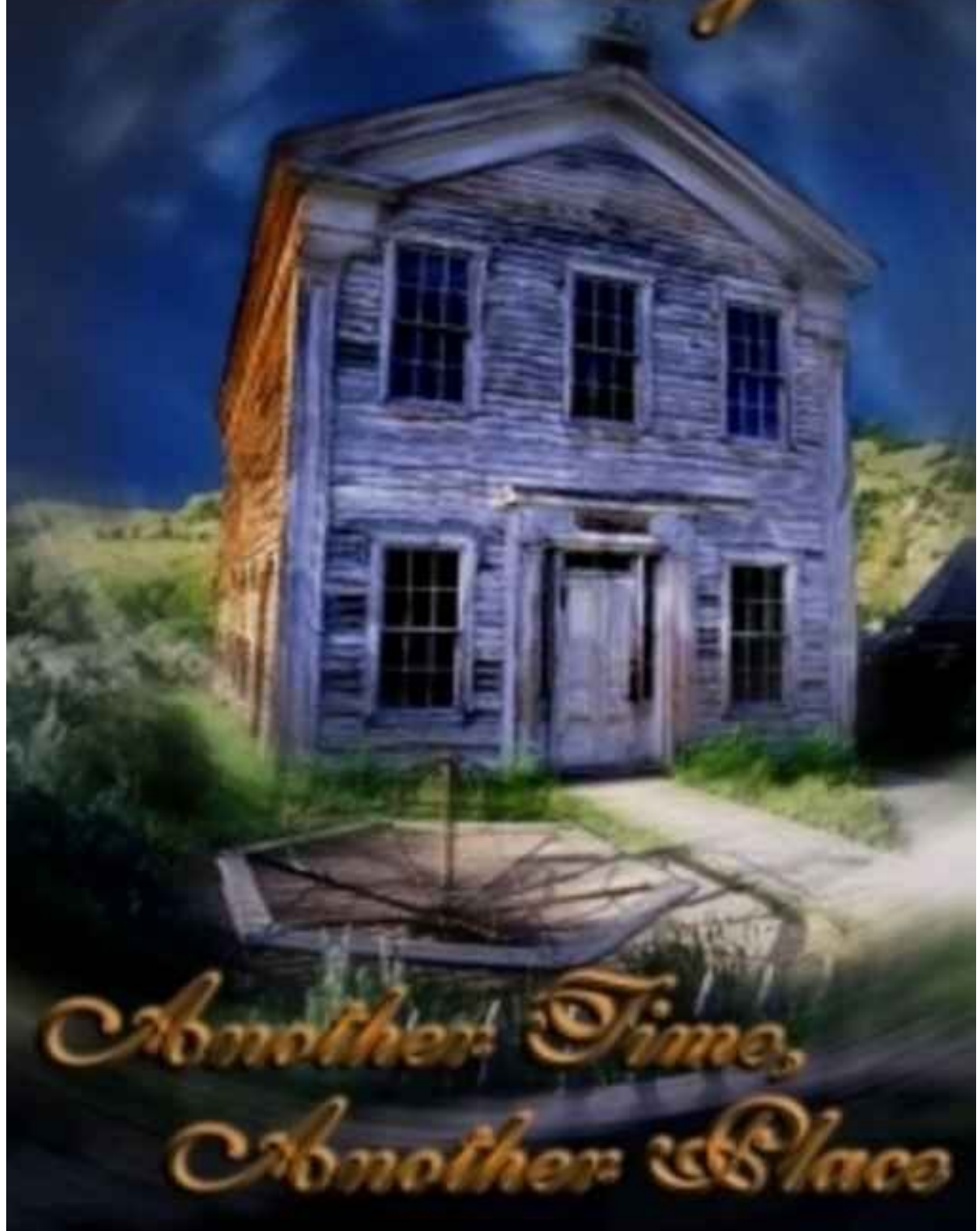


Barni Bryan



*Another Time,
Another Place*

ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER PLACE

by

Barri Bryan

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New Concepts Publishing

5202 Humphreys Rd.

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

Prologue

It happened in another time -- a century that is no more, and in another place -- a secluded corner of an isolated and arid area. In this remote and almost inaccessible spot there stood near a tiny hamlet an old-fashioned two-room schoolhouse. Because it was nestled in a secluded grove of tall oaks within a stone's throw of a clear running stream, the view, even from a great distance, was fair to behold. Maybe that's the reason the residents of this out-of-the-way rural community named the school Fairview.

Events that occurred at Fairview School in that all-but-forgotten past haunt the scene to this day and thereby hangs a tale. . .

Chapter One

A slim young girl leading a child by the hand made her way up an overgrown path toward the clapboard country school. "Are you the new school teacher?" She addressed the tall fashionably attired young woman who stood in the open door of the little two-room building, then waited expectantly.

Grace Collin's position as teacher at the Fairview School was new enough for her to feel a tingle of pleasure at being referred to as teacher. "Yes, I am."

"Then I reckon you're who we're a lookin' for."

The girl emanated a fragile aura of mystery that brought a touch of sadness, leaving the usually composed Grace feeling as melancholy as waning sunset. "How may I help you?"

"We come to see about enrolling in school, " The girl nodded toward the barefoot child beside her. "This here is Emmy Lou."

Grace studied the unexpected callers and was fascinated by what she saw. There was nothing unusual or unique about either of her visitors but the young woman – Grace was reluctant to use the word woman to describe one so youthful and innocent in appearance - the girl -- was an elfin-like creature, who emanated an aura of other-worldliness. She nodded to the child. "Good afternoon, Emmy Lou."

Emmy Lou failed to respond. Grace didn't notice. She couldn't take her eyes off the young girl standing beside the fragile child. Why? She wondered, was this waif-like creature so intriguing? It was certainly not because of the girl's physical appearance. A more ordinary female one could never hope to see. With her freckled nose, her flyaway brown hair, and her wide-set green eyes, hers was a face that would pass unnoticed in a crowd. Grace realized, quite suddenly, that she was staring. Extending one hand, she invited, "Won't you come in?"

"Yes ma'am." The girl got a firmer grip on Emmy Lou's hand and the two walked up the steps and onto the small stoop.

Grace opened the front door and stepped back, thinking as she did so that she had never before seen such finely chiseled features or a fairer more translucent complexion. This enchanting young girl possessed something much more striking and far more complex than mere physical beauty. Grace felt vaguely disturbed without knowing why. Her melancholy thoughts were interrupted when the girl said, "I was afraid you wouldn't be here, and we come all the way from Henry's Mill."

Henry's Mill was almost five miles from the school. "You walked?" Grace asked as she followed the strange duo into the vestibule.

"I did." The girl shrugged one slim shoulder. "Emmy Lou got tired so I toted her a part of the way."

"Would you like a drink of water?" Grace pointed toward the water fountain near the cloakroom door.

"You got a cup?" The girl nodded in Emmy Lou's direction. "She cain't reach this here fountain."

While Grace was finding a cup, the girl thirstily slurped water into her mouth. After Emmy Lou had drunk from the cup, she handed it to the girl and then wiped her face on the tail of her dress. The girl gave the cup back to Grace. "Daddy sent me to find out about startin' Emmy Lou to school. What do I have to do?"

"Has Emmy Lou been to school before?"

"No ma'am. This will be her first year."

"It's really very simple," Grace explained. "There's an enrollment card to complete. This way, please." Turning, she walked from the vestibule to her classroom.

The two visitors followed her inside.

"Would you like to sit down?" Grace extended her hand toward a desk in the front row.

The girl sat sideways in the desk. Emmy Lou leaned into her lap, turned her face away from Grace and stared toward the back door. The girl's assessing eyes swept around the room, taking in the neat rows of desks, the bookcase near the door, the blackboard that lined three walls. "This here is a nice place."

"Thank you," Grace murmured, pleased by such honest and artless praise.

After a moment of awkward silence, the girl said, "Brother Johnson says a bus will come to get Emmy Lou for school every morning and bring her home every afternoon. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right." By now Grace had found an enrollment card and a pencil, and put them on the desk in front of the girl.

She used one slim finger to push the card away. "I cain't fill this thang out," she informed Grace in her flat, West Texas drawl.

Grace protested, "But you haven't even read it."

"I cain't do that, neither." The girl's smooth brow creased into a frown. "I never learnt to read."

Grace was appalled. She had been cautioned before she accepted this position that the backwoods people in this area were poorly educated. But this was 1946, for heaven's sake. Everyone, or so she had thought until now, could read at some primary level. Before discretion could stay her tongue, she blurted out, "Not a word?"

The young girl hung her head. "No ma'am." Color licked along her delicate cheekbones. Then her head came up as she brightened considerably, "I cain't read words, but I'm good at solving pitchers."

The meaning of her cryptic words eluded Grace. "Pitchers? I don't understand."

The girl pointed to the portrait of George Washington that hung above Grace's desk. "I can look at pitchers and guess what they mean."

"Oh." Suddenly, Grace understood much more than she cared to. She swallowed over the lump in her throat. "You mean pictures?"

The girl nodded. "Yes ma'am, pitchers. Me and daddy, and Cody too, want Emmy Lou to do better. We want her to know how to solve words."

"Of course you do." Grace was feeling chagrined and frustrated at her own lack of insight. "Would you like me to fill the card out for you?" She sat in the desk across from the girl. "My name is Grace Collins. You may call me Miss Grace."

"Miss Grace." The girl spoke the words as if she could taste them. "That's a right pretty name. Is it like the grace Brother Johnson preaches about?"

Reverend Abner Johnson was the pastor of Fairview's Full Gospel Church. He was a muscular man in

his mid-thirties, who looked more like a wrestler than a man of the cloth. In the short time Grace had been in this area, she had heard a great deal about Brother Johnson's fiery sermons and his ability to cast out demons. Never before had there been any mention of his expounding on the merits of grace. "I don't think so. My mother named me Grace."

For the first time since she had entered the school, the girl smiled--- and such a smile. It was poignant as an old melody when one has forgotten the words. "Well my mamma sure didn't name me Sissie."

"Is that your name?" Grace asked, surprised at my own audacity.

"I reckon so." Sissie shrugged. "My mamma died when I was borned. My daddy and Cody, that's my big brother, raised me. They thought I was gonna die too, so they never bothered to give me no name. They just called me Sissie."

That pathetic admission, so blandly stated, tore at Grace's heart. "I'm sorry."

Sissie smiled once more. It had to be the sweetest, saddest smile Grace had ever seen. "There ain't no need to be sorry. I reckon I'm lucky to have any name a tall."

Feeling inept and inadequate to deal with such a personal and pathetic revelation, Grace changed the subject. "I'll have to ask you some questions." Picking up the pencil, she reached for the enrollment card. "Is Emmy Lou your sister?"

Surprise brought Sissie's head up. "Emmy Lou's mine." She pulled Emmy Lou nearer to her. "She's my own borned child."

Grace was appalled. This fairy-like creature didn't look a day over sixteen. She had been advised before accepting this position that some of the customs and practices in this isolated little corner of the world would be seem old fashioned and antiquated compared to the cosmopolitan life she had know as the only child of a wealthy and powerful oil executive and his heiress wife. She had been warned that some of the views held by its residents could very easily conflict with the teachings espoused by the prestigious and very expensive private college she had attended for the past four years. She had thought until this moment that she had prepared herself for every eventually. Obviously, she'd been mistaken. Too stunned to speak, Grace stared with her mouth hanging open.

Cautiously, Sissie asked, "You ain't one of them state people are you?"

Grace managed to close her mouth and to pull her scattered thoughts together. So many questions ran through her mind, the main one being what had prompted such a query? She decided not to pursue subjects that she was ill equipped to deal with. Yet she couldn't help but wonder what fears and superstitions lived inside the uneducated mind of this hauntingly enigmatic woman-child. "No, I'm just a teacher. This is information I need for the school." When Sissie made no further objections, she asked, "What is your full name?"

"I done told you, it's Sissie." Suspicion tightened Sissie's voice. "I thought this was about Emmy Lou."

"It is about Emmy Lou." Grace explained slowly and carefully, "Every student must fill out an enrollment card. These are very routine questions. I need to know Emmy Lou's mother's complete name. You do have a last name, don't you?"

Uncertainty creased Sissie's forehead into a delicate frown. "Does that mean you ask everybody the same questions?"

"That's what it means." Grace was feeling more uncomfortable by the moment. "What is your last name?"

Sissie loosened her grip on Emmy Lou and then straightened to face Grace. "You want to know my last

name?"

Grace's discomfort was being replaced by impatience. "Yes, please."

"It's Slayton." The young woman lifted her chin. In that fleeting moment she looked almost regal. "My name is Sissie Slayton."

Grace printed Slayton, Sissie in the designated space, and lifting her pencil, raised her head and asked, "What is Emmy Lou's father's name?"

"Emmy Lou ain't got no daddy," Sissie spoke without the slightest trace of shame or embarrassment.

"Is your husband dead?" Her lack of shame led Grace to assume as much.

"Emmy Lou ain't got no daddy." Sissie looked up at Grace from under her sooty lashes, her green eyes wide and candid. "She ain't never had one."

Was this poor backwoods creature truly that ignorant? It seemed possible. She couldn't read. She couldn't write and she couldn't have been much more than a baby herself when Emmy Lou was born. Grace took a deep breath. "Just because you didn't marry the man who sired Emmy Lou doesn't mean he is not her father." She sat with her pencil poised, ready to write. "What is his name?"

"Sired?" Sissie questioned, her face twisting into a puzzled frown.

"Bred, produced . . ." Grace felt herself blushing. Her words sounded crude in her own ears. "The man you granted sexual favors to . . ." That was even more uncouth. She inhaled and started again. "The man you slept with. . ."

Something akin to a sob throbbed through Sissie's voice. "You don't have to explain no more, Miss Grace. I may be ignorant, but I ain't dumb." She studied the backs of her slim work-worn hands. "I ain't never told nobody that. I don't aim to start with you." Standing, she took Emmy Lou by the hand. "We gotta go now. Daddy and Cody will be a wantin' supper."

The aura of mystery that surrounded this strange young woman was beginning to intrigue Grace. "Sit down, Sissie." She gestured toward the desk the young woman had so recently vacated. "We can work something out."

Sissie's gaze narrowed. "Are you gonna let Emmy Lou go to school?"

That was not Grace's decision to make. She wasn't sure she could explain that to Sissie. "I'll do my best, but I need more information."

Sissie eased back down into the desk. She was like a wild animal being coaxed into a cage. "Like what?"

"Like when was Emmy Lou born, and has she been vaccinated for small pox?"

On the end of a relieved sigh, Sissie answered, "The third day of August, nineteen hundred and forty, and yes ma'am, she has."

"Thank you." Grace printed the information on Emmy Lou's enrollment card, and then looked up. "There's more. Shall I continue?"

"I reckon so."

Without further argument or inquiry, Sissie answered all the other necessary questions, then rose and took Emmy Lou by the hand. "Thank you, Miss Grace."

"You're welcome, Sissie," Grace answered. She laid her pencil aside. "I'll see Emmy Lou next Monday."

"Yes ma'am." Without another word or a backward look, Sissie and Emmy Lou walked out the door and down the steps. Grace stood in the doorway and watched until the two had disappeared around a bend in the narrow path.

Chapter Two

The next few weeks were busy ones. Grace all but forgot about that brief encounter with her two strange visitors.

A few days after school began a second teacher arrived to take over the duties of teaching the upper grades. Much to Grace's surprise, and not to her displeasure, the teacher was a single, unattached young man. His name was David Adams.

David was a tall man, and very slim with a handsome face and somber dark eyes. His black hair was slicked to his head until it shone like patent leather. From the onset, Grace liked him. He was open and sensitive, kind and compassionate. He displayed all the characteristics that made him seem a perfect teacher. In a matter of weeks, Grace and David had become not only colleagues but also friends.

As the weeks passed, David and Grace fell into the habit of calling at the homes of students who began to miss too many school days, even if those absences were excused. They were careful never to make visits together. The residents of this small community would have thought that most inappropriate. But they did compare notes, and discuss ways to encourage not only students, but also parents, to see the importance of children attending school regularly.

By late October, Emmy Lou had begun to miss school quite frequently. One bright Indian summer Saturday Grace decided to drive over to Henry's Mill and visit Emmy Lou and Sissie. Over breakfast, she told Maude Perkins of her plan.

Miss Maude Perkins was a spinster in her late fifties. Her father had been the publisher of The Herald, the local newspaper. When he passed on, he left his only daughter a fine old Victorian house, and little else. Maude supplemented her meager income by supplying room and board to unmarried ladies. Grace made her home with Miss Maude. So did a pretty young bookkeeper, a middle-aged secretary, two frumpy sales ladies, and a bank clerk with henna-red hair.

"You're going to Henry's Mill?" Maude followed Grace into the front parlor. "Is that a good idea?" She had until now, had nothing but high praise for Grace's efforts to contact parents of absent children.

"Emmy Lou has missed several days of school, " Grace explained. "I think I should call on her mother."

Maude pointed to a chair in the corner of the parlor, the one with the needlepoint bottom. "Sit down, Grace."

Grace sat, feeling uneasy and not knowing why.

Maude's cheeks, thin and delicate as old parchment, were stained with splotches of red. "I am not a gossip, Grace."

Grace was well aware of that fact. "I know that." She could have added that Maude Perkins was one of the most genteel and refined woman she'd ever known. She didn't.

Maude perched on the end of her velvet-cushioned couch, turned her head to one side and asked, "What do you know about the Slayton family?"

"Not much," Grace had to admit. "I met Sissie Slayton when she came to enroll her daughter in school."

Maude seemed surprised. "Sissie Slayton came to school? When was this?"

Apprehension began to unravel inside Grace's stomach. "The day before classes began. Why do you

ask?"

"I never knew Sissie to go anywhere alone before."

"She wasn't alone. She had her daughter with her. At first I couldn't believe that child was the mother of a little girl."

Maude was clearly surprised and visibly curious. "What did Sissie want? What did she say?"

"She wanted to enroll Emmy Lou, that's her daughter's name, in school. She said very little. " Grace was reluctant to reveal more. As delicately as possible, she asked, "How old is Sissie? "

"She's in her early twenties, I believe. Why?"

Grace would have never have judged Sissie to be that old. "She seemed such a strange little creature. I wondered about her."

"You're not the first person to wonder about Sissie Slayton." Maude stared down at her blue veined hands, folded and resting in her lap. "The local residents refer to Sissie as a 'fairy child'."

Grace was intrigued. "That's what she's like, a fairy, or an elf, or a pixie."

Maude sat very straight and spoke sternly. " I don't think you should go to Henry's Mill."

Grace was not about to be deterred now. "But I must if I'm to find out about Emmy Lou." Even as she spoke, she knew that was not her only reason for wanting to make this call.

"Then you are going?" Maude sounded anything but pleased.

In Miss Maude's warm parlor, Grace felt goose bumps gambol across her bare arms. "I am. I must."

"If you have your mind set on this foolishness, I can't stop you." Then the habitually soft-spoken Miss Maude Perkins declared with force and authority. "But I absolutely forbid you to go to Morgan's Mill alone."

Grace was outraged. She kept her voice calm, but inside she was seething. "I don't think you can stop me."

Maude was immediately apologetic. "Oh, my dear, I am sorry." She leaned forward and smiled.

"Perhaps this once Mr. Adams could go with you."

"I can't ask him to do that." Feeling a little foolish, Grace added, "I wouldn't be proper." She brightened as a new idea materialized. "Perhaps you could go to Henry's Mill with me."

Maude faltered. "I don't know. I know this is important to you." After some thought, she offered, "If you absolutely must make this trip, perhaps Mr. Adams and I should both go with you."

Chapter Three

That seemed an excellent idea, but when Grace broached to subject to David, he seemed reluctant. "I don't know that going to Henry's Mill is a good idea." He was seated across from Grace in Maude's front parlor. "You aren't from around here, so you don't know anything at all about the Slayton family. I grew up over near Benton's Crossing. That's quite a distance, but even there we knew about the notorious Slayton clan."

Again, Grace felt that touch of apprehension. It was coupled with an almost morbid curiosity. "Perhaps you can enlighten me."

One of David's eyebrows climbed up his broad brow. "You want to know about the Slaytons?"

Grace nodded. "I do. I'm especially curious about Sissie. She seems to be such a mysterious little thing."

David drew a long breath. "Most of what I know is gossip and hearsay."

Grace complained, "Everybody keeps hinting and insinuating, but I can't get anyone to come forward with facts."

David walked to the window. With his back to Grace, he replied, "Maybe that's because that's all there is - gossip and conjecture."

Impatience brought Grace to her feet. "For heaven's sake, David, do you intend to tell me or don't you?"

David turned on his heel. "Sit down, Grace. " He came across the room. "Didn't Maude tell you anything?"

"If she had, would I be asking you?" Agitation put a bite in Grace's voice. "What is the big secret about Sissie?" She sat on the edge of Miss Maude's needlepoint chair and met David's troubled gaze.

David pushed his hand through his hair, ruffling the smooth surface. "I don't know anything specific about Sissie but the Slayton saga is a long story and not a pretty one."

He was hedging again. Grace drew a deep breath. "I have plenty of time."

With a shrug, David sat down on the couch and began to speak. "Henry and Sarah Slayton came to West Texas from somewhere up north around the turn of the century. That fact alone was enough to make them suspect to the people of this area. Henry and Sarah didn't help matters any. From the onset, they were loners. They kept to themselves and never made any effort to become a part of the community. There were only two reasons for going to the Slayton farm. One was to have corn ground into meal--Henry had built a gristmill on the creek that runs through his place-- The other was to purchase moonshine--Henry also had a still. Henry and Sarah had two sons, William and Howard. William died some years ago. Howard is the man Sissie calls father."

Grace was disappointed. She failed to see anything out of the ordinary in that story, and she said so, adding, "Being from the north should not make three generations of Slaytons suspect."

The irony of her statement was wasted on David. "It didn't. What happened on a dark road in the dead of night back in October of 1925 did and to this day, it still does."

At last she was hearing something besides evasions and innuendo. Grace pressed, "What did happen?"

"William Slayton was found along side a deserted road. He'd been badly beaten. He died a few days later from those injuries. The night he was attacked was also the night Sissie was born." David puffed

out his cheeks, exhaled and then lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

Grace sat, tapped the floor with her foot and waited, trying to hide her impatience.

Finally, David said, "You must realize that what I am telling you is based as much on rumor as it is on fact."

Grace snapped, "Will you get on with the story?"

David nodded and continued, "The morning before Sissie was born-- that night William Slayton came into town roaring drunk. He was a big man and a mean one. The people in the village gave him a wide berth. For reasons known only to William, he sought out Silas McCauley, the town banker and Sissie's maternal grandfather."

"Sissie's mother was a McCauley?" Grace was astonished. The McCauley's were the most prominent family in Fairview.

David nodded decisively, "She was. Of course old Silas was heartbroken when his only daughter-- her name was Claire-- eloped with a man who was not only a social outcast but had been married before and was the father of a ten year old son."

Splaying one hand across her left breast, Grace asked, "You're speaking of Howard Slayton?"

"Yes. Silas tried to have the marriage annulled, but since Claire was of age, he couldn't do that. Neither could he persuade his daughter to come home, so he disinherited her."

Grace shook her head. "I had no idea."

"It's one of those things that no one talks about, not openly, at least." David sucked in his breath. "To this day how Howard and Claire met in the first place remains a mystery." With a dismissive wave of his hand, he went on with his story. "Anyway, on this particular day William Slayton went to the McCauley mansion and bulldozed his way inside. Then he began to raise holy hell..." David grimaced. "...To create quite a disturbance. It seems William didn't approve of the way the McCauleys had treated Claire."

Grace interrupted, "I find it odd that a man such as you describe William to be was so concerned about his sister-in-law's relationship with her family."

"Bear with me, please." David held up one hand. "In time I think you will draw some obvious conclusions." With a sigh and a shake of his head, he went on. "As I was saying, William created quite a disturbance. Old Silas called the sheriff and had him locked up. The sheriff gave William time to sober up then turned him loose around sundown and told him to go home. William started, but he never made it. Late the next afternoon Henry found his son lying by the side of the road. He'd been severely beaten. The old man managed somehow to get William home. He died the next day. So, by the way did Claire."

"How terrible," Grace gasped. Words Sissie spoken earlier floated across her mind. My mamma died when I was borned. "Who did kill William Slayton?"

With what could only be described as blasé detachment, David replied, "The case was never solved."

"Was there ever an arrest, or a trial?" Grace was sitting on the edge of her chair.

"Oh, yes." David swallowed, hard. "Howard was arrested."

"Howard?" Grace echoed. "The authorities arrested William's brother - Sissie's father?"

"Howard was without a doubt William's brother. There has always been some question about him being Sissie's father." A tinge of red colored David's neck and crept toward his face. Forgive my forthrightness, but I know no other way to say this. The story is that..." David's face was crimson with embarrassment. "William could well have been the father of Claire's child." He swallowed. "It was rumored that William had seduced the wife that Howard adored and then flaunted his triumph in his brother's face."

That seemed flimsy evidence on which to base a murder charge and Grace said so, then added as an afterthought, "Although I have to admit, it is proof positive of immorality and cruelty."

"The sheriff had more than just hearsay." David hastened to explain, "A few months before Sissie was born, Howard and William came to the village to buy supplies. While they were there, they got into a fistfight. Later, bystanders reported that Howard was accusing William of..." Again David blushed. "...raping his wife."

Grace gasped. "Was that true?"

"I don't know. William denied the charge of rape and then laughed in his brother's face. He insisted that Claire had given herself to him willingly. The sheriff arrested both brothers for disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace. He had to lock them in different cells. Howard was threatening to kill William. He turned William loose the next morning. He held Howard until that afternoon. The sheriff wanted to interrogate Howard. If his accusations against his brother were true, the sheriff wanted Howard to press charges against William."

Grace's eyes were wide with amazement. "Were they? Did he?"

David shrugged. "Were the allegations of rape true? To this day no one knows. Howard refused to make any kind of statement. He told the sheriff that he'd attend to the matter himself."

By now Grace was hanging onto David's every word. "Was Howard tried for his brother's murder?"

Davis shook his head. "No."

"Why not?"

David's voice was resigned. "Howard had an ironclad alibi. He had been with Claire, who was in labor. Old Doc Harvey swore to that, so Howard walked away a free man. A week later, just after Claire's remains were interred beside William's in the Slayton family burial plot, Howard and old Henry came to town to visit the sheriff. They demanded that the sheriff arrest Silas McCauley. They said Silas had paid someone to attack William. The sheriff investigated, but he never came up with any proof. So, to this day, no one knows who killed William Slayton."

It appeared to Grace that there was much more to this mystery than had ever been brought to light. She carefully refrained from voicing that thought. "The killer knows," she told David with swift certainty. "And if Silas McCauley hired that killer, he knows too."

David replied, "Silas McCauley is ninety-eight years old, and no longer of sound mind." Then he asked, "Do you still want to go to Henry's Mill?"

"I do." The truth was, she could hardly wait to be on her way. "I'll call Maude."

Chapter Four

For reasons she was not able to comprehend, that visit left Grace deeply troubled and profoundly disturbed. Even before the trio reached the low rambling house the Slayton's called home, her pulse was beating in her ears like a muffled drum. Excitement fizzed through her blood like champagne. She hadn't been this nervous since she her debut ball, and for the life of her, she didn't know why.

David parked his modest little Ford four door in the shade of an old oak several yards from the house and set the brake. "Well. Ladies, we're here. Get out, but be prepared for anything."

Grace stepped from the car and looked around. It was like entering another country, or another world. Sunlight shone through the tree leaves and patterned dancing shadows on the ground. An eerie gauze-like haze had settled over the landscape. Despite the strangeness of her surroundings, for a fleeting second she experienced a startling sense of *déjà vu*. It was gone almost before it appeared. Before decorum could dictate silence, she spoke her thoughts. "This is an eerie place."

Maude used her cane to balance herself as she got out of the back seat. "My dear, it's positively ghostly."

"I have to agree but we've come this far." David offered Maude his arm. "Shall we continue?"

Maude took David's arm. "It would be impolite to do otherwise." He fell in step with Maude as they walked toward the house.

Grace seemed rooted to the spot where she stood.

Turning, Maude motioned with her cane. "Come along, dear."

Grace moved slowly toward the house, studying her surroundings as she went. The sights were strange, almost alien. At the same time they were hauntingly familiar. Polarizing emotions made it difficult for her to hold onto her equilibrium.

From what seemed a far distance, Maude called, "Grace, are you coming?"

Grace quickened her pace as she struggled to focus her thoughts and stabilize her emotions. "Yes, Maude." But she was still lagging far behind when David lifted his fist and knocked on the front door three times.

It swung open to reveal a man in his early thirties. His hair was a sandy brown, his complexion ruddy from spending long hours in the sun. He was a few inches taller than David and towered head and shoulders over Maude. Except for his remarkable height there was nothing to set him apart or distinguish him from any of the other men she'd met since coming to this isolated place. Then he spoke and Grace's world shifted. His voice was, despite that terrible West Texas twang, deep and powerful. It carried a threatening note that was as sinister as it was compelling. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Like metal to a magnet, Grace quickened her pace and moved toward the tall man. His dynamic presence was a force field pulling her ever closer. It was as if she had waited a lifetime for this one moment. With her heart racing, she came to stand directly behind Maude.

David, seemingly undaunted and ever the gentleman, made introductions. "My name is David Adams." He gestured toward Maude. "And this is Miss Maude Perkins." Then he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder toward Grace. "The lady behind me is Miss Grace Collins. We're from the Fairview School."

"You still ain't said what you want." The tall man's grim face and belligerent stance were enough to make David take a step backward.

As if moved by some unseen force, Grace pushed between Maude and David and extended her hand. "I'm Emmy Lou's teacher. I came to talk to Emmy Lou's mother about her frequent absences from school."

The man's granite face softened into an almost-smile. "I'm Cody Slayton." Long, strong fingers wrapped around her wrist. "Pleased to make your acquaintance." His touch sent an electric shock through Grace's fingers and all the way up her arm. Her heart was racing out of control. She stared up into Cody Slayton's eyes and her breath caught in her throat. They were two orbs of glittering green with flecks of liquid topaz floating inside.

When she could find her voice, she asked, "May I speak with Miss. . . Sissie?"

Cody stepped back and opened the door a little wider. "I reckon." His steady gaze never once left Grace's face. "Y'all come in."

Grace Collins, who had, from birth, been schooled in all the social amenities and since childhood been adept at making small talk, was suddenly as tongue-tied as a schoolgirl. "T-t-thank you." She walked past Cody and into the room. David and Maude followed a few steps behind her.

The sight that greeted Grace was not what she had expected to see. The large room was comfortably and tastefully furnished with overstuffed chairs and a long leather couch. A bouquet of late blooming wild flowers stood on a table near a window. A fire burned in the fireplace.

Cody moved across the floor with the poise of a proud stallion. "Y'all set. I'll call my sister." He made his exit through a door that Grace assumed led to the kitchen.

Maude and David sat on the leather couch. Grace eased down into one of the overstuffed chairs and did her best to appear calm and collected. That was difficult to do when confused emotions and bewildering sensations were surging through her like an ocean tide.

After what seemed an unwarranted length of time, Sissie came to stand in the doorway. Without so much as a hello, she said, "Cody said you want to see me, Miss Grace."

"Yes." Grace tried to keep the quiver from her voice. "It's about Emmy Lou."

Sissie, with childish candor, asked, "She ain't been bein' bad at school, has she?"

Before Grace could reply, an elderly, stoop-shouldered man appeared behind Sissie. "Then why'd y'all come here?"

Without turning, Sissie said, "This here is my daddy."

David once again introduced himself and his friends. He began by saying, "My name is David Adams." He then went on to establish the identity of his two female companions.

The elderly man listened politely before saying, "I'm Howard Slayton." Stepping around Sissie, he came into the room and sat in a chair across from David and Maude. "I knowed Miz Perkins's papa. Never thought I'd have his daughter come a callin' at my house. What do y'all want?"

Grace came directly to the point. "We are concerned about Emmy Lou missing so much school."

Howard Slayton's eyes narrowed to slits. "Is that all?"

Grace wanted to tell him that was enough. Instead she launched into her usual spiel about the importance of regular attendance in school.

There followed almost thirty minutes of small talk. Grace kept the awkward and often one-sided conversation going. Even as she rambled on and on about trivial events and insignificant happenings, confusing emotions were consuming her. She hoped against hope that Cody Slayton would return. At the same time, an opposing and irrational fear that he would reappear kept her nervous and tense as a drawn bowstring.

As slow time limped along, David seemed to grow more and more impatient, finally he stood and said, "We must be going."

Maude agreed, almost too readily. "Yes. We must." She struggled to her feet.

Most reluctantly, Grace stood and asked Sissie, "Will you make a concentrated effort to keep Emmy Lou in school?"

Sissie nodded. "Yes ma'am."

The visitors said their good-byes and in less than five minutes they were seated in David's Ford and had begun the first leg of their journey, a trip down the winding dirt lane that led from Henry's Mill to a bumpy county road. They drove without speaking, each person lost in private thought. As David made a sharp left turn onto the county road, Maude leaned forward. "This has been a most interesting visit, in more ways than one, don't you think?"

David nodded in agreement. Grace, who couldn't shake the feeling that she'd made a fool of herself, was careful to remain noncommittal.

Maude asked, much to Grace's surprise, "David, my dear, what did you think of Sissie?"

That question seemed to make David uncomfortable. He glanced momentarily in Grace's direction before shifting his gaze back to the road. "I can't decide if she's wise beyond her years or hopelessly naive. There's something about her that is as intriguing as it is upsetting."

Maude chuckled. "Sissie is a puzzle. And Cody – what a handsome specimen of manhood he is. Judging from Grace's reaction to him, she agrees with me."

Grace didn't want to talk about Cody Slayton or the obviously upsetting affect he'd had on her. She adroitly directed the conversation back to Sissie. "Did you know that Sissie is illiterate?"

Over David's gasp and Maude's sigh, Grace explained. "She couldn't write her name on the enrollment card for Emmy Lou."

After that Grace was able to steer the conversation to a more impersonal channel. The remainder of the way home the three discussed at length, the importance of education.

Chapter Five

Over the next several days Grace did her best to forget about Cody Slayton. Try as she might, she couldn't. His face with its granite features floated across her mind at the oddest of moments. In her dreams she heard his drawling, twang-ridden voice. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Y'all come in. More than once she caught herself looking over her shoulder, thinking – or was she hoping? – that he would be there. Such nonsense, she told herself, since it was doubtful that she would ever see him again.

Maybe that's why what happened two weeks later came as such a surprise. Grace had stayed after school to grade papers. When she had completed that long and rather arduous chore, she decided to take a few minutes to write the next day's assignments on the blackboard before locking up and going home. She was totally engrossed in the task at hand when a faint scraping sound broke her chain of thought and made her turn and look. The tall figure of a man loomed in the doorway. Even though shadows obscured his features, she knew who he was. Her heart skipped a beat as fear mingled with a sense of sheer elation. "Mr. Slayton?"

The rough twang reached out to her. "Yes ma'am."

Grace laid her chalk in the trough beneath the blackboard as she searched for something, anything, to say. After a hushed pause, she managed to whisper, "Good evening."

Cody came inside and closed the door behind him. "And a good evenin' to you, ma'am."

Instinctively Grace took a step backward. "I didn't expect a caller." She retreated another step backward.

"I didn't expect to be here neither." Cody extended one hand in a gesture of supplication. "You don't have to be afraid, Miss Grace. I ain't gonna hurt you."

Grace told a blatant lie. "I'm not afraid." She was more afraid than she'd ever been in her entire life and it was a fear that she could neither explain nor describe.

Cody removed his hat. A lock of sandy hair fell across his ruddy forehead. He came into the room, sat sideways in a desk and laid his hat on its smooth surface. "I'm glad 'cause the last thing I wanna do is scare you."

Those words brought little assurance and no comfort at all. "Why are you here?"

"You knowed I'd come to you, sooner or later."

Grace was suddenly forced to face a truth she'd evaded since she'd first set eyes on Cody Slayton. She knew, oh, how well she knew. On some subconscious level, she had always known. A second and even more devastating realization slammed into her with the force of a run away train. If Cody had not come to her, sooner or later she would have gone to him. She dared not give utterance to such an alarming revelation. "What do you want?"

Cody's tone softened and changed in pitch and timbre. Every trace of his West Texas twang disappeared. The voice that spoke to her now carried the sophisticated accents of an English gentleman. "Do you believe in fate, Grace?"

Had her ears deceived her? No! She had heard what she had heard. This new voice was also an old voice, one that was achingly dear and intimately familiar. "I – don't know. " Had the logical, levelheaded Grace Collins taken leave of her senses? "I have to go now." She sidled toward the door.

That maddeningly provocative voice fell on her ears like lilting music. "Sit down Grace."

Against all that seemed rational, Grace obeyed. She perched sideways in the desk across from her visitor. "Fate is such a nonspecific term." As a touch of reason returned, the need to put distance between herself and the persistent pull of this disturbingly persuasive voice propelled her to her feet. "I should turn on a light. It will be dark soon."

In the semi darkness Cody's eyes were green mirrors reflecting the dying brightness of day. That reflected radiance created a halo of luminosity around the two of them. "You and I don't need light. We are familiar with the ways of darkness."

The absurdity of such a cultured voice emanating from the rough-cut man before her was enough to once more shock Grace into immediate and unquestioning submission. Without a moment's hesitation or a single word of protest, she sat. Her mind shifted from the voice to the message it delivered. It was a communication that carried a double meaning, of that Grace was certain. What that second meaning was, she could not imagine. "I seem to have lost my train of thought."

Cody tented his fingers, an unlikely gestures for a man of his lowly position. "We were discussing fate. Do you believe in fate, sweet Grace?"

His voice mesmerized her. Grace swallowed painfully. "I -- suppose so."

"So do I. I also subscribe to the existence of the Fate's handmaidens, Chance, Fortune, and Destiny. They alone can guide us over the dark path that leads to a transitory future. But time like space is circular and even as we travel forward we are moving backward, always backward toward an unending past as we seek an eternal present."

A chill had settled over the room. Grace shivered. His obscure words struck a profound and responsive chord deep in some secret part of her being. "Who are you?" He had to be a manifestation of – what? Was he the embodiment of an elusive dream or the reincarnation of a recurring nightmare? "Your voice, your new voice, I've heard it before, but I can't remember where or when."

"My new voice is, in the grander scheme of things, my old voice. But you know that because you know about me, just as I know about you."

A new insight moved Grace to a new and even more frightening revelation. An entity from some shadowy nether region had taken command of Cody Slayton's body. She sucked in her breath. "You're not Cody."

The voice chuckled. No, I'm not. On the other hand, Cody is Me just as Grace is You. Think, my love, and then remember."

Grace probed the deepest recesses of her memory. Almost, she could recall a distant and shrouded past-- almost, but not quite. Always, just as her mind reached to hold and retrieve a whispered recollection from some dim and remote long ago, it slipped through her thoughts like water through a sieve. "If only I could."

Again the voice reached out to her, caressing, imploring, compelling. "Oh, what we knew when we knew. Then I lost you. Over countless life cycles and through a century of centuries, I have pursued you."

Grace couldn't believe that she was listening to such a bizarre and pagan avowal. Even more unbelievable was her willingness to accept and her desire to hear more. She leaned forward. "Help me remember."

"Oh, my love, I will, I will. We will remember together in the only way true lovers ever remember." Leaning forward, he touched her face with his fingertips and then let them slide to the soft juncture

where her shoulders met her throat. "We need to be alone. Will you come with me?"

Joy, like a spark from smitten steel struck inside Grace's breast, bringing a pleasure that was so near to pain that she gasped. Did she dare? "I don't...." She searched in her muddled mind to find some reason, some excuse for refusing. "It wouldn't be appropriate." Suddenly, she didn't give a damn about what was appropriate. "Where can we go?"

Standing, Cody set his hat on his head and turning, offered Grace his arm. "I know the perfect place. Shall we?"

She placed her hand on his sleeve. Touching him evoked silken memories from some forgotten past and promised a future that would bring again erotic pleasures and delectable delights. A quicksilver tingle tightened Grace's skin. "Yes, please."

Together they walked across the floor, through the vestibule, out the door, over the stoop and down the steps before making their way toward the banks of the nearby creek. Ahead of them an eerie light spotlighted a secluded area in a grove of trees.

When they arrived at the grassy knoll, Cody dropped to the ground and pulled Grace down beside him. The usually hard earth was soft as velvet. Grace made no protest as he took her into his arms, kissed her tenderly and touched her in intimate places. After a few minutes of his tender wooing, she put her arms around his neck and drew his face downward. With his lips very near hers, she whispered. "I've never done this before."

His rough hands reached for the buttons of her blouse. "Yes, you have, but not in this life cycle." He slid her blouse over her shoulders. "Sometimes I forget that you are bound by dark and sinister forces." He tossed it toward a scrubby mesquite. "I sometimes underestimate the strength of the spell and the power of the curse." He sighed. "All I can think of is that glorious morning after our first night together. We watched a Sumerian sunrise and pledged our eternal love. If only you could recall with me Babylon, Persia, Greece, Italy, France, Spain, England. ... "

The melancholy sound of that melodious voice wove its magic spell. Grace was completely enthralled. "But darling, we have now." What, she wondered, were the spell and the curse he spoke of? Her intent to inquire was swept away on a wave of pure sensation as he unfastened her bra and pulled it from her body, exposing her creamy white breasts and leaving her arms bare and gleaming in the luminous light.

"An eternal passion burns ever bright." Dipping his head, he caught one of her nipples in his mouth and sucked gently.

The sweet fire of desire erupted between Grace's legs as passion knotted her stomach. Her throat was dry, her skin tingled. The grass beneath her became a couch of silk with curtains of magnificently embroidered fabric hanging in folds around it. In the distance faint strains of exotic music could be heard. She closed her eyes and reached to touch Cody. Her fingers tangled in the abundant growth of hair on his chest. She opened them to discover that he was completely bare. The stiff evidence of his arousal throbbed as she took it in her hand and stroked gently.

He threw back his head and moaned into the perfume-laden air. Then slowly, tenderly, he removed her fingers and pressed them to his lips. "We've waited an eternity for this moment, let's make it last " He lay down beside her on the soft, silken couch. It was only then that Grace realized she was completely bare. She reveled in her nudity.

For what could have been an hour and may have been an eternity, they made blissful, lavish, passionate, tender, wonder-filled love. As they shamelessly engaged in wanton acts of erotic, self-indulgent lust, that voice spoke phrases that seared her soul and scorched her body. Even though she could neither recognize the words nor understand their meanings, the mere sound of them carried her to

unbearable heights of sexual pleasure.

After an eon of teasing and titillating, he climbed astride her eager, quivering body and pushed himself deep inside the moist crevice between her legs. An electric charge jolted through her. For a moment he laid perfectly still, leaving Grace wanting and eager. "Please, please."

He began to move inside her, slowly at first, then with gradually escalating force and speed. She met and matched his rising rhythm. Higher and higher she climbed, soaring past the stars, flying over the moon and gliding into the zone of a pure and blissful delight. Then the rhythm broke, sending a burst of exquisite pleasure erupting inside her. Endless throes of blissful rapture caught and twisted her body in surging spasms of infinite ecstasy.

Slowly, and with languid delight, she descended. As she floated downward she became aware of Cody lying atop her, his sandy hair wet with perspiration, his muscular body relaxed and sated. She was too stunned to speak and too mortified to look him in the eye. She had made brazen, wanton love to a complete stranger. Her embarrassment was for what he must think of her. She felt not the slightest touch of shame for what had just happened.

The silence that surrounded them was thick enough to be sliced with a knife. Grace sat on the hard ground and searched for her clothes. As she hurriedly dressed, Cody found his pants and put them on, then he shoved his arms into the sleeves of his shirt. Finally he spoke, this time in that flat, West Texas drawl. "I'm mighty sorry about this Miss Grace."

His words cut deeply. He was sorry and she didn't have a single regret. On a sigh, Grace admitted, "It wasn't all your fault."

"I don't know what got into me. I don't usually act like this."

Grace could believe that. Neither did she. What must he think of her? What would others think if they knew? If Cody breathed a word of what had happened here tonight her teaching career would be over. No self-respecting school district would hire a promiscuous teacher. "We shouldn't tell anyone what happened here tonight." Standing, she put my hand to her swimming head. "Promise you won't tell."

Cody looked as distraught as she felt. "Yes ma'am, I promise."

Grace said as she turned, "And we shouldn't see each other again, ever."

"Yes ma'am, I agree."

"I have to go, Mr. Slayton." Grace walked without looking back - away from this strange man who had, in the space of one evening, loosened the foundations that supported her secure little world.

Chapter Six

By the time Grace gathered her book bag and papers and locked the school it was half past nine. By the time she pulled her Pontiac Chieftain into Maude's drive it was a few moments after ten. As she got out of her car, Maude called to her from the front porch. "Grace? Where have you been? I've been worried to death about you."

Grace gathered her bag and papers and slammed her car door. "I'm sorry you were worried. I was working on a project and forgot all about time." She ran her fingers through her long hair. She must look a fright. As she neared the front porch, Maude said, "David was here. He waited for a while, then he went home." She opened the front door. "Come inside dear."

Grace stepped inside. Thank goodness the light in the front entranceway was dim. "Did David say what he wanted?"

Maude closed the door and locked it. "Nothing specific. He's very excited about this new project you two are working on."

Grace has no idea what project Maude was referring to, but she nodded her head, choosing silence as a way to avoid telling a blatant lie.

Maude retreated toward her bedroom. "Go to bed, dear. You look worn to a frazzle." She snapped her fingers. "Oh, yes, David said to tell you he'd talk to you tomorrow about his project."

Grace said her thanks and made a swift exit. Once inside her room, she fell, fully clad, across her bed and immediately dropped into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next day at school Grace kept busy and tried not to think. No matter what her hands found to do, her mind kept replaying the events of last evening. The last bell had rung and the last wayward stray child had wandered from the schoolyard when David came into Grace's classroom and stopped in the doorway. "Grace, I'd like to ask a favor of you."

Grace liked David. She considered him a friend. By now she also knew him well enough to recognize when he was troubled. "If it's within my power, you know I will."

David actually blushed. "I want you to stay after school one afternoon a week." He put his hands in his pockets, and dropped his head. "I have promised Sissie Slayton that I will teach her to read. I can't let her come here without a chaperon. Would you stay?"

Any other time Grace would have thought to ask when David had seen Sissie. This day she was too engrossed in her own emotions to wonder about anything else. "I could manage that."

David smiled. "Perhaps afterward we could go to Lucie's Cafe and have dinner."

Grace was set to refuse, then she reconsidered. Being seen with David was a sure way to deter any suspicion that might arise about her and Cody. A guilty conscience made her say, "Only if we go Dutch."

After a while Grace came to look forward to those dinners. They helped her fight the overwhelming urge to seek out Cody Slaton. They were also bright spots in an otherwise rather dreary routine.

One evening over coffee and dessert, David surprised Grace by asking her if she would attend church services with him the following Sunday. "I would be pleased if you would accept." He smiled at her over the rim of his coffee cup.

Grace explained, "I attend the Church of Christ with Maude each Sunday morning."

"Do you have some objection to going to a Full Gospel Church?"

She did. Some of the stories she had heard about Reverend Howard's ability to break spells and cast out devils were frightening. Grace dodged answering by saying, "But you're a Baptist. Why would you go there?"

"I have two other adults who want to join Sissie's class. They both attend the Full Gospel Church. Being there with them in a religious atmosphere will help me establish a rapport." His voice quivered. "It would mean so much to me if you would go." Reaching across the table, he caught her hand in his.

Grace laid her other hand over his cold fingers. He was a caring and compassionate person. If he felt constrained to help the less fortunate of the village, she felt duty bound to help. "Then I'll go."

David drew an uneasy breath. "I'm so glad. I need you, Grace, but by now you must know that." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingertips.

Quickly, Grace pulled her hand away. "David, please. We must be very careful. You know how people in Fairview love to gossip."

Davis's eyes scanned the crowded restaurant. "I'm sorry, Grace. I got carried away. It's just that this project means so much to me."

She should have refused his request then and there. She should have, but she didn't and her reasons for accepting were purely selfish ones. Social obligations, no matter how trivial or distasteful, would help keep her mind off Cody, or so she thought.

She was wrong. During the weeks and months that followed Grace attended church with David and continued to have dinner with him on Friday evenings. It neither eased her pain nor dimmed her recollections. It seemed that the memory of that brief and enchanted interlude with Cody Slaton was stamped indelibly in her memory.

The Christmas holidays came and went. Grace spent two weeks in Dallas with her parents, and discovered that home wasn't home anymore. She could hardly wait to get back to school and her work there. She could not admit, even to herself, that the real reason for wanting to return was Cody.

Chapter Seven

Over the next few months, as winter slowly turned to spring, the class David started for Sissie expanded to include ten students, and Grace became active in teaching classes also. One evening in late May, as the last student disappeared down the trail toward the village, Grace cornered David in the vestibule. "Should we continue the adult classes through the summer?"

"I won't be here during the summer." David tucked his briefcase under his arm. "I'm going to Austin to attend summer school."

Grace's heart fell to the pit of her stomach. She had hoped Sissie would continue classes through the summer. As tenuous as it was, that was her only link to Cody. "How long will you be gone?"

David seemed agitated that she should ask. "Summer school lasts twelve weeks."

Grace echoed, "Twelve weeks?" That sounded like a lifetime. She managed a smile, of sorts. "I'll miss you."

"And I you. You've come to mean a great deal to me, Grace."

David and Grace said their good-byes the night of graduation. The graduates, along with families and friends, had long departed. Cleaning and straightening after such a festive affair had taken some time. They were standing in the vestibule of the school. "I'm leaving tonight," David said as he dropped a kiss on Grace's cheek. Then he lifted his head and sighed. "Forgive me, Grace, and try to understand."

Grace rubbed the spot he had kissed. "Forgive you for what?"

Taking her arm, David ushered her through the door, then he secured the front door lock, and dropped his keys into her hand. "I'm leaving these in your care because I know I can trust you."

Grace wrapped her fingers wrapped around the cool metal. David was acting very strangely. "I'll keep them safe until you return."

Taking her arm again, David led Grace down the path to their parked cars. As they stopped beside Grace's automobile, David drew a deep breath. "Please don't think badly of me when I'm gone."

That seemed a strange request. Grace watched as David got into his little Ford and sped off into the night. When the sound of the motor had faded into silence, she settled into her Pontiac Chieftain, pulled it into gear, and drove toward Maude's house.

Through that long night, sleep eluded her. Over and over she rehearsed her plan. She would stay in the village through the summer. During that time she would find some way to see Cody again. When she closed her eyes, she could feel him inside her, pushing, shoving, and driving her toward a state of supreme bliss. She opened her eyes and stared into the darkness. She had to find a way to be with Cody. Doubts, hopes, fears, and desires crowded into her mind with polarizing consequences. Dawn was streaking the morning skies before she slept. It seemed she had scarcely closed her eyes when Maude's pounding on her door awakened her. "Grace, get up dear. Something terrible has happened."

Grace sat up and reached for her robe. "What? Where?" Had someone learned of her tryst with Cody? Her heart began to race.

Maude poked her head around the door. Her eyes were huge in her pale face. "David has run away with Sissie Slayton. They took Emmy Lou with them."

"David and Sissie?" The robe slid from Grace's nerveless fingers. "When?"

"Last night after graduation." Maude waved one blue veined hand. "The news is all over town."

Grace gasped. "This is terrible."

"That's not the worst of it." Maude looked over her shoulder. "Cody Slayton is here. He wants to see you."

"Sissie's brother is here?" Grace's fear rode on a wave of joy. "What does he want?"

"He wants to see you." Maude came into the room, and closed the door behind her. "I'm frightened, Grace. He looks positively savage."

Grace pulled her petticoat over her head. She couldn't greet Cody in her robe. "I'll be right out. Ask him to wait in the parlor."

Maude was obviously appalled by that suggestion. "Not on your life. My livelihood depends on being able to rent rooms to unmarried ladies. Can you imagine what will happen if the news gets out that Cody Slayton was a caller at my home?" Maude drew a shuddering breath. "Get him out of here, Grace, and fast!"

Grace buttoned the top button of her blouse with shaking fingers. She'd better do just that and fast wouldn't be quick enough. "I'll do my best."

Cody sat with his hat in his lap, looking strangely out of place amid Maude's antiques and bric-a-brac. He stood when Grace entered the room and swallowed with difficulty. "Miss Grace, thank you for seeing me."

Grace was too upset to bother with social amenities. "Have you heard from Sissie? Is she all right?"

"I don't know what all the fuss is about. Sissie's a grown woman and David is a grown man. They can go off together if they want to. " Without any warning at all, his voice changed and he spoke in that dearly familiar, fearfully frightening clipped English accent. "I can understand your concern for Sissie. She has shared multiple life cycles with you. She has been your sister once, your mother twice, and your friend more times than I can remember."

That entity was back and spouting heresy that seemed to bounce off the walls of Maude Perkins's old-fashioned parlor and echo down its hallway. Grace was painfully aware that Maude was listening intently to every word the voice was saying. She cleared her throat. "Thank you for coming to tell me about Sissie."

"You're welcome." Cody pushed his hat down on his head. "Will you drive me home, Miss Grace?"

Grace shivered. "I don't think I can. You see. . . "

Cody's hand was on the doorknob. In that clipped English accent he said, "The day will come when you will wish you had, Miss Grace."

Those words, so softly spoken, were a threat. He was telling her that if she didn't go with him now, she would never see him again. "Wait!" Grace called as she reached for her jacket. "I can take you as far as the school." Over Maude's loud protests, she followed Cody outside.

They were in Grace's Chieftain and driving past the General Store before Grace dared speak "This is a test of some kind isn't it?"

"A most important one." Cody cut his eyes in her direction. They glowed with an eerie green light.

Grace's mind was spinning in bewilderment and her head was swirling with confusion. In the front yard of the school she stopped her car and set the brake. "Do you want to come inside?"

Cody nodded his head. The voice said, "We must."

They got out of the car and went into the school. In the vestibule Grace paused. For the past several months she had lived in her own private purgatory. A cold shiver shook through her as she realized that this was her one chance to escape, to be free. "I'm ready for the test."

Cody took her hand and walked with her to her classroom. The desks had been stacked around the wall. The middle of the floor was bare. Cody led her there, then turned her around to face him. His expression was grave. "Make love to me, Grace."

On a trapped breath she whispered, "How can I do that?"

His glowing eyes caressed her. "Follow the dictates of your heart and remember to follow the rules."

Slowly his mellifluous words found lodging in her confused mind and she did remember oh, God! She remembered! It was their special game. "The rules are I can touch you but you can't touch me." She began to undress him. "I can speak to you but you can't speak to me."

Cody nodded and stood still as a statue as she stripped him of every stitch of his clothing and then carefully, deftly, stooped to pull his boots and socks from his feet. He stood before her, big and stiff and gorgeous.

Grace tiptoed, put her lips over his mouth, closed her eyes and pushed her tongue between his teeth. He moaned deep in his throat. She opened her eyes and to her great surprise, beheld, not the ruddy countenance of Cody Slayton, but the smooth handsome face of an English gentleman. "My Lord," she whispered as she dropped her mouth to his chest, took one of his male nipples between her teeth and bit ever so gently. The English Gentleman shuddered as he altered into a dark and handsome renaissance painter with a goatee and curls to rival those of any fair lady.

Enchanted by the strange transformation that was taking place before her very eyes, Grace dropped to her knees and ran her tongue inside his navel. Her medieval knight groaned his satisfaction. She kissed and licked her way down his taunt belly as her searching hands caressed his back and buttocks. Her knight of old threw back his head and gritted his teeth to keep from crying out in pleasure. As her erotic exploration continued, her silent, still lover transmuted into Roman soldier, then a Greek athlete before becoming a Persian poet, and lastly, a Babylonian priest. Her scorching hands stilled and her searing mouth stopped at the end of the line of hair that stopped at his groin. She looked up into his silent, set face. His eyes were lasers of soft green light, but he spoke not a word.

Grace lowered her head and took his huge erection into her mouth. He bit his lip and whimpered as if in pain. She sucked, gently at first, then with greater speed and suction. He writhed and twisted. His face was a mask of hard passion, still he didn't speak nor cry out. Just before it seemed that he might explode, he ejaculated with the force of a bursting bomb. Grace put her hands against his upper legs to steady herself. As he relaxed, she licked his flaccid member then let it slide from her mouth and closed her eyes.

Stooping, he pulled her gently to her feet and licked drops of seamen from her lips. She opened her eyes to a glorious sight. The metamorphous was complete. Before her stood her handsome Sumerian prince, magnificent in his nudity. "Celadon, my prince. You are here." His smile melted her heart and quickened the fire in her veins.

"The gods be praised, you know me. The battle is half won. Now comes the second test. Do you remember the rules?"

Grace did remember. Oh, how well she remembered. She replied, as her body shook with anticipation, "This time you may touch me, but I can't touch you. You may speak to me, but I can't speak to you."

"Are you ready?" Even before she could answer he was removing her outer garments. His fingers were

like firebrands. Grace opened her mouth. Her prince laid his fingers across her lips. "Not a word."

Grace closed her eyes and reveled in the sensuous pleasure of being undressed by her lover.

When she was completely bare, he kissed her breasts and touched her hair and face. Sparks of pure passion ignited fire in the hollow between her legs. She moaned and whimpered, but she didn't utter a word.

His mouth became an instrument that purveyed pure pleasure to each intimate and aching spot it touched. His hands worked magic with their deft and probing stroking. The fire inside her blazed higher and higher until she feared she might be consumed by it. When she thought that one more kiss would sear her soul and one more caress would bring immolation, her prince stopped and knelt before her. Her last sane thought before he buried his face in the furry hollow between her legs was that she must not speak. Then he ran his tongue around her moist opening and sucked gently. Grace shook with pleasure and anticipation. His tongue entered her body and moved with a repeated rhythm in and out. She was hurled into a world of pure sensation that brought her to an immediate and shattering climax. Her knees buckled. If her prince had not caught her, she would have fallen. The ecstasy of the moment lingered as she drifted from some enchanted haven of the sensuous bliss and back to earth again. From far away her prince was calling, "Aurora, my love, we have broken the spell. The curse is lifted. We can go home."

In a dreamy, sated, voice she asked, "Where is home?"

Her prince took her by the hand. "Above the stars, over the moon and past the milky way to the enchanted land of happy-ever-after." He led her outside and to the grassy knoll where they had first made love. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. "Yes, take me home."

Naked and arm-in-arm they stepped onto thin air and rapidly ascended toward the heavens. As the world beneath them disappeared from view, Grace looked down. Her car was little more than a speck and the school looked like a doll's house. Then she turned her gaze toward her prince and her eternal future.

Epilogue

To this day there are skeptics who dispute the story of Grace and her prince. How, they ask, can two people step out on thin air and disappear into the heavens? More to the point, how can one woman make love to an English Lord, a renaissance painter, a medieval knight, a roman soldier, a Greek athlete, a Persian poet, a Babylonian priest and a Sumerian prince all in one afternoon and survive?

And then there are those true believers who return each year to the dilapidated and deserted Fairview School. They still gather and stand to gaze at the pile of rotting clothing left behind by the two lover. They still dare to hope that this enchanted spot will work its magic and they too will find their own true love and discover for themselves the elusive land of Happy-Ever-After.

The End