back, following that road for a ways, only to discover it lead into a maze of other roads running throughout the orchards. They then headed back to the big house before night engulfed the valley once again.

After a few hours of hashing over the events of the day, Emma thought it would be an added treat to start a fire in the masterpiece of a fireplace. So she enlisted the help of the older boys and headed off to the back of the house

She had to pause for a minute, after exiting the back door. To let her eyes adjust to the moonless night. Soon however, she was able to see the woodpile, on the other end of the elongated wood deck. She'd peeked out back earlier in the day, but only from one of the windows. The deck had to be an addition, like the dining room. It didn't appear to have been over a hundred years old. The red wood was her first clue, but back then, they didn't have a need for such a thing. The porch was their place of visiting and entertaining guest.

While filling the boy's arms, a twinkle of light caught her eye through the dense woodland behind the house. She hurried the boys back inside with the request that they send out Mike. When he appeared at the door, He wasn't alone, Rob and Alex, were right by his side.

"What is it Em?" He asked in a rather hushed voice.

It only took her a moment to explain, pointing into the darkness, and then there was another twinkle of light. Remembering what Jim had said about the kids from the town coming up

partying. They decide they'd better look. Kit insisted on going along, so after they retrieve the flashlights from the van, the five of them started out towards the dense woods.

They couldn't have walked more than a few feet, after descending the deck steps. When there was another, twinkle of light. A light breeze rustled through the trees about them, and little animals could be heard moving back off the path. They moved along in single file, another twenty feet, and then thirty – There it was the source of the light.

Before them laid a pond as smooth as glass, measuring about eighty feet across, and in its mirrored surface the full moon was being reflected. It was magnificent, and a small moonlit dale lay stretching out before them.

They followed, what appeared to be a well-beaten path to the right, around the hidden beauty. Soon they came to a small wooden footbridge, running over a fast moving stream that was emptying out of the glassy pond. They continued to walk on, the moonlight lighting their way. No one spoke, just strolled, one after the other. Emma wasn't sure idol curiosity had drawn them, but they walked on. Nearly two blocks from the deck steps. They saw it. There nestled back in the large pines stood the third house.

The colonial style was such a drastic change from the others, that it made her shutter. It had obviously taken someone, a long time, and a lot of money to build, such a beautiful home. Although it didn't appear to be much larger than the other two, the style was extravagant for the area. The second floor balcony made her gasp in delight. The other two homes, had each offered up twenty some bedrooms. What could this one hold, she pondered. As they approached a three, foot high, Stonehenge, with an iron gate. Emma could suddenly smell roses, but before she could say anything about the penetrating aroma, Kit did.

"Mom, do you smell that?"

They had spoken little up until then, now everyone stopped and sniffed the air. "What." Mike demanded, "I don't smell anything."

Neither did the others, but Emma couldn't deny the pungent sent of roses. She'd known for a long time that he too, carried the powers, whatever they were.

"You're both crazy." Mike uttered, reaching for the gate. "Everyone knows roses do n't bloom in the snow."

Even though the snow was melting, she had to admit again, it was the wrong time of the year for roses. Of course, it had been the wrong time of the year for roses, when she smelled it on the old lady too.

The thought of running into the old lady, that night frightened her. The smell, had become so strong, it was turning her stomach.

"Let's look in the morning." She suggested reaching for Mike's arm.

"What is this?" he blurted out, pulling his arm away. "You afraid of the smell of roses" God, she thought if I could only get him to listen to me, the others didn't seem to be ready to go inside either.

"Maybe, we really should just come back in the morning, Mike." Alex said stepping a bit closer to her.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Rob inserted "But it really would be safer in the morning." With those words, he and Kit started back towards the big house.

Alex took hold of her hand and gently tugged her in that direction, but Mike wasn't moving, so she flashed him a silent plead, to leave them alone. He hesitated but then followed the others.

Realizing, the others were leaving – Mike grabbed her hand and ushered her off, in their direction. His hold on her arm was extremely tight, and she noticed that he seem to be whispering under his breath. When the others had crossed the footbridge, He pulled her to a stop.

"Emma." he exclaimed, "You got to stop doing these things."

"What?" she hoped to avoid his well practiced lecture.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about." He responded, tightening his grip.

"Stop your hurting me." she declared, trying to pull free, but his grip, was to strong. "OK, OK, I know what you mean." she reluctantly gave in to his hold.

"You got to stop this, before people start to talk." He said, flinging her arm free. "It's a small town here. And People will talk Emma."

Cursing him under her breath and rubbing the spot, she knew full well, was going to be bruised by morning. She marched on to the steps, where Kit had chosen to wait for his parents. He knew they'd had words, when she didn't even stop to stroke his ego, for smelling the roses. Slowly he followed his father up the steps, and in to the house.

Alex was telling, about their great discovery when she entered the room, flashing a glance her way and a dirty look at Mike when he noticed her rubbing her arm. He continued but never said a thing about the rose smell.

Before long, everyone was snuggled down into his or her sleeping bag and the room became quiet. Sleep wasn't to be hers for quite some time, she hated going to bed mad at Mike. That had been something she'd promised her mother she would never do. She just hadn't realized how hard that promise would be to keep. There were those nights that she would be willing to make up, but Mike didn't always recover that fast.

He didn't have what she would call a snap temper, even though he'd reacted to Jim as if he had the night before. She figured that to be a left over reaction, for all the talking about Jim she'd done, during the past week. After all, he hadn't even made a move, until Crystal called out Jim's name, but he sure knew how to hold a grudge. He would often go days, even weeks, without speaking to her about something he, felt was wrong. She couldn't remember him, asking for forgiveness, when he was wrong; he'd never admitted he was wrong. Tossing and turning, she tried to snuggle up to him, but he even repelled her in his sleep, rolling further away.

They were rudely awakened before seven the next morning, by the low rumble of moving trucks. She couldn't believe the size of the four trucks when they lined up out front of the big house. How had managed to make it over the arched bridge?

There was no way it was all going to fit into that one house and how was she going to know where everything was to go. To her amazement the first man, through the door pinned a color-coded map on the wall, and then began to bring in boxes and furniture with the same color tagged for that house.

He then suggested that someone go up and unlock the lodge and the house out back. The words, OUT BACK, took her by surprise. She was able to locate the key for the lodge and Alex was on his way, in just minutes. As for the house out back, she fumbled with the large ring, Jim had presented her with a week earlier, asking "You mean the Lytle-White house?" she pointed down the road.

"No." he insisted "The house out back." he most definitely was pointing to the third house. Again, she fumbled with the keys for a minute before Rob snatched them from her and headed for the back door saying, "I'll take care of it Em."

That was possibly the most complete conversation she'd had all day, or at least until they were ready to go, ten and a half hours later. In the meantime, she'd stayed busy keeping the kids and herself out of their way.

Her biggest concern all day was if someone had caught the movers, before, they tried to move the furniture into the Lytle-White house. However, she was never able to find someone that knew, and it frustrated her, not knowing. Once she'd sent Crystal down, to find out if there was anything there, but there wasn't, so she started to worry, where they had put the furniture.

Shortly before four, she finally got the opportunity to ask the headman, where the furniture for the Lytle White house had been placed. His answer shocked her.

"Why, we never even brought it out."

"Who called you?" she knew her voice showed her dismay.

"Well, it's been a standing order, but if you're ready for it, we'll bring it back tomorrow." he rushed his answer, forgetting that the next day was Sunday.

"No." she exclaimed "I mean," calming herself down. "I thought you had brought it out today and we're not ready for it."

"Mrs. Haager said not to bring it out until you said. So you didn't want it today right?" He sounded a bit confused.

By the time he left, she'd ended up a bit confused too. Mainly over the idea of when the order had been given, to not bring the furniture out. Once he said it was last week and another time he said it was when she'd put the stuff in storage. Either way, the furniture was back at the warehouse and would be ready, whenever they were ready for it. Before leaving, he left her with instructions, for the care of the wooden furniture.

Glancing about the cluttered rooms, she could hardly believe her eyes. She couldn't have asked for a finer quality of furniture. There were pieces dating back before even her grandmothers birth, she was sure. As well, as newer twentieth century, art deco.

Stepping to the bottom of the staircase, she decided to go check on the furniture arrangement upstairs. She along with everyone else had been up and down those steps at least half a million times that day, never with any strange experiences. Until, she hit the third step that time.

Suddenly, she was surrounded by darkness. At first, she thought she'd passed out, but then she realized she wasn't even in the house any longer. As her eyes adjusted to the blackness, she was able to distinguish she was out front of the big house. She'd already seen the scene, twice before, each with more detail. She could feel the smooth rail, in her hand but she couldn't let go of it. She could also feel the rough cobblestone, beneath her feet and the cool moist air on her face.

Why had it happen this time? She pondered as she glanced around. Fiddle music filled the breeze rushing past her ears. Light streamed from every room of the large house, the front door was open and she could see several people mingling about inside. She wondered if they could see her as well.



The yard, if you could call it that was as generally rough looking, except nearer to the house were several flower beds, filled with tulips and Easter lilies in bloom, it must be early spring, she thought.

As impressed as she was with all that she could see, she kept wondering what she was doing there. Suddenly, a shrieking cry shattered the night air, and then several pleas of NO! Followed, whirling around to look behind her, she could see two people struggling in the dark several yards from her.

A tall shadowy figure of a man was pushing a smaller female, to the ground. The girl cried for all she was worth, with pleas of help and screams of No. The sounds mingled, in Emma head, as she struggled to free herself from the handrail. However, it held her tightly in place, all she was able to do was listen to the rape take place, even when she attempted to call out – she found her voice was gone.

When she feared she could hear no more, without losing her mind, she found she was back where she belonged. Immediately, she grabbed for the handrail again. Perhaps this time she'd be able to move, she could go for help, she could stop him—but she couldn't get back there.

She ran down the steps and back up several times but still nothing happened. Exhausted, she lowered herself to the second step, breathlessly wondering if she wasn't supposed to have stopped that from happening. If not then why had she seen it? It suddenly dawned on her that she couldn't change the past, how could she? It wasn't in a time she could do something about, right, she thought to herself. What would've happened if she'd changed the past? What would it of changed in the present? Would there even be a present? The questions went around in her head, without answers. Had someone seen me? Finally, that thought brought her back to reality. Quickly she looked about the two rooms, and discovered she was still alone.

"Thank heaven." she uttered to herself, and then went back to puzzling out the problem in the past. "I can't change it."

"You can't change what?" Mike asked from behind her.

The squeal was out of her mouth before she could stop it. She jumped to her feet, sending her long hair streaming about her pale face.

"My god Em, I didn't mean to scare you." he latched on to her forearm, near where he'd grabbed her last night. Quickly she pulled away, more because of the pain, then the fear that he might hurt her again. He got a good view of the massive bruise, for the first time when the movements slid her sleeve up her arm.

"Oh Em" he pulled his hand back in disgust "I never... I" he stopped trying to speak and lowered his head.

She knew he hadn't meant to hurt her, he couldn't have done it on purpose, and it had been an accident. "I Know," she answered back through the pain. "You just scared me."

He raised his head, and looking like a scared puppy asked, "Did I really do that?" She only nodded "It's this damn house." He shouted, pounding his fist down on the rail. "I'm afraid you'll get so wrapped up with it that – well, it's doing strange things to you."

"No it isn't." she demanded in just as loud a voice. "It has nothing to do with the house."

Gently he pushed back the hair from her face, and lifted her chin to look him in the eyes "You promise it has nothing to do with the house."

"Of course it has nothing to do with the house." She whispered, pressing her face against his chest, if only she could tell him the truth.

"Then what?" he asked stroking her hair, down her back. "What is it you can't change?"

"Your attitude towards this house." she answered lowering herself back to the second step, he swung around and sat next to her.

"Mike, it's what we've dreamed of owning for years, it's big enough, and it's got everything to get started. It's..."

"It's not in the right place." he interrupted her. "You're not going to be able to promote this place." he went on.

"Sure I will. " she protested. "You just have to believe."

"I do, in you." He answered.

Sure she thought, but not in what I can do. I'm a hopeless, helpless, thing for you to take care of. She never uttered the words though. Instead, she said, "Well then I'll just have to show you, how profitable this place will be."

"No Em, you need to show me that come Monday morning you're going to be back in our home in Salt Lake. That's what you have to show me."

The words snapped at more than her temper, it was a personal insult. Biting her lower lip the way she did when she was hurt, and flexing her right hand, she asked in as smooth a tone as she could manage. "What do you have against this place?"

"It's too far off the beaten path."

"Well, then I'll just go out and widen the path." she shot back.

He sat for a few minutes, shaking his head back and forth "And you're just the one to do it. Aren't you?"

She could tell from the tone of his voice that he was giving in. Within a few more minutes, he'd agreed to let her stay, a few weeks if she could talk someone else into staying with her. At that note, she immediately popped to her feet. Only to be reseated, a raised nail on the third step had caught the hem of her blouse. Once loose, she raced off to the kitchen to find Beth, and ask if she would be willing to stay.

There in the middle of the large stainless steel room, sat all six girls cooking up a storm. They immediately started to show off their wares, turkey dinner with all the dressings. Someone had gone to town earlier in the day, and they'd been cooking for hours. After telling them how good it all looked and smelt, she pushed open the door to the large dining room, where she found several people putting chairs around Rattan tables. The sight was impressive, everyone working together towards a common goal.

Before dinner was ready to be placed on the table, Beth insured that the tables were all properly dressed with clothes, of brightly colored floral prints and napkins to match. The color coordinated plates and glasses were then put in their places, along with some fine silverware found in another box.

That night, after pie for dessert, everyone made up their own rooms and slept in real beds. The bed was real but she wouldn't have called what she and Mike did sleeping, he just wasn't ready to except, that she was going to stay there, with or without him. He hadn't expected her to find someone to move down on such short notice, repeatedly, he told her all the reasons the place wouldn't sell. It's too far off the main road, it's too far out of a town, it's not a big enough town, the furniture was all wrong. She'd have to refurnish with the cheap stuff or find a way of nailing everything down Etc, Etc...

She rebutted every statement, hour after hour, until finally sometime around four, he gave up. The last thing she recalled him saying, as her head settled in to the pillow, was "The kids are going back to Salt Lake with me, TOMORROW." They did just that, even after she'd talked Beth and Rob in to staying, with their girls and Alex assured Mike he and his two boys were going to stay as well, Mike refused to let the kids stay with her.

It wasn't as if they were really fighting. It was more as if she'd finally found a piece of ground to stand on, and was going to stand there. That was something she'd never done before, he wasn't able to sway her, and so he took the only stand he felt would buckle her knees. It almost worked, but when Kit assured her that, he'd bring the kids down on weekends. He'd given her the strength she needed to hold on. It wasn't going to be easy without their support, but she was determined to see it through.

She took comfort in knowing the kids would be out of school in a couple of months, and figured if she really put her mind to it, that she'd be able to show Mike it was going to work by then. It also helped, when he kissed her before leaving and added three magic words: I LOVE YOU.

## CHAPTER FIVE WHERE TO START

Emma busied herself with little things for most the day, and when Alex returned around midnight, he came with a full Bronco, and a bag Mike had packed for her. He may not agree with the way the place was to be run, but he still cared that she wore clean clothes. Good thing too, one more day in the same pair of jeans and they would've been walking.

The next morning she started a small load of laundry, in the industrial machine (after Beth had to show her where it was). Overall, she was glad to see Beth taking an active part in the place. She'd always been more inclined to that portion of the home than Emma had.

Often, Emma felt a little bitter about not being as good a cook as Beth or inadequate when it came to organizing a kitchen, but it just meant they accented each other, at least in business, because Beth had no head for figures or paperwork.

Everyone knew that Mike hadn't left on the best of notes, and Emma felt as if they were treading lightly because of it. So while sliding her chair back from the table at breakfast, she declared

"Come hell or high water, Chatterton Place will be operational, before summer."

She left the room full of cheers, and started to find what needed to be done first. Sliding into the first room on the other side of the entrance hall, she discovered it was full of books, tables and a desk, it had to of been planned as an office. It was in just the right place for an office, just at the bottom of the steps and back off the main rooms.

Unlike any of the other rooms, it had two doors, one that entered from each hall, on opposite sides. A large fireplace took up most of one wall and a built in closet most of another. The window was the same size as those on the second floor, but the room only had one, the rest of the walls were bare.

As she entered the room, she noticed a large box, setting squarely in the middle of the desk. In bold black letters it read – START HERE FIRST.

Do to resent history that was the last box she pulled apart. The others contained all sorts of stuff for an office. Including telephone equipment and a full computer set up. When she stumbled across a box of stationary with the letterhead CHATTERTON PLACE, she decided it was time to look into the marked box.

Slowly she pulled the file marked read first; inside was a finely penned, handwritten letter that read:

I wish I knew your name, so I could address this to you

However, I rest assured that God has supplied the proper person.

First, I should tell you who I am. My name is Mrs. Janis Haager. I am not relation directly to the Chatterton's. Mrs. Charlotte Chatterton Dalton hired me right after the birth of her first son – as a nanny. I remained with them until I married. After my husband ran off with our son, I returned to their employment. Mrs. Dalton lost her husband a short time later and both of her boys were killed in the war. Mrs. Dalton became very driven after their deaths, to find the rightful heir to Chatterton Place, it was her Grandparents home, in southern Utah, but you know that now.

Her older sister was the person she was looking for, but for over forty years, she'd not seen her. Mrs. Dalton told me the story one night, about how her sister Lizzy had disgraced the family name and had been sent off with the culprit, whom she'd, indulged.

Emme, her Grandmother, had inherited the money to buy the place, from her Grandmother, and although hers to do with as she saw fit, she was to leave it to her oldest granddaughter, Lizzy.

After she was run off, Emme never forgave her husband and it was said to have brought about a big split in the family.

Anyway, Mrs. Dalton vowed to find her older sister, and bring peace to the earth once again, but she'd simply disappeared. She hunted for nearly fifty years herself then I was enlisted to finish the job, for which I have committed another thirty years on top of that.

Unfortunately, I was not successful either.

I have to admit, that I lost the first two years hunting for the GOLD.

After a couple of years, I decided that the stories were all wrong. There was no Gold but the property was a diamond in the ruff. Old Johnny was a brilliant man. He'd laid the place out, so to keep a family well to do, long after his demise. I asked Mr. Becksted to handle the affairs when Mrs. Dalton's accountant died. You may wish to have someone else do the job but Mr. Becksted is a fine man.

Over the years, I've made some improvements and set up a few things that were not completed as of this writing. If you wish to complete these things, I have put them in steps of importance, if followed the place will be operational in only a few months.

By the way, in my heart you are the rightful owner, but if you're not, remember that with my signatures on those papers, the place is rightfully yours.

Good luck and God's blessings are upon you. Janis Haager.

Emma's hand was trembling so badly she could hardly distinguish that which followed. After calming herself, she picked up the letter once again to read the instructions about following the step program.

Indeed, she'd laid them out in steps, One thru Twenty-five. Briefly thumbing through each it seemed to Emma that the head of a large corporation must've helped.

Not only were there things for Emma to do around the home's but there were contractor's she had to contact.

Code names, had been implemented so the work could be finish after her death. Everything was in a list, right from the company who was to rebuild the village area, down to the installation of the phone equipment and computer sales points. Furthermore, everything had already been PAID for. There was even a large sum of money in the local bank as a set up fund. Emma just needed to sign the card Mrs. Haager left, and return it to the bank.

Emma sat shaking her head when Beth popped through the door to announce that lunch was ready. Where had the time gone? She was more than happy to join the others in the dining room, although a portion of her mind remained behind. At least that was her excuse, when she jumped to her feet, the minute Alex mentioned the Rumor of GOLD. When she returned to the table with the letter, they understood her feelings on the matter.

"Mrs. Haager had lost two years looking for the Gold. It's going to be a waste of time-" She insisted, but Alex wasn't so sure. He kept repeating the stupid poem, the woman at the store had told him and Mike Saturday.

IN THE CASE BENEATH THE THREE, YOU'LL FIND THE KEY,

TO THE DOOR BEHIND THE BOOK STORE

"She said something else, but I can't remember how it goes."

Emma insisted it was a stupid poem and didn't make any sense. "Why would anyone want a key to a book store?"

"That's not all of it Em. It also said something about: ONE RIBBON BECOMING THREE, IS WHERE MY CHEST WILL BE."

Beth interrupted Alex "It's not right to go looking for Gold when we're sitting well right now."

"That's just what I was trying to say." Emma commended Beth. "Besides the only thing that would make life any easier would be to have the Village rebuilt, Right?"

Everyone agreed, "Well that's just what I'm going to look into tomorrow, Mrs. Haager has already paid to have it done." she couldn't believe how wide all eyes grew. "So all I have to do is contact the construction company and let them know we are ready to start it."

"What if it's out of business?" Rob asked, with a mouth full of sandwich.

"Have hope guy's." Emma responded, heading back to the office.

She'd decided to take things one-step at a time. Mrs. Haager must've had a reason in laying it out that way. So who was she to mess with success? The next file contained a list of things to do right away. At the top of the list was contacting Mr. Mason and renewing his contract.

Emma agreed completely, since neither she or the others knew anything about farming, it was the best idea all day. She'd no sooner nodded her head to agree, when Jim popped his head into the room from the front hall, he stood there for a minute, glaring at her.

She worried she must've given him a "die look" as her kids called them. She tried a smile and suddenly he seemed to come back to life.

"You startled me there for a moment." He said crossing the room to take a seat across from her at the desk. "I never realized that someone as beautiful as you could look so good behind a desk."

The comment took her by surprise. Beautiful had never been one of those words she would've used to describe herself, Shelly yes, Crystal most definitely, but not her.

"What's this, buttering up the boss?"

His grin grew wider and his eyes were like pools of water. "Aw, she does live inside you."

She wouldn't mind listening to his complements all day, After all a woman who's been married so long, very seldom gets to hear such stuff. Her and Mike's relationship was pretty much business like now a days. She'd just figured that raising a family was like that. Her distant look must've alerted him to keep talking.

"I never realized how much you looked like your G.G. Grandmother, till just then."

"What?" she asked, confused by his statement

"When I walked through the door, that's why I stopped and stared."

The room had grown stuffy, all of a sudden, what he was trying to say still didn't make sense. "How about we talk outside, I feel the walls are closing in on me?"

Claustrophobic, had never been one of those words she would've used to describe herself, but right then the only thing she could think of was getting out of the house. He seemed more than willing to follow. After descending the steps to the cobblestone walk, she asked.

"When did you see a picture of my G.G. Grandmother?"

"Mom's got a book of all the founding parents. It has a few pictures, if you'd like I'll ask her if you can borrow it."

"I'd like that." she answered, and then a long silence ensued, as they followed the path around the lake and across the footbridge. Approaching the plantation style home, she said. "You know it's funny, every time I think of you, you're right there."

He stopped by a half-beaten path, which led down to the water's edge. "You shouldn't have thought so hard the other night."

She knew he was talking about his run in with Mike. He hadn't been back up since then. "Sorry about that." she said following him through the high grass.

"What are you sorry about? He's the one that should be saying those words." He stopped and said, looking back at her.

"He's touchy about his car."

"He should be more concerned about his wife." He announced as he started back off, through a stand of trees.

She wondered what he meant, but was sure she was in no danger, so she continued following after like a little puppy.

"What in the hell, gave you the idea I had a gun?" he swung around and shot at her as if he'd just remembered it.

"The stick" She was defending herself now.

"Hell girl, I wouldn't carry a gun to shoe off a few kids'."

She wondered why he kept referring to her as a girl. It definitely wasn't a word to describe her. Jim kept walking towards the pond, where he stopped and lifted his foot to a copper rock. She was a bit out of breath when she finally caught up with him.



"I've never seen such a peaceful place."

"Have you been up to the lake?" he said softly

"Yah, but it's a different effect." she found she was whispering too, "Here it could be the 1800's. You know, there's no way of marking time."

He turned and looked at her as if he knew what she meant, his eyes were piercing but not painfully, they were gentle – then he looked back down at the water.

"I don't know it's just different." she went on – however, he didn't seem to be listening any longer. He was looking down at the water with such intent it was beginning to irritate her. Leaning closer, so she could see what he was staring at, she caught the faint outline of a fish, and understood his frustration. It had to be at least two feet long. Suddenly as if she'd touched him, he looked up at her and said "Sorry, that beast has avoided my hook for thirty years."

"Thirty years." She didn't mean to repeat what he'd said, but thirty years is a long time to be after one fish.

"I didn't think fish lived that long."

"Well" he looked back at the water "Maybe it's not the same one, but I'd still like to catch him, I guess things are better this way –" he looked back at her "I mean, some things in this world are best not tied down." Again, his eyes captured hers and for a minute, she felt as if he were exploring her soul. She wondered if this was his way of sizing her up.

"So what had you thinking about me today?" His words brought her back to reality, "Oh-" she had to look away, just to get a sense of what she wanted to say. "I was going through Mrs. Haager's lists this afternoon. She recommended that I contact you and renew your contract."

His expression was one of relief, he went on to tell her that he'd been worried she wasn't going to come to that decision. Even though he really hadn't had a contract, his father was the one with the contract. He'd counted on the extra money each year to keep the kids in school.

"Kid's?" she asked. He'd only spoken of his son Jimmy, who was away at college, some place in California.

"Sara is just finishing up her Jr. Year." he paused turning away from the pond. "She's in California with her mother's parents. They didn't think a single man was the best person to raise her."

She detected a sense of sorrow in his voice, so refrained from questioning about the separation.

"The last thing in this world you need to worry about is your job, just because you've gotten stuck with us city folk."

He started to laugh and the twinkle returned to his eyes. "Yah, I kind of thought you might need some help?" he said with a chuckle.

"Mrs. Haager said you knew this place like the back of your hand." She'd been successful in changing the subject.

"She was talking about Dad." He answered swinging around to look straight at her. "I don't know a thing about the Gold."

For the third time that day, she heard the word Gold, as if it was supposed to mean something to her. "Gold!" she replied "My God doesn't anyone around here talk about anything besides that stupid poem?" He raised his eyebrows in told of his surprise. "My whole life has turned upside down in the past week." she went on, realizing that her voice was rather loud, so she lowered it. "A month ago, my family records were all intact. I knew as much about my G.G. Grandparents, as anyone my age should know."

They'd walked back to the cobblestone path as they talked. He stopped by the gate that had repelled her the other night. "We didn't have any secrets." Suddenly she stopped. "I guess that's why they call them secrets. Isn't it?" he shook his head in acknowledgement "Any way, this place was never spoken of. Or even wrote about." She was running out of steam. "My Dad, died without even knowing it was here. He worked his whole life for a place like this, and died three months before he was able to retire and buy one." She paused looking down at the ground, trying to hide the tears. "It's not fair. He should've been able to enjoy it, not me."

He stepped to her side, and put his arm around her shoulders, she swallowed hard and continued "It's bad enough, I have to step in and take care of this place, Why should I have to figure out why we were never told about It." she wiped the tear from her cheek, and sniffled. "The last thing I want is to battle with a folklore, which could send everyone I bring in to work, off looking for GOLD!"

He gently turned her so she had her face on his chest. His arms were warm and comforting. He stood there silent for a minute until she brought her tears under control. Then he said through a chuckle, "For a little girl you sure know how to spit out the words."

Maybe he was right. She was acting like a child. After all, there she was wrapped up in the arms of some man, she barely knew, crying her eyes out over some stupid poem. He pulled a checkered cloth from his back pocket and made her wipe her nose.

"I guess Mike was right." She finally said breaking the silence.

"About what?" he asked, leaning her out to look down at her.

"She was shaking her head, back and forth. "He said that I couldn't run this place by myself."

"For hell sakes no one could, doesn't he know that? Why in the hell did he go running off back to Salt Lake leaving you here by yourself?"

She pulled loose and slid up on the Stonehenge that surrounded the third house. "Whose house is this?" she asked, pointing.

"You mean whose house was it, don't you? Besides" he answered stepping closer to her. "No changing the subject, this time. Why did he leave you here?"

"He didn't. I refused to go back to Salt Lake."

"Anything to do with this." he grabbed for her arm and pushed her sleeve up. It was quite apparent, that it had been caused by someone grabbing her. She pulled her arm free and pushed the sleeve back down, what business is it of his, she thought.

"No.!" she exclaimed, swinging her feet over the wall. "I've never owned a place I could call mine before. He wanted me to go back to Salt Lake and live in a rental."

She still hadn't figured out why she was telling him, but she felt better knowing he knew. He didn't ask any more questions, for a minute. She just sat there, soaking in the sun, staring up at the second floor balcony. The house was such a radical difference from the other two, it looked like something out of "gone with the wind."

"It was my grandmother's home." he suddenly started to talk. "Old Johnny built it, I guess to help ease her home sickness." She was just about to ask how they had met, when he answered.

"They met on his mission. Her parents were upset about her decision to join the church, and she became an outcast. So he simply brought her home and married her."

It wasn't quite the romantic story she'd expected, but then again she figured most marriages back then were more for convenience, not love.

"You want to go in?" he asked opening the gate.

She debated the question for a moment. It'd been frightful the other night, but right then it wasn't anything more than another house.

"Sure" Why not she thought, sliding off the wall.

"But I don't have the key." she suddenly remembered.

"I've never known it to be locked." He responded bouncing up the semicircle stairway.

When the door flung open, she felt she'd stepped into one of the pages from *Gone with the Wind*. It's the closest thing she'd ever seen to Tara. Of course, there was furniture and boxes to be unpacked, but it didn't distract from the giant white columns, stretching some thirty feet to the ceiling.

The large open spaces made her wish to go back outside, and look at the size of the house. The entrance hall consisted of nearly the entire center of the house, with smaller rooms opening onto it. In the center of it rose a grand staircase, running to the back of the room, there was a small platform and it split creating two smaller staircases, that rose another five or six feet to the second floor. A delicate white, carved wood banister, circled back on both sides. In the middle, directly above her hung a two-tier chandelier.

Abruptly she turned and shot back out of the house. Jim raced after, only to find her a good distance from the Stonehenge, staring up at the house.

"Emma." He called "are you Okay?" He finished reaching the point where she stood.

All she could do, was shake her head yes then No then yes again. He grabbed her harshly by the shoulders and shook her, asking "What Emma? What did you see?"

Closing her eyes, she managed to stop the picture from bouncing around. And uttered

"It's not real"

Again, he repeated shaking her even harder "What did you see?"

"I can't believe it's that big." Emma stammered out.

Suddenly he released her and turned away laughing. "My god girl, I thought you really saw something."

She opened her eyes to find him heading back to the house, "Saw something, like what?" She exclaimed.

He stopped and looked at her with a puzzled look. "A snake or a bug or something like that" He rattled off. He didn't have her completely convinced that's what he meant, but she acted as if he had.

"Did I really see that, I mean that house, it is real isn't it?"

He only shot his famous grin back at her. Telling her, she was acting like a child again.

"It looks like something out of a book." She hoped that'd make her sound a bit more grown up.

"Yah, it does, huh." He answered from the top steps, she still hadn't move.

"Are you coming?" He called back, but she wasn't so sure she could go back inside.

"There isn't anything in here that will hurt you." He pleaded.

"Jim, you don't understand." She was staring down at her old ratty tennis shoes, and feeling very inadequate. "I've never owned even the smallest piece of property-" she went on to say, looking up to where he stood. "I've raised my children in one rental, after another." She drew a deep breath and turned to look back at the pond and the surrounding dell. It was soothing for her troubled nerves. "I'm not good enough to own something as impressive as that, I wouldn't even know how to care for it correctly." She went on, moving the dirt around with the toe of her shoe, not realizing he was now standing only a few feet away. "I don't feel clean enough."

"Clean enough!" His voice showed his frustration, as he swung her around by her sore arm. Quickly she pulled it away gasping. She knew he hadn't meant to hurt her.

"My brothers might be ready for this, and God knows they deserve it more, but I'm the one stuck with it." Again, the tears started to flow freely. Pushing them to the side she thought, she must look like a baby. Every time he was around her, the tears started, but she was frustrated. How was she going to rebuild this place herself? She held her head lower, hoping he wouldn't notice her moist eyes, but gently he clasped his hands about her face and lifted it to look directly into her eyes.

He swayed a bit looking back at the open door, and then he bent down, thrust his strong shoulder into her stomach, and lifted her off the ground. Swiftly he bound through the gate and up the steps, and then sprinted through the door and down the two steps at the landing, crossing the room to plop her squarely on her backside, at the foot of the stairs.

"You listen to me, and listen good girl, because I don't ever want to say this again" His steely blue gray eyes were piercing. Somewhere in the process, he'd lost his hat, allowing his thinning hair to encircle his ears.

"Besides-" he added dropping to his knees, to look her squarely in the face. "I doubt I'll ever have the nerve to say it again." He took a deep breath and went on, with more emotion. "You're the chosen one!"

Blankly she stared at him, time standing still "For what?" She asked, not liking his choice of words. He sprung to his feet and swirled around with arms extended "This Em. All of this, and everything that goes along with this." He stopped – looking down at her, "You have the POWER." He whispered it, as if it was something required.

He was beginning to scare her, and he must have sensed it, for he turned and walked off into the first small room at the front of the house.

How did he know of the Power, she wondered, or was he speaking of something else. She was fearful of asking the question but it had to be asked. "What power?"

There was no response. Perhaps he hadn't heard her, so she stood and proceeded to follow him into the room. "What power?" She asked again, entering the room, but still no response. He stood, motionless, before the large window, which overlooked the dell they'd entered through. Marble gave way to hard wood floors at the arched doorway, the far wall was nearly encompassed with a marble fireplace, there were no bookcases in this room, unlike in the other home's and the walls were a solid plaster, painted white. Instead of the usual wallpapered effect, that was very prevalent, elsewhere.

"Jim... you're scaring me." She whispered as if she were in a church.

"I don't mean to." He said, in a hushed tone, turning his attention to her "I just thought you would understand." He looked down at her feet for a moment, then slowly returned his eyes to hers, she knew she'd just been given the once over.

"Humans, unlike the animals in nature, have the ability to aspire to whatever level they wish."

She sighed a breath of relief "Awe, the old 'anyone can do it speech'." From the moment they met, she knew, he could read her better than anyone else had ever been able to. What gave him the ability, she wondered, when Mike can't seem to find it?

"What did you think I meant?" He questioned.

"I don't know." She searched for an answer. "I just thought you may have meant something different."

"I'm sure you have that too." He said, walking towards her, His face very serious. The thought made Emma gasp.

"How – Why" Stumbled out of her mouth

Slowly he reached for her hand but she pulled away in fright, no one had been able to read her palm. Once though, her Grandma had said something rather strange, while stroking her hand, but not reading her palm. She'd said that she had special powers, that she may one day find a curse. It'd frightened her then, and even the thought of it now sent chills up her back. Maybe he'd see something good, she thought offering it to him anyway.

He chuckled "I don't read palms." He said taking it and turned it over. Then he softly stroked the top of her hand looking straight into her eyes, and gently he stopped just at the fringes of her fingertips.

"You look with your fingers."

"Doesn't every one?" She asked pulling her hand away. He only turned and walked back to the window, disappointed.

"What do you see?" He demanded pointing out the window.

Slowly, she walked to the window, expecting to see more than the dell, but that was all that was there. The yellow lace curtains defused even that. "Tell me." He demanded

So moving a bit closer, she pushed back the curtain for a better look. Instantly, the scene before her changed. Her first reaction was to pull away, but he held her hand firmly in place. His other hand he'd placed on her waist so she couldn't turn away.

"Tell me! What do you see?" He commanded, although not in a harsh voice. It was more like a whisper that sent chills down her spine, because of his closeness.

"Its winter," she started, half expecting him to pull away in shock, but he only held tight.

So she went on, telling him everything she could see, right from the naked trees, and snow that appeared to be several feet deep, to the children ice skating on the pond, she even told him what they wore. Then she turned to see what kind of reaction she was going to get. If it had been Mike, he would be telling her just how crazy she was. No matter what he ever said, though she couldn't deny the strange occurrences.

"What about the deer?" He asked, causing her attention to be redirected back to the scene that lay before them. Sure enough, there was a deer, drinking from where the pond ran into the small stream, at the footbridge. More important though, was the fact that he knew the deer was there. Turning but not releasing the curtain, she asked looking directly into his face, "You can see it too, can't you?" He never answered. He only grasped her hand even tighter. Suddenly she became very aware of just how close he was, when she felt his breath quicken.

"Watch, and don't pull away." He demanded "No matter what."

Again, his hot breath caressed the back of her neck, it was a horrid spot to place an arousal point, it never seemed to serve her well. Mike was very seldom in that position, and everyone else who whispered something in her ear, was. She couldn't help her weakening knees, or the emotions that were bubbling lose. His tense body and quickening breath served no help, nor did his heaving chest at her back.

So she focused on the picture that was emerging before her. It could've been mistaken as a scene for an old play, or a Curriers and Ives plate. She uttered out everything she saw, bewildered she looked to him in confusion. What more did he want. He'd proven they both could see the picture.

"What is it you want me to see?" She asked, only a few inches from his face, he still hadn't retrieved his hat and his cologne was stronger than she'd realized.

Momentarily he looked down at her, his eyes were intense, and he was having trouble catching his breath. "Just watch." He pleaded, "I've never been able to witness the whole thing."

The words were strong, but his touch softened. He returned to watching back out the window, and she followed suit, but his gentle circular stroking of her waist, was an indication to her that he was feel the magic too.

What was she to witness? Would it tell her something about her Grandmother? She hadn't long to wait, from the far side of the pond, come a tall dark man, he must of been at least seventy. She wouldn't have guessed that from the way he forcefully strolled across the ice, without the aid of ice skates. She wasn't sure why she thought he was that old, perhaps his dress. It was similar to the man in the picture. No, it was the man from the picture. She could tell he must be yelling, from the way the children reacted as he approached. However, one couple in particular seemed to be ignoring him.

It was this couple he went directly to, the others gathered away from the couple. Leaving them isolated, near the far end of the pond. The deer had moved on, in the commotion. It was obvious, even from her distance, that a tense disagreement was taking place. First with words, then suddenly the elderly man threw the first blow, flattening his hand across the young man's face.

He immediately, pushed the girl to the ice, with such a force that she slid backwards on her butt, for several feet. Finally coming to rest at the feet of her friends, they in turn helped her to her feet.

In the meantime, the other two were in a pushing match. The older man had the younger man by the collar, trying to remove him from the ice. The younger seemingly had the disadvantage. Wearing skates, he was able to keep his balance, while his elder slide about. Finally, the younger man gave him a push and the two were separated. He then started for the edge of the pond, where it appeared his shoes were, but the older man, wasn't about to wait long enough for him to change his shoe's, before having him removed. Fiercely, gripping his coat by the back, he swung him back onto the ice. The boy had no choice in the matter. His skated feet followed the direction, with the most force.



Suddenly the ice gave way, with a frightful crack, and fell away. Screams shattered the silence of even the house. She turned away. Unable to witness the youth's death, after all, he couldn't have been much older than Kit, her son.

"Watch" Jim commanded, "You have to watch."

She peered back through squinted eyes, to the frightful death, taking place. The youthful boy popped to the surface, arms stretched high for assistance. The kids inched forward. However, were turned back by the elderly man. Again, the boy went under. Jim's grip on her waist, loosened and he laid his head against the back of her head.

A second later the youth again popped up, swiftly, the girl who'd been pushed to the ice, flung herself forward, across the jagged surface. Another child reached for her feet but missed, two more boys threw themselves onto the bitter cold ice, and managed to reach her feet, she'd secured the youth's arm, extending above the icy water. First one hand and then the other wrapped around the single arm. A moment later, she was drug backwards from the thin ice area. In her grasp, she dragged a limp body with her, motionless it laid on the ice. Then one of the boy's who'd caught her feet, lifted the soggy body, over his shoulder and ran off towards the big house, as fast as his skated feet would allow. The other children too, all but the girl, she sat motionless on the bitter cold surface of the ice, head lowered, staring in to her hands.

A few feet away stood the older man, wiping his hands as if he'd gotten them dirty. Stepping forward he offered the girl a hand up, but she pushed his hand away and stood on her own. It was obvious that they were having words. Then she too ran off towards the house, leaving the older man to stand alone in the dark that was engulfing the area.

Jim's hands fell limp to his side and he turned away, returning the curtain to its original position, she also turned away.

"Is he dead?" She stutters out the words.

At first, he could only shake his head, and then the words came rolling off his lips.

"No – but he'll never return to this house or that pond, again."

She was relieved to hear that the youth lived, but what did it have to do with her.

"Who are they?"

"The boy's my Grandfather, on my mother's side." Jim responded from the fireplace, where he'd taken refuge. As she crossed the room to join him, it became apparent that tears filled his eyes. Her own heart was beating so loud she thought he must surely be able to hear it.

"The girl is your Grandmother." He answered, the words stuck like a thorn in her heart, he said he hadn't heard much about her Grandmother.

"Why didn't you tell me, before?" She shot back with a dash of hurt in her voice.

"I thought you would see it for yourself." He attempted to defend himself. "How was I to know, you'd be so squeamish about entering the house."

"You mean you see it every time you look out that window?"

"No," he answered, looking down at boots he wore. "Just when the mood is right"

"Then why were you so sure that I'd see it?" She demanded to know.

"The way you watched the sunrise that morning, you had to be seeing something." He said looking her straight in the eyes.

"I was... the sunrise, what did you see?"

"The most beautiful woman I've ever seen, your streaming black hair framed the dancing sunlight across your face. You saw more than a sunrise, I know you did, I could feel it, in your body. Your heart was racing."

"Why me, Why do I see these things"

"I told you, you are the Chosen one." He whispered. The chosen one, what did that mean?

She wasn't destined to find out that afternoon, Rob come barging in at just that instant, asking if he'd placed the furniture up stairs properly. Then as if he'd forgotten his true reason for entering the house, he announced that Beth was looking all over for her. She had to leave the subject unanswered; worried that Rob already suspected something was going on between the two of them.

A few hours later, after helping Beth prepare dinner, and another rousing conversation about the poem. She slipped away in hopes of finding Jim and finishing the conversation.

As with every time before, her foot no sooner touched the front porch, with Jim on her mind, and his old beat up black truck approached from the direction of the barns. However, he never stopped, with a toot of his horn, and a friendly wave, he simply drove on.

Alex, who had stepped out of the house, just behind her, waved back as well. "You know—" he said, "I can't believe that guy nearly got himself killed last week." She only nodded in response. "Sure glad we didn't kill him. He's the only person that knows anything about this place."

"Amen to that." she concluded, "Of course he's been here a bit longer than the rest of us too."

"Yah" he answered with a grunt as he lowered himself into the old porch swing. "But it's going to take more than a few years to obtain all the information, he packs around in his little finger."

She was a bit puzzled with the statement. "Like what?"

"Oh, you know, How to run the tractor and other equipment it takes to run this place."

She figured she knew where this conversation was headed, so she told him "I agree that's why I reinstated his contract, this afternoon."

"So that's what you two were talking about, up there all alone in the house out back."

That wasn't quite what she'd expected to hear him say, after all, what business is it of his if she's alone with a man for a few minutes. If he was worried about her having to defend herself, He may as well get over it. She'd decided that, she was fully capable, of looking after herself. After all, if she was going to care for this place, she must be able to care for herself.

"What did you think we were doing?" Her voice was full of spirit, that rattled of don't mess with me mister.

"Hey, no need to get upset, I just thought you might be comparing notes on ghost's or something."

"Ghost's" She exclaimed. Again, he'd taken her by surprise.

"Where" Beth's voice was hushed, as she stepped out the door, looking around carefully.

"Right there babe" Alex pointed to the front step.

Beth jumped straight up and rushed to Emma side.

"Alex-" Emma exclaimed, "That's not funny, you know as well as I do there's no ghost's around here."

Beth looked relieved, but Alex laughed so hard Emma feared he might hurt himself.

"Al, you're driving me crazy with all this ghost stuff, I wish you'd just stop." Beth proclaimed at the top of her regular voice.

"Really Alex, grow up." Emma words were sharp and right to the point.

He stopped laughing immediately "Okay, wise guys if there's no ghost, just how are we going to solve the poem. Doesn't a ghost always help in those stories the kids read?"

"Look" Emma proclaimed starting for the door "I've got dishes to do, so you figure out how we'll work it out."

"I asked the girls to do them, Em so sit down and relax." Beth's statement stopped her at the door.

"Then she wouldn't have any reason to avoid the topic." Alex taunted her back into the conversation.

"Okay Alex," she said taking a seat next to him on the swing. "What do you think I know, that I'm not telling you?"

"How you found this place existed?"

She wasn't sure if that was an accusation, or not, so she proceeded as if he'd never heard the story.

"No." He stopped her at buying the china. "I don't want to hear that silly story again. I want to know how you found this place."

"Listen Alex, that's the only story I have." Emma shot back.

"Really Al, I was there with her when she found out about it, I even had to drive home because she was in shock. It's the truth, so help me God." Beth rarely swore in the Lord name, and Alex knew it.

"You mean you really found it that way."

Emma had just about lost her temper, with him "That's the truth, and nothing but the truth."

"So help you God." He added

"So help me." Emma finished for his benefit.

His face grew extremely serious, with those words "Emma I didn't mean to sound like I was calling you a liar or anything like that. It's just that Dad thinks, since you were doing some genealogy, you came across the Will and made the proclamation, of the discovery."

Emma only sat there shaking her head.

"Do you know the odds, of falling into something like this?" He went on.

Still she shook her head, fearful her voice may still sound angry, which she no longer was, because she realized he was asking verbally, what she'd been asking herself, since she found the envelope.

"It's unbelievable," he exclaimed

"Of course it is." Beth replied, "Does Emma ever do things, other people can believe in?"

"Don't you mean what my big brothers can believe in?" Emma asked back.

Beth shook her head this time. "They don't believe we can do anything good."

Silence filled the night air after that, finally Alex spoke up "So do you think someone, from the other side helped you?"

"Alex, I can't even guess at that, how would anyone ever know if they were being assisted from the other side?"

"Well how about the smell of roses, up at the house that night?"

"What smell?" Beth asked.

She figured it was okay that Alex had brought up the smell of roses, even though she didn't understand why she'd smelt it. She then had to give her reason for turning back, that night but it had nothing to do with ghosts. As she explained, she was fearful of running into the old lady in the dark, and how she knew the old lady was there. She admitted she didn't know who she was, but was even more assured today when they'd found the door open, that she was there that night.

"Do you think she'll be back?" Beth asked, with a scared expression on her face.

"I certainly hope so." Emma answered, in hopes of easing Beth's mind that she wasn't a ghost.

"After all, I'd like to be able to show her all the progress we'll make, if we could only get to bed at a decent time of the night."

That was the only way she could fit the time into the conversation, without looking evasive, and they both understood what she meant. She may not have put the poem to rest, but she certainly gave them something else to ponder.

## CHAPTER SIX STEP BY STEP

The next morning Emma tackled the rest of the first list, and started the second. By week's end, she'd gotten the phone and computer systems hooked up, and had got the construction crew

started on the village. By the end of the following week, everyone was astonished, not by the passage of time but by the accomplishments achieved. By then it had become an unwritten vow, they wouldn't stop until everything was accomplished. They worked both independently and in a group, inside and out.

By step eight, Emma understood why Mrs. Haager had laid it out in steps. If one wasn't completed, then the next was impossible to start, each built upon the one before, like a pyramid.

Most significant were the changes being accomplished in the home's. Every nook and corner was cleaned and polished, boxes were unpacked, and the items placed in their rightful spots. Furniture was moved and removed, until Emma herself felt it was right, she'd chosen to combine the wicker and the wooden furniture in the same rooms. When the first room was completed, all agreed it had been a stroke of genius. The newly painted white wicker off set the dark wood perfectly.

The days grew longer and longer, even the hours they were able to work grew longer with each passing day, until the sun seemed to be rising before six and staying in the sky until after eight.

Dinner grew later and later as well. Emma often wondered if she could've digested the food from it before she ate breakfast. Almost every one stopped for a spot of tea and toast, around ten and again about two. It was what held them over.

Kit brought the kids down weekly, and their help was immense, but not once did Mike return. She'd spoken to him on the phone every evening. The calls always ended with love, kisses, and him telling her, he'd be there to run the place when she got it running. The thought irritated her. If she were strong enough to set the place up, why didn't he believe she could run it? How was he going to just come in and run something he didn't know anything about? Once, after a lesson on the operation of the power plant, she'd uttered something to that fact to Jim, who'd no idea what she was talking about, and grew angry when she tried to explain it. It'd taken all she could do, just to get him back on the subject at hand.

By mid-May, the place resembled an actual resort. She'd purchased several horses, and found three old carriages – which could be repaired. Small plants had stuck their little heads through the ground, and were now blooming all over the place. The scenic views would've been enough to sell the place, but an added splash of color here and there never hurt.

A three rail fence now divided the areas, she felt were not meant for the average guest. She assisted in the erection of most of it, herself. Not one fingernail on either hand was left when done, but she didn't care. Really, the only thing that seemed to be left to do was touching up and painting the houses and farm areas. She felt assured that even that would be completed by the June 25th, opening date.

As hard as it was to believe, another payday was rapidly bearing down on her, the clock over the fireplace read eleven thirty five, and she was still staring at a stack of papers that would make even the best of bookkeepers cringe. Why hadn't she been able to convince Mike to do this for her, he was the one with the degree in accounting, she thought as she twirled the pencil between her fingers, gazing down on the numbers that blurred before her tired eyes.

The low constant hum of the sander against the wooden floors over her head caused her to carry on. If they could keep going, so can I, she thought. The sound of dishes rattling about in the kitchen, told her Beth was still hard at work, as well, adding to her determination to finish the checks on time.

There were only a few more figures to total before she could call it quits for the night. Emma was sure glad Jim was on salary, perhaps she should suggest that to the others, she thought, but then decided against it. She already felt like a slave driver, even if the others decided what needed to be done by themselves most the time, there were still her suggestions – like removing the old wax. "Won't that make it hard to keep the floor shiny? I mean, wouldn't it be better if we remove the old wax first?" Why hadn't she just kept her mouth shut, she never thought they'd take it to the point of sanding the floors – she figured they'd just chemically strip them.

She felt sorry for them, physically they must be worn out, she thought, as she turned back to the checks. Now the hardest thing she had to do was lift a pencil, but even that seemed impossible. She'd been up since five, she'd made it part of her routine, to be up before the others, and stay up until they went to bed, hoping to build their respect in her. Truthfully, she wished their enthusiasm would wear off, She didn't know how much longer she could keep it up.

She knew it was silly, but she didn't want anyone to be able to call her a slacker, not that she'd ever been called one, but she'd slung the word plenty of times herself. On the other hand, she'd met a few people in her life she just couldn't keep up with no matter what she did.

Super-people, like Marcy, her neighbor back ST. Paul. There was a leader, she thought whimsically. How that woman keeps going amazed even her. PTA president six years running, Den mother, taught Sunday school, worked part time and ran a house with five children. No matter how hard Emma tried, she couldn't keep up.

Jeff Rich was probably the only other name on her list. He was her boss at the auditing company. They used to run this little contest, the two of them. Based upon the total dollar amount each of their crews had counted, in a single week. Even when her total surpassed, anything she'd ever done before. He came in with a larger total, but that was only half of it, he actually had the gull, to wear a hole in his new shoes that week.

The thought made her chuckle. She'd actually measured performance by holes in the sole of shoes. She figured his secret out though, she threw her heels away and went to flats. Their sole were thinner and the blood blisters, on her feet weren't as bad.

He'd taught her many things, besides how to wear a pair of shoes out. The man had had the patience of a saint. She took her job serious and figured everyone else had to as well. If he hadn't stepped in when he had, she probably would've fired herself out of a job. It's hard to keep a crew or build a good one if the only thing you want to do is fire people who laugh at numbers.

"Some people find numbers funny. Let them, as long as they come up with a good count of the merchandise." He had told her one time, she knew he was right who was she to judge them? "Look, if you want a good crew, build it. I give you good people and you just need to train them."

He took every firing as a personal failure, when she'd started to look at it that way, her entire way of looking at life changed. Everyone became a challenge to train and most of them she won. Even when she moved on to working in the motel, that secret got her more leader positions than she wanted to count.

She'd pulled herself closer to the desk and was laying her head on her hands, eyes closed, remembering. When two quick soft raps on the door drew her back to reality, it was Jim. She could tell he'd been to town, his cologne entered even before he did, whirling about her head like a strong gust of spring. Even his hat seemed to have been dusted clean.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have interrupted. You looked so peaceful. Did I wake you?"

"Goodness No!" she exclaimed, "Just remembering a time gone by."

"A good one I'd hope." He responded, striding in as if she'd invited him. Then after turning a chair in front of her desk, he straddled it like a horse.

She didn't want company, but the memories were too nice to disgrace without a comment.

"The best, but what brings you in tonight?" She knew her tone wasn't friendly, but lately she hadn't felt very friendly, towards him. Every time he stopped by, he was all dressed up. Indicating he'd been to town again. She would just about kill to go to town for something other than business, even just a movie would be nice, but that wasn't the only thing that had been bugging her. He was never around when she needed an extra set of hands. Oh, sure, she saw him out on the tractor, riding up and down the fields, and sometimes she would even catch him feeding the horses. Mostly, the only thing she saw was Jim riding around in his rickety old truck. She may have even considered him a personal failure of hers, if it weren't for his special ability to read her mind. "You're up set with me, aren't you?"



"I'm just tired." She shrugged off his prying eyes, and returned to the papers at hand. "So what can I do for you, besides get these checks out on time?"

He didn't answer right away, which drew her eyes back to his face. "You really are upset with me. Tell me what I've done."

"How do you do that? Am I really that transparent?"

Shifting his hat back on his head, he chuckled slightly before answering "Shit girl, I don't have to look too far, you just offered me an extra check. Sounds like you're trying to buy my attention, or something."

Rolling her eyes back into her head, she lay back against the chair and shook her head. She'd indeed just offered him a check. "Ok, you got me." she responded between chimes from the clock "What's it going to cost me to get you to do some work around here." She may have sugarcoated her question with a chuckle, but he caught the drift of her feelings.

"What! You think I've been shirking my duties" his loud voice rang through the sparsely decorated room, as did the sound of the chair when it hit the floor.

"Jim, I was just kidding." She had to cool him down. He couldn't walk out, even if he did just run the tractor up and down the fields, it was more than she could do now.

"Like Hell Girl! You think I'm lazy. Well little girl, I challenge you to do it."

His words set a fire burning in her. He wasn't going to call her a little girl and get away with it. She was the boss.

"You got it" she shot back, wishing she hadn't started the conversation.

"Tomorrow." he demanded as he headed for the door "Be ready, – I'll be here at four."

"Four!" Her words were ignored as he stormed out.

"Damn." She declared aloud as she pounded the keyboard to start the checks.

After laying the checks on the small kitchen table, that Beth had rounded up to give the stainless kitchen a touch of home. She headed for her room at the top of the steps. The one bedroom was the only that impressed her most. Mainly it was the view from the window that caught her eye.

She'd set the alarm for three-thirty, but it must've been piercing the air for nearly twenty minutes before she was aware enough to respond to it. Rolling over she would've given anything to take back her words. She must've lost her mind. How could he expect her to do it, on just three and a half hours of sleep? By the tap on her door a minute later, he obviously did. Quickly grabbing

her jeans and an old sweatshirt, she stumbled to the door, and called a soft. "Just a minute" What was he out to prove? That he really can do more, than he has been.

"Aren't you ready yet?"

"Come in!" She demanded, fastening the snap at the top of her faded jeans. His impatience, left her feeling scatter brained.

She was just pulling her hair out of the back of the shirt, when he popped the door open and stepped in. By the fresh sent of Irish Spring, it was obvious he'd found time to shower. When she reached for the hairbrush, he grabbed her hand and said, "That'll wait, but the cows won't"

"Jim!" She protested as he towed her towards the door, "What cows?"

"Where do you think you get your milk from?"

"Cow's of course." She responded pulling her hand free, and bending to grab her boots. "But why do we have to milk them."

"Do you want those poor innocent animals blowing up?" His words painted a horrendous picture in her head, straightening, she looked at him in discuss.

"Why do you do that to me? I could actually see a poor cow blowing up."

"You shouldn't have such an active imagination." He answered with a larger than normal smile. "It makes a body wonder what else you might be viewing differently, than everyone else."

She didn't have any idea what he was referring to but whatever it was caused him to laugh. Since she wasn't crazy about going with a man, who had grumped at her the night before, she didn't even ask him to explain it.

It was just as dark outside, as it'd been when she went to sleep. She was headed for the front door, but Jim took a route, through the old dining room instead.

"Where you going" She insisted taking hold of the cold metal knob

"Like I asked before, where do you get your milk?"

The large metal containers in the kitchen, she thought, that's what he's heading for. After all if it weren't for him having to pick them up so early, every morning, he wouldn't have a key to the back door, and she could've left him waiting on the step till she was ready. Following after like a puppy, she grabbed several apples as they passed through the kitchen, and quickly shoved them into her pocket before picking up the second can and trailing him to the truck.

When he didn't break for breakfast a few hours later, she was more than willing to share them, between packing bags of grain from the truck to the barn. Of course, that was after they'd milked all thirty some of his cow, and emptied the pasteurizer, for the dairy driver to take to town.

By noon, she was ready to concede she'd misjudged him, but he wasn't ready to hear it. He never even said a thing about the way she'd been able to pack the grain bags, nearly as well as he. Of course he'd been carrying two to every one of hers, so she considered it wasn't quite fair, to pat herself on the back.

He'd asked about the kid's, it was a sore subject with her but she'd contained her temper, at least well enough to tell him about how Kit was doing in school. "If he keeps up at the pace he's progressing now. He'll be able to come down and help a few weeks before he has to return for graduation."

"Great I need all the hands I can get."

She was no longer ready to challenge that statement. She'd no sooner finished her sandwich and a soda, before he was back at work. The rest of the afternoon, was devoted to cleaning the barn. Now she understood why he broke for lunch before proceeding on to it.

If there was a more discussing job there about, she hadn't seen it. She even considered asking him if he'd saved that job, for a day she was willing to help, then decided that she hadn't seen his temper all day, and didn't want to.

When they'd finished refilling each stall with fresh straw, they moved on to cleaning up her milking facility, so it would be ready to start operations the next week. When the cows he'd chosen were to arrive. It wasn't a bad job, except when he turned on the water to scrub out the large pasteurization tanks. She would've appreciated it if he'd given her a heads up that the water was coming on, instead of just leaving the hose lying on the floor, she would've picked it up and pointed it at the tank. Of course, he found the sight of her desperately trying to grab a snaking hose amusing. So once she was able to obtain the wilily beast, he was the first thing to be sprayed. "See who's laughing now."

The burst as slight as it was, removed his hat immediately, and drenched his face.

"Woe." he cried, dashing for the shut off valve.

She couldn't contain her laughter, even when he physically took the nozzle away from her and threatened to spank her bottom. "How dare you." she'd exclaimed through burst of belly wrenching chuckles.

"Was that a dare?" His eyes glistened with excitement. "I can't resist a dare."

"No, no—" She held out her hand while backing away from her would be attacker, still unable to control the laughter.

"Good, cause it certainly would've brought me more pleasure than you can imagine."

She loved his dancing eyes. They were not always that way. However, when they were, she didn't need to guess if she was pleasing, she just knew she was. Nearly Twenty years with Mike and she still had to ask.

When they headed for his place, sometime around five she felt like she'd been hit by a Mack truck, every inch of her body hurt. She certainly wasn't looking forward to waking up in the morning, a hot bath and a soft bed was all she could think of right then.

"Why don't you just drop me off at the house?" Was that exhausted, voice really hers.

"What?" He looked shocked "I thought you wanted to know just what I do all day?"

"You work hard." She admitted

"I'm not finished and neither, are you." He insisted driving right past the Big House. "Besides I owe you a meal."

She'd no intention of going to town with him. She didn't want to find out how he spent his evening hour. Besides, she wasn't dressed to leave the ranch. Without a bath, she wasn't even ready to be seen by his Mother, even though she knew Jesse wouldn't say a thing.

"Jim, I'm not dressed to go anywhere; stop and let me get cleaned up at least." Her tone was filled with a frantic air.

"Relax, Mom's got dinner ready, and then you can get cleaned up."

"Forget it. I'm not going to expect your mother to sit down, with a person that smells like she spent the afternoon cleaning horse stalls."

"Is that the new perfume, you're wearing." He asked trying to hold back the chuckle under his breath.

"Jim I'm serious." She insisted, as they pulled to a stop at the main road.

"Do I really look like a man that would make you go to town, smelling like that."

"Fine" She cried as she popped the truck door open "Pick me up on your way back."

"Wait!" He called, too shaken by her abrupt departure to remember to take the truck out of gear before, reaching to pull her back in. The unexpected jump of the truck sent her reeling to the dirt. A second later, his strong arms were pulling her to her feet again.

"Damn it Em. Don't you know better than to get out of a truck when it's still running?"

Just like a man, she thought, telling me how to live my life again. Why she'd ever thought him different, she couldn't remember right then. "Sure, like it's my fault you can't get away with telling me, what I'm going to do or not."

"What?" He pulled back with the tone in her voice.

"Well isn't that what you were doing. Telling me what I'm going to do?" She asked brushing the dust from her already damp jeans.

"No." He wrenched his face "Well, I guess it sounded that way. Mom — I asked Mom to pick you up some clothes this morning." He started back around the truck.

She really hadn't been referring to the clean clothes, as much as she was the way he yelled at her for getting out of the truck. She should've clarified her meaning - it was too late now. "Look, I already have five men telling me how to run my life, and one coming up that thinks, just because his father can do it, he can too." He'd stopped at the front of the truck to listen. "I just don't need another."

"Get in the truck and I'll take you home." He sounded so disappointed, that she had to ask.

"Where were you going to take me?"

Slowly, walking towards her like a corrected child, he ran his hand along the length of the truck right up to the door handle. Head drooping, he said, "I guess — I should've told you that ha?"

"It might've helped." She responded with a sigh, as she stepped forward and waited for him to open the door.

Looking up at her, with an apologetic face he said "Sorry, I have a meeting that I have to be at. I just thought it'd be a good time for you to meet some of the folks that live in town." He really was sorry and she was almost ready to believe that it wouldn't happen again, but just because he was a man, she was sure it would.

Rubbing her backside, she considered his invitation. "Sounds like a good idea." Was all she managed, before he shuffled her back into the truck, slamming the door.

"But I still need clothes — and a good bath." she continued, the minute he opened his door.

"Mom's taken care of it." He insisted starting the truck. "I hope she asked Beth to bring that cute pink number — I happened to miss it last week, but everyone in town has been talking about."

She knew exactly what outfit he was referring to. Her pink linen business suit, but she doubted Beth would choose it, Beth preferred Blue. Jesse had taken care of everything, including running a hot tub the minute she saw the truck pull up the drive. Sliding down into the claw foot tub, Emma released a deep sigh of relief. Her back muscles ached beneath the hot, lavender scented water. She was so glad Jesse had not handed her the Irish spring. She found the sent enjoyable on him, but if they both showed up smelling that way — it wouldn't of made a very good impression.

She hated to disappoint him, but Beth was true to her treat. Jesse had laid her soft, blue sweater suit and cream-colored camisole top, on the bed. After a quick dusting with her own scented powder, she dressed and looked through the overnight bag Beth had packed, but her hair drier was missing. Jesse had to own one, so she headed for the steps, to ask. Jim stood on the landing. From the look on his face, Blue hadn't disappointed him a bit. In fact, if he hadn't had a good hold on the arm rail, she may have had to pick him up from the bottom of the old staircase. "You saved me, from having to find your mother."

"I...what" he asked.

"I need her hair drier." She answered backing up, so he could clear the top step.

"Her what" He responded stepping forward, scanning her entire frame

"Her hair drier" She repeated the moment his eyes reached hers

"Oh." She'd finally managed to crack through to other senses, besides those driven by sex. "She doesn't own one but I do. Just a minute and I'll get it." He finished the statement as he squeezed past her in the narrow hallway. In passing, he briefly brushed against her breasts, filling her with sensations she'd nearly forgotten. Had he noticed the immediate response from her body, she hoped not.

As he trailed off down the hall she considered following, but only for the briefest of moments, she'd have to keep her distance. Returning to the room, she combed out her wet hair, and applied a brisk application of mascara before he entered the room with the drier.

"Thanks," was all she was going to say as she took the over grown, old drier from his hands, asking, "Do I look alright? I mean you're staring." She quickly turned back to examine herself in the mirror "Is it appropriate for the meeting?"

She couldn't help but watch his eyes, he didn't know. Anyway, he was too busy scanning her backside. When their eyes did meet, he looked like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Clearing his throat, he asked. "You do have something to wear over that, don't you?"

"Of course" She swung around him to grab the waist length jacket from the bed.

With a slight sigh, he answered "Good. Cause if I'd taken you to the meeting wearing nothing but that —" he scanned her breast line once again "I may not have been able to insure your safety."

She couldn't help the grin that crossed her face. Even he didn't seem to mind herself confidence.

"Hurry, Mom's hungry," was the last word he uttered before closing the door slowly behind himself, but the low growl, that escaped spoke for its self.

After slipping on her white heels and fluffing her hair, she joined the others. Jesse eyes grow wide as she descended the last step. "Emma, you're as pretty as a picture."

"The wait was with it." Jim announced as he crossed the room to take her hand, and escort her into the dining room.

She might have fallen asleep in her mashed potatoes, except for the way Jim never took his eyes of her. When Jesse stood to bring in the dessert, Jim stood as well and announced, "Sorry Mom, but we don't have time, after the meeting perhaps."

Emma didn't mind, she was already full. It would've only added to her sleepiness. Again, he was examining her from head to toe, as he opened the door to the truck.

"Stop that!" She insisted, feeling a bit insecure

"What?" He looked back at her innocently "I didn't do anything."

Looking straight at him, she responded, "You're making me feel insecure."

"About what"

"You know." She pressed past him and on to the stiff seat.

He looked a bit confused and then closed the door securely between them. His eye never left hers as he rounded the truck, by the time he climbed in his side it was obvious that he understood. The drive was almost too quiet. She wondered if she'd hurt his feeling – was she asking something more than he was willing to give?

"Damn it Jim, speak to me."

"Didn't you just tell me to shut up?"

"No, I asked you to stop looking at me that way." She didn't have to explain, but she did "It's causing me to think strange things – It's not right. I – I know it's not your fault but."

Gently laying his hand on hers, he said, "It's alright Emma. I know what you're saying. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have even dared to look at you that way. I—" His voice trailed off into the stillness of the night. Then just before they reached town, he abruptly put his hand back over hers "Really I am sorry Emma, please forgive me."

She squeezed his hand, but there was a tension, that surrounded them now "Jim, I'm new at taken care of myself. I'm enjoying having a say at how my life proceeds. I need to believe I can do it by myself — please understand." A wink was his only response to her well thought out speech.

They were immediately overwhelmed with people the moment they entered the door. Emma drifted off to one side, simply looking for protection from the loud speaking group. Jim wouldn't hear of it however – the moment he was able to break loose, he once again had her arm wrapped around his arm and started to introduce her to everyone there.

She'd never seen so many heads turn at once. In the briefest of moments, she became the talk of the hall. Suddenly every one crowded about her asking how the progress was coming. One elderly woman declared she had her G, G. Grandfathers eyes but her Grandmothers skin coloration. How would she know, Emma pondered? She enjoyed the comments but shunned all the attention – the more people who crowded about them, the closer she stuck to Jim. Until he finally, declared she was having trouble breathing and asked if they might step outside for a minute. The minute the brisk air hit her hot cheeks she felt the ground bob to greet her. Luckily, his arms were closer. Snatching her back against himself, he whispered "Hang in there, I can't get away to take you home right now. I have this meeting to bring to order then, I promise."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop doing that."

"Doing what?" She asked

"Saying you're sorry for being you. Good God Girl, I can't point out a single person in the hall, that could've done all you did today, and still be here tonight. I shouldn't have dragged you out like this."

The deeper she breathed to clear her head, the more his intoxicating cologne fill her every senses. His slow, gentle strokes up and down her arm left her paralyzed. She wasn't happy when a dark



haired man stuck his head out the door, asking if they should start the meeting without him, but she wasn't sure she could've been held responsible for her action, if he hadn't.

"Todd," Jim exclaimed "Emma's not feeling well could –"

"What's the problem?" The younger man released the door and stepped out.

"I worked her too hard this afternoon. I should've just let her go to bed instead of dragging her off, to this silly meeting."

The younger man, raised a suspicious brow in her direction, "He's been putting you through your paces has he?"

"Todd," Jim interrupted "Mrs. Chase, was out to prove that she can run that Place of hers without me."

She knew from the tone of his voice, he was out to protect her reputation, clearly identifying her as MRS. CHASE "Emma, I'd like you to meet our local Medic, Todd Richards."

"Doctor" She questioned her hearing

"We just call him KID." Jim insisted with a chuckle.

"Alright, Old Man." Todd shot back, and then turning his attention to her, he offered his hand. "Emma I'm pleased to meet you. Jim has told—"

Jim's rather loud throat clearing drew the conversation to a halt. "Didn't you say they needed me inside?"

Todd's eyes gleamed. He'd caught the old fellow on a touchy subject. "Why Jim, I was just going to tell Emma how often you spoke of her." The tension that had swept through his body was still there, so she was left to believe Todd was telling the truth. Stepping back, Jim said "Ok kid. See to it that no one else manages to get away with her. I promised her husband to make sure she didn't run into any of our rowdies."

He was laying it on thick, too thick for her stomach to handle – But he must have had his reasons, so she didn't battle his words. After a few more deep breaths, without his intoxicating cologne, she was ready to go in to the meeting. Not only had he come to a meeting, he was conducting it as THE MAYOR. Would his surprises never end?

After several, rather business like discussions, the subject of the summer fair was brought to the table. An elderly woman suggested that they capture Emma as Chairperson, and before she could decline, the whole place voted a loud approval and the subject was settled — at least as far as they were willing to believe. How was she possibly going to fit it in her schedule? When the

meeting was called to a close, she was once again bombarded with unfamiliar faces and sweet friendly voices telling her it would be the best Summer Fair, since Old Johnny died.

Oh, of course they wouldn't hear of having it anywhere but the Big House.

Thank God for Todd, she thought finally slipping away undetected, but then when only the door lay between her and freedom, a bearded man in his late thirties, stepped in front of her.

"Mrs. Chase," He stopped her progress capturing her between his arm and the half open door, suddenly she felt like a prisoner. "It's going to be a pleasure to see the old place up and running again."

"Wes" Jim's voice rang from just beyond her view, "The lady doesn't feel well." He continued stepping out from behind the frightening shadow of a man, to reach for her hand, and glide her out of the man's grasp, and into his familiar warmth. A minute later, he pressed her into the cab of the truck, and slammed the door roughly.

"What did I do, this time?" She questioned the second he climbed into the cab.

"Nothing" He grumped, starting the truck

"Jim. What did I do?" He didn't answer, instead he roared up the blacken highway as if the truck knew where it was going by its self. She'd never been partial to speeding cars – or trucks in this case. The sharper than regular curves, that she knew laid just ahead, prompted an angry demand from her trembling lips. "Okay you crazy bastard, Stop this truck."

She regretted those word the rest of the night – stop he did right there and then. When the truck finished spinning and was still in one piece, she flung the door open and screamed, "You're crazy." As she, headed back to the road they'd just left at such a rapid rate of speed seconds before.

"Damn you, Girl" He shouted, climbing from the smoking relic he called a truck.

She'd just about reached the road base when he caught up with her, flinging her around a nd against his pounding chest. She should've pushed him away or screamed for help, but she did neither. She clung to him for dear life. He ran his fingers through her tangled hair, smashing her face against his chest even more, but she didn't care. When his heart slowed down, he bent down and nibbled, at her neck.

"I'm sorry." They uttered in unison.

When he suddenly tipped her back to look deep into her eyes, she could've bet the ranch, that he was going to kiss her. What he did instead startled her. He nuzzled his head down onto her chest and cried.

She hadn't seen a man cry since her father, after the death of her grandmother. Mike hadn't cried when his stepmother died, he hadn't even shed a tear when her Mother died and he was closer to her than he was his own. Even when they had nearly lost Jason right after birth, he'd never cried. It had taken her months to trust that Jason wasn't going to die, but Mike carried on as always. How was she going to handle this? What was she supposed to do?

He'd lost his black Stetson somewhere in the commotion, his black hair shone blue in the moon light against her creamy skin. "Jim. Please help me – What did I do?" Her voice sounded so childish, she hardly recognized it herself.

Drawing a deep breath, he slowly raised his head to look into her frightened black eyes, streaked with her own tears. "I could've killed you."

"You could've killed yourself"

Pressing his fingers to her lips, he said. "But it's only you, I care about." His eyes were no longer twinkling.

"What did I do, that made you so mad?"

Pushing her away, he turned and watched the truck smoke. "It wasn't you, it was me. I over-reacted." He sounded so depressed she couldn't just let him stand there. Stepping forward she caressed his shoulders, and then pressed herself against his back.

"Wes." His voice trembled, "He's trouble."

"I – I never"

"I know." He swung around so rapidly she lost her balance for a moment, only to be caught up in his arms. "You're the one he's been searching for all these years. He won't hesitate to take what he wants." She may not have known what he was referring to, but she understood his implications. "I'm kind of new at this myself." He continued on, "I don't know what I should be doing. All I know is what I want to be doing."

It took every ounce of will she owned, to step away from him. Why she couldn't turn and walk away from him, the way she'd done in the past, to many who'd used those words on her, she didn't know.

"Slow, Jim. I don't know why I'm feeling what I'm feeling — I'm not even sure what to call it."

"Magic" He leaned closer and whispered in her ear. The warmth of his closeness made her shiver. Perhaps it was magic, the magic everyone around town seemed to feel. It took him half an hour to get the truck running. Once he had it going, he took her straight home.

## CHAPTER SEVEN HANDLE WITH CARE

She was exhausted, and her body hurt at every level, but she could still feel the warmth of his arms around her, holding her close to his pounding chest. It wasn't right and she knew it, shaking her head to shed the thoughts from her mind, she quickly removed the soft sweater and pulled her old reliable nightgown over her head. There wasn't much to it, thin straps, and a bellowed body, made of satin. It allowed her to toss and turn all she wanted, without restriction.

Toss and turn she did, waking several times, sweaty and frightened by the events of a dream. Mainly they centered on Jim, but the last one included Mike and the disturbing words, "I understand. It's Okay."

It was useless to keep trying, she figured, grabbing the clock from the nightstand. Why put it off, she'd be up in an hour anyway. Instantly, she headed for the kitchen to brew a fresh pot of coffee, she was going to need it. Mrs. what's her name, was supposed to be there sometime around ten, to discuss the preparations for the Summer Fair, but before then she had to do all that she'd let laps, while pretending to keep up with Jim.

Why in the world had she challenged him, of course he could do it better and faster than she could. That wasn't the reasoning she'd used though, she'd felt he was slacking off, not doing his job. Boy, did he prove her wrong, she thought, rubbing the bruises that ran the length of her upper arms and thighs.

She wasn't what some may call, a bleeder but she certainly bruised easily enough. That was what she'd tried to tell Jim, the day he pointed out the bruises Mike left by dragging her back to the house. Was he all that different, she now was covered with his bruises? Although admittedly, most of them came from packing grain bags, only a few were obtained when the truck whirled about.

The back door stood ajar, when she tippy toed onto the icy kitchen floor. The empty metal containers were missing, so she felt it was safe to proceed, without fear of running into Jim, he wouldn't return them until sometime after day light. By then she would find something else to keep her busy, and out of his sight.

Silently she was planning ways to avoid, the emotions she couldn't explain, and felt incapable of handling right then. Sipping the hot coffee, she'd had to wait until it perked. She stepped to the door in order to close it, but instead she found herself drawn out in to the brisk morning air. It

rejuvenated her sense of life, she loved mornings, and sunrises, they represented life in its beginning to her. Sunset's while pretty, never seemed to cast the same warm feeling into her soul.

Dew covered the wooden deck, causing her feet to slip slightly, as she trudged to the three steps at the back. There she stood very still watching and listening to the morning in its infancy. Small animals scurried about the bushes, darting back and forth out of her sight. Secretly she hoped to see the small deer, she'd witnessed a few days earlier, drinking from the pond.

The lush undergrowth grew greener and greener daily. The thought of seeing the pond from where she stood now, was impossible. Lush leaves had filled in the trees, and were stretching their little veins to reach the sun, camouflaging the last of the pond from the deck's sight.

Softly she walked to the edge of the dell, silently so not to disturb any unwitting visitors. Her heart fell in disappointment. She was the only visitor there. Perhaps she thought, still toting the steaming cup of coffee with both hands wrapped around it. If I sit quietly for a few minute, something may show up. She inched her way to the copper toned stone, at the water's edge, took a seat and proceeded to watch and wait. Soon though, her mind slipped to the events of the night before, as she gazed intensely into the clear water, waves of guilt washed across her. How could she even allow herself to think the things she had, Mike had always been there for her. Never had his eyes wandered, or at least if they had, he'd always returned home to her that night.

I'm only doing what he and I have planned for years, she argued silently with herself. He's the traitor. They'd promised each other for years, to find a piece of land and work it into a bed and breakfast. They now had the land and all he wanted to do was stay in Salt Lake. No amount of excuses could hide the fact, that he just simply wanted nothing to do with the place.

Was this one of those times, she was expected to give a hundred and ten percent. Should she just turn her back on the Place? Forget about building it into something to be proud of, something to pass on to the kids, perhaps, even somewhere to grow old in.

She just couldn't imagine herself growing old, without Mike at her side, yet she still wasn't ready to give it up either. Mike was used to getting things his way, whenever they disagreed, she would always just give up and let him have whatever it was he wanted, if she could just hang in there a little while longer... Who was she fooling, certainly not herself, he wasn't about to come to his senses any time soon. If she was going to make this place, a place to be proud of, then she was going to have to do it herself.

"Where you waiting for me" Jim's hoarse voice interrupted her thoughts, with his arrogant assumptions.

"What?" she whirled to look up at his unshaven face. It was apparent that his night hadn't been much more successful, than hers had.

"I didn't mean to startle you." He said softly, sitting down on the damp tall grass, near her bare feet. "You been walking in your sleep?" he continued on stoking a tender finger across them. Giggling she pulled them away, from his searing touch "I must of lost track of time." She again combed her hair back away from her face, with her fingers. He wasn't listening to her explanation anyway. He was fixated with staring at her feet.

"Don't leave because of me." He uttered without looking up.

The nerve of him, how dare he think I'd throw in the towel so easily, she thought, "Is that what you were out to prove last night, were you trying to drive me out?"

"How dare you!" he exclaimed looking up at her for the first time, the look that sweep immediately across his face, alerted her that there was something desperately wrong with her.

Turning her attention upon herself she realized, just how see through, the gown had really become over the years. The moonlight played around her sensual outline. Shadowing her every curve, she'd embarrassed him with her immodest behavior. Quickly she attempted to cover herself. Only to have her hands snatched back away from her body, almost as fast.

"Don't." He roared, pulling her to her feet, alongside of him, as he eyed every inch of her body once again.

"Let me go – let me go" she cried pulling away and heading towards the house.

"Emma, Emma." he shouted after.

She wasn't about to look back, she didn't need another bruise, or a lecture on what is appreciate to wear. What she needed was to get to work, and drive all his foolishness from her head.

It'd been a good thought, but proved to be as impossible as convincing Mrs. what's her name, she'd never set up a Ball before, she'd never even been to one, let alone sponsoring it.

"My dear, you're a Chatterton."

"I'm one-eighth a Chatterton." Her spooky laugh caused Emma's stomach to turn.

"Oh no MY dear, there is no such thing as a partial Chatterton."

Emma simply chose to discuss the matter at some later date, she hated being judged by a name, it was something she'd never really given much thought to before but suddenly felt sorry for all famous people. It'd gotten hard even to stop in town, without having someone corner her and carry on a conversation about the Place.

"It's not your style, is it?" The harsh voice drew her attention.

"Pardon me?" She turned confused by the statement, to find a tall dark haired man, grinning at her from beneath his bushy mustache. His face was shadowed from the afternoon sun, by the wide brim of his white Stetson.

"It's not something you'd be caught dead in." He repeated, pointing to the dress in the window.

Looking back, she could see what he meant. The dress was hideous. The large floral print, made the dress appear even broader than it was. In fact, she wasn't even looking in the store at all. She'd been watching Jim's truck, which was parked across the street from where she stood.

"Perhaps, that's exactly what I do need." she answered the stranger's statement a bit sarcastically.

"Not from where I stand." Jim's familiar voice answered her back.

"Hell Jim. Can't I just simply have a nice conversation with this lovely lady, without drawing you out of the wood work?"

Hardly" Jim protested, reaching around to take her hand and drag her towards him.

"Wait a minute here!" She exclaimed pulling her hand free. "Introduce me to this gentleman, before you tow me off." Jim's face twitched, in contempt.

"You heard the lady, Jim. Introduce me."

"Fine," he dropped his hand to his side, hopelessly. "Emma Chase, meet Wes Harris."

The name conjured up memories of the frightful truck ride, a week earlier. "Stay clear of him!" Jim had demanded, "You got what he wants, and he'll take it one way or the other."

She hoped her fear didn't show, as she reached for Jim's limp hand. He didn't withhold it, going so far as to pull her from in front of the tall stranger, and next to him, but she still hadn't seen the man's face clearly.

"Mr. Harris, it's a pleasure to meet you." she hoped the hand she addressed toward him wasn't shaking as badly as her voice had.

"No indeed—" He took her hand and pulled it to his bushy lips "The pleasures all mine."

"Damned right" Jim insisted. "This old bum says that to all the ladies in the area, hoping one might actually take him serious, Emma."

"Excuse me-" she tried to change the subject and withdraw before the tension she could feel growing in Jim's body, actually did get loose. "But I really did have an appointment with a dress."

"Oh, please don't let our-" he looked at Jim sarcastically "Old school resentments, chase you off."

"I'm not." she stepped forward away from Jim's body heat and around the tall stranger. "I really do have an appointment. It was nice to meet you." She continued as she stepped backwards towards the store door. Casting a look of thanks, towards Jim she stepped in. Although she wasn't listening, it sounded like he said the pleasure was all his.

She stepped right to the counter and asked if there was a back door. No such luck, however the style of shop had prevented Jim from following. At least that was what she assumed, when he merely waited outside. Actually, she thought he'd given up waiting and walked away or she may have spent the whole day in the shop.

Swiftly slipping into her car, she felt sure she'd avoided him, until he popped up from the back seat saying, "I knew you weren't going to buy that dress." Her heart leaped to her throat, and all turned black. A moment later, she awoke, to him lightly tapping her face. "Are you alright?"

She pulled away instinctively. She'd never fainted in her life. Suddenly he jumped backward with hands in the air, and proclaimed

"I promise I'll never touch you again — I mean-" he realized what he'd just said and couldn't let those words stand. "I—" He dropped his head, to stare at the seat that separated them "I will never hurt you again."

She didn't understand to what he was referring. "Hurt me — how?"

He looked around to see if anyone else was within hearing range, then turning back to her, he asked "Can't we go somewhere, that's not so public?"

She considered what he was asking, could she trust herself with him. She'd have to learn to, because she wasn't about to throw in the towel "Where" she looked about for a suitable spot.

"My office," he responded as he climbed from the back seat and opened her door.



She'd never been to his office. Actually, she'd gone looking for it once to submit a license fee but was unable to find Mayor James's Office that day. She didn't know who that was until the night of the meeting.

On the sidewalk, he wrapped her arm around his and started towards the town's only bar. Inside he quickly shuffled her up the steps, just off the doorway to an entirely different looking atmosphere. A long hallway jetted back to a brick wall. She could see several glass doors on each side, all finely imprinted with large black lettering, indicating county offices.

"Why, above the bar." her words hadn't made sense, she felt as if she'd left the bigger portion of her statement out, but he understood clearly what she'd asked.

"Why not, after all, this was the place everyone was going to get in trouble. Or at least that was the reasoning they used when they put it here." He stopped about half way down the hall, and pulled a key from his pocket. Inside he switched the lights on and cleared a seat. Then pulling a chair from the corner, he took a seat in front of her.

"Would you like something to drink?"

She couldn't help but laugh. "What, you got your own key to that too." Understanding her amusement, he chuckled as well. His eyes were once again dancing. "I like it when you laugh."

"Because, then you know I'm not going to hit you." he asked picking up the phone.

"No. You wouldn't." she was startled by his assumption. On the other hand— had he hit other women? Was that what he was telling her? She considered all aspects of the man, as she knew him, and discerned he couldn't hit a woman. After ordering a pot of coffee, he returned the phone to its rightful spot and looked back at her.

"Well, have you made your mind up yet? Would I actually hit you?"

When their eyes meet, she had trouble concentrating, and looked down at her feet. Again, he took it the wrong way.

"I've driven you off, even before you could understand."

"You've not driven me off. From anywhere." she spoke up, in her strongest voice "Don't you understand – I don't fear you." Her voice trailed off when there was a small tap at the door.

She stood and walked to the window, as he opened the door. Emma could tell the sweet young thing, presenting him with a tray, was smitten with him, even before she turned to witness, the blush on the girls face. Turning to look back out the window, she listened to his reaction, and determined the sweet thing was barking up the wrong tree. She wondered if she wore her heart

on her sleeve so obviously. Did the rest of town already know her feelings for that man? Was that what they huddled about below, discussing? She watched the reader board, across the street at the bank, flash ninety-eight degrees, May's already turned warm, warmer than she'd expected.

If he spoke to her, before he started to trace small circles on her back, she didn't hear him. The soft gentle, motion, caused her to grip the window seal even harder. Hoping to draw on its strength, before she'd responded to his comment.

"Their right, pink suit's you very well."

He was referring to her pink linen suit, perhaps that was what they were talking about, it had obviously raised a few brows, and the last time she wore it.

"I'd forgotten you hadn't seen it before." She answered through trembling lips, as he gently lifted her silky black hair, and slid her jacket from her shoulders. Turning he tossed it to chair, then he tenderly, turned her around and stroked the soft upper portion of her arms. When she refused to look, up into his piercing blue eyes, he turned and walked back to the desk stating,

"You heal fast."

It dawned on her that he'd seen the bruises that morning. "You don't think you did that – I mean the bruises...?" the words stammered from her lips.

Looking down at the floor, he responded, "Don't you?"

It was obvious that, he was convinced he had. "My God Jim, you didn't do that. The grain bags did, you should've seen my legs." she attempted to correct his misconception, while pouring a cup of coffee. "I bruise easy, that's all there is to it."

"Then why'd you pull away?" he asked taking the cup she offered, with a puzzled look upon his face "I don't understand, what have I done to make you fear me, if you don't blame me for the marks?"

She stared down into the blackened water, searching for just the right words.

"I told you – I fear myself." that was as clear as she could put it. Her hands and bottom lip were trembling.

Sitting his cup down, he reached out and cupped her face, tipping it up to look at him, his hands still radiated the warmth of the coffee. She felt as if she would burst if, she didn't tell him how she felt, but what good would that do? Admitting her feelings, would only leave her open to get hurt. What could he do to change the situation?

She felt he was searching her soul, as he gazed down upon her trembling lips, wetting his own as if in anticipation. "What else do you fear?" He questioned softly.

Didn't he know, hadn't he already searched every avenue of her brain, she wondered. Closing her eyes, she turned away, breaking his entrapment. "That you're going to kiss me – that you don't want to – that place, and all the silly stories that go with It." looking back at him she continued on "Must I even tell you these things. Don't you already know, all that's stored up inside of me?"

When his strong hand encircled her neck and pulled her up to meet his burning lips. There was nothing to do, not that she wanted to. Even when his forceful tongue, parted her trembling lips and explored her mouth, she didn't pull away. He's the one that suddenly released her and walked to the window. The air seemed cold, against her searing chest, in his absents. "You don't understand and I can't explain it." He finally stated, turning back to her. "As God as my witness, Emma I wish I could."

She'd already crossed the threshold of sin, what was to hold her back now. "Please. You did want to do that. Didn't you?" It was her turn to try to read his mind, through his suddenly stormy eyes.

"Oh God yes—" He exclaimed, "from the moment I meet you."

"Then why can't you tell me." She asked the question, not sure to what he'd been referring.

He only turned to look back out the window, she wasn't about to take his silence as an answer, crossing the room, she pressed herself against his back, and whispered.

"Please."

Immediately he reversed their positions and held her close to his body. She now looked out the window, as he laid his chin down on her head.

"That morning at the pond, you looked like an angel sent from heaven." He continued on, nuzzling his nose deep into her hair. "Your hair laid like silk across your shoulder, dipping to cover even your chest at times, as you stared down into the clear water." he paused as if to collect his words. "Moonlight played across your angelic body." His lip was trembling, almost as fast as hers was. "When I sat down and you were bare footed, I just knew God was tormenting me with something that wasn't real –" His voice broke and she could almost feel the lump in his throat. "But then I saw the marks, the ones I, if not personally placed there – allowed to happen" he struggled with each word. "I – I knew I wasn't ready for this yet."

"What? You're not ready for what?" her voice was trembling too.

He merely rocked his head back and forth, before he spun her around, to look down into her tear stained face. "You're not ready either, I originally thought you were going to be too weak, but you proved me wrong didn't you." He asked with raised eyebrows and a half chuckle. "You're ready to face up to your feeling and I'm not. But you're not ready to know all of it."

The puzzled look never seemed to leave her face, no matter what he uttered.

"Lord, oh sweet lord." he looked up to the ceiling as if for an answer, then looking back down at her, he said "I wish I could just tell you, but that would break the bonds of the legend."

At last, he'd said something that made sense. If anything of the stories about the magic of the valley made sense. "Emma, you're just going to have to believe me. That everything will work out. I promise I won't let anything happen to you."

"Jim you're scaring me."

"I know baby." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest, once more. "Just remember you're never alone — I'm only as far away as you want me to be."

When he tipped her back to look down at her, she understood what he was asking and she laid her face back against his chest, and felt him sigh as he placed his hands on her back and pulled her even closer.

Strapped securely to his chest, he locked the world out, but even the hot confining seat belts couldn't hold her emotions back, once alone in the car. She'd made it barely into the canyon, before the tears became so overpowering that she had to pull off the road.

What was she going to do? She'd kept a brave face for him, but inside she was heaped with fear. The silly little poem rattled about in her head.

BENEATH THE THREE —IN MY CASE — YOU SHALL FIND THE KEY THAT  
UNLOCKS THE BOOK STOR —DOOR. WRAPED IN TISSUE — INSIDE THE FALLS —  
MY CHEST YE SHALL SEE.

She couldn't make sense of it. She couldn't even remember the way it was supposed to go together.

"It doesn't make sense." She blurted aloud to herself. "Why in the world would I want a key to a book store?" Lowering her head to the steering wheel, to allow a few more tears to pass from her cheeks, she thought, that isn't even to what he was referring. He said the legend, not the poem. What was the legend, and what does it have to do with the pictures in my head. Am I supposed to change the events of the past somehow? Was I supposed to stop that rape?

She trembled, just thinking about it. Painfully, she'd forced it from her mind ever since that day. "And what about the things I saw with Jim." She found herself verbalizing the words again. Could they all be connected?

"WHAT PART DO I PLAY, SWEET LORD." she called at the top of her lungs, while staring up into the clear sky, through the windshield. It had worked for Jim, where was her answers? The sky lay silent, as she'd known it would. Why had she even bothered? She wondered if there was a God, or had her actions driven him off. She refused to pay penitence- ate pork and never fish on Friday- She still celebrated all the holidays, and had never set foot into the mighty temple of her father's. If she had the time, she could come up with a few more rules she'd broken, including kissing another man.

If someone had stumbled upon the car that afternoon, the person might have thought her crazy or at least a non-believer. They would never have known just how much she did believe. They would've considered her questioning a lack of faith, but would've had no knowledge of the immense longing for what she knew to be true. The superior being was the only one that understood what she'd been through, or what she was to embark upon.

## CHAPTER EIGHT A DANCE UNSEEN

Beth's reaction to Emma's puffy, red eyes, happened as soon as Emma was through the door. "My god Sis, what is it?" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around her "Did Juan talk to you about the Village?" she asked with the biggest squeeze Emma could remember receiving, in a long time. "Is there something wrong up there? Will we have to wait, to move in?"

It was obvious, that Beth had no idea what was troubling Emma, for which Emma said a small prayer. "No, it's nothing. You know me, I'll cry over silly little things."

"Jim?" Beth asked stepping back, and Emma's heart skipped a beat. "Did he get a hold of you?"

Was that a question, or a statement? "What?" was all she could manage to say, Beth knew her better than any other person, she'd probably read her tears and knew of her dilemma even before she'd spoke. "He called an hour ago, looking for you. Did you see him?" she rephrased the question, as she went about pouring a cup of tea.

"Oh no...I mean I saw him in town – But that was this afternoon, what'd he want?" like she really thought Beth would know what Jim had up his sleeve.

"To take you to a dance," Beth answered, placing the steaming cup before her. "And from the look of your eyes, that's just what you need. After all, Em." she continued on sitting down next to her at the small table. "You shouldn't just lock yourself up here. He's right – I hadn't seen it"

Beth looked down at her cup thoughtfully, "We all know you're making a sacrifice for us, you could be in Salt Lake with your kids, and Mike—"

"He said that?"

"Well...no. Actually, he reminded me that I should say thank you, but when you came through that door." She looked up to meet Emma's eyes with tears falling across her own. "I've been so wrapped up." Catching the irritation in Emma's eyes, she changed her half-choking tone to one of defense. "Don't be mad at him. He just said that you looked home sick, the last time he saw you, I just started thinking about it, and well, we could be doing this, I mean fixing up the place, you didn't even need to offer to let us stay."

"Bull!" Emma broke in again "I didn't offer you anything, except hard work. For what, I don't pay as well as some. He needs to keep his nose out of it."

It was easy being in charge with Beth, at least most of the time. She'd always looked to Emma for guidance. The two of them were closer than even that. Mike had always kidded that in order to get a whole woman, he should've married both. The things Beth excelled in, Emma fell flat, right down to the bust line. Then again, Emma was better in other things, which Mike was sometimes willing to admit, but not often.

"Don't get mad at him, he didn't say that. He was just worried about you and well—" she looked down again "I should've known how unhappy you were. I mean after all, how many times do you really cry over something stupid?"

There was no pulling the wool over Beth's eyes, rubbing her hand across her face, Emma was forced to admit her sister was right, but the next excuse worked, how can anyone rebuke, PMS.

Even if she wasn't able to confide in Beth then, there'd come a day when she'd have to, there was no way she was going to be able to keep her secret alone. However, for now, she at least had something else to dwell on.

If she threw in the towel, she'd be wiping out any hope of Beth and Rob, getting that second chance they'd dubbed this. Then there was Alex, he hadn't been able to raise his boy's, without the medaling effects of his mother, since his divorce. As she glanced around the large living room, she decided, that the place was his second chance too.

Easing back into the overstuffed chair in front of the fireplace; placed exactly where she'd imagined it that first night, she thought of how it could be her second chance at life as well. All the men, that insisted on living her life for her, where in Salt Lake, two hundred and fifty miles away. For the first time in her life, she was actually making decisions for herself. Mike wasn't there to remind her of the things she needed to do, as if she really had that bad of a memory.

There were no older brothers around either. Letting her know, how short of their expectations she fell.

She missed them though, not for all their little ideologies, but just because they had always been there. It was like walking a tight rope without a net, if she fell it was a long way to the ground, and a sudden stop at the bottom

She couldn't truthfully say when she fell in love with Mike. He was always just there. They'd meet in high school the fall of her sophomore year. He was senior, a big man on campus not because of the sports he played, but for the fact that he was who he was. She'd found it attractive, that he seemed to know where he was going in life. It had offered her comfort, and security after her father died, she'd never meant to let him rule her life though. Perhaps he didn't, she considered; at least most of it. She'd worked before they were married and returned just before Jason was born.

She loved to work, especially when she felt she was achieving something worthwhile. Figures and facts came easy they had to, or else without a high school diploma she would have gone nowhere. She learned through life, things she didn't know how to do; she taught herself to do. A lot of the time she would end up talking herself into a job, knowing nothing about it only to tap everyone else's brains, and come out on top.

Like the auditing company. When originally hired, she was supposed to count items on shelves. She did, but she also watched the crew supervisor's, and within a few months, she knew everything they did; as well as everything she was required to do. So one morning when the supervisor didn't show up, she took the crew out. When she returned to the office an hour before the other supervisor's, with a good store count, she was promoted the next day. Six months later, she'd figured out what the office manager did, and when he fell short, she was ready to step in.

After that, she had a fantastic résumé for leadership, accuracy, and durability.

"Penny for your thoughts" Jim asked directly above her.

Remembering some of her stronger moments, gave her the strength to face him again. Whatever it was he knew, that he wouldn't say – didn't seem to matter as much. She felt assured that she'd find it out eventually, and when she did, she'd handle it.

"Not really." she answered with a large smile, as he took a seat in the matching chair, pushing his hat back. "It's silly. I was just thinking about all the strange people you meet, when you're on the road."

"It doesn't matter anyway – That smile talks for its self." He said even before considering her comment, and then suddenly as if it'd just sunk in, he blurted out "On the road?"

His reactions made her giggle even more, fringing on the brink of a full-blown laugh. "When I worked for an Auditing company, I was required to travel a lot."

"So, you know what it's like, to be away from home?"

"Sort of, Yeah." she answered a bit melancholy. "I spent four or five days out, usually a week. But once I realized what it was doing to the kid's— Well you know they were little, Jason was still in diapers – I don't even know who potty trained him." her voice grew softer, and softer as she spoke. She'd just about forgotten the down side to the whole thing. He would think her terrible for running off and letting someone else care for her kids.

"But you enjoyed the work?"

He'd caught the point she was trying to make. "I loved being in charge and the people were great." she added with a sigh "But I just couldn't stand to be away that long."

"Your family always comes first, right?"

"Family should always be first, shouldn't it?"

Stretching his long legs out in front of him, he dropped his black Stetson to the floor and looked straight at her. "It's really the only thing a person has in this life, you know. I mean sure you can own land, or a car, or a lot of clothes –" he dropped his eyes for a minute, then looked back at her "But kids are your only true mark in life." She could've taken that as a slur, but she knew better, he was talking from the heart. She could only nod her head and agree. The solemn look on his face made her wish she'd never brought the subject up. So as smoothly as possible, she changed it, asking if he'd like some coffee.

She had only to pushed open the swinging doors to the kitchen, before Beth meet her with a tray full of goodies, and a full pot of coffee, as well as a bit of advice.

"Remember Emma, companionship, isn't a sin."

"Just don't let it get out of hand?"

Thoughtfully, Beth replied, "You may not regret that either." before she trudged off, for a walk with Rob.

Beth viewed things differently than she did, perhaps because it was her second marriage, or just because she'd had the opportunity to date as an adult. Whatever reason there was for it, Emma often wished she could be as liberal as Beth.



Returning to the living room with tray in hand, she discovered that Jim had the blackened logs a blaze, in the fireplace. "I don't know how you do it." She proclaimed. She'd actually hoped for a fire.

"What is it with you Girl," there he'd used that name again, why did he insist on calling her Girl. "Aren't you afraid of getting slivers in those pretty feet of yours?"

She'd forgotten she was bare footed as usual. "It's a bad habit." she responded, placing the tray on the coffee table. "But since Rob and Alex, sanded all the floors down –" rising up, she discovered that the comb that had held her hair in place, had fallen out. Looking at the floor, for its wear about, she finished, "Well I just don't think about it anymore."

"Leave it." Jim said, "I think it looks best, down." So did she, but it was always in her face. Instead of looking further for the clip, she simply twisted it into a long ringlet and dropped it down her back. When he chuckled, she threw him a confused look.

"You enjoy being the boss lady, don't you?"

The phrase didn't fit her at all. It even conjured images of what she would call "The True Business Woman". A woman with a tongue that whipped like a lash, who carried a knife, meant for another person's back. "No, I think you've got the wrong impression, I'm not the boss. When have I ever told you to do something?" she paused for a response before, easing herself back into the chair as he merely shook his head. "I don't have to be around here—sometimes. I actually feel like someone else is in charge – you know unseen." His eyes were warm, but it was apparent he'd no idea to what she was referring. "You run my legs off. It's getting harder and harder for me to just keep up."

"You don't have to" he answered, looking up from his coffee.

"Oh yes I do, there's only two people in this world, I wasn't able to keep up with, before coming here, Jeff, an old boss of mine and Marcy, my neighbor back in St Paul. No matter what I did, I couldn't match Jeff's performance at work. And Marcy –" she paused wondering how to phrase it "She was always out doing me, I mean how do you keep up with super-people?"

"You like competition?"

She was beginning to wonder if he was even listening to her, "I hate competition. The only person, someone should be competing against, is himself or herself. That's how they improve – Not by comparing themselves to someone else." she raised her voice stating the facts clearly.

"Then why do you feel you need to keep up, with us?" he asked, with a confused look on his face.

With a deep sigh, she tried to explain, "I guess it's not so much keeping up, I've always started on the bottom and watched others, and here I should be the one everyone else looks up to. Half the time I don't know how I know what to do – I mean Mike's always made the decisions."

"Emma." he's voice was raised, as he reached for another cookie. "Give yourself some credit, will you, even if Mike's always ruled your life"

"I didn't say he ruled me." She protested

"I didn't mean for it to sound like that." He defended "I was just saying, you have a head on those pretty shoulders, and you know what to do with it, as well as he does."

Shamefully she looked away, he was only offering a compliment, and she was ready to rip into him.

"You didn't need to clean horse stalls, to prove to me, you can run this place. Damn, these cookies are good."

"I'll tell Beth you said so."

"Why, she didn't make them." he protested

How'd he know that? "No, I can't read your mind." he insisted, but he obviously could her face. "I called when you were putting them in the oven. Beth told me. So why give her the credit? I just don't understand, one minute you're looking for recognition and the next you're giving it away. Why?"

"I'm not looking for recognition," she demanded, as she stood and walked to the window. "I want respect." turning to look where he now stood, she continued on "The best way to get it, is to give it, isn't it? Pride is going to be the death of this world yet. It's Beth's receipt. I only put the ingredients together and threw them in the oven, what pride is there in following directions? I'm good at following directions. But I want to be, just as good at creating them, that's what takes talent." She wanted to be able to see what needed done, and do it, or be able to tell someone else to do it. She felt, she was all ways following someone else's receipt, be a good girl, get married, have children, and don't raise trouble.

"You didn't include insecurity to your list of fears." He spoke from her side.

"There's a lot I didn't include." whispering, she turned to look up at him.

"So I see." he unwound her hair from the large ringlet, allowing it to fall softly across her shoulders. "Is there anything, I can do?" he asked softly, holding her upper arms. "That is, other

than tell you, how much respect I have for you." He whimpered in return, drawing a deep breath "You've totally blown me away, Girl. I couldn't do what you do."

"Bull," she blurted out, feeling as if he were trying to pacify her, she pulled away "Just what couldn't you do, like I said, some people are just super-people, your one and I'm not." Turning she watched a mix of reactions shoot across his face.

"You're just too stubborn to see the truth. I'll bet you were trying to keep up with Jeff and Marcy at the same time, like you're doing here."

She had to admit he was right, she just couldn't blend the job and home together, and come up with a smooth batch. Apparently, her face had turned into a large print book to him.

"See," he insisted, brushing her hair back across her shoulders, "It wasn't that they were super-bodies, you were just splitting up your energies. You're doing the same thing here, trying to keep up with all of us at the same time. You can't do it, no one could."

She'd never stopped to realize, just how easy it'd become, to keep up with Marcy, once she was no longer working. After turning on the radio, she rejoined him in front of the fireplace, and discussed work-war-stories, until well into the evening. They never did go dancing, but she did unwind, she even woke the next morning ready to get back to work.

## CHAPTER NINE OLDER BROTHERS

Emma was deep in thought swinging on the porch swing, the next morning. When Jim pulled her car to the front of the house, then left it running as he casually strolled up the front walk. "What's that for?" she questioned

"I thought you might want to get away for a few days, before throwing yourself in to this big affair."

How had he known? That was just what she'd been thinking about, but she feared the work would stop, the minute she drove off the property.

"Nothing, to worry about here" he responded, as if he was reading her every thought, again. "The painters will be here tomorrow, and you said yourself, the rest of us know what to do."

"How do you always know what I'm thinking?"

He chuckled, and showed her a note she left herself, "Simple reasoning my dear girl. When you start leaving notes reminding yourself to say I LOVE YOU to the kids, it's time to get away."

No strong-arming was required, within minutes she was on the road, and didn't return until midweek. Her escape had been successful, she returned rested and full of a renewed energy. Quite the same way the others returned, after they'd been away for a few days. She'd so envied them, in that. Now, she too was able to drink of the fountain of renewed strength.

Kit traveled back with her, he'd finished classes nearly a month early, and since there wasn't anything holding him in Salt Lake, he chose to assist her there.

She and Mike, had finally agreed the others could join them, the week after school got out. Although, she still wasn't able to convince him, he was a required part of the picture. He hung tight to his belief, that he could just step in, and run the place, when and if, she got it running; at least that's what he was saying this week.

His whole attitude had left her frustrated, and angry, so she'd gone shopping. She needed a couple extra bags to finish gathering her stuff up from around there, and knowing she may never need them again, she went right to a thrift store to buy them. Why waste good money, she thought. She was successful in her bid, and retrieved a few bonuses in the trip, namely; a Ball gown.

After all, she'd never been to a Ball in her life, and had no idea when she would go again. Besides the dress was just what she would've bought in a normal store, if she'd gone looking for one. It was made of a shimmery material, in the palest shade of pink. Small pearls adorned the low cut circular neck, and continued down the back, serving as buttons. The skirt was full and flowed smoothly to the floor. The store attendant assisted her in the fitting room, and when she stepped before the long mirror outside the dressing room, she felt like a princess. The waist, fit snug about her small frame, and even the mid arm – puffed sleeves, fell in place properly. The clerk had said, it looked like it was made for her, and she had to agree.

There were a couple of other dresses, that she felt would fit the girls. She knew Shelly had several Prom dresses, but poor Crystal had never owned anything as nice as these were, so she bought them as well, after all who would know.

She thought their eyes were going to pop out of their little heads, when she showed them the dresses. She hadn't realized until that moment that she hadn't told them about the Ball, or even informed Mike. Instantly she woke him and explained the situation no luck though, he had to work that night, meaning she would have to attend herself.

Jim and Alex were seated on the top step, when she and Kit pulled up, when she got out of the car, she saw worry in their faces. "What's wrong?" she shouted to the pair but there was no response, except the large manila envelope, they waved above their heads.

"So what is it?" she asked again, as she followed the walk towards them.

"Don't know." Alex finally answered. "But the sheriff brought it by this morning."

Quickly she grabbed it from their hands, and raced into the office for the letter opener. With trembling hands, she pulled the legal paper from its cover, and began to read. She could feel her blood pressure rising, as her eyes scanned over the paper, anger filled her every pore. She flung the papers to the desk, and marched through the house slamming out the back door.

Alex and Jim had followed her into the office and had stood very still during the entire reading. Now they followed, spewing out questions at every turn. She stopped at the steps, and turned to address them, Beth had joined them. She knew her eyes were probably filled with tears but she didn't care. "Their contesting the Will" her voice rattled as she spoke.

"Who" Jim spit out

"My older brothers," she answered, feeling her composure draining. "Who else"

"I don't believe it" Beth exclaimed

"I do." Emma responded, turning away to complete her retreat.

The tears, had already escaped her dark lashes by the time she reached the footbridge. Walking had become hard. She couldn't see anything through the mascara-streaked lashes. So there she stopped, and removed the heels she wore, allowing her feet to feel the cobblestone, path beneath them. Just before the gate, she diverted off the course path, and set off across the high grass, to the copper rock, near the ponds edge. Despite the scene she'd witnessed, from the Plantation house window, this had become her private refuge. She'd returned to it so often over the past six weeks, that the grass no longer even stood back up.

Pulling her skirt close to her legs, she took a seat on the rock and submerged her feet, in the cool water that lapped at her rocks bottom. She restrained her tears no longer. Through her heavy sobs, she uttered to herself "How dare they." first as a whispered, then louder and louder until she was screaming it. "How dare they, they can't take it from Me." she again whispered, the strength required to fight, drained from her body.

"We won't let them." a response came from behind her.

She'd been sobbing so hard, she hadn't noticed Jim standing only a few feet away. He knew rested his firm hand, on her shoulder, but she didn't look up. She didn't have to. His blue eyes were ingrained in her mind, like the lines of her own palm. She only continued to curl and uncurl her toes in the water.

When she didn't respond, he bent nearer wrapping his arm about her shoulder and whispered in her ear "You're the chosen, it is your destiny, and they can't change it."

She only shook her head at first then finally responded, "I told you, I'm not good enough, and I've never been good enough, in their eyes."

She hadn't finished the statement, before he forcefully lifted her off the rock and swung her about to look him squarely in the eye, her toes dangling inches above the ground "I told you before, you're the only one—" He stopped abruptly, and lowered her to the ground. She wiped the tears from her cheeks, but didn't look up at him. "Don't lower your pretty face to no one" he demanded, grabbing her chin and forcing her to look straight at him. She bit her lip in the process. Her body was trembling like a small leaf in a rainstorm. "Be proud of who you are." he continued in a commanding tone.

"Leave me alone." she battled back, pulling herself free from his grip. "You don't understand." she shouted, standing up straight "They've always done this to me, if I got B's, they felt I should've got A's, when I got A's, they would burst my bubble by telling me I didn't deserve them." She turned to star back at the pond, and wiped the remaining tears from her mascara-streaked face. "No matter how hard I tried to please them, they were never happy. How am I going to change the rules of their game now?" Again, the tears flooded her face.

"You can't change the rules, in their game." he responded "But that's just it, this isn't their game, it's yours." A truer, truth he couldn't have spoken, the words sunk deep in her heart. He was right— it was her game.

"No matter how you look at it," he went on "They just weren't born with all the right equipment. The facts are as plain and beautiful as that setting Sun." He continued when she turned to look back at him, and he wiped the tears from her face. "The story says that it must be a granddaughter," he paused for a moment "Doesn't it?"

"Your right," she uttered, pushing past him, "Well at least I think, that's the way it goes." she completed her statement as she approached the footbridge. He was right at her heels, and he stayed there, until she had the phone in her hands.

Mr. Becksted was kind enough to interrupt, a meeting and took her call right away. After he cleared his office, he returned to talk to her in private. She didn't require the same on her end,

instantly she put him on the speakerphone, so all could hear. She filled him in on the events of the day, and added the information as to who'd filled the suite.

He then told her, that if tradition were to hold up in this case, she'd be the only granddaughter, to qualify. "Although, in the case of your death, Beth would be the next in line"

"Emma." his voice rang clear. "Your Great Grandmother, Emme Bloodworth Chatterton, inherited it from her Grandmother, Emmiline York Worthington, who inherited it from her Grandmother, Emmiline Wentworth York." He stopped to take a breath. "It seems the name Emma's a tradition as well." He added with a chuckle. "The process is what we would call a locked progression."

"I don't understand." She admitted, looking to the other concerned faces, in the room. Beth was doing her best to hold back her tears. Rob was at her side, summoned from the Lytle White house where he'd been painting. Alex and Kit stood side by side, next to the door and Jim stood at her side with his hand resting on her shoulder.

Silence gripped the air. It was so quiet they could hear him rustling papers around on his desk. "Mr. Becksted, are you there?"

"Just a minute Emma." he responded. Again, the paper sound was the only sound, on either end. "I'm here." He finally stated. "I can't find your Great- Great Grandmother's Will, I was sure we had one, but, I have the bible page showing the progression all written under Inheritance."

"I still don't understand." again, she replied.

"Well it means, if we have to actually go to court, things may get a little sticky." He paused "What I'm trying to say, is that without Emme's Will in hand, and even thought the rest of the family members recognize you as the true heiress, your position may be in jeopardy."

Emma acknowledged what he'd just said, and then he continued, "I don't know what made me think we had her Will, but I'll see to it that everything here is gone through. In the mean time you do the same, Her Will could be anywhere."

If it even exists, she thought to herself, as her hopes sunk. All in all the news wasn't as good as she'd hoped, but it wasn't as bad as it could've been, but it had taken its toll.

"Well, I guess it's time to go find some gold." Alex popped off. She didn't feel like setting him straight, so she let him get away with it, that time. Although, she was sure Jim had noticed the look, she'd thrown in Alex's direction.

Sometime after dinner that night, which Jim was present at as usual, Emma announced the work would go on, "At least until they put a block on the money." With that Alex again, mentioned the Gold. She held back what emotions she could, when she replied

"I don't know how to tell you this." she paused and glanced about the room, every eye was upon her. Even Jim's soft Blues ones- they were the most reassuring. "But with five million in the bank, I doubt that Gold is going to be much more help." There she'd finally said it. For months, they'd been asking how she'd managed to do everything.

"My God" Beth shouted from the kitchen, making her presents known.

"How?" someone asked "When?" rang another voice.

Emma stared up at the wooden blades of the fan overhead, then looking back at them, she continued on "I've known about it from the first, my best guess is that Mrs. Haager, and Jim, were very good business partners, or at least successful." She turned to look him squarely in the face.

"That's why a box of gold never interested you." Alex interjected.

"Right" Rob answered, "Why worry about finding a box of gold, when you've got a bank of it."

"NO" Emma gripped the table. "Why waste valuable time, searching for something that doesn't exist. And with full knowledge, the land about you is worth all the gold in the world." she finished, looking straight at Jim. Whose big grin and dancing eyes were his way of telling her, he agreed. At last she'd put something on the table, that no one dared argue with.

"Fine," Kit spoke up "Then take the money and fight Uncle Sam." he was referring to her oldest brother, whose name appeared first on the papers.

She wished it could be as simple as that, but it wasn't. "NO." she responded shaking her head. "I haven't touched it yet, and now is not the time to start."

"Then how –" Rob questioned. "Have you paid us, all of these months?"

"Yeah, and what about the Village" Alex added.

She rubbed her forehead. Someone would've thought she was divulging secret papers, belonging to the government. Jim stepped a bit closer "Through a fund setup by Mrs. Haager, I told you she'd already made arrangements, to have several things completed, after her death. The Village is just one of them. Believe it or not, she has already paid to have another home, built up here."

Kit threw his hands up in the air, and shook his head "Why do you let them do these things to you, why can't you just fight, you always just give up"



His words had drawn blood, hers. In other words, he was calling her a coward. Jim quickly, sprang forth and put his hand on her back. "Your mother's tired, Kit." it was obvious to her, he'd felt the pain. "Give her a chance to sleep on it, and I promise she'll be up to par tomorrow."

She was relieved to have someone to stand up for her, but she rather wished, he hadn't promised she'd have all the answers, by morning. The group took him at his word, and started to disband, heading for bed. She walked out to the truck with him, mostly in silence. At the end of the walk, she finally said, "I don't know Jim, where am I going to find the answers."

After stepping into the darkness, he suddenly slid his strong arm around her waist, and pulled her close to him. She didn't fuss. Instead, she simply laid her face on his chest, and drank in the comfort he was offering. It wasn't enough, and it never lasted long, but she enjoyed all he was willing to give. Softly he stroked her long black hair and whispered, "I shouldn't be doing this."

She gently shook her head in disagreement. "Hugs don't count." When he laughed her head rhythmically bobbed up and down.

"You feel rather secure in your standing, don't you?"

"Do you mean I'm sure of myself?" she replied, looking up at him. "With you, yes."

"Oh," he whispered, "I see you're not scared of me."

She grinned and shook her head.

"You're not afraid I might suddenly rip off your clothes, and do unspeakable things to your person?"

He'd never spoken that way before. Maybe she should be a little fearful. She thought about it, but then answered "NO."

"Well at least you thought about it, didn't you?" he asked pushing her out far enough to look her in the eyes. She only nodded. "I thought so," he said pulling her back close to himself "I guess I'll have to settle for this."

She could've easily fallen asleep right there, the world seemed to be in its rightful place, for those few moments, and then he shuffled her back into the light and went on home.

Quietly, she pulled the high back chair in front of the fireplace, and started a fire. Then took a seat, and started to contemplate what he'd asked. A man's language wasn't always as simple as it sounded, and she knew exactly what he'd meant. She couldn't do it though, and he knew it even before he'd asked. She'd been correct about hugs not counting, people hug each other all the time, and it never means a thing. In some circles, it's even proper to kiss, and not have it mean

anything. Theirs hadn't been that innocent, and she knew she had to keep a close eye out, so it didn't happen again.

She diverted her thoughts, to the problem at hand. She'd learned a lot, from their talk up at the pond. She now recognized that she indeed, had the upper hand in this game. She was living on the property, and had been, long enough to secure her rights in the county. In addition, she'd recently made some important contacts, which may serve her best interest now.

As for finding the Will, there on the property, it was a long chance. They'd already gone through every place that could've held the silly thing. Sleep kept creeping into her eyes. After battling it off for the third time, she decided it was time to turn in. Laying her notebook to the side, she was surprised to find the fire had grown cold, she hadn't noticed it'd even go out.

Ascending the stairs, she noticed the wood paneling was missing, and in its place cheery wallpaper hung. She recalled discussing it last week with the contractor but was sure they'd told her they couldn't get there until next week. It was impressive though, and decided to thank whomever it was that had picked the paper out. Reaching the landing, before she turned, to climb the last six steps to the second floor, she suddenly questioned if the door was lock, it'd been left open night after night, it seemed. Therefore, she descended the steps to check, since not knowing would keep her awake.

For some reason, she couldn't get the lock to turn. She wondered if someone had had it replaced, it just didn't look the same, and then she realized the door wasn't the same either. A solid wood door stood before her. Even through the fatigue she was feeling, it was apparent to her, before she turned around, that she wasn't in the right time, again.

Quickly she looked towards the landing, and then away, the picture was there. She pulled her hands in towards herself. She wasn't touching anything. Lowering her head, she closed her eyes and counted One – Two – Three – then opened them.

Nothing had changed. She was still seeing things in the past– and smelling it. A strong sent of roses, penetrated her nostrils, coming from the sitting room. Before she could look, a man's voice rang out. "Emma"

The situation was all too similar. She'd been there before. A dainty, young girl appeared at the top of the staircase and called. "Coming Grandfather"

Emma expected the whole thing to disappear then, but it didn't. The girl descending the steps, and passed only inches from her. On into the sitting room she went, and came to a stop, in front of a large high backed chair. The conversation that ensued, reminded Emma of many she herself had conducted. The young girl was instructed on good and bad influences, they reinforced that

they were older, and had more knowledge of the world at large. It seemed they were having a disagreement over who would be taking her to the Spring Cotillion.

The word was familiar to her. She recalled hearing her Grandmother, speaking about it every chance she got. Obviously, it must've been a point in time that had impressed upon her many lessons. The first being that Grandfather knew better than she, who was going to take her.

If memory served her right, her Grandmother had mentioned that it was the biggest event of a young girl's life. It was her coming out party, where all young debutantes, were introduced to the adult world. It signified, the age of dating or in this case, meeting beaux. The event came with plenty of pompadour, too. The girl was responsible for sewing her own dress, and matching bow for the hair. If the parents agreed, she'd be able to wear her hair high on her head, but if they were stiff necked, it was only pulled up on the back of her neck. In addition, there was the white gloves and matching shoes.

She'd been so caught up in remembering the event, as her grandmother had described it, that she missed most of the conversation, that continued in the sitting room. It wasn't until she heard the name West, that she was drawn back, but by then the girl was no longer in the room, a rather sweet looking elderly woman was speaking,

"Someday, she'll thank you John." her voice was as soft and sweet as she appeared to be.

"Maybe Emme, she's not you, though." He said as he rose, from the chair. His dark hair and dark clothing, took Emma by surprise. It was the man from the picture, and the pond, she grew so fearful, that she actually started to shake. Slowly moving backwards, out of the room, as if she thought they might see her.

Suddenly a loud commotion arose from the living room. Turning, she discovered the room filled to over full, with people, big people, little tiny girls, babes in mother's arms, all dancing and singing. At the fireplace, on the mantel, Old Johnny rested his arm, two women on each side of him. One was her own Great-Great Grandmother, she knew only because of the scene she'd just watched, in the sitting room.

It puzzled her, how had they gotten there so fast, and, where had all the people come from. Nothing made sense, so why worry about it, she thought. What she need to worry about, was how she was going to get back to her own time. That is, if she really wasn't there all along, it bothered her that no one seemed to be able to see her. Actually, it would've been a bigger problem, if they could've seen her. Jeans and t-shirts were probably not looked upon as being suitable attire, for the event that was taking place.

Music filled the air, and everyone was dancing and carrying on. Then suddenly the music stopped and everyone fell back, to clear a path to the staircase. Emma had taken up a perch near

the door, so she was one of the first people to see her Grandmother, descend the steps. No longer did she look to be the youthful girl, with braids twisted about her head. Her dress, although not one; a girl today would wear to a ball, but was glorious just the same. It was made of a velvet fabric, and had little embroidered flowers about the neck and cuffs, it was full from the waist down, and tapered to fit snug at her waist, although it left a bit of imagination, as to where the bust line would've been. Her Grandmother always was well endowed, in that fact, so she wondered where they had gone.

Her grandfather met her at the bottom of the steps, and made the presentation of her to everyone, an older boy, then stepped forward and was introduced, as Mr. West. It was her Grandfather, though she found him so handsome, it was hard for her to believe. The music started again, and she took his hand, and then started to dance.

The warmth of the room began to get to her, as she watched them dance, beneath an extremely large glass globe that hung from the middle of the room. On it was a hand painted picture of the falls, up at the lake. It was impressive. She figured, if she ever made it back to her own time, she'd search the stores for something similar. However, for right that minute she had to step outside, for some cool air. In addition, she hoped that perhaps stepping through the door would, break the spell.

She even closed her eyes as she did so, but when she opened them, it was still the spring of 1914. As she walked the distance of the front walk, she listened to the music carefully, she'd heard it before but she wasn't sure where. Suddenly she turned to look back at the house and discovered the same scene she'd seen, three times. That's why the music had sounded familiar.

Suddenly, a shrill cry broke the brisk air that pressed against her flushed cheeks. Whirling about, she caught a faint glimpse of a couple struggling just outside the light. This was the moment she'd hoped for, she could now help that girl. That has to be the reason I'm here, it was obvious to her that the girl was being raped.

Emma could hear her own heart beating in her ears. She couldn't just stand there doing nothing. She started to run towards the couple, the closer she got, the more she could hear the girl repeatedly crying no.

Forty feet more, thirty feet more, she passed beyond the light – and leaped from the chair in front of the fireplace. Her abrupt movement sent her notebook flying into the fire itself. Immediately, she grabbed for it, and then dropped back into the chair, had it really just been a dream? It couldn't have been, she could feel the cobblestone beneath her feet, and the heat in her cheeks. It had to be real. Quickly she wrote down every detail, right from the dress she wore, to the glass globe in the living room, she feared she'd forget it, before she got it all written down.

She lay in the bed, until just after sunrise, when she could hear Beth moving about in the kitchen. Then she dressed, and joined her in the kitchen, when she offered to help with breakfast, Beth responded with "It looks like you should go back to bed, to me."

After breakfast, when it appeared, they all might just slip back into bed, she decided to reiterate her words of the night before. "I spent most of the night, reviewing this situation."

"Who didn't" Kit snapped back.

"Well" she said, lowering her head to look at her shoes, "Perhaps I don't need to say this but I'm going to anyway." Suddenly, as if her head had been lifted, by some unseen force, she looked up and realized Jim had just entered the room. "I want you all to remember that these people, are your Uncle's and Aunt's" she looked to Kit. "Your brother's and sister-in-law's." she responded looking to Beth "And your parent's" Turning to find Alex.

"And my grandparents, " Alex's oldest son Mark added.

"Right," she looked back to Jim "And unbelievably, they love each one of us." she rushed her words, knowing full well, what the response was going to be.

"Like shit." Rob proclaimed.

"Really Em, open your eyes." Alex added.

"Listen—" she tried to interrupt.

"No mom, you listen." Kit stated, standing up, "You're always covering for them, you have to stop."

"Kit, please." she started to plead with him, but noticing Jim approaching the front of the room, decided to change her strategy, "Listen, if we walk off now, they win by default. That's not the way I'm leaving this place." It didn't feel right telling them that, after all, she'd always played the peacemaker. She somehow, she'd earned the position of playing the go between. "But I can't have you let this hurt continue to grow. I understand, that if it were not for them, questioning this now, it maybe some other family member, from a part of the family we don't know."

"Oh, so it's better to be hurt by someone that loves you, then a complete stranger, right." Kit shot back.

"Kit, sit down and listen to your Mother." Jim stood up saying.

"Where do you get off?" Kit turned on him

"Listen." Beth spoke up "What your Mom is saying makes sense, she's just pointing out the facts. If this hadn't taken place now, we could've made a success of this place, only to have it take away."

"No one is going to take this place away from any of you." Jim again spoke up. "They just don't fit the bill, don't you understand. The court will not go against tradition, it can't, or else it may risk someone coming along and changing the tradition, that give them strength." He was beginning to sound like a lawyer or something. He even looked the part, resting his back against the glass hutch, with his pipe in the corner of his mouth.

"Now we just have to get back to work. Too many things have been put in place to turn back now." Emma added. She was expecting a better response than she received, but at least they went back to work and not to bed. "By the way, keep your eyes open for that Will."

She stepped into the kitchen, with Beth, just so Kit and Jim would be alone for a minute. Since she didn't hear any fighting, or raised voices, she figured it was all right to go back in. The two of them were sitting at the first table drinking coffee. When he saw her enter the room, he stood up and gave her a kiss on the cheek. She didn't know what he'd said, but it must have touched Kit's, he defiantly didn't leave that room with the same impression of his Mother that he'd entered with.

The next task was to call Mike, and inform him of the problem, she knew she was going to have to play peacemaker, again. Unfortunately, she wasn't going to have Jim around to plead her case for her.

He didn't get as out raged as she'd expected, matter of a fact he even sounded a bit like he'd expected it. "Besides, just who do they expect to run it any better than you? After all, I'm the only one with a degree in motel management. They'll have to come to me to run the place." He was determined, to hold tight to that status "And you're the only one with any housekeeping experience." he added as if it were a passing thought.

To think, that was all he thought of her, made her blood boil, she didn't hear much of the rest of the conversation. She decided that it would be better off for the phone, if she didn't call him so much. After all that was the second cord, she'd replaced, and it appeared to need it again. She just had a bad habit of stretching it, whenever she got mad, and lately, that was only when she called him.

Swirling around in her chair, she slapped the desk so hard that she tipped the box on the corner over. Mrs. Haager's files flew all over the floor, tears welled up in her eyes, and she hung her head low again, only to remember Jim's words, once again ring in her head.

He was right she was someone to be proud of; after all, it wasn't Mike, or her older brothers that had gotten the place to where it was today.

"I'm better than making beds and cleaning toilets." She started to talk right aloud. "I wonder who it was that set the phone system up, and connected the eight points of sale to the computer, it wasn't them." she got up and started to re-file the papers on the floor. "And tell me, does one of them, even know the price that wheat is going for this week, How about what a good horse go's for. Can they milk a cow, or know how much milk that can be expected from that cow. No" she answered herself. "It wasn't him that put together those advertising packets, and sent them off. It was me and when they called last week to book the first tour, was he here to take the call. Will he be here on the first, when the tour group agent shows up to inspect the place. I don't think so." She finished sitting on the floor.

However, he was right about one thing. She learned everything she knew about the business from him, and that most definitely, was more than her brothers knew about running the place.

## CHAPTER TEN VIP WEEKEND

Nearly a week had past, before she was able to tell Jim of the dream. Everyone was back to his or her normal busy selves, and discussion of the suite dwindled, washing the pain of betrayal from their hearts. Thanks to the late spring rain, the valley grew greener with each shower, adding to the general over all beauty, of the progress being made.

It appeared the June opening date, was going to be meet. However, it was the summer fair's deadline, which had her up and about early this morning.

As Emma headed out the back door, to find Alex; she knew he'd be in the green houses. They'd been his pet project, since he first discovered them, shortly after finding the third house. He'd spent every free minute he could find, reconstruction them from the ground up. She thought they had been a total loss when he first found them. He proved they weren't.

Jim had appeared at the door in the middle of one of their discussions. Obviously, wishing to speak to her, but he patiently waited until Alex finished telling her his plans.

Once he realized Jim was there, Alex asked if he knew how old Johnny had come up with such an ingenious, way of keeping the place warm during the winter months. She'd no idea what he was talking about, but Jim seemed to understand the question and for the next half hour, they discussed the pro's and con's, of heating the place with underground water pipes, that ran out of the hot springs, not too far away. When the conversation developed in to a more extensive one, on the usage of hot springs, she excused herself and took a seat out under a tall pine for shade. The June sun was already hot, but the extra glass didn't help matters. They followed suite not

missing a beat, in the conversation, soon all three sat Indian style, comparing the advantages of heating this way.

When Alex took off, down the hill for the refreshments, Jim leaned close and whispered.

"I finally got you to myself." She knew he was kidding, and chuckled. "No really Emma." he continued on, very serious "I've been trying to talk to you for days, but that kid of yours won't leave me alone with you, for even a minute."

She understood what he was saying. Kit had left for Salt Lake that morning, to prepare for his graduation. She'd be returning herself in a few days, then when she returned home, she'd be bringing the rest of the kids with her.

"So what's so important?" she whispered back "And why are we whispering?"

"I don't know why we're whispering, now. I didn't want Alex to get the wrong idea, a minute ago." He was grinning at her, the way it always did, when she was in the room. "I just needed to talk to you." he went on with a twinkle in his eye.

Their time was up, Alex was returning with three sodas in hand. Taking back his place on the ground, he continued on right where he'd left off, not noticing the silent words passing between Jim and herself.

"So tell me, how did old Johnny know he could do what he did, to the place?"

"Oh" Jim looked up at him. "I guess he just stumbled on the idea."

He went on to recite bits and pieces of the story he'd told her the first night. How no one else wanted the land. Not even the Indians. They called it bad medicine land – due to all the hot springs. The settlers feared the land as well, because they feared it would blow up like the ships on the Mississippi. Therefore, he'd been able to buy it for ten cent an acre, if it hadn't been for Emme's Grandmother dying when she did, he wouldn't have had the funds to do so then. Suddenly she'd an idea, and had to do some research, so she quickly excused herself, and started the three quarter mile trek, back to the Big House.

She was just nearing the Plantation House, as it was becoming known, when Jim caught up with her. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he tugged her in the door of the third house, and pinned her to the wall. Staring straight into her eyes, so close he could've kissed her, he said through deep breaths "When can we talk?" She fought off the temptations gnawing at her lips, and told him, later that evening. With a wink, he agreed to meet her at the barn, and then released her, to go on her way. She hated to put him off, but needed to do this research, she'd have to tell him about it later.



She'd been tied up after dinner, when a couple of women from the party committee, showed up, and dragged her off to look at flowers for the Ball. It had required changing into a dress and heels, and driving all the way to Cedar, only to remember they didn't need the extra expense; after all she assured them, the green house's would be able to supply all the cut flowers they could use.

By the time she returned, later had turned into very late. She drove directly to the barn, not even stopping at the house to let anyone know where she was headed. She'd hoped someone would be on the front porch, as it seemed someone always was, but that wasn't to be the case.

When she arrived, all but one dimly lit light was off, and it was way in the back, of the barn. Near the big door, that led to the pasture. She wasn't crazy about the thought of walking in there alone, but Jim's truck was still there, he must be somewhere around.

As cautiously as she could, with heels on, she entered the large red building and called his name. There was no response, but the other door stood completely open. Doing her best not to step in anything, she made her way to the other side of the barn, and called his name again.

Suddenly there was a noise behind her in the barn, but before she could turn. Two strong hands gripped about her waist. The scream was passing her lips, before she heard Jim say "You looking for me." Good thing his arms were around her, or her heels, wouldn't have been the only thing covered with cow chips.

When she awoke, he'd gently laid her on a pile of fresh mowed hay, and had his jacket wrapped about her chest and arms, he sat crossed legged right next to her, with his head hung low in his hands. The moment she moved, he looked up at her, she thought she could see moisture slipping from his eyes, but refrained from saying so. Wetting her lips, she asked "How long have I been here?"

Again, he lowered his head and whispered something, she didn't hear, it obviously wasn't intended for her ears, and then responded "About fifteen minutes. I'll never do that again, you gave me such a fright, girl."

"I've never fainted before" she stated, sitting up, pushing his jacket off. A cool breeze, slithered up her back, the zipper on her dress was undone. When she reached, back to make sure, He simply said, "First thing you do, when someone passes out, loosen their clothing. Sorry, I really didn't—"

"It's Ok Jim, I know." she reassured him "Although, I've never passes out before, at least not from fright." She remembered her former boss's wedding. That night the cause was champagne.

He looked so pitiful. She couldn't help but want to comfort him. "The least you could do is zip it back up." She said with a wink of the eye.

When he regained his composure, He lifted his head and said, "I've never known a girl, so set to destroy me."

"What do you mean?"

He didn't let her turn to look at him, he just simple held on, and nuzzled his nose deep into her hair. She let her guard down, and allowed herself to be a woman. Softly she kissed, his forearm, and relaxed back against his broad chest. He released his shoulder grip and replaced it with one around her waist. She knew it wasn't right, but it felt so good, just to be held. Neither of them spoke, for the longest of time, and then he lifted his head off her shoulder and released her waist. The moment was over, but she enjoyed it, more than she could say.

Swiftly she pulled herself to her feet. On wobbly knees, she walked to the back door. She was sure he got the message. She stopped just short of passing through it. There she stood, arms folded close to her chest, she wouldn't have admitted it, but it was to hold on to the warmth, she'd just encountered. He followed a minute later, stretching his arm above her to lean against the barn door. All though there was nothing out there to look at, at least she wasn't staring into his deep eyes. "This has just—"

"I know." he said, squeezing her shoulder. "I feel the same thing, it's like magic." quickly she spun around

"That's it, I've been trying to put my finger on the right word." realizing she was once again looking deep into his eyes, she quickly turned back.

"You can't hide from me. I mean we have to work together every day. How are we going to handle this?" She'd no way of answering him. He leaned forward and whispered. "Ok, we'll pretend it doesn't exist, for a while longer." he straightened back up. "Now." he said in a normal tone "how about if we compare notes, about what we have seen."

Pulling away from his grasp she said, "I can't think straight, right now." she'd again turned to look him squarely in the eyes, "Can't we have this talk, another time. I –" his eyes were soft, and they distracted her thoughts, again, "I've got to get out of here."

"Emma, don't run from me."

She wasn't running, just moving as fast as she could, in heels. Whirling around at the opposite door, she discovered, he hadn't moved a step towards her. The distance gave her the space to think clearly.

"I'm not running from you. I told you before, it's me I fear." With that, she continued on to the car, then home.

The next afternoon, as she sat on the porch swing, watching out across the ever-greening land. A group of cars caught her eye as they pulled off the main road, and headed towards the big house. At first she thought, perhaps they were a group of people from town, but as they crossed the arched bridge. She recognized one of the cars. It was her older brother Bobs.

Panic, flooded every pore, as she raced for the phone, exclaiming at the top of her lungs as she passed through the living room, continuing on to her office. Within the time it took for them to drive from the bridge to the front gate, she'd had Mr. B. on the line.

"Slow down Emma, tell me what's happening." His fatherly tone always left her feeling somehow better, even when he couldn't make thing all right. This time, he simply had to remind her, that the court date wasn't set until, August. Hanging up the phone, she suddenly realized, they were there to check the place out. Well if they wanted to see, who could best run it, then that was what they'd see. She proclaimed to the group that had gathered outside her office "If they want to see how we treat our guest's, then that's what we'll give them".

For the next two days, these people were treated like VIP's, they were wined and dined, taken on personalized tours of the place, taught to ride, and even feasted on the fine brook trout, from the rainbow colored lake, but not a word of the suite was discussed.

To an outsider stopping by, it may have appeared, there was a great family reunion under way, but to her it was back breaking work, not to through them off the land. More than once, she found herself with tongue in check, fighting the hurtful word that lay waiting, on the tip of her tongue.

By Sunday afternoon, when the last of the car's had driven off, she simple dropped into the large chair in front of the fire place, and started to cry so hard, that even Beth couldn't console her. If there was anything to be grateful for, it was that K it was in Salt Lake. He didn't witness her "feet kissing" attempt, to show them who was the boss, she knew he despised her peacekeeping missions. Now, she felt more like an ass kisser then peacekeeper, what else was she to do? In the old days, she could've drawn a gun and chased them off her land, but in this day, not everyone used guns, to solve their problems. The more she mulled it over in her head, the larger her headache got.

By dark, when it appeared everyone had stopped trying to comfort her, and gone to bed. A shadowed figure on the front porch startled her. Quickly moving to the curtain to get a better look, she recognized Jim's slight outline sitting in the porch swing.

She hadn't seen him all weekend. In fact she hadn't seen him since their talk at the barn. It was understandable that he stayed clear of the place, over the weekend, but what was he doing on the front porch, at this time of the night, she thought, as she stepped out into the cool evening air.

"I understand you need Me." his deep clear words sprung to her ears.

"Who called? Beth." she asked treading a bit closer, but he only shook his head.

"I just know." he responded, not looking up at her. He was working on the mind reading thing.

"Looks like you need me more." she remarked, about the way his hair was uncombed and his face needed a shave. When his piercing blue eyes meet hers, she knew she'd guessed right.

"What is it?" She questioned lowering herself to his feet, and looking up into his troubled face.

"Tell me, what can I do?"

"Oh Emma," he responded pulling her face against his leg. "Sara –" His voice broke and he began to weep openly in front of her. His whole body was trembling. Quickly climbing onto the swing, to cradle him in her arms, where he wept like a baby into her chest. Then as his sobs, diminished, he managed to tell her about the accident, but it had occurred nearly a month ago, why had he waited so long to react?

"They just called me the other day, the doctor said that her Grandmother was killed, and since there wasn't going to be anyone there, to help her, she would—" again his voice trailed off into nothing. "They wouldn't let me raise her, they said it wasn't right. Now they want to send her here, and I don't even know her." he looked up at her, his eyes red and puffed, "I haven't even gotten a picture, in two years. I don't even know what she looks like."

"It'll be ok. I promise we'll find a way to care for her."

"She can't walk. I mean the doctor said she could, if she would. She was driving though, and she thinks it's her fault."

"Oh, Jim." she could feel his pain, the thought of having a child, that someone took away, was difficult in the first place, but now they were asking him to do the impossible, become a father overnight. Wrap a child, that doesn't know him, into his arms, and kiss and make it better.

They sat there silently, for quite some time. Then suddenly, he sprang up and walked to the porch railing. Where he stood silently, looking out over the slumbering valley. When she joined him, he quickly swept her to him, with his arms wrapped tightly around her. When she tensed, he bent close and whispered to her "Remember Emma, hugs don't count. Besides I'm here to cheer you up."

"I made such a fool of myself this weekend." She sighed looking down at the small flowers growing at the edge of the porch.

"It didn't look that way to me." He offered

"Well then, I felt like a fool. Running those guy's all over the place, wiping their noses."

"You mean kissing butt." He said with a half-witted chuckle.

"Call it what you want, I thought I had them eating out of my hand, and really they had me jumping through hoops."

"It looked like you were all enjoying yourselves, to me."

"Where were you?" she puzzled turning to look up at him.

"Oh, here and there but trust me, you were never out of sight."

The thought sent a chill up her back "When you say never out of your sight –"

"Of course not." he answered her question even before she'd finished it.

"See, you did it again." amazement filled her face, How did he keep doing that.

"I tell you, I can't read your mind, but your face is another story, every time I see it."

"So you thought we were amusing ha?" she asked turning to look back out across the valley.

"I said you looked like a family enjoying themselves. It almost had me wondering, why I was so afraid they might hurt you." When she didn't argue his comment, he went on to ask, "Would they hurt you?"

"God no –" she again pulled loose enough to look at him "They just expect more than I can give."

"Like what?" he asked stoking her burning cheeks.

"Like the land, I wanted to divided it up with them, but before I can even get it moving through the courts, they file this stupid suite, wanting all of it." she responded shifting her weight around him, so she could walk back to the swing. "I never intended to keep it all, Mr. B. said I'd have to run it for a year or two, before the court would even consider breaking the tradition." she finished sitting down. "But, what can I do to help you, with Sara? Do you need money to get her here?"

"I'll need a couple days off."

"Anything you want, it's yours."

"That's a pretty broad description, are you sure you have that to offer." she thought he meant concerning Sara, until he drew her close enough, she could feel his hot breath on her nose. By then she'd no time to react, before he pressed his sweet lips to hers. Even though she didn't want to pull away, that was exactly what she did.

She didn't see him again until after she'd returned from Kit's graduation. She'd spent most the week in Salt Lake, with hopes that with the extra time, she'd be able to convince Mike to come along as well. The only thing that happened was the two of them were fighting constantly.

"Poor Kit, it should've been the best time of his life, and all he got to hear, was the two of us going at each other's throat." she told Beth, when asked how the week had gone.

"Why can't he just admit here is where you're going to be?" Beth asked, stepping back to the kitchen counter, to chop carrots.

"If I knew that, I'd have the war won." She remarked, while filling the sugar container.

"By the way, Jim's back." Beth added as if that may make everything all right.

"How's Sara?"

"He's not said much, but Jesse called yesterday, and asked if you were back yet." Jesse, often called, but she just felt as if she'd better check in on her, this time.

"Did she say, there was anything, we could help with."

"Kid's"

"Oh, I get it, if Sara knows she's not the only one around, she may feel better."

"Exactly, I guess Jimmy –" she paused with a puzzled look on her face. "Is that his name?"

Emma bobbed her head to agree, and Beth continued on, "He came home too, but he doesn't know her much better, since Jim raised him."

"That poor girl" Emma remarked, as she spooned the sweetener into her tea. "I'll make up a basket of fruit. Then have them take it over. The kids may just be what she needs."

That was just what she did. As soon as she was able to convince Shelly Jesse needed the help, Shelly was more than willing to make the trip, Crystal and Jason went along to keep her company.

By dark, when the trio hadn't returned, Emma, decided to check on them. To her surprise, Kit's Geo was parked out front, along with Shelly's Honda, and from the crowd on the front porch, it looked like the poor girl, wouldn't be friend poor for long.

Slipping around the side of the house, so not to disturb the smaller group on the front porch, she watched carefully the larger group under the large front tree. There she could see, Kit and Shelly, along with Beth's girls and even Jakes oldest boy huddled around the poor little thing in a

wheel chair, and another boy she only thought looked familiar, Crystal was on the porch with a couple of other boys and a very dark haired girl.

She'd just cleared the porch, walking on to the back door. When Jim grabbed hold of her arm, she hadn't seen him there. She nearly gave him away, with a scream – but he covered her mouth first. While whispering, "It's just me"

By the time, her heart returned, to its slower pace. He held her tightly against him, facing the front of the house, when he bowed the small bush he could see the group, under the tree.

"Isn't she beautiful?" he whispered barely above his breath. Emma could barely see her from where she stood, but answered affirmative any way. She wasn't about to pop his bubble, by telling him that parents always thought, their children were the best looking things on the earth.

The longer she stood there though, the more she began to see what he meant. At first, the girl's long blond hair was all she could see, but when Kit moved the chair closer to the house, she was able to see the beauty.

Large almond shaped blue eyes, that were twinkling at that moment, studied Kit's face intensely, with a warm smile, and rosy cheeks, that lied about the health of the sweet thing. Her complexion was whipped strawberry cream, the high cheek bone hinted at her the small frame, captured in the wheel chair.

Jim stood clutching her tightly, not saying a word.

"Is that Jimmy?" she moved the bush to point out the figured she'd thought familiar,

"Yes." he responded, with an air of distaste "I don't know what that college has planted in his head, look at those clothes."

"What's wrong with him?" she puzzled

"I forget you're from the city, where it's ok, for kids to belong to local posses, and where they wear their hanky around their heads."

"Be patient, he comes from good stock, I'm sure it'll show." she hoped, her answer would ease his mind. "So tell me, where's my lost child."

"In the house with Mom." he answered stepping back to free her. "I hope your right. He worries me, and the way he keeps hanging on Shelly, should worry you."

She leaned forward again to see if she'd anything to worry about, but from where she stood, the hold he had on her daughter, looked no different from anything she'd seen before.

"Shelly knows what she's looking for, if he doesn't meet her standards, he'll know soon enough."

"Like her Mom, Ha?" He said with a wink, as she continued towards the back door.

Inside Jesse was busy entertaining Jason, with a hot batch of cookies and punch. Even though he was only a couple years younger than the rest, it was just enough to make him an outsider.

"Mom, we're watching the game." he exclaimed, the moment she stepped in, then he trotted off, so as not to miss the game. Jesse took a seat at the kitchen table and asked, "So did you manage to convince him to move?" catching her off guard.

"And I thought, I could get you to tell me, what's been going on around here." she said with a chuckle.

"That didn't answer the question." Jim's voice rang from the door. "Is he?"

"No," her voice showed the frustration she felt, as she looked down at her hands, and twisted the band on her finger. "I don't know what it's going to take to get him here."

"Why worry?" he remarked taking a seat across the table from her with his hot cup of coffee. "If he's not smart enough to know, what he's throwing away. He's stupid enough to lose it."

"James!" Jesse nearly shouted at him, "You know what it's like when people go their different ways, she doesn't need any one telling her how to handle it."

"We're not going our separate ways!" she attempted to clarify the situation "He just won't come down." Who was she trying to convince, them? They could see it from the outside, and even if she couldn't, they could see a separation occurring, but the battle did manage to change the subject.

After Jesse told how Jimmy had come home, to help with his little sister, Jim again, said that he was worried about the way he'd been hanging on Shelly. She knew that he was a bit partial for Shelly, but found it difficult to think, he would actually watch out for her, and not his own son.

"Maybe it's right," Jesse added her two cents, "Maybe it's the right blood mix."

Blood Mix, just the sound of the words sent Emma's heart racing. However, the way Jesse grabbed her mouth, and hung her head, caused Emma to worry even more.

"Mom" Jim exclaimed, throwing his mother a look of disgust.

"My God – what are you talking about?" Emma had risen to her feet.



"It's alright, Emma." Jim stood as well, "Mom has this stupid story, she's always talking about and she's told it so many times, she's began to believe it."

It was more the way he said the word, then what he actually said that eased her mind and allowed her to sit down. "What kind of a story?" she asked, looking over at Jesse, but it was Jim that continued "The legend, it says when the right people get together, then peace will once again be returned to the earth."

"Married... that's what you meant, by blood mixing."

"The birth of a child," Jesse corrected her. "That's the only way blood should be mixed."

"Like I said it's silly." Jim stated

"Makes sense to me, I mean, I wish it could be that easy to insure peace, I'd marry them off tonight believe me, Shelly would whip him into shape."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN EMMA'S FIRST CATILLION

By morning, she'd decided that the tale Jesse had spun the night before, had to be part of the legend the people of town were always talking about. However, she'd also decided she hadn't the time to finding out what it meant. The Summer Fair was only a week away, and the grand opening two.

While she had some calls and inquiries about reservations, she was beginning to think Mike was right. Maybe the place was unsellable. Perhaps it did lay too far off the beaten path.

At least, that's what she was considering the minute the phone rang, and Julianna Russo barged into the picture. She represented a travel group out of L.A. that often ran tours through the area. She was the first true taker, on the pamphlet Emma had sent out, or at least, would be, after she could see the place herself.

Emma assured her, she was welcome to stop by any time. She had other plans, stating particular dates, leaving Emma speechless. It just so happened, she wished to look the place over, the same weekend as the Fair. How was Emma to decline, she'd said anytime. Therefore, her first reservation went down on the books as requested, adding only a brief note that she'd chosen a weekend unlike any other.

"Unlike any other" Julianna's sweet voice questioned

"The town has convinced me, to allow them to hold the annual Summer Fair, here that weekend. You should find it exciting – but please remember it's not always so hectic around here."

"Oh," she stammered "I had for—" when the line went silent once again, Emma considered asking if she'd prefer to change her reservation, but before she could ask, Mrs. Russo started again. "I'm sorry." She said clearing her throat. "I must have swallowed something wrong, I think that sounds fun. So often, I end up at a place before they open, only to be bored. Besides, I never get to find out how they treat their guests, you know since I'm really the only one they have to watch over at that time."

Emma caught her meaning, and went on to confirm the reservation date. Mrs. Russo certainly wasn't going to be alone, Emma thought. She'll only be one, of a few hundred I'll have to watch over. Shaking her head, she wondered how she'd managed to get herself in such a fine predicament. "It's Jim's fault."

"What's my fault, NOW?" he asked from the doorway.

"You allowed those people, to wrangle me into this Fair, even before I knew what they were talking about."

"OH, That again." he responded, turning the chair around to straddle it, like a horse. "Are you ever going to forgive me, for dragging you to that meeting?"

"I doubt it." She answered jokingly. "There's no way to rid you of a problem, like taking poor Emma to a meeting half asleep."

"Come on, I was just as tired." he pleaded. He was right, she'd gotten herself into this mess, and she shouldn't be punishing him.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. But it's more fun to tease you about it."

"Teasing is that what you call it. Hell Girl, you have me doing things even Mom couldn't the year she was in charge. And, whoever it was that thought up building a dance floor, in the parking lot should be shot."

"You got the gun? Go ahead. Put me out of my misery."

The twinkle her admission had sparked in his eyes, made her think of how they had twinkled the day he kissed her. Neither had spoken a word about it, since then. Sometimes she wondered if it had really happened. He hadn't gotten close to her since kissing her, not that she was complaining, but it had been enjoyable, even if she had regretted it later.

"No. That would be too easy; I'll come up with a way to pay you back. Just you wait." The tease in his voice, made her feel as if she might enjoy that too.

The dance floor was only one of the things, she began to fear wouldn't be finished on time. Why had all the plans, looked so simple on paper? No one bothered to tell her how difficult a Rodeo was to sponsor, and the liability insurance she had to arrange to cover the fair games, just about drove her crazy.

Come hell or high water though, it was all going to come together, if someone didn't kill her first. Beth had been cooking for days, Alex cutting and arranging flowers, and Rob and the kids had been busy setting up the kids little game area.

As for her by Friday morning she'd lost track of what day it was. Until, Mrs. Russo stepped in the front door, and someone was sent to find her, throwing straw for the rodeo. Racing back to the house, she didn't once give a thought to what she looked like, until she came face to face, with perhaps the most beautiful woman she'd ever met.

Julianna Russo was everything she'd ever wished to be. Right from her flowing honey colored hair and pink complexion, to her long legs and dainty feet. The rose-colored suit she wore must have been made for her. That was the only way she could've got it to fit so well. Beth had drawn her into the large dining area, and was serving her tea and toast, while she awaited Emma's arrival.

"Mrs. Russo," Emma proclaimed half out of breath. "It's a pleasure. Sorry I wasn't here to meet you."

"Nonsense," her voice spilled like fresh morning dew, across her apricot colored lips. "A young gentleman met me in the drive, and has already taken by bags to my room."

Thank God for the kids, Emma whispered to herself, as she reached to take the warm hand extended towards her, even her nails matched her lips. Emma recalled, how her Grandmother had always insisted, that was a true sign of a real woman. God knew she seldom wore either, but when she did, they were never the same color.

"You have a lovely place here." She continued on, scanning the large room. "Please call me Jewel I hate Mrs. Russo."

Jewel, Emma thought, so appropriate. Like Crystal's name, it fit her precisely, as pristine and refined as a fine diamond. A moment later, she caught sight of her own reflection, in the glass doors and cringed in horror. Two more opposites had never sat at one table before. Quickly removing the straw from her hair, Emma apologized.

"Sorry, it's been more trouble setting up, than I'd originally anticipated."

"Oh my dear," she responded with a chuckle so delicate "You look delightful. I only wish I could look so good, without the help of a full staff of beauty consultants."

She was just being polite, Emma knew no matter what time of day, or night she was to find this woman, she would always be beautiful. Beauty has no secrets, it a birthright, either you were born with it or without. "Your being kind"

She went on to tell Ms Russo that unfortunately she'd forgotten to include the fact of the Summer Ball, which was to be held there, that night. "However if you would like, I believe, I may have something that might fit." she really didn't mean her herself. They were nowhere near the same size. She was actually referring, to one of the dresses she'd purchased for Crystal.

"Formal, Ha"

Emma nodded, feeling embarrassed, that she had put the poor woman in that position.

"That won't be necessary, one thing this job has taught me. Always be prepared, like a scout, I carry all kinds of clothes. I have to, for times like this."

"Forgive me. I should've called you back."

"Don't be silly."

The beauty sitting across from her, refused to discuss the matter any further. Stopping in front of the mirror, on her way back out, Emma could only wish, she looked like that, at least the people of town, would have someone else to discuss, and perhaps leave her alone for the night.

As the clock in the hall tolled six, she knew she was running behind schedule, as usual. She couldn't remember ever being on time, something always come up, it drove Mike crazy. That thought, made her wish he were there to rag on her once again.

Slipping into her own gown, she hunted desperately, for something to set off the plunging neckline, of pearls and brocade. She should've thought about it earlier. The band had already started to play, down stair in the sitting room. A few minutes later as she struggled to pull on the lace gloves, she heard the western band start up out back. If she delayed a minute more, they would never know she was even there. Frantically forcing her diamond studs into her ear lobes, she started for the steps.

Her heart was beating fast as she swiftly descended the first six steps, she could hardly hear the music. Then stopping on the landing, she realized the music had indeed stopped. All eyes were on her, and time stood still.

At the bottom of the steps, Jim stepped out of the sitting room and extended his hand. She felt the blood rush to her face, she was no princess, but he most definitely was prince charming. Absent of his hat, his dark curly hair flowed backward like the dreamy Knight on a white

charger, she'd seen in a movie. He was wearing a tuxedo, and black polished shoes. The sight of him left her breathless.

Out of the corner of her eye she could tell, he wasn't the only person awaiting her decent. If she didn't move soon, there was no telling what might happen. Setting her eyes on his, she lifted the long flowing skirt with her right hand, and gripped the arm rail tight with the other. Drawing a deep breath (at least as deep as the dress would allow) She took her first step, and then another, soon she'd reached the mid-way point of the case. There she lifted her hand from the rail. Fearing if she didn't, she may somehow slip into the past again. Another two-steps down, she closed her eyes, and their fingers touched, sparks filling the air. Her fingers tightly clutched between his, she continued her decent. Not a second had past, feet firmly planted on solid ground, her hand securely in his. He dropped to one knee and proclaimed "Mrs. Emma Chase, our hostess for the night."

A rousing round of applause erupted. How'd she ever think they might not even see her? As he stood and escorted her to the fireplace, a strange air of déjà vu hovered about her. It was so much like the dream, she feared to allow the girls out of sight, the rest of the night. For that matter, she'd make sure none of the girls, were allowed to move about unescorted.

She could hardly believe how small the large room seemed, she'd had no idea so many people lived in town. Far off in a corner of the old dining room, she spied Beth huddled with Alex and Rob, other than their friendly faces, she knew very few. She was just about to head into the friendly confines of their comforting faces. When Jim gently turned her to look into his face

"Mom thought you might need this." He whispered slipping a necklace into her hand. A small gold heart with a pearl in the middle, it was just what she'd been looking for.

"Will you help me put it on." she looked up at him

"What else is a big strong guy, like me, good for?"

"I can think of a few things." she responded, lifting her hair, to allow him access. She was playing with the thought of introducing him to Jewel, but a piece of her, wouldn't allow it.

"Oh yea." he leaned close to ask. "Like what?"

Tipping her head sideways, so only he could hear, she whispered. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

She shouldn't tease him that way, and she knew it, but for reasons unknown, she simple felt at easy around him. She often teased with Alex that way, and it meant nothing more than space filler, when she didn't know what to say. She knew what she had said that time, and what's more, she knew what she meant, but Jim never would.

It was obvious, as he smoothed her hair back across her shoulders that the group had chosen to talk about them, even with Jewel wondering around somewhere.

As she turned back, to look into the overheated faces of the group, déjà' vu again crept into the back of her mind. The scene was all too familiar. Old Johnny had stood next to Emme, at the fireplace in her dream. Suddenly she could stand there any more – she had to move.

Heading for Beth, she was distracted by one person after another. Each crowding in, to tell her what a terrific job, she'd done in restoring the old place. Soon she forgot her original intention, and ended up on the dance floor, with a rather bushy faced looking older man. However, he sure knew how to whirl a girl. When another man asked to cut in, she politely declined, using the excuse she had to check on the food, there were a few good things about being the host.

Again, she searched the house for a safe heaven. Beth had slipped into her comfort zone, the kitchen. Where Emma paused for a moment, and would've stayed longer, but Alex pulled her back onto the dance floor. Really he just wanted to talk, but that was probably the most private place around.

"Have you been listening to what this people are talking about?" he whispered, barely above the music.

"Sure, they love the place." she barely had time to respond, before Jim cut in.

Alex didn't look very pleased, but trotted away in silence any why. When Jim scooped her into his arms, and gave a new name to dancing to the oldies. If they had been any closer, surgery may have been needed to separate them.

"Jim, your crushing me"

"I'm not going to let you out of my sight." he responded, with an almost fearful tone.

"What's wrong?" she immediately asked, stopping so fast he nearly fell over. "Where are the girls?"

He looked confused, "Out back, Why?"

She hadn't even waited for his "Why" before starting for the door. Once on the porch, she could hear the distinctive difference in musical instruments. The western band, sounded inviting, but she was out to find the girls. Quickly, racing around the corner of the porch, she ran smack dab into a very tall man. Rushing her apologies, she pushed on past and nearly flew down the walk, to the back of the house, all the time watching the faces of the crowd.

She forgot all about the care of delicate fabric, and even the white heels she'd chosen to wear. Accounting for their whereabouts, was the single thought, filling her head as she darted in, and out of the younger crowd, mingling about the parking lot floor.

Then almost as if the crowd sensed her wish, a path opened and the seven of them were clearly visible to her, in a nook of their own, the six stood about Sara in her wheel chair, each girl, securely tucked under a young man's arm of Emma's approval. They actually looked as if they weren't listening to the music; of course with Sara in the wheel chair, how else would she have expected them to act.

"They're fine." Jim's voice peeled above the maracas.

So she could see. Embarrassment quickly took its place, on her face and she dropped her head, as the crowd once again closed in.

"What frightened you?" he asked stepping closer, to lay his warm hand on her back.

"It's silly." she answered, starting back to the house.

"Because that's what Mike would see, or where you just trying to get away from me."

"NO." she exclaimed, swirling back around to look up at him.

"No what? No, Mike wouldn't think it silly or No..."

"Mike would think it silly, he thinks anything I dream is ridiculous" she gazed down at the mud on her shoes.

"Don't do that." He commanded, tugging her chin up again. "Don't lower your head to me." he went on, tucking his hand under her arm and guided her back towards the house. "Tell me why you thought the girls were in danger?"

She started to shake her head no, meaning she didn't know how to explain.

"It's not silly. Did you find the scene from the window to be silly?" They'd reached the walk, and she stopped to clear the mud from her shoes.

"No, none of it's silly – he just can't handle it." she answered finally.

"I don't care what he thinks," he declared clearly, gripping her upper arm, "Why do you think the girls are in danger?"

"The dream." she answered under distress. "I dreamed about the party – Well about a party – and someone was being raped."

Throwing a look back over his shoulders to where the kids, stood laughing and giggling, He remarked, "I wouldn't worry about them, they're fine." then looking back down at her, on his face was the fear, his voice had held originally "It's you I worry about."

"Now, you're being silly, why would any man in his right mind, come looking for an old biddy like me, when he could have them."

"I'm not playing games here. Emma." he pulled her closer, twisting her arm in the process.

"You're hurting Me." she quickly withdrew her arms from his loosened grip, and hurried up the walk. She heard him shout after her, but she didn't turn to look back.

Back in the security of the crowded house, she took the time to consider his words. Perhaps, she'd been playing games with his head, but why had he insisted, she was the one who needed to be watched over. The dream hadn't been about her, maybe it hadn't been about anyone in particular, or worse yet, maybe it really was from the past.

She feared receiving additional answers from the past, more than she did the present. So she found other things to think about, with a house full of people, conversation was the last thing she was lacking for.

Self-consciously she found people staring every time she turned around ; it got so bad, that at one point she stepped into the guest room, off the kitchen to check her dress, fearing she may have torn it. To her surprise, Jewel was reclining in the high backed chair, in front of the fireplace.

"Sorry, I just had to take a look." Emma excused herself, while stepping in front of the mirror.

"You look delightful, Emma." her voice flowed like a sweet tune.

"You know if you keep that up, I'm not going to let you leave."

"Sometimes, I wish I could stay."

"Like now." Emma asked sitting down in the other chair.

"Yeah, like now. I never realized how much I left behind."

"When"

Suddenly she looked over at Emma, as if seeing her for the first time. "I'm sorry, I come from a small town, but I was in a hurry to leave, you know see the real world."



"They both have a lot to offer, I'm from the big city myself. Sometimes I'd give anything, to be able to do something the whole town doesn't know about, but I can tell you one thing."

"What?"

"The small towns offer a security I've never felt in my life. I mean, well you know how big city people are. I doubt someone could get hurt around here, without having a neighbor or two to come to their rescue. That's the way it should be."

"You belong here Emma." she remarked standing and walking to the window. "I've cut off all those strings. I destroyed all hope of ever coming home."

The way she phrased "Coming home", Emma began to wonder if she was from around there. "I hope that's not the truth, everyone needs the ability to go home." she joined her at the window. "Jewel, if you every need a place to go." she paused to make sure she was listening. When she released the curtain and turned with tears in her eyes. Emma no longer even wondered if she should hug, she just did, "You'll always be welcome here."

Her heart went out to the lost spirit, but didn't know what she could add, to what she'd already said. So quietly, she withdrew, leaving the poor woman to contemplate her own problems.

The house radiated heat, as she approached the front door, the brisk air, called her to escape. Summer's sweet fragrance's beckoned her towards them, as well. Stepping out onto the porch, again she experienced the feeling of being there before. That was what she'd done in the dream.

"It took place --" stepping to the edge of the top step "Right down there." she didn't even realize she was talking out loud, perhaps she should walk out there. No, Jim had said she was the one in danger. She shouldn't leave the porch

She'd been so engrossed in thought, that she hadn't even realized she was no longer alone on the porch. Not until, she felt the strong-arm cinch up about her waist had even acknowledge the hand on the side of her face. Someone was holding her from the back. But it wasn't Jim, the tuxedo color was wrong.

Swiftly she twirled around to face her captor, he was but a mere shadowed outline, against the blazing lights of the house, It didn't appear he was about to release his grip of her waist either. What should she do? If only she could see his face, his eyes. Then she would know how to react, she could read his soul. When his grip tightened, even before he spoke, she did not intend to wait around to find out what he wanted any longer.

"No," she shouted pushing against his firm chest, then debated if that was such a good idea, as her heel teetered, on the top step, and finally slid out from under her. She mentally prepared

herself to hit the ground, and then start running, if she got the chance. He was going to have the upper hand, if she actually was to lie on the ground.

She never hit the ground. A pair of familiar feeling arms caught her the moment she teetered backwards, and pulled her close "The lady's not interested Wes." Jim's tetanus voice broke the silence, and his arms her fall. Her feet had no sooner hit the ground, before she whirled herself against his chest.

"Someday Jim I'll get to that lady of yours, when you're not around." The tall stranger proclaimed, before staggering his way back into the house.

Jim had been right. She was the one who should've been listening. Her head was reeling with thoughts of, what if, and she couldn't seem to catch her breath, soon her legs felt like spaghetti. Once he realized she was about to faint, he scooped her off her feet, and carried her to the porch swing. Gently sitting her down, he took a seat next to her and stroked the back of her neck.

"You were right. I should've listened." She said then wondered if the frightened voice was her own.

"I should've explained. I knew he and Jill had had a fight. It was only natural, he would come after you." She didn't understand a thing he was saying. Who was Jill? Wasn't that his x-wife, she thought. No, Julie was. So who was Jill?

The confusion, only added to the dizziness she was experiencing. Besides, who he fights with was his business, she just wanted to know what he meant by that last remark. "What did he mean?"

"Exactly what he said" Jim answered, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

She wasn't ready to expand on that thought, but he was. "Emma you stay clear of that Guy." his voice trembled as he spoke, clueing her in on the fear he felt for her. Wes Harris, had already caused enough trouble between them, she wasn't about to question him anymore. At least not right then, someday, she would turn all her unanswered questions loose on him, but right that minute, it was probably better to let it ride. She'd seen his temper once. A party wasn't any place to summons it up again.

She stayed close, probably closer than her reputation could handle that night. Never moving about freely, and always avoiding the prying eyes of the town's people. When the last of the partygoers, had been shuffled out the door, and the band packed up, she sighed her first free breath, not that being attached, to Jim's arm was very terrible. It had just been, the way people kept talking behind their backs. Soft whispers, of innuendos, and snide remarks, when they

didn't think she was listening. The comments that caused her the most trouble though, were addressing the Legend of the valley, and the way they had of tying her, into the subject,

They were making sure the band, hadn't left anything out, where it'd get wet if it rained that night. When Jim suddenly turned to her saying, he hadn't gotten a dance with her, after all the hard work he'd put in on the dance floor. She hated to point out the fact, that the band had already left, but did so just the same. "Wait, I've got the answer." He announced racing off to the truck. When he turned the oldies up, loud enough to be heard, she thought she was going to keel over in laughter. Racing back on to the wooden floor, he whirled her so high into the air. She feared she might go into orbit, before pulling her down to rest against his chest. Leaving her feet to dangle a good foot of the ground

"Just thought I'd give you a few ideas what these strong arms are better used for." He grinned, lowering her slowly down his chest, to the wooden floor. "Now, what kind of ideas do you have?" he asked glancing down at her with every bit the mischief of a young lover on his first date.

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know." she restated her, tease of earlier. Again knowing she shouldn't, by the twinge of guilt in her stomach.

"Please Lady." He clasped his hand together and dropped to his knee.

His reaction caught her of balance she couldn't do anything but stare into his warm blue eyes. Her heart was melting, she had to react or risk losing herself in them, THIS MAGIC MOMENT, suddenly filled the airwave's and she told him "Dance with me."

## CHAPTER TWELVE SUSPICIONS

Two or three sharp raps on the front door, brought Emma shouting from the warmth of her snug bed, a mere four hours after dancing with Jim. Quickly snatching the cotton robe from the end of her bed, she raced for the steps; only to be stopped short when Alex's hoarse voice rang up to meet her. "Good God, man. Don't tell me in a house this size, you couldn't find a bed to sleep in."

Jim had opened the door for him, and now they both stood staring up at her at the top of the steps. "Good morning," Jim called looking like warmed over death, suddenly she wondered if she looked as bad. Smoothing her hair she thought "what the Hell" she'd traveled this far, she might as well go down and get the morning started.

"Depends on whose eyes you're looking through." she answered, stumbling down to the landing.

"From where I stand, it looks pretty good." Alex responded looking directly at her, as she continued down the steps. Suddenly as her toe hit the third step, the slipper stuck and she was propelled into Jim's arms; catching her about the waist, he lowered her to the floor.

"Hell Emma, good thing you didn't do that last night, those people from town would never have shut up." Blinking her eyes, in disbelief of how fast it had all taken place, she looked at him in confusion. "Don't tell me you didn't hear them." Alex answered her unspoken question, as he headed for the kitchen. "I don't believe you two."

She looked to Jim, hoping he wasn't hearing the accusation she was. He wasn't hearing anything. She doubted he'd even seen Alex, through the blur that covered both eyes.

Stopping at the large round table, that was the only thing in the old dining room, except the nine-foot china hutch. He looked back at them and added, "Sometimes, you two are in your own little world. You had to of heard them, everyone there was talking about it. Surely Jim, you heard them talking about the Legend." Self-doubt filled his face.

"Oh, shot Alex, I thought we'd really missed something." Emma proclaimed, pushing past him and into the kitchen, to make a pot of coffee. Jim wasn't moving so fast. Matter of a fact, he wasn't moving at all.

"What did you hear?" Jim asked, in the same tone she'd heard him use on Wes the night before.

"Shit Jim, they were talking about mixing blood." Mixing blood – that was the why Jesse had said it too. She never let go of the door, instead she softly stepped back into the room. She'd never put the two together before. What could mixing blood have to do with her valley, Or rather the magic of her valley?

"That's what your mom was talking about, that night." she looked to Jim for an answer.

"It's nothing." he responded, stepping past her to the kitchen, but she and Alex exchanged looks, His said "I don't think it was that simple" as he to barged pass her as well.

"Not so fast." he declared clearly, making no mistake that he was upset, by Jim's unpretentious tone. "If what they were talking about didn't scare you Then what in the hell were you still doing here this morning."

He was defending her reputation, as he looked from one to the other of them. "Relax, Alex." he patted him on the shoulder as he started for the coffee maker. "I was protecting her, not attacking her." he never took his eyes off her, the entire time. Was that message intended more for her than him?

"From what"

"Mr. Harris." Jim proclaimed, looking straight at Alex. "Don't tell me you missed him grabbing at her last night."

"Everyone there was trying to touch her." Alex shot back. "Like they thought she could somehow, rid them of all their woes, or at least the STONE would."

"Stone?" she finally found her voice "What stone?" Jim looked as if someone had just hit him over the head with a stone of his own.

"Damn it. I knew this stupid fair was a bad idea." He announced heading for the back door.

"No way" Alex stepped in front of him "You're not going anywhere."

Turning to look back at her, he shrugged "Ok, I guess we drink coffee without cream."

He had only wanted the milk, Jimmy had left on the back porch, and it suddenly occurred to her that Alex was really over reacting to this stone thing. "Alex, sit down." she heard herself command. "You'd think Jim was public enemy number one, the way you're treating him." She looked into Jim's clearing blue eyes as she got the creamer from the porch. "He'll tell us what the stone means, but I need some coffee first."

The two of them seem to be having, an unspoken conversation, while she proceeded to make coffee and toast for all, or at least they were caught up in a game of stare the other one down. She knew where Alex was coming from. He'd always looked after her like a big brother. She wondered if he saw Jim as a threat to her or him. Was he possibly fearful of losing the closeness they had?

"Stop it." she could take the silent treatment no longer, "Damn it." That caught their attention. She rarely swore aloud, four dark blue eyes now held her in their grasp. She'd never spoke to Alex that way before. His was filled with anger, but Jim's danced with a spark of amusement. Pulling her hair, tightly to the back of her neck, she sighed and asked "Jim, please."

"You could have any of those people tell you the story. I mean I'm not hiding any secrets."

"Ok then, why is it so hard to get you to tell us it." Alex asked, venting his anger on Jim.

"Like Emma's always saying, it's one of those silly little tales from this part of the world."

"We want to hear it just the same. Blood mixing, doesn't exactly sound innocent." Alex roared in his face.

"It just means marriage." Emma answered from the counter where she spread the toast, with butter.

"Not quit," Jim responded, after considering her comment. "It means the birth of a child, conceived in that marriage." That was what she meant to say, it made sense the blood of each parent would be mixed in a child.

"So what does it have to do with the legend?" Alex asked, running out of steam.

"Will you guys cut me some slack here, it's early and my heads not working." It wasn't like Jim to look for excuses, he always called it the way he saw it, no matter where he saw it. "This isn't exactly my cup of tea here, I've grown up listening to it, but that doesn't mean I put much credit in it."

She couldn't help but notice his anxiety, after a few good swigs of coffee. He seemed more ready to include them in on the valley's legend.

"They've always told me that the story started before time itself, now you may think that I'm down playing God here, but I'm not." he was talking directly to her, a slight smile was all he required to continue on. "The Entity, I guess they were once as we are, I mean they had bodies at one time. But it's said that they were discarded because of their lack of use." That didn't make any sense to her, but her confusion didn't stop his tale. "After they discovered the secret's to eternity, they simply were laid down."

Now that made more sense, he was talking about immortal people. God's – One of the stumbers in the first of the bible for her "The word God's appears, not God," she interrupted his train of thought.

"What?"

"On the first page of the bible, Gods are quoted not God."

"So?" Alex questioned.

"Remember, when I asked about the reference, every one told me it was a miss print, or it'd been copied wrong – long ago."

"Yah, so what" Alex was still responding not following her thought.

"They wanted me to believe it was a miss print, but they also wanted me to believe every other thing there." Jim shook his head, as if he understood what she was getting at. "Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"You're well read on the bible aren't you?" he was questioning her reliability.

"She's well read on everything." Alex responded. "Just don't try telling her about a horror story, she'll throw you out of the house." Jim looked surprised.

"Those things aren't books," she shuttered, thinking about the horrid things, "there something from the decrepit minds of, misguided people." He couldn't stop himself from laughing. "I learn more about you every day." He added with that twinkle in his eye.

"Yeah, but what we want to know about is the legend." she remind him.

"Ok, something happened to the Entities world, so they were left to wonder the universe looking for a new place."

"How old did you say this story is?" Alex questioned.

"Hell, how am I supposed to know?" Jim shot back. "Why?"

"Well, it couldn't be all that old, people haven't called it the universe, for all that long." Alex answered full of self-confidence.

"I didn't say I was quoting it, there's a name for their plant but I –" He twisted his napkin around his fingers. "I don't remember what it is, like I said, I don't believe it, and I'm just telling you what I can remember." She couldn't help but lay her hand on his leg, in hope of mellowing him out. It worked, without Alex even knowing, where Jim's reassurance was drawn from.

She carefully listened to him recreate, the first book of the bible, before getting up and wondering to the door. The large metal room offered little, in natural light, with no windows. She knew the sun would soon be rising, and the thought of missing it bothered her, more than his story of aliens, being added upon the beast of the land. When Jim paused to watch her, Alex reassured him she was only seeking the sunrise. "I doubt she's missed one since she was born."

She'd already missed the lavender and pink, softly glowing before the actually cresting. That was really her favorite time to watch the eastern sky. Turning back to find they had both sat absolutely still until she was prepared to continue, touched her.

"What are there about a sunrise, that so interreges you that way?" Jim asked in a reverent tone.

"Your face glows as if it were the sun itself."

She was actually embarrassed, by his comment "I dreamed once, I saw the second coming, the sky was much like it was this morning, filled with those wispy clouds." she couldn't believe she was telling this to him, she'd never told anyone about the dream. "I can't even express the real beauty, I saw that day." she was no longer even looking at them, although her eyes were fixed on him, the imprint in her mind, had taken over. "The sky was soft lavender, with slivers of silver slashing across it. On each level were multitudes of angles, singing." She sighed and returned her gaze to them, their facial expressions, said she'd touched them beyond what was physically possible.

She wasn't one that could handle, being the center of attention. She had to return the floor to Jim. "So what does the story have to do with a stone, and what does it have to do with this valley?" It wasn't going to be that easy, she'd shifted gears, but they were stuck. Both watched her intensely, as she strolled back to her seat, next to Jim. "What?" she couldn't stand their gaze anymore "What?"

"Jim had just—" Alex stopped and looked to Jim, in question.

"I just told Alex, that the stone would be passed down through the generations, till a soul who could really see the beauty of the earth, received it." She'd obviously missed some important factors.

"I'm sorry. I thought I could hear you, while watching that, I must have missed something here."

"It's not important Em." Alex suddenly pushed back his chair and started for the coffee pot again. "But I have to ask." he turned to look straight at her. "Do you have the stone?"

"Do I look like I have the stone?" she through her arms up in the air, but that wasn't what he wanted to hear, sitting down again she bluntly responded "NO." She waited for him to pour a round for each and return to his seat. Before asking, "So what does it have to do with the valley?"

"Old Johnny said it was here." Jim answered right away.

"But he had to of believed in Mormonism, or else he wouldn't have been here."

"He believed in polygamy, and the method in which the plates were translated." Jim responded.

"It's silly. Em" Alex repeated his word of earlier. "Why waste a good morning listening to this bull."

She couldn't explain his change of heart, but he made it clear that he didn't want to discuss it any further. When Jim released a sigh of relief, she knew they hadn't told her the whole story, and she was once again left to find it out for herself.

Actually, Alex couldn't have chosen a better time to brake off the conversation. A split second later Rob and Beth, strolled through the back door, and proceeded to push each of them out, on their way.

Quietly returning to her room on the second floor, she pulled on a pair of jeans and a red checked balloon blouse. Staring at herself in the long mirror, she determined she hadn't heard enough of the legend, to decide how important it was. Jim wasn't off the hook yet, she would just find him, and ask the things Alex wasn't ready for her to hear.



Her search started at the horse corrals, every one there was preparing for the rodeo, later that afternoon. While she took a rigorous ribbing, Jim wasn't present. Even Kit got a slap across her butt, before she headed off towards the games, to be held nearer the Lytle White house.

Passing in front of the house, she suddenly remembered, she'd better check in on Jewel. However, Jim came storming out the door before she'd reached it. His jaw locked and eyes seeing only the ground as he marched towards her.

"I was—" was the only thing she managed to get out before he had passed her, and was half way up the road. He was in no mood to talk, and she knew it. Who had brought him to this state of mind, she could only guess... Alex

Why he couldn't let her take care of herself, she didn't know, she changed her intended destination and headed for the green house. Alex would regret trying to run her life, after all did he think he was his father, or something, she cursed under her breath.

First, she had to find Jewel. That wasn't as difficult as she'd thought. Sitting on the steps just inside the front door, the beauty held her head in her hands.

"Is there something I can do?" Emma softly questioned, wondering what had brought her to this state, was her homesickness that bad.

"No," she responded sniffing back the tears "I need you to sign some papers, and I'll be on my way."

"You mean."

"There yours, I'd decided that before I came here, your voice spoke loud enough for itself, but when I arrived and the others took care of me – even when they didn't know I was coming. That says a lot, for the warmth of this place."

Emma ate up every bit of the praise, like a personal pat on her back. "Just let me get them." she finished trotting up the steps. Emma had forgotten all about Jim and Alex, hurrying into her office, she rapidly confirmed the group's itineraries, filling her reservations until January. She'd done it. "No" she corrected her thinking "they had done it." meaning everyone, who had helped around the place in the last two months.

The papers weren't as complicated as she'd thought they might be. Simple assurance's on both sides and she signed a million dollar deal. What was there to keep Mike from come down, Now? It wasn't going to stop in January, Jewel ran tour groups for skiers all winter, that she was anxious to book as well, but she had to get back to her office before she could give her those names and dates.

Emma was flying high in her own pride, as she picked up the phone and called Mike. Ten minutes later, he'd deflated her ego, and had her running on improving even her best, full throttle. No matter what she did, he just wasn't going to budge. If he didn't want to be there with her, Jim would.

Why couldn't he see, that this was just what they'd wanted, for so long? All their planning, all their saving, and yet he wouldn't even give it a chance. Did he realize how far he was pushing her away? Emma couldn't help running to her room. What she needed was a good cry.

"Sis, are you okay?" Beth asked from just outside her door

"Beth I can't do it alone." she pleaded as Beth came around the edge of the bed. "Mike won't come down."

"Who needs Mike anyway?"

"I do. He knows how to run this place, I'm just a glorified maid, he said as much today. And he was right, he's the only one with a degree in Hotels, but he won't come down here."

"You listen to me." Beth tugged her face up to look straight at her. "You don't need any one. He's not been here to put this place together, and you and I know that's half the battle."

After talking to Beth, Emma stepped out the back door. There Jim was waiting as if he knew she was coming. Taking Emma by the hand, dragging her onto the dance floor, where they spent the rest of the night, two stepping, which he was amazed she knew how to do. After showing off her fancy footwork with the cotton-eyed-Joe and the electric slide, he got the idea that she liked any kind of dance, and he kept her busy doing so, right in front of all to see.

She was oblivious to who was watching, but later when Alex pulled her aside and reprimanded her, for openly carrying on with Jim. She had to wonder if the kids had been watching.

They had, as she found out in the kitchen. Where they had all assembled for a cold soda, even Jimmy and Sara, were present. When Shelly told her that was the first time, she'd seen her smile like that, in years.

"He's good for you Mom." Kit added.

"No" Crystal spoke up "The dancing – was good for her."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN THE OLD BARN

Over the next week, life's pace increased tenfold. Construction on the Village finally reached a point, where three cottages had been finished. Not that the crew would've achieved it, had it not been for Emma riding their butts constantly.

Originally, she'd figured everyone would just move into the Lytle-White house, but when Jewel wrote the contract for eighty rooms per night, well who was she to argue with profit. The extra twenty rooms had pushed the total over a million dollars, and that wasn't including the cost of lunch and dinners. By the time she did the figuring a couple days later, the move was warranted.

The others had expected it all along it was only Emma, who was caught off guard. No amount of rearranging was going to keep her and the kids in just one of the older house. Even though there was an extra room or two at each site. Three bedrooms, in the same house were impossible, without moving up to the village, and she wasn't splitting up her little family.

So she did the next best thing she sacrificed the larger kitchen everyone else had received, and went on the search for the little comforts, Mike clung tightly to in Salt Lake. Extra beds weren't a problem, for that matter most of the bedroom furniture wasn't a problem. When it came to furnishing the rest of the cottage though, she was left to head for town.

Unfortunately, hiring additional people to assist in caring for the place got in the way of that too. As the great moving day arrived, she wasn't feeling too great. Not only had she not arranged for the additional pieces, which would allow her to call the cottage home. She hadn't been able to fill a roster of housekeeper's either. She simply had started recruiting too late. The National Parks had beaten her to the punch, pulling all available high school students the day school ended.

"Hindsight." she mumbled, as she prepared to again go across the names job services had sent her.

"Who's hinny?" Beth asked, placing a hot cup of coffee in front of her at the kitchen table.

"My hinny, someone should kick it."

"What now?" Beth plopped down in the chair across from her. "We were wondering what you'd been up to, cooped up in that office all week."

"Oh, Beth" she mumbled, "I should've had that ad in the paper weeks ago; there's no one left, who wants to make beds."

"What about us?"

"Don't you think feeding fifty people a night is enough to keep you busy during the day?" In that area she'd lucked out, obtaining three cooks had been easier than anything else had. In addition, all knew how to bake, saving her an additional salary.

"What about the kids?"

Emma hadn't considered them. Since Jake had allowed his two girls to come down with hers. That meant there were an extra eleven bodies running around, and even though the youngest one was only twelve, he would still be able to set up housekeeping carts and empty trash.

"Beth your brilliant." she exclaimed heading for the main dining room, where they were all mulling about.

She found negotiating a contract with them, nearly as difficult as with teamsters. The way the tours were stacked, meant Sunday would be their only day off. Therefore, she had to make concessions, like Saturday afternoon a free movie for all in town. In addition, as Jason pointed out, they could spend their money anyway they wanted. Kit explained that Jason wanted a computer. However, the decisive factor was when she told them "I'll start a college fund for each of you." Even Kit was willing to make beds then; although, she knew Jim needed his assistance more. That was another section, she'd over looked, and who was going to be helping Jim? She hesitated only briefly before deciding none of them were old enough to do it. Jim was going to have to find his own help, or at least older help.

Holding down a serious job was no new concept for her children. She wasn't too sure how Jake and Alex, was going to react to the news though. Jake's girls were the same age as Shelly and Crystal. Neither had ever worked and as far as she could tell, neither saw it as a requirement for life, having been raised by their Mother on welfare – before coming to stay with their father. Both felt, finding a man was the most important thing in life; they were going to be a challenge. Alex's boys were just too young to think about going to work in the real world. Mark, his oldest, was just fourteen, and Steve barely twelve. Jake wouldn't get much of a chance to speak, but Alex, might get mad.

She headed straight for him, hoping to break the news herself. Mark beat her to the punch, and Alex looked relieved to see her. After he left, Alex told her he'd been wondering what he was going to do to keep them out of trouble.

She tried to imagine the kind of summer it was going to be, as her and Alex drove up to the big red barn, where anything that didn't work was stored, along with all of his and Beth's furniture. She couldn't even picture it, how was eleven kids, four adults, and a hand full of people from town, going to handle approx. two hundred people per night, six nights a week; it was insanity.

Noticing Jim's truck parked out front she refigured. Five adults, as if he was going to be able to make that much of a difference. Besides, he was going to busy taking care of the ranch section. That was what they'd decided, the day after the summer fair. She would see to the resort portion and he would take care of the ranch.

Load after load was pulled, separated, and trucked on to the Village that day, where several more hands there would shuffle the boxes, etc. into the appropriate cottage. With each dwindling load, more and more of the ancient building became exposed; she'd never really taken a good look at the size of the place.

Two decrepit old tractors filled most of the front. However, the roofline indicated there was a good hundred feet she couldn't see. So after shoving the last large box into the front seat of Alex's Bronco; the place she was going to ride in and battling that she would be fine until someone, returned for her. She used the time to wonder through the unwanted things.

A treasure hunter at heart, she'd been looking for an excuse to look around. Behind the tractor's, there were three old buggies. Two with the fringe, still attached and the third, was what some may call a buckboard, or at least she thought that was its purpose. It looked like a long wooden box, with wheels attached and a seat that sat higher than the rest; inside its bed, laid the winter skids for all three buggies.

She may not have been able to envision the summer, but winter was looking up. Hayrides and caroling expeditions had suddenly loomed into her vision. She was so caught up with her winter wonderland. She tripped over an old rope, landing on an old trunk. Brushing the dirt from her knees, she retrieved the coarsely woven length from the floor and proceeded to wind it up. As she reached to place it on a hook near the back door, the voices she'd been hearing for quite some time grow even louder. She could hardly believe Alex would have had time to drive up to the Village, and get back so soon; let alone unload the overstuffed jeep. Snagging the hook at last, she turned to find who was there, but the voices had grown quiet.

Pushing the back door open she discovered she was as alone as ever. No one had returned, so who had she heard? Looking back into the dustily lit building she wondered if she really was alone. Perhaps someone had come looking for Jim, and was told he was here. Just because she couldn't see a car from where she stood, didn't mean someone hadn't parked next to the opposite doors, at the other end of the building. Just to make sure she stepped back into the building and called "Hello." No response was forthcoming, although again she could hear the two voices. So again she shouted "Hello" but still nothing it seemed they were too occupied with each other to acknowledge her.

She dreaded the thought of walking back in there, but if job services had sent them ... well Jim needed the help. Slowly she retraced her steps, listening to the voices grow louder with anger. Stopping mid-way in the massive structure, she looked about. Still she couldn't see anyone.

Suddenly she decided walking back in there hadn't been the best thing to do. It was obvious, that if she called out now, they would know she'd overheard their disagreement. Since she still wasn't sure what they were fighting about, they may not have wanted her to know. It was the same distance to either door, but out-front was where Alex, was going to expect her to meet him.

As if struck by lightning, it dawned on her who was fighting. It must to be Alex and Jim. Even though, they hadn't seemed up set earlier, Alex still hadn't explained why he had shut Jim up that morning in the kitchen.

"Damn, that stupid legend" she barked as she, marched towards the voices. With each step the voices grew louder and louder. They were out front. She thought as she pushed past the tractor, and into the clearing that had been created by removing the furniture. Her blood was boiling, as she envisioned stepping into the opening and demanding, they put a stop to the foolishness. Swinging the door with all her might, she screeched, "Stop this bull shit." but there was no one there, no car, nobody.

Where had they gone? Blankly she stared up the silent road. Whirling around, she looked back into the massive barn. Light filtered from the far door, but not a soul was in sight. How could she have walked right past them, and not seen them? The answer, made her choke. Stumbling towards the corral, she laid against the wooden rail and gasp for air – Ghosts.

Again the angry voices filled the silent morning air, they were moving towards her. Oh why had she swore, she had outraged them. They'd been willing to let her walk through their barn, and not shown themselves, so why had she cursed. Dropping to her knees, she pleaded with God. "Please, I know better – don't let me see them – Please"

She didn't know how she would regret those words, the voices grew louder and louder. Until they consumed her entire head, but she never saw a thing. Angry, loud, male voices riveted her brain, holding her suspended in place, with the mighty tongue-lashing taking place.

Cupping her hands over her ears didn't help. As the fight proceeded, she tried to escape only to be tugged to the ground. Something had a hold of the back of her blouse. She'd pinched her eyes shut, fearful of witnessing the event, hoping she could turn them away, but as she sat helpless against the rough wood pole, she realized she was bond to hear their words. Against her will, she listened. They weren't reprehending her, for her slip of the tongue. They didn't even seem to know she was there. They were fighting over a girl. One insisted she should be with him. The other a bit more calm, simply replied she would be with him. She didn't understand the details – she didn't care to either. All she wanted was to have them leave her alone.

"You can't be with her all the time, some day Lizzy will be with me, and you won't be able to stop me from getting the stone."

Instantly, she recognized her Grandmother's name. The words had been so similar, to what Wes had said to Jim, for her to listen any longer, she had to get out of there. Standing up took all her might, only to again have something tug at her back. There was no stopping her now, she wasn't about to hear another word. Throwing herself forward, she felt the cloth pull from her back. She was free – still she wasn't about to open her eyes, God only knew what she might see. Blindly she shot for the barn door, it was only a few feet away, there she would open her eyes, and run for the house.

Two masculine arms stopped her in her tracks. The scream that split the silence, echoed from the mountain tops, as she beat against the chest of – of – Ghost's don't have chests. However, she could still hear the voices – again, she raised her fist.

"Emma... Emma what is it?" Jim's frantic voice broke the captive tones.

"Listen, listen." she responded breathless. Looking up into his blank eyes, He couldn't hear them, but for her the tones grow louder again "Stop them," she screeched at the top of her lungs. "Stop them, make them leave me alone."

He yanked her head to his chest, and pressed his hands over her free ear. His heart was beating to match hers. Sweat mingled with his magical cologne filled her nostrils, but the voices continued. Pushing herself free, Emma started to run. Again his mighty arms stopped her, pushing her into the open door of the truck, he popped the clutch and was flying before she even knew where she was. Crouched into as small of a ball as physically possible, she cupped her ears.

"Tell me the legend – tell me WHY me, I'm losing my mind, I'm hearing things." Talking seemed to stop the penetration. So she keeps rambling on "God, WHY me?" She bounced up and down with every chuckhole in the dirt road, when he hit the smooth pavement he moved even faster. Emma was losing her voice from shouting, all the time refusing to open her eyes. "Tell me the legends, Jim please tell me." He slammed the brakes, causing the truck to fishtail and slid sideways. Popping the clutch and clicking the key even before it had come to a stop. A second later she was pulled from the truck and carried towards the door of his house, his mother meet them there. "Tell her." He demanded. "She has to know."

She'd heard him, but the voices weren't gone. "Stop them. Tell me how to stop them." She pleaded as well. A second voice rang in response. It wasn't as clear. Jim had carried her into the living room. "Help her, she's hearing things. Help her." His voice was filled with fear. "Please help her." She wondered if his mother could actually do something. Maybe she knew magic.

"Please God, Please." She begged.

A sharp jab at her naked arm was the only response. Swiftly she became aware of Todd's presents, and the needle "No—" was her final word.

"You over dosed her."

"I didn't have time to, I only gave her about a fourth of a does, and she shouldn't have reacted this way."

She could hear them but she couldn't answer, it was as if something was holding her mouth closed. No, her brain wasn't sending the right message that was it, she'd just have to think about it harder, and she'd have to fight herself awake.

"If you didn't give her too much, why is she like this?" Jim demanded frustration filling his voice.

Fight, Emma fight – let them know you're here.

"I don't know why she's acting this way?" Todd responded taking her hand and letting it drop again; as he struggled to defending himself. Again he retrieved her hand, checking her pulse. Lift your hand, she thought. Lift it now – now. Suddenly she felt it strike his clean-shaven face. "Emma, can you hear me?" he pleaded.

"Oh, please, God please." Jim echoed his sentiment.

Talk Emma, talk. Tell them you can hear them. "Yes –"

Jim dropped limp, next to her side. "Thank God." spilled from his trembling lips pressed to her cheek. "Can you still hear them?" he whispered. She'd been working so hard at speaking. She'd totally forgotten about the voices, they were gone. She whispered a silent prayer of thanks, and shook her head No.

"What kind of voices were you hearing? What did they tell you to do?" Todd was asking the questions. It occurred to her that he wasn't asking them, with the same tone as Jim. He thought she'd lost her mind, maybe she had.

"They didn't tell me to do anything," she fought to answer, attempting to open her eyes at the same time, but everything was fuzzy. "They were fighting."

"Fighting?" Todd was confused.

"What'd you expect her to say?" Jim jumped to her defense.



"Schizophrenic's usually think the voices were telling them how to take over the world."

"Skit...so... what" Emma tried to repeat what it was he'd said. "You think I'm losing my mind" she may not have been able to see, but she could sit up. "Don't you?"

"Hold on Emma," Jim's voice almost had a ring of laughter about it, as he firmly gripped her arms. "You can't even see who you're attacking."

The scream that ripped from her lips, took them both by surprise. He'd grabbed the spot of her injection. Quickly, Todd pushed her back to the bed. The sheet that had covered her chest, slipped below her breasts, and she realized she was naked. It was replaced almost as fast.

"Good God. Todd you bruised her." Jim pulled the sheet back again.

"Jim," Todd laid the sheet down again, "Give her some privacy! I couldn't have bruised her." He had to rethink that, after looking at the large red spot on her upper arm. "I couldn't have done this."

"Who else do you think hit her?" Jim shot back.

"Stop this. I told you I bruise easy."

"A bleeder" Todd snapped.

"No. The blood veins run close to the top of the skin." she repeated what every Doctor who'd ever examined her, had said "I over heat really easy too."

"That's why she over reacted to the medicine." Todd exclaimed pulling at her arm.

"Don't." she pulled away again, the picture less fuzzy "Leave me alone. Why in the heck did you medicate me anyway? Weren't you taught not to just shot up strangers?"

"She's right." Jim hopped on the bandwagon.

"Damn it old man, don't be telling me what I should be doing." a minute later they watched as the door slammed shut at his heels and then looked into each other's faces.

"He has a tendency to over react." Jim said with raised eyebrows. "What were they fighting about?"

She didn't even want to think about it and there he stood, wanting her to tell him about it. "Tell me the legend." she demanded right back.

"Who ripped your blouse off?"

"Ripped my blouse?" she'd forgotten about the hand holding her down, until just then. Fear ravaged her body, propelling her into his arms, where she felt safe. "I don't know, I couldn't see them, I didn't want to see them." He held her firmly pressed to his chest, where she could hear his heart beating. She pulled the sheet around her as she continued. "I'm not losing my mind, am I?"

"Of course not" he tipped her back to look at her face. "Do you know how long it took me to see that entire scene from the window? Years, Emma Years." His face was intense, forcing his brow up to a peek each time he said years.

"Is it the legend?" she continued, looking for an answer, as he drew her back to his chest. "Is that what's haunting me?" His head only shook back and forth "Tell me the story," she pleaded, looking up into his eyes, "Please."

"Stories don't ripe clothing."

"And neither do ghosts." Todd added from the door.

"Like you'd know" Jim shot back.

"Ok, you've got me." The younger form, of him stepped to the edge of the bed. "I don't know, but you apparently do. Who ripped her blouse? And who was fighting over her?"

"Not me, It was Grandma." she had to correct his misinterpretation of what she'd said. "They were fighting over Lizzy – No they were fighting about who was going to get the stone – That was what they were fighting about – the STONE." They looked from her to each other, then back again "The Stone?" Todd repeated the last word slow and deliberately.

"I'll have Mom bring you a blouse." Jim responded bouncing up from the bed. His absence left her feeling chilled. A minute later, he'd dragged Todd, dumbfounded from the room.

When Jesse entered the room a few minutes later, she claimed not to know what was being asked. If she'd been so ill informed, why had Jim brought her there to hear the story? The sweet old woman had to know something, but it became clear, she wasn't going to hear it from Jesse's lips or at least not until Jim gave permission for her to hear it.

As she followed Jesse into the large kitchen, she discovered Jim and Todd where both gone, but to where? Jesse again played dumb. The more she moved about, the faster the injection wore off. The black coffee Jesse feed her, aided as well, it also added to her anxiety. By the time Jim kicked open the back door, she nearly attacked him. "Where have you been? How dare you leave me stranded?" The grin that exploded across his face, told a story all its own. Todd, who had entered right behind was grinning as well. "It's not funny." she was chomping at the bit.

"You know me and a dare." He answered pouring himself a cup of coffee, looking a cocky eye in her direction. His glare disarmed her. Remembering dare was the wrong word to use, and she sunk back into the chair and rephrased her question. "Ok, what have you boys been up to?" she asked sarcastically

"Well I'll be" spilled from Todd's mouth "You've tamed the tiger" He responded with a laugh. He'd considered her a Tiger, What had she done to him to deserve that name?

The confusion she felt, must have been apparent on her face, for Jim laughed and said, "I tried to tell him you could hold your own, sorry if he got the wrong idea. But I had to do something to stop him from locking you up."

"Me!" she immediately went back to full claws.

"Woe. Hold it Girl. We just went out to find the ghost's, you need to thank us, not chew off our heads."

"What did you find?" she shot off the chair.

"Relax," he responded with a firm hand on her shoulder. As he pulled the remains of her blouse, from his pocket and waved it about in front of his face. "A large nail had a hold of you."

"A nail," she exclaimed, feeling rather stupid. "No! It couldn't have felt like a hand." It hadn't felt like a hand, she thought, actually she hadn't felt anything at all. Something had just held and kept her down. Closing her eyes and dropping her head into her hands, she realized it could've been a nail. She might have snagged her blouse, and when she went to move, it pulled her back. Gently Jim stroked the back of her neck, "It was a nail. Your blouse was still attached to it."

"But that doesn't explain the voices" Todd remarked, taking a seat at the table. She didn't even need to be looking in to his face to know what he was thinking.

"I'm not crazy." she straightened up immediately to defend herself.

"Hold on Girl" Jim laid his hand on hers "He's not saying you are." he'd jumped to stop her attack, pulling his chair closer to her, he demanded, "Mom, tell her the story."

"She knows it." Jesse answered going back to the sink, "Just ask, she knows it." Emma couldn't figure out why, his sweet Mother had turned on her, how was she supposed to know the story?

"Fine Mom," Jim responded sarcastically "What do you believe in Emma?"

"What?" was he really asking her to define it?

"What do you believe in, you know God, etc?" He looked serious.

"Do you really want Todd to lock me up?" she looked straight at him. Even with his arm around her shoulder, he couldn't protect her from the strange looks people would give her, if they heard this conversation repeated. Mike would go straight through the roof, she thought if he knew she was spreading her strange beliefs.

Jim's eyes danced, as he chuckled. "He isn't going to lock you up, I was just kidding."

Shaking her head, she whispered, "Ok, you asked for it. I guess I kind of believe along the lines you were telling Alex, the other day."

"That's why the lack of reaction." Jim stated, moving his arm to the back of the chair instead of on her shoulders.

"Hell, Jim you can't tell me you believe in the bible." she turned to look only at him, ignoring the others. "Man was in his infancy when they wrote it, those guys would call us God's." She paused, waiting for the normal reaction. Surprise crept into his face. He didn't call her a non-believer – he didn't say anything. "And I think – I know you well enough to know that you don't believe we evolved from moss."

"Ameba" Todd interrupted

"It doesn't matter what I believe in, what do you believe?" Jim responded to her directly.

"Something between the two." she quickly responded.

"See I told you she knew" Jesse insisted, joining them at the table. Turning her attention to Emma, she asked, "So do you believe the story?"

"I don't know the story. All I know is what everyone would call my own active imagination." Quickly she scanned Todd's face along with the others. "Man could not have been made from the dirt of this planet. If evolution was correct, why did it take so long for it to occur? Did we have to wait till the dinosaur's died off to get enough bacteria, to grow?" the three of them sat there speechless. "What do I believe? I believe both the stories, God didn't have to start with dirt, life had already began when he come upon it. He added the magic – intelligence or perhaps humanity."

Jesse interrupted "How?"

"Why do I care?" the words made Jesse face flash with anger. "He did, that's all that matters."

"It does matter. You have to understand where you came from." When Jesse fought back, Emma felt right at home, everyone she'd ever spoken to about her beliefs fought that point.

"It's said over and over in the bible. Neither he nor his son was from this earth, they are from above— we are from below. Man has always known where they were from, I mean the Gods." she'd practiced telling what she'd found, but had never had the nerve to say it before. "Why else was the tower of Babel built? Why does man want to go into space so bad?" Jesse's face was a glow with delight, but Jim looked confused, and even if Jim had assured her that Todd wouldn't lock her up, the look on his face told another story. "Look, let me try it a different way, we all have two parents right? Well so did, the first parents – a Father in Heaven, or space – and a Mother of the earth. Mother earth, Mother Nature, she gave us our body. He gave us our intelligence and commanded we use it to subdue the beasts."

"Do you believe in God?" Todd asked.

"Didn't I just say so?" she'd grown impatient with his strange looks. "Of course I believe in God. I just think, when the second coming accurse –" she hesitated before going on "He'll arrive in a spaceship."

"A spaceship" Jim exclaimed. Pulling his hand across his mouth, she didn't need to see his smile to know he thought she'd lost it.

"Yes, if you want to read about abductions, The National Rags, have nothing over the Bible. Just look at how many people in there, were raised up with God and saw the future." she was addressing Jim directly now. "Or at least they thought it was the future. They didn't even have the language, to tell us what they saw. Some were told they couldn't tell." she looked to Jesse for conformation. Her eyes were gleaming like stars in the evening sky. "Who's to tell if they were looking at our future or God's past?" Her eyes stopped on Todd's shocked face.

"I get it, we are what he was, right" Todd responded.

"Ok, I've told you what I believe, NOW tell me the story." She shifted her eyes back to Jesse.

The tension, which had filled Jim's body before they'd started again sweep up his thigh that was next to her. "You know Todd, we should leave,"

"No" she knew better than to demand he stay "Please, stay." she asked with all the persuasion she could, squeezing his hand helped. "Why does this scare you?"

"Scare me." he pulled his hand away "It doesn't scare me."

"It does me, so please stay." She pleaded reaching for his hand once more. She didn't need to search hard.

"Go ahead Mom, tell her."

Jesse looked as if she were seeing a miracle, stammering she started the same way Jim had the Saturday before. "Before time began, our makers dwelled on another planet, far away." she lifted her hand as if to point to heaven "When their planet's life came to an end, they were left to search for a home. Crossing from the dark to the light, earth appeared to be the best place around." she lowered them and scanned them about the room, her eyes were a glow with the truth she held. "The Entities had long before reached, immortality. They neither knew birth nor death." her voice dropped to a hushed whisper, sending chills up and down Emma's back, Jim held tightly to her hand that was trembling. "The Master, he who was in charge—was the only one who could recall life with a body. It was he, which made the decision to populate, the earth. Knowing full well that the entities would have to undergo massive changes, bodiless, they couldn't exist in our gravity."

"What one minute here." Todd insisted, "Are you telling me –" he looked to Emma, "that what Emma said really is the story?" He obviously hadn't heard it either.

"Partly," Jesse answered, "She's missing a few importing factors." she looked back to her. "But considering she's had to put this together by herself, without her Grandmother to tell her, she's done very well" Emma looked to Jim, had he known the story all along? Was it what, he was referring to when he'd insisted he couldn't tell her? "He couldn't tell you Emma." Jesse was speaking to her. "It's said that only your Father could tell, and I can only tell you so much."

"Like what?"

"I can tell you that, the master believed he'd accrued all of his knowledge from the time he held a body. And like a father – He wanted the others to have that knowledge." she grinned, with warm loving eyes. "You know – it's one thing to see a sunrise and another to behold a sunrise." He'd obviously told her, of her interest in sunrises.

"So although the body that was chosen wasn't perfect, it was clearly a way to teach them what they were missing. While the Entities wouldn't actually die, the body most certainly would, and the Entities would experience a period of inactivity. They would also experience birth, as painful as it was, through it their lines and knowledge would progress."

"We couldn't have all come from one set of parents, either." Emma interrupted to press a point that had caused her great difficulty, in the past.

"We didn't." Jesse answered with a broad smile, "That comment says you really have read the book, there were several sets of parents – scattered all over the world."

When she paused, Emma again used the time to ask a question. "But you haven't said a thing about the STONE, is it something like Abraham used to lead his people out of Egypt, or Moses

followed in leading his people in the wilderness?" She could've asked about Noah, or even the Mormon prophet, but the example was enough.

"Exactly," Jesse responded with another large smile. "The Master declared that it would lead his people back to him. Through it, they could hear his words, if truly pure at heart. Allowing it to be lost or misused would cause the world to be cast into utter darkness. He would not be able to speak to his children, cutting off all chances of evolving to a higher standard."

She suddenly felt very small. "Why do the people of town, think it's here?"

"It is" Jesse's simple words, combined with the intense look in her eyes, made her shutter.

"Old Johnny took the blame for losing it." Jim answered.

Turning to look into his eyes, she didn't find fear at all. It was more like relief.

"Here...in this...Valley?" she questioned him directly

"When he ran your Grandmother off"

"She didn't have it." Emma declared

"No, no one has it." Jesse remarked, "If they do, it's the wrong person."

"The fight, that's what it was about." She declared, "They were fighting about the STONE or at least who was going to be with Grandma, the one guy said almost the same thing Mr. Harris said the other night to you." She'd been looking into each of the faces, but turned to look straight at Jim as she said the last sentence.

"Wes, challenged you again?" Todd's voice rattled as he asked the question.

"He was pawing Emma, like an animal in heat." Jim responded, but Jesse didn't approve of his description, neither did she. "An animal in heat, he really wasn't all that bad."

"Emma you stay clear of that men, he's the beast if ever I've seen one." Jesse's voice broke as she spoke.

"Why does he want the Stone, I mean if he's not supposed to have it, what good is it to him?" Turning to Jim, she whispered "Please."

"Damn it Girl." he snapped "Mom you have to tell her." he turned his attention to his Mother.

"How else is she supposed to protect herself? Just because her Father was supposed to tell her --" he paused for a quick breath "Shit Mom he's dead – how's a dead person going to tell her?"

"James," she shouted standing up "You know better than to talk to me that way."

"Mom, you've got to tell her." he battled his mother for her.

"Emma, he's of the blood, as you are, but he's a bad seed – a bad seed." Her voice rattled as she repeated Bad Seed. The blood, what did she mean? "I don't understand, is this part of the mixing of the blood, you were talking about?"

"NO!" Jim shouted, "He's the bad seed. You must stay away from him."

His temper made her shrink back into her chair. "James. If you keep this up, I wouldn't blame that Girl, if she just walked out."

Emma had considered it, and might have, except for the way his hands were trembling. She knew he was scared, but not for himself. He was afraid she'd let Wes get to close. The conversation was over, but she left that table just as confused, as she'd been in the beginning. If they knew more and she believed they did, they weren't about to share it with her.

#### CHAPTER FOURTEEN LAUGHTER MAKES GOOD MEDACINE

On Monday the first tours arrived, and again life took on an increased pace. The long summer days, grew even longer. Up before sunrise, Emma often didn't get to see the cottage again until well after dark. Sundays became their only resemblance of life, and they took every advantage of those they could. Picnic's, fishing, horseback riding, all reams of an active outdoor life was covered.

As June passed into July, the mountains grew greener, fresh fruit from the orchards, started to appear, daily on the tables. Cherries of the black beauties type, apricot's, and early plums, all found their way in as well as the berries from the hills about the house. Strawberries, Blueberries, and raspberries made for a special breakfast every day of the week.

Flowers filled every vacant space, some planted and others wild, but all beautiful in the eye of the visitors. The fastest growing flowers, she found to be her own children, Jason may have bought the first computer, but by the fourth of July, the kids had turned one of the cottages into a small wonderland of electronic devices.

She found it amazing, how much a child would actually be willing to learn if given the right devices. Kit had re-run the satellite cable connecting a transceiver, in addition to the receiver they owned. Soon he was talking to people all over the world, via the eye in the sky, as he called it. After the fireworks display on the fourth, Jimmy and Kit interfaced, all the computers located in different houses with the big house. Then they went about setting up several more computers



in one of the cottages in the village. Crystal contacted the satellite company and signed the place up for internet and classes taught via the internet, everything from electronics to cooking classes. The little place became their hangout when they weren't working. Anytime of the day, she could stop by and find someone learning to work a computer, including the adults.

Unexpectedly one afternoon late in July, Jason asked if his father was ever going to move back with them. She sat cooling her feet in the brisk water of the lake, as the hot southern sun beat down upon her face. She was at a loss for words. She hadn't even spoken to Mike in over a week, how was she supposed to tell her son that his father was living in a fantasy world. Mike still believed they were going to move back to Salt Lake with him. She couldn't just tell Jason, NEVER. She held out hope, all be it small, but there was hope in her heart that he may someday come to his senses and appear at the door. Jason seemed to understand when she couldn't answer, because the tears choked back the words.

Whatever it was, that made Mike stay in Salt Lake was probably the same thing that made it impossible for her to return. She didn't have a name for it, nothing quite seemed to fit, but like the old nightgown she owned, she just seemed to belong there. It looked terrible, with small hole appearing every time she wore it, but when she was feeling blue, she could put it on and the world seemed right.

The longer he held out, the less important she felt she was in his life. By mid-August she'd even began to doubt that if he changed his mind, they would still have a life together. The last time she spoke to him, he'd gone so far as to suggest that when her Brothers took the land she would finally be coming home. She'd choked back the tears for days replaying his words repeatedly in head but the day she received the property deed with her G.G. Grandmothers name all over it, she stopped worrying and started fighting.

It was the only time all summer, something strange had happen to her. She'd gotten the idea, while talking with Jim and Alex up at the green house. Hurrying back to the house she'd gone straight to the phone and found the number for the land office. If indeed the land had been secured by her Great-Great Grandmothers estate, then perhaps it may have been noted on the deed of how it was to be divided. The day the letter arrived, she was stunned to find more than a simple notation about how the land was secured. Attached was a copy of a letter to her Great Grand Grandmother. While she understood little of the written old English, it was clear that the letter was from her parents, and went so far as to point out the tradition by which she'd inherited the items included with the money. Included were all the names of the past recipients of the estate, clear back to the wife of an Earl of York in 1490.

The wide range of nationalities made her realize just how accurate her Grandmother was, when she would call her a Heinz 57, meaning a little bit of all. For a brief moment while pondering the strange letters beneath the Earl's name, she felt the weight of the world on her shoulders. A minute later she realized she wasn't alone, before her stood a woman.

If it hadn't been for the dream, she may have been left wondering who she was, or from what time, but she knew instantly that the lovely sweet faced woman standing before her, was her Great-Great Grandmothers, Emme. She wore what Emma would've called a Mormon dress. It was coal black adding contrast to her gray hair and soft blue eyes, which looked as if she'd been crying for days. Her nose was as red as Rudolph's was. She was busy placing small items in the large globe from the living room. Carefully she placed a small gray bag, several papers, and a picture of herself, along with some other trinkets in the small opening in the base of the globe, and she then wrapped the entire object with a white cloth and placed it in a red and white hatbox.

Outside the room somewhere, Emma could hear a loud discussion, taking place. A man's deep voice thrashed someone's morals, accusing her of all kinds of acts. The girl's voice shuttered as she attempted to fight back, claiming that she'd done nothing wrong – that he'd hurt her – that it was never her idea. It was evident from the conversation, that the girl was pregnant.

The elderly woman, pressed down the lid on the box, making sure it was down tightly. The discussion in the hall turned violent. Suddenly a loud slap made her cringe. She wished she could help the girl, but she'd already experienced enough of these experiences, to know that the only thing she was there for was to observe. Her heart no longer even raced, as it had the other times, she was able to keep track of everything that was occurring. The sights, the sounds, even the strong sent of rose's that filled the air, but this rose smell was coming from the cut flowers, that adorned the room. The scene, faded as quickly as it had appeared, the moment the phone rang and as usual, she was left to figuring out what it meant, by herself.

Mike was returning her call, since he'd been asleep, when Emma had tried calling him earlier in the day, to tell him of Shelly's declaration. He wasn't pleased to hear, that another of his children, had chosen not to return to Salt Lake for school.

"She can't do this!" His voice hoarse from the sleep was clearly angry "She can't stay there, she has to come home."

"She considers this home, too." Emma had shot back. "Like the rest of the kids."

"IT's not and never will be, as long as I'm alive to stop you from putting them through that hell." The words didn't make any sense to her, as he went on. "So help me God, I'll stop you, from doing this."

"Doing what? What is it that I'm doing that's so bad? You just feel guilty, and rightfully so, you should be here, with us—" she paused for a breath, and then finished him off. "They're not coming back – none of them. And if you know what's good for you, you had better get your ass, down here before you lose us all."

It wasn't as if she hung up, but he probably thought so, when the phone went dead. She didn't know what to think either, for there she sat with the cord in her hand, dangling freely from the phone base. Sure she'd been pulling the cord, as usual when she spoke to him, but not hard enough to pull it completely loose from the phone, how it happened she hadn't the slightest idea, but when she tried to redial him, the number was busy.

Indicating he'd taken the phone off the hook, she was so mad; it was probably better that way. If she'd gotten a hold of him again, she would've asked for the divorce, she'd been considering.

Outside a steady rain had started. Much like her mood, it drizzled all evening. Nearing dark, the thunder and lightning started up. First at a distance, its dancing light could be seen across the valley, then grow closer and closer; like the big band in the homecoming parade. Soon even the china in the glass hutch was dancing under its thundering crashes. By eight she and Beth were standing in the kitchen surrounded by concerned faces, Crystal's fear was more than prevalent; it seemed everyone feared what was rolling their way.

Beth had hurried a batch of cookies, with a touch of milk for the kids. Just then Jim, streaked through the back door, drenched from head to toe; even his boots swished as he walked, and the brim of his hat laid flattened to the sides of his head. Reaching for the wall phone, he slipped and crashed into the counter. Mumbling a few words, he finally grabbed the receiver, only to slam it down again with a few more choice words. Another crack of thunder rattled Emma to voice her worst fears. Fire dangers had been running extremely high. Jumping down she asked, "What do we need to do first?"

"Nothing—" He replied wiping his face with the towel Beth had supplied. She ran through all the roads leading out of the valley, in her head. All roads ran to the main one, if that were blocked, they would have to— "It's Rosie, she's in labor." He finished his statement. She dropped her arms, limp to her side and felt the blood rush back into her face.

"Labor, I thought the place was on fire."

"Don't jump the gun. The phones are down; we don't need something else going wrong, so just pray — Hard."

"What can we do?" Beth was thinking faster than she was.

"There's nothing you can do, or I for that matter, I sure wish Dad was here, he'd know what to do." He stopped wiping his head, long enough to take the cup from Emma's hand. Gulping down the hot liquid, he allowed some to ooze from the corner of his mouth, then replaced the cup immediately and wiped his face again. "Stay put girls. It's bound to be a long night." With those words, he was back out, into the fierce night soon disappearing out of sight. Leaving the door banging back and forth, until Emma extended her arm and drew it shut.

By morning, Emma felt those words should've been written in stone, long night was an understatement. First the phones went, the satellite followed. Luck was with them in keeping the lights on, so the phone system between the homes never faltered either, giving her the ability to stay in touch with the other houses.

Guests had to be re-assured until long after midnight. Jimmy and Shelly reported the same occurring at the Lytle-White house. Alex was at the village with the rest of the children, who weren't excited about the storm. Kit, at the Plantation house ran out of extra blankets and Rob up at the lodge thought his arms were going to fall off, because of the firewood he'd carried.

Emma felt lucky that she knew where everyone was, until it came to sharing the last quilt with the two youngest on the wooden floor of the office. Then it would've been easier to have them in their own beds, at the cottage. She gave up trying to do the audit sometime around two Am and joined the children with a rolled up towel for a pillow. By four thirty, when her wristwatch alarm went off, all she wanted to do was smash it. Turning over to pull some quilt back over herself, she suddenly realized if she left right then, she could make it up to the village, take a shower, and be back before the others missed her. Quietly she rose and headed for the car.

The drive was refreshing, even in the dark. She stayed to the main road, although it was longer, because of the damage she witnessed while approaching the dirt cut off. The wind had torn tree limbs loose and deposited them wherever it wished. A large branch had fallen across the back of her car, so she taken Kit's small truck instead. Besides the stream would be running fast, leaving the possibility that the road could've been wished out, and truck would've given her the extra power she might need.

As she followed the back road into the Village, she noticed, that the lake looked like a puddle of mud and that the falls were oozing, a chocolate colored substance, but she felt assured that it would be back to normal in a day or two. She'd seen the same thing happen several times before, and every time she thought the lake was a total loss, it bounced back and this was going to be no different.

After a quick shower and some fresh clothes, Emma headed back to the Big House. Approaching the drive, she remembered Jim was with Rosie. She had to know that everything had turned out okay, so instead of walking directly into the house she headed for the stables, only a few hundred feet up the road.

Light was starting to crest over the rain-drenched mountains. The sky had turned its array, of blue and violet it always did after a storm, with small melting spots of orange and yellow flooding over it. Tiny droplets of water clung to everything. When she brushed past a bush, she got a face washing.

About halfway there she caught sight of the new foal, it's black as night coat glistened in the morning light. From his stocking less legs, to his slicked down mane and back to his streaming black tail, not a sight of white was visible.

Jim rested against the fence; she'd helped erect before the opening. His hat drooped, low about his neck and was pushed high on his forehead. She was still too far away to see his eyes, but was sure they didn't look much better. The sleeves on the red and blue checked western shirt he wore, were rolled up to his elbows and his jeans, were covered in mud and blood.

She quickened her pace to jump the extra wide irrigation ditch that ran along the right side of the road. It was swollen to over flowing, by the extra rain. She'd carefully chosen a spot that wasn't as wide as the rest. Landing upright, her feet quickly slide backwards down the slanting side and into the water. Pulling herself back to a standing position, she flipped the extra water from the toe.

Jim caught the splash, and turned to see her just as she righted her and waved a hello. Then he reached out and stroked the little foal's forehead. "Meet Lightning." He called to her as she started towards him. Just as she kicked her foot up to climb on the second rail, the foal bolted and flipped his head towards her. Down its nose ran a jagged, white line. Indicating where he'd gotten his name.

Her right foot slipped, leaving all of her weight to land on the left, she'd already thrown her arm over the top rail, for a chance to touch him before he pulled away. The left foot failed her too, passing clean through the two wooden poles. Abruptly she landed on her chest, just below the breasts, forcing the air to be pushed from her lungs. She grabbed for the rail, with both hands but the backwards movement tilted her fall and she plummeted backwards to the moistened ground. Only one leg cleared the wooden poles, the other was hung up, and she felt a sharp snap shoot up the calf, before the lights went out.

She was in the van, traveling at a high rate of speed, when she came to. Kit held tightly to her hand, and she could hear Jim talking in the front seat. Her chest felt like a boulder had been dropped on it, crushing the life from her lungs. She tried to turn her head but found that hurt as well. Breathing was difficult, talking impossible, so she squeezed Kit's hand; he turned to look down at her. "Don't try to move, you're hurt." His voice was strained, and if she wasn't mistaken, he'd been crying. She rolled her head to the side, a bit further and looked up at the droopy hat that flapped in the wind, rushing through the open window.

Kit said something but she wasn't really listening, she was wondering if she'd been hurt why she was in the van? Someone had removed the first bench, leaving a wide space. Again, Kit said something, but she still didn't hear him. Jim's hand reached back from the front seat and Kit slide her hand into his. As comforting as Kit's hand had been, she somehow felt better knowing Jim was there. "Close your eyes Mom, we'll be there in just a minute." She did as she was

instructed. When she opened them, again she was being pulled from the van and placed on a long bed. The pain was beyond her control and she knew the scream that forged from her lips, was inappropriate, but couldn't control it.

Then the pain was gone, before her lay the lake, beautiful and rainbow colored, in her hand she held tight to something. The hot rough sand, burnt the bottom of her naked feet, quickly she headed for the shade of a large rock that sat on the edge of the water. A cool breeze blew her hair about her face, whipping it into her mouth, and then Mike stepped forward and removed it. He was dressed all in white, Jim stood only a few feet away, clad in white too.

The trees bowed in the increasingly strong wind, the smell of wild flowers filled her nostrils, and the sun beat down upon her face, warming her cheeks. Looking down she discovered she was floating, above the ground. Not touching the hot sand any longer, she raced to the water, and splashed the cool water about her face. Her lashes stuck shut, with the heavy moisture and Jim wiped them free with a single stroke of his hand. The warmth of the sun grew warmer, and brighter, until she could hardly open her eyes at all. Then a brilliant, rainbow shot forth, from the lake. Twirling high above her head, weaving its self into a giant braid.

The water started to churn, at her feet, and bubbles rose to the surface, bursting into bright colored lights above the water. Jim stood on one side of her and Mike the other, each took hold of her upper arms and together they rose, up, up, up. Until they were, quite some distance above the shore. Looking down Emma could see all of her children and family below her. Then she gently opened her hand and displayed the stone she'd hidden with-in. A great explosion erupted from beneath her and they were thrown, even higher into the air. In the commotion, she wavered and the stone fell from her hands, swiftly she grabbed for it. Throwing herself forward suddenly her eyes popped open, to find she was nearly sitting straight up in bed. The pain was crushing against her chest, as Doctor Todd pressed her back to the bed. "Lay still Emma." He commanded, lifting her gown. "Do you know where you are?" He asked looking down at her. She struggled to speak, but finally nodded her head yes.

"Good," he spoke softly, while moving his hand to her other side. "You fell. The guy's just brought you in. Can you tell me where it hurts?" She moistened her lips and tried to speak, but still the pain was beyond her control. Therefore, she lifted her hand and gently touched a point just below her chest. Then she moved on to the back of her head. Her leg also hurt, but she couldn't reach it. "Plus your leg, right?" he asked, she nodded "Well, that's about what I'd already decided, it looks like you've broken a couple rib's Girl."

She flashed him a look of disappointment and he recognized it immediately. With a small chuckle he replied, "Ok, I won't call you that, but—" he turned to see if there was any one listening. "You got to promise not to call me Kid, around here." Her smile, confirmed the agreement. "Your eyes do twinkle, when you smile." He added before pulling the curtain back to call the nurse and to order x-rays. Where he'd heard that, she thought, only to come up with

one person, Jim. Quickly she grabbed for his white coat, Todd stepped closer immediately, so she didn't have to speak very loud. With a horse tone, she asked, "Where's he?" His developing smile, said he understood even though she'd left out some of the more important words.

"He's just outside with Kit, I want to have a couple picture of your chest, then—" Her sad eyes alerted him, she wasn't pleased. "Okay." He sighed with a deep breath "He's about to go crazy too. I guess I might as well let him in." The kid might not have looked much older than Kit but he understood the smile that replaced her sad eyes. A minute later Jim and Kit were escorted to her bedside. Kit rushed to her side and drew her hand up into his. "Mom, are you alright?" erupted from his quivering lips. She nodded and then turned to look up at Jim. "You gave us a hell of a scare, Girl." Why it never bothered her coming from his mouth, she didn't know, but she didn't even give him a dirty look this time.

A nurse had entered just behind them, and was now preparing her to be moved to the x-ray department. She did manage to tell Kit, NOT to call his father, before being pulled from the room. Only to watch his disappointed eyes fade from sight.

As the white walls of the hall passed rapidly by her, she thought about the dream. It probably had something to do with, knowing she was in the hospital, and all the white clothing. The scene at the lake she knew had been conjured up, by her fear of the muddy thing she'd seen earlier that morning. Mike on one side and Jim the other signified, the pull her heart was going through, and the fight she'd had with Mike the day before, but why she was clutching the stone in her hand, left her wondering.

She was able to control the pain, as long as she was well advised to the movement she'd have to undergo, before it actually took place. When they returned her to the emergency room, they pushed her into a small, but private room set off to the side of the rest. Kit was awaiting her arrival, a minute later Jim joined them escorted by Todd.

"Well Emma," he spoke softly, heading for a lighted board. "It looks like you broke more than one of those ribs."

"Does that mean, if I'd only broke one, the pain would be half as bad?" she struggled to ask.

"No trying to be funny." Todd replied, with a half-witted chuckle. "Are you about ready for some pain med?"

"Oh shit, Todd. Why haven't you given her something for it already?" Jim shouted jumping to her side.

"Sit down old man," Todd shouts back "Give me chance and I'll tell you." Todd rested his hand on Jim's shoulder to calm him. Kit's face showed his amazement in someone calling this giant of a man, old. "I wasn't about to go shooting something in to those pretty arms of her, before I knew

what I was working with." He was addressing her more than he was addressing the others. "But now that I know what I'm working with," he turned to look back at Jim, "I'll give her something by mouth." The experience of the voices loomed before her, he'd learned his lesson, and he wouldn't go around shooting her up, anymore.

"That is unless you've been hearing voices?" He paused and looked at her. She really wished he hadn't mentioned it, for Kit jumped in at that point. "What voices?" his face looked more scared then confused.

"It's a personal joke," Jim came to her rescue.

"He doesn't like her calling him Kid, so he teases her about hearing voices when she does." She knew he was pulling Kit's leg, but no one there said a thing about it. Quickly Todd shifted gears, returning to the problem at hand explaining that she'd broken two ribs and bruised three more. Actually, he said she'd moved the other three, and that at some time in the future, they would actually brake or straighten themselves. He also concluded that she'd broken her leg; of which she had no doubt, and separated her shoulder.

"All I did was fall." She couldn't contain her amazement any longer, "How did I do all that, by landing on my butt?" She looked to Jim.

"You hit that fence pretty damned hard Girl, before landing on your BUTT." He responded with a smile.

"Look, you guys keep side tracking Todd." Kit spoke up out of patients, with the pair. "Why don't you just, let him finish?"

"Kit it is Okay." She fought with the words, because she'd moved to fast to control the pain. "You know you have to take the bad, with a healthy helping a laugher, or it seems worse."

"So that's how you're doing it," Todd exclaimed, "You should teach classes." She throws him a puzzled look. "Well most people would've been bagging for pain killers, before now. So either you're super-woman or you've managed to master pain."

"Believe me, I've never mastered pain." She was remembering the pain she'd gone through with Jason's birth.

"She's a superwoman." Kit exclaimed, "At least she thinks so and indestructible too." He added in a sarcastic tone. She was getting tired of listening to his put downs, "What is it Kit?" she asked directly. "Have I stepped on your toes?"

"You don't have a right, not telling Dad you're here." He snapped, stepping to the single window in the room. "You know he has a right to know."



"Kit,"

"He's right," Jim agreed with him.

"You don't know—" she turned to look at Jim "He'll only tell me how stupid I was for climbing on the silly fence in the first place. Nothing's an accident at least not where I'm concerned, He'll think I planned it just to get him down here." Now the pain had been allowed through her shield, she'd let down her guard. Gripping the side of the bed, she looked to Todd for help.

"It's on its way in." He remarked, flipping his head towards Kit, while looking at Jim. "How about you boys waiting outside for a minute, I need to see to casting her leg."

"Why can't we stay?" Kit snapped, looking back to her.

She would've answered but the pain was squeezing the breath from her. Her face had turned a pasty white. Even the rose color had drained from her lips, giving them a blue color. "My God, her lips are blue." He exclaimed rushing back to her side. Jim captured him before he could touch her, and Todd pushed the oxygen mask to her face, while exclaiming, "She lost her concentration point. Give her a minute to regain it." With his free hand, he waved them from the room.

Once they were gone, she did concentrate on her breathing, but she just kept worrying about Kit calling Mike, so she wasn't able to rebuild the wall. Squinting, she even tried to block out what Todd was saying, but when he asked if she wanted someone, she responded "Jim."

When Jim pulled her fingers loose from the bed cloth and wrapped them around his hand, she felt the release of the tension almost immediately. When he said that Kit hadn't and wouldn't call Mike, she was even more relieved. With the weight of that lifted from her mind, she was able to gain control of the pain within a few minutes.

"Damn, I've never seen anything like it." Todd exclaimed watching her pulse lower to a controlled state. "This woman has the most unique way of controlling pain I think I've ever seen." Jim didn't say a word; he simply stroked her hand as if it were a sick kitten. When she did finally open her eyes, she saw his concerned eyes first. They made her feel guilty for putting him through this, so she stroked the worried frown from her face, replacing it with a smile, his eyes instantly started to twinkle.

"You two have a silent world." Todd exclaimed watching the two of them now.

"No," Jim corrected him "But we wish we did—" looking to his puzzled friend, "It helps when no one says anything."

"I mean, you talk to each other" he looked down at her "Without saying a thing." She nodded. She understood what he was saying. After he set her leg, and before she insisted on going home, he sought to wrap her ribs. "I hate to break this up," Todd said looking up to Jim "But I've got to wrap her ribs. Since she had some time to absorb that medicine, I think she'll be fine." However, Jim wasn't about to leave her side until she said it was all right.

Her modesty dictated the rule. "I'll be Okay." She said with a slight squeeze of the hand. "Really" She had to verbalize her assurance, before he would leave. Once he was out of the room, Todd quickly moved about securing her chest back into place, but with each wrap of the tape, he commented on the magic, he'd witnessed that day.

"Emma, are you listening to me?" She had been but the painkiller was doing its thing. Slowly she nodded her head Yes. "The medicine has gone to work, hasn't it?" Again, she nodded yes. "I think you should spend the night here." Her response was immediate "NO" She hadn't been in a hospital since she had Jason, some fourteen years earlier; she wasn't about to break a good record, if she could help it.

"No, I can't"

"What do you mean you can't? It's not like you've got much choice here."

"I won't stay." Was all she replied, while sliding down from the table? "I can't." She couldn't tell him, that she was afraid to stay.

"Whoa! You can't just walk out of here." He gently stopped her progression towards the door.

"Oh yes I can." She turned to look him straight in the eye, knowing that he couldn't keep her there without her permission.

"Okay, so you can, but you shouldn't, let's put it that way. You need someone to keep an eye on you."

"I have a house full of people." She could hardly believe she was standing there disagreeing with a Doctor, if she could've just done that with Jason's birth...but Todd was so young. That had to be the difference, she felt that she knew better what she could do and not do than he did.

"Todd, I can't stay here. Not unless you want a basket case in the morning." He seemed to suddenly understand, squeezing her free hand, he gave in. "Alright, but if you start having problems breathing" he squeezed his brow together. "I don't believe I'm letting you do this."

"Just say, I didn't give you much choice." She remarked looking about the room for her clothing. "Where are my clothes?"

"See, I knew there was a reason for you to stay. You don't have any; they cut them off, when you came in. We had to, it was the only why we could tell what was broke."

Determination pulsed through her veins; a little thing like clothes wasn't going to keep her there. Turning she pulled the bed sheet from the bed. "So I owe the place a sheet." She couldn't wrap it about herself without his help—so he helped, wrapping her left arm tightly against her body, in hopes of assisting the separation in the shoulder.

Kit drove home, some four hours after they had left. Jim sat in the front set, holding her like a child in his arms. She hardly noticed when they arrived. She was too far out of it, to pay much attention. After sliding out of the van, Jim gently lifted, her a bit higher and she wrapped her arm around his neck, whispering a soft, "THANK YOU." From the look in his eyes, the words weren't needed.

They had just about reached the front door of the big house, when Mike's voice broke her peace. Kit had to have called him; why else would he be there? She didn't even open her eyes, to acknowledge his presents, which she was sure made him mad, but when Jim, refused to allow him to take her from him, in the middle of the front steps. Mike's response was, totally unwarranted. "Oh, I see. Now you're going to tell me, what's good for MY WIFE are you."

Jim didn't pay him much mind, or at least if he did, she couldn't tell. He just continued on, to the room that Beth pointed out for him. Softly lowering her to the bed, he bent and softly kissed her on the forehead before turning to leave, but Mike wasn't about to let it end the simply.

"Shit, it's probably your fault she fell off that stupid fence and hurt herself, isn't it?" She was too far gone, to care much what he said about her, but the look on Kit's face, spoke for its self.

"Shut up. Damn it, she said you would act this way, you're so damn stupid, you don't know what you got going for you." She thought they were going to fight right there.

"How dare you speak to me that way? Is that what this place is teaching you, how to talk back to your FATHER?" Mike grabbed him by the shirt.

"STOP it." She shouted, and then fell back to the bed.

"Get the hell out of here." Jim commanded pushing the two of them towards the door.

"Like you have the right," Mike shouted, pushing back. "Has she been keeping your bed warm too?" That was the last thing she heard, until she opened her eyes a few hours later, racked with pain. Beth was curled up in a chair next to her bed, intensely reading something. The moment she moved, she was at her side.

"Don't move, the doctor said you should've stayed in the hospital."

"Beth, you know." She couldn't get her mouth wet enough to say anything else.

Lifting a glass from the nightstand, Beth pressed a straw to her lips, and responded. "I know. Damn that stupid doctor." Emma knew she wasn't cursing Todd, but the thing that called himself a doctor in Vegas, where Jason had been born.

"Where's Mike?" She asked, not wishing to pursue the other subject.

"Sulking in the office," She didn't sound too pleased to have to break the news.

"Jim?"

"He went to find Kit." What did she mean find Kit?

"I'll tell you later, you just need to lie still for a few more hours and it'll be morning." She couldn't have been out that long was Emma's first thought, but then she returned to the subject of Kit. "Tell me now," She demanded taking another sip of water.

"Sis, believe me, it'll wait till morning." Beth really didn't want to tell her.

"Please! I promise I won't get out of this bed." That was something she could promise, with no doubts. There was no way for her to stand, even if she could sit up.

"He and Mike fought."

"Is he hurt, Mike didn't hit him, did he." She could feel the binding about her chest grow tighter, with her rapid breaths.

"He's fine, Jim wiped the floor with Mike the minute he raised his hand to strike him."

Like a smothering pillow, the pain sweep over her and the light again was gone.

When she opens her eyes again, it was to Mike's trumpeting voice thundering just beyond her door, in the hall. Her first instinct was to shut him up, before he woke the guests. The moment she went to move, she realized she was being held in place, by someone holding her hand, it was Jim. He looked like warmed over death, his eyes were sunk deep into his unshaven face, and his hair matted to his head.

"Let him do it." He whispered, "Before I throw them out, myself."

"The guest's" She puzzled.

"Your brother's"

"He'll wake the guest—My brother's" Her mind had taken longer than normal time to absorb what he'd said.

"They need it." He went on "Just Who in the hell do they think they are? Storming in here the minute you're down, to take over the place." It sounded like he'd at last met her brothers. Dropping back against the pillows, she wondered what else could go wrong. If it weren't for his strong hold on her hand, she doubted if she'd still be awake. The pain that throbbed in her chest was crushing, and the more upset she got, the worse it seemed to get. Suddenly she remembered the guest's again.

"But he'll wake the guest's." She struggled to sit back up.

"The house is empty." He insisted pushing her back down. "They won't be back till Monday now."

Did he just say it was Sunday, she thought. What happen to Saturday, or Friday for that matter? "It can't be Sunday." She stated looking up into his eyes. "Where's Kit?"

With the slightest chuckle, he said. "Your brain never stops does it?" then he stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, "Kit's with Mom, you've pretty well sleep through the weekend."

"How I mean." He laid his fingertips on her lips to hush her.

"You shouldn't be talking. Todd said it had something to do with the shot's."

Now she was even more confused than ever, pushing his fingers away, she asked anyway. "The Doc's been here?"

"I guess I should start, at the beginning, Ha." When she nodded that would be her preference, he when on. "When you passed out the first time, Beth called him and he's been here about every six hours since. He said you should've stayed in the hospital, but that you seemed to have a fear of them, so that was why he let you go." It looked as if she were pulling teeth to get him to tell her the story. "So he's keep you medicated, in hopes that the extra rest would do the trick and stop the phenomena. Your temperature's been shooting up and down for two days. At least that's what Beth said when she called this morning. I—Well,"

"You haven't been here since the fight." She imposed, just to let him know she knew.

With a sigh, he went on "Right, Kit's fine, he's going to stay with Mom and me awhile. That is if it's Okay with you. He feels bad about inviting this upon you."

"He didn't, it's just his Dad. He's always over reacts that way. Really he's probably not mad at any one."

"I know," He replied resting back in the chair but he still didn't release her hand. "I apologized to him this morning, and he admitted that he was just scared of losing you." He looked as if they must have had a good talk. "I can understand where he's coming from, I've gone crazy for the past two days not being able to see you. I had to— to get in to see you, he's not staying."

She wasn't sure if that news came as a surprise or not. She remembered somewhere, him telling her the same thing, but she couldn't remember where they were. It was like a dream. Mike chooses to enter at that point, and Jim immediately stood to leave. "Relax, Jim." He commanded, sounding as if he'd lost the spark that was flying in the hall. "You've got her awake, that's more than I've been able to do in days." Jim sat back down but he attempted to release her hand. She wouldn't release it though, gripping even tighter as Mike gently gave her a kiss.

"You needed the sleep." He whispered, as he rose to tower above her.

"Really I've got to get to the—Mom needs me." Jim insisted patting her hand then prying it from his. "I've got to be going." He reiterated, shooting for the door.

Mike watched as she cringed at Jim's escape. "I'm not going to yell." He spoke softly, "I know that it only upsets you." Did he really care, she wondered looking to his eyes for an answer.

"I didn't do this to get you down here." She had to make sure he understood that it was an accident.

"I know." He responded, walking around the bed to stand where Jim had. "I had to come down anyway. Mr. B. has some—You don't need to talk business right now." He paused and lifted her hand. The old familiar feeling came rushing back into her. She couldn't hate this guy. She loved him, for all the little things that made him, him including his loud out bursts. They talked softly for several hours, before he said that he wasn't going to stay. Actually, he said he couldn't stay not that he didn't want to stay.

"Mike I want you here. Can't you just?"

"No" He sounded intent. "I can't watch what this place will do to you."

"It's not going to do anything to me!" She raised her voice and the pain returned to her chest.

"You can't get upset. The Dr. will be here in a few minutes, if he finds you upset, He'll send me packing now."

So Todd had been the one to set him straight, she thought. "I'm not upset, I just need you here. I want you here." He didn't respond. He changed the subject, and started telling her, about her brothers. When she realized, that subject caused pain too. She bowed out of that conversation too and moved on to Kit, but that he wouldn't talk about. Within a few hours, they had totally

run out of things to discuss and the room fell silent. When Todd tapped at the door, she was happier than he could've realized to see him.

"Looks like your back in the world of the living." He said the minute she called for him to enter, "I'll bet, you're ready for some medicine, aren't you?"

"Not if it's going to put me to sleep, what I really want to do is get out of this bed."

"Emma," Mike's voice was raised "How dare you talk to the Doctor that way."

"Dang it Mike, you mean this Kid, Has he been pulling your leg too?"

"It's good to have you back." Todd responded before Mike caught the drift. "But I warn you Girl, you can't go around telling my secrets."

"Alright, I get it." Mike wiped the dumbfounded look from his face, "You know each other."

"Of course" Todd looked confused "Doesn't everyone know their Doctor."

"Todd, you're still thinking small town remember." She tried to explain.

"I can tell I'm not needed here." Mike suggested as he slipped towards the door. She wanted to reassure him that he was, but instead she just let him slide away.

"Has he been being good?" Todd's face returned to the serious intent of his visit.

"Has he been bad?" She shot right back with her own question.

"He better not upset you, I can't promise to be around to pull Jim off his throat one more time."

"Have they been fighting a lot?"

"You might say so." He answered lifting her gown to listen to her chest. "Can't say I blame them, if you looked at me the way you look at them, I'd be willing to battle to the death, too." She was touched by his sentiment, but not the thought that either of them thought, they had to battle to the death. When she opened her mouth to speak, he hushed her. Then rolling her to listen to her back, he said, "The sleep was the best medicine, I could've ordered. You sound clear this morning. Besides, if you had to put up with all the bull that has flown around this place in the last two days, I would've had to hospitalize you in Provo." Provo is where the mental hospital is located in Utah and everyone knows it. Therefore, she got a good idea of what was taking place.

"You know if you had told me you had such pretty girls running around here before. I'd have found a way of making house calls sooner." He changed the subject, avoiding the crazy, topic.

"See something, you like did yah?" She didn't care to discuss her crazy brothers either.

"Well, you might say so." He paused looking at Crystal walking through the door. "But," he looked down at her "She's married." His teasing actually made her blush that time.

"Mom, you're looking so much better, you've even got some color to your cheeks." Crystal declared at just that minute.

"She does, doesn't she? I think you're right, we should make her blush more often." He gave her secret away.

The two of them then went on to discuss, other matters that were taking place in town. Things that didn't terribly concern her, so she listened but with only a half an ear. She was trying to put the pieces together, that everyone had supplied about the arrival of her brother's and the events that she'd slept through. As best as she could tell, the minute they found out she'd been hurt. They had joined the cause, and planned to take over the place, only to be turned back at the pass by, Jim and then Mike.

Mike was still a puzzle to her. Why did he insist, that the place was going to do things to her? Did he mean change her? After lunch, she got another opportunity to ask, when he brought her a tray. "Beth said she'll be in later to pick it up." He remarked starting for the door.

"Wait, stay with me" Why did she even have to ask. "Please?" There she was, right back to pleading with him, she thought, but she'd missed him so.

"If you really want me to" he hesitated at the door.

"Why do I even have to ask, of course I want you to stay? I want more than you to stay now. I want you to stay always."

"I can't Em," He insisted but took a seat anyway. "I've made arrangements for my vacation time to cover this, but I'm going back to Salt Lake. I wish I could but..."

"But what"

"I've already got things— I've made arrangements for taking over another motel."

They went on to talk about other things, but she finally understood what she'd been up against—A title. He had to be the one in charge, she thought after he left. That was it all along, he'd known that Mr. B. had said she was the one that made the decisions, and he couldn't live with it. Therefore, he was out to show her up, by finding another property to manage.

It should've made her mad, but it worked just the reverse. Had they been that competitive their entire marriage, she wondered. She felt like she'd always let him have his way, but perhaps he



didn't see it that way. Maybe he saw her getting what he took schooling for and felt that it wasn't fair, but didn't he see that he could do the same managerial job there, and still not bother the rules that Mr. B. had laid in place. Did he really only see an over grown motel when he saw the place.

The more she mulled it over the more she got frustrated with him. By Wednesday, when he came to her complaining about her soft bed at the cottage, asking to trade places. She didn't even care enough to throw a fit about being moved from the house, and a place where she could tell what was going on in the world – to a place so secluded, she didn't hear a human voice for hours during the day.

She did feel better about staying with the kid's, but they left for school early and then went on to work afterwards. The girls didn't even get back until after dark, and Jason usually spent the evening with Alex's boys. Kit still hadn't stopped by to talk, neither had Jim. For that matter, everyone stopped coming by to check up on her after a few days. By late Saturday night she was so bored she found herself sitting in front of the television trying to brush her hair with her good hand, but when the brush snagged and tumbled to the floor she didn't even try to retrieve it; instead she found herself weeping hopelessly. When Jim gently lifted and cradled her into his massive arms, like a baby. She cried even harder. He never uttered a word. He merely rocked back and forth with her, until she stopped crying. Then he pulled a rag from his back pocket and made her blow her nose.

"Some superwoman, huh" She asked looking him squarely in the face. "I'm always crying."

"That's one of those things that make you a super-person; it takes a strong person to let someone see you cry." He twisted the words but it was quite similar to what she'd told him the night he cried. Besides she didn't know he was watching, she hadn't even heard him come into the house. "Can I help, with your hair?" He asked softly, bending to retrieve the brush.

"No," she snapped, "I need to be able to do it myself." She drew a deep breath and added "I need to learn to do it all myself."

"Not as long, as you're willing to let me help." He replied, picking up the brush.

"That's just it. Don't you get it? I've always leaned on someone. I've always let him make the decisions." She couldn't say another word for the large lump that had caught in her throat.

"He hasn't made one decision concerning this place. So what's his leaving tomorrow going to do? Not a thing, Monday the place will be back to normal, and he still won't be here to help."

"Jim, we've been married for nearly twenty years, that's something I've taken great pride in, especially in a world with a fifty percent divorce rate. I shouldn't let him throw it away that fast. I've gone through..." again the lump was more than she could move.

"It's another reason you're the greatest." He responded, stroking her hair smooth with the brush.

"No, I'm not." She turned to look up at where he now stood. "It should mean, more than a piece of ground, more than his stupid pride. It should mean life, his and mine. If I don't give up and go back, it'll be my fault it failed."

"That's silly." He swung around her, to come to a rest on his knees, looking up at her. "He can't expect that you're always the one giving up things. He needs to give up things too. Or what kind of marriage is it?" She didn't respond, "It's not something that's built on take, marriage is built on giving— from one to the other, all the things that the first doesn't have." His eyes weren't twinkling they were serious. "Like Mom says, 'I don't love you for you, but for what you make of me when I'm with you.'" He squeezed her hand "You see you give to one another the things that best complements the other."

"It still hurts." She dropped her head, hoping to hid the tears that had swelled to over flowing, dropping his head on to her leg, he said, stroking her hand. "I know, I know."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN AN OLD LOVE STORY

On Sunday when Mike pulled away there was not a kiss – no three little words – no nothing – except like a second thought, a slight wave when he realized she was standing there. On Monday, life went back to normal, as Jim had predicted. The busses rolled in around five, dinner was served by seven, and dishes done by nine. The kids strolled off to the cottage and another game on the computer. Beth and Rob, slipped off for their nightly walk and Alex was headed for town, where he'd found a woman he liked.

The next day they did it all again, except they started with breakfast, and ended with the dinner dishes, cramming a hundred or more people through there in between. By Friday she could take being grounded no longer, she figured what Todd didn't know, wouldn't hurt her. She tackled driving the car, but that came after she mastered walking with one crutch, without his permission. Then she moved on to walking around without the crutches, at all. That he through a fit about, she couldn't remove the dirt from the bottom of the cast, so there was no way to hide her hikes. For which he did the only thing he could. He gave her a walking cast.

By the end of September, when Mr. B. called to discuss the court case, he had to wait for her to hobble up from the stable. When she finally reached the phone, only to be told that he was coming right down. She panicked, why would he not just tell her what it was about, over the phone, and why had he said that Jim had to be there? She didn't have long to find out. He caught the shuttle; flying into the Cedar City and was there in less than an hour, Jim meet him at the airport. Since, the house was full she met with him at Jim's. There was never a time she'd

met with him that she didn't think he looked like Santa. Even when he told her that day, that he didn't trust what the outcome of the suite was going to be.

"That deed was a true find." He stroked her ego, "But in order to use it." He paused to look from her to Jim. "It may mean you will have to claim all of the land."

"What do you mean ALL of the land?" She puzzled.

"The deed says clearly that the land was bought by Emme, not Jonathan. So in fact he never had any right deeding it to anyone that Emme didn't want it to go to."

The idea hit her like a bat. She'd have to claim all of the original property, all of it, including Jims. "No. Don't use it," She proclaimed, "that's not what I want."

"Emma, think about what you're saying." Jim cut her off short. "If this is the only way—"

"It doesn't matter – you're not to use it." She pressed her point.

"Emma let me finish, I only want to submit it to the court, in order to get an extension, and it will also give the Judge an opportunity, to see the tradition. And that's what we really want him to consider, not the amount of land in the original deed."

"So you can have him look at it without, claiming the other property?"

"Well, I can try, but the deed clearly indicated that Emme owned it, and the letter attached, that we really do want him to see ... said that she had to pass it on to her Granddaughter but it also said ALL the land was included in the will. Not just part of it."

"You can't us it then –" she insisted, "I refuse to let it affect Jim's property."

"It'll also affect Mr. Harris's property, and whoever it is that now owns the property, that lies west of town."

"Do it." Jim demanded, "I'm not afraid of losing the land."

"Neither am I" She shot back "I didn't even know about this place six months ago, and it's brought nothing but problem since I found it. So why am I supposed to be upset when they want to take it away."

"Nothing but problems" Jim asked with a look of disappointment.

"No, I didn't mean." She couldn't stand the pain in his eyes. "I just meant." She choked back the tears, by staring up at the ceiling "I just don't want to see anyone else hurt by this."

"You two need to talk," Mr. Becksted, interrupted her. "Beth said she had a room for me, that's where I'll be." He said standing to leave. "We'll talk in the morning." Jesse gave him a ride up to the big house, leaving the two of them to stare at each other over the dining room table.

"I didn't mean."

"I know what you meant." He cut her off before she could finish, but he hadn't snapped.

Slowly she rose and hobbled into the warmth of the living room. She loved what Jesse had done with that room. Anywhere a person's eye, were to light, there was another family picture. It was like walking through a living family album. The areas not cover with pictures, offered up candy dishes, trinket boxes, and a wide array of unused ashtrays.

Emma had one picture in particular, that she returned to repeatedly, it was very similar to a picture of herself, on her first birthday. The newspaper's use to print the first year pictures free, so probably every home in Utah had a similar one lying around some place; it was Jim's baby picture, and Jesse had it sitting on the mantle above the old fireplace.

When she realized Jim was no longer sitting at the table, she limped back through the dining room, and on through the kitchen to the back door. Where she thought, he might have gone, to light up his pipe, but he was nowhere in sight. Stepping onto the back porch, she considered that her words may have hurt more then she'd thought Perhaps he'd left her there alone and gone off to find someone that thought about what they were saying, before opening their mouth.

She was kicking herself for opening her mouth, when he stepped out the door saying, "I thought you were in the front room." The hairbrush in his hand said all that needed to be said, but he asked just the same. "Can I brush your hair?" Suddenly she remembered what a mess she must look, especially if he was willing to attend to her hair. Beth had done a good job of teaching her how to wrap her sleeve inside her blouses, but she still had no chest. "I must look a mess."

"Not at all" He stepped to her side. "I just wanted to let you know, that I'm still here and still willing to help, if you'll just let me."

"I'm sorry. I should've thought before speaking." What had she ever done to deserve, such loyalty?

"I told you, I know what you meant, and I do. I know you weren't talking about me." He remarked gently turning her around to stroke her hair. "I Love the way your hair feels like satin." After a few strokes of the brush, he gripped her by the shoulders and pulled her back against him. "And I LOVE YOU." He whispered laying his head on her shoulder blade.

"Jim –" She turned to look him straight in the eye, the feelings were rushing through her body – Fear, Joy, Respect ... Passion. "Oh," she laid her face against his chest, "God, help Me.," she

whispered. Her heart pounding, "Jim, I—" He was the answer; she could just let him tell her what to do, let him make the decisions, let him...No she couldn't. She'd do it herself, she thought, "I can't do this, I want you but."

"No," He pushed her back, "I'm not offering you a night, I want you by my side, now and forever, there is no one night stands for this guy." He turned and stepped away from her. "When you come to my bed, it's forever, or never. I won't be sharing you with no one."

"Wait, I think you misunderstood what I said, I said I want to but it's not right—" She turned to look back out the window. "Not right now, I—I couldn't do it."

Again, he wrapped his mighty arms around her and pulled her back towards him. "I know." He snuggled his nose deep into her hair, and whispered "I knew what you were going to say, even before I asked. I just needed to make my stand clear."

"I know there would be nothing less. I wouldn't ask for anything less myself, but you see that's just it. I'm still married, and until I'm not, even this frightens me." She went to move away, but he held on. "Jim, you're pushing me past the point of return. Please." She could hardly believe that was her voice begging him to release her. Every inch of her wanted him to hold her, to kiss her, to make love to her, but the tiny voice inside said differently.

With a deep breath, he said "Just a minute more. Then I'll let you go, PLEASE." when she nodded her head in agreement, he loosened his grip, but didn't totally let her go. Silence filled the air as they listened to each other breathe, then as he dropped his hands to his side, he said "Remember you'll never have to ask me twice, to stay with you." He was referring to how she'd pleaded with Mike to stay. Backing away, she stumbled over an old trunk, and ended up, being caught by him and drawn back against his firm body. "Mom keeps telling me to move that." He righted her, looking down at the old trunk. "But I never thought it would get in the way of a cast."

It looked familiar but different to her. Racking her brain, she finally remembered where she'd seen one like it. Suddenly she realized where the 'Will' could be. "Jim, take me up to the old barn."

"The what?" he was lost.

"The trunk reminded me of one that's up there, maybe—"

"The Will" He exclaimed, taking her hand and pulling her towards the screen door.

A minute later, they were in his truck racing towards the old barn. She couldn't believe he was taking her there. She hadn't been there since hearing the voices. The only thing she was hearing right then was Jim; rambling on about finding the Will and how it would solve their problems. If

only that were true, she thought, knowing better. Even if the trunk contained the Will, it wasn't going to solve all of her problems.

When Jim pulled to a stop in front of the large old building, she couldn't seem to get her feet to move. Approaching the wide doors, he turned back to discover that she hadn't moved an inch.

"I can't go in there." She answered his questioning look.

"Sure you can—" he walked back to her side. "I'm going to be with you." He went on slipping his hand around her oversized waist. "I don't know where it's at."

"It's by the back door. Pass the carriages and buck board, by the wall." She tried to talk him out of making her go in. "I'll slow you down." She continues looking down to her casted leg.

Swinging her around, to pull her close to his face, he said, "Nothing is ever going to hurt you, with me at your side." He was so sure of himself, that she found herself believing. If only he, knew the terror she'd experienced that day. "I promise you." He added looking into the depth of her soul. "I'll never let anything bad happen to you." With a deep sigh, she held tightly to his hand and led the way through the discarded items. Slowly they moved pass the buggies and the weathered wooden buckboard, and then sliding by an old plow she caught her cast on an old piece of rope and again nearly tripped into the relic of a trunk. Jim broke her fall, by pulling her back against him, with such force that it rattled her ribs, causing pain to shoot to her face.

"I'm sorry, Are you Okay?" He quickly brushed the hair from her face; biting her bottom lip, she nodded. "Don't lie to me." He demanded, "You only bite that lip, when you're hurting."

"I'll be fine. There —" She pointed to the trunk, "That's it." His face was filled with disappointment. "What is it, have you seen it before? Have you looked in it?"

He only shook his head No, as he proceed to walk around the large wooden item. "The letters are missing."

"What letters?"

"Never mind, I'll tell you later." He answered reaching for the lid. A second later, he clicked the key and flipped the latch loose, and then he turned to look up at her. He didn't appear to be so sure of himself all of a sudden. She stepped forward and laid her hand on his shoulder, with a nod, said "It's Okay, open it." She'd no warning signs, no strange thoughts, and no indication of what was to lie on the inside at all. Reaching up to take her hand with one of his, he tipped the lid open with the other. Light sprung from the box, and the barn looked new. Jim jumped to his feet and clutched her tightly, crushing her face to his chest. She could hear the pounding of his heart, and the quick shallow breaths he was taking, but she didn't hear anything else.

Light streamed through his fingers, knit across her face and sunlight danced on her hair, causing her to feel the warmth on her head. His body was no longer tense and she could tell that whatever it was that he was watching wasn't going to hurt her. Lifting his hand from her face, she to become a witness to one of the most loving scene's she'd ever seen.

Just inside of the back door stood a couple entwined in each other's arms, quite the same way Jim now held her. The young girl's face was pressed tightly to a tall dark man's chest, where she was sobbing for all she was worth.

"He- hurt- me. I just couldn't stop- him."

"I know Liz. I know. He wants the stone."

"Grandma-won't, let him have it. Grandfather said I have to marry him. I love you-I can't marry him."

"You won't marry him." He pushed her away proclaiming loudly, "So help me God, you will not live with the scallywag."

"James it's his child" she lowered her head and weep loudly, "I can't expect...."

"You're not asking me to." He yanked her face up, allowing the sun to shine on her darkened eyes. "I'm going to do it, because I love you and that means all of you."

"Grandpa won't let us. He knows it's Robert's, Grandma told him, but he won't believe that I didn't want it."

"It doesn't matter." He insisted pulling her close to him again. "We'll just run away, we'll go to the city, they can't stop us from getting married there. They won't find us there."

The girl simply sighed and snuggled even closer to the tall dark man. Her pale skin was contrast to his, as was his blue eyes, to her black ones. For all the differences they exhibited, the heart they shared was big enough to keep them together, for a lifetime.

Jim drew small circles on her back. When she looked into his eyes, the tear that had just slipped down his cheek made her realize how much she loved him.

Gently his counterpart, drooped to kiss the tears from Lizzy's face, and then said, "I will put all we need into this trunk, and meet you here in the barn on Friday." With his last gentle kiss, the scene faded and they were left standing in front of the old trunk. Looking up at Jim, she whispered, "That was my Grandmother and your Grandfather."

"He loved her so." He commented, pulling her closer "I wonder why they never made it."

"Perhaps this will tell," she bent down to pick up a letter from the cluttered trunk.

Carefully she unfolded the fragile brown paper and read. She believed it was her grandmothers writing. It appeared from what was written, that the following Friday was their target date. There was no hint of problems, she spoke of how much she loved him, and a small water spot on the edge, Emma assumed was left by a warm tear of love. Lowering the letter, she looked up at Jim and said, "They loved each other so — it wasn't fair." He was so touched by her expression, that he cupped her face, and pressed his moist lips to hers. She didn't even have the will to pull free. She melted into his arms and drank of the sweet wine he offered.

"That does count." He whispered pulling away. He was referring to the way she always said hugs didn't count. "I'm sorry."

She curled her arm around her waist and bowed at the middle, not from the pain of her ribs, but from the chill, his absence had created. "Oh Jim," she cried with the hurt her heart was feeling, "I can't go on this way."

"I've hurt you." He pulled her close again.

"No, your arms burn my flesh, my soul will burn too." She turned from his longing touch, gasping for air.

"Emma," he caught her up against him again. "I've got to have you." The warmth he expelled was beyond any she'd ever known.

"NO—" she shouted pulling far enough away he couldn't touch her. "No." she again whispered, breathless, lowering her head, to look only at the dirt beneath her feet. "I can't make that kind of commitment right now. I'm not free to do so."

With that, she stumbled back to the truck and rested against the hood, he followed a few minutes later. After assisting her in to the truck, he climbed in the other side and lowered his head to the steering wheel. "Forgive me Emma. I nearly forgot myself in there." He looked to her for comfort, but the weight he felt came from his own mind not hers.

"Tell me about the letters you thought should be on the trunk."

"Forgive me first." He wasn't about to go on until she said she did.

"Jim, there was nothing to forgive. We both know that was right. It's just a matter of time."

He brushed her hair from her face, and she feared he would kiss her again, but he merely whispered. "You promise." When she nodded her head, the tears spilled from his warm loving



eyes and he turned back to the wheel. "The day I first walked in on you, in your office, I saw her."

"Who" Emma asked

"You're G.G. Grandmother, Emme." He paused running his hand around the wheel, "She was putting a hat box —"

"A red and white striped hat box" She interrupted him.

"You've seen it?"

"I saw her place several things in a large globe, with a picture of the falls painted on it and then put it into a hat box."

"A red and white hat box" He took her hand.

She nodded her head.

"I saw her put it in a trunk, with the letters E.C. engraved on the lid, and then she threw a large old quilt over top it."

"When did you see it?" She was confused, if he saw it why hadn't she.

"The day you offered me a job—" He responded, "Remember when I stepped in, you said, you thought you had given me one of your die looks."

She remembered. "You had such a strange look on your face."

"Because you look so much like her, I thought I was seeing double. She had a picture of herself and I guess old Johnny." He finished looking into her eyes. "You have the same black eyes that I fell in love with." Raising his hand, he gently stroked her face with the back of it. "Perhaps we should sit down and tell all that we know of the story."

It wasn't the first time someone had called it a story, Beth had said she'd a good novel started, when she'd read Emma's notebook, while Emma sleep after breaking her ribs, but she'd never thought of it as a story. "A story, Beth said the same thing, when she read my note book."

"You don't leave it laying around do you?" He asked starting the truck.

"No, I guess Mike had brought it in from the office." She wasn't sure how it had got to her bedside. "It doesn't matter though, if someone can figure it out, more power to them, I can't."

"I guess you're right, it's their story. Maybe you should fill in the lost details, for me."

"Like what?" She looked puzzled.

"Like the way she got pregnant with Robert's child."

"You don't know?"

With a strange look on his face, he sarcastically said, "Would I be asking, if I know?"

"I just thought that if you had seen the different things, well that you had seen them all."

He hadn't, so the first stop was at her office to pick up the notebook, and then on they went to his place, where after he got finished reading her notes, he looked impressed. They'd figured out James and Lizzy had fallen in love, but that old Johnny didn't think he was right for her, so he chased him off. Then on the night of the spring cotillion, Old Johnny had made her go with Robert, who proceeded to think that her hand for a dance, gave him the right to rape her. That was the sight of three of her visions. The disagreement she heard, told who was fighting over her and the stone, and the one they'd just witnessed told of the true love that the two of them shared.

"But if they had planned to run away, and get married, how did they both end up with someone else?" She thought it a stupid question, but it was the missing part to their story.

"Maybe we should be glad." He answered looking down at where she sat at his feet. "Or we could be brother and sister, right now."

"Your right, I've been trying to figure out how to change the past, ever since that first day. Maybe I shouldn't try so hard."

"My god Girl, what made you think you could change it. The past is written, no man can change it."

"Oh, I know, but it seems they deserve more than just—" She looked to him for the right word.

"I don't think they had an empty life. Just look, they each got married."

"Yah, for Grandma it happen twice."

"Okay, maybe her life would've been smoother. But if you had stopped the rape—Your father would've never been born."

"My God," She exclaimed sitting up. "I never thought about it that way. What else would be different?"

"I wouldn't be here either, neither would Mom."

No one she loved would be there. The depth of that act became more and more apparent as she continued to dwell on the thought. "And how different, would the world be?" She asked him.

"The story said that if the stone was to fall into the wrong hands."

"But it didn't, she said her grandma wouldn't let her take it. So that means—"

"It means that it's here some place." He said resting back into the chair.

"Jim, we can't let them take the land, we're the right people." She popped to her knees "We've got to stop them."

"Isn't that what I've said, all along?" He'd never said I told you so before "But not because I believe that story—" he leaned forward and brushed her hair down, then lifting her face to look down upon her he said, "Because I want you here with me."

That night when she returned to the big house, Emma told Mr. Becksted, to go ahead with his plan.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN A BROTHERLY INVASION

After returning from Todd's office where he removed the wrap that kept her arm bound to her chest, she'd paced the floor for hours before sitting down in front of the computer. She knew she could've drove to Cedar for the court hearing but felt it was better if she didn't run into her brothers.

When the call came in it was exactly as she'd expected, they gave her the extension. What she hadn't expected was the judge granting them the right to move onto the property right away. Even after Mr. B. explained it, it made no sense to her, of course she was looking at it through emotions, not logic. Obviously, she'd made an impact on the county, and the court wasn't going to let her brother's step in and snatch up the land simply for resale value. The only way they would be able to take over the place, was if they actually were to work the land.

Beth could tell that the call had come the minute Emma passed through the kitchen holding back the tears. She may have even been able to control them, if Alex and Jim hadn't met her at the door. The minute she felt blocked in, they started to flow.

"Em, what did he say?" Beth beckoned her with a cup of coffee, to sit and tell all. She wasn't interested in sitting down, and less interested in telling them, what the court had deemed fit. Nevertheless, she did. They had a right to know they would soon be bombarded with the Elders of the family.

"The court did what!" Alex exclaimed

"It's not fair." Beth blurted out. That was Emma's feeling exactly, but what was she to say?

"So where do we go from here?" Jim asked, meaning they should put a strategy together. What Emma heard was what she felt; they had lost it and would have to start to look for a place to live. "Oh" she wailed, "I've lost your land." Then she pushed past them to the outside and ran to the pond. She was glad it was dark, that way the guests didn't think there was some crazy person running around. She hadn't made it all the way to the copper toned rock, before Jim had her arm.

"Stop" He shouted, bringing her to halt "God girl, for someone with a cast on their leg, you can sure move."

"I've lost it."

"Bull! What I heard you say was that we were going to have to make room for some more help."

"Jim, you don't know these people, they can take over so fast, and it'll make your head spin."

"I've dealt with them, remember. They just wanted to be helpful, Mike over reacted as usual. I have to admit, that once Mike came out swinging they fought back, but what else could be expected from someone related to you." He made them sound almost controllable.

Remembering what he'd said up at the old barn, she sighed and took a deep breath. "Maybe you're right, together nothing can beat us."

The smile that embraced his face made him irresistible. They went on to talk about which cottages in the village; they were going to let them stay in, as they walked back to the big house.

They had no sooner got inside of the back door, than Sam her oldest brother was on the phone. Bob and Steve's calls followed in succession. She told each they were welcome to move in on the weekend. By making them wait, she felt as if she were still in charge. After hanging up the phone for the third time, Alex, Beth and Rob, joined her and Jim in her office, and put together a battle plan.

Friday morning rolled around all too soon. No matter what she'd told her brother's, they still showed up before five, including Jake, but nothing was about to take her by surprise, after finding Mike sleeping in the office that morning. As she stood there filled with emotions, he'd encompassed her lips with his. Then before she could catch her breath, he started telling her how he was going to arrange the office with his things. Suddenly recalling Jim was just behind her, she pulled free and turned to find him gone.

By Saturday afternoon, she'd interrupted moving her office stuff down to the basement, to referee a disagreement between Beth and Lydia about using the vegetables from the gardens. Later in the day, she had to settle a disagreement between, Sara, who had been doing all the reservations and Mike. Sunday went the same way, as did Monday Tuesday and Wednesday.

The only person she hadn't had to put back into their place was Jim, whom she'd not seen, since Mike kissed her. By Friday evening, even before the tour bus had pulled in and after a rousing fight with Kit, Emma threw her hands in the air and headed for town. When she stepped into the bar for a beer, and discovered, a bleached blond hanging off Jim's arm, she climbed back into the car and drove on.

It wasn't as clean a get a way, as she'd hoped. Todd caught her by her week arm, causing her to stand still, long enough him to see that she was in no mood to talk. When he asked where she was headed, she merely tipped her head in the direction of the setting sun and climbed into her car.

She'd no idea that there was a small community of people that lived out there, but after watching the sunset across the barren desert and doing a lot of thinking, she was about to leave when a strangely dressed man approaching the car, asking if she needed help. He spoke in old English, and the clothing he wore looked a lot like the pictures she'd seen of the Amish. For whatever reason she didn't, fear him. Looking back over his shoulder to the sun that was nearly set, he suggested that spending the night on the side of the road was not a good idea. When she agreed and said she was about to head on back to town, he interrupted and offered her a place to spend the night. It was almost as if he understood she was in turmoil. Even though she didn't know a soul there, she accepted his invitation.

She didn't sleep much, but not because she was in a strange place. They'd made her feel welcome. She'd even been invited to read the bible aloud with them. There was no discussion after the reading; strange because that was usually where whoever had invited you to participate had the opportunity to tell you their beliefs. By morning, she was ready to go back and try it again. After saying her many thanks, the man that had lead her there, walked with her back to the car.

She could tell that Jim's truck was parked in front of her car, even before she cleared of the fence, which marked the end of their property. Jacob, continued to walk on with her, and as they approached the truck, Jim stepped from the driver's side and called a hardy hello, to the two of them. Jacob recognized Jim at once and began talking in some language she didn't recognize. When he realized she didn't understand, he apologized. Again repeated what he'd said to Jim.

"I said you are the morning sun, in a night sky."

"She does have a way of popping up where she doesn't belong." Jim responded, without a smile. "Jacob, I thank you for looking after her."

"Jim, she needs no one to watch after her, she has God." Was Jacobs's response, as she hobbled towards the car?

They went on to exchange a few more words, before Jacob turned and with a deep bow in her direction, headed home. Jim hesitantly opened her passenger door and sat down. Pushing his hat back, he said, "The next time you need to get away for a while try telling someone."

She'd had people telling her what to do all week; she was in no mood to allow him to tell her what to do. "Just who do you think you are, telling me what to do?" She went right for the juggler. "I went looking for you first, only to find a bimbo on your arm."

"BIMBO – That was Maggie."

"What in the hell do I care what her name is."

"You're jealous." He responded with a chuckle "I don't believe it."

Her face was red, but not because she was blushing. "Damn you." She raised her hand and struck him across the upper arm. "Don't laugh at me." He caught her hand before she could pull it back.

"Alright girl let's get something straight. I was with Maggie, Julie's older sister and her husband Karl. I would've been pleased to introduce you. Instead of come out looking for you." He held her hand above her head. "And since I would never raise me hand to you, I would like to think you would show me the same respect." He continued on forcing his face into hers. When he released her hand, she gently stroked the back of his head while continuing to stare into his eyes. Feeling as if she were eating crow, she whispered, "I'm sorry, for hitting you and jumping to conclusions."

"That's better." He said sitting straight in the seat again. Then without notice he swung his hand under her chin and pressed his lips to hers, she didn't even try forcing him away; when he moved beyond her lips, to tease with her tongue, she didn't resist.

He seductively caressed her neck, and she privately wished it would never end. When he moved back far enough to see her eyes were still closed he again, moved in for another. Still she didn't resist, she even went so far as to be the first to open her mouth and allow him passage. When his hand moved down her arm to her fingers, he slightly brushed over her ring. It was like an alarm, and instantly she pulled away. Leaving a cold empty spot where her mouth had once been.

"Damn it Girl, We're going to have to talk about this," he declared, shifting into a slower gear "Do you just take off, like this often?" Pressing her hand to her lips, as if she couldn't believe it

had happen, she shook her head. "Good, because I couldn't go through to many nights scared like that."

"I was scared, everything is slipping away. I'm losing my grip." She held on to the wheel for dear life, trembling like there was no tomorrow.

"Woe, there girl, don't go doing this to me."

Dropping her head to meet her hands at the wheel, she said through a shaky voice, "I'll take hearing voices any day, to putting up with those people."

"Oh Baby," he uttered wrapping his arm around her shoulder "You can handle it; you just need to change your approach."

"That's easy for you to say." She raised her head "You haven't been around to see what they can do to me." She paused for a deep breath "You haven't been around at all. So what makes you think you can just stroll in here and kiss me."

"Do you have a middle button? Why is it you're either biting my head off or driving me crazy?" He sounded nearly as shaky as she felt, but the twinkle in his eyes made her laugh.

"Am I really all that bad to live with?" She asked with a chuckle.

"Hey, I don't know, I haven't got that far yet, but I can tell you that—" she looked over at him, "That I'd love to find out."

"You think I'm going about this wrong?"

"Okay," he smacked his lips together "We'll stick to the problem at hand." Shifting back onto his side of the car, he said, "Yes, I think you're going about this Brother Thing wrong. What you really want is a way for all of you to work together right?"

"Yes."

"Then wouldn't it be better to educate them on how the place is operated, then going around trying to clean up the mistakes they make." It made sense, and was implementable. He must have seen the light go on in her head, for he quickly moved back to the question he wanted answered. Lifting her hair up and sliding his hand to the back of her neck, he said, "Now, what are you going to do with Mike?" She simple couldn't come up with an answer for him, so the only thing she did was shake her head back and forth, biting her bottom lip. "Alright," he sighed, "I won't push you, but that doesn't mean I'm giving up. I've waited too long to have you here."

On the drive home, she thought about how the Amish people had worked together, and she envied them. By the time she pulled to a stop in front of the big house, she decided that was exactly how the place was going to operate.

She was a bit taken back, when she realized that no one there had even missed her. Beth was the only one that even said something about her not changing her clothes. Everyone she saw, she told about a meeting to be held at three in a large dining room and told them to tell everyone they saw. She even went so far as to wake Mike, and demand he be there, although she didn't think he would show, or for that matter even remember she'd spoken to him.

When she clumsily, climbed the basement steps, and stepped into the dining room. She found her suspicions about Mike correct, but everyone else was there, including Jim, who had found a seat near the front of the room. First Emma thanked everyone for coming, and let all know, they'd be paid for the hour they were in training. She then went on to explain what cross training was all about. Emma believed it was going to come unglued, when she said that everyone there was going to learn how to do everyone else's job, including hers.

"I'll start tomorrow by teaching everyone the basic's for running the Resort side of the place."

"What do you mean Resort side?" Mike's voice rang from the doorway. "Compared to what?"

"If you'll let me finish, I was going to say in comparison to the Ranch."

"The ranch" Half the group repeated

"Just what I thought, most of you see only the Resort, but only a few of you have seen the Ranch. Well people, take a good look out that window, you see that wheat growing in the meadow." She watched as all their heads turned to the lower valley floor. "It's going to be harvested this next week, and those of you not involved with it will be assisting Jim and a few hands picking in the orchards. But first I'm going to show you why we must send our food on to town to be processed before we can serve it to our guest's."

From there she pulled out the ten-pound book of regulations, required for serving food to the public. The largest section, she pointed out, was one on how home grown food couldn't be served to the public without first being inspected by the health department. From there she went on to the portion on NO HOME CANNING. Lydia seemed to have been put in her place, and until she knew the rules, as well as Beth, that's where she would stay. The second afternoon she went on to the care and cleaning of the guest rooms, and all the regulations required by the state. "And of course we have in addition to the health inspectors, a reservations system which has additional requirements." She made sure that everyone there knew that a germicide was used in the wash, so even though they didn't have white linens that would be easy to bleach, their sheets carried no germs. Mike was the only one, who knew why that subject had been covered.



On the third day, she covered the computer and telephone system, along with the satellite dishes and steam extractors, which turned the hot springs into electricity. She only touched on the purification plant for the drinking water and the many wells that were used to keep the place looking so green. Briefly, she included the new conversion idea, of Kit's to have all cars running on battery power charged by their free electricity by spring.

From there she branched in to the areas she knew the most about, Sales, bookkeeping, employee record keeping, tax records, and balancing the two sides with the middle. Jim never missed a class. Mike stopped getting up, once he realized she knew what she was talking about, without his help. As for the others, those of them who were still interested at the end of the first week, she figured had potential for growing beyond her, mainly the kids, were there.

She kept her promise about training them in all aspects of the place. The following week she made sure everyone spent at least a few hours a day in the fields, or orchards. In addition, everyone had to wait tables, wash dishes, make beds, clean toilets, and pack luggage. Some were taken on by the cooks to be taught the trade of a side cook, and others learned the laundry, wasn't the coolest spot around.

By the end of September, she figured they'd enough information to step in if needed, but not enough to be dangerous. More importantly, she'd managed to get them all to sit down with each other. She'd converted the meeting into a time to eat and discuss their problems and solutions.

She was perhaps the most impressed, with the way the ideas flowed during their daily meeting. Everyone had a better idea, and some even flew. Mainly though she listened to all of their suggestions, and when they were feasible, she implemented them.

While she wasn't overly excited with working out of the barren basement, she did rather enjoy being able to avoid Mike's tyrant temper. He would've understood so much more about the operations of the place, if he'd just gotten up to attend the daily meetings.

She knew that most of his confusion came from a lack of knowledge, of what was going on around there. While he insisted he needed his sleep, she knew what it was like to do the audit. She never had any trouble sleeping through the night. Therefore, she knew first hand, he was just using it as an excuse. The same way he'd declared that their bedroom at the cottage was too far away from the big house, to control what he needed to during the day. He solved that problem by cleared out the rest of her stuff from the office and set up a small bed in there.

The only eyes, he was pulling the wool over were his own. He never had been much on the little things, that make a relationship work, but now he'd even stopped the occasional loving strokes, as they passed in the hall. If she were to feel a hand on her body it was Jim's, caressing her at moments of need.

By the first of October, the chill was more than in the air, it hung in every conversation they had, and nipped at her nose when they didn't agree, but to keep peace she brushed off the frost, and allowed him to do as he pleased. This included not attending the meetings, and sleeping all day. He also managed to get out of milking the cows, and collecting the eggs, as everyone else had to do.

When Jim announced he had to round up the cattle, scattered throughout the hills, and drive them down to the flat lands for winter-feeding. She didn't even attempt to ask him to help, and when he found out she was going along to do the cooking, he merely made fun of her. Saying things like "You can't boil water, how are you going to feed twenty men?" Then when he found out that Kit and Jimmy were going along too, He started to say "twenty men and two boys" sarcastically.

She may have been able to shake off his comments, but Kit drank them in like a sponge. He was living at Jim's, and only talking to her when necessary. He may have been mad at his Dad, but she was the one to pay the price, the more Mike shot off his mouth, the less Kit came around. Even Crystal, found other things to keep herself occupied. She'd been assisting Dr. Todd in setting up his office there in town. Crystal was the twinkle in her father eye, so when she stopped coming around he seemed to get even worse.

As much as she wanted to be able to explain to Crystal, her Father attitude, she didn't understand it herself. If he was planning to carry a grudge around with him, twenty-four hour a day, why had he even bothered to come down? It was almost as if he'd had no choice in the matter, he acted as if someone was holding something over his head. She tried to dispel the thought by assuring herself with the fact he never spoke to her brothers, with the exception of Jake of course. "Jake " that's it, she thought. Jake must be the answer.

"What." Jake answered, to what he thought, was her calling him, popping his head into the shabby dimly lit room in the basement.

"I was just looking over who I could have help on the round up." She figured she could find some time there alone with him, to ask the more important questions.

"Sure, Sis" He responded, "What time do we leave?"

"Meet Jim at the Stables about Four."

"The stables— Like where they keep the horses?" He looked like, what she must have looked like the day Jim decided it was time for her to learn to ride.

"Don't worry; they're going to drive up."

"But I—will I actually have to ride one? I mean I'm not afraid, it's just that well – I remember that horse you rode."

"I did too; right up until Jim took me by the hand and helped me get over my fear. Believe me, not all horses are like that."

"You promise to help me. I mean—" his jaw firm, and green eyes set on her face. "We can get through this together, right." He was reciting lines she'd told him when he showed up at her house stoned.

"Right" She answered with a smile. "Believe me it'll be a piece of cake."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN THE ROSE LADY

She met the group of old hands at the stable at four, with a van full of hot muffins and coffee. After arriving in the highlands, she pulled out more coffee along with eggs, bacon and a half-ton of potatoes. All was gone in minutes. Then the first group rode out to locate larger groups of cattle.

Jake hung back, strutting his six foot two height around, as he was just waiting to be told where he was going to be needed the most. His walnut colored hair flaring from under the large hat. He'd even gone so far as to buy a leather jacket with the fringe across his chest, to impress the rugged old hands, Jim had arranged to help. Unfortunately they saw right through his city slicker veneer, and when he just couldn't bring himself to get on a horse, Jim pulled his fat from the fire by saying he was only there to assist her.

"Like that little lady needs help." a tall lanky hand called, as he jumped his horse the way cowboys in the movies do. "I'll bet she could handle a few hundred hungry cowboys, single handed...Of course I'd like to see how she treats just one in bed." While she was listening, she didn't even bother to react to that comment, although she did take every word as a compliment.

The sun was just starting to peek its nippy nose over the mountains, when Jim and the last of the odd hands, pulled up stake. She was busy at the side of the van, washing dishes, when he strutted around the side, and sweep her up into his arms.

"Have a good day dear." his words fell with a bit of humor, as he planted a kiss on her forehead. The shocked look on her face was met with a wink, meaning he would explain it later. Then he too, mounted the black mare like someone trying out for a part in the movies.

"He does things like that a lot, doesn't he?" Jakes voice caught her off guard.

"He's a kidder." She responded not removing her eyes from the direction, he rode.

"What he did was just make sure those other guy's don't lay a hand on you."

"What?" she turned to look back at his green eyes.

"He just marked you, as taken. You would've had to overhear the conversation, taking place around the fire to understand."

"He marked me, so the others would leave me alone?" she wasn't sure if she liked the thought of his marking her, it sounded like something a dog did to his territory.

"He's okay – I like him." Was Jake's only response as he treaded off towards the horse left behind for him? "Now show me how to get on this beast."

"Jake, I can't" she waved her hand to tap the cast, she was still totting around. "But I can tell you how to do it. Just give me a minute to finish these dishes."

Once the last of the metal tins, were dried she hobbled over, to where he'd taken a seat on a flat rock. After leading Rosie out to where he could see, she wasn't an ill spirited animal, she hoped she could talk him through a mounting. Oh, he managed to get up. He just didn't want to be there, and came down nearly as fast.

"Jake she's not going to hurt you."

"How do you know, she might decide to find a fence?"

"She's a good girl." She used the words to stroke the smooth hair of the chestnut colored horse's nose "I just know she wouldn't hurt you. Dang it Jake, Jim taught me to ride on this horse. She's just a sweetheart."

"No," he proclaimed heading for his truck. "I don't need to prove anything to you."

"You're right you don't, but I need help with lunch and dinner just the same." her plea was met with an abrupt stop.

"Alright, I can do that."

Jim had said that bologna sandwiches would do for lunch, but chilly was required for dinner, so she got that started. In addition, a good supply of wood would need to be dragged down to keep the fire going. After managing to start the chili, and making lunch just in time for the guys to come back. Emma knew it was time to talk to Jake.

"I want to know what you said to Mike to get him to come down here." There she'd said it, blunt and right to the point.

"I didn't say a thing, and I'm not here to help Sam take this place away from you." he responded, standing to meet her glare.

"Look I'm not really accusing you. I just want to know who it was. Someone had to have said something."

"Ask his grandmother." he tossed the rest of his sandwich into the fire.

"She's—" She cut off the word "dead" before it rolled from her lips, because she wasn't sure she was. "I don't know where to get a hold of her."

"Well she's the only one that knew what to say."

"What did she say? I mean did you see her?"

"Not really. Damn it Em. You know better then ask me this."

She knew she was treading on thin ice, her grandmother had taught them all too well, about ease dropping. "I have to know." she took a seat on the blanket and crossed her legs before her.

"Shit..." he passed around her. "I knew I shouldn't have been listening, but well...since you left, it's not been the same." he looked down at her "You know," She didn't respond, so he continued. "I came home early one day, and well... they were in the kitchen talking" he was flexing his hand, as if he'd a ball in it. "I knew I should've announced myself, but they were talking about this place and..." he walked off towards the truck "I listened. I was afraid he was going to leave and not tell Me." he turned around and shot back at her. "If he'd done that...I couldn't pay the rent myself...I had to know what he was going to do."

"Alright, Jake I get the picture."

"No you don't. You and Beth took off and—"

"I told you, you could move down right from the start."

"But Mike didn't think it was going work. How was I to know that you knew what you were doing?"

His words bit at her self-respect. "Why don't you guys think I have a brain?" she asked pulling herself to her feet. "Why don't you ever give me credit for being able to take care of myself?"

"You sure proved us wrong, didn't you?" He sheepishly whispered, almost too low for her to hear, through her racing brain. "I mean look what you've done with this place." he spoke a bit louder. She reached for a stick to stir the fire, wondering if he was just trying to appease her ego. "So what did his grandmother say?" She asked returning the conversation to the original subject.

"I didn't listen for long – but she said that no matter what he wanted, he had to be here with you."

"Why?" She searched his eyes, to see if he was telling the truth.

"I don't know. She said something about the light and dark." her confusion showed. "I don't know, honestly." he through his hands up. "She said it had to do with the light and dark." he looked as if he were a child being called down for telling a fib. "Really Em, She didn't say anything else." he stopped abruptly then added "No. Wait a minute – she said something about peace on earth. I thought she was quoting the bible." He was telling her the truth, even if he was ringing his hands.

"So what did she look like, I mean was she nice."

"I don't know. I didn't interrupt them. I was just on my way up the steps." He paced back and forth, as if she had him under a magnifying glass. "She wore some awful cologne though."

"What kind of cologne."

"It smelled like roses, really strong roses."

Emma had to back off the questioning, even though she'd several that were running through her head. She remembered all too well, the way her answers seem to come. She couldn't risk the chance that he couldn't answer the question. "Come on, we've got to get the rolls from the house." she changed the subject by heading for the Van.

"What's it mean – I mean the smell of roses?" he wasn't ready to let it drop. "Rob said that, that night you smelled rose's up at that house, but that no one else could smell it."

"It meant that I could smell roses, Kit could too."

If she hadn't been so preoccupied thinking about the rose lady. She might have realized the sky had turned dark and over cast. Meaning a storm was approaching, but the strange little lady kept running through her mind. Maybe she really was Mike's grandmother, or maybe Jake had just called her that because of her age, but he never saw her, how did he know how old the lady was?

That question kept reappearing in her thought repeatedly, as she peeled the potatoes for potato pancakes. When she thought she might go mad if she didn't ask the question, she posed it as best as she could to Jake.

"Why did you think, it was his grandmother?"

"What?"

"The rose lady—I mean the lady that smelled like roses. How did you know it was his grandmother, if you didn't meet her?"

"The way she spoke to him." he answered looking back down for another potato. "She was talking about his Mom, said that she told him the story when he was a kid...No" he looked back up at her "She said his mother had to have told him the story when he was a kid. And he agreed that she had." The questions his response had conjured up in her head were best left alone. "Hmmm..." was her only response, as she stepped to the fire to stir it up again.

Cattle had been herded in to the small valley, just below them all day. Off and on, she caught a glimpse of Jim riding high in the saddle, bringing up the rear, but he never stopped in, not even for his afternoon coffee. As the last twinkling of light speed from the sky, a brisk wind developed, and the undeniable scent of snow filled her nostrils. Even the horses could tell it was coming, if she'd been wise, she would've not just started the van, and drove it back to the house.

Jim hadn't come in yet, so there was no way she was going to leave, without trying to explain first. She watched as the heavy clouds dropped over the valley below, sucking everything, that it came in touch with, into a white curtain. As did the rest of the group, all but Jim and two other men had come down. One of the men said she should head for home, but her reply was – she's in this to the end. However, she did break camp. By gathering everything up, and seeing to it that they were all properly stored away. Even when the snow whirled about her head, causing her hair to be whipped into her face, she didn't give up until she had it all put in its rightful spot. Then and only then, did she slide into the driver side of the van, and start the engine.

Still Jim hadn't come in, or perhaps he had and was sitting in one of the other trucks, she couldn't tell. The snow was coming down to fast. Gripping the wheel so hard, that her knuckles had gone white, she began to wonder if the others even cared. Several of them had joined her in the van, but they were now engrossed in a game of poker, and paid little mind to the storm going on outside.

It wasn't until the tall lanky man, the rest called Dusty, slide into the passenger seat. That she realized the laughter had stopped.

"He knows this land, like the back of his hand." He declared, laying a hand on her shaking knee.

"And who's not supposed to be in my seat." the door flew open, and Jim covered with snow, was pushing him out of his way. The others had climbed into their own trucks. "Damn it Girl, what in the Hell are you still doing here?"

"We tried to get her to leave." a voice rose from the back. "But you got yourself a keeper there Jim. She told us where to get off. And I'll be damned if she didn't weather that cold as good as the rest of us."

She couldn't tell from his tone, if he was still mad at her or not. She didn't care one way or the other, all she cared about was that he wasn't out in the cold, any longer. Pushing the Indian blanket from herself, she handed it to him, along with the thermos. "I'm a big girl and it's just a little snow."

"Like I said, real hell cat on wheels," Dusty stated through a stained toothy grin

"Well, I guess I'll just have to put some of that fire out," she looked back at him "Someday." he finished.

"How dare you." she spit out the words. "I—" she stopped short, remembering how badly she'd just been worried.

"You what – Can take care of you? And haven't you learned not to dare me yet?"

Despite the kidding she was taking from the back seat, she bit her lip and said, "I'm glad you made it back okay."

"I told her, you're an old hand at this stuff, but from the knuckle's – I don't think she believed me." Dusty again spoke for the back.

Jim's expression changed and the arch in his back dropped, but the look in his eye was just as cool towards her. Within the next hour, she wished she'd gone home when told. Not because of anything, he said or did, but because of the amount of snow that was coming down. When a storm drops six inches in an hour, it's a storm to be reckoned with. When the depth reached eight, Dusty declared they had better make a run for it.

"Shit Jim, we've pulled a herd down in more snow than this."

"Yeah, and lost half of it too."

"I can't afford to get stuck in here." Someone else said from further back. "I've got cows of my own out there."

"And just what are we going to do with her?" Jim waved his hand in Emma's direction.

Oh boy, he'd done it now, she thought as she felt the small of her back arch up in response.

"What the Hell do you mean?" she declared, "What are you going to do with me. I'll go out of here the same way you do."



"Woe, Girl." Jim pressed her back into her seat. "I just meant you can't ride with a leg in a cast." He added with a half-witted grin, "Besides we didn't bring enough horses for you to ride out of here."

If it hadn't been for the way he lifted his hand before grinning over at her, and then tenderly stroked her shoulder, she would've been out that door, showing him who could ride with a cast.

"She'll just ride double with one of us. Me I'll take her with me." Dusty volunteered, Jim raised a bow, considering the proposal "Fine – but she'll ride with me."

As they all piled out of the van, and let the others know what the plan was, she felt the tip of how cold the ride home was going to be. Snow squished into her cast, from the opening at her toes, sliding back in to the van, she pulled on the woolen sock she'd brought with her, Just in case it got a bit nippy before she could drive back to the house after dark.

There snuggled down in the far back seat was Jake, she'd forgot all about him, and more over she'd forgot about his fear. There was no way she was going to get him on a horse, not even if his life depended on it, and it just might have. Catching Jim's attention while he spoke to the others in the blinding snow she waved him to her side, where he swooped in to haul her up. Realizing his intention, she stepped back and allowed his mighty arm to swish pass. She was trying his patients, for when he dismounted and took her by the hand his grip was almost bruising.

"What am I going to do with you," he chuckled.

"Leave me here."

"Not on your life." He snapped, swirling her in to meet his chest. "You're going with me."

"Jake," she declared "I forgot about Jake."

Even if he hadn't witness the helpless scene of Jake refusing to get on Rosie—she had. Her pleading eyes said that she wasn't doing this to irate him, but to save face for Jake. "Dusty, we're not going with." He called over her head. "Get in there tonight, tell them where we are." he released her, but only long enough for her to turn and see Dusty's face as Jim called out his commands. "Damn it. Get Wes to put that helicopter up in the morning. Tell him Emma's here – he'll do it."

"Shit how'd I know I wouldn't get to wrap my arms around that little hell cat of yours." Dusty remarked shaking the snow from his hat. "What about the boy's?"

"They'll stay."

"But Dad" Jimmy's voice cut through the freezing air.

"Jim you can't."

"They'll stay." Jim insisted, "They don't know these hills that well, wouldn't want to have to pull them from the drift in the morning." He finished, by handing his reins to Dusty. "See to it that she gets bedded down for the night." Jimmy and Kit did the same with their horses, before slipping into the horse trailer.

While he watched as the group headed out without them, she climbed back into the van. Kit's eyes had been filled with disappointment, but if Jim said they were a bit too wet behind the ears to do it, he meant it. Jake settled back into his little corner at the back of van, and apologetically said, "Em I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I probably would've kept the horse off balance any way." She responded sliding onto the second seat, since the first had been removed to make room for the food earlier in the day.

When Jim open the door and let a great gust of wind and snow in, she realized just how cold she really was, even the tips of her toes were freezing. Of course, it hadn't helped matters, to walk around in the snow with just a stocking over her cast. The rolled sleeping bag he threw her way appeared to be the answer.

Quickly she pulled it apart and thrust her numb toes in first. Jake did the same directly behind her. Jim just leaned his nap sack against the van wall, for a pillow and casually spread the heavier covering across him on the floor, in front of her. Tipping his hat down across his face, he whispered a good night and the darkened van fell silent.

Before too long Jake's steady snore filled the air, Jim hadn't moved since he said good night. Her toes still were freezing and she just couldn't figure out how to keep her cast on the thin seat and still feel comfortable. Finally, she sat up and pulled the soaked sock from her foot, something she should've done sooner. Jim stirred and pulled his transistor from his pocket, unplugging the earphones, so that the oldies overrode Jake's snoring.

She'd slept by herself for so long, without the aid of either, that the sound was bond to keep her awake all night. Being sandwiched between the two didn't help matters. So as she sat there rubbing her cold toes, she tried to figure out what to tell Mike, when he had to send help out for them in the morning. He'd said she shouldn't get involved, reminded her that it was Jim's job, and that Jim was fully capable of doing it without her, but no – she had to come along. Now, thanks partly to her and the cast, Jim and the boys were stuck in the middle of a blizzard.

As she watched his chest rise and fall, rhythmically to each slumbering breath, she wished that she'd listened. He probably was upset with her too, although he had a different way of showing it, she'd learned that his silence bit just as hard, as Mike's roar.

The snow was coming down even harder now, she could only tell by the rate it piled up on the hood. Entrenched in thought, about how cold the night was going to get, she didn't realize Jim wasn't asleep, until he pushed up his hat, to look at her and folded back his sleeping bag, as an open invitation to join him. How could she resist the extra warmth, she surely didn't need to be asked twice. Quickly she moved to the floor next to him, he then securely wrapped her up with both bags.

"Warmer?" he asked snuggling down so the back of her head rested against his chest, and he was able to completely wrap his arm around her waist.

"Are you mad at me?"

"It's not your fault Jake's afraid of horses?"

"Are the boy's alright back there?"

"Their more concerned about the girls, worrying about them, then the snow." he replied, nuzzling his nose into her hair.

"Where were you, when I was eighteen." she asked melancholy.

"Right in front of your nose." he answered briskly.

"No you weren't."

"Yes, I was. But you could only see Bobby."

Bobby, she thought, she'd known only one Bobby in her entire life – The boy who lived across from her Grandfather's home in Meadow. Recognizing the name, she tried to sit up, but he held her firmly in place.

"Bobby Harris?" she questioned any way

"The one and only"

"How do you know him? I mean..."

"Bobby and I are cousins. When did I meet you? Hum, do you want to know about the first time or the last?"

She couldn't believe her ears. How could she have meet this man, and not remembered it? He had to be pulling her leg. "No, we had never met till the morning I drove into the valley." she was sure of herself.

"You mean to tell me, that you don't remember going horseback riding, with Mr. Wells." She did. How could she forget the horse, which made her afraid to get back on one, until he taught her how to ride? "Remember." he went on "He put you on that horse and the first thing it did was head for the fence. Damn, you screamed and jumped around, but you never pulled the reins, till he'd brushed you up against the barbwire."

"You weren't there." she racked her brain to remember but it was no good. She couldn't have been much over six maybe eight, when that happened.

"Oh, yes I was. I grabbed the horse right after he brushed the fence, I couldn't believe how brave you were. You didn't swear and you didn't cry, you just got down, thanked Mr. Well's and ran off home."

"Yeah right, with a scare that still shows." she had to admit, that he had to have been there. There was no way he could've known how she acted, if he hadn't.

"Or there was the time you came over for some milk, with Beth. Uncle Frank, kidded with her about attaching the machine up to her, and you blow up. Standing right up to his face and called him a chauvinistic pig."

"Jim..." she remembered the incident, but not him.

"You were about twelve or thirteen, and boy did you have guts. Uncle Frank was known for taking out any one that spoke back... and may have even kicked your butt, but Bob and I stopped him." She remembers the guy was mean...but his face still didn't ring a bell.

"But of course," a small chuckle slipped from the back of his throat, "there was the time, that a sweet little city girl, with raven colored eyes, drove into town, scooped up my heart, and drove away." she was beginning to feel guilty for not remembering.

"Don't tell me you don't remember the trip to Fillmore, you took with me and Bobby." That she remembered, or at least the trip.

"Were you?"

"The CRAZY Jack Ass, that couldn't Drive." he proclaimed, as if he was proud of it.

"No!"

"I bitched the minute Bobby said we were going to do Mr. West a favor and kept it up, right till you stepped out the door in that mini skirt. Your hair was nearly longer then it was." boy did she remember that day. "I never said a thing about helping Mr. West after that."

"Seems to me that you're forgetting the best part of the story." she interrupted.

"No I'm not. I opened that truck door and watched love climb in next to me."

"I hated that skirt, but Grandpa always said a girl should wear skirts, so that weekend I did. He let me wear my jeans after then."

"No doubt – when you were sitting between Bobby and me, I was beginning to wonder, where it went when you sat down."

"Above my butt"

"You said it, not me." He said with a chuckle

"Why do you think I raised such a fuss, when you started to drive so crazy? I kept bouncing all over the place and the last place I wanted to end up was on Bobby's lap."

"That was the last place I wanted you too." he readjusted to snuggle her a bit closer. "You had smelt so good sitting there next to me on the way into town, and when we sandwiched you between us, in that booth, at Wanda's place, you kept rubbing my foot with yours," He paused, as if to clarify the picture he'd painted in his head. "But" he went on "When you went to the restroom, Bobby through me the keys, to the truck and I knew what he had in mind. Therefore, after, he got you giggling and then put his hand on your leg—. Shit I had to do something."

"At seventy miles an hour" she asked

"Look." he insisted, "I knew where the turn off was. I mean it's not like you would've been the first—" he broke for a deep breath "anyway I also knew that Fred would be waiting about a mile this side of it. I wasn't about to make that turn."

"So you drew the cop's attention." Here she'd thought, that boy was crazy, all these years. When in reality he was just trying to preserve her virginity.

"I was planning on coming back to see you later that night and explaining. But when Fred dragged me home, dad went thru the roof – I didn't sit for a week."

"Oh Jim, I'm sorry." she didn't know what to say, so silence gripped the two of them again. At least she was warm, and she knew he'd loved her since that fateful day.

"Do you ever wonder, what it might be like, if Fred wouldn't have been there?" she finally asked.

"Yeah, Bobby would've killed me for not making the turn off."

"No, I mean if I hadn't thought you were crazy."

In less than a heartbeat, he'd slide her off his chest, and pinned her to the floor of the van. Staring down into her eyes he said, "Isn't he taking care of you?" He could've meant a hundred things, like watching over her, reminding her to do things, thanking her for doing things, helping her with the house, but he didn't mean any of those. How was she to admit that her own husband hadn't touched her in over six months? She knew the separation had been a trying one, but when he moved down, it was as if he left some of the better parts in Salt Lake, mainly his love for her. Not once in the time he'd been back, had he even passionately held her. His touch, when he had to touch her, was cold.

When she delayed answering, he slid his warm hand under the wool sweater and across the silky skin of her stomach, coming to rest at the valley between her breasts. When she didn't resist, he continued on to gently stroke the arousal zone around the nipple. She'd crossed the safety boundary there was no turning back. As he tipped his head to smoocher her lips, the song Suspicious Minds, broke the airwaves. As swiftly as possible, he pulled his hand from her blouse, and whirled to turn off the radio. She'd heard too much already, rolling to her other side, she masked her face with her hands, and weep silent tears.

He only rolled up against her, laying a hand on her shoulder and buried his face into her shoulder blade. He was trembling with a long overdue wanting, She'd let it go too far, she should've stopped it right from the start. He was going to think she was leading him on, and maybe she'd been, but they both knew it wasn't right. "Please," he whispered through trembling lips pressed tightly to her back, "Please just let me hold you – keep you warm – I promise."

His voice made her heart ache, she'd had time to catch her breath, and regain her shield of protection. Allowing him to hold her wasn't going to be a problem, any longer. She knew once he promised, that he wouldn't try again, so she curled up against his chest and went to sleep, but not before he'd repeated the question. "He isn't taking care of you is he?"

She never uttered a word. A simple rocking of her head let him know his assumptions were correct. To which he softly kissed her on the top of the head.

The moment Jake brushed up against her foot she shot to sitting position. "Don't move you look so warm." Jake continued on, pushing the door open. "Nature calls." She couldn't believe her eyes. The eight inches of snow had grown to well over two feet. When he slammed the door, the snow that fell from the window, was the only spot to look out of their warm enclave. Jim swung his arm under her arm and across her chest to pull her down next to him.

"Jim," she insisted, but to no avail, his grip was stronger than she was. "The snow"

"I now, I've watched it come down all night. Along with you toss and turn." He answered pulling the bag up around her again. "I never realized, how badly I tormented you, till you started

to cry about five this morning, calling out Mike's name several time, as you pushed my hands from you."

"Jim, I was just dreaming."

"Yeah, of the hell I keep dragging you through, every time I make demands on you."

She couldn't even remember the dream. She hadn't wanted to dream, since before the ball, when she—No. She wasn't going to start thinking about that again. Every time she thought of how she'd slipped into the past, something strange happened. "Just lay with me till they come." He tightened his arm across her chest, "I promise. I won't torment you any longer."

"You can't do that—" he stopped her, by pressing his fingers to her lips. "No" she turned to have her say. "I need you."

"Damn it girl, why is it the only one around here that knows you have spunk, is me"

She relaxed her back and eased herself back against his chest.

"Oh, I don't want you to stop. I just wished you'd show it, to the others. I was afraid that they had broken that spirit of yours." She drew a long cleansing breath and collected her thoughts. As he went on to tell her, how meek she'd appeared that first day. "It's that spirit, I love. I loved it right from the first time I met you. When you didn't cry, you had a look of eat nails but you didn't even say that. You just thanked him and walked off."

"Jim you can't leave me alone to run this place."

"Who said anything about leaving?" He turned her to look down at her concerned face. "I said that I'd back off, and stop tormenting you. I have no plans of being too far. When you're ready, you'll know where to find me. You won't have to tell me twice, once is all I need to find my way to your bed."

She released a sigh of relief, as she dropped her chin to his chest. She'd already admitted that she and Mike were running a loveless marriage. What would it hurt to tell him how she really felt?

"Jim,"

"You don't have to say anything." he insisted, "I just want to hold you. I may never get this chance again, please."

She longed for so much more but this would have to do. Snuggled close to him is where she remained until after the other's joined them, and the helicopter could be heard hovering overhead. If it had been left to her, she would've remained behind before getting in that flying thing. She

didn't have much to say about it though. When they lowered the harness, Jim put it around her waist first. Mr. Harris chuckled because of the look on her face when she finally was drawn into the open door, fifty feet above. "Don't like these things, Huh?" He nearly had to yell for her to hear. She merely shook her head No, and slide across the floor to grip tightly to his vacated seat. "It's Okay Sweetheart." he tapped her on the hand. "We won't be up here long."

She over looked the Sweetheart stuff, but she really wished he hadn't phrased the rest of his reassurance that way.

Kit was the next to come aboard, then Jimmy and Jake. When he hesitated, she recalled whom she was dealing with. If he hated Jim half as much as Jim hated him, she was in for a fight. "What are you waiting for." she demanded to know, why he wasn't lowering the belt.

"We'll have to come back and get him." The bushy faced cowboy in a white hat declared.

"The hell you will," she somehow found her knees and rose to her feet look him straight in the face. "He's going with us...NOW" When he didn't react right away, she grabbed the rope from his hand and threw it out the door.

"Woe...and she's even beautiful when she spits fire" was his only comment, but she wasn't listening. She'd slide to the open hatch, where she could hear nothing except the whirling wind about her head, but she could see Jim strapping the belt around his waist. When he was ready, she hit the button on the hoist and he was slowly drawn into the bay. Once he was in the door, she collapsed to her knees again and slid back out of the way. Mr. Harris looked as if he'd seen a ghost. Once the door was closed, Jim took a seat next to her and demanded to know.

"This thing only holds six people why in the hell did you send down that rope." He wasn't talking to her. His rough tone and demanding words where addressed to Mr. Harris. Who looked as if he still didn't believe his eyes at what had she done?

"When I said we would come back for you, that sweet little mouse, turned into a lion. Hell, Jimbo, There was no way she was going to let me leave you there. And you think you need to protect her." His eyes never left hers.

Jim broke loose, with a half-witted laugh, as he through his arm around her shoulders.

"It's about time, But girl, he really did know what he was doing."

The pilot had already started towards the airport and they landed without any trouble but it could've been disasters. She would just have to learn to watch her newfound abilities. Back on the ground in Cedar, as she climbed down from the runner, she felt the old familiar pain in her right side. She was sure she'd felt the pop, the minute the harness lifted her feet from the ground, but her fear of heights had over rode the sensation of another rib breaking. Everyone was present



to welcome them back into the world of drivable roads. Even Mike raced towards her with such force she cringed away, but he grabbed her just the same. Twirling her around before, he attempted to let her stand on her own only to find her limp, unconscious body incapable of responding.

She felt like she'd hit the tarmac hard when she opened her eyes and found the Doc bending over her. Although, the snow had been removed, she was still lying in a puddle of water, which had started to seep through her clothing. "Let me up." she pushed back his prying hand and sat up.

"Lay down." Mike commanded.

"The ambulance is on its way." Todd proclaimed holding his hand in the middle of her back.

"I'm fine," she demanded, forcing her way to her knees. Even if she wasn't, she wasn't about to make a scene there for all to see and pity.

"Emma, the Doc. says it's your rib." Jim bent down in front of her. "You need help."

"No." she wasn't going to hear of it, although she did reach for his hand to finish drawing herself to a standing position.

"Shit Em." Mike barked, "I don't know what the hell this place has done to you, but come to your senses and lay down till the ambulance gets here."

"This place has made me strong. I'm not going to the hospital and I'm not going to bed." she took a few steps towards the cars. "If the cast on my leg isn't enough, the last thing I need to do is be put back to bed." she just kept on trudging forward leaving the crowd behind.

"I told you Jimbo, she can take care of herself." Mr. Harris recited his statement of earlier.

"But now's not the time to prove it." Jim answered holding back, as Mike wrapped his arm around her and assisted her to the car.

Jim rode back to the house with her and Mike, as did Todd who just refused to admit, that she could work through broken ribs. "Look Todd, if you promise to take this cast off, I'll let them take me to the clinic." she bargained with what she felt might be an incentive, as they got off the freeway in town.

"It's too wet, to leave it on anyway." He finally agreed.

Once the cast was off, she agreed to take a mild pain pill, but she wasn't about to go to bed, and there was no way she was going to allow him, to wrap her up with a sticky bunch of tape either. All she wanted to do was take a hot bath, and get out of those wet clothes.

If she didn't know better, she would've thought Jim and Mike might have had words, while she'd argued with Todd. Because of the look on Jim's face when she walked out of the office by herself, but if they had, it wasn't apparent in the car on the way up the hill. Jim told of how she'd persuaded Wes into sending the rope back down for him, and Mike sounded dismayed, due to the fact of her fear of height.

"Well she sure didn't look like she was afraid, as she sent that rope over the edge of the hatch." Jim responded. Mike through her a look of amazement and even chuckled.

"Perhaps this place is making you strong – smelling that is."

When they both chuckled, she was sure if there had been any words, they had been forgotten already. And so, the first snow sweep into the valley, laying all that sat still in mounds of white powder, and with it came the holiday's.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN CHRISTMAS AT CHATTERTON PLACE

Over the next couple of weeks, she understood what it was like to be alone in this world. Not only did Jim stop stroking her, every time they passed. He stopped coming by all together. The outburst of emotion, that Mike had used to drop her to the tarmac, never re-appeared. Even while discussing business, he keeps a healthy distance between them. Seldom making eye contact, and as usual not attending any of the group meetings.

If he'd just taken the time to get involved, he may have found the end of the year less competitive. Actually, she'd called the meeting in hopes of seeing Jim, but even he, didn't show.

The premature snow had brought thoughts of the holidays to the forefront of everyone's mind. She'd been so preoccupied, trying to figure out what she'd done to deserve being abandoned. That the conversation was well developed before she fell into it.

"That's just what the place reminds me of. Especially since, the guy's installed the lamps." Beth's green eyes were gleaming with excitement, as Emma became aware of what was being said.

"We'll make some costumes." Shelly added

"Right and we can sing carols all over the place" Lydia even seemed to be in the swing of the discussion.

If only she'd some idea of what they were talking about. Admitting she hadn't been listening, would've been like getting her to go to the doctor. After all, she'd been the one to call the meeting. While Kit was telling how they finally managed to get the trucks out of the canyon. She was sidetracked, remembering the way Jim had promised to stop tormenting her. She knew his stand on how final that decision was going to be. How could he have expected her to take it

any less serious? Was that why he hadn't been around? Had he thought she would just allow him to have his way, without a commitment? Had she been too willing to slip into his sleeping bag? She'd been freezing. He couldn't put her down for that.

"Mom" Jimmy was asking her a question, which again she hadn't heard. Unfolding her arms from across her chest, where they reminded her of the warmth Jim had offered. She finally had to admit that she wasn't listening.

"Mom" Crystal exclaimed, "You've been shaking your head yes for twenty minutes, don't tell us you're changing your mind."

"No –no" she only wished, she knew what she'd just agreed to. "I just didn't hear Jimmy." She could tell from the look in her daughter's face, that she didn't believe her. Lucky for her, Jimmy wasn't quite so skeptical.

"I just wanted to know if it would be okay to get those buggies out of the old barn. Dad said he saw the skids there too. If you'll let us, we'll put them on – somehow." he looked around the room for help

"I can do that." Sam spoke up.

"Well, then we can offer sleigh rides." He finished

"And hay rides." Crystal added, "Mom I told Todd about having hayrides, we have to have hayrides."

It dawned on Emma they had been discussing the holidays, or at least the preparations for the holidays. "I think that's a great idea." She agreed, and then suddenly remembering the unusual things that had happen there, she added. "I just think you had better ask your Father about it first." The minute she referred to Jim as his Father, she realized he'd called her Mom, like the rest of the kids. It made her feel successful, in a way that being recognized as a mother could only do.

"He'll help. I just know he will." He proclaimed

As she looked into his flashing black eyes, she thought back to the first time she'd seen him standing in the front yard of Jim's. He'd been clad all in gang clothing, sporting a bandana around his shaven head and swearing every other word. How very different he was from the man that stood before her.

"Great." Shelly exclaimed throwing her arms around his strong shoulders. "It'll be the best Christmas ever."

She recalled that as a child the holidays, had always been the best time of the year. Preparation started sometime around the end of October. They would learn new songs to be caroled, or a part in a play, and ended with a giant New Year Eve party at her parents' house. There were parties to attend every weekend between Thanksgiving and the First of the year. Dresses to be made or bought—Presents to be wrapped—A tree to be picked, but mainly there was excitement in the air, even romance.

While she chooses to forget the Christmas, she and Mike broke up. The one he came asking her to marry him made up for it. Then the kids came along and money got tight, but still there were all the parties to attend. After her mother's death, her family went their different ways and she even lost track of her cousin's. Soon Mike convinced her that last minute shopping was foolish, and she started buying the presents during the year, leaving nothing to chance. The cards stopped coming, mainly because no one knew where she was most of the time. The tree became artificial, the eggnog imitation, and the romance of the season was swept out with extra hours, to pay the bills. Parties became outdated. Caroling grew cold. Then of course, there were the icy roads to travel, the drunk drivers, crowded stores, muggers – soon it even became too costly to call. The only thing that continued to give her comfort was her mothers' miniature village, which she'd managed to hang on to and sat up every year under the fake tree.

The spirit of Christmas was as warm and growing in her heart, as the bleak and barren trees outside her kitchen window, she thought, as she poured herself another cup of coffee and went back to the third quarter reports on the crowded kitchen table. Snow was again falling, while she moved the sugar bowl for the fourth time, in an attempt to keep the small space she'd managed to secure from the breakfast rush, taking place around her.

"Why don't you just do those in your office?" Jason asked for the third time that week.

"Jason, Mom told you. She can't stand the light in the basement." Shelly replayed her words.

"Yeah, you don't want her going blind do you?" Crystal asked, shuffling the milk around again.

"Todd said that a person's sight is the most important sense."

While she was proud of the way Crystal had made the decision to work at Todd's office, and take nursing classes at night, she'd just about had enough of the 'Todd said' syndrome. A minute later when the phone rang, Shelly jumped for it before Crystal could get to her feet and the toppled milk engulfed her paperwork. She'd finally had enough of everything.

After wiping up the soggy mess, tongue in cheek because she knew darn well it was her fault for not standing up to Mike. She decided she'd better get out of there before she lost her temper, with the wrong people. So after tacking the still legible spreadsheets to the fridge to dry, she headed for town, hoping she could cut Mike's reminders of Christmas shopping, off at the pass. Even thought it was only the end of October. He probably thought she had it done months ago.

The snow flurried before the car, in a great blanket of white. If she hadn't been so entrenched in thought, she might have seen the large white pick up before she did. Its driver obviously was having just as much trouble seeing. He was driving squarely down the centerline. By the time his headlights cut through the blinding whiteout in front of her, ditching the car was all she had a chance to do. Cutting her wheel sharply to the right, she plowed into a mound of snow and came to rest against a misplaced bolder, from the steep overhang of the cliff above her.

The sudden stop had forced the breath from her damaged rib cage, and propelled her forehead against the steering wheel. "Thank God," she whispered, "For seat belts", as she leaned back against the stiff leather of the cold seat. She didn't even think the other driver had stopped, until he suddenly appeared at her door and started to pull her from the dead vehicle.

When he couldn't get the belt to come loose immediately, he started to probe about her chest. "What the heck, do you think you're doing?" she protested loudly, forcing his hand from her body.

"How bad are you hurt?" his hot breath smelt of cinnamon, as he dropped to his knees and laid his head down at her leg, out of breath. "I couldn't see you." He announced looking up at her. "Damn it. Why do they still have school on these mornings?"

It was Wes Harris, or she thought it was. He had a cut, which was gushing blood down his face, from over his right eye. "Your hurt." she exclaimed, reaching for her purse, but it wasn't at her side any longer.

"Emma?" he pronounced her name, as if they were long lost friends, "My God," he reached up to gently slide his hand down her cheek.

"Let me get to my purse." he looked so frightened she couldn't think "I've got a tissue." she found the button and released the strap from over her shoulder. Turning, she found it lodged between the seats, pulling the white puffs from their covering, she quickly turned back to press them to his cut but he was no longer at her side. Stepping from the car into the swirling cloud, she caught the slow movement of someone walking away from her. "Wait." she shouted into the hushed flakes falling on her nose. "Wait."

Before chasing him down, she reached in and set the flashers to clicking. Then proceeded on to the other side of the road, where the truck lay on its side, and a few hundred feet from the pavement. She could hardly believe that that much damage could be done by a near miss. Trying to step in his footsteps, she suddenly remembered he'd said something about school. She paused and drew a breath, was there a child in that wreckage? Was that why he'd wondered off so fast? "Mr. Harris." She called with all her might.

"Stay there Emma." he called back. He'd done it again, what reason did this man have, to call her by her first name. They had never even had a full conversation before. She could hear him speaking to someone, but with no response. Her heart jumped to her throat, there had to be a child.

"Please let me help. Maybe I can do something, calm the child or something." She pleaded to be allowed to come closer.

"Stay there." his voice raced back, to stop her in her tracks. "I'll be right there."

What was she going to be able to do anyway? All she had was a few tissues and two shaky hands. Helplessly, she stood there, listening to him speak softly to someone she couldn't see, then static filled the air, and she heard the response. "I hear you Wes, Repeat your local." he'd been hailing someone on the CB. He again repeated their location, and then walked around to where she'd taken a seat in the snow, attempting to calm herself enough to ease the difficulty she was having with breathing.

"You are hurt, aren't you?"

"I'm fine," she stood up "But you're still bleeding."

"Hell you are." he pushed away her hand and wrapped his arm around her waist, as she staggered in the deep snow. "Here let me help you back to the car, if we get to close to the truck, it might just finish off down the hill."

The snow had been falling so hard, that she couldn't tell where they were, but when he said that, she realized that if the cliff was over hanging the car. Then the truck must be very close to the edge of the drop off, which plummeted another hundred feet, to the riverbed below. "You could've slide off there."

"Yeah, and I could've killed you too." he answered helping her into the driver's seat. "Then where would this world be heading?" She didn't mean to look as if he was speaking another language, but she didn't understand his logic. "Forget it." He finally responded, "You really don't know what I mean anyway, do you?"

Shaking her head no, she managed to press the tissue to his head. "You said you were headed for the school."

He knelt at the open door and allowed her to care for the cut. "What I said was – I don't understand why they don't close school on days like this. I mean after all, you probably have a small tribe running around your place too."

"They are all taking classes via satellite, with a computer hook up." She replied straightening up. "They don't go to town for school." she rephrased her statement, because of the surprise on his face.

"Satellite, computer." he looked blankly into her face, "Don't tell me—" he stopped, in the middle of the sentence, and again reached for her face.

"What" she pulled back, even though his first touch was gently. "Don't tell you what."

He looked shocked by her sudden outburst. Shaking off the snow, which had continued to collect on the brim of his hat, he said, "I just can't imagine the county giving you the permission."

"I don't need permission. I can teach my children any way I like. I just have to see to it that they can meet the states requirements for credits."

"No school?" he again looked shocked, she went on to explain the states requirements, and promised to help him set up something similar, before the sheriff's car pulled up.

Once they determined that she wasn't hurt, or at least that was what she told them. She was allowed to leave. As she drove the rest of the way into town, she wondered why Jim had thrown such a fit about not getting to close to that kind, concerned, family man. Oh granted he once frightened her on the front porch, but that could've been partly her fault. She recalled Jim telling her and Alex, that he was after the stone, and he would find one way or the other to get it.

The small town offered little in the way of a real department store, so it seemed the drug store would be the best place to start. Ghosts adorned the front window, squeezed between the Rx sign and the newest movie release to video. Inside a long bar stretched down one side of the small building and several small isles held the beauty supplies. At the back of the room was a small window, where two elderly women were standing having their prescriptions filled.

"Ms. Chase." Mr. Washburn's hoarse voice caught her attention from behind the fountain bar "You'd better sit down" he continued, streaking to her side. "Who hit you?" His face was filled with concern as he pressed her to a stool. She couldn't figure out how, he knew about the accident.

"He didn't hit me, we just missed each other." she spilled the facts, she thought he wanted to hear,

"Who?" he again asked

"Mr. Harris. His truck." she didn't have a chance to finish her statement before he was racing off across the street. Dumbfound she sat there, playing with the strap of her purse, trying to figure out what he'd ran off for, when like a streak of lightning Jim came bounding thru the door.

"What did he do?" he was demanding in her face. "Tell me what he did."

The room wasn't exactly holding still for her eyes.

"Jim, stop shaking me." She pried her arms loose from his tight grip, "We had an accident. No – we almost had an accident"

"Where is he?"

"With the sheriff, his truck rolled over." The gasp that sucked the air from the room was deafening. "But he's okay." she turned to look at the crowd that had gathered.

"It doesn't look like you are." Jim insisted grabbing her hand.

"I'm fine, I just need a coke," she pulled herself around to stare into the mirror on the other side of the bar. "Mr. Washburn, my I have a soda please."

"Emma you have a bump on your head." Jim rested his hand on her shoulder.

"Yes," she responded trying to shrug off his hot hand, "and if I don't get some Christmas shopping done, Mike will put one on the back of it too."

"Christmas shopping" Mr. Washburn questioned, as he sat a coke on the counter and handed her a towel with ice wrapped in it. "Put it on your head." He commanded, "It'll take down the swelling."

"Damn it Girl." Jim slapped the back of her chair, before he stormed out the door, nearly as fast as he'd entered. She closed her eyes, so not to see him slide across the way.

"How's the dickens village coming along?" Mr. Washburn seemed to sense that she didn't want to talk about the accident.

"The what?" she opened her eyes in total surprise.

"Your oldest girl was here yesterday, ordering more hats from the Miss's." He replied turning his back to her.

Perhaps she'd hit her head harder than she'd thought, but even if that was the case she wasn't about to tell him that. He would've just gone chasing after Jim again.



"Oh, it's coming along just fine."

"Jimmy said that you're even going to be offering sleigh rides." he'd finally said something she remembered.

"And hay rides too." she added.

"It's going to be great to have the place back in operation. I remember as a kid going up there to ice skate on the pond. You might even draw a few more people here to the ski resort, with a little thing like a Dickens festival."

She didn't know what he was talking about, but had to admit that it did sound fun. When she thought she could walk without staggering, she opened her purse to pay for her soda and discovered she'd hit the height of embarrassment. She didn't even have a quarter with her. Of course, he told her to forget about it anyway, but the thought that she didn't have any money with her, bothered her. She couldn't even remember the last time she paid for something with cash. Sure, she made out checks every day for the Place, but she hadn't used money in months. How had she planned to buy anything without it? Worst yet, she didn't have a penny to her name. She hadn't cut herself a check since the kids had moved down and before then the only reason she had, was to send to Mike.

Sliding into the car, she wondered just how she'd managed to go so long without spending money. She had to have put gas in the car. No – she hadn't the kids keep it filled when they used it. She hadn't even been in a grocery store in over eight months. The ranch supplied everything she wanted, and what she needed extra she ordered and paid for on an account. The thought of not needing money, was overwhelming. For years, she and Mike had struggled from one check, to the next. That thought made her realize she'd better call the insurance company and report the accident, before Mike came unglued, after all it was his car. Kit had started the conversion process with her van, after they had managed to get it down the canyon.

Pushing the keys into place, she debated calling from the Cottage. Then decided that was going to be too long after the accident for Mike to be pleased, and decided that she'd better find a phone as soon as possible. Scanning the abandoned street for a pay phone, she suddenly recalled that she didn't have any money.

Rubbing her forehead, she wondered if the bump had affected her more than she'd thought. Jim was the only person she felt she could impose upon – for the use of his phone. However, if she was going to go there, she knew she'd better be ready for a lecture, but what other choice did she have? She pulled the keys out and headed for his office, half wishing he wouldn't be there and she could just borrow the bar's phone. No luck, what he was doing there at that time a day was a mystery to her, but he was holding the phone to his ear when she slowly opened the door.

He waved for her to come in, and pushed a seat her way. She ignored it and walked to the window, where she waited until he was off the phone. The memory of the last time she'd stood at that window flooded back to her, making her being there even more difficult. How could he have held her so tight, so gently and still walked away as if she meant nothing the next morning? She didn't realize just how much she'd missed his warm touch, until the minute he softly laid his hand on her upper arm. Closing her eyes, she leaned backwards, against his masculine chest and whispered, "I'm sorry – I shouldn't have."

He slipped his hand across her mouth and hushed her "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have stormed."

She spun and covered his mouth, to hush his apology. Staring up into his all-encompassing eyes, she started to tremble when he nibbled at the tips of her fingers. But when he sucked one into his mouth, her legs turned to jelly, and she gripped tightly to his strong shoulders to support her faltering knees.

"I promised –" He whirled her around and sat her down on the chair, "to stop tormenting you." he uttered with a shaky voice. "And I can't do it when your that close." She examined her hands as he stretched the distance between them, to the other side of the desk, wondering what she should say. She'd already admitted to a loveless marriage, should she ask him to be patient? Would he wait? Did she have the right to ask?

"I think the Dickens's thing's a great idea." He said when he regained his composure.

"I only wish I knew what it was." she admitted to her lack of knowledge "I was too busy trying to figure out, why you had abandoned me, to listen that day."

He gripped his hands tightly together, and laid his head down on them on the desk "I haven't abandoned you." he replied through clinched teeth. "I promised you." he looked up, with wanting eyes. "And I told Mike I'd stay away from"

"What does he have to do with this? I would've thought that promise was made the other direction." She declared, gripping the arm of the chair with both hands. "I'm filing for divorce after the first of the year." She looked down expecting the worst, but when not a word fell from his lips, she debated if she'd said the wrong thing. "He just doesn't want anything to do with this place, with me."

He gently stroked the edge of her chin, then dropping her face – he turned and walked to the window. "I haven't made it easy on him."

"Jim, you haven't been there."

"Your car, it's –" he turned and started for the door "on fire."

Racing into the middle of the street, she got her first good view, of the strangest thing she'd ever seen. How could a car catch fire in the middle of a blizzard? Mr. Washburn was battling it with a small extinguisher, but it was useless. By the time the fire truck arrived, there wasn't much more than a smoldering shell left. The man dressed in a heavy black coat, said that the gas line had been ruptured in the accident. "If you'd started that thing before it caught fire, it would've gone up like a bomb."

The thought of how close she'd come to turning that key, left her without legs. Jim caught her up and carried her into the drug store, to sit her on the stool she'd occupied earlier. Then he shouted for someone to get the Doc, the words had no sooner escaped his mouth, when Todd appeared at the door. The minute he took her hand, she pulled away. "I'm fine, I just can't believe how close I came to—" she turned to look up at Jim. "I decided I'd have to call from your office, or he'd get Mad." she knew she wasn't making much sense. Todd insisted on taking her home. Jim agreed to stay behind to see to it that the mess was cleaned up. Nonetheless, that was her last excursion, away from the Place without an escort.

Sure Mike had appeared to be sympathetic to the cause, while the Doc was still standing there. The minute he'd cleared the door, Mike's true feeling cut loose and they weren't the same as when she landed at the airport. Although she'd walked away feeling like she'd just been scraped from the tarmac again.

He made it real clear, that she'd nearly destroyed, two cars in the last month and that she'd come close to losing her life both times. "Are you ready to go home now?" he asked at the top of his lungs. "I told you, this place will kill you. Why in the Hell do you think I didn't want you down here? Let me take you home now." he paused at the back door of the cottage, with his hand clutching the knob.

"No. It was my fault. It has nothing to do with the Place."

"Fine, but you're not getting out of my sight, even the kid's know better than running off, without money in their pocket."

"Fine I'll just sit around here and rot." She shouted back.

"Fine, maybe in a few months you'll be ready to go home." He screeched, as he pulled the door shut, behind himself.

"This is my home." she'd used so much emphasis, that it ripped at the tender muscles of her chest.

"How dare him," she screeched, ripping the spreadsheet from its drying spot. "I'll show him, this place is mine." she flung it on the empty table and sat down with a thud on the wooden chair. "Damn him." She was running out of steam. "Damn him." she uttered again. Before lowering

her head to the table and crying her eyes out. "I'll give him what he wants." She whispered through the tears. "I'll sit here and play 'little miss stupid', making the beds, cooking his dinner. Which, he doesn't even come home to eat. Let him run this damn place." If Jim hadn't made it so clear that he didn't want a thing to do with her, she may have had the strength to fight back, but he'd made a promise and she knew he wouldn't back down. He was a man of his word. She couldn't be a person who makes him break a promise.

Emma did just as she was told for the following month. Pulling the so-called clutter, from her bedroom was the first step. She boxed all the little items, which she'd hung from her four-poster bed. With each she recalled another time spent with Jim, the rawhide and feather headdress he'd braided in to her hair, at the summer fair. A ring of flowers, he'd placed upon her head the morning he'd taken her to the Shakespeare festival, along with the ribbons she'd tied around her waist, as a belt.

While she was in the mood, she pulled the stuff from the closet and laid it in the box as well. Then was the pair of pants he'd allowed her to wear home, the day she was attacked by the doors. Soon the tears flooded her eyes and she could hardly see the shirt, he'd wrapped her in, the day at the old barn. Dropping to her knees, she clutched it to her face, allowing the scent of him to fill her total being.

Her chest burned with self-hatred, why had she allowed herself to fall in love with someone, who she couldn't have, and would allow a principle to stand between them?

"No" she shot to her knees, "This isn't right." gazing about the room, she realized that she'd only pulled the things that meant something to she and Jim. "It's all got to go." Jumping to her feet she pull anything that made the room look like hers. She and Mike's bedroom had always been barren, empty of endearing things. Even pictures had never adorned the walls.

Quickly she pulled everything that resembled a feminine aspect. Changing the bright spread from the bed, and replacing it with a solid brown one Mike had brought with him, was the final touch. Stepping back, it looked as bleak as an old motel room, not a touch of her remained behind. Turning, she striped the remaining portions of the house the same way, boxing everything. When Shelly stopped by to make sure she was okay, she had her and Jimmy hall all of it up to the old barn. She then put all of her jeans in a drawer, and pulled all of her dresses to the front of her closet. She even went so far as to slip her boots under the head of the bed and put on a pair of heels. Next, she pulled her hair up and twisted it in a tight knot, at the top of her head. A bit of make-up, her nails painted and she started a batch of cookies, which she deliberately burned, so he wouldn't think a thing had changed.

By the time the kids came home, she'd striped the small table in the front room of the pictures and created a desk for herself. At which she was seated, when they came through the door.

"Mom," Jason started to tell her about his day, only to be turned back by her die look, for interrupting her.

Day after day, she spent doing the reports without the aid of the computer. Never venturing out, to find out what was going on around the place. She forced herself back into the old habits held before coming to the village. When she ran out of reports, she flipped on the TV and lit up a cigarette. Soon she didn't even bother to get up before the sun. Considering they were at the point, where there was more dark then light, she sleep a lot. But what did it matter anyway. There was no reason to get up.

Thanksgiving rolled around and she made the usual, turkey sandwiches with oven fries. She couldn't help but envy the kids, when they snuck away to Beth's for a real meal. Mike seemed pleased though, and after all, wasn't that what a wife is there for. He still only used their bed as a place to rest his head. This was when he decided to grace her with his presence, at all. Even then, he never uttered a word of what was happening around the place, she'd had to turn to the kids for that.

She finally understood all the references to the Dickens Festival, but she didn't think Mike knew about it. Because of the way, he keeps talking about other things that were going to happen there that Christmas. Perhaps they were both going to have their place. Although she couldn't understand how a Dickens scene would look quite right with a giant Santa and a million little lights draped all over the place, but it was made clear that she was to keep her nose out of it. "You're doing just fine here." Mike echoed as he again left her stranded there alone.

After the first couple of weeks of Beth trying to convince her to go back to work, only to be told the same thing repeatedly, she'd even stopped coming by. "That bump on your head, did more than I thought it had." She'd proclaimed the last time she'd stopped by. "It's warped your brain." The kids did less and less complaining, as they watched Mike stop by more often. They were again lulled into a state of false security.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN DARKEST BEFORE THE DAWN

The day after Thanksgiving, she started to pull the old phony tree from the box, when Mike announced there wasn't enough room there for a tree. So they would just go without, that year. "Besides I've got a lady coming in to decorate the one in the lobby, so you really don't need to do a thing. Besides I don't think, I brought that old stuff of yours down."

"What did you do with them?" The thought that he didn't remember what he'd done with her mother's little village sent chills up and down her spine.

"I sent it off to good will, it was nothing but junk anyway." he finished the sentence as he slipped out the door, leaving her standing there trembling from head to toe with anger. She'd spent weeks doing what he wanted, living in a stripped resemblance of a house. Letting him run the Place, allowing him to tell her how she could dress, what she should cook and who she couldn't see. Her chest heaved with anguish, for the lost items. Items she had adored as a child, earned the right to put together as a youth, and inherited as a young mother. Her rage grew with each additional breath she took.

The insurance had come through with a new car for him, weeks earlier and her van sat dormant at the side of the house, but she didn't have the keys. He had said she didn't need to go anywhere and he'd meant it. "Well I'll show him." she forced through clenched teeth. "Dad did teach me a few things." She didn't even stop to pull on her coat. After wiring the van, she climbed in and shot off down the hill. She slowed to an almost stop at the road that led to Jims. Then figured it wouldn't make a difference, and keep on going.

When she was drawn to a halt at the edge of town, for a stupid parade... she cursed under her breath. Then a strange thing happened. She caught the sound of Christmas bells tolling from the little church, and she felt drawn to them. Popping the clutch to stall out the engine she then proceeded on foot from there. Through the crowd that had gathered up the side road and down the main street searching for the sound of the bells. Christmas carols soon found their way into her head, and blotted out the sound of the people she pushed past. The church lay just ahead, but so did the largest crowd of people.

Sidestepping the bodies that lay before her and it, she pressed herself to the cement front of buildings and forged on. A small doorway, offered a brief relief from the pressure, of having to excuse herself for every step she took. The towering white walls lay just beyond, drawing a deep breath to precede the remaining few hundred feet. She again forged forward. Only to be pulled back from the crowd, by two very familiar arms.

When he turned her to look down into her eyes, an undeniable snarl rolled from his lips. He lifted her from her feet, to drag her back further into the darkness of the doorway. Her body still seared with rage. "Let me go." she commanded him "Put me down." When he responded as told, she again raced for the crowd. But couldn't go any further, his touch had done it to her again, and she needed him. Turning back, she found herself pleading, "Please hold me." immediately his arms were around her, once again clutching her close to his chest.

"Please?" he bent and whispered in her ear. Turning she looked deep into his glistening blue eyes.

"Oh, PLEASE." she responded in the briefest of tones.

When he again towed her into the darkness, she followed carelessly. Pressing against his chest, the minute he stopped. Gripping his shirt with both hands, she just stood there trembling in his arms.

"It's him." Jim whispered, and then had to pull her back when she jumped. "It's Ok, babe. I meant you're mad at Mike. You're trembling the same way that you did that day on the college campus." Sometimes he was difficult to understand. "I don't know what you were doing there, but the minute I say those eyes filled with tears – I was ready to kill him. You couldn't have been much over sixteen."

As strange as it sounded, she knew what he was saying. The Christmas she'd blocked from her memory, "Sixteen and a half. My Mother was scared silly."

"He was going to college, there?"

"He was in bed with Angelia." She said softly into his chest.

"Angelia?"

"She was as beautiful as her name. I'd no way of competing."

"But you won." he whispered, tracing the line of her chin with his thumb.

"After three miscarriages, he found someone who would give him a son."

"I was so tempted to follow you that day. I mean... after I helped you pick up those presents, I watched as you threw them away."

"I hate Christmas." She declared. "I hate it."

"No you don't." he responded lifting her face to look down into her eyes. "You hate..."

"I don't hate anyone." She looked away. "I just can't – Oh God I do hate him." She buried her face into his shirt, and allowed the tears she'd been holding all day to flow freely. She stumbled through the events of the day, and then sobbed over how she'd tried to please him for the last couple of week.

"I know. I know." he uttered, cupping her face up to kiss the tears from it. His thumbs encircled her ears as he smothered her mouth with his. His chest was throbbing as his hand slide across her shoulder and down her arm. Then he slid it around her waist and into the small of her back, where he tugged her into his hips. When she didn't resist, he pushed his tongue into the depth of her mouth. Then when she was willing to meet him half way, he allowed his other hand to drop to her burning breast. Where he met with rock hard nipples, he pinched between his gentle fingers.

Her breathing came in gulps, flooding the burning depths of her body throughout her limbs. Clinging to his shoulders to stand, she met his every move with a counter stroke. Her heart was pounding so loud in her head. She didn't know how she managed to hear the approaching footsteps. Braking free from his hands, she slipped behind him to protect her identity. Gripping his shirt, as he told the stranger that he would be there in a minute she pressed her burning lips to his flexing muscles.

When he turned to tell her he had to leave, he again scooped her up against his hips. "I'll take you back to Mom's after I flip this switch, and light the tree."

"I can't...you can't." he pressed his finger to her lips.

"Stay here, I'll be right back." he smiled the light of love across the span of the few inches they stood apart.

She did as told standing at the edge of the doorway she watched as he and several children flipped the switch, and lit the giant tree that stood in the front yard of the church. Then the carols rang forth from the stipules and filled the whole town, with the love the lord had brought forth over two thousand years before.

When he returned, she asked, "Will you take me home? I mean my home." she stuttered out the words, biting on her lower lip. "I promised to make it through the end of the year for the kids."

"Who – Who did you promise?" she could feel the pain in his voice.

"Me. I promised myself, the kids deserve it." she shuttered as he took hold of her arms. "I have to find the woman you deserve." she turned away from him. "I feel like I've been lost."

When he gently encircled her and pulled her back to him, she knew he understood. "You have a right to have the real me."

"I just want you – all of you." He whispered nuzzling his nose in next to her neck.

"I'm not all here. I won't be, until I can set him straight. Please understand. I need you to be strong, I live on your strength." she was once again trembling, but not because of the heat that filled her body, she was afraid he would turn away. Turning to face him, she stroked her hands softly over his chest. "Jim, I'll go with you right now—" she'd given in.

"That son of a bitch." he pushed her away. "He's broke your spirit." he stepped towards the street. "How dare you beg me" he spun and scooped her from her feet, sweeping her back into the blackness of the doorway. "Hit me, kick, scream" he shook her violently, by the shoulders. "Fight back."



She couldn't, she didn't have the strength to fight back. When he stopped shaking her and let her go, she simply slumped to the cement, crying. "I need you in my corner."

"Damn it Girl, I've always been in your corner." he dropped to his knees, "But you got to fight, or he'll just keep rolling over you." Looking up, she noticed the tears spilling across his cheeks. "You have to fight back."

"I will, I just need to know that you're there." she reached out and wiped, her fingers across his face.

"I'm here." he answered, "I'll always be here."

Mike hadn't even missed her, although the kids knew she was gone. She was stampeded at the door with hugs and kisses, and a couple of very frightened girls.

"Mom, we thought you weren't coming back." Crystal cried throwing her arm around her neck.

"Dad's been such a beast. We wouldn't blame you, but we were afraid you'd left us." Shelly finished her sister's statement.

"Wait a minute," she pushed their hand from her body "Are you telling me, that you don't think I should've done all the things he wanted?"

"Mom, no man treats his wife that way." Crystal answered, "Todd says—"

"You have to stand up to him." Shelly cut her off. "How can he respect you if you don't respect yourself?"

She blinked in amazement, was this really her two little girls, telling her the same things she'd told them. "I'll never go anyplace that you don't know where I'm at. But—" she wondered if she should let her plans out of the bag. "I'm not going to stay here in this house, any longer." When their eyes popped out of their heads, she rephrased the statement. "I mean, I'm going back to work." It would hurt them to see their parents split up, even if they saw their father for what he was.

The next morning she hotwired the Van again, and meet Jim at the back door dressed to go to work, when he picked up the empty milk containers. She may have been willing to work in the basement for the time being, but she wasn't about to take any guff from Mike. When he realized she was there, and came looking to find out why.

"This is my place, and you're only in charge of the hotel side of it. Now if there are any other questions, I'd ask that you knock, but as you can see I still don't have a door." That had been a

bone of contention since she took her office to the basement. Every time she mentioned the door, he would tell her she didn't need one.

"What in the hell has come over you. I ask you a simple question and you jump down my throat." he backed away from her.

"You know what happens when, a pinned lion gets loose?" she waited for a response but there wasn't one. "I'm going back to work and there's nothing that you can do about it."

"Em, shit. I never said you couldn't work. You can do whatever you want."

"Oh, I see. So does that mean I can have the keys to my Van, so I can stop hot wiring it?"

"Emma, you can't do that, it has a computer chip." he exclaimed putting her down again.

"If you didn't want me damaging the Damn thing, you should've given me my keys weeks ago." she shot right back, he wasn't going to make her feel guilty.

"Why didn't you ask for them?"

"Because it's mine, why should I have to beg for anything?"

"You're twisting this, who have you been talking to."

"Don't you think I have a brain of my own?"

"I'm not going to talk to you when you're like this." he turned to leave.

"Did I say you could leave?" she was feeling the weight of her position. He spun with a shocked look on his face. "I want all the current reports on the reservations, payrolls, occupancy, and a breakdown of the food and beverage costs."

"Yes sir." he responded with a salute, as he shuffled up the steps.

A full minute passed before Beth was there throwing her arms around her neck. "Your back"

That seemed the consensus, of all she encountered that day. Matter of fact if she hadn't come to her senses then, the Dickens Festival would've gone down the tubes. Mike really had no idea that it had been planned for over two months. He'd ordered a half a million little lights, and just ordered Kit to have them installed by the first week of December, when she stepped in and ask if it was part of the Dickens Scene. Kit just shook his head no, but Mike lost his cool.

"Just because your back now, how and the hell do you think you are you going to pull off something like that, in less than a week."

"I'm not. The whole place has been planning for it for months, and tonight it all comes together, with the first of the hayrides. So if you'd like to join us, I'm sure you're more than welcome."

"And just who do you think will be watching after all your guest's while you're out riding around in a hay stack."

"The people I pay to watch over them. But you're a night auditor, so that doesn't include you." She drew blood with that statement, and the pain was evident in the way he backed down from her immediately. She couldn't stand the hurt she experienced, as he left her and Kit standing there.

"He's been asking for it." Kit uttered as he stepped to the back door.

"Kit" she wanted his blessing, but he wasn't ready to offer it yet.

"But He's still your husband ... isn't he?"

"I'll talk to him." she'd been put in her place.

Humbly, she knocked at his office and when he finally responded, she stepped in to find him shuffling papers about his desk.

"I'm sorry," it took every ounce of guts she had to open herself up to his rage.

"No, I'm sorry." He said looking down at the desk. He went on with a shaky voice. "I just thought that if I locked you up. I could keep you."

"You forced my hand. How did you think I'd act when you told me about mom's village?" He didn't respond, so she left it at that. She'd said she was sorry, for belittling him in front of his son. That was the only thing they had to discuss right then.

Eighteenth century garb was handed out before dark, and when the busses rolled in that night, they were met by a full English village, right down to the tall smoke pipe hats and barmaids waiting tables.

There had been a rush to finish the decorating of the big house, but with everyone pulling together it came off, with minutes to spare. The other house's had been decorated a day or two earlier.

After dinner not only was there a hayride offered to the visitors, but Kit had also dressed up the pond for ice skater's as well. The buggies with the fringe on top had been converted into rather handsome sleighs. Carolers were position at every front door, and their harmonious expressions rose about the valley in unison. Where the kids had positioned the bell to toll, every hour on the hour, keep her wondering throughout the night. As she wondered about the pond, dressed in not

only her fancy dress but also a full-length coat of velvet and fur, with her hair neatly tucked up, under a stylish hat with a feather dress, she was taken aback by the similar scene that had developed on the frozen pond. Not that there were two men struggling over a single girl, but the way the couple's clutched so closely to each other.

She hadn't expected the season to become so hectic, had she really complained about not attending parties. Everyone offered one that year and of course, the newest occupants were expected to attend as a couple, but Mike worked his magic and managed to get out of everyone, except the one the city leaders threw. He'd been asked to join the FOE, so that was the one he decided they would make their appearance at, even though it was held Christmas eve and the drive back up the canyon was going to be icy.

He had even gone out and bought her a special dress. She wouldn't have chosen it, but she was still trying to pretend theirs was a real marriage, so she felt obligated to wear it. She had no objection to the emerald color, or the full skirt that fell below her knees, but the strap less tight fitting bodes made her feel self-conscious about her muscular arms.

When Mike chose a table close to the far wall, and then snuggled her in next to it she wondered what she'd even worried about. Drinks were being passed around as if they were water, and everyone seemed to be indulging. Everyone except her she hadn't been much on drinking, since she'd gotten tipsy at her boss's wedding a few years back.

Jim was there but he kept his distance, not that she thought Mike would've even noticed him after the first hour. The large band drowned out almost everything, said at the table. Not that she was really listening. She spent most of the night staring at her hands.

When rocking around the Christmas tree started to play, she lifted her head and longed to dance, but by then Mike would've been doing good to stand. Searching about the room, her eyes finally fell on Jim speaking to someone at the bar. A minute later, he asked her to dance. When Mike responded, "Emma doesn't dance." there fell a hush on the room.

Not removing his eyes from her Jim said, "I asked her." With that, he reached behind Mike to take her hand. She didn't bother to ask Mike for his approval, before she stood and joined Jim on the dance floor. The band stopped and announced that the pros have just taken the floor, so everyone thinking about winning this contest had better think twice.

If they hadn't made such a fuss about it, Mike may have not lost his cool. However, as Jim whirled her about the floor, his glare grew colder and colder. When Jim didn't return her to her seat after the first dance, she didn't even give it a second thought. Then the contest was announced and he held her, not allowing her to take a seat next to what appeared to be a steaming Mike.

His warm smile made everything all right. As he back stepped her to the two steps, then there were a couple more turns and he dipped her so low she could see the ceiling, framing his hat as he bent to kiss her in front of everyone. Lifting her back to her feet, she shot him a look of disappointment, and he pointed up to where a bow of mistletoe hung. The crowd was a cheer of laughter and Mike a ghostly white, even for his normally pale color.

He twirled her a couple times more to the stage where he hoisted the large cup above his head and the crowd again shouted out cheers, indicating it was theirs. He then wrapped her arm around his and escorted her back to the table, where she slide in behind Mike and he then turned a chair around squatting on it to stare into Mike's red face to say, "I like to dance with those women that don't dance."

She just knew Mike was going to blow. But before he had a chance, Todd had a hold of her hand saying, "This is more my style" pulling her towards the dance floor. When she couldn't concentrate on the music, Todd took hold of her head and forced her to look at him.

"They'll work it out, but now I understand how they both can see a different woman in that body."

"Do you still think I'm schizophrenic?"

"Goodness no," he chuckled "It's all wrapped in together, in the most beautiful body I've ever seen." He looked as if he was about to put an exception to that, but a hand on his shoulder cut him off.

"I agree, son." It was Mr. Harris. Had he said son, she wondered? Yes, he meant it. She could see the distant resemblance. They both boasted of the same black eyes and wavy black hair. She had to admit that since, Mr. Harris had removed his mustache. His face was more pleasing to the eye.

"Dad" Todd didn't sound too thrilled to be relinquishing her hand. "Her husband might not agree." he looked desperately over his shoulder, for help.

"He's too busy letting Jimbo know whose wife she is." he said sweeping her hand from Todd's.

"Wait," she started to protest. However, when he stopped immediately and looked at her, as if she had a right to speak up. She simply smiled and said."Its okay, Todd, the next dance is yours."

"Changing your opinion of me are you?"

"You can't always believe everything you hear about a person, in a small town." she replied but kept a healthy distance anyway.

"I knew you were a person to judge a soul yourself. You've always been that way." he responded twirling her out for another turn.

"Have we met before?"

Wetting his lips, he chuckled and started to say, "You don't mean—"

Jim's strong arm cut him off, gently slipping her out from under his arm. "Emma, I hate to interrupt you but Mike really should get home. I think he's had a bit too much to drink."

Instantly, her attention was directed to where Mike stood next to the door. Jim escorted her back to his side, and then assisted her in getting him in the car. Opening her door for her, he squeezed her hand and whispered "Drive carefully." his eyes said something else, so she pulled him back when he turned to walk away. "It'll be alright, I promise."

If more than words had been exchanged, she'd have to wait to ask someone who wasn't entrenched in Mr. Harris's eyes, at the time. Mike was too far out of it to answer any of her questions, although he did manage to assist her quite well, in getting into the house. But when he toppled to the bed, she thought he was out. Right up until he yanked her to his side the minute she tried to loosen his shirt.

Thirty minutes later, as she clutched the pillow to her burning chest, staring down at her shredded emerald dress on the floor. She knew she'd driven him to that, by allowing Jim to flirt the way she had. Pushing his weighty body from her legs, she slipped from beneath him – and free from his pain full lovemaking. She'd thought she could overpower him at first, but the alcohol, had not only given him extra strength, it had given him the ability to force himself on her without thinking what the consequences would be.

Not expecting to spend the night there, she'd nothing to cover her battered body. Searching through his dresser, she discovered her old reliable, wadded up in the top drawer. Despite its tattered appearance, it covered what needed to be covered. Mainly the bruises that were already starting to appear on her tender breasts. Once covered, the thought of having to crawl back in that bed with him, brought a bitter taste to her mouth. Lucky for her, Christmas had fallen on Monday that year. The house was empty, except for the unconscious body lying before her.

Perhaps a smoke, she thought, would help her pull herself together. Then she would find another bed, where she could lay her aching body down. Beth always had her smokes above the refrigerator, even though there was no smoking in the house, so it was to the kitchen she headed.

She had just started to run her fingers along the ledge, when she heard someone in the front of the house. Fearful it was Mike looking for another round, she approached the bedroom with caution. Silently peeking around the doorframe, she was shocked to see him spread eagle across the bed; because she could still hear the strange sounds emanating from the living room.

Waking him wouldn't have been her first choice for security, but he was the only one around. Bouncing on the edge of the bed, she shook his masculine shoulders firmly enough to wake him. A minute later he had her pinned to the bed once more clawing at her clothing, mumbling with a thick tongue. "I knew you would remember the better times."

"No – Mike" she tried to push his hands away, "No – There's someone in the living room."

He responded but only to her pleas of No. Rolling to his side, he glared at her through his blood shot eyes "He's probably looking for you. Go to him, go ahead go." he pushed her with such force that she nearly toppled off the bed. "Get out of here." he went on to command her, turning to face the wall.

She reacted more to his command than her curiosity of who was in the living room, leaving the door open behind her, just in case she was right about the sound. Tiptoeing across the hall, she felt her way to the front hall. Quietly she felt her way towards the French doors.

The room remained the same. Time wasn't playing tricks on her. She could hear the pounding of her own heart, throbbing in her head. She held back every breath, exhaling slowly, so not to make any more noise than she already had. The doors appeared to be locked, the latch securely twisted to the right, but she didn't cross the open space between the end of the hall and them to make sure.

The sounds had stopped. The house breathed with her every breath. Low moans could be heard up stairs, from the wood expanding and contracting to the differing temperatures outside. Off to her right she could hear the sound of the bushes rustling against the house. Inside the sitting room, that had been converted for the season, into a Santa's workshop, the grandfather clock, clicked a rhythm similar to her heart.

Her breathing slowed and she eventually rolled to look into the shadowy lit room. There was not a thing out of place. The twelve-foot tree stood smack dab, in the middle of the three windows. Glistening as it had for weeks, with silver and gold bows and candle looking lights. Both high backed chairs facing her were empty. Even the highly polished desk in the corner, used to hold the sign in book, was undisturbed.

With a sigh of relief, she strolled into the room fully exposed. She started to think she'd allowed her imagination to run away with her, until she spied the solitary gift beneath the tree. They had chosen to leave that space empty, because they couldn't find wrapping paper to fit the period. The box neatly snuggled beneath the lower boughs, looked so naturally that she wondered if someone had added it for an effect.

She lowered herself to her knees and debated pulling the box from its hiding spot. While she was sure she'd find the box empty, there was always that chance that it could hold something she really didn't want to see.

It wasn't a box wrapped in paper, although it was a box, but the pattern was printed right on the box itself with a removable lid, similar to a hatbox she had seen in the vision, but square. The lid was held in place with a satin ribbon, tied with a floppy crimson bow at the top. A small paper tag, held in place with a gold string displayed a name, but she couldn't read it from where she'd knelt.

"Don't tell me that you don't know who it's from." Mike harsh voice sent her cringing to kiss her knees.

"Em," he dropped to his knees at her side, wrapping her into his arms. "I shouldn't have." He pressed his lips to her head "I knew better than to think, that would bring you back to me." When she didn't push him away, he went on to stroke her hair down her back. "God how you must hate me"

"You scared me." she managed to force through her trembling lips. "Look" she pointed to the box.

"Yeah." he responded standing up "you're a good actress. You can't tell me that it's not from him."

"I don't know who it's from." she shot back, straightening herself to rest against her feet. "And for that matter, I don't know who it's for either. If you're so certain it's for me and not a bomb, you pick it up." The look in his face, took on a different twist. "After all you're the one who's always saying this place is going to kill me."

"I do not." he responded dropping to his knees, "I said it was going to take you away from me." he paused looking at the box, then asked "What makes you think it's a bomb." The amazement that filled her face spoke for itself. "Damn it Em. Just because I don't like what you say, doesn't mean I haven't learned to listen."

She had to rethink, the way she'd been looking at him. Had he really been listening to her all the time? If so, why hadn't he believed her when she said the Place would be a big success. "Why wouldn't you move down here then?"

"I told you, this place will take you away from me."

"You mean Jim will." his face showed the pain, "But he's not, you're driving me."

"Stop it." he screeched, reaching for the box. "It's going to happen and that's all I know."



"What's going to happen?" but her words were ignored. He'd pulled the box from its hiding spot and was dropping it in front of her.

"See, it's to you, any more questions."

The tag indeed had her name scratched across it, along with the date 1914, the year before her father was born. Scrambling backwards, she screeched "its grandma's"

"What?" he asked moving with her. "What do you mean it's your Grandma's...she's dead."

When their eyes meet, she recognized the fear she was feeling. Should she tell him about the other times, would he listen? "I know, but that's to her not me. Look at the date. It's the year she was driven off the ranch." He looked down at her with little recognition of what she was saying.

"What do you mean driven off the ranch?"

"Mike I can't explain it right now, just trust me. That was meant for my grandmother. Jim—"

"Jim would understand everything." He shouted at her again, she'd chosen the wrong thing to say. "Wouldn't he?" he jumped back to the box and ripped the ribbon from it, the same way he'd undressed her. The ribbon free, he quickly tugged the lid from its place, allowing the contents to be seen. A very large flour canister, minus its lid, filled the entire box. Inside it another canister could be seen, lid intact. The rose pattern was apparent even from where she sat. "Shit," he exclaimed pulling back, "It matches the china."

"I told you, it was meant for Grandma." she slipped a bit closer, to get a better look. "It's the missing canisters."

That he understood, or had already recognized, before she uttered the words.

"So what are they doing here?" he crawled to her side, looking longingly into her eyes for an answer.

"I don't know." she responded shaking her head. "Who put the box there?"

He rattled his head in response. "It's beautiful though." he reached to touch the hand painted items.

"No," she slapped away his hand "We could—"

"We could what?" he asked reaching out to caress her flinching cheek. "What you and Jim have been busy doing all summer?" She could've taken that as an accusation, but his hand held no pain in its touch. "Have you and he been chasing ghosts all along?"

"There isn't any ghost's. It's a story of love."

"Yeah, yours." he ripped his hand from her face and turned to dump the contents of the box out.

"No." she shouted but it was too late. He'd already poured them onto the floor, breaking the large lid that had been securely tucked at the side of the others. She didn't think twice before grabbing the two pieces and streaking off to the large dining room, him right behind. When she reached the first table she went to lay them down and find some glue, but he stopped her by grabbing her arms.

"I'm sorry." He pleaded with her, pulling her very close to his body, tears streaked from her eyes, instantly blurring all that surrounded her. Why did he have to be so brutal? He'd never been that way. Oh sure he'd always been indifferent to sentimental things, but he'd never gone out deliberately to hurt her before. He'd buried his face in her hair, pleading for her forgiveness – but she didn't listen. She wouldn't let him get away with it any longer.

Forcing herself from his tight grip, she demanded even before she was completely free, "I want a divorce." He didn't let go of her, but the look that filled his face said more than shock, he was scared, and his hands were trembling. Again, she tried to push free, and again he refused to let her go. The fear she was watching in his face, slipped to his chest, catching his every breath.

Once she realized he wasn't even looking at her, she too started to tremble. They had slipped into the past. Scanning the area, she discovered the room that had once held her glass china hutch had disappeared. They stood at the side of the house. The snow that had covered the ground was gone. Wild flowers covered everything she could see. It was dark and only the dimmest of light was being expelled from the large bay window, to their left.

"Listen." he stooped down to whisper into her ear.

She hadn't heard the voices, before but the minute he said it she could suddenly hear two people fighting. The words were familiar, but they couldn't see who was fighting. "He's fighting with a girl." Mike's astute sense's aided to that of her own. "Where – Where are they?" He continued. "Can we find them?" he asked close to her face. Turning she looked around her, only to again shrug her shoulders.

How did he expect that she had the answers? She was just as much caught there as he was. Why would she want to find out who it was anyway? All she was doing was weighing out how she was going to get out of there. The ground stung her naked feet, with little prickly things.

"Up there," he pushed at her back. "We can see them from up there."

"Mike my feet." She protested more for the thought of standing still, then from the pain.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her from the ground, then started to tiptoe through the thorny ground covering, to the edge of the house, at just the point the new portion was added on to the porch. The swing swung in the light breeze that rustled through the open space between the front door and the railing around the porch.

"Don't go any further." She commanded him, when he started to walk into the open space beyond the porch. He did as told, but still they couldn't see anyone. The disagreement was taking place inside the house.

"Where are they?"

"Inside, they must be inside." She'd no sooner said it, than the front door was kicked open, and a tall dark man carried a girl onto the porch. Mike pulled her back against him, as he lowered her to her feet, dodging the chance that they might be seen. She soon lost track of what he was doing at all, she became engrossed in the words that flew, in the warm night air.

The girl kicked and twisted in the man's arms, exclaiming to him how she'd been hurt. That if he made her go with him, he would hurt her again, but he only pushed and pulled on her, until he'd her nearly to the buckboard, there she broke loose and shouted for James. "He isn't coming." he shouted, grabbing her again, "You are going to marry Robert, he's going to marry you one way or the other." The girl had overlooked the long gun, clutched beneath his arm, until just that minute, when he pulled it to point it at her face. "Now, get in the wagon, or—"

"No John, don't hurt her." an elderly woman had stepped onto the porch. "Don't make her do this."

"She'll marry him or I'll kill her love James. I'll be damned if I'll have a hussy living in my house."

"John you'll be damned alright, but only if you force this child to do this."

"Take that back in the house. Get back in the house, now." he shouted to the woman on the porch, forcing the girl onto the wagon.

Emma hadn't noticed until just then, that the woman on the porch was holding the hatbox in her hands. The box was what she'd been looking for the day she and Jim witnessed the most loving moment, her grandmother had ever known. She had to see if there was something, she could do to stop this. Prying loose from Mike's hands she slide under the porch rail. Still clutching tightly to the broken piece of china, Mike stopped her by grabbing her feet and pulling her back towards him.

"No" she whispered kicking her feet, but it was more then she could do to hold on to the china. Which she knew was what brought them there. He'd no sooner pulled her back under the rail

when they both realized there commotion had drawn the attention of Old Johnny. He had the gun pointed in their direction. Lizzy was fighting with him not to pull the trigger, screaming at the top of her lungs "James"

"EMMA!" his voice was loud enough to be two in her ear, immediately she released the china and the scene sweep from sight. Leaving them standing on the front porch in the middle of a blinding blizzard. The threat of being blown away, took on a new meaning. The wind that raced through the open space ripped at her naked legs and swirled her gown up.

Immediately Mike pulled her close to him and exclaimed, "What was that? How did you do that?"

Pulling loose she raced for the front door, only to be turned back by the thought that she had seen them locked earlier.

"Open it." he commanded reaching to pull them open. When he turned to look back at her, he said, "You knew it was locked, didn't you."

Before she could explain, he pushed her to the edge of the house. Where he tried the doors on the new addition, they were locked too. "The back door." he shouted into the wind, grabbing her hand and dragging her around the edge of the house. Into the depth of the snow that had been drifted there, by the nonstop wind at that point.

Releasing her hand, he plowed through the newly fallen powder, forcing it off to one side, as he raced ahead. She knew he had to be as cold as she was. He didn't even have a shirt to cover his burning chest and the PJ bottoms he'd put on before leaving the bedroom, offered little more in warmth than her own worn excuse for a night gown.

Reaching the door, he pulled with all his might, but it was no use. Forcing her against the wall, he screamed, "Stay here, the car – I'll check the car."

He was racing off out of sight before she could remind him, that she'd locked the doors as he always insisted. Sliding down the door, in an attempt to cover her numb legs, she replayed the scene they had just witnessed.

Before long she realized Mike had been gone too long. Maybe he was hurt, maybe he'd gotten inside the car, and she hadn't heard the horn. She couldn't stay there any longer. Brushing the powder from her shoulders, she flipped her hair and forged towards the edge of the house, where she'd hoped to see him, but she couldn't see anything. The snow was falling even harder, and the wind had indeed increased, whipping her hair at a furry about her face.

Then she was lifted from the burning cold, and dragged back towards the back of the house. Her arms pinned at her side, she couldn't remove the hair from her face to see who had rescued her.

With a thud, her back was pressed to the wall and her arms freed. Fumbling, she pushed the hair from her face, only to be lifted again and tossed inside the back door. Her feet were so numb. She couldn't even feel when she was put down. Catching herself from falling, she snagged onto a shirt.

"I've got to go get Mike." Jim's clear tones filled her heart with warmth, but it did nothing for her feet.

Stumbling her way down the hall, she sought the first bed with a quilt she could wrap around herself. Jumping to the middle she snarled the soft comforter about her shivering body and huddled down into a small ball, to reserve all the warmth she could. A moment later, Mike raced through the door to join her, Jim only a step behind.

"What the Hell. Are you trying to kill her? That isn't what I agreed to." Jim's temper snapped, at Mike.

"Wait. We were locked out." she defended her half-frozen husband. "We saw Old' Johnny hauling Lizzy off." she proclaimed, looking up at his angered face, snow clung to his hat and about his chest. "He wouldn't believe her."

"What is this? How do you know their names?" Mike demanded an answer, while he wrapped a blanket around himself. "It's like I said. He knows everything. I'm just your husband. Don't bother telling me anything. He probably knows you spent the night in my bed, already." She wouldn't have quite put it that way, but he was right, she'd been with him. Jim's face was filled with betrayal and pain. As she turned her face away, so not to see. Then suddenly he picked her torn dress from the floor.

"It doesn't look like she had much choice." He shouted, throwing it into Mike's face.

"It doesn't matter, I made love to her. Me"

"Love? Is that how I'm supposed to believe lovemaking is done." Jim shot back. "We could've achieved that."

When Mike flipped the blanket from his back, he stormed from the room. Searching Jim's face for compassion, she came up empty.

"I'll kill him." He declared before storming out after him.

"Jim no." she chased after him. "He's still my husband."

"Did you want that." he stopped, whirling to squeeze her frozen arms.

Staring up into his eye, she couldn't lie "NO." she responded in a contrite tone, "But I don't want to see you in Jail either." He lifted her chin and softly kissed her on the forehead.

"I won't kill him." He whispered releasing her arms, "It's alright, go get in bed. Get warm." he pushed her towards the bed. "I promise."

Snuggling down into the quilt, she felt as if she'd just witnessed the most important thing in her life. As the weight of the quilt weighed down upon her tired body, she felt the warmth press deep into her bones, like the sun on a brisk April day, melting the snows of winter. At the point where the mind gave way to the slumber of darkness, she felt the quilt be moved closer to her face. Sleep gripped her eyes too tightly for her to open them but Jim's intoxicating cologne gave his presence away.

Jason bouncing on the end of the bed woke her to a new world. Mike had left her jeans and a western shirt, folded across the high backed chair. The girls meet her at the door with a tray of breakfast, and even Kit had a hug for his old mother. After eating, and before she could ask Mike if the night before had really happened. She was whisked off to Jim's, to open the presents from under the real tree her home couldn't contain.

Jesse met them at the door with a loving hug that reminded her of the way her own mother use to hold her. Over her shoulders she caught a glimpse of Jim, smiling down at her from his lofty perch at the top of the steps. When he joined them in the living room, she couldn't believe the warmth his hand offered; as he led her to stand in front of the tree gently he tipped his head forward indicating she should look down. Fighting back the tears she simple dropped to her knees and stroked her mother's village. Mike hadn't thrown them out after all. If the evening before was to have taken the cake, Christmas day was the icing.

The trinkets exchanged that day, would never replace the love that room held for a few short hour. Both Shelly and Sara received engagement rings from Jimmy and Kit. All seemed complete when Todd showed up and Crystal fell over herself, trying to act grown up in front of her idle.

The Chatterton Place Saga continues in Book Two, Secrets Unravel.

An unbelievable peace has blanketed the valley for nearly three months, but how long will it last? For every one discovery Emma has found out about her Great Great Grandparents during the past year, there were three more questions to haunt her mind. Will her brothers get the land and silence the love story, or will the secrets finally be revealed?

Garlitz/Chatterton Place

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