

1

Why was she out on a night like this?

Of course Ariel knew the answer before she had even asked herself the question. It was because she was needed by one of the townsfolk who had been badly injured causing him great pain and his family increasing stress, so she couldn't say no.

The wind howled through the tops of the trees making them look like giant spiders swinging in the night sky. Clouds rolled in covering the sliver of moon bringing the threat of rain, or worse. “People in their right minds don’t go into the darkness on a night like tonight,” her old Nanna had said. “You mark my words; something evil is about this night.”

Ariel had simply given her a hug and said she would send word if it was going to be late before she returned.

The birds first drew her attention, as they should have been quiet. Suddenly, the blackness of her surroundings was as bright as day, as lightning began piercing the sky. Eerie forms appeared to be everywhere, coming out of the night, driven by the wind. The trees bare limbs now looked like long boney fingers reaching for her hair and cloak. *I should have reached the farmer’s cottage by now*, she said to herself.

Ariel's heart began beating faster and harder as the shapes and sounds seemed to close in on her. "*Oh, it's just the storm,*" she said to herself, "*And all because Nanna tried to scare me before I left home.*"

Suddenly, there in her path was the largest beast she had ever seen. He was as black as the night with eyes of gold, flashing as if they were lightning bolts.

A scream caught in Ariel's throat, threatening to choke her. She began running with the lightning as her only guide. Ariel had not noticed the freezing rain had started to come down until she slipped on the icy ground. Suddenly she was falling. Ariel could not stop herself and the last thing she remembered was the echo of Nanna's words in her head--something evil... something evil... something evil...

The girl's hair was like honey, fresh from the hive, with the feel of silk sliding through his fingers. With it fanned out on the pillow and the light from the fire behind her, she almost glowed like an angel, "Or perhaps," he thought out loud, "a fairy princess." Her skin was pale and pure as the new snow, except where there were scratches, cuts and bruises from her fall. They had begun to color and the blood had dried.

Thank heavens Thor had come and taken him back to the girl. She would surely have frozen to death in the sudden ice storm wearing only a thin dress and lightweight cape.. The girl had been unconscious when he found her lying at the bottom of a steep hill. At first he had thought her dead, she was covered with small twigs and dried leaves after the fall. He had carefully picked her up, thinking her weight not much more than a feather, and carried her back to his cabin, deep into the dark endless forest. Christian, the second son of the Earl of Blackthorne, was sitting next to the bed with his great dog, Thor, close by when she began to stir.

The first thing Ariel saw when she finally opened her eyes was the giant beast. With the fire behind him giving a strange red glow to his eyes and body. When she screamed and tried to sit up, she was unable to move as if a big weight were holding her down. Suddenly he was there, in her line of sight, the most handsome man she had ever seen or even imagine. Of course in the small and quiet village where Dove cottage was, there were very few men at all. As he turned to face her fully, she screamed once more and quickly closed her eyes.

The girl's reaction was precisely why Christian had come to this cabin so deeply hidden. His thoughts took him back three months when he could be seen at the most desirable of entertainments in London, for at the high point of the season, even though he was a second son, he was not poor and was considered a very good catch. All the husband hunting mamas invited Christian into their homes. He had been dressed to the nines in his black evening coat, a vest shot with silver, lace at the cuff, and silver cufflinks. He was traveling to the third ball of the evening when he heard the cries for help. There were no others attending him, as he loved driving his own high-perched phantom with a pair of matching black beauties at his command.

He pulled the horses to an immediate halt and jumped from the seat at a run. He always had his sword at hand, but he was totally unprepared for the scene that unfolded in front of him as he rounded the corner. Three men, one with a torch, had cornered a young female and were most definitely planning something very unpleasant. He caught the three by surprise and one scoundrel was on the ground, injured before he had time to react. Christian had not, however, been as lucky with the other two brutes. One of them pulled a very large knife on him, while the man with the torch began swinging the flame at him with all his might. The ruffian knocked the sword from Christian's hand, while the other lunged forward with his knife. He had been aiming for the heart, but got his shoulder instead, as Christian had turned quickly. As Christian lay on the ground, the men continued to punish him for

spoiling their fun with the girl. They seemed to get great pleasure from bashing on his face and kicking him in all the other areas of his body. The two brutes heard shouts of more help coming in their direction, so deciding their fun had come to an end, they quickly gathered up their comrade and ran. By this time, Christian had been beyond caring, beyond knowing, as a blessed darkness had taken him away from the burning pain into oblivion.

Christian was shaking his head trying to rid his mind of the dark thought, when he realized the girl lying in his bed was talking to him.

“Please sir, I am so sorry. I did not mean to upset you thusly. It is just...”

“No, it is I whom should apologize to you. After your fall, I’m sure my face was not the first thing you should lay your eyes on.”

“It’s not your face that gave me a start and caused me to be so ill mannered. When I woke and saw him again, I saw him in the woods just before I fell and was unable to move...” her voice fell off as the ‘beast’ came forward. “Sure I was startled at first by your appearance, but it was truly not you but the beast that made me scream. I have never seen such an animal and he truly did give me a fright.

“I’m not at all surprised. You took quite a nasty fall and I fear you bumped your head more than once on your way down that incline. You were nearly frozen when Thor lead me to you.” When the huge animal heard his name, he came even closer to nuzzle his master’s hand.

“I thought that beast was going to attack me.”

“Thor? Nonsense! He would never hurt anyone, unless of course, someone was trying to hurt him or perhaps myself.” Almost as though the dog understood what his master was saying, Thor came closer to Ariel and gave her hand a sound licking. “See, I told you he is harmless,” he added.

Ariel was not convinced he was harmless, but at least she decided he perhaps wasn't the monster she had first thought him to be out on the path. "Still, I'm not sure he should be allowed to wander the countryside scaring people half to death," she commented.

"Point taken, my lady, I do suppose not everyone sees Thor as I do. He is my very dear friend and companion."

A blush came over Ariel as she realized she had been extremely rude and ungrateful. After all he had rescued her. "It is my turn to apologize to you for my rudeness. After all you have surely saved my life and given me shelter. Nanna would be appalled at my behavior." At the thought of Nanna she quickly tried to get up once more. The dizziness made the room spin and she was sure someone had lit a hundred candles.

Noticing her disorientation, Christian reached to steady her, "Easy does it, my girl, you have some nasty bumps and bruises on that lovely head of yours."

"Nanna says I should not speak to gentlemen to whom I have not been properly introduced," she stated matter-of-factly, blushing once more.

With a slight smile, the gentleman in question graciously bowed and said, "My lady, if I may, my name is Christian Delacourt, second son of the Earl of Blackthorne. At this moment you are abed in my humble abode."

"Oh!" was the only response she was able to give.

Ariel had heard the rumors that the Earl's son had come to the area to recover from an accident of some kind, but had, like most others, thought that he was living at his father's estate, Blackthorne. She did not expect to find him in a hovel such as this. The fact that he was the son of an Earl made her all the more ill at ease. Even though her parents had both been from families of title, her life had centered on the poor tenants and farmers, not the gentry and upper classes.

Christian could see her discomfort and again felt it must be because of his disfigurement and not his manners and most certainly not his name. "I'm sorry if I have frightened you," he said softly, hoping not to do so further.

"Oh, my lord, please forgive me if I gave that impression for I'm truly not afraid. Only," she hesitated, "well... surprised and embarrassed."

He raised his brow, thinking it odd of her to be surprised, but decided not to tax her strength further by asking why. He simply said, "As it may be, now that you know my name, would you care to disclose your name?"

Ariel blushed as she said, "I am sorry for I am being quite remiss myself. Mistress Ariel McAllister and I reside at Dove Cottage."

How fitting, he thought, for her to be living some place with a name like Dove Cottage. "Do you reside there by yourself?" he inquired.

"Oh, no, of course not! Nanna lives with me and there is Jacob to take care of the heavy chores and help Nanna. Before Papa died three years ago, he made sure everything was taken care of for as long as I lived there. Naturally, I will always live there for it is where I was born and raised and cannot imagine I would ever live anywhere else."

Didn't she know how beautiful and desirable she was? I can't imagine she will be unwed for very long, even in this part of the country, he thought to himself.

"Anyway," she was saying, "I was on my way into the village..."

"On your way into the village? Alone, at night, in this storm!" he was almost yelling. "What were you thinking? Why would this Nanna of yours let you go?"

"I was on my way in to help one of the villagers who had fallen. You see, for reasons unknown, I have been give certain gifts," she stated casually. "Some call them powers and people have come

seeking my help for years. She is not my nanny anymore but my companion and she was strongly against me going out tonight. I must have taken the wrong path in the dark. I don't usually come so far into the woods."

Christian laughed bitterly saying, "Where were you three months ago? I would have gladly rendered myself of your, ah, services. Now I fear it is much too late. "

"I would have been more than willing to help you if I had but known of your injuries. Why are you so sure it is too late to help you now?"

With almost a sneer he replied, "My cuts, bruises and broken bones are nearly all mended. It is only the scars on my face and in my mind that have not fully recovered. I'm not sure they ever will." Christian's mind was drifting back to the days, weeks and months of pain and suffering and even at times, loathing of the fact that he had survived his attackers' assault.

They had found Christian lying in his own blood, more dead than alive. Someone in the group of rescuers had recognized him as Blackthorne's son. He was taken to his father's townhouse and several physicians had been called in to attend to him. They had stitched the knife wound in his shoulder, bound his ribs and set several other broken bones. They told his family he would probably not survive and if he did, he would be scarred for life. Christian lay unconscious for ten days, but had clung to life. When he did gain consciousness, he was masked with a blanket of pain and delirium.

She was bringing him back to the present once again with her sweet melodic voice. "As I was saying, I really must be on my way, for Nanna will be frantic with worry. I told her I would send word if I was to be late. As for your scars, only time will tell, but you have a good and kind heart and that is half the battle."

At that moment both their heads turned to look out the tiny window where the first rays of daylight were filtering through the trees.

“Here, let me help you,” said Christian. “I’m sure you are still going to be a little dizzy from your fall.”

Christian helped Ariel rise to a sitting position. She waited for the room to stop moving before she continued her ascent from the bed. Ariel was thinking of Nanna back at Dove Cottage, pacing a track in the rug of the sitting area. Little did Ariel know that the storm, which had almost claimed her life, had found another victim.

2

Nanna, as Ariel had expected, had been pacing the floor when a message from the family of the man who had fallen inquired when Ariel was planning to come to his aid. Upon hearing that her charge had never arrived, she was, almost instantly, out the door calling and searching for her beloved Ariel. Nanna had cared for her since she had been born, just as she had done for Ariel's mother, when she was growing up. Now her angel was missing and she pushed on past her endurance to find her. Nanna had become tired and disoriented sometime during her search and had decided to rest a short while hoping to regain her sense of direction again. This was how they found her the next day, at peace with all around and lost to this world forever.

Christian had delivered Ariel safely at the door of Dove Cottage less than an hour from the time she had regained consciousness back in the cabin. She had insisted they hurry because of her concern for Nanna. Christian watched her from the woods, not wanting to encounter any more strangers, saying he hoped everything would be well with her. Once she was in the door he was gone. Ariel thought, perhaps she had imagined the whole episode, except she still had one of Christian's blankets wrapped around her for her cape had been in tatters and of little protection against the cold of the day.

Ariel rushed into the cottage calling for Nanna the minute she opened the door. "Nanna, Nanna, where are you? I'm sorry I'm so late and didn't send word, but I fell and the most handsome man I have ever met rescued me and took me to his cabin. Nanna, where are you?" She had looked everywhere in the cottage and Nanna was nowhere to be found. She knew Nanna had not gone back to

bed for her nightgown was lying at the bottom of her bed. There was a cold pot of tea sitting on the table next to the fireplace, which had only the glowing embers of last night's fire.

Ariel thought perhaps Nanna had gone into the village to look for her. Donning a different cloak she headed towards the door. Before she could reach it there was a loud knock. With a feeling of dread, Ariel went to the door. She knew Nanna would not be knocking at the door. As she had feared, when she opened the door several of the village men were standing with their heads down and the look of sympathy in their eyes. She knew in that moment that Nanna had joined her beloved father and mother.

The men of the village explained to Ariel they had gone in search of her. The son of the injured villager had come to see when she was planning to come to aid his father. Nanna had informed him that Mistress Ariel, the man blushed, "I mean you mistress, "had left their cottage over an hour past. The boy ran back to the village and the cry went out for a search party. That was when they had found Ariel's much loved nanny. "Please, take me to her," she said quietly with only a hint of tears in her eyes. Nanna had told her many times, "Don't waste your tears on me when I'm gone girl, for I will be with people I love and will be happy."

The next several days were like being in a constant dream. She went about her daily routine with a drive that concerned all the people of the village who had come to love her, not only because of her powers, but because of her sweet and caring manner. They were all worried about the welfare of one of their own.

The first day after she made arrangements to have Nanna returned to Dove Cottage, she went to the injured man's home to give him relief. He was in great pain when she arrived and it took her many hours to relax him and get him onto the road to recovery. This being accomplished, Ariel headed home to take care of Nanna.

The house was dark when she arrived, except for the fire burning. “Thank you, Jacob, for starting the fire,” she said to the empty room. That was when she could control the tears no longer. She wasn’t sure exactly why she was crying, she just knew she had to cry or she would never heal.

Several hours later, she had made herself some strong tea and set about preparing Nanna for burial. She had carefully removed the clothes Nanna was wearing out in the woods, for they were soiled and torn. She gently washed the woman with a loving touch that could not be mistaken, the whole time telling her of her experience with Christian. Later she redressed Nanna in her Sunday’s best, combed the old woman’s gray hair and covered it with her cap. Satisfied with the results, Ariel said her good-byes, giving Nanna a kiss on the cheek. Taking the lamp she returned to her room. She extinguished the light and nearly collapsed onto her bed and laid her head upon her pillow. Moments later she was sound asleep dreaming of Christian.

Christian learned of the tragedy from the man sent to check on him and bring his supplies. That evening, knowing his concern for Ariel could possibly cost him the chance of being seen, he had watched outside the cottage for her return. It was he who had started the fire for her. He would have done more, but he wasn’t sure what to do so he just waited outside watching for her return. It was late when she arrived and it was even longer before a lamp was lit and there was any movement inside.

He and Thor had stood in the quietness, watching until her lamp had gone out. “Come on Thor, I guess she will be alright for tonight. Let’s be to our own beds. Tomorrow, perhaps I can think of a way to help her more.”

3

“You simply can’t stay here by yourself miss, it just isn’t proper,” said Mr. Abrams, her father’s solicitor.

“That’s nonsense. My father made arrangements for me to live here as long as I wanted to.”

“I beg your pardon, but my instructions were that I was to see you were cared for properly and living by yourself is not proper. Your father had every hope that when the time came and Nanna could no longer care for that you would be married and be starting a new life. If this was not the case, he instructed me to contact your father’s family in hopes that they would come and take you to live with them.”

Ariel sat in front of the fire not feeling its warmth, stunned by what Mr. Abrams had just disclosed to her. Had Nanna known of her father’s wishes? No, she was sure of that much. Nanna didn’t know and she never would. With tears in her eyes Ariel looked at the fresh bouquet of flowers Christian had brought her yesterday. That’s it, she thought, Christian will have an answer to her newest dilemma. Christian had shown up the evening after Nanna’s funeral and every evening since. They would eat supper together. Later they would sit by the fire drinking tea and talking well into the night. Yesterday he had appeared with the beautiful flowers. When she had questioned where they came from in the middle of winter, he simply told her he had picked them from behind his house.

Christian had been wonderful these past weeks. He seemed to bring sunshine with him and Ariel found herself looking forward to his visits. Each and every visit had brightened her lonely days. The concern of the villagers was not the same as Christian's. She realized she was depending on him more and more each day.

Coming back to the present Ariel cried "Please Mr. Abrams, you must give me more time. I must have time."

"I'm sorry Miss, but I must follow your father's instructions. As I say, they were very clear. He said I was to contact them only under extreme circumstances. I will be trying to locate your father's family as soon as possible. Now if there is nothing further, I will bid you good day." With that, Mr. Abrams took his leave.

When Christian arrived he found Ariel still sitting with tears rimming her red eyes where Mr. Abrams had left her. The fire was dying and Christian's concern was genuine. In the last several weeks he had grown to care for Ariel a great deal. He tried to tell himself it was like a sister and brother relationship, but deep inside he knew it was more. Ariel made him feel alive again. She was working her magic on him, healing his soul as well as his body. He found himself counting the hours until he would see her again, almost as soon as he left her presence.

"Ariel, what is it? What has upset you so?" He was on his knee beside her; Thor was also nuzzling her cold hands, trying to give her comfort.

"Oh Christian, it's all so terrible," tears now streaming down her lovely cheeks. "Papa's solicitor was here and he said I must go and live with my father's family or get... I can hardly bear to think about it let alone say it."

"What is it that is so ridiculous or horrible you can't even say what it is?"

Blushing, she said, “I must get married.” It was said so quietly that at first Christian was not sure he had heard her correctly.

He was quiet for a long time. When he finally spoke, his response took Ariel by surprise. “Then you will simply have to marry me,” he stated, with much more calm than he was feeling.

She could only stare at him. She knew she had fallen in love with him at that moment, but she could never marry him. He had not said anything of love and there were too many differences in their backgrounds and families to even consider such an alliance.

“I could never marry you.” Before she could give her reasons, he cut in. There was bitterness in his voice she had not heard in a long time.

“Oh, I see, I’m good enough to be here every day, but you could not marry me and be exposed to my scarred face the rest of your life.” With that he rose to take his leave.

Ariel was almost in shock at what Christian had just said. Didn’t he know how much she had grown to care for him? She never even noticed the scars anymore and anyway, they were fading a little more each day. She didn’t think he even realized it because he never looked at himself. If she could touch the scars, they would disappear even faster. That aside, she had to stop him from leaving thinking she was so shallow.

“Christian! No, your injuries have nothing to do with my answer. I know your family would never accept a marriage between us.”

“You underestimate my parents. Give them a chance, you will see. They will welcome you with open arms. They are coming for the holiday season to Blackthorne. Come meet them, and then make your decision. If they are the only reason you have said no, then we can be married before Boxing Day.”

“Meet your parents? I don’t know. I’ve never attended any social events except in the village.

What if I make a mistake? What would I wear?’

“Ariel, relax. It would just be my family and they will love you even if you come dressed in rags. Please say you will give them a chance.”

“Just your parents?”

“Yes, Mother, Father and perhaps Andrew, my older brother, I promise.”

“Alright, I will meet your family and then decide whether to marry you.”

Christian then grabbed her and spun her around. Before he realized what he was doing his mouth was seeking hers with a longing he never knew existed. His hunger for her taste grew with each moment. Ariel’s mouth was as sweet as honey and she smelled of lilacs in the spring. Her hands moved of their own volition, going from her sides to his chest, then up to his face, caressing, holding him hoping for the moment to never end.

When it seemed as if the embrace would last forever, Thor decided he wanted to be part of this happy event. He stuck his muzzle and head between them as if to say, “I’m part of this too.” Both of them were a little embarrassed about letting themselves be so carried away with emotion and began to laugh.

“We will go to Blackthorne next week when my parents have settled in. They are arriving in a few days and I am planning to be there when they get home. Before I come to get you I’ll send a note so you can be ready.” With all that said, Christian gave her a big hug and was out the door.

Plans were whirling around in Christian’s head so fast that he was back at his cabin before he knew it. Upon entering he rubbed Thor’s head saying, “Well old friend I believe we are going to be married soon.”

Thor simply gave a nod of approval and went to the hearth and lay down.

What had she just agreed to? She knew without question that she loved Christian with all her heart and that he truly cared for her, but she was not as sure of his family.

“Oh well,” she said to herself with a shrug of her shoulders and went upstairs. If she had to be ready in a week, she better get busy for she had much to do.

Before her father had passed away, he made sure that Ariel had a proper wardrobe; this included a traveling outfit, which she had thought was a waste of money, for they never traveled beyond the village. She also had two day dresses and one dress for evening meals. She was sure that the dress would fall short of anything else worn at Blackthorne. Perhaps I should go through my mother’s things. She may have had a dress or two I could use.

Nanna had packed away all of her mother’s things with loving care shortly after she had died. She found the clothes just as they had been left so many years ago. Tears came to Ariel’s eyes as she imagined her mother dressed in some of the lovely clothing that had been hidden away in these trunks. Ariel felt as though she had found a secret treasure. From the quality of the clothes, Ariel decided her mother’s family must have had money at the time for her coming out. She also knew that her father’s family was considered a family of high standing in the social world. So why had both families been so against a marriage between her father and mother?

Her parents never spoke of their lives before they came to Dove Cottage and she knew only what Nanna had told her. She had told Ariel that her mother’s parents were very strict and had chosen someone else to be her husband. Abigail had met Ariel’s father during the season her mother and father had decided she should enjoy before her marriage. As Nanna had continued her story, she told Ariel how they had fallen deeply in love. This is all Nanna would ever tell her. Ariel, thinking as much of herself, as her parents, said, “If two people are truly in love, then they should be allowed to follow their hearts desire.” With that said, she sat down to make a list of the tasks ahead. She would need to change the

dresses a bit. Her mother had been a bit more wholesome than she herself was and some of the trims were outdated. There were the villagers to notify where to locate her if they needed help. Anything else could wait for her return to Dove Cottage.

4

Ariel had just finished altering the most beautiful gown she had ever seen. It was of the finest velvet, pale pink in color. Over the velvet was a gossamer fabric covered with exquisite hand sewn flowers with tiny diamonds as centers. Not wanting to wait any longer, Ariel decided she must try on the dress. While going through her mother's things she had found a string of beads and stones to weave through her hair and a pair of pink slippers to match.

Later that afternoon, when Christian returned to the cottage, he spied her through the window dressed in her pink velvet gown. She was standing in the sunlight dancing with her imaginary partner. *She truly is the fairy princess as I first thought her*, he said to himself. With that, he burst through the door and took Ariel into his embrace. Had it only been four days since he had been here last? To him it seemed weeks. So much had changed. He had finally admitted to himself that he was in love with Ariel. At the manor when he had first seen his reflection he was shocked. The scars were all but gone—Ariel—for he knew she had worked her magic. Did Ariel feel the same way he wondered? He had only to take one look in her eyes to know his answer. Yes, Yes, Yes!

Christian could not hold back any longer, taking her mouth with a hunger that at first frightened Ariel, but soon she began to relax. Her legs felt as if they had turned to liquid and she was afraid she would fall if Christian released her too quickly. His arms took on a life of their own exploring the muscles of his chest and arms. They traveled up to his face. She gently caressed his cheek before

continuing to his hair. She was driving him mad with her innocent touches, for he knew, without a doubt, she was young and innocent.

Even knowing this, he could not contain his desire for her. He began to explore parts of her body she did not know could be so sensitive to a simple touch of a hand or the brush of gentle lips. Christian worked his way from her lips to her neck and lower. Everywhere he was touching her seemed to be on fire and there were stranger feelings in the secret parts of her body that she didn't understand. She knew she should stop this madness, but the aches and desires inside were too strong to stop now. There had to be more, there had to be some release to the tension she felt inside.

Then it was all over. Christian, afraid he could not stop if he went any further, or longer, stopped his exploration of her perfect body. He did not want to shock Ariel in her innocence to the point she would be afraid of him. His body yearned for the fulfillment it needed, but he made himself pull away from her to break the magic spell that seemed to hold them both.

Ariel wanted to cry, for the longing within her body had not been satisfied. She wondered if it ever would be.

"It is so wonderful to see you, but I didn't expect you to come so soon," she said once she was calm enough to speak.

She was looking at him for the first time since he had entered the cottage and surprised her with his loving embrace. He looked different, not quite the same man who had left her four days ago. Not only were his clothes different, but his manner of being seemed changed. He had a confident air about him that he had not possessed before he had left, or was it just her imagination?

She soon had her answer. "I have been to Blackthorne making sure everything is in ready for my family and your visit. I came today because they have been delayed and will not be here for several more days. I could not wait to see you and to thank you for the miracles you have given me."

“Miracles? I have not worked any miracles on you. What are you speaking about?” she asked with great concern.

“My face, for one thing. The doctors said I would most likely be scarred for life. When I returned to Blackthorne, people no longer seemed repulsed by them. When I finally made myself look in a mirror, I found the scars were almost gone, they are fading more and more every day too. I also realized that the world is not all dark and hateful as I had felt it was since my injury. Bless you, Ariel.”

“It was not me Christian. It has been your own inner goodness that has healed your scars. I merely helped you find that goodness again.” She would never tell him that it had been her touches that had healed his scarred face, for she did not want him to think she had done it out of pity or repulsion. She had done it for love.

“Come with me now to Blackthorne, I cannot stand having you so far from me. I need you,” he said with a passion she had not heard in his voice before.

“What of my clothes? They are not ready or packed. I must also let my father’s solicitor, as well as the folks in the village; know where I can be reached. There are so many things to do, I must have one more day.”

“Very well,” he said reluctantly, “but I must insist that you have someone to help you. That way we can return to the manor together tonight. I will send my coachman back to Blackthorne for a maid. In the meantime, I will help you with what needs to be done.” With that, he walked out to his carriage and spoke with the coachman.

When he returned inside, it was to find the downstairs area empty. Ariel had hoped to change her gown and return downstairs before Christian was back in the cottage. Unfortunately, she was only removing her arms from the pink velvet when he appeared at the door.

He watched her in total silence. His amazement grew as she revealed her pure ivory shoulders and arms. Her body was perfection beyond belief and soon she was to be his to love and cherish forever. Before she discovered his presence, he slipped back down the stairs.

She had realized she was not breathing until she heard his feet falling on the steps taking him back down. He had not said a word, but had simply stood in the doorway as she was removing the gown. She could feel his eyes on her body even though she could not see him. She should have been outraged, or at the very least embarrassed, to have him see her undressing. Ariel could not help being thrilled anymore than Christian could stop the sigh that had escaped his lips without his knowing. She hurried to finish redressing and ran down the stairs.

Finding him staring into the flames of the fire he had just added wood to, deep in thought, “What are you thinking about?” she asked with the feeling she was intruding.

“I was thinking of our future for you have changed your mind and will marry me. What will it bring and where will it take us?” he asked taking her hand gently in his like it was one of the first delicate flowers of spring. “Where would you like to live, like to see, like to go?”

“Christian, as long as I am with you, nothing else will matter. I just want whatever it is you desire.” With that said, she gave him a quick kiss and a tug at his hand. “Come help me write a note to Mr. Abrams. I do not wish to say the wrong thing.”

Christian smiled and said, “Simply tell him you are marrying the man of your dreams and that there is no need to contact your father’s family.”

“Although it is all true enough, I could hardly say so in a note to Mr. Abrams. Could I ask him to attend me at Blackthorne Hall as soon as possible?”

“My dear, I think that would be an excellent idea. Then he will be able to see you are in good hands and will not need to bother any of your family.”

That settled it. She sat down to write the note. Christian was watching her with an intensity that made her blush, yet she began to feel a heat building deep in the very core of her body. She dearly hoped she would find the answer once she and Christian were wed. Being on her own she was too shy to talk to anyone before.

Upon finishing the message to Mr. Abrams, Ariel decided to make a pot of tea and set out fresh scones and honey. They ate and drank in silence; each lost in their own thoughts. Both Ariel and Christian were startled by the knock at the door.

Christian's coachman had returned. Not only had he brought the maid, but also another carriage and driver. Christian knew Ariel would want to oversee the packing so while she was attending her task, Christian was busy with his own

He had ordered a cold spread to be sent along also. Mrs. Flint had outdone herself. There was fresh bread, slabs of cold meats, cheeses, boiled eggs, half of a chicken and for dessert--fresh strawberries with cream. Just as Christian finished unpacking the spread, Ariel came down the stairs.

"Christian, will you call the..." she stopped in mid-sentence. "Where did all this food come from?"

"I had the cook send a little cold supper to tide us over until we get back to the hall. I hope you can find something you would like to eat." He smiled as she spied the fresh strawberries. Her beautiful blue eyes were as big as summer cornflowers.

"Fresh strawberries in the middle of winter? I suppose these came from behind your home too?" she said with a twinkle of laughter in her eyes. She had finally reasoned that he had been speaking of Blackthorne Hall when he said home. She had also surmised that they must have a magnificent greenhouse on the grounds to supply the household with fresh fruit and flowers year round.

“So you have guessed my little secret? I am at your mercy my love.” With that, he tenderly took her hand and kissed it.

He did not release her hand, but stood caressing it for several moments. It seemed that time stood still. Suddenly, his hand was in his pocket. When he pulled it out he had his grandmother’s wedding ring. He placed it on Ariel’s finger. “This is to show one and all you are to be mine and no one else’s from this day forward.” With this said, he kissed her fingers one by one then the palm of her hand. Ariel thought she would melt from sheer delight. Christian had called her his love and given her a ring.

“Oh, Christian, I do not know what to say.” She had tears in her eyes. “The ring is so beautiful and you called me your love. It all seems so wonderful to be true.”

“You do not need to say anything; your eyes say it all. I was afraid you would not like the ring. It was my grandmother’s and it is very old.” The stones were set in the shape of a flower.

“That makes it all the more precious to me my darling.” She blushed at using such a personal term of endearment.

I must be very gentle with Ariel for she is so very innocent indeed, he thought to himself when he saw the blush on her cheeks. “Now, what was it you were asking me when you came down the stairs?”

“Oh, I completely forgot. My bedroom is so small that we have room for only one trunk at a time. It is now full and we cannot move it out of the way ourselves, so I was hoping the coachmen could come up and remove it.”

“I will call them directly. Please help yourself to some food and I will join you as soon as I see to the removal of your trunk.” With a slight bow, he left her.

Ariel’s clothing and personal items were not many and with an experienced maid to help, it only took two hours to pack everything she needed for her stay at Blackthorne Hall.

They were stopping in the village to let an elder know where she was going and how long she was to be gone. They would post her letter to Mr. Abrams when they reached Blackthorne.

5

She had changed into her traveling clothes for the trip, even though it was only ten miles on decent roads. It took them less than one hour and the sun was setting in the west as they approached Blackthorne Hall. The windows of the hall sparkled like large diamonds. The site of the soft, warm brick structure took Ariel's breath away.

She had never seen a home that was so beautiful or so large. Suddenly, she was very nervous. *Why did I agree to come here? I don't belong in this world anymore than Christian belongs in mine.* It was a big mistake and she should return home right now, before it was too late to turn back. Surely she would make a mistake that would embarrass and humiliate her and cause Christian's love to hate.

Christian took her hand in his. He could read the apprehension in her face as she saw his home for the first time. "You will be perfect here. My parents will love you the moment they meet you."

Ariel didn't realize they had stopped. With Christian's help she stepped from the carriage onto the drive. The lawns were now barren and brown, but she had no doubt in the spring and summer they would be a riot of colors and wonderful scents from the blooming trees, shrubs and flowers.

As they entered the hall, they were greeted by a woman dressed in black with a crisp white apron wrapped around her. Her graying hair was covered and keys hung at her waist. "Good evening my lord is there anything I can get for you?" she asked with a strong authoritative voice that reminded Ariel of Nanna.

“Ariel, may I present Mrs. Hutchins, without whom, this house would be in shambles.”

With a playful smile Mrs. Hutchins said, “You better not let Willowby hear you say that. He will be sorely put out and pout for a week.”

“I do not pout Mrs. Hutchins,” said a stern faced man with an almost scolding voice. He turned and bowed his head to Christian. “Have you forgotten your manners so soon young man? You have not introduced me to your guest. I am Willowby, the butler here at Blackthorne Hall, and I bid you welcome.”

Ariel’s mouth had dropped open when the man had reprimanded Christian. She couldn’t imagine anyone talking to him in such a manner, let alone a servant.

“Now Willowby, you must not give Ariel the wrong impression of you,” Christian replied.

Mrs. Hutchins just smiled as though this was an on-going trial in her life that she simply must bare in silence.

“You see, my parents left my upbringing to these two and of course, the cook, Mrs. Flint. They sometimes forget I am an adult now!” And he emphasized the later part with a raised eyebrow.

Mrs. Hutchins, Willowby, May I present Ariel McAllister of Dove Cottage. She is to be my bride.”

Mrs. Hutchins clapped her hands and gave Ariel a big hug. “Welcome to the family my dear.”

Willowby simply bowed, “Miss” was all he said and turned to walk away.

“Don’t mind him; he’s not one to show his emotions. We’re glad to have our one and only Christian back. It’s you we have to thank for that, I’m sure. Come now, I’ll show you to your room so you can rest a wee bit before dinner.” As an afterthought, she turned to Christian, “the same for you, my boy. It hasn’t been so long ago that you were at death’s door.”

“Mrs. Hutchins, I would like you to set a table in the blue salon for our supper. The formal dining room is too large and cold for just the two of us,” said Christian, as he followed the two women up the wide staircase.

Ariel was in awe, twisting her head from left to right and back to the left again, not wanting to miss anything along the way. There were several alcoves along the way holding suits of armor standing in silent vigil over their domain. Pictures of men and women, whom she would later learn, were all ancestors of Christian’s family. Fresh flowers were on all the tables and dozens of candles lit their way down the passage.

“I will leave you here. The maids are unpacking your things, but if they are a bother, they can come back after you have rested. I will come to take you down for dinner in about an hour and a half. If you wish anything before that, please tell one of the maids or simply ring your bell. Have a good rest miss,” said Mrs. Hutchins turning to leave.

“Oh please, call me Ariel, as for a rest; I fear I am much too excited to lie down. Only if it wouldn’t be too much trouble I think I’d love a pot of hot tea. I will be happy to follow you down to the kitchen and bring it back up here myself. I’m not accustomed to being waited on. At Dove Cottage it was just Nanna and I and we took care of each other over the past three years.”

“Now my dear, as long as you are in this house, you need not lift a finger. There are plenty of servants to do everyone’s bidding without adding extra work for any of them.” With a quick squeeze of Ariel’s hands, Mrs. Hutchins was off. She couldn’t wait to tell Mrs. Flint how wonderful Ariel was and about the upcoming marriage. Of course, Willowby had probably seen to that part already. When she entered the kitchen, it was to find the look of great concern on Mrs. Flint’s face and a scowl on Willowby’s.

6

“Whatever is the matter with the two of you?” she asked.

“Willowby says Christian has been tricked into marrying some nobody who is just after his inheritance. She has bewitched him into thinking he is in love with her and may even be a witch.”

“A witch?!! What in the world has made you think that sweet, innocent girl is a witch? We have only just met her,” looking at Willowby, “and you, Mrs. Flint, have not met her at all. Why would you even say such a thing?”

“It wasn’t me,” said the cook in her defense. “It was all Willowby’s idea like I said before.”

Willowby gave a little grimace as Mrs. Hutchins turned her gaze upon him. “Where did you come up with this nonsense?”

“I don’t believe it to be nonsense. Did you get a good look at Christian’s face when he came in?”

“What does Christian’s face have to do with all of this?”

“Today his scars were almost gone when he came home with that girl.”

“So?”...

“So, they were still quite visible when he left this morning and now they are all but gone. That doesn’t happen in real life, only in stories. If the witch has cast a spell, perhaps the scars are still there

and we just can't see them. Once the girl gets what she wants, she will remove the spell and the scars will be visible again. That would be devastating to Christian, I'm afraid."

Mrs. Hutchins could only shake her head, "All I know is what I saw in the girl's eyes and she is very much in love with our Christian. Even if she is a witch, I'm sure she is a good one. After all, we all know about good witches and warlocks." With that said, she turned to leave the kitchen.

Remembering why she had come down to the kitchen in the first place, she asked Mrs. Flint to send a pot of hot tea up to Ariel.

In the meantime, Ariel had entered her room. She thought there must have been some mistake, for when she entered through the door Mrs. Hutchins had indicated she found herself standing in a lovely sitting room. It was the color of fresh lavender with cream colored accents. The matching chairs sitting in front of the fireplace were a darker purple and the small settee was cream color. There was also a small desk to write at and several tables in various spots around the room. Seeing another door across the room that was ajar, she crossed to have a look. Inside was a beautiful bedroom. The two maids were finished unpacking her meager belongings. They were putting the room in order, Ariel decided to sit in one of the chairs in front of the fire in the outer room rather than interrupt the servants.

She hadn't been sitting very long before there was a knock at her door. Thinking it was Christian, she ran to the door and pulled it open, "Christian, the room is lovely, but..." she stopped in mid-sentence, when she realized it was not Christian at the door.

Mrs. Flint had decided to just see this witch for herself, but when the girl pulled open the door and began speaking, the poor woman almost dropped the tray. She thought to herself--*this person was not ordinary, she may not be a witch, but neither is she a nobody like Willowby had said.* "I brought you the hot tea Mrs. Hutchins said you wanted Miss," she managed when she could speak again.

“You must be Mrs. Flint, but you didn’t need to bring this up yourself. I’m sure you must be very busy cooking for a household as large as this one.”

It was no trouble Miss, besides I wanted to meet you for myself.” With that said, she took the tray over to the table by the fire.

Ariel felt she was under a large magnifying glass. She knew Nanna would have been the same way if the tables were turned. She decided to ignore the cook’s tone and said, “I insist you call me Ariel and by the way, that basket of food you packed was absolutely wonderful and I very much enjoyed the fresh strawberries and cream. Thank you so much. It was very thoughtful.”

Mrs. Flint began pouring the tea. When Ariel thanked her for the food, she spilled hot tea on her hand. She let out a yelp and almost dropped the teacup.

Quickly Ariel was at her side. Taking the cook’s hand she said, “Let me have a look.” As she ran her hand over the cook’s, she felt an odd sensation and then the hurt was gone, as well as the red mark. “There, I think it will be alright now. If it gives you anymore trouble, please come and see me.”

The cook was so shocked; she could only nod her head and left Ariel to her tea. Once back in her own domain, she was able to think about what had happened. *So, she is a witch, but I’m sure she is a good witch, just as Mrs. Hutchins said.* Having accomplished what she had set out to do, she went back to work knowing Christian would be truly happy in his marriage. She knew the girl would have agreed to marry only if she was in love. She would tell Willowby just that the next time she saw him too.

Ariel had curled up in her chair while she drank the delicious tea. When she finished it she set the cup back on the table and leaned back into the chair. Wondering what her future held, she fell asleep.

“Ariel, darling, wake up. It is almost time for dinner,” Christian was touching her hand.

“I’m so sorry; I never planned on falling asleep. I need to change my gown and freshen up before dinner.”

“You look perfectly wonderful. There are just the two of us for dinner. It is being served in the blue salon, so it is very informal.”

Blushing slightly, Ariel said, “I was having the strangest dream and I was afraid I was going to lose you.”

“You can’t get rid of me that easily, a dream indeed.”

“It was so real, yet so unreal at the same time. My mother, and Nanna and even my mother’s parents—although I have never met them—were in it too. They were all telling me that my life has been a lie. Well, maybe not a lie, but certainly not the whole truth and I would soon learn the entire story. Christian, what can it mean? I’m so afraid. If it is true, it could change our lives completely.”

“Relax, my sweet, everything is going to be perfect, just as you are perfect.” Rubbing his hands up and down her back made Ariel yearn for more. Her mouth was seeking her lover’s mouth, her hands touching, caressing, and exploring.

Christian too wanted more. Her touches were driving Christian mad with desire for her. His hands began a search of their own--first on her face, then lower to her neck and shoulders. Finally, his hands found her breast, which came to a hard peak with his first caresses. His breath was coming out faster and heavier with every touch, every kiss. Ariel’s tongue had greeted his and tasted like honey. He had to stop now before it was too late to stop. No matter how much he wanted her, he would not take her before they were wed. He heard her moan and was again lost in her kisses.

Why was he pulling away? Her mind was clouded with the passion so deep it made her tremble. She knew he was feeling the same way just moments before. So why was he leaving her standing alone with longings so deep they seemed to hurt at the center of her sole.. It took several moments for her

mind to clear and realize Christian was speaking to someone on the other side of the door. Feeling embarrassed,, Ariel stepped back trying to repair her hairdo and straighten her dress.

Willowby had come to call them to dinner and his voice seemed a bit agitated. “Sir, is everything okay? Sir, are you there? Can you hear me? Dinner is ready in the blue salon.”

“Yes, Willowby, I’m here and I heard you. We will be right down. Thank you,” Christian replied, in a slightly displeased sounding voice, as Willowby would relate to Mrs. Flint and Mrs. Hutchins later.

“I should think you would have realized that she doesn’t mean Christian any harm. She loves the boy, I could tell when we spoke earlier. She may be a witch but a good one. After all she did heal my hand after I burned it.: stated Mrs. Flint emphatically.

“Besides,” Mrs. Hutchins added, “our Christian is special; I wager he would know if she were trying to cast any spell on him.”

“Think what you want,” said Willowby gruffly, “I will keep my judgment for later. Now we must be to our bed for tomorrow will be a busy day with his lord and ladyship arriving.”

7

Ariel was still tired when she woke early the next morning. The dream she had experienced the evening before had returned. It had her tossing and turning all night.

Nanna was saying she was sorry she had not explained everything to her before she had left her. Her mother said everything would work out for Christian and herself. Her mother's parents were also in the dream saying they would soon be with her and that she was not alone. Knowing she had Christian's love she would never feel alone again. Besides how could her grandparents be with her if they were dead? Father had told her before he died that they had passed many years ago.

Thinking about the dream, Ariel rose and went to her window. The beautiful velvet drapes were still drawn to keep out the cold drafts of winter. It had been dark in the room except for the light of the fire and one low burning candle when she had entered last night. All she could see were walls of a light color and the floor under her feet was dark and soft. Now, in the daylight, she thought it more beautiful than the sitting room. The same color theme had been used only in reverse. The walls and hangings were the cream color and the trimmings were varying shades of lavender with touches of gold here and there.

Then lost again in her thoughts of the dream last night, Ariel didn't hear the first timid knocks at her door. When she did answer the door, it was to find a maid holding a tray with steaming hot cup of cocoa, fresh baked bread and jam. "When you are ready miss, I am to take you to the library, for you are to have a grand tour of the Hall today.

Ariel was anxious to see Christian this morning for she wanted to tell him of the recurring dream she was having and hoped he could help her make sense of it. Within the hour she had eaten, washed, dressed in a lovely pink striped muslin day dress. The maid had offered to style her hair but wanting to

hurry she simply put it up as she did every day in a loose bun. Now she was following the maid to the library. Christian was standing at the fireplace with his back to the door when she entered, but he could feel her presence.

When Ariel saw him there at the fire, Thor at his side, she marveled again at how lucky she was to have his love. He was dressed in a dark brown short coat, a buff colored pair of pants and a vest of the same color with gold embroidery. The cravat at his neck was snow white and his rich brown hair was pulled back and tied at the neck for he had not yet had it cut since his injuries. Christian was smiling when he turned to greet her. Thor came bounding across the room stopping just short of knocking her down.

“It would seem Thor is as glad to see you as I am this morning. My parents are to arrive sometime late today, but until then, the day is ours.” Christian noticed that the smile on Ariel’s face turned to worry at the mention of his parents.

“Relax, my mother and father will love you as I do. There is nothing to worry about. As a matter of fact, I’m sure my mother already knows about you.”

“Know of me? How could she? Have you written her about us? About me?” Even more nervous now, she began to pace.

“No, I haven’t communicated with them since I left town to recover, but you see now that I look back, it was my mother who strongly urged me to stay at the cabin near Dove Cottage. I think she knew of you and your powers and hoped we would meet. I must say, I’m very glad she did so. I’m so happy to have found you.”

“Your mother knows about me and my healing power? But how? I thought only the villagers knew about them and they have kept it a secret all these years.

“Don’t worry about it now. I’m sure mother will tell you everything when the time is right.

Now let us take a tour of my home.”

It was nearly two hours later when they were back to the blue salon where they had eaten their dinner the night before. It was smaller and less formal than the other salons and Ariel was sure that this was where the family usually gathered.

The cook had set out tea and several different desserts for them when they had finished.

“Mrs. Flint is going to spoil me,” said Ariel. “I have never had so many delicacies.”

“I can think of no one who deserves to be spoiled more than you. Your life has not been easy. I couldn’t imagine growing up without my mother, even if she was absent much of the time. Add to that losing your father and Nanna has had to be hard adjusting. I know I can never take their place in your heart. I hope I will be able to fill part of the void their parting has made”

“Christian, you must know you already occupy a large space in my heart.”

“I want to make you happy and spoil you along the way. When we are married, I plan to buy you a new wardrobe, head-to-toe; jewels fit for a queen; and of course, a new home that you can decorate to your liking.”

“Is there something wrong with my clothes? I didn’t bring anything that has been mended or stained.”

“No, no, there is nothing wrong with them. You are absolutely charming. I just want you to have everything new to start our new life together.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. This spoiling business is a little new to me. It will take some getting accustomed to, but I’ll try,” Ariel said light heartedly with a smile on her face.

“Now that this is settled, let’s lie down for a rest. You did not sound ungrateful at all, my dear. If you would like, I will have a bath prepared for you while we are eating nuncheon. Then you can rest

before dressing for dinner.. Mother and Father always dress for dinner. Would you wear the pink gown you had on yesterday? You took my breath away when I saw you in it.”

“Was that only yesterday? It seems like ages ago. Oh, by the way, was my note to Mr. Abrams sent out,” Ariel inquired. I almost forgot about it.”

I sent it by messenger first thing this morning. He should receive it by this evening.”

While they ate lunch, they talked about Christian’s family. His brother, two years his senior, had sent a note at the last minute saying he would be unable to join the family for the holidays, doing the grand tour and checking on some business holdings that belonged to the family. His parents were very loving and understanding and they were prone to spoiling their children. They were also looking forward to having grandchildren. Ariel blushed when she heard this, but knew deep inside she could hardly wait to have a child with Christian.

Mrs. Hutchins entered at this point and announced that Ariel’s bath was ready upstairs in her chambers, so she bid Christian good afternoon and went up for her bath and to rest up for the evening ahead. He told her when it was time to come down he would escort her to dinner.

Ariel had fallen asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. The dream returned. Ariel’s mother told her she would know everything of the past soon and not to fear her future. Her grandparents were excited and couldn’t wait to meet her. She was shocked when a maid had come in to help her dress for dinner to see it was dark outside.

and the maid informed Ariel that the Earl and her ladyship arrived several hours ago and were now themselves preparing for dinner. Yes, Master Christian had greeted his parents and told them about her, the maid replied to her question. “They are anxious to meet you,” she was saying while she helped Ariel into her dress. “Do you have a special way you would like your hair or may I just try something with it?”

“I never do anything but put it in a knot, but if you think you can do something with it, please be my guest.” Ariel gave the maid the chain of beads and stones.

Meanwhile, in the bedchamber of the Earl and her ladyship, Mrs. Hutchins was telling of all the preparations that had been made for their stay.

“Yes, yes, I’m sure everything is in perfect order,” said Lady Gweneth, “Now tell me about the girl that Christian has brought home to be his bride.”

“Oh, she is lovely my lady, soft spoken, yet I feel she has a strong will. She is very thoughtful of others.”

“But is she in love with my son? Is there something you may not have told me about her?”

“Ariel seems to be very much in love with our Christian, but I can’t think of anything I have left out. Of course, she has only been here for one day. You can’t know everything about someone in that short of a time.”

“Oh, come now Mrs. Hutchins, I’m sure that you, Mrs. Flint and Mr. Willowby have had a discussion or two about her. Afterall, I have seen Christian. He is back to his old self, yet different.”

Mrs. Hutchins blushed at these words and wringing her hands she said, “Well, Mr. Willowby thinks she is a witch and has put a spell on your son. Of course there is Christian’s face and his outlook is so much better and Mrs. Flint’s hand...”

Before she could continue, Lady Gweneth cut in “Her hand? What about it?”

“Well, you see, Mrs. Flint had taken hot tea up to the girl and some spilled on her hand. Well, the way she tells it is the girl took her hand and the pain and redness disappeared almost instantly.”

“I knew it!” exclaimed Lady Gweneth. “I knew there was a healing witch near the cabin I sent Christian to. I had sensed her more than once when I visited the area. What did Christian say her name was? McNal? No, McAllister. I can’t think of anyone I know by that name, but I’m sure there are

many families I have not heard of. Thank you very much for confirming my suspicions. I will be more than happy to bless their marriage. Come, I must not keep the rest of the family waiting. I can't wait to meet Ariel. She has done so much for this family already."

The maid attending Ariel had decided to put Ariel's hair in braids done up with the strings of beads that matched the dress. She was just putting the finishing touches on Ariel's hair, when there was a knock at the door.

Christian had come to her room a little early because he had another gift for her. It had been his grandmother's. Since Christian's mother had everything she could ever want, Grandmother had bequeathed everything to him. He was sure Ariel would love it. His grandfather had found the heartstone when he was just a lad. When he met his bride-to-be he knew why he had kept it all those years. He had a necklace made for her and she had worn it every day for the rest of her life. Now Christian was giving it to his bride-to-be.

As he entered Ariel's sitting room, Christian was struck again by her beauty. The way the maid had done her hair gave Ariel a regal appearance. "My god you are stunning. I must be the luckiest man in the world. Will you do me the honor of wearing my grandmother's heartstone? It is a token of my love for you,"

"Oh, Christian, it is so beautiful," she said with tears in her eyes. I have nothing to give to you in return." When he put the necklace around her neck Ariel could feel it hum against her bare skin.

Caressing her neck he said, "I didn't mean to make you cry my darling. You have given me more than I could ever repay you for."

"What are you talking about? I haven't given you anything."

"Don't you know you gave me my life back? If it wasn't for you, I would still be living in that lonely cabin, feeling sorry for myself. Self-pity makes a very poor friend. Don't think that I don't know

it was your touches that have also healed my visual scars as well. The doctors had told me they would never disappear completely, yet they are gone now in this short space of time.”

“Christian, you were as much a part of your recovery as I was. The touches would not have worked their magic if you didn’t have a good and unselfish soul. There are things I can’t mend or heal. My father’s broken heart was one. I was too young to save my mother’s life and father never quite got over her loss. I knew you were not a vain person, so I did not mind helping, even before I fell in love with you.”

“Come, I don’t want to be late for dinner, although the thought of spending time alone with you is quite appealing at this moment.” He took her by the arm and led her down to the blue salon, where his parents would be waiting.

8

Upon arrival to the blue salon, Ariel was awed by the stunning couple who were Christian's parents.

Lord William was nearly as tall as his son. He also had the same color eyes and hair as Christian. Her ladyship had red hair with emerald green eyes. Ariel was to learn later that Andrew had inherited his mother's coloring, but his father's looks. Christian had been blessed with his mother's features.

"Mother, Father, I would like you to meet Mistress Ariel McAllister of Dove Cottage. Ariel, I wish you to meet my parents, the Earl and Duchess of Blackthorne."

Ariel did a perfect curtsy to both as befitting their station and said she was pleased to make their acquaintance.

"The pleasure is all ours," replied the duchess. "We owe you a great debt of gratitude for giving us back our son. I had begun to fear we might lose him forever after he was attacked. Now, thanks to you, he is as good as new and I think maybe even a little better." Gweneth looked at her husband and gave him a quick wink. She knew that shortly before the attack, Christian and his father had a discussion about how it was time he decided what he was going to do with his life and perhaps even get married. Christian had voiced his opinion with booming resound that he was not ready to settle down,

let alone take a wife in the near future and slammed out of the house. Now, here he was, wanting to be married before Boxing Day. Gweneth had to admit, she was very happy with his choice.

“Ariel,” the Earl said, “it’s wonderful to meet you. I also want to thank you. Christian is very important to us. It is good to have him whole again.

Blushing, Ariel said, “All I have done is love him.”

Gweneth came up and gave Ariel a hug as she whispered in her ear, “I know it was more than just love and I thank you again.”

She knows I’m a witch. How can that be, Ariel thought to herself. Mother once told me that only witches could tell if someone was a...”Oh!” she said out loud and looked into Lady Gweneth’s eyes. Neither one said a word--but Christian’s mother gave a slight nod of her head and her look said, "We will talk later."

“McAllister, hmmm, the name does not ring a bell. What about your family?” the Earl was asking.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you very much. My parents never talked about their families. I do know that my mother was betrothed to someone of her father’s choosing, but her mother had insisted she have one season. While in London, my parents met and fell in love. For reasons unknown to me, neither father would give their blessing or approval. My parents were so in love, they ran away. My mother’s mother found out at the last minute about the elopement. She insisted they take Nanna with them to help. Nanna passed without revealing my parents’ true identities. All I have left are two distant cousins. My father’s solicitor has been contacted. He should be arriving here any day now and we will be informing him of my intentions to wed Christian. I hope you don’t mind his coming here. Christian said it would be alright.”

“Of course it is alright. We are to be your family now and if you need or want something you have only to ask,” his lordship said.

At that moment, Willowby entered the room and announced dinner. The Earl extended his arm to Ariel and escorted her to the dining room. Christian, following his father’s suit, offered his mother an arm taking her into dinner.

The meal was a grand affair for Mrs. Flint had gone all out to welcome home her employers. There were several courses, pheasant with chestnut stuffing, and asparagus tips on freshly caught salmon over a bed of rice. The beef brisket melted in your mouth. Each selection was served with their own sauces and a different wine. Finally, dessert was served in a variety of fresh tarts and other delicious pastries. There was also a delicious warm pudding.

Ariel could not believe so much food was prepared for one meal.

“I know my dear, the amount of food was a bit in excess, but Mrs. Flint would be hurt if I told her to cut back,” said the duchess.

Startled that her thoughts were known by the duchess Ariel blushed. However, she now knew the area of expertise the duchess had her power in. It made her a little nervous knowing that at any moment her thoughts might be read..

“Shall we return to the blue salon for a talk while the men have their after-dinner brandy?”

Still somewhat in shock, Ariel could only nod her head in agreement. Only when the ladies began to rise did Christian notice that his bride-to-be had become very pale. “Are you ill, my dear? Is there something I can get for you?”

“Ill? Oh no, perhaps a bit too much wine with dinner. Your mother and I are going to the salon for tea. I’m sure that will be just the thing.”

“I will come with you,” as Christian made to take her arm.

“Oh, no, please stay here and spend some time with your father. You seemed to be having an interesting discussion.”

“Yes, it was rather. I will tell you about it later, that is, if you are sure you’re alright.”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine,” said Ariel as she turned to leave with her ladyship.

Christian stopped her and kissed her hand, sending waves of heat up her arm. “We will be in the library if you need us. Father and I will join you and mother in a short while.” Their eyes were saying “I can’t wait to be alone with you” to each other. “Until later,” he bent kissing the rapidly beating pulse at her wrist.

Ariel watched him leave the room and then followed the smiling duchess to the blue salon.

“My dear, sit with me by the fire. It is so relaxing and we have much to talk about.” Ariel hesitated. “Come, I promise I will not read your thoughts and you can tell me what you wish me to know and nothing more. Sometimes I get so bored with eating that I find myself unwittingly doing it. It can be very embarrassing and other times it can be very entertaining.”

“It’s not so much that I mind, it is just that things are happening so fast. Before I become accustomed to one thing, there is something more to absorb. Everything is getting a bit jumbled in my head, I’m afraid.”

“Nonsense, your head is just fine. To tell you the truth, I was reading your thoughts because I wanted to make sure you were in love with Christian as much as he is in love with you. I should have been happy with simply observing you together. The glow in your eyes has answered any questions I might have had. I will try to stay out of your thoughts from now on.”

“Thank you, your ladyship, that is very kind of you. I know this is all quite sudden. I think that if I were you, I would feel the same way and truly I have fallen deeply in love with your son.”

“Then the matter is settled, and Ariel, please call me Gweneth and you must call Christian’s father William.

“You know Ariel, you look very familiar. Perhaps I saw you when we visited some of the crofters, but I don’t think so. Although I could feel your existence, I don’t think we ever met. Maybe one of your parents was an acquaintance of mine. What was your mother’s name?”

“They only used her first name and that was Abigail and my father’s name was Richard. Beyond that, I know nothing as I told you earlier,” she said looking more than a little distressed. I’m sure that my father’s solicitor will have my family history.

“I’m sorry; I did not mean to upset you. Let’s talk of something else like myself or Christian.” Gweneth watched Ariel’s eyes light up with love and joy at the mere mention of her son’s name. “So, it’s to be my son first. Shall I start at his beginning?”

“Yes, please do. I want to learn all I can about his life.”

“Well, my mother was still alive when Christian was born. She knew from the moment he was born he was one of us,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes.

Ariel was so shocked by this very first statement that her mouth actually fell open.

“Didn’t you have even the slightest suspicion about Christian? I guess I can understand if you didn’t. Christian doesn’t like to use his magic and at times, he won’t even admit he has any power. You see, his older brother, Andrew, doesn’t have any powers whatsoever. When they were young, Christian wanted to be just like his big brother. To make a long story short, instead of developing his skills to use against his brother, Christian ignored them as much as possible. Oh, he dabbled a little here and there to amaze his friends as he got older, but he has never pursued them seriously. Perhaps once he settles down with you, he will want to learn more and use his gifts with great joy. Has he told you anything about why he was at the cabin in the woods?”

“Only that he had been injured and could not stand the looks of pity and horror when people would look at him. He also said he thought you could sense I was in the area and had encouraged him to stay at the cabin in the woods. Did you really do that? Were you hoping we would meet?”

This time it was Lady Gweneth who was embarrassed, “Yes, I must admit, I’m guilty as charged, although I never wanted any harm to come to you or your nanny. For that I am truly sorry. Once we set things in motion, the outcome is in the hands of fate. I can only hope you are able to forgive me. I was so concerned for Christian’s life with no other way to go.”

“You have done nothing for which you need to be forgiven. I would have taken the same steps if it had been a child of mine in the same situation. What exactly did happen, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Three men had taken a young woman against her will and I’m afraid they had one thing on their minds. Christian heard her screams for help and went to her rescue. He is good at defending himself, but not against those odds. They had clubs and knives. Once they got him on the ground, they continued to beat him until the girl was able to bring help back. They brought him to our home. He was in very bad condition. He had injuries to his head, face, arms, and legs. They had broken several of his ribs. He had also lost a large amount of blood because of a knife wound to his shoulder. We sent for help because I do not have your ability to heal. The physicians patched him up, but they didn’t really think he would survive the night. I stayed up talking to him all night. I even went into his subconscious trying to ease some of the pain. It was almost unbearable for me. Several times during the night he begged me to let him go for it was painful to stay. I of course didn’t let him go. I gave him the medicine the doctor had left. Between the medication and the pain Christian went into a coma. He lay unconscious for several more days. I would have sent for you if I had known who you were and exactly where you lived. Those first awful days I didn’t even remember that I had felt your presence around

Blackthorne Hall. Once he was on the mend, I didn't think there was a need for your help. Soon, however, it became clear after he was up and about; he was not the same warm loving person. That was when I remembered the cabin in the woods. I am so glad he went and I am doubly glad you and Christian met." The last was said with tears in a mother's eyes.

At that moment, the men entered the salon The room was filled once more with happiness. They all talked for a while longer. They set the wedding date for Boxing Day Eve. It would be just the household staff and Christian's parents.

"Well it is growing late and we have had a long day my dear." The Earl gave his wife a quick wink, "If you are ready I shall escort you to our chambers." With smiles and nods all around, they slipped away, arm-in-arm.

9

“Not very subtle I’m afraid,” said Christian as he took Ariel into his arms. “I have wanted to do this all evening.”

His kisses were full of hunger and promise. Promises of what Ariel was not sure, but she matched his hunger and desire. He was now kissing her whole face, then his lips traveled down her neck and to the top of her creamy white breasts exposed by the cut of her gown.

Ariel felt a heat rise at the core of her body, her legs would no longer be able to support her if Christian had not been holding her so tightly.

She heard him whisper in her ear, “I don’t know how I can wait to make you mine, to show you the depth of my love for you.”

Not knowing exactly what he wanted, but knowing she needed something more too, she said, “Please, there must be more beyond this part. Something to relieve this ache inside. I need you. I want you. Please.” She was breathless now. “Show me tonight, I don’t think I can wait a moment longer.”

Trembling with anticipation and need, he replied hoarsely, “You don’t know what you are asking. If I continue much longer on this path, I don’t know if I will be able stop myself. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m afraid I don’t know anything about making love, but I want to learn.” She then kissed him with a longing he could not mistake.

Christian gently picked up Ariel and started for the staircase. “You’re sure?” he asked again.

She could only nod her head yes. Wrapping her arms tightly around his neck they turned to the direction of her chamber.

Once in her bedroom, he set her down looking into her eyes. What he saw there overwhelmed him. There was longing, trust, and more love than he could ever have imagined. He also saw a nervousness, which reminded him this was to be her first time with a man. He would have to go slowly and gently. The thought of hurting her made him hesitate. Christian was almost as nervous as his beloved.

“You are not going to change your mind, are you?” he asked.

“I know I’m ignorant about what happens between a man and a woman, as I said earlier, so please teach me how to love you.”

He could not resist her plea. He picked her up and carried her to the bed, kissing her the whole time he held her. After setting her on the soft mattress, he stepped back to remove his evening jacket and vest. Next, he untied his cravat and removed the studs of his shirt. Before he returned to the bed, he had discarded his shoes and stockings.

Slowly getting on the bed with Ariel, his heart began beating faster. He was shacking as if it was his first time too. Kneeling at her feet, he removed one slipper, then the other. Then reaching under her dress, he rolled down her stockings one at a time. He moved, straddling her legs and taking her dress up at the same time.

Ariel was glad that the only light in the room came from the fire in the hearth. She knew she was blushing as Christian worked magic with his hands as he moved up the length of her body.

He released the lacing of her gown and had it over her head in an instant. Ariel drew in a deep breath as he found her firm round breasts and began to rub them through her chemise. They became taut instantly at his touch, begging for release.

Her hands began to explore the rigid muscles of her lover's arms and chest. She shocked herself when she tore at the front of his shirt. She wanted to feel his warm, smooth skin. Ariel felt him shiver under her hands and was encouraged to go further. Her hands traveled down his chest to the hard muscles of his stomach. So caught up in her own explorations, she didn't realize he'd pulled down the straps of her chemise until she felt him sucking at her breast. Ariel thought she would faint from the ecstasy.

Christian could wait no longer to see the rest of her perfect body with alabaster skin. He wanted to taste every inch of her. His lips trailed liquid fire from her lovely neck down to the tip of her toes and started back up again. When he came to her womanhood, he paused, then brought her to the edge of fulfillment sucking, kissing and caressing with his tongue.

"Please!" she begged as he pulled away to remove his pants. Almost crying with need she welcomed him with open arms.

Christian parted her legs. "I will be as gentle as I can, your first time can bring you discomfort."

Pulling him close harshly she said, "Now Christian, now, make me yours for now and always."

He entered her slowly, but she couldn't wait any longer and moved her hips to meet him. There was a sharp pain, but as she cried out, Christian muffled it with a kiss. Shortly, replacing the pain was a warm glow that grew and grew until she thought they would be consumed by the flames. Her body began to tingle all over. Then the waves of spasms gripped her whole being and the room exploded with a thousand lights.

He had fought to keep control of himself until his lover was satisfied. Then he blessedly found his release, planting his seed deep inside her womb. Christian became aware of his surroundings as he felt her warm tears on his chest. Thinking he had truly hurt her, he gathered her in his arms. "I'm so sorry, I should have been more thoughtful of you, more restrained for your first time. Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive you? You have just taken me to the most wonderful place in the world and my tears are of joy, happiness and wonder. Is it always like that?"

"I will surely try to make it so. Would you like to try again? Perhaps we can even improve."

"Can we? I mean again so soon?" Taking her magic hands, he guided them to his manhood, which was already getting hard just thinking of making love with this amazing woman. So sweet and innocent, yet ready to explore the new world of making love, and she was all his.

When Ariel awoke the next morning, she was disappointed to find she was alone in her bed. She and Christian had made love two more times before falling asleep in each other's arms. Each time was more wonderful as they learned more and more about each other's bodies, feelings and desires. In just one week they were to be wed. They had talked a little, between their times of passion, of their future. They planned to move to London, living in his parents' home until they found a proper home of their own. Neither one of them wanted a very large home. Still it would need to be large enough for a little entertaining and hopefully several children.

Ariel blushed, wondering if she could possibly already be carrying Christian's child. Thinking again of the intimacy they had shared during the night, there was a very good chance she was.

"Are you awake Miss? Master Christian ordered a hot bath for you," called a maid from outside her room.

How thoughtful of Christian she thought. As she moved to leave her bed, she realized her body was stiff and sore. Once out of the bed, she threw on her robe, for she was still naked from their night of lovemaking. The bed covers were also in total disarray and there was a dark red stain on the linens that showed the loss of her virginity. “Yes, please come in,” she called as she quickly straightened the bedclothes before the maids could see anything. Walking to the windows while putting her hair in a knot, she was thinking of how Christian had taken out all the pins and unbraided her hair the second time they made love, he had wanted to touch the silky tresses of honey gold hair.

The maid, who had first knocked, lightly touched her arm and snapped her out of her daydream. “Your bath is ready. Will you be wanting my assistance?”

“I’m sure I can manage on my own.”

“Then I’ll come when you ring to help you dress.”

Ariel was just fastening up her chemise when the maid returned.

“I’m to take you directly to the library when you are dressed.” She was carrying a tray with fresh baked bread, butter and jam. There was also a piping hot pot of tea.

“This is for you to nibble on while I dress you. The Earl wished to inform you that you have visitors and everyone will meet in the library.”

“Do you know who they might be? I was expecting my father’s solicitor, but you said visitors. I suppose it could be some of the people from my village. Perhaps someone has been injured and needs my help.”

“I don’t know the identity of your visitors, but I do know they are from the city Miss,” the maid informed her.

Worried over who was waiting for her, she decided she couldn’t even eat one bite of the delicious smelling bread. She did take several sips of the hot tea for she suddenly felt very cold.

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The moment Ariel entered the library; Christian knew his love was nervous for she was holding her bottom lip in her teeth. He went to her immediately and took her hand. “Don’t worry about anything. Mother, Father and I are all here and shall stay if you want.”

She saw Mr. Abrams over on one side of the room talking with a rather odious looking man. Ariel took an instant dislike to the man and felt he was trouble. He was dressed like a dandy and looked like he had been living a life of debauchery.

Lady Gweneth was sitting near the fire and Christian led Ariel over to join her. The Earl was in a chair opposite his wife. The two men came over to make introductions.

Mr. Abrams cleared his throat, acknowledged the Earl and his wife and turned to address Ariel. “I came as soon as I received your message your ladyship. May I have the honor of presenting James Bradford, the Duke of Belfore, your cousin. And to you,” talking to the duke, “your cousin, Lady Ariel Belfore.”

Ariel was sure she had just walked into a play or maybe she was still asleep and having a nightmare. Lady Gweneth took her hand and gave it a squeeze For a show of support.

Christian was the first to speak. “I think you had better explain just what you mean by all of this. Why did you introduce my fiancée as Lady Ariel Belfore?”

“Let me start back several years ago,” Mr. Abrams began. “Lady Ariel’s father contacted me. He had several rather strange requests. First, he had just become the Duke of Belfore with his father’s death. For reasons never disclosed to me, he ran all his dealings through me. He wished to continue living under the name of McAllister, his mother’s maiden name. He had amassed a large fortune in his own right, so you my lady are a very rich woman. He also set up allotments for his mother, so she would never have to worry about money for anything she wanted or needed, within reason for the rest of her life. When your father died, the title went to your cousin. He is the son of your father’s younger brother, who has also passed. Your life care is intact. His lordship gave me a letter for you when or if you were ever to wed. I have it here.” He handed the letter over to her. It had her father’s familiar script on the outside. It was sealed with wax and stamped with the family crest of Belfore.

Shaking, Ariel took the letter, but all she could do is stare at it like it was so foreign it defied thought.

“That explains what Mr. Abrams is all about, but why are you here sir?” Christian asked, looking directly at the Duke.

Very indignantly the Duke replied, “Why, to protect Lady Ariel from making a big mistake by marrying the first man she meets. For all I know, you could be a fortune hunter. After all, her father did request that her family be contacted if this ‘Nanna-person’ died.”

The Earl put an arm on his son to restrain him. He knew Christian was close to putting his fist in the pompous man’s face, for he felt almost the same way.

Ariel, who had still been sitting on the divan, jumped up and asked, “What do you mean ‘Nanna-person’ anyway?! She was the kindest, most warm-hearted and loving person on earth. She was the closest person I had to a mother since I lost Mama!”

“Yes, well, be that as it may, she is gone now and that leaves me to watch over you.”

Before she said something she might regret later, she turned to the duchess and asked, “Would you accompany me to the blue salon. I would like to read my father’s letter there.”

“Of course, my dear. Just let me order some refreshments for our guests.”

“Thank you, your ladyship. That is most generous of you,” said Mr. Abrams.

“Bah! It’s the least they could do after we came all this way in the middle of winter and the food at the inn we stayed at was deplorable,” was the Dukes reply.

“I will have a word with you as soon as it is possible,” Lady Gweneth whispered to her son as she left the room.

“At the earliest convenience Mother, for I wish to know what that Popinjay has on his mind. I plan to question him in great detail.”

Ariel was waiting by the door. “My lady, I am so sorry, My cousin...”

“Nonsense, you have nothing to be sorry for, my dear. You can’t help whom your relatives are any more than you can control their actions. I’m certain that he gave Mr. Abrams little choice but to bring him along. I know you had nothing to do with his being here.”

“Still...”

“Not another word about it, but the news does in fact answer some of the questions, like why you looked so familiar, and why I didn’t know your family name.”

“I don’t understand. Why would news of my name answer those questions?”

“You see my dear, your mother and I grew up almost as neighbors near the Scottish border. Let us read your father’s letter first, and then maybe I can fill in any gaps or questions you have.”

They had reached the blue salon. Ariel went straight to the fire. She could not seem to get warm. This was all too much for her. Her whole world had just been turned upside down and now she wasn’t even who she had thought she was for the past twenty-one years.

“Are you ready to start reading or perhaps you would like me to read it to you,” the duchess offered.

“Would you please?” Ariel said, handing her the letter. “I don’t think I could read it myself.” She was wringing her hands and pacing in front of the fire.

“Come now, sit by me while I read and don’t worry. I have a pretty good idea what your father wrote.” She broke the seal on the letter and began to read.

My dearest darling daughter, if you are reading this letter, it is because you are soon planning to marry. I only have one thing to ask of you on the subject. Make sure you are marrying for the right reason—because you are in love. Love and love alone is the only reason to marry anyone. Don’t marry to satisfy somebody else or because you think that it is what you should do. I have made provisions for you, even if you decided never to marry. Your mother was promised to another, but we were in love and married against both of our families’ wishes. Neither of us regretted one moment of our time together.

Because of our families, we changed our last name and never were in contact with them. Your mother made me promise to never take you to be raised by either family. She didn’t want you subjected to the prejudices she had to face because she was born a witch.

Secondly, do not blame Nanna for not telling you the truth after I was gone, for I made her give her solemn promise she would not reveal the truth unless you were to marry.

I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive your mother and I, but we did this out of love for each other and for you. I wish you all the happiness in the world. I know you will live happily if you marry for love.

Follow your heart and good-bye,

Your loving Father

Even the duchess was left speechless. Although she had been correct in her assumptions about the contents of the letter, they deeply moved her to see them written down.

Ariel was still sitting next to her, tears streaming down her cheeks unchecked. All she could think was that her whole life had been a lie. Would Christian still want to marry her, knowing she was not who she said she was? Lost in her thoughts, she had not heard the maid come in with the tea tray.

“Ariel, my dear, drink this. It will help settle your nerves. After the morning we’ve all had, the Lord knows we can use this,” and she took a large drink from her own cup.

Ariel followed suit and nearly choked on the contents. Lady Gweneth had put a generous amount of brandy in the tea. Eyes watering, her cheeks all rosy, she set the cup down and said, “What am I going to do your Ladyship? Everything is all different now.”

“The only things that are different are your last name and you now know one of your cousins, however odious he may be. As far as I can tell, and that’s quite a bit you know, the most important things are still the same. You are still in love with my son and he most certainly loves you and wants to marry you. He thinks the sooner the better. I admit, I did a little mind peeking this morning at breakfast. Now as to what to do, I think we should go in and thank Mr. Abrams for coming so quickly. We will also let your cousin and Mr. Abrams know that the wedding will go on as scheduled. Does that all meet with your approval, Lady Ariel?”

Ariel giggled a little at being called Lady Ariel, for she had finished her tea and having eaten nothing since last night, the brandy had gone straight to her head. “Yes, it certainly does and I think we should send them on their way back to the city where they belong.”

“An excellent idea, my dear, very excellent.”

They both rose and walked arm-in-arm to the library. When they arrived, it was apparent that things weren’t going any better than when they had left.

Ariel went straight to Mr. Abrams. “I want to thank you for coming so quickly and for the letter.” Holding her father’s letter in her hand she went on, “Christian and I are to be married in a week’s time. We will be in contact with you when we move to London.”

“Now see here,” Sir James was blustering. “I think I have a thing or two to say about whom you will marry and when.”

“No cousin, you don’t. My father told me to follow my heart and that is just what I’m doing,” she said as she walked over to Christian. “We have plans to make, so if you will excuse us, I will bid you good day and a safe journey.”

“Of all the ungrateful...” Before the Duke could finish, Willowby entered the room announcing the carriage was awaiting them in the drive.

After the two men had left, Christian turned to his beloved and asked, “Is that really what your father said?”

“Yes. He said that he and Mother had done the same and never had a single regret while they were together.”

“Oh, darling, I’m so glad to hear you say that. I was afraid you may have decided not to marry me and to go to London with your cousin instead.”

“Please don’t remind me of that awful person is a relative. I’m glad you didn’t box him in the nose. I know I had the urge to do so more than once during the interview.” Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

There was a knock at the door. It was Willowby to announce Mrs. Flint had prepared a luncheon to be served in the small dining room. The mood at the table was a happy one, full of expectations for the coming holiday and wedding.

11

Later in the blue salon, Ariel and Lady Gweneth continued their conversation about the wedding. “I have called for the seamstress in town to attend us here at the hall tomorrow. She is to bring materials suited for a wedding gown and several other outfits for both you and myself. They are to be a gift from me to you for all you have done for this family.”

“I haven’t done anything anyone else with my powers wouldn’t have done. That is too splendid of a gift. I fell in love with Christian and used my powers out of love, not for repayment.

“I know you did my dear. It is just I need to do this in return. I just wish Andrew was going to be here. He is quite close to Christian and will be upset that he will miss the wedding.”

There was a tap at the door. It was Willowby with tea. He told the ladies that the gentlemen would be joining them shortly. Both Ariel and Lady Gweneth were surprised that it had been several hours since lunch, but they had accomplished a great deal in that time. The very short guest list was made. The menu for the wedding breakfast was complete and the choice of flowers had been discussed.

When the door opened, it was only the Earl that entered the room. Ariel tried to hide her disappointment, but fell slightly short of the mark.

“My dear,” said the Earl, as he bent over and gave his wife a kiss, “Christian has been unavoidably detained and will join us as soon as he can.” Knowing his wife, he kept his mind closed so she could not read his thoughts.

“What are you two up to this time?” she asked.

“Why, I’m sure I don’t have any idea what you are talking about my sweet,” but there was a grin on his face that belied the statement.

Just then the door opened again and Christian entered the room in the company of another gentleman. He was slightly older than Christian and had red hair. The moment the duchess saw the second person enter the room; she gave a cry, jumped up and ran across the room.

“Oh, Andrew, you are home! But how did you get here? When did you arrive? Why didn’t you let us know you were coming?”

“Whoa, Mother, let me catch my breath. I will answer all your questions soon enough, but first, may I have a cup of tea?”

“Oh, yes of course, come and meet Ariel. Andrew, I would like you to meet Lady Ariel Belfore, your brother’s future wife.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Lady Ariel. You are everything and more than Christian said you were.”

“Christian has told you about me? But when?”

“He wrote me about you a couple of months ago when he first met you. Something about a storm and a place called Dove Cottage, I believe.”

“There you see, I did remember it all brother, and you did not stretch the truth the least little bit. She is very beautiful. And, as a matter of fact, too good for you. I think I shall take her for myself. After all, I am the oldest and should be the first to wed. What do you say little brother? Are you going to give me a chance to win this beautiful woman’s hand?”

Ariel was blushing beyond belief as Andrew bent over and kissed her hand.

“Not even a half of a chance. Go out and find someone on your own. I can’t do everything for you.”

“But you are so good at it. You have found a very rare find indeed, and a witch too, so I was already informed,” he said, with a big smile.

So, he had a good sense of humor, thought Ariel, wonderful.

“Now boys, do stop so I can get some answers.” Lady Gweneth tried to sound stern, but fell short of doing so.

The brothers laughed and said in unison, “Okay, what do you want to know?”

“When did you arrive? I didn’t hear any carriages outside or any commotion in the hall. How did you get here? How long are you staying or are you home for good?”

“Slow down, mother. I can answer most of your questions, but as for how I got home, Christian will have to answer that one.”

“Christian? What has he to do with how you got home?” asked, looking at her youngest son in question.

“Well, I guess you could say I have finally found my special power and have become quite good at it, even if I say so myself.”

“Well, don’t look at me to back you up. I shall not be able to sit down for a week,” Andrew said as he started to rub his backside.

“You see Mother, I seem to be able to travel from one place to another with just the snap of my fingers and anyone who is touching me can or will be moved at the same time and to the same place. Of course it is a little more complicated and I would be happy to go into detail at another time. We would have been here sooner, but it took me a while to find him once I got to Paris. Then he insisted on changing his clothes before we came in to see you.”

“Well,” responded Andrew a bit miffed, “after all, I was boxing at a club and was not fit to be in a lady’s company. So there, you have your answer as to when I arrived. It was about thirty minutes ago, upstairs in my room. That is why you didn’t hear any carriage, horses or noise in the hallway. As to how long, well, that is up to Christian, I guess. I will be staying through the holidays, so I will be here for the wedding. Christian has asked me to stand for him and of course, I accepted. It has not been decided when he will take me back as of yet. But, I should be able to come home soon to stay. The business dealings I have been working on are going very well, and are almost complete.”

“That is wonderful,” his mother exclaimed. “Now both my sons are with me, what a magnificent holiday gift. Thank you so very much Christian!”

“I’m very glad you liked my gift,” he replied. “Now if you don’t mind, I would like to take Ariel on a short walk. There are several things we need to discuss.”

“By all means, I think we all have things to see to, with all the unusual happenings today, there is a definite need for catching up. Shall we all meet here at say, eight o’clock for a sherry before dinner?”

All agreed with Lady Gweneth and left to go their separate ways.

After everyone else had left the salon, Christian took Ariel in his arms and said, “I have wanted to be alone with you all day. How do you feel? Are you okay? You don’t have any regrets, do you?”

She was returning his hugs and got up on tiptoes and began to kiss him most thoroughly. “Now were those the kisses of a woman who had any regrets?” She laughed as he put his hands around her waist, picked her up and twirled around in circles with her.

“I hope you are at least half as happy as I am at this moment. Do you want to stay here and talk or would you like to go out for a walk? Or we could always go to your chambers and talk,” he asked with a mischievous grin and a twinkle in his eyes.

“Christian, it’s in the middle of the day! I may not be schooled in proper etiquette, but I’m sure that is most improper. We had best take a walk, for I think we are both overheated,” blushing as she left his arms to retrieve her cloak and bonnet.

Christian was thinking that he would need to purchase a cape lined with ermine with a matching muffler to keep his love warm on what he hoped would be

“Christian, did you know that my mother and yours grew up as neighbors near the Scottish border?” She paused a moment in thought. “That means she must know my mother’s maiden name and her parents. Once we are married, I think I would like to go there just to meet them, if they are still alive. They were in the dreams that I told you about and I got the impression they were.”

“That is one of the things I wished to discuss with you. I thought perhaps before we go to London, we had better wrap-up some loose ends around here. Do you have any idea what you want to do with Dove Cottage? It is all yours, you know, and you can do what you wish with it.”

“I hadn’t even thought about it. It has always been my home. What do you think I should do with it?”

“Do you know anyone in the village that needs or deserves a home like Dove Cottage?”

“Well, there is Jacob and his family. I don’t know what they will do if Dove Cottage is sold. He has always been around to help with chores and his wife sometimes came in and gave a hand with the spring cleaning and did the laundry for us.”

“Then why not allow them to live in the cottage as long as they desire. You can decide what personal things you would like. I will have everything packed and stored until we have a home of our own ready to receive them.”

“That is a wonderful idea. I’m so glad you thought of it. Do you think we could do that before we are married? I’m sure Jacob and his wife will welcome the news and they can help me with the packing.”

“We will make the trip tomorrow if that is convenient for you.”

“I will ask your mother what time the dressmaker is coming. We can go either before or after she has been there. Now was there anything else you wish to discuss?”

“Only this, my dear,” he replied, kissing her before she could say another word. “Will you allow me to come to your room again tonight?”

“After last night, I think I would be very lonely in that big bed all by myself.” Ariel smiled. There was a look of triumph in Christian’s eyes. “I never want to be alone again, promise me you will never leave me.”

“My darling Ariel, I promise I will never leave you. I want only to be with you forever and always.”

Ariel shivered, she could feel there was something wrong, not at this instant, but something in the not too distant future that could destroy their happiness.

“You are cold. Let us return to the house before you catch a chill. I don’t want you to be ill on our wedding day.” Wrapping his arm around her, they walked back to the hall in silence. The lovers were thinking of what the future held for them, a new home, new friends, and perhaps, their own family. They would go to the balls, the theater, the opera, drives in the park and taking long walks. The future was theirs to do as they wished.

12

Back in London the next day...

“The nerve of that chit. She’s nothing more than a country bumpkin. You should have seen her gown. It was very out of date. She was clinging to that no title person she wants to marry like a child to its mother. She even had the nerve to dismiss me, The Duke of Belfore.”

“But James, you told me the solicitor has a will saying she may do as she wishes. Why are you so upset anyway?”

“Because as soon as I heard about dear cousin Ariel,” he smiled, “I decided she was to become my bride, so I could take control of her fortune. You know most of our money is tied up, so we can’t spend any amount we want to. If I were to marry our cousin, I would be in charge of all her money. Think of it brother, all the money we could ever want for clothes, horses, the ladies, or whatever else struck our fancy.”

“That is all very well and good, but you are a little late for marriage.”

“Never doubt brother. Where there’s a will, there’s a way and I will gain control of her fortune one way or the other.

Lord James then poured them each a drink and proposed a toast, “To our newly found cousin and our new found wealth.” He threw back the drink and laughed in such a way that it made his brother shake.

In another part of the city, three men sat in a run-down tavern drinking and talking.

“My woman threw me out this mornin’ sayin’ she don’t need no one-armed man hangin’ ‘round not bringin’ any money in.”

“I lost the fat purse I pinched and almost got myself caught by a bow street runner last night.”

“Know what ya mean. We’ve not had anythin’ good happen to the lot of us since we had the run in with that nob that stuck Ben ‘ere in the arm.”

“I heard it were the Earl of Blackthorne’s youngest,” said the largest man of the three. “Bet that’s why we be having all this bad luck.”

Ben piped in, “I’d give up me other arm to get even with that bloke. Seein’ im six-feet under would do me good, it would.”

All three men chorused agreement and ordered more drinks. They were all still sitting there an hour later when two well-dressed men entered the tavern.

“Are you sure you know what you are doing?” questioned the younger man, as he held a kerchief to his nose, hoping to block the mixture of spirits, sweat and dirt in the place. The sight of so much human waste was making him more nervous by the minute.

“Don’t worry. I know exactly what I’m doing. If you can’t handle this, perhaps you should wait for me outside in the carriage,” said the second man. Having dismissed the other man, he continued to survey the room. The banging of cups and squeals from the barmaids mixed with the smell of sweat and smoke was like adrenaline to the man. He felt alive, invigorated and sure of his plan. He was not looking for anyone in particular, but when his eyes saw the three men, he knew he had found who he needed.

“Gentlemen,” he said as he approached their table, “I have a job for you if you are interested. May I sit with you and buy a round of drinks?”

“Why not? It’s your money gov’nor.”

After about a half an hour, the gentleman rose and left the tavern, well satisfied with himself. As he entered the carriage he said, “All is in agreement. I told the men I would contact them when they

were to carry out their instructions and gave them each a gold piece with a promise of more when the job was done.”

Ariel and Christian had to postpone their trip to Dove Cottage a whole day. Lady Gweneth said the dressmaker was to arrive by eight o'clock and had insisted she needed to be there the whole day if she was expected to have several of the gowns ready by the end of the week. That would mean several fittings during the day.

So Ariel and Christian decided to leave bright and early the following day. That would give them almost the whole day to go through the cottage and begin the packing. They planned to store the crates at Blackthorne until such time as they were needed.

The Earl had remarked during the evening meal that one of his friends was moving out of their present home into a larger place, but had not yet decided what they would do with the small house. He felt it would be perfect for Christian and Ariel.

“Would you like me to write Lord and Lady Finch? I would like to purchase the home for you if it is to your liking.”

“It would be splendid if you would contact them. Perhaps a meeting could be set up for late January. It is very generous for you to offer it as a wedding gift. I have been in the Finch home several times and I think it would suit us very well. I would like Ariel to see it before we make a final decision on any house.

The whole family decided to forego any activities after dinner and retire to their bedrooms. It had been a very full day and tomorrow promised the same for the ladies.

True to her word, the dressmaker arrived at precisely eight o'clock with bolt after bolt of material, trims, ribbons and other adornments and dozens of pictures of gowns. Lady Gweneth insisted they begin with the wedding dress. They decided on champagne color brocade, trimmed with matching

velvet. There was also to be a velvet cloak trimmed in fur to wear to the church in the village where the ceremony was to take place. After that, Ariel lost count of the gowns that were ordered—several for Lady Gweneth and even more for herself. There were to be new undergarments and nightwear.

Once during the long day, Ariel thought she saw Christian talking with the dressmaker. Lunch had been brought up to the duchess' suite and the fittings continued all through the day. The dressmaker and her seamstresses would return in two days time for final fittings.

Ariel was so exhausted when they finished she asked for a light supper to be brought to her room. Tomorrow would be another big day and she knew she needed plenty of rest. Expecting one of the maids with her dinner, she answered the knock at her door in her dressing gown and slippers. However, when she opened the door, there stood Christian with her dinner tray in his hands.

“I missed you all day and thought perhaps you wouldn't mind if I joined you for a bite of food.”

Ariel was blushing, “I'm not dressed to receive visitors, but perhaps I can make an exception this one time.”

Lord, she is still so innocent even after our night of lovemaking. Will she never cease to amaze me? Somehow, I feel she will always have surprises for me and I can't wait. He put down the tray and took her into his arms, kissing her thoroughly. “Maybe we could just skip dinner and make love instead.”

“Christian, what would your mother say?” she asked almost alarmed.

“As a matter of record, it was Mother who suggested I bring up supper, thinking we would perhaps like some private time together.” He smiled and bent his head to kiss her again. He captured her mouth with his, his tongue exploring new territories of her mouth. Her lips parted slowly, allowing entry in. Their tongues mixing with each other's like a sensual dance. His hands were everywhere at once. Lighting fires everywhere he touched. He soon found her breasts, already taunt with desire. He

found the ties to her dressing gown easy to undo and was pleasantly surprised to find her totally naked beneath. Christian's lips soon followed the path of his hands. Ariel threw back her head to allow Christian better access to her neck and then her breasts. She almost cried with sheer delight at his touch.

Ariel wanted to give him as much pleasure as he was giving her. Her hands began their exploration with his head. Running her hands through his hair, she gained courage to go further. She undid the studs of his shirt, ran her hands once again over his muscular chest. She could tell her hands were driving him mad with desire for he shook as they stood near the fire.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. Her secret place was already moist and ready. He wanted to be slow and gentle, but Ariel was matching move for move with him. It did not take long to reach their peaks of fulfillment. The both shuddered in a release that seemed to fill the room with love and it was love that delivered Christian's seed. They lay wrapped in each others arms as their souls returned to mind and body.

It was nearly two hours later when Christian said he was ready to eat the supper he had brought upstairs. Ariel realized she too was famished, for she had been so busy taking the gowns on and off for fittings, that she had barely touched her lunch. They ate in relative silence. Both were lost in their own thoughts, but very much aware of each other's presence. When they finished, Christian said good night, gave Ariel a quick kiss and was gone.

Ariel was so warmly satisfied that she fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

13

They had agreed they wanted to be on the road by daybreak for they were to take an open wagon plus the carriage for there were things that Ariel wished to bring to the hall straight away.

Jacob and his wife, Mary, were at the cottage doing some chores. Mary had decided to launder all the bedding and do some general cleaning. Meanwhile, Jacob was bringing in a supply of wood and feeding the chickens and pig. They were both outside when the carriage pulled up.

They hardly recognized Ariel. The maid had done her hair up in a fashionable style and Lady Gweneth had insisted she wear one of her ladyship's heavy cloaks with a fur lining. They had ridden in the comfort of the Earl's traveling carriage drawn by no less than four magnificently matched animals.

"Is that you Miss Ariel? I hardly knew ye with all the fine trappings and your hair lookin' so fancy and all," Mary said a little in awe.

"Yes, it's me and I am so glad you are both here today. I must tell you both everything that has happened and I also have two requests to make of the two of you.

"First of all, I'm to marry on the eve of Boxing Day at the village church near Blackthorne and I want you to come. Please say you will. You are the closest people I have to a family. Well, that is not quite true," she added after she heard Christian laugh. "That however is a long story and I say we go inside, make a pot of tea and then I will tell you the rest."

The older couple could only sit and stare at Ariel like she had grown two heads as she told them the whole tale. One or the other would shake their head and go, “tsk! tsk!”

“If my father’s mother is half as bad as the cousin I met, I don’t think I want to meet her. I am however looking forward to meeting my mother’s parents. Mother has come to me in my dreams and told me they are sorry about the way they treated my parents and want to get to know me. The older couple gave each other knowing looks as Ariel continued with her story.

“I am going to pack up all my personal belongings and remove them to Blackthorne for now. We will be living in London at least part of the year and I would like my things with me.”

“That is understandable. What is to happen to Dove Cottage? It would be a shame to let it sit empty,” said Jacob finally finding his voice again.

“Well, that brings me to the second request. I want the two of you and your family to live in Dove Cottage.”

“We could never afford that miss, as much as we could use the space and all with another one on the way.”

“No! No! You don’t understand. I want you to be sort of caretakers here. I will pay you to live here and watch over the cottage. I don’t think I could ever sell it.”

“Oh Miss, I mean your ladyship, that is so wonderful. To tell you the truth, we have been a bit worried as to how we were going to get by. You have answered all our prayers.” Mary’s tears were out of control now and she couldn’t say another word.

“Does that mean you’ll accept my offer?”

“It certainly does and we will also be more than happy to attend your wedding,” Jacob answered shaking first Ariel’s hand and then Christian’s. “We are most grateful to you both and please excuse Mary,” she was still crying, “she’s a bit over emotional these days.”

“Well, let us finish our tea and get to the business at hand. I would like to start in Mama and Papa’s room.”

Christian worked right alongside Ariel as she went from room to room. He watched her revealing the memories that each item brought. Some were happy, others were sad, but they were all memories she would cherish all her life and many she would be able to share with their children.

There were only a few things Ariel wanted to take with her in the carriage, such as Nanna’s sewing basket, a miniature of her mother the summer she married and her father’s favorite key fob. She told Mary and Jacob to give away or use any clothing that was left. Christian told them he would leave the wagon and driver to help with everything Ariel had designated to be packed away and bring the things back to Blackthorne. There were hugs all around and the young lovers were on their way back to Blackthorne.

“That went as well as could be expected,” said Ariel as she fingered the frame on her mother’s portrait. “I’m so glad that Mary, Jacob and their family will be living in the cottage. I wouldn’t want it to go to ruin for lack of attention. This way, I can always move back in when you lose interest in me.”

“Yes my dear. Anything you say,” answering her, lost in his own thoughts not realizing what she had said.

Knowing this, Ariel continued, trying to hide her humor, “You do know I may decide to go to London for a season after all. Maybe I will catch the eye of a very attentive young lord.”

“London? A season? What are you talking about?” He grabbed her by her arms and looked her straight in the eyes, “Tell me, have you changed your mind? You told me you loved me.”

“Oh Christian, I’m so sorry, I was only teasing you because you heard nothing I was saying. Of course I love you and I will never change my mind.” To prove it, she gave him a long loving kiss with the promise of more to come.

When they arrived back at Blackthorne, Ariel said she wished to lay down before dressing for dinner and went straight to her room.

Christian had not yet had time to speak with his mother alone and decided that this would be his best chance to do so. He found her in the solarium. “Mother, may I have a word with you?”

“Certainly my dear, I’ve been expecting you. Did you and Ariel have a successful day?”

“Yes, that is part of what I wanted to talk to you about. The other is the matter of her cousin.”

“Beware of him Christian, as he had evil thoughts going through his sick mind. When he first arrived, he thought to take Ariel away and wed her himself. Somehow Ariel’s father managed to tie up most of the titled assets. The Duke is already in debt because of his debauchery. He figured Ariel’s money would bail him out. I don’t think you’ve seen the last of him.”

“Don’t worry Mother. Now that I know what he was thinking, I will be on the lookout for trouble. Ariel said you know her grandparents and where they live. Could you please tell me? I heard Ariel tell Jacob and Mary, the couple who are moving into Dove Cottage, she had a desire to meet her mother’s parents. I want to try to bring them here in time for the wedding.”

“I would be more than happy to.” They talked a while longer and he told her of his plan. The duchess agreed it was a wonderful idea.

“The day after tomorrow, the dressmaker will be here again and Ariel will not have time to notice if you are absent for most of the day. I wish you good luck!”

14

Today is my wedding day, thought Ariel as soon as she awoke. She decided to have hot cocoa and toast in her room followed by a long relaxing hot bath. She felt the need to unwind before her big day got underway. The last two days had been very hectic.

First with finalizing a food list and doing flower arrangements and then she had spent most of yesterday at the hands of the dressmaker. Her wedding gown, which was now hanging on the door of her wardrobe, had been finished when the woman and her staff had arrived. It had needed only a few minor adjustments.

She had not seen Christian all day, but decided that he was probably busy with his own plans. She was disappointed when he did not show up at her door with her supper last evening. Lady Gweneth, however, did stop by and when Ariel mentioned not seeing Christian, her ladyship told Ariel she had forbid him to see her because it was bad luck for the bride and groom to see each other the night before the wedding.

Ariel had decided to retire so she could get an early start this morning. She had slept soundly, but her dreams of her mother were back, only this time the dream was different. Her mother had said that Christian was perfect for her and knew they would be happy together. She again told Ariel she'd made peace with mother and father and very much-wanted Ariel to meet them soon. During her dream her mother had also told her:

I will be near if you need my help, just call for me. Right now, your father is calling me and I must go. Be happy for we are together again and very happy and we want the same for you. So long for now my sweet daughter and remember, just call.

Ariel had finished her bath and was sitting by the fire combing and drying her hair. She had been so caught up in her thoughts of the dream that she had not heard the knock at the door. She was a bit startled to have her ladyship asking to come in.

“Of course you may come in. I am finished with my bath and I’m drying my hair before I start to dress.” Ariel was surprised that Lady Gweneth was not alone as she entered the room.

“Ariel, I would like you to meet...” was as far as she got with the introduction, for as soon as Ariel saw the face of the woman with Lady Gweneth, she knew who it was.

With tears in her eyes and arms open wide, she ran into her grandmother’s embrace. “Oh Grandmother, I’m so glad you are here. Mama came to me last night and said she had made her peace with you. She wanted us to meet very soon. How did you know where I was? Did Mama tell you? Is Grandfather here too? When may I meet him? Will the two of you walk me down the aisle? When did you get here? Will you be able to stay long?”

“My goodness child, I am breathless from all your questions and I have yet to answer one of them. Slow down, let me have a look at you. You were right, Gweneth. She does look like my Abby, except for the color of her hair. She seems to have her temperament too. We got here last night, but you were already sound asleep. I did get a peek at you then, but you never woke up, even when I kissed you on the cheek.”

“That was you. I thought Mama had given me the kiss. It was so real in my dream!”

“As to how we got here, it was your young man. Early yesterday afternoon, he showed up at our country estate near the Scottish border. He sat and talked to us for several hours. He said he wanted to know how your grandfather and I felt about all that has happened with your parents, Nanna, you and him in the past twenty years. When he was satisfied that we were truly sorry about the past and wanted to be

part of your life, he asked us to come with him to be a part of your wedding day. He is very thoughtful, that Christian.”

“Your grandfather and I wanted you to have this.” In saying this, she handed Ariel a locket. “It was your mother’s when she was a young girl, and it has a lock of her baby hair in it. Your grandfather and I will be very proud to walk you down the aisle today. Now, I better leave you so I can get ready and so you can too.” She gave Ariel another hug and was gone.

The rest of the day went by in one big blur. Ariel remembered getting dressed and leaving for the church. The rest was like a waking dream. The day was bright and sunny and though it was cold the birds were singing. People from her village had come to wish her well. She was aware of everything that was going on, but it didn’t seem real. After the ceremony, those who had been in the church went back to the hall for the wedding breakfast. There were many toasts to the bride and groom. There was plenty of food too. They even had music to dance to.

Christian and Ariel had never danced together, but when they were out there it was as if they had danced together for years. Ariel felt like she was floating around the room on a cloud.

“Thank you so much for bringing my grandparents here. It was the most wonderful thing you could have done for me today. I love you so much and I have nothing to give you.”

“You have given me more than you will ever know already. So much, in fact that I don’t think I’ll ever catch up with you.”

“I gave you nothing my heart didn’t want to give ten times over.” They kissed there in the middle of the dance floor. “Do we need to stay a long time with the guests?” The hunger in her eyes made Christian hard with desire.

“We should be able to slip away soon. I can’t wait to have you all to myself. It seems like it has been forever since we have made love. The anticipation is driving me mad.”

The newlyweds danced a few more dances, ate a little more food, drank a little more wine and talked to a few more people, then slipped away to start their life together—alone.

Christian escorted Ariel to her door, where he picked her up and carried her over the threshold. He set her down in the middle of her sitting room. “I will leave you to your maid while I change into something more comfortable myself. I shall only be gone ten minutes.”

Ariel was about to say something when he turned on his heels and was gone. As she walked into the bedchamber Ariel was surprised there were several changes since she had left for her wedding.

Many of the clothes that had been ordered had arrived. They were already neatly put away. The bed was turned down; extra candles were lit all over the room even though it was still afternoon it would soon be dark. The fire was burning brightly and there were refreshments on the side table. There was champagne and very large ripe strawberries with fresh cream, which she knew was Christian’s doing. She realized there was something lying on the bed and went over to investigate. There on the bed, looking like a pink cloud, were the most beautiful nightgown and wrapper she had ever seen. It was made from the highest quality silk money could buy. It was almost transparent and the stitching was of the first quality also. It was then she saw the note.

My dearest darling wife,

I hope you will wear this for our wedding night. I love seeing you in pink.

Your obedient servant,

Christian

She was wondering how she would ever get her wedding gown off when the door opened and her maid appeared. “Her ladyship said I was to give you assistance. I am sorry it took so long to get here but I didn’t realize, until a few moments ago, you had left the festivities. Please forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive, there is no harm done. The room looks lovely, did you set everything in place?”

“Yes miss, er, ...your ladyship, oh dear, I’m not sure what I’m to call you.”

“Just call me Ariel. That is how people have addressed me all my life. I see no need to change now. Come, Christian will be here any moment and I want to be ready for him.”

The maid hurried to do her bidding. Oohing and aahing over the confection of pink, she helped Ariel into the outfit and brushed out her hair. The maid, Elsbeth by name, was just dropping a curtsy and turning to leave as Christian entered the room.

He only had eyes for Ariel. She was a vision in pink. He was glad he had thought of it the first day the dressmaker had come to the hall.

Christian looked quite dashing in his dark green silk dressing robe and she found herself wondering if he had on anything beneath the robe. His shoulders filled the robe to the edge and tapered down to his slim waist. Ariel wanted to feel the silk beneath her hands. His muscles would be solid, almost rigid to the touch. His skin still held the glow of summer and his green eyes sparkled with excitement.

Tonight they were man and wife. There would be no need to leave after they made love. Tonight was their first night in a lifetime of nights, and days too if he had anything to say about it. Why should a little daylight interfere with their lovemaking. That was not the case now for the sky had darkened and the drapes had been drawn. He marveled at how the glow of the candles made Ariel almost seem to sparkle, like stardust had been sprinkled all over her. He could not wait a moment longer; he needed her now.

Ariel could sense his needs, for they echoed her own. They came together like the roar of the surf on the beaches during a great storm. Christian wanted to take it slow and easy, but Ariel's response to his advances made it impossible. They had been apart too long to go slowly. Ariel was fierce in her aggression, not waiting for Christian's lead. Her hands began to explore. Already she had disrobed him to find him magnificently naked and ready for her. She rained kisses over and down his torso. Lower

and lower she went rubbing, touching, kissing. She felt him take a deep breath as she came to his manhood. The moans soon followed and when he thought he would die from the sheer pleasure of her loving, he picked her up and carried her to the bed. With one quick movement she found herself naked before her lover.

It was now Christian's turn to torment. He began with kisses on her face and neck. He soon found her breasts, each turning hard as he took them to his mouth. Then he was going lower and lower. Soon he was at the apex of her womanhood. A fire was growing inside her that she knew would only be put out with completion of their act of love. She could not wait, would not wait any longer. She pulled his face up to meet hers and whispered, "now, in the name of love, now!"

He entered her with one swift thrust and would have slowed to make it last but Ariel thrust herself to him, matching his every move. Gone was the thought of slow and gentle. His mind was a haze of red, the fire in him was all consuming. She was beyond thought. The fire had totally engulfed her entire body. She could feel the fire burning in Christian also. Ariel thought they must be at the edge of time for she felt they were about to fall into nothingness. They felt each other as they went over that edge. The world seemed to shatter into a million pieces and colored lights of their union filled all space and all time. They lay in each other's arms unable to speak and unaware of the rest of the world.

15

In London however there were four people who were very aware of the two lovers. Lord Belfore had returned to the tavern as he had promised. He was giving them the details of the job he wanted them to do for him. "The popinjay who has married my cousin this day is Christian Delacourt. He is the second son of the Earl of Blackthorne."

One of the three ruffians had been taking a drink of his ale when the Duke said the name of the one man they all truly hated and started to choke. One of his pals slapped him, none too gently, on the back. "Ere now; careful mate or ye'll choke to death afore we kin do 'is grace's job."

"Yes, well as I was saying, my cousin and her new husband are planning to live at the Earl's residence until they find a home of their own. They are planning to come to London within the next month. You must watch the house for a chance to take the chit. You are to let me know when you have her. I want her kept alive until I have what I want from her husband. Then she is yours to do with as you please. Do I make myself clear? She is to stay alive until I give you word otherwise. If my orders are not kept there will be no more payment. Am I clear?"

All three men smiled and nodded their heads. The Duke then gave them each more gold, with the promise of more when the job was done, and an address they were to use to contact him when they had the girl.

Once they were alone all three started to laugh. “Kin you believe it? ‘E’s a payin’ us fer snatchin’ ar enemy’s wife. It don’t git no better en that.”

“It’s ‘bout time luck changed fer the three of us.”

“Let’s ‘ave a drink and make our plans.” They ordered a round of drinks and began to discuss their revenge.

“Ya know ‘is nibs said she was to be alive ‘til ‘e ‘ad wot ‘e wanted, but ‘e didn’t say nothin’ ‘bout ‘er condition, if ya know wha I mean.” He winked and elbowed both his cronies.

Back at home, the Duke was discussing the meeting with his brother. “Everything is set. The plan will go into action as soon as the happy couple arrives in town. I will ask for all of Ariel’s money and in return I will promise to give her back to her husband. Of course I can’t guarantee what condition she will be in.” An evil laugh followed his brother when all he could do was shake his head and leave the room.

Back at Blackthorne, the newlyweds lay side by side in silence just savoring their lovemaking and each other. Ariel spoke first. “Is it always so beautiful? Not just the feelings, but the lights and color also?”

“Although, as you must know, you are not the first woman I have ever been with, I can tell you I have never experienced anything that even comes close to what happens when you and I make love. Now, I am thirsty and could use a little snack. How about you, my lady?”

“Oh, yes! I had forgotten all about the strawberries and champagne. Let me get them.”

“Stay where you are. I have need to serve you my love.” He was up and over to the table before she could protest. He carried the whole table over to the bedside and proceeded to pour a glass of the sparkling amber liquid for them both. Ariel had plucked one of the strawberries from its resting-place and dipped it into the fresh, fluffy whipped cream.

Propped up on pillows he handed Ariel her glass and said, “To us, may we have thousands of nights like tonight.” They touched glasses and drank.

“To our love,” said Ariel and took a bit of the strawberry and then shared it with Christian.

As Christian was biting the strawberry he was offering Ariel a sip of champagne from his glass. Then he fed her a berry as she shared her glass of champagne with him.

When Ariel took a bite of the juicy berry Christian captured the liquid at the corner of her mouth with his lips and tongue. He could never remember a strawberry tasting so sweet. As Ariel fed him another strawberry he nibbled at her fingertips and kissed her fingers. He could feel her powers in each and every finger. The thought of her fingers on his skin made him tingle with anticipation. He began kissing the palm of her hand, then her wrist and he continued up her arm to her shoulder. By the time he reached her neck Ariel’s skin was aglow. Taking the champagne glass from her other hand he said, “This time, my sweet, we will go slow and easy so that we may savor each feeling, all the sensation that our lovemaking will bring us.” Upon reaching her ear he started at the back of her neck. He then worked his way back down on her other arm. From there he worked his way down her perfect legs to a dainty foot. He kissed the soles of both her feet and started back up the other leg.

When he came to her womanhood, he found her hot and moist with desire. Ariel thought she would go mad. The things he was doing to her made her blood feel like molten lava flowing through her body. He took her to the very edge of fulfillment before he moved up to capture her breast in sweet torment.

“Now! Now, please! I can’t wait a moment longer for you. Come into me so that we may both find release,” she begged.

Ever so slowly he entered her, enjoying each and every sensation. Once he was buried deep inside her surrounding warmth he stopped. “Slow and easy, my love, slow and easy. I want this to last.

Enjoy each touch, each movement, each caress to its fullest.” He began to move ever so slowly in and out while the whole time he continued to caress her body.

Ariel was sure her soul was going to be lost forever. His body could not hold out any longer as it moved beyond her control. At that moment she knew her soul had not been lost, their souls had become one as they both found peace in a mind shattering release over the edge. Still inside her, they fell asleep.

“I think everything went splendidly today. Ariel was glowing and Christian was very handsome indeed. I am so glad Christian brought you both here.” Lady Gweneth was saying to Ariel’s grandparents. “Do you have any plans? I hope you will feel free to stay here as long as you wish. It has been a very long time since we have spoken. Since my parents passed I have not traveled back home. Sometimes I miss the harsh countryside and the quiet life.”

“Thank you for the invitation. We would like to stay for a while and get to know our only grandchild. I’m afraid that we did her parents a great injustice when we refused to give them our blessings. But we were worried that our Abby would be subject to so much ridicule and harassment because of her powers that they would grow to hate their life together in a very short time. We were wrong about everything and we have paid dearly for that mistake. We can’t change the past but we hope to do better in the future. For now I think these old bones of mine are ready for bed. Thank you again for all your kindness. I hope we can talk more tomorrow. Good night.”

The next morning, family and guests alike slept to a late hour. All had breakfast in their rooms except Christian and he decided he needed some exercise and went for a ride in the brisk winter air.

When he returned the bride and groom had a large breakfast in their room for they were both famished.

The couple had made love no less than twice more during the night, once very late after all the candles had gutted out and once again as the sun was rising in the eastern sky. They had talked for a long time during the night.

“Father’s heard from the Finches and they are very interested in selling their present residence in London. They are planning to return to the city by the first part of February. They said we are welcome to look at the house anytime after that. I guess they plan to take some of the furnishings with them. You can decide what you want and don’t want if we do purchase their home. I am sure your taste may be very different from the Finches. The draperies and colors as I recall will not suit you. Have you ever been to London?” Ariel shook her head no. “That is wonderful. Perhaps we will go to town early so I can show it to you at our leisure. We will also need to pay Mr. Abrams a visit so we can get your affairs in order. I want to take you to the opera, shopping, a play or two and there are bound to be several party invitations, although this is still the off season. I want to show you off to all my friends. They shall all be very surprised to say the very least.”

“Stop! Stop! You are making my head spin with all these plans. I’m just a simple country girl. I’m not sure I can keep up a pace like that very long.”

“That is why I wish to go to London early. By the time the season starts you will be ready for all the entertainments that will come our way. There will be a dozen different events to choose from almost every night.

“You will need more clothes and we will need to hire a staff. I had a gentleman’s gentleman but let him go after my accident. So that should be one of our first orders of business--to hire a man for me, and a maid for you. They can start while we are staying at Father and Mother’s townhouse. Are you in agreement with everything?”

“I guess so if you really think it all necessary. Since I have no idea how to go on in the city I will trust your judgement on all counts. I would however like to spend as much time as possible with Grandmother and Grandfather while they are here. I would also like to visit their home so I may see where my mother grew up.”

“I am sure they would love that. Perhaps we will be able to stay a few days when I take them back. If there is anything else I can do for you or that you wish for, let me know. Now my sweet, enough talk, come to me, I have need for you once more.” So as the stars faded in the sky they had made love once more.

Everyone was present for the afternoon tea. Mrs. Flint had outdone herself with the treats. There were cucumber and watercress sandwiches, several different fruit tarts, cakes and fresh fruit.

“By Jove, I haven’t seen a spread like this for tea in years.” Ariel’s grandfather said. “With just the two of us at home it seems such a waste.”

“Here now Henry, you don’t need to let everyone see the Scottish side of you or your family,” said his wife.

“Yes, well, it’s still a nice tea,” he said a little gruffly and looking a little embarrassed when everyone laughed.

“Oh Grandfather Henry, Christian and I will come visit so you can have a big tea. Maybe some of the neighbors will come too. We are both planning to take you home when you are ready to go back. I want to see where Mama grew up if it is okay with you both,” looking first at one grandparent then the other.

“We are very happy that you want to come to our home and you are welcome to stay as long as you would like,” said her grandmother. “We thought we would stay here for a week or so. That way we can come to know each other and we can tell you all about your mother as she was growing up.”

“That sounds wonderful. I’m so glad you have decided to stay a while. There is so much to talk about. If you would like Christian would be happy to take you to Dove Cottage and we can visit Mama’s and Papa’s gravesites.”

“I would love to do those things. I, or we as she patted her husband’s hand, want to learn about our Abby’s life after she left us. Do you think you will be able to stay long at our home?”

“We have made plans to go to London before the end of January and so it will have to be a short visit this time but I promise we will come again when we can stay longer. Ariel then went over and gave her grandparents a big hug.

It was at this moment that her grandmother noticed she was wearing a heartstone around her neck. “Oh my, you are a very lucky person indeed. Who has given you this and to whom did it belong? The power of the stone is very strong. You must keep it with you at all times my dear.”

“Christian gave it to me. It was his grandmother’s. Her husband found it when he was a lad. What powers does it possess?”

“The power of each stone is a little different but will show its powers to the wearer if it is needed. I don’t know whether my mother ever used its power. If she did she never told me,” Lady Gweneth offered. “But your grandmother is correct in saying that you must always have it with you, ALWAYS.” Changing the subject quickly, like the subject made her uncomfortable, Lady Gweneth said, “Well Christian, it sounds like you and Ariel have enough plans to keep the both of you quite busy up to the start of the season. So, I shan’t feel bad when I tell you that your father and I are going on holiday also. We thought we would join Andrew in Paris. He has been after us to come and see the sights for ever so long. When we get back, if you still need a hand with a house in London I will be glad to help.”

“Thank you for the offer. Although I was hoping you would take Ariel around during the day, I suppose it can wait until the season starts. Now, if everyone would excuse me and my new bride, we are for a bit of fresh air.” Bowing his ado’s he led Ariel to the hall where the maid was waiting with her

cloak. "I felt as if I was going to go mad in there," Christian whispered as they went out the door Willowby was holding for them.

"What would ever make you feel like that? I thought it all quite pleasant. Grandfather is certainly a man of very few words. How long do you think we will be able to stay with them? I can't wait to see my mother's home. Speaking of mothers, did you notice the way yours changed the subject when we were talking about the heartstone?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did and I found it a bit odd. But in answer to your first question, this is why I was about to go mad," he was grabbing her and pulling her into an embrace and crushing her mouth with a hungry kiss.

"Do you realize it has been almost three hours since I was able to hold you in my arms, kiss you and tell you how much I love you? My desire for you seems to have no limits."

Slightly embarrassed by his show of affection in public, well maybe not public, but at the very least in plain sight of the hall, Ariel said, "Christian someone could be watching us from the house. What would they think of us?"

"Why my dearest they would simply think the truth, that we are very much in love. Besides we *are* married now."

Meanwhile, back in the solarium, Lady Gweneth was alone with Alicia, Ariel's grandmother. "Do you think they noticed overly much that I changed the subject away from the heartstone? I just couldn't bring myself to tell them that the stone usually shows its powers only in life-and-death situations. I didn't want to alarm them unnecessarily. Just because she has the stone doesn't mean something bad will happen."

“I caught the vibrations too and I’m glad you didn’t say anything. Surely Ariel would worry without cause because she knew more about it. The stone will reveal itself if and when the time comes. Until then it looks lovely around her neck.”

“Alicia, tell me, did you meet any of the family that Abbey married into? One of Ariel’s cousins was here with the solicitor and I can’t seem to shake this feeling that he means trouble.”

“We met Ariel’s grandparents on several occasions. We also met several other members at a dinner. I believe there was one younger brother of Ariel’s father whom had already married and had a child. The dinner had been held at the Belfore House and I believe the whole family was living under one roof. His brother, Ariel’s uncle, was a most unpleasant fellow. He gave me the impression that he felt we were not good enough to sit at his father’s table. I don’t believe he had anything of his own and neither did he have any desire to make his own way in life. He lived to gamble and didn’t seem to care for his wife at all. He was one of the biggest reasons we didn’t want Abby to marry into the family. That, and the fact that the Duke and Duchess had a very low opinion of Scots in general. If the man you are speaking of is the child we met that evening, I’m sure you are not wrong in your feelings.”

“I’m afraid there is nothing I can do, except I did warn Christian. I’m sure he will be very careful when they get to London to protect Ariel from any possible harm.”

“I’m sure he will do everything he can to make life safe for my granddaughter. I know he loves her very much. Now if you don’t mind, I think I shall lie down for a bit before dinner. I’m afraid I’m not as young as I would like to think I am.”

“I’m sorry,” said Lady Gweneth, “I should not have kept you so long.”

“Nonsense, I am more than happy to visit. We are quite by ourselves at home most of the time and this is indeed a very pleasant change. I just am not up to the late hours we have kept the last couple of nights.” When she rose to leave she bent over and gave the duchess a kiss on the cheek. “I’m glad

Ariel had found such a wonderful family to marry into. She deserves all the happiness that comes her way,” and was gone.

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Lady Gweneth sat alone in the solarium trying to decide if she should perhaps tell either Christian or Ariel about the powers of the necklace, or just let it be. In the end she decided she would discuss the situation with her husband before she made her final decision. She realized it was getting dark and rose to prepare for dinner.

Andrew and his father had been in the library going over their business dealings when they too discovered the late hour and started upstairs. All three met at the foot of the staircase and went up together.

“Has anyone seen Christian or Ariel? Surely they aren’t still outside in the darkness,” queried the duchess.

“No, but I will stop by their chambers and inquire after them. Maybe they will not be coming down for dinner,” laughed Andrew. “After all, they are newlyweds and all.”

“Andrew, watch what you say in front of your mother, that is not a subject to be brought up in mixed company,” his father admonished.

Andrew contritely bowed to his mother, “I beg your pardon Madame.”

“Oh, pooh, don’t listen to your father. My sensibilities are not that delicate after all my years of marriage. See you at dinner.”

Andrew had not been that far off the mark concerning the newlyweds. After a very short walk Christian had led Ariel back to their chambers. “Really Christian what will they think of us? I mean it *is* the middle of the afternoon and still daylight.”

“My darling, this is only the second day of our marriage. Everyone is probably surprised we came down for tea. I promise I will help you dress in time for dinner. That way the maid need not interrupt us either. I will even tell her that if anyone inquires, to tell them we have laid down to rest and will be down for dinner. Will that satisfy your sweet innocence?”

Ariel still showed some resistance. He pulled her close to him and whispered, “perhaps this will change your mind.” Pulling her still closer, he began to move his hands up and down her back and gently kissing her lovely tender lips.

Her acceptance came as a low moan from deep within her aroused body. She could no more deny him than she could deny a man dying of thirst a drink. “I will only be a moment to give the maid our message.” So it was when Andrew came to their door that the maid in turn relayed the message to him.

He simply acknowledged this and was on his way. *You are one very lucky man little brother, very lucky indeed.*

Meanwhile, inside the chambers, Ariel and Christian had fallen asleep in each other’s arms. The lights of their lovemaking filling their minds all afternoon before sleepiness had overtaken them both.

They were both startled awake with the knock at the bedroom door. “My lady, are you sure you can manage? It is only thirty minutes until dinner,” the maid was saying through the door. “Did you hear me? Are you sure you don’t need my assistance to get ready on time?” she repeated again.

Ariel was shaking her no as she whispered to Christian. “I don’t want her to come in and see the room. What would she think?”

“She would think, my dear, that we are two very lucky people indeed.” He was laughing a bit when he replied to the maid, “we are doing just fine but thank you for your offer. Please tell them downstairs we may be a bit tardy for dinner.”

Ariel had already climbed out of bed and was picking up clothes and underthings from around the room. She found her chemise in a pool next to the bed; Christian’s shirt was on the chair near the window. His cravat was hanging on the knob of the dressing table and her dress was inside out by the door to the sitting room. A similar fate had met the rest of their articles of clothing and Ariel was gathering them up as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, Christian was busy dressing for dinner so he was ready when Ariel needed his assistance dressing. “Your hair is so lovely; you could just leave it down and tie it with a ribbon. After all, it is just family at dinner.”

Dinner was a lively affair with stories of childhood escapades coming from everyone at the table, except Ariel who sat listening intently to each and every story told.

“Do you remember the time I got mad at you for frog hunting in our little boat? You said I was too young to be standing in the boat and might tip it over. Well, I got even very quickly, didn’t I? Not only did I tip you out of the boat, but I also turned you into the most handsome frog in the pond—red hair and all.”

“Yes, well as I remember, Father gave you what for when he discovered your little escapade.”

“Everything would have been okay if you hadn’t tried to eat that bumble bee that stung you.”

“I can still feel the fuzzy little hairs on my tongue,” Andrew replied.

Well you will be happy to know I haven’t turned anyone into a frog since. Both brothers laughed at this and the next story began.

Her grandparents relayed one about the time Ariel's mother had just gotten a new gown. "She was so proud of her new dress that she insisted she wear it immediately. She and several other children had gone for a walk when it began to rain. I don't believe I have ever seen it rain so hard in such a short time. The ground became a giant mud hole instantly."

"Oh dear, she must have ruined her new dress beyond repair." Ariel could see the dress in her mind.

"Quite the contrary, my dear, she came home, not only as dry as a bone, but as clean as the first moment she had put it on. I told how proud I was of her for not having ruined her dress. She answered back, 'I wish I had listened to you and worn an old dress instead.'

"When I asked why she felt that way she replied, 'All the other children had ever so much more fun than I did. If I'd had on an old dress I could have played all the wonderful mud games they did.' I was so shocked by her answer that it wasn't until later that I laughed. Our Abby could be quite the tomboy if she wanted to be."

The stories continued throughout the dinner. Ariel supposed everything had been delicious, but when it was over, if someone had asked her what she had eaten she couldn't have named one thing she had consumed.

The men decided to skip the usual after-dinner brandy and instead joined the ladies in the salon. There it was decided that everyone would go their separate ways in a fortnight.

Ariel's days were filled with preparations for her new home. Lady Gweneth and her grandmother helped her make lists of items she would need to purchase when she arrived in London. They helped her with the sewing of new linens and they all worked together on a large needlepoint pattern.

Ariel had taken her mother's sewing box down to the blue salon the first morning they were to sew. When her grandmother saw it there were tears in her eyes instantly. "Your grandfather and I gave this box to your mother on her sixteenth birthday. Did she ever show you the secret compartment?" she asked as she ran her hand over the smooth wood.

"No, I don't think so. I was so young when she passed away that she never had time to show me."

"Well then, it's about time you learned the secret of the box. Come, let us empty it so I can reveal the compartment to you." Ariel hurried to do her grandmother's bidding. As she took out the threads, needles, ribbons and buttons in the box she wondered if her mother had hidden anything in the secret place. Once the task was done she took it back to her grandmother and sat down beside her on the settee.

When her grandmother pushed on the inside bottom of the box the whole bottom opened like a pair of butterfly wings. There were several things hidden away. First was a lock of hair tied with a piece of ribbon. It was without question Ariel's hair. There were two letters sealed with wax—one was for Ariel and the other was for her grandmother. They each took their respective letter. Even after all the years in the box, Ariel could still catch the scent of her mother. She felt warm inside just knowing that her mother had written her before she died. She could never remember seeing her mother's handwriting before. It was almost artistry in its form—so beautiful, so precise. Finally after a long time she broke the wax seal and began to read:

My sweetest darling daughter,

I am writing you this letter knowing I will never see you grow to womanhood, but I shall be with you at all times. I am just sorry I will not be there in person. My spirit will be watching over you as you grow. Nanna knows how to train you to use your powers in the proper way.

My time on this earth is growing short and I shall miss you deeply. Remember I have always loved you and always will. Have a good life Ariel.

May the peace of God be with you.

Lovingly,

Your Mother

Ariel sat staring at the letter for a long time before she was able to speak. As she had read the letter it was as if her mother was right there beside her reading it to her. Her voice as clear as Ariel remembered it from her dreams. Ariel finally rose and excused herself and went straight to her bedroom. When she reached her sitting room she could contain her tears no longer.

Oh Mother, I miss you so much. Why did you have to go? Nanna was wonderful to me but I feel I missed so much with you gone. It seems that everyone I have loved in my life is taken away too soon.

Ariel awoke with a start. Christian was beside her watching her with deep concern. “Are you alright? Mother told me what happened and I came directly to you. You must have been dreaming when I came in. You seemed very disturbed. Do you remember your dream?”

“No, I don’t even remember falling asleep. The last thing I can recall is crying. I must have cried myself to sleep. I do know I am very glad you are here with me now. What time is it anyway?”

“It’s tea time. Do you feel like going down or would you like to have it here? I will, of course, be more than happy to stay and share the time with you.” Ariel saw the sparkle in his eyes and blushed in spite of herself.

“As wonderful as that sounds I do think we should go down and have tea with our families. There is so little time before we will all be going our own ways and you never know when we will be together again.”

“Okay, but just remember I did offer you an alternative. If the tea is so boring it brings you to tears you cannot blame me.” Having had his say, he offered her his arm and led them out of their room and down the stairs.

Ariel had been wrong in saying her grandfather was a man of few words. He had kept the entire assembly laughing so hard that many of them were in tears. He was telling one tale after another. Some were about him as a boy, some were about his courtship. Ariel had a feeling they were all embellished to entertain. During a short lull between her grandfather's stories Ariel sought out her grandmother.

"I'm sorry for the way I behaved earlier today. I must admit I can never remember reading anything my mother had written, let alone to me in particular. I guess it hit me a lot harder than I would have expected it to."

"You might say I reacted in a similar way myself. My hands were shaking so badly that I too excused myself only moments after you left and went to my room to compose myself enough to read my letter."

"I am so glad that we found the letters, and to think how long they have waited to be read."

Ariel's grandmother's eyes began to shine with unshed tears as she said, "I just wish your mother had lived longer so we could have made our peace while she was still alive. I very much regret missing you grow up into the beautiful young woman you have become."

"Well we are together now and no one can take that away from us. Tomorrow Christian and I will take you to Dove Cottage and visit Mother and Father's gravesite if weather permits."

Next day the weather did permit their trip to Dove Cottage. Ariel's grandparents were introduced to the family who would be taking care of the cottage. They also visited the graves of Ariel's parents. They said their goodbyes to the couple and a short prayer was said. They all returned to the hall in a solemn mood.

The final days of the visit went by so quickly that everyone was amazed the last night when Christian offered up a toast to remember it. "May we all remember these past weeks with joy and

warmness. Let the family that has been formed last for centuries to come and the love we all share her spread well beyond these walls.”

One and all raised their cups in agreement and drank to the future of their family.

17

The next day Christian took his brother and parents to France where they were to vacation and finish their business dealings. They would return to England by the more conventional modes of transportation in time for the opening of the new season.

Ariel, Christian and her grandparents returned to the birthplace of her mother the following day. Ariel explored every inch of her grandparent's home and the grounds surrounding the home. She walked where her mother had run and played. She sat in the room that had been her mother's. She could feel her being everywhere. She was able to see things as her mother had seen them. Felt things as her mother had felt them.

Her mother had been very lonely at times. The walls of the nursery told a sad tale. When Abby had been almost four her mother had given birth to a beautiful baby boy. Abby had cared for him like a mother hen. Tragically when the boy turned two he died, leaving a big void in Abby's life. Even though she had many friends and several cousins, they could not take his place.

Ariel could also feel the love her mother had had for her parents. She knew that her grandparents had loved her mother beyond all bounds and tried to give her anything she desired. That was why she could not understand why they did not want her to marry the man she loved.

Sitting in her mother's room Ariel experienced the turbulence her mother had felt upon her return from London. As loving parents, Ariel's grandparents had returned with their daughter to their

home thinking she would soon forget the young man from London. In London they had all met his family and were, to say the least, disenchanted with the whole lot except for the one person, the only person, who counted—Ariel's future father. They had decided the barriers would be too great to overcome and had forbidden the marriage.

Her mother had known her parents loved her. Loving Ariel's father as much as she did made her decision very difficult. When her love showed up at her parent's door only days after the family's return, he was once again turned away. From then on the two had met secretly at night making plans for a life together. Abby never mentioned Ariel's father to her parents again. Once all their plans were ready, James had left for a short time to put all the plans in motion. When he returned it would be to take Abby away to a new life with him.

While he was gone Ariel's mother had made a stash of many things she knew she would need or want to start a new home far away. Several times a day she would carry things to a cave they had chosen not too far from her parent's home. Ariel knew she would visit the cave the next day.

Ariel sensed her mother's anticipation change to worry when James took longer to return for her than was expected. Abby now knew she was carrying a child and also knew it would devastate her parents if they found out. However, her worry became so great that Abby had confided the whole story to Nanna making her promise not to tell her parents until she was gone. She had known as soon as she told Nanna that she would leave her parent's home, whether or not her lover came for her. She loved her parents too much to cause them so much embarrassment and pain. Nanna had tried to convince her to tell her parents saying they would understand and love and support her no matter what.

In the meantime Abby kept taking things to the cave and hoping for her lover's return. Three weeks to the day he returned with a wagon to the cave. He already had the wagon half loaded when Abby arrived that day.

She had wept when she saw him and ran to his open arms, nearly knocking them both to the ground. He apologized for being so late and proceeded to tell her about all he had done. She in turn told him of the impending birth and her decision to leave home alone.

“That will not be necessary now for I am here to take you to your new home. We will fill it with love and happiness to raise our child.” Ariel knew that is just what they did. Abby had never returned or had any contact with her parents after that day.

The next day, while Christian was locked in the library with her grandfather, Ariel visited the cave where her mother and father had spent so many hours. They had not had enough room on the wagon for all the things that had been stored in the cave. Her grandparents had not had the heart to take the things back to the castle. The articles were still there like treasure waiting to be found. She was drawn to one item in particular. Her mother had carefully wrapped it and put it in a box to protect it. Unwrapping one item carefully, Ariel found a miniature rocking horse. She knew immediately her grandfather had made it for the son who had died so young.

“I shall take you back to the castle and my son can play with you when he comes to visit,” Ariel said aloud. She was so shocked at what she had said that it gave her a start. She had not admitted out loud that she was with child even to herself and it would take a while to have it really sink in. She was not going to tell Christian until she had to, for she knew he would alter all his plans for them in London for her health and the baby.

Upon returning from the cave Ariel was greeted by her grandmother. “Did you have a successful day my dear? Did you find any answers to questions you didn’t even know you had? You seem to be more at peace today. As a matter of fact I could swear you are glowing,” her grandmother said with a sharp eye on her granddaughter.

Ariel blushed at this, “Yes, I did have a very good day. I found this in the cave.” Handing her grandmother the horse, “I was going to leave it here so our children could play with it whenever we came to visit. But, I think I would like to take it with us to put in our new home.”

“Of course you may take it. I’m sure your son will find great pleasure in the toy. Your grandfather will be very happy knowing his great grandson is enjoying a toy he made so many years ago.”

“You...you know? But how? I only realized it today when I was in the cave. Did you know about mother being with child before she left with father?”

“Of course I knew, a mother, or in your case a grandmother, always knows that sort of thing. The only reason you didn’t know before was because you have been so busy.”

“You never said anything to mother?”

“No, I didn’t. Our relationship was strained as it was and I didn’t want her to run away alone. I knew by this time that your father would come for her and take her away from us, but at least I knew she would be safe and loved. Your father was not first in line to become the next Duke of Belfore so he had no reason to stay with his family. Besides he had a younger brother as well as an older one. He really didn’t want anything to do with any of his family. I know now that your parents were happy with or without our blessing. That was more important than anything else was. I’m hoping things can be different this time and you will let your grandfather and I be part of your new life.”

Giving her grandmother a big hug Ariel said, “Just try to keep me away. I’m so happy that I fear I will burst at the seams.”

“You will be doing that soon enough my dear.” And they both began to laugh.

“Ah! Music to me ears,” her grandfather said as he and Christian entered the room. They had been out going over the holdings of the estate for someday it would all be Ariel’s. “And just what was so amusing that it has the two of you sound like school girls?”

“Nothing much, just enjoying each other’s company, love,” said Ariel’s grandmother as she winked at Ariel.

“Okay,” throwing his hand in the air, “I know when I’ve been bested and this is one of those times. Subject dropped.”

Ariel had taken the miniature rocking horse over to show Christian and was explaining how she had found it in the cave. “Mother had to leave this behind when father came to take her away. It has been safely packed in a box ever since.”

“I knew those things were in the cave but I never had the heart to bring them back here,” said her grandfather.

“I’m so glad you didn’t, it was like finding a buried treasure. Did you two get done with what you needed to do today?” Ariel asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. The way is clear if you are ready to leave for London tomorrow morning after breakfast,” Christian replied. “I know we have not had a very long visit but I promise we will return when we can stay longer. We have much to do in London before we can settle in our own home.”

Ariel could only nod her head in agreement for she was sad to be leaving her grandparents so soon. Feeling for the heartstone around her neck, she had the feeling that something terrible was going to happen once they arrived in London.

18

They had been in London for a week and Ariel was still in awe with everything about it--the people, the buildings, shops and entertainments alike.

Christian had taken Ariel to the home of Lord and Lady Finch. Ariel had fallen in love with the house saying it would be perfect for them. With the matter of their future home settled, they started enjoying the interest of the city.

The newlyweds were, of course, a big hit in town. All the men fell in love with Ariel and Christian had always been highly thought of. All his friends were glad to have him back in London.

Ariel had all but forgotten about her feeling of disaster amid the whirl of activities, until her cousin came for a visit. She was holding tea and he and his brother were the first to arrive.

“Dear cousin Ariel, you look wonderful,” he said with something close to a sneer. “May I present my younger brother, your cousin William, William your cousin, Lady Ariel. The grand life of the city must agree with you.”

“Thank you cousin, but I must attribute my happiness to my husband. It is nice to meet you cousin.” Ariel replied with a curtsy. “Won’t you sit and have tea? I’m expecting several other guests this afternoon. I’m sure you will know most everyone.”

“Well, we can stay for one cup but we have other commitments and would not care to overstay our welcome. By the way, where is that wonderful husband of yours?”

“Oh, he is due home at any moment. He had some business to attend to this morning but promised to be back for tea.”

“Wonderful, it would be a shame to miss him.” The smile on his lips did not reach his eyes and Ariel once again had the feeling of impending disaster.

For the rest of the afternoon she could not shake the dark feeling and by the time the couple was to go out that evening Christian was concerned enough to ask why she was so agitated and preoccupied.

“Oh, my cousins came...”

“Your cousins were here? Why didn’t you tell me? What did they do to upset you so? You should have said something when I arrived home.” He was holding his wife and felt her tremble.

“They were perfect gentlemen. It was not what they said or did that has me upset. It is just a feeling I have that something terrible is going to happen. But I don’t know what, when or to whom it will happen.”

To make Ariel more at ease he laughed and said, “Women and their intuition would have men on the edge of their seats at all times if they listened. However, just to be on the safe side, please promise you will not leave the house alone. If I can’t attend you, take your maid or one of the footmen with you. Promise!”

“Yes, I promise, but you must do the same,” she warned.

“I would look quite silly with your maid at my side.” But when he saw the worry on Ariel’s face he promised to do the same.

“I don’t think I could continue to live if anything were to happen to you.”

“You must never say anything like that again, do you hear me? Never say that again.” He had her by the shoulders and was shaking her and then holding her tightly. She could hardly breath.

“Christian, you are scaring me. I will never say it again, but I can’t stop the way I feel”

“I’m sorry if I scared you, but you scared me saying what you did. Nothing is going to happen to me, to us. We are destined to be together for now and forever.” He bent his head, his lips meeting hers in a kiss that sent sparks up and down their spines. “If we don’t stop now we will never leave home tonight.”

Looking at her husband with love and mischief in her eyes she said, “That sounds like a wonderful idea. We have been on the go every minute since we arrived here in London. I wouldn’t mind spending a night at home with you. Perhaps we could play a game of chess or…” She never got any further for Christian had picked her up and was halfway up the stairs.

“Games indeed, I’ll show you what game I have in mind,” he said as he threw open the door to their bedroom.

Ariel’s laughter could be heard throughout the household. “My heavens sir, whatever type of game do you have in mind?”

“Why it’s the oldest game in the world between a man and a woman.” With that he placed her on their bed. “Let the game begin!”

All thoughts of doom and gloom were lost with their first kiss. Nothing could stand in the way of their love for each other. Hours later they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

The next morning Ariel woke alone in the big bed. She had known she would, but there was still disappointment not being able to see Christian beside her when she opened her eyes. Christian noticed her stir from across the room. He was standing at the window with a note in his hand. “I have some urgent business to take care of, but I shall be home for lunch and I shall be at your service for the remainder of the day.”

Disappointed, Ariel ordered a bath, deciding to use her time alone to organize her thoughts and to write down some of the lists that were in her head. There were the things for their new home to

choose, like drapery and furniture fabrics; more linens and china and silver; wall coverings and new beds and furniture for the nursery. She knew she would soon have to tell Christian they were to have a child. Ariel could already notice subtle changes in her body and was sure Christian would soon notice them too.

Across town Christian was at his solicitors, putting final touches on his will and allocation of all his properties. He wanted to make sure if anything were to happen to him Ariel and his son would be taken care of for life. His precious Ariel thought she was keeping the baby a secret. Christian had known before they had left Blackthorne. He kept quiet, wanting it to be her secret to be told. He had already paid a visit to hire a pair of Bowstreet runners to watch Ariel's cousins. They were to report daily on the cousins' comings and goings and any visitors they might have were to be noted.

"Can you believe that simple country mouse holding tea, as if it were court? Why, she put on more airs than the Queen herself."

"I found her quite charming, in a simple sort of way. Her manners were impeccable and her beauty..."

"Oh, shut up! You are practically drooling over that milkmaid of a cousin. Just who does she think she is? She has never been properly introduced into society. It's all because of that no-title husband of hers. He thinks he is... well never mind that. Our dear cousin will soon learn he is not as perfectly wonderful and self-assured as he acts. Our plans will soon come to a head. We will then see who is the better man." His laughter, which made his own brother feel sorry for Ariel and her husband, was pure evil.

"as anyone come out besides the 'igh and mighty 'imself?" The leader of the thugs, Turnbill, had just returned with fresh ale and some bread and cheese to eat and drink as he and Neil watched for a chance to put their plan into action.

“Not a bloody soul ‘as been in or out. This be nothin’ but a waste of time. We been ‘ere for three days now and she ne’er comes out on ‘er own.”

“Well, maybe today’s our lucky day,” as he pointed to the front door.

Cautiously Ariel stepped out the front door. She was really too agitated to worry overly much about her promise to Christian. After she had bathed and dressed, she was putting the heartstone around her neck and the chain became tangled and broke. “On, no! What shall I do? I can’t let this out of my possession and I must have it repaired.” thinking out loud. *I must get my maid to walk with me to the jewelers. They will simply have to fix it while I wait for it. I have no other choice.*

“Come along, what is the matter with you?” Ariel was pulling the maid out the door. “My husband took me to the jewelers just last week. It isn’t that far to walk.”

“It’s not the walk I’m afraid of, Madame, it’s what lurks in the dark corners that has me a wee bit nervous. You’ve got me so rattled I forgot me hat. I’ll be just a moment.” And with that the maid ran back inside.

Not wanting to waste time, Ariel continued down the steps and on down the path. *The maid will simply have to catch up with me for I wish to be back home before Christian* she thought to herself.

Suddenly things went black and her arms were pinned to her side. When she tried to scream a foul-smelling rag was stuffed in her mouth. She dropped her reticule as she was none-to-gently shoved into a cart filled with hay and covered up completely.

“That were almost too easy,” one of her captors said.

“It be far from over. One of us best go tell our employer we ‘ave the package and tell ‘im where we be ‘idden at.”

“’ow long ya think we’ll ‘ave to wait?”

“Somethin’ tells me it won’t take the cur long to try an’ git ‘er back. No sir, not long at all.”

Christian was able to finish his business sooner than he had hoped and arrived home to nothing short of bedlam.

Ariel's maid was in tears, ringing her hand and saying, "I only left for a moment, only a moment." Other servants were running here and there at the orders of the butler.

"What is it? What has happened? Will someone please tell me what is going on? But deep in his heart he knew. His worst fears had come to pass even with all he had done to safeguard his precious Ariel. Someone had taken her from him. Anger began to build in the pit of his stomach where only moments ago burning fear had been.

"What is the matter with you people? Why couldn't you protect one person for a few hours?"

Suddenly he grabbed the wrist of Ariel's maid, none to gently and demanding. "Now, I want to know exactly what happened and when it happened."

With tears brimming in her eyes and terror pounding in her heart, the maid told Christian everything.

"Please my lord, it wasn't my fault. I was only gone a minute or two to fetch my hat. She were so upset because her necklace broke. Her ladyship didn't stay inside the gates. We found her reticule just beyond them. I would never intentionally let any harm come to her." When she finished telling all she knew she collapsed on the floor, a pile of nerves.

For the first time, he saw how upset the maid was. "I know how impatient my wife can be at times and she is used to doing things on her own. I'm sure you did nothing wrong however try to be a little more prepared in the future. Now, go clean yourself up and be ready to serve your mistress when I return with her."

“Yes sir, right away sir, anything you say sir,” making a clumsy attempt at curtsies all the way out of the room, thankful she still had her job. Before the maid was even out of the room Christian was organizing and giving out orders.

“Send one of the footmen to notify the Bowstreet runners of the abduction. Tell the runners if anyone shows at the Duke’s residence that looks out of place to follow them. One runner is to stay at the Duke’s to watch the brothers. Perhaps we can get lucky if it was Ariel’s cousins who did it. Have a horse saddled and our best rider standing by. I will only be a moment.” With that said he dashed into his father’s study.

“If anyone harms a hair on her beautiful head there will be hell to pay.” His fists were drawn so tight they were turning white. The butler, who had followed him into the study, was thanking his lucky stars he was not going to be on the business end of those hands.

“Sir, what do you have in mind? Only one man and a horse is not going to afford much of a rescue, if you pardon my saying so.”

“I can’t be accurate with my transport if I take more. I have refined my abilities to transport with these stones but I haven’t been able to increase how much I can move. When we arrive at the spot where they are holding Ariel I will send the horse and rider to fetch the runners and then here to get the closed carriage. In the meantime I will locate exactly where Ariel is being held.”

“Sir, you must not take on these ruffians alone!” the butler said with great concern for Christian. “Promise you won’t do anything until help arrives.”

“As long as Ariel is safe I will not attempt to rescue her alone. But if I determine she is in any danger I cannot promise anything. I will wait outside if I can.” Christian had been loading two of his father’s pistols. Taking them and his sword he left the room.

19

Ariel was carried up a very narrow, steep and smelly staircase. She was still gagged and blindfolded but her heart had stopped pounding as if it would explode at any moment. Her head had also cleared to a point where she could think and not be in a panic.

The men had thrown her onto a cot. She was sure it was covered with all manner of vermin, not to mention years of filth and odors. Ariel lay very still hoping her captors would think her unconscious. *Christian will be here shortly. I hope he doesn't do anything dangerous. If I stay quiet and don't move I'm sure I will be safe.*

Out on the street, Christian had indeed arrived with the horse and rider. As soon as he was sure of the exact building and the street he sent the rider on his way to get help. Unable to do as he promised and wait outside for help, Christian entered the building. Quietly he began to climb the stairs. Listening at each door he soon found the rooms where the ruffians were holding Ariel.

“Ben ought to be here soon with ‘is lordship then we can ‘ave our way with the beauty without any interference.” They laughed, then continued, ““Ey, at least we don’t ‘ave to worry ‘bout that ‘usband of ‘ers interrupting our fun like ‘e did last fall in the street.”

The hair on Christian’s neck was standing on end. These were the same men who had attacked him all those months ago. Ariel was in grave danger and he felt the longer he waited the more danger she would be in.

Ariel had heard the conversation also and was very aware of the danger, not only to herself, but also to Christian if he tried to rescue her alone. It was at this moment the commotion in the outer room began. First there was a loud crash; followed by what she would later learn was a gunshot. There was a short struggle and then silence. Ariel felt she would go mad for she knew in her heart--it had been Christian who had come crashing through the outer door in an attempt to rescue her.

What has happened? Was Christian all right? Why was it taking so long for him, if he is okay, to come for me? All these things were going through Ariel's mind when someone entered the room. Ariel held her breath in fear, backing up to the wall, not wanting to think the worst but unable not to.

Then he spoke, "Ariel, are you okay? They didn't harm you did they? Ariel?!!

Ariel began to breathe again. It was her beloved Christian. She began to stir on the cot and make muffled sounds.

Christian found, and lit, a candle. That was when he saw her—bound, gagged, and blindfolded—lying on the filthy cot. Anger returned. "I was too kind to those blackhearts. Death came to swiftly and easily. I should have made them suffer more for the way they treated you." All the while he had been freeing Ariel from her bonds.

"Oh Christian, I was so frightened," flinging her arms around him as soon as she was free. Those were the same men who brought harm to you before."

"Yes, I know, but there is nothing to fear from them now or ever again." Folding her in his warm embrace, wanting to kiss and inspect every inch of her to make sure she had come to no harm.

"We cannot stay here. The two in the other room were waiting for others and I don't want to be here when they come. I have a carriage coming with help, but if it is not here when we get downstairs I will take us home my way. Agreed?"

Ariel could only nod her head. She was wrapped in his arms being carried to safety. Christian had rescued her and that was the only thing that mattered at this moment.

“Keep your eyes closed, my love. I don’t want you to see what has taken place in the other room. It is not a pretty sight and no lady should have to be subjected to it.” Having said this he carried her through the room and down the stairs.

“Do you think you can stand on your own? I want to make sure everything is clear outside and check to see if our carriage has arrived?”

Not trusting her voice Ariel again nodded her head then looked into Christian’s eyes. Seeing nothing but the love he held for her gave her strength to do what was needed.

Setting her gently on the floor just inside the doorway, Christian held her making sure she was steady on her feet. He could not resist giving her one warm, but hungry, kiss before he went out into the street.

Christian had walked both ways on the street making sure all was safe for Ariel. He did not see his carriage and decided there was no time to waste waiting for it.

Christian had failed to see a carriage approaching from the opposite direction but the occupants had seen him.

“He will not mess up my plans! I will take care of him myself.” Lord James drew a pistol from under the seat and gave orders for the carriage to slow down.

“You can’t mean to shoot him brother. You could be hung for it if you were caught.”

“Who would testify against me? You brother?” He laughed. “I think not.” Cocking the pistol and aiming at Christian’s back, he pulled the trigger.

“Our carriage has not yet come to a stop. We will be...”

Christian had been walking towards the doorway where he had left Ariel. She had stepped into the opening and was watching Christian's approach. She saw the carriage coming and was about to tell Christian when she heard the same sound she had heard upstairs, but this time she saw the smoking pistol in the carriage window. She could only stand in the doorway and scream.

"Look, it is our cousin. We can't stop now. She will recognize us."

"Blast! Can nothing ever go the way I want it to? Very well drive on. We will pay our respects to the widow later," and laughed at his own sick joke.

By this time Ariel had reached Christian who was lying face down where he had fallen. Christian had not had time to react to the sound of the gunshot or to Ariel's scream before he felt the slam of the ball in the middle of his back. Pain then seared through his whole body. A white, blinding pain he had known before. But this time it was different and he knew he was dying.

"Christian! Christian! Please Christian, try to focus on me." It was Ariel, bending over him. "I must get to the wound if I am to save you!"

Christian fought to stay conscious. Taking Ariel's hands in his he said, "No, you must promise you will not use your powers to help me." The effort of talking was almost too much. His pain was almost to the point of blocking out all reason. However, Christian knew he must get Ariel's promise for she would be putting herself and their child in grave danger if she tried to save him. "Please you must promise for the sake of our child."

"You know of the child?" Ariel was shocked.

"Yes, and I also know that if you try..." the pain was too much. He had to stop for a few moments. "If you try to help me you are risking the life of our child, as well as yourself. I could never live with myself knowing... Promise Ariel! Promise!"

"Oh Christian! I can not live without you please don't do this!"

“I must have your promise!” The corners of his mouth were white with pain, his voice barely a whisper. “Ariel, I beg you!”

Unable to control the tears she took Christian’s hand, she had already cradled his head in her lap. Then she promised not to use her powers to save his life.

“I shall always love you my sweet Ariel.” With the last of his strength, he caressed her face and the blessed darkness overtook him.

“Christian, no! You can’t leave me. We have our whole lives ahead of us. We are meant to be together now and forever. Our time has been too short. Fight! Stay with me. I need you.”

Christian’s men arrived moments later only to find they were too late to help rescue their master’s wife. Ariel was on the pavement with Christian’s head in her lap, his blood was everywhere. The men had to carry both Ariel and Christian to the waiting carriage.

Crying, Ariel begged the men, “Be careful, don’t hurt him. He has suffered so much already.”

They knew their master was beyond feeling anything, however, they simply did as she bid. She was in shock also and there was no reason to upset her further.

“When we get you home I will have the best surgeon attend you. You will be right as rain in no time at all.” Ariel was saying to the unconscious love of her life lying on the seat across from her.

Upon arrival at home she had Christian carried to their bedchamber and sent a footman for a surgeon. She had his man help her undress Christian and clean up all the dried blood.

“My darling you have lost a great deal of blood, but I believe because you are young and strong you can make a complete recovery.”

Christian was able to hear her words but felt no more pain. He could see his beautiful Ariel leaning over his body on their bed. He knew he must be dead or dying because he could feel himself floating towards a bright light.

When Ariel had her husband cleaned and bandaged, she called her maid. After quickly changing her soiled gown and washing her face and hands she addressed the maid, “Thank you for your assistance. Would you please go see if the surgeon has arrived? We are ready for him.”

“Yes, my lady.” Not wanting to upset her mistress further she curtsied and left the room shaking her head. She went downstairs and finding the butler she relayed Lady Ariel’s wishes and all that had occurred since they had arrived with the wounded young master.

She added that she felt he was dying as they spoke. She felt the surgeon was not going to be able to do anything to save him.

The butler, having been employed for many years by the family, listened nodding. He had seen too many unexplainable things to nay-say her ladyship when she said Master Christian would be on the mend. He went about his business with a lighter step and a happier heart.

While the made had been talking to the butler, the surgeon arrived. A footman ushered him upstairs to the patient.

From the information he had been given he felt his services would not be needed and after his examination he relayed his feelings to her ladyship.

“I feel it would be an effort in futility to remove the ball from your husband’s back. There is no way he is going to survive the loss of blood.”

“I do not care one fig what you feel or say. You will remove the ball and bandage my husband. I will not hold you responsible for the outcome one way or the other, but you WILL remove the ball now!” Ariel said this with determination.

The surgeon simply shook his head and went to work removing the ball from Christian’s back. After he had bandaged the wound he again turned and spoke to Ariel. “I doubt he will survive the night, but I have removed the ball and bandaged the wound. I will leave medication. If he happens to live

through the night he will need it for the pain.” Having had his say, he turned on his heel and exited the room.

While everything was going on in the bedchamber Christian had floated closer to the bright light on his final journey.

“Christian! Christian!”

He didn’t know where he was but he thought he heard his grandmother calling his name. It was so bright. He could see nothing but a white brilliance all around him.

Then suddenly his grandmother was there in front of him. “Christian you cannot stay. It is not your time. Ariel needs you and you are to have many more children. It has been written so.”

“Grandmother, I did not want to come and leave my beloved. I could not allow Ariel to save me in her condition. Would you have me risk both mother and child?”

“Your wife possesses a power greater than she could imagine. Look, she has cleaned you and insisted the surgeon remove the ball in your back. Now she is nursing and talking to you. Soon she will remember the heartstone. You must be there to respond or all will be lost. Go now, no harm will come to Ariel or the babe. The time is near.” Having had her say, she gave her grandson a hug and disappeared back into the light.

Ariel was at Christian’s bedside. *He is so still and so cold*, she thought. Then she realized she could not feel him take a breath. “No!” she screamed. “No, you cannot leave me.” *There has to be something that I can do without going against my vow to Christian.* Her beloved was gone. Ariel began to sob, rocking back and forth holding Christian’s cold lifeless hand.

Suddenly she remembered Lady Backthorne’s words, “Keep this stone with you at all times, if it is needed you will know what to do, how it works and what to say.”

Ariel rushed to the door of the chamber. She knew her maid was waiting on the other side in case she was needed by her mistress.

“Quickly, where is my reticule? I need my reticule.”

“It is on your dressing table. I put it there after it was found on the sidewalk, the maid said as she rushed to retrieve it for her mistress.

Once Ariel had her reticule in hand she dug out the heartstone. With a shaking hand Ariel placed the stone on Christian's still heart. Not knowing how she knew the words, she began to chant the ancient spell:

*Oh Mighty Ancients of Power—hear my plea. Return to me the heart of my heart,
the mate of my soul, my life of my love and make my love whole again.*

She closed her eyes. Rocking to and fro repeating the words over and over again and again. .

“Ariel.” It was only a whisper. She thought she just imagined she had hear Christian speak her name, but it happened again.

“Ariel, I am here!” He took her hand in his. The effort took every ounce of strength he had. The darkness overtook him once more.

Ariel though, knew all would be right with her world.

Epilogue

It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining on the golden leaves of autumn.

Yesterday had been a very long day. Christian had been out and about early, trying to catch up some of the business he was unable to do while recuperating from his wound.

It had taken nearly six months to gain back his strength. In that six months time Ariel had blossomed into the woman he knew she would be right before his very eyes. Christian marveled at the changes in her body daily as their child was growing inside her.

Yesterday morning, while Christian was out, Ariel had gone into labor. It had been a long labor, but not a hard one. Ariel had insisted that Christian be present the whole time. He applied cold compressed to her brow and held her hand during each contraction. Their son had been born just before midnight and both parents had fallen asleep immediately.

They awoke in each other's arms, to the sound of their newborn son's cry.

"It would seem our son is in need of his mother. I can fully understand that need myself. It has been a very long time for me to wait." He began kissing Ariel to make his point.

"Yes, well it will be a while longer too, first things first. Your son has a greater need of me than you do. You will simply have to wait your turn. Now go fetch our son so I may feed him."

"The servants said you had become very bossy since my injury, now I see it is true." Chuckling Christian went and picked up their son.

“Well, someone had to get things done. We still would be in your parents’ home you know,” she replied, as she dropped her nightgown to allow the babe to suckle. “By the way, was there any word of my cousins yesterday?”

“No and I don’t think there ever will be. I’m sure they were aboard the first ship out of port. They know they never dare step on English soil again if they want to live. Now, I suppose I must leave you for a while. We are sure to have all manner of visitors today.”

“I wish you never had to leave me, even for a short time.”

“You know I am never very far away—for we are bound heart and soul forever”